Infinite Dendrogram

1. The Beginning of Possibility

Sakon Kaidou

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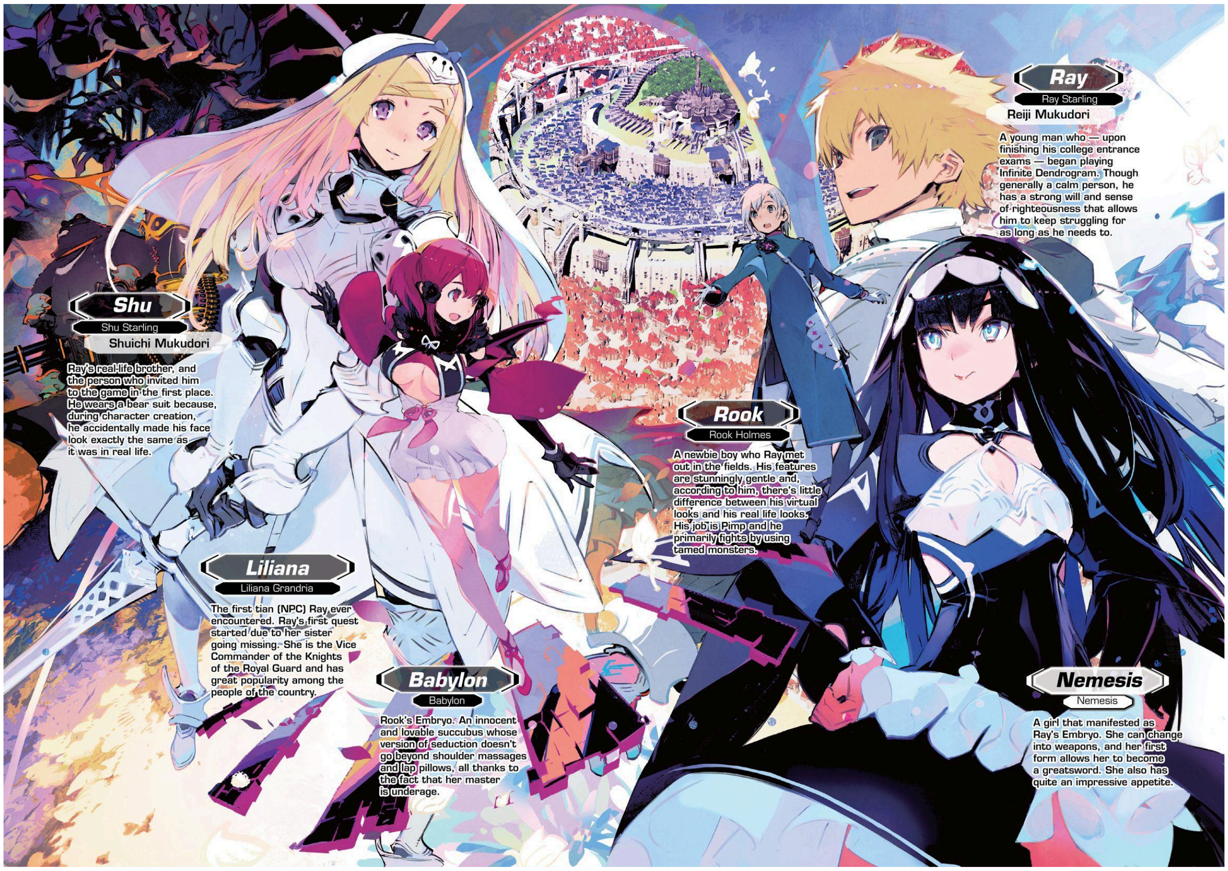


Shu

Shu Starling

Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's real-life brother, and the person who invited him to the game in the first place. He wears a bear suit because, during character creation, he accidentally made his face look exactly the same as it was in real life.

Liliana

Liliana Grandria

The first tian (NPC) Ray ever encountered. Ray's first quest started due to her sister going missing. She is the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard and has great popularity among the people of the country.

Babylon

Babylon

Rook's Embryo. An innocent and lovable succubus whose version of seduction doesn't go beyond shoulder massages and lap pillows, all thanks to the fact that her master is underage.

Rook

Rook Holmes

A newbie boy who Ray met out in the fields. His features are stunningly gentle and, according to him, there's little difference between his virtual looks and his real life looks. His job is Pimp and he primarily fights by using tamed monsters.

Ray

Ray Starling

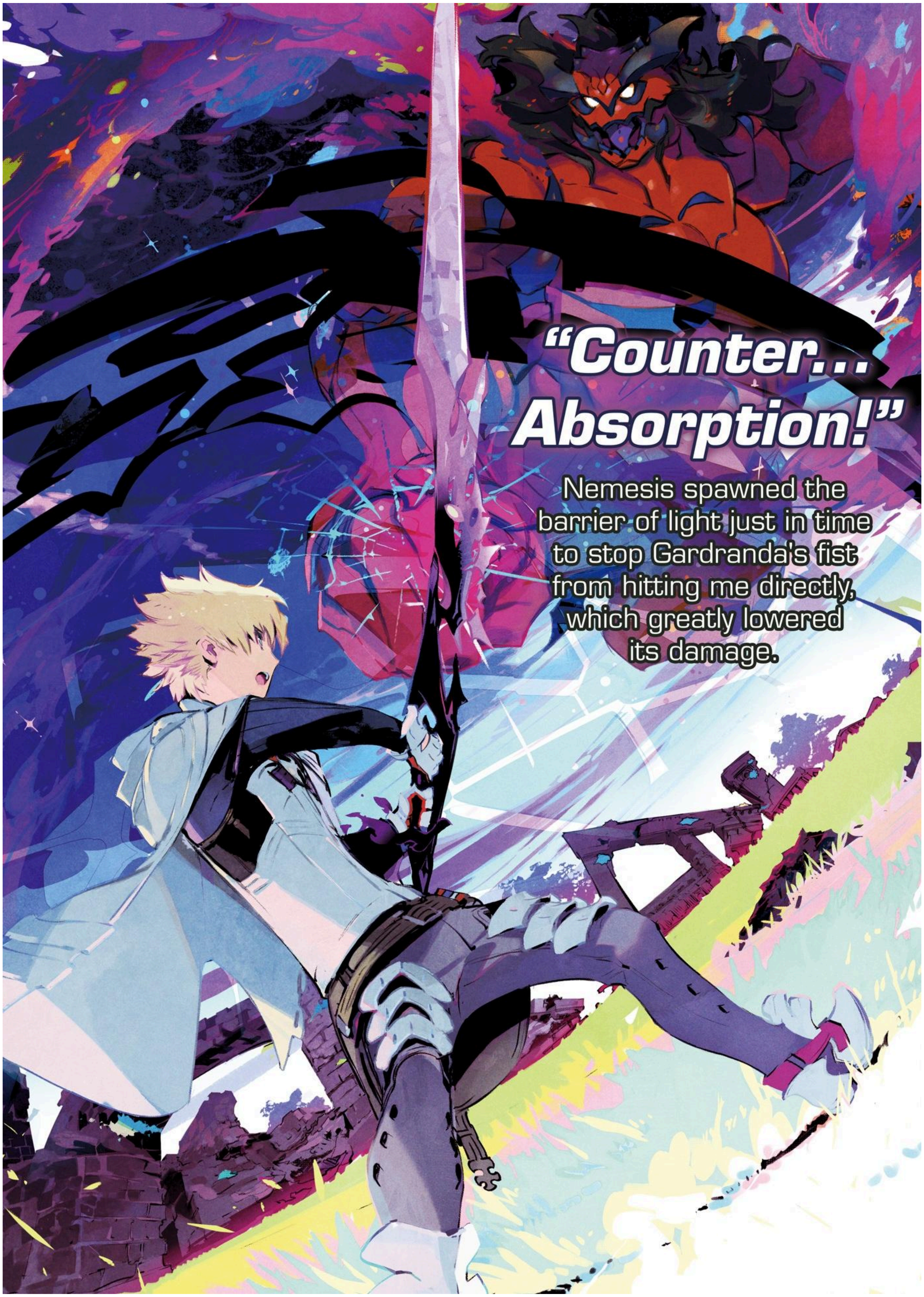
Reiji Mukudori

A young man who — upon finishing his college entrance exams — began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.

Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She can change into weapons, and her first form allows her to become a greatsword. She also has quite an impressive appetite.



“Counter… Absorption!”

Nemesis spawned the barrier of light just in time to stop Gardranda's fist from hitting me directly, which greatly lowered its damage.

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Chapter Zero: *Infinite Dendrogram*

July 15, 2043. On this date, the VRMMO *Infinite Dendrogram* was released around the world. It had been nearly half a century since man had first dreamt of a VRMMO (virtual reality massively multiplayer online) game.

In the 2000s, a variety of media, such as manga, anime, and video games, began to incorporate VRMMOs into their stories as the ultimate "dream game." From among a sea of creative entertainment, people eagerly looked forward to the release of a VRMMO, and in the 2010s, quasi-VR headsets were released, offering enhanced quality of sight and sound immersion.

Although at first a mere product of fantasy, VRMMOs were anticipated, developed, and then finally given form. In the 2030s, a small number of full-dive VRMMO games were released, allowing players to enter game worlds using all five of their senses.

The reason so few were released was due to the difficulty and enormous cost of development. This meant that only companies with leading technology and sufficient resources could even make an attempt. Or perhaps more were attempted, but never completed.

However, the few completed games that did make it out into the world were quickly met with disappointment. Unlike the VRMMOs depicted in fiction, these ones lacked in realism, they assailed the senses with discomfort, and their graphics were hardly any different from existing game systems. Also, despite guarantees of a safe design, players one after another fell ill and were taken to the hospital.

The development companies behind the initial dive VRMMOs all went bankrupt due to poor sales, bad reputations, and numerous lawsuits from afflicted players.

A reviewer from the time had the following to say about these games: "They managed to create the 'dream game,' but they weren't able to create the 'dream.'"

Dive VRMMO games continued to be developed, but none were made that could be considered a success.

That is... until *Infinite Dendrogram* was released.

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The lack of information about *Infinite Dendrogram* before its release was abnormal.

It was kept secret the whole time, and on the day of release, the developers only made one announcement simultaneously across the global media networks. In it, they presented four key selling points for the game.

First: the five senses would be perfectly simulated.

Second: even if there were 100 million players, all of them would play in the same game world on a single server.

Third: players could choose how they'd view the game world, with options including realistic, 3D CG, and 2D anime.

Fourth: time within the game would flow three times faster than in the real world.

In response to the announcement, voices from around the world could be heard saying: "Is this really even possible?" "Just how much money and tech did they use to make this?" "Even for a case of misleading advertisement, isn't this going a bit far?"

Although the announcement had an impact, people found its content simply absurd. Out of everyone that saw the announcement, and this included non-gamers, 99.9998% didn't believe it and didn't buy the game.

The remaining 0.0002% of people, however, said things like, "It seems like a lie, but what if it's true..." "I'll try it," "I believe it," and they headed into stores to buy the game.

The necessary hardware cost around 10,000 yen, and was an extraordinary, some would even say reckless, pricing scheme. This helped lure in customers, with some saying, "Well, even if it's a lie, it's only 10,000 yen." So they bought it and started playing.

And once they logged into the game... they all knew it was the real thing.

Overcome with amazement at the game's realism, they would log out and look at their clocks, only to be astonished even more. The dreams they saw were all real — the “dream game” was now a reality.

The day after release, amid the clamor set off around the world by posts and comments from those who played the game, the developers released another announcement. This time, the contents of the game were detailed. A man named Lewis Carroll, the lead developer for *Infinite Dendrogram*, presented the broadcast announcement and said the following:

“The game system in *Infinite Dendrogram* has a special feature. Rather than relying on thousands of possible combinations of jobs and skills, this feature provides absolute and distinct uniqueness. This feature is the Embryo. It will offer players truly infinite possibilities and unique customization.

“Embryos will respond to personal circumstances and evolve from among an infinity of patterns. These patterns will not merely be different colors and parts, but will even include unique skills, allowing them to be truly limitless in scope. This is what *Infinite Dendrogram* is all about.

“Yes, *Infinite Dendrogram* will provide you with a new world and your very own unique possibility.”

These words served as the last trigger needed to turn the game into a giant movement.

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March 16, 2045 — Reiji Mukudori

I, Reiji Mukudori, was sitting on my heels with the game in front of me and a nervous expression on my face.

It probably sounded like an exaggeration, but after waiting a year and a half, I was finally going to be able to play *Infinite Dendrogram*. So, of course, I was nervous.

“It’s been a long road,” I said.

The game had been announced and released during the summer of my junior year in high school — at the same time I had been motivating myself to do my best on my college entrance exams.

I’m sure there had been other game-loving high schoolers in their junior or senior years who had been left in despair like I had been, thinking, *why of all times did such an interesting-looking game have to come out during my entrance exam years?*

However, I had now successfully made it into a college in the city, and had taken the opportunity to start living on my own. I had finished moving yesterday, and my parents, who'd helped me, had already returned home.

I can play games as much as I want now!

I had headed to the game store this morning as soon as it opened and purchased a copy of *Infinite Dendrogram*. For about half a year after its release, it had apparently been difficult to get a hold of a copy, but a whole year and a half later, I was able to buy it without any trouble.

My older brother, by the way, was one of the ones who had bought the game on release day. This whole time, he had been calling me saying, "Hurry up and let's play *Dendro* together." I hadn't been sure if this made me feel bitter or simply jealous.

But all those feelings end today!

"...Let's do this!" I braced myself and opened the box. Inside, were a helmet-type game system and a manual.

According to the manual, in order to enter the game world, all you needed to do was put on the helmet and turn on the switch. There were other explanations regarding visuals and time as well, but "amazing" would be the only way I could describe them.

Really, just how in the world did they make this game? I wondered. *It seems to be ten, maybe twenty years ahead of current technology...*

However, now wasn't the time to be scared. Following the instructions and recommendations in the manual, I put on the helmet and lay on my bed facing the ceiling. I then turned on the game.

Instantly, my vision went black.

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"Hello and welcommme."

Before I knew it, I was no longer in my room, but in a space that appeared to be the study of a Western-style, wooden building. The voice had come from a cat I had never seen before, which sat in front of me on a seemingly well-made, wooden rocking chair.

...A cat?

"I'm sorry for the intrusion," I said. I was confused, but decided to respond with a greeting first.

"Yes, that's niiice," said the cat. "I like people with proper mannerrrs." The cat spoke in fluent Japanese, but with a slow drawl at the end of his sentences.

"Is this like the game's tutorial or something?" I asked.

"That's riiight. You'll be sent into the game after you finish configuring various settings herrre. Oh, I'm Cheshire, control AI No. 13 for *Infinite Dendrograaam.* Nice to meet youuu."

Control AI... I see. No wonder it's able to use fuzzy logic in its responses.

Control AIs are man-made cyber intelligences with entire modern supercomputers serving as their brains. Their primary uses, as the name suggests, are in control and management. It's said that just one of them can perfectly, and at high speeds, manage the databases and networks of a small country.

If this one is No. 13, does that mean there are twelve other control AIs of equal ability involved in managing this game?

"Nice to meet you, too," I said.

"All riiight," said the cat. "First up is selecting the graphiiics. Samples of these will alternate, so choose which one you like the best, okaaay?"

After the cat... Cheshire... said this, the surrounding scenery completely changed.

The study I turned into a spacious area — a somewhat Middle Ages European townscape. There were many people walking about, and after a fixed period of time, their appearance would change. Actually, it wasn't their appearance, but rather, the way I saw them was changing. It went from a realistic appearance to CG, from CG to anime, and then back to realistic.

"...Wait, how are you doing this?" I asked.

"Imagery perceived by sight is processed by the brain, after all, so there's a waaay," replied Cheshire. "And so, the way you see can be changed like this, but which one will you go wiiith? You can change it later by using an itemmm."

"I'll leave it as-is," I said.

I thought it would be better to see normally until I got used to the game, so that's what I did. Although I *was* interested in how it would feel to touch something that looked like it was from an anime.

"Okaaay," said Cheshire, and the scenery reverted back to the study. "Next is your player naaame. What do you want your name to be in the gaaame?"

"I'll go with Ray Starling." This was a name I had often used in games before. It was simply a distorted version of my first name and the English translation of my last name, Mukudori.

"Okay, then I'll set it to thaaat," said the cat. "Next, the settings for your appearaaance."

After Cheshire said this, a featureless mannequin and a bunch of window screens appeared before me. These screens contained words such as "height," "weight," "bust," their corresponding sliders, as well as facial features.

"These are..." I said slowly.

"Use those parts and sliders to make your own avatar for the gaaame," said Cheshire. "Oh, you can also make it into an animal like me, or even change your genderrr."

No, I'm not so sure about changing my gender in a game this realistic...

"It's okay to take your time and think it overrr," said Cheshire. "We have three times the amount of time here than in the real wooorld. ...Oh yeah, there was that one time when someone repeatedly logged in and out and spent one month in Earth time making their avatarrr."

That's a tremendous amount of effort and concentration, so I don't think I'll be able to go that far.

It wasn't just because of the sheer number of sliders and parts, but the values you could set for each of them were way too exact. It was almost like they were telling me to make a real human face.

For a beginner, that's way too difficult, I thought. *In that case...*

"Can I just use my real appearance as the default and make some changes to that?" I asked.

"You can do thaaat," Cheshire said and waved his tail.

The mannequin turned into me.

"Now you just need to make some changes using this as your baaase," said the cat.

"Thanks," I said.

It was fairly simple after this. I left most of the settings the same, but changed my hair color to blond, and changed my ethnicity as well, which altered my face. While I worked on this, I wondered about what my face would look like if I set it to anime or CG. *I'd be able to see it if I played* *without changing any of the settings, but... no, it's better that I don't play online with my actual face.*

And like that, I finished creating my avatar after about thirty minutes or so.

"And... finished," I said.

"Okaaay. Then I'll hand over your starting itemmms." Cheshire waved a padded paw in the air and a bag fell from empty space. "This is your storage bag, also known as your inventoryyy. The storage space inside it is from a different dimensionnn. You can store items in here if they're yours, but on the flip side, you can't put any items in here that arrren't."

"I see," I said.

It's a useful bag, but I guess that means it can't be used to commit crimes.

"Well," Cheshire continued, "if it's an item that dropped from someone you PKed, or one that you stole with the Steal skill, then it'll go innn."

I fell silent. *I don't know what to say to that.*

"By the way, if a player's Steal skill is high enough in level, they can steal an item from even inside this 4D pocket-like item baaag," the cat said. "So be carefulll."

Now just how exactly am I supposed to be careful against a thief that's capable of stealing from the fourth dimension?

"This bag is for beginners, but there are also other types, such as ones that are tough to steal from, small ones, and ones with a lot of capacityyy," the cat said.

"What is the capacity of this one, by the way?" I asked.

"The size is about equal to one classroom, and the weight is maybe around one ton in Earth measuremeeents."

"It can fit quite a lot," I said. "That's plenty."

"It's apparently not enough if you're a merchant, thooough," said the cat. "They're likely to buy new onnnes. Oh, item bags will scatter their contents around if they get destroyed, so pay attention to their durabilityyy."

"I'll be careful," I said.

"Next is a set of beginner equipmeeent. Ray, what will you piiick?" Cheshire pulled a catalog from a bookshelf and showed it to me.

In it were full sets of various types of armor. There was the typical Eastern and Western style armor, but in addition to these, there were traditional outfits from China, India, the Middle East, and South America. On the opposite end, there were even outfits that seemed to be from Sci-Fi movies.

"I'll go with this, then," I said, choosing a combination that consisted of innerwear, a jacket, jeans, and a bandana. The look vaguely resembled the male protagonist from a masterpiece game of the last century.

I played retro games as well as modern games thanks to my brother, so although the look was a bit behind the times, it matched my tastes.

"Okaaay. What will you pick for your first weaponnn?" the cat asked.

I turned to a different page in the catalog. All kinds of weapons were listed, including a wooden sword, a practice sword with a dull blade, a knife, a bow, a sling, and a staff.

I should choose something that matches my outfit.

"I'll go with the knife," I said.

"Okaaay. So for your weapon and equipment... Wazaaaam." It was hard to tell if Cheshire's voice was energetic or not, but as he said that, my appearance changed. My outfit switched to the one I had just chosen, and a knife now hung from a belt at my waist. Most impressive of all, my appearance had changed to mirror the avatar I'd made earlier.

"Wow, this is something else," I said as I looked at myself in the full-length mirror Cheshire had provided. *It looks pretty good.*

"Oh yeah, that's right, here's your starting moneyyy." Cheshire handed me five coins that appeared to be made out of silver. "Five silver coins is worth 5,000 lirrr. One rice ball costs about 10 lir, by the waaay."

Then 1 lir would be about 10 yen, I thought. *In that case, 5,000 lir is a lot of money.*

"Is it okay to get this much in the beginning?" I asked.

"Yep. Be sure to learn how to make money before it runs out, thoooough," he said.

In other words, I probably won't get any more after this, so I should use it wisely.

"Well then, it's finally time to transfer your Embryooo," he said.

"Oh, the thing in all the rumors!" I said.

Embryos.

I'd heard they were the greatest feature in *Infinite Dendrogram*. They offered true uniqueness and evolved in infinite ways based on the player.

They were partners that exceeded the likes of items and equipment.

My brother, who was already playing the game, said, “If this hadn’t been a well-made dive VRMMO, but just a regular MMO instead, I’m sure it still would’ve been a hit as long as it had the Embryo system.”

“Do you need an explanation on Embryooos?” asked the cat.

“Since you’re offering, I guess I should listen to it,” I said. *It’s probably best to hear the tutorials for unique systems, after all.*

“Okaaay,” said the cat. “All players receive an Embryo at the starrrt. The only time they’ll look the same is while they are in this zeroth fooorm. With the first form and beyond, they’ll change in completely different ways based on their ownerrr.”

“Ohhh,” I said. *As a gamer, I can’t help but be fascinated by features that allow for something to be totally unique.*

“Although the possibilities are infinite, there are some rough categorieees,” added the cat.

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” I said. This was because I’d done my best to block out any information before I started playing. I’d been worried that I might abandon my entrance exams if I’d found out something about the game, as it would have made it harder to resist playing it.

The only information I’d heard from my brother was that “it’s fun.” It might have been the case that he’d also been worried about my exams, and so he hadn’t told me anything specific.

“The broad categories arrre: Type Arms — a device type that players can equip as a weapon or armorrr. Type Guardian — a monster type that protects the playerrr. Type Chariot — a vehicle type that players can riiide. Type Castle — a building type that players can reside innn. Type Territory — a barrier type that players can deployyy. That’s about ittt.”

“Ohhh,” I said. I was starting to get excited to see how my Embryo would turn out.

“Also, besides these ones, there are rare and advanced categories that an Embryo can evolve into, tooo. There are even categories that are unique to one Embryooo. It’d be nice if you could get onnne.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “But if that’s the case, there are bound to be players who keep resetting their character until they get a rare category.”

“Ahh, you can’t remake your character in this gaaame,” said the cat.

“Huh?”

"Even if someone bought different hardware and played the game, that person would log in as the same character as the first tiiime," Cheshire explained. "Their Embryo would also be the saaame. This is because we keep records on our side of users' brain wave dataaa."

"......" I was silent.

They record our brain wave data... I thought. *Yeah, that sounds kind of scary.*

"Even if they were able to reset, it's all based on that person anywaaay, so I think their Embryo would end up exactly the saaame," said the cat.

Is that how it works?

"Annnd... while we were talking, your Embryo finished transferrinnng," the cat added.

"Huh? ...Ah." I realized that on the back of my left hand was now embedded a faintly glowing oval gem.

"That's your Embryooo," Cheshire said. "It'll be stuck to your left hand during its zeroth form, but it'll come off after it hatches and reaches its first forrrm."

In other words, I guess it's sort of like I'm incubating an egg.

"By the way, is there any chance it can break while it's an egg?" I asked.

"That won't happennn," said the cat. "Any damage an Embryo receives while in its zeroth form will be passed on to the playerrr."

Ahh, I see. So that means the Embryo will be safe even if the player dies.

"But after they hatch, Embryos can be damaged and break like anything elllse," the cat said. "They'll self-repair over time, thooough."

It's kind of like a living creature.

"By the way, after your Embryo turns into its first form, a tattoo of a crest will appear where the egg waaas," said the cat. "It serves as a sort of identification for players in this worrrld. Without it, you wouldn't be able to tell players apart from NPCees."

"Is that so?" I asked.

But no, there's no way you would mistake an NPC for a human... right?

"Also, the crest has the ability to store your Embryooo," said the cat. "When you don't need it, you can keep your Embryo in your left hannnd. You'll be together with it as long as you play this game, so please take care of ittt."

"Got it," I said.

I'm still not sure how my Embryo will evolve, but that's fine. It all comes down to oneself anyway, so I guess it'll work out on its own.

"It's nice to meet you, partner," I said.

Needless to say, there was no response from my Embryo, but I got the feeling that it shined slightly.

"Lastly, please choose which nation to joiiin." Cheshire laid out a map on the study's desk. It was an old scroll map. After it was unfurled, however, pillars of light rose up from seven locations on the map, and from within them, I could see various towns. "The nations with pillars of light are the ones you can join in the beginninnng. What you see in the pillars is the capital of each nationnn."

Floating in letters of light around each of the pillars was the name and explanation of each nation.

Surrounded by castle walls is a Western fantasy town, with a white limestone castle at its center.

Kingdom of Altar: the land of knights.

Sakura petals dance through the air in this city made of wood. A Japanese-style castle looms high above it.

Tenchi: the land of blades.

Subtle elegance hangs in the air of these mountains. A large river flows for all eternity through its valleys.

Huang He Empire: the land of the hermits.

Black smoke rises from countless factories and forms a cloud that blocks out the sky. On the ground is a modern day city made of steel.

Dryfe Imperium: the land of machines.

Bazaars nestle up to a giant oasis, surrounded by desert as far as the eye can see.

Caldina: the commercial city-state union.

Made from connecting countless large ships together, this man-made landmass floats in the middle of the open sea.

Granvaloa: the maritime nation.

At the base of Yggdrasil deep in the forest, elves, fairies, and demi-humans live in this secluded garden of flowers.

Legendaria: the homeland of fairies.

"Ohhh..." I said.

Seeing this makes me want to visit every one of them, I thought. *Tenchi has a similar feel to the Azuchi-Momoyama Period, while Huang He gives off a sense of Chinese fantasy. Dryfe seems like they'd have robots, and just walking through the bazaars of Caldina would feel like I was sightseeing. The seas of Granvaloa call out to me to seek adventure, and as for Legendaria, there's no need to even think of a reason.*

However...

"I'll go with the Kingdom of Altar," I said.

"Okaaay," said the cat. "By the way, as a quick survey, what would your reason for choosing that beee?"

"My brother is waiting for me."

"Oh, is that so..."

I had called my brother from the store right after I'd bought the game, and he'd said, "Then I'll be waiting for you in the Kingdom of Altar's capital."

...Since he's waiting, I have no choice, I thought. *But why did he choose the Kingdom of Altar, anyway? I'm pretty sure he likes robots and warships, so why didn't he go with the Dryfe Imperium or Granvaloa? Well, I guess I'll just have to ask him in person.*

"There are events that allow you to change the nation you belong to, so don't feel so down about ittt," said the cat.

"Yeah, thanks..." I said.

I need to change gears, I thought. *The Kingdom of Altar seems kind of plain and normal, but it just might be a nice place.*

"Okay then, I'm going to send you to the Kingdom of Altar's royal capital, Alteaaa," said the cat.

"Ah, just a second. What are the goals in this game?"

In all the games I'd played since I was a kid, even online ones, they'd had established goals such as defeating the evil god or demon king. I thought this game would be the same, but when I asked this to Cheshire...

"Anythinnng," was the response I got.

"Anything?" I asked.

"That's what I meannnt. Anythinnng. You can become a hero or the demon king, a king or a slave, a good person or an evil person. You can do something, or you can do nothing. You can stay in *Infinite Dendrogram*, or leave it. It's all up to you. If it's possible, then you can do anything you want." Cheshire's way of speaking had changed. "Just like the Embryo in your left hand, what's about to begin is infinite in possibility."

His speech had morphed from the slow drawl. It was almost as if he were narrating something.

"Welcome to *Infinite Dendrogram*. We warmly welcome you," a voice said.

As soon as these words were spoken, the study disappeared from my surroundings. The desk, the bookshelf, and even Cheshire, vanished, and I was left floating in the air.

"Huh?"

Below me was a familiar-looking world. I was looking down on the same continent I'd seen on the map just moments earlier. Before long, almost as if my body was being sucked down toward one point on the continent — the Kingdom of Altar — I started to fall at a great speed.

And just like that, I set foot in the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

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In front of the South Gate, Royal Capital Altea, Kingdom of Altar — Ray Starling.

"I thought I was going to die..." My heart was pounding after being suddenly dropped from the sky, and I forced in breaths to help calm myself down.

The feeling of the fall still remained with me:

The sight of scenery changing vividly before me at high speed.

The sound of my body scraping against the air as I fell.

The chill in the air whipping around me.

The smell of wind I had never smelt before.

The taste of dirt from the ground — I had fallen over in a daze, confused at how abnormally safe my landing had been. There hadn't been any pain — it was apparently turned off by default — but all five of my other senses had perceived this world just as they would the real one.

"This... is too real," I said quietly.

A true dive VRMMO... I finally had a sense that the dream game had become a reality.

I did think the theatrics had been a bit over the top, but I had now made my way into the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

I looked about my surroundings and saw a large gate behind me. It was encompassed by white castle walls that stretched up as far as I could see. There were also soldiers clad in Western-style armor serving as its gatekeepers.

This gate is one of the places I saw in Cheshire's room, so it's probably safe to say this is Altea, the Kingdom of Altar's royal capital.

The gate was open leading into the town, and for a while now, carriages and people had been coming and going.

It seems I can pass through just fine.

As it was my first time, I timidly — or, more accurately, suspiciously — passed through the gate and was able to enter the town without any trouble.

"All right," I said with relief. *It looks like they don't do inspections for people entering or leaving Altea.*

Since I'd safely made it into town, all that remained was to head to where I was supposed to meet my brother.

"If I remember correctly, he said a large water fountain on the capital's central street," I said. "He did say I could reach it by heading straight from the entrance, but... hmm... I'll take a look just in case."

I recited the words "main menu" in my mind, and just like it was described in the manual, a game window appeared in front of me. The window was split into two; on the right side was my name and a simplified view of my stats, while on the left side was a list of various menu commands.

I glanced over at my stats and saw that my current level was 0. Jobs in *Infinite Dendrogram* supposedly each had their own level, and since I was currently jobless, my level was stuck at 0.

"Map... Here it is." I found what I was looking for in the menu and opened it up. A new window appeared displaying a map of the Royal

Capital Altea.

Normally, a map had to be filled in by traveling around or by buying maps. However, the manual explained that a player's starting area, the capital of the nation they joined and its surroundings, got input into the map from the start.

This is useful.

"I see. I see," I murmured.

The city of Altea was circular in shape and surrounded by castle walls. These walls had a gate at each of the four cardinal points, and stretching out from each of them was a large, stone-paved road leading to the center of the city.

The roads would have intersected into a cross if they had continued; however, this was not the case. At the center of the royal capital was another ring of castle walls, and inside it was the area for nobility. Special permission was required to enter this area, and at its center was the royal castle.

Well, I probably won't have any need to go there for a while, I thought.

The central street we were supposed to meet at was the one running from the South Gate to the nobility area. The gate I had just passed through, by the way, was the South Gate.

So if I simply head straight, I should be able to reach the water fountain.

I was walking while looking at my map and thinking this, when...

"Ah?!"

"Huh?" Somehow, I had locked eyes with a woman I didn't know. She had run out from a side alley, and since I'd been engrossed in my map, I hadn't noticed until she was right upon me. I reacted late and wasn't able to avoid her, causing us to collide. As a result, I was flung more than fifteen meters away.

"Gah..." I muttered. *That felt like it caused some serious damage.*

As a matter of fact, the window screen I still had open showed that I'd lost 80% of my HP. In addition to this, I appeared to have broken some bones. The status effects "broken left arm" and "broken right leg" were now being displayed.

Just one collision with a lady, and I receive such near-fatal wounds as these... come on, just how shockingly frail am I?

"A-Are you all right?!" The woman that ran into me rushed over to my side with a pale look on her face. She had soft hair and kind facial features... and was wearing white, metal armor that looked absurdly heavy.

I wouldn't be surprised if that thing weighs a hundred kilos.

"I-I'm..." I tried to tell her, "I'm okay. It was no big deal." However, my body was still numb from the damage and I couldn't properly move my tongue.

"I'm so sorry! Force Heal!" Her hand instantly glowed white and particles of light fell from it onto my body. My HP was completely healed, and the status effects for my broken bones were also gone.

"Oh... ohhh..."

That must've been healing magic. It was a common occurrence in video games to nearly die and then get completely healed, but this was what it was like to actually experience it. *...It's kind of scary.*

"I'm terribly sorry! This is all because I wasn't paying attention to what's in front of me while running..." she said.

"N-No, I was also looking away... By the way, are you okay?" I asked. We'd collided with enough force to give me near-fatal wounds, so I was worried that she might have been injured as well, but... she was completely unharmed.

She appeared to be a really high-level player, and the equipment she was wearing looked to be of a high-grade as well. Her stats, then, would most likely be high, too.

So that's why our collision ended up the way it did.

"I'm fine," she replied. "But I caused you to get such a terrible injury..."

"Oh no, y-you were kind enough to heal me, so I'll be just fine." I couldn't help but speak politely. On top of that, I was fairly sure my voice was shaking. The damage from when we'd collided had caused me to lose my nerve.

"B-By the way, it looked like you were in quite the hurry. Is there something wrong?" When I asked her this, the woman suddenly appeared to have remembered something.

"Well actually, my little sister left the house and I was in the middle of searching for her."

"Your sister?" I asked.

"Yes. This is her in this picture. Have you seen her anywhere?" Asking this, she took out a picture and showed it to me. *Although this world has a* *fantasy setting, it would appear that pictures are readily available.* In the picture was a cute little girl. She looked like a younger version of the woman in front of me, but with straight hair instead of wavy.

Her sister, huh? I thought. *Like me and my brother, she must be playing this game together with her sister.*

I could only stay silent as she looked at me in desperation. I felt bad for her, but I hadn't seen her sister. "I'm sorry. I just started recently, and I just entered this town through that gate a moment ago..."

"Is that so... Then she might already be inside... Um, this is my contact information," the woman added. "If you happen to see my sister anywhere, please contact me! Also, I'm really sorry for running into you!" She took out a piece of paper, wrote something on it, and then handed it to me.

"There's no need to apologize, so please go and search for your sister," I said.

"Thank you... Well then, goodbye!" she said and darted off, leaving me with a memo in my hand. The following was written on it: "Liliana Grandria, Knights of the Royal Guard Vice Commander, Kingdom of Altar."

"Huh?"

Characters I had never seen before were being translated into Japanese in my head. More shocking than that, however, was the rest of the memo...

"The quest 'Search for Milianne Grandria, Difficulty Level 5' has started. Please see the quest screen for further details."

I was at a loss for words.

Umm... yeah.

Although she looked like a real human to me, this meant that she wasn't actually a player, but instead...

"She was an NPC?!"

And just like that, I realized again just how unbelievably realistic *Infinite Dendrogram* was.

◇

Shortly after I met Liliana and received my first quest, I arrived at the large water fountain on the central street where I was to meet my brother. On the way there, I had a look at the help information, and apparently difficulty level 5 quests were supposed to be undertaken by a party of advanced players. So without a doubt, it wasn't something I could partake in.

Why would a quest like this be given to a beginner, anyway? I wondered. *I should just ask Bro about it for now.*

Thinking about this, I had hurried my way to the water fountain, and...

The scene that greeted me left me speechless.

There was a nearly two-meter-tall *bear costume* with a sign reading "Welcome little brother" parked in front of the water fountain.

"...What in the world is that?" I managed.

There's no way... But... No, no way... But then again...

This is where we're supposed to meet.

There likely aren't that many people out there waiting for their younger brother.

He wouldn't know my character name, and it's not like he can use my real one, so it makes sense to write "little brother" on the sign. I get that part.

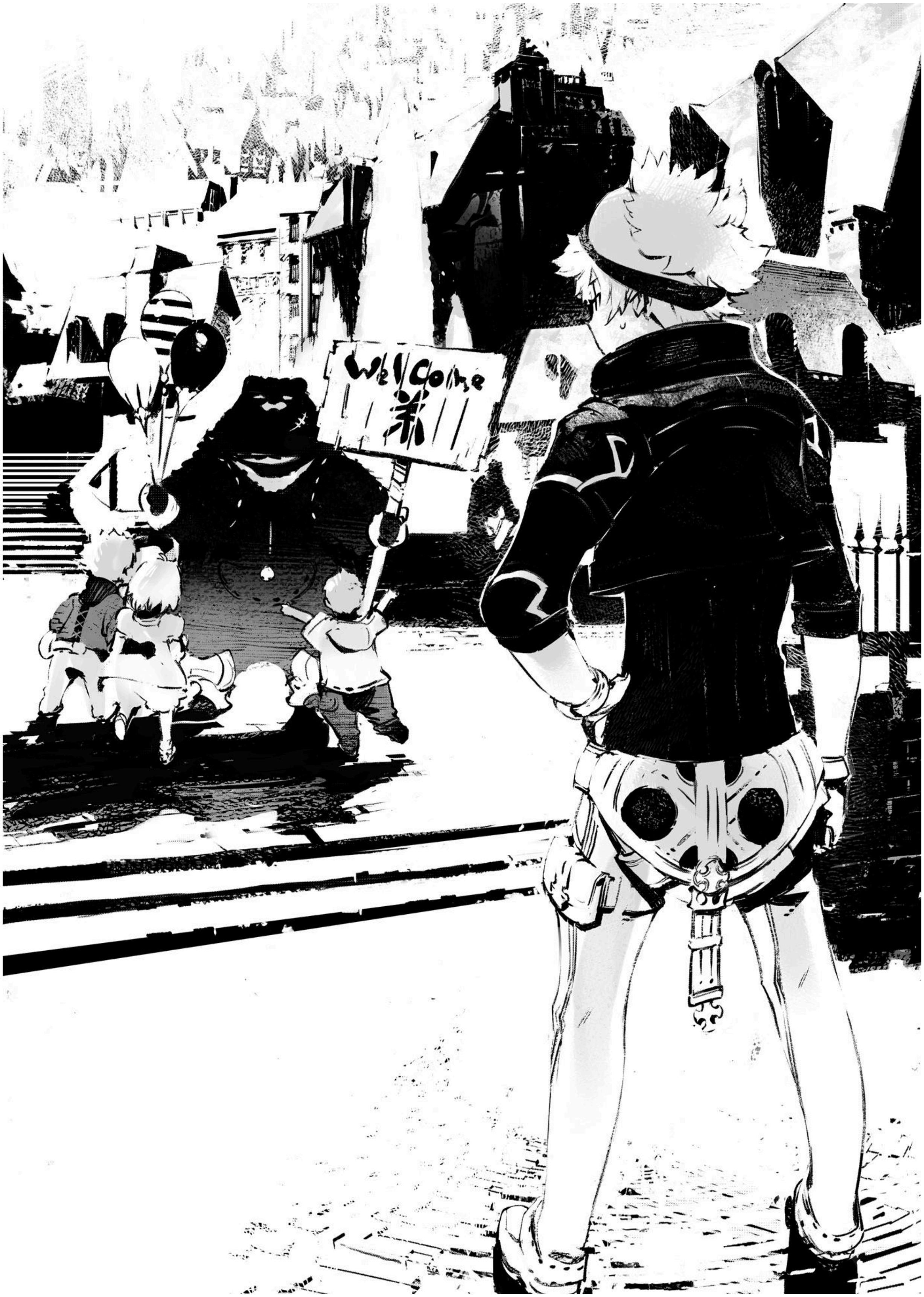
But...

"Why the costume?" I asked aloud.

It's going to take some guts to talk to that thing.

For a little while now, children had been gathering around the bear. I couldn't tell if they were NPCs or players, but they seemed to be very attached to the bear. They were climbing onto its head and lap, as well as hanging from its arms.

I wasn't getting anywhere at this rate, so I steeled my nerves, and decided to talk to it. "Excuse me. I would like to ask you something..."


Welcome
米

"Yes, yes, just bear with me for a moment."

Was that a pun...? I thought. *I get that it you're a bear, but still...*

"Are you Shuichi Mukudori... Forget it, is that you, Bro?" I asked.

"Indeed it is," he said. "Hey, Reiji."

...I so wanted to be wrong.

"I'm glad we were able to meet up." The bear — I mean, my brother, Shuichi Mukudori — stood up and said, "Shall we go, then?"

He then pulled out some candy from his storage bag — or rather, a pocket attached to his stomach — and passed them out to the children gathered around him.

Is he pretending to be that famous character? I thought. *In that case, he should be a cat, or at least a raccoon.*

"Yay!"

"Thanks, Mr. Bear!"

The children received their candy and then headed off in cheerful spirits. Before long, only my brother and I were left remaining.

"I guess first up should be introductions," my brother said. "My name here is Shu Starling."

"I'm Ray Starling," I said. "So like I thought, we did end up with the same name."

Since it was so easy to use the English translation of our last name, Mukudori, whenever someone in my family made a character, eight out of ten times we'd end up with the name Starling.

"So, what should we do?" my brother asked. "It looks like your Embryo hasn't hatched yet, so should I show you around the town? While we're at it, if you want to pick up some equipment, I can lend you some money at no interest."

"Oh, well, actually..." I explained to him about the quest I had just received.

"Really... A quest from Liliana," he said. "I've never received one before."

"Really, though, why would I get a quest like this when I'm at level 0?" I asked.

"That's because this world is realistic, and a lot of quests are triggered by coincidence," he said. "Incidents don't occur in order to create a quest, but quests arise when there happens to be an incident. There are many quests you won't be able to trigger intentionally, and there'll be a lot of cases where you end up going on one you didn't intend to. Well, consider it a good baptism... you were able to get a sense for how realistic the people of this world are, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "It was so realistic, in fact, I'm a bit suspicious as to whether I'm talking to the real you, or just an NPC pretending to be you."

"Of course it's me," he said. "You better bear-lieve it."

"Stop it with the bear stuff!" It made me feel weird because I knew the person inside and could picture him.

"Ha ha ha. By the way, Liliana is a contender for the first or second most popular person in this kingdom. She even has a fan club made up of both players and tians."

"There's a fan club... Oh, and what's a 'tian'?" I asked.

"A person that isn't a player," he said. "Well, you can just think of it as the general term for NPCs."

"Interesting... so that means even NPCs participate in fan clubs," I said.

"According to the developers, 'their personalities and ability to think are on the same level as humans.' So that kind of thing is the bear minimum of their capabilities."

Really, this game is so sophisticated, it's almost alarming.

"By the way, did it say anywhere in the quest information about where to search?" my brother asked.

"No, nothing," I said. "They're telling me to search for someone without any hints. That's why I don't know where or how I should start."

Although to be accurate, this memo would count as a hint, I figured.

"Hmm," he said. "Can you hand me that memo for a sec?"

"Here you go."

My brother took the memo, but instead of reading its contents, he flipped it over and showed its back to me.

Dear Sister,

The shops were all out of remberries, so I'm going to go get some. I'm bringing bug-repellent incense, so I'll be okay. Please look forward to it and wait for me.

From Milia.

"Isn't this..." I said slowly.

"She must have been in a real hurry," said my brother. "She wrote her contact information on the back of the memo her sister left and gave it to you."

I didn't notice it either. Since the memo had been written on parchment paper, I hadn't been able to see through it.

"What are these remberries?" I asked.

"Remberries are one of the high-grade specialties from around here," he said. "Just think of them as really delicious fruit."

"'Go get' must mean that she went to go search for them," I said. *Milianne seems to be quite the proactive kid.*

"There are two places around here where you can get remberries," said my brother. "The first is an orchard within the capital. You can harvest there if you pay the fee of 5,000 lir per basket."

Isn't that the entire amount you get at the beginning of the game? I thought. *That's expensive!*

"The other one is just outside the South Gate. It's called Old Reve Orchard."

"Old Reve Orchard?" I asked.

"Some things happened, and insect-type monsters have taken up living there. So it's an abandoned orchard," he said. "Even now, there are a lot of fruit trees growing wild there, but at the same time, it's become a nest for monsters."

"So the stuff about bug-repellent incense must mean..." I said slowly.

"Probably so."

That's way too proactive!

"Go to the safer orchard!" I shouted.

"5,000 lir is asking a bit much from a child," said my brother. "Even the market value of 50 lir for one would be tough."

"But still, that doesn't mean..."

"Old Reve Orchard, by the way, is a place players usually mistake for being beginner-friendly due to how close it is to the starting point," he said. "However, it's a dungeon where beginners enter and then get killed right off the bat. It's also known as the 'newbie killer.'"

This couldn't be any worse.

I'd just realized this now, but when I'd met Liliana, she had probably been headed toward the old orchard. When Liliana had said, “Then she might already be inside,” she must have been convinced that Milianne had already entered the orchard because I hadn’t seen her after passing through the South Gate.

“Well,” my brother continued, “in any case, it’d be best to clear this one quickly. It’s probably the type where you’ll fail if time elapses.”

“What?” I asked.

“I told you, right?” he said. “In this world, incidents are realistic and occur spontaneously. That’s why there are no guarantees that things will be fine until the player clears the quest, unlike in older games.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Let me tell you this from my experience as one of the starting players,” he said. “There have been examples in the past of people dying. A sage revered as a hero, the commander of the knights, and even the king of this nation — they all died.”

“......” I didn’t know what to say.

“Despite that, the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* carries on without a hitch,” he said. “That’s because it’s real.”

I began to imagine...

What if the girl in the picture gets attacked by monsters and tragically dies? Imagining it gave me an unpleasant feeling. Thinking about Liliana caused those feelings to sink even further. *I know that they’re NPCs, but...*

“That’d leave a bad taste in my mouth,” I said.

“Wouldn’t it?” my brother agreed. “So let’s clear it and shoot for a happy ending.”

I couldn’t see my brother’s face because of the bear costume, but I had the feeling that he was smiling on the inside.

Thus, my brother and my newbie self formed a party, and we set off to tackle my first quest.

The quest to clear was “Search for Milianne Grandria.”

The difficulty level, 5.

The location was the trap dungeon “newbie killer,” Old Reve Orchard.

The goal... was a happy ending.

Start quest.

Chapter One: Nemesis

"By the way, have you pawsed to look at your starting stats yet?" my brother asked me as we headed toward Old Reve Orchard.

Come to think of it, not yet, I realized.

"Status information... Here it is." I clicked on the option and a new window appeared displaying my stats.

My level was of course 0, and I currently had no job equipped. It seemed multiple jobs could be equipped at once, and so in addition to the level for each job, there was also a total level. My level for both was still 0.

The other stats displayed were HP, MP, SP, STR, END, DEX, AGI, and LUC. Each of them was fairly low; other than having 98 HP and 23 SP, the rest were all below 20. I didn't have anything to compare them with, but those stats were probably weak.

...But then again, I guess there's no way a newbie at level 0 would be strong, I reminded myself.

"So I'll be going into this dungeon called the 'newbie killer' at level 0, won't I?" I asked.

"You'll bearly make it past zero if you don't equip a job," said my brother. "Do you want to get one before we go?"

"...No, it doesn't look like we have the time. I'll go like this," I said.

It'd be unbearable if the girl in the picture were to die while we were doing that, I thought. *The most important thing right now is speed.*

My brother and I talked as we ran.

"Can I ask you a few things?" I asked.

"I guess I can bear that."

"I didn't see a stat for INT, so what factors into magic strength?" I asked. "There is magic in this game, right?" *Liliana did use healing magic, after all.*

"It's based on your max MP and the level of the magic skill," said my brother. "Also, the total amount of MP you pour into it. And there is no INT stat in this game, by the way. Your intelligence is the bear basics, yourself, after all."

That makes sense, I thought. *I wouldn't really get what it meant if you told me my intelligence went up.*

"Oh, and as for skills that use SP, their strength isn't based on your SP, but on various other related stats," my brother went on. "Well, those various stats will receive adjustments from your Embryo, so their variation will be infinite."

"That sounds complicated," I said.

"If you bear with it, I'm sure it'll go fine! How things turn out will be a pawsitive reflection of your individuality."

...He's really getting into those bear puns, isn't he?

"Oh, yeah. Let me give you some accessories I have." Bro Bear handed me some items from his bag.

When I looked at them, these included: ten Healing Potions that could easily heal me to max health, one Lifesaving Brooch, and four Dragonscale Ward accessories.

"The Lifesaving Brooch bears the brunt of your fatal damage, but it has a 10% chance of breaking," my brother explained. "How many times this is checked is determined by the amount of damage divided by your HP. The Dragonscale Ward will reduce incoming damage by 90%, but it'll break after one use."

I see, they appear to be throwaway accessories, but they'll definitely help.

"This game has level and stat restrictions for equipment," said my brother. "So I'll beef you up with these accessories instead since they don't have any level restrictions."

There are five slots for equipping accessories, so they'll all fit perfectly.

"Thanks, Bro... Hey that reminds me, what's the death penalty in this game?"

A death penalty: it was a feature found in many online games. To put it simply, it was some sort of demerit for a character that died. They could lose levels, for example, or have their stats lowered for a period of time.

Since he's trying to help me avoid dying, this game must have some kind of a death penalty, I thought. This was why I wanted to ask him what that penalty was, but...

"A 24 hour login ban."

The answer I received was unexpected.

"...A what?" I asked.

"If you die in this game, you won't be able to log in for 24 hours in real time, or 72 hours in the game world," he said.

...Are they out of their minds? I thought incredulously. *I can't believe there's a game that won't let you play it as a death penalty.*

"The frightening thing about this penalty isn't that you can't play the game; it's that three days will pass by in *Infinite Dendrogram* without you," he said. "So for example, if you're in the middle of a quest like we are, you'll have to abandon the quest for three days. When you're in a world as realistic as this one... that's what's so scary."

What would happen if Bro Bear and I were to leave this quest alone for three days?

...The answer to that was obvious.

"I'll tag along and try not to die," I said. "I'm not sure how useful I'll be at level 0, though."

Or more like, I won't be of any use at all.

"By the way, like I mentioned earlier, Old Reve Orchard is a trap dungeon known as the 'newbie killer,'" said my brother. "Innocent newbs starting *Dendro* without any prior knowledge enter the dungeon saying, 'Yaay, I'm gonna go on an adventure nearby,' and then it's game over, they get their bear butts exposed and smacked to the extreme. They get insta-killed and can't log in for a whole day."

It's like a trauma-generating machine.

"However, it's strange. Why is the difficulty level 5? Based on the levels of the monsters in the dungeon... it's too high."

As I listened to my brother mutter this, we passed through the South Gate of the Royal Capital Altea.

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The orchard was located about ten minutes' running distance from the South Gate. It was surrounded by a metal fence, and a worn-out sign at the entrance read, "Welcome to Reve Orchard." The place, however, seemed long-abandoned. Plants grew wild, and the color on the sign had faded.

"Well then, it's time to storm in, but..." My brother stopped in front of the entrance to Old Reve Orchard, which was now a den of insect monsters. Right after that, a new window appeared before me.

“Party request from Shu Starling.
Will you join this party? Yes / No”

“It’ll be easier to cover for you if I can constantly track your status,” he said.

“Okay, got it.” I clicked “Yes” on the window, and as soon as I did, a screen opened up showing the status of our party. My brother’s name had been added to it as well.

There’s space on the party screen for four more players, so this game must have a maximum party limit of six.

Displayed along with my brother’s name were also his stats. However...

“What’s going on with this?” I asked.

On my brother’s status screen, everything other than his name was blacked out, including even his level and HP.

“Ah. That’s the concealing ability of this suit,” he said. “If there’s a difference in level between me and an enemy or ally, then they can’t bear witness to my stats.”

What kind of ability is that? I thought. *That makes it harder to help with support magic... Not that I have any... Oh, that reminds me.*

“Hey Bro, I didn’t get the chance to ask this because of the quest, but why are you wearing a bear costume?” I asked.

My brother rubbed the eyes of his costume with his bear fingers. “It’s a story that’ll leave us both in tears.”

“We’re kind of busy, so hurry up and answer my question,” I said.

“My little brother is looking at me so coldly...” he grumbled to himself, before gradually starting to speak. “So, you know how there’s a part where you create your character, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It was a pain to make it from scratch, so I tried to do it using myself as the base.”

“So did I.”

“Well, I made a bit of a mistake...”

“A mistake...” I began. “What did you do?”

“I accidentally confirmed it without making any changes.”

“...Oh boy.”

So in other words, inside the suit was my brother’s actual face and appearance. Playing an online game with your actual face was a risky thing to do. This was especially true in my brother’s case.

Yeah, with that you’d have no choice but to wear something like a suit.

“By the way, the reason I chose this kingdom is because I saw a store in the capital selling costumes,” he said.

“Oh, so that’s why you didn’t go somewhere that was more along your tastes, like Dryfe or Granvaloa,” I said.

“Drastic times called for drastic measures... Oh, and by the way, costume number one cost 4,980 lir.”

“That’s almost the entire starting amount!” I cried. *Just how exactly did he get by in the beginning?!*

“On top of that, it was a gag item with no defense,” he said. “I was one of the first players, so there was no information available. Really, from that hopeless start, it’s been a path full of hardship until I got a hold of this costume.”

“So what abilities does this one have?” I asked.

“Take a look.”

“Ultimate Suit Series: Hind Bear

Ancient Legendary Armor

DEF +903 (beary high)

Skills:

Disguise: completely hides your stats from anyone with a total level of 100 less than yours.

Built-In AC: a built-in AC designed for any environment. The perfect temperature any time, any place.

Power Assist: supports movement with muscle motors. STR +903.

Bullet-Proof Made: able to withstand even crossfire. Reduces damage from physical ranged attacks by 903.

Knife-Proof Made: feel safe on even the days with a lot of assassins. Reduces damage from physical close-ranged attacks by 903.

Utility Bear Hands: mysteriously, these hands can properly grab things, and they can be used quite skillfully. Increased damage to fish and insect monsters.

????: ■”

What’s with this overly high-spec gag item?

“What’s ‘+903 (beary high)’ supposed to mean?” I asked. “Is it actually as high as that implies, though? Wait, what level are you anyway, Bro Bear?”

I can’t see his stats at all right now, so at the very least, his total level should be over 100, but...

“That’s a bearied se-cr-et,” he said.

Man, that’s irritating.

“All right then, that’s enough of our comedy skit for now. Let’s go save the girl.”

“...About 90% of the material came from you, Bro Bear, but I agree,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We made our way into Old Reve Orchard. Once inside, we followed a path of weeds and broken signs. On one of the signs was written, “500 metels to remberry field.”

“I take it that means 500 meters?” I asked.

“Pretty easy to understand, isn’t it?” my brother agreed. “Also... have you noticed?”

“...The sound, right?” I asked. “I’ve been hearing it for a while now.”

From the direction the sign pointed in, I could hear clashing sounds and the cries of something inhuman. I couldn’t see anything due to all the plants in the way; however, Liliana, who’d entered the dungeon ahead of us, was without a doubt fighting something.

That was when I realized that the sound of battle could only be heard from the remberry field, while everywhere else was quiet.

“Are there no other players here?” I asked.

“Ahh, there are a lot of people with trauma from this dungeon,” said my brother. “On top of that, the drop items and materials you can gather at these levels aren’t all that great, either. Also, the insects attack in swarms, and a lot of them can cause Poison or Paralyze, so a counter for status effects is a must.”

I guess it’s what you’d call an unpopular hunting ground.

“Well, thanks to that, it does make it easier for me to fight...” my brother muttered. “Baldr, activate in second form.”

“Ready.” An electronic voice I hadn’t heard before answered him.

The back of my brother’s left hand began to glow through his costume, and then something suddenly flew out from it. The bear’s silhouette now had the following strange additions to it: a ring of gun barrels, a motorized mechanism for quick reloading, an ammunition belt, and a giant drum-like magazine.

Right there before me was a heavy firearm known as the Gatling gun.

“...Isn’t this game supposed to be primarily fantasy-based?” I asked. As I looked at my brother’s Embryo, which was likely a Type Arms, I couldn’t help but ask this question.

I envisioned Type Arms to be more, you know, like a demon sword or a demon spear. Is something like a Gatling gun allowed? I wondered.

“The machine Imperium Dryfe also exists in this world, so my Embryo is just fine.” Bro Bear laughed as he hoisted the drum magazine on his back and lifted the barrel of the Gatling gun under his right arm.

As I stared, somewhat shocked at the surreal sight of him...

“KIKIKI...”

“CHIKI... CHIKI...”

Bee and ant-type insect monsters had begun to swarm around us.

“All right then, let’s bear-eak our way through to the remberry field,” Bro Bear said, as he readied his Gatling gun... and fired away.

“YEAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!”

In the next instant, the sound of explosions roared about us. The insect monsters were smashed to pieces, and their bodily fluids were scattered all around.

The gun barrel spun, and each bullet it spit out added to the number of corpses. As soon as the monsters fell to the ground, they turned into specks of light and disappeared.

It was a one-sided killing spree. Bro Bear mowed down the monsters faster than they could appear. In under a minute, a few thousand empty cartridges had been ejected from the Gatling gun.

Normally, there would be no way he could hold and fire something that heavy-looking. However, based on what he had showed me earlier, his costume was essentially a power suit.

His STR is at least ninety times higher than mine, so that might be why *it's possible,* I thought. *Even so, it's bizarre for him to be shooting while walking.*

The reason he didn't run out of ammo while firing at that pace was probably because his Gatling gun was an Embryo. It was likely using some sort of mysterious power.

Seeing him carry a Gatling gun and rapidly fire like that... It's almost like that one scene from that old, famous movie, I thought. *I think it was the second film in a series about cyborgs, and the most well-known title of an actor who later became a state governor.*

Well, given that it's a bear costume doing it and not a muscle-bulging, macho man actor, it'd probably turn into a C-class movie.

"In any case, it really doesn't look like I'll be of any use..." I said. If I were to carelessly get out in front, I would probably end up like Swiss cheese in an instant.

"Oh, you can ignore the drop items. I want you to stick right behind me," said my brother. He was referring to the drop items that had remained behind after the monsters disappeared.

Parts like this are really game-like.

"Gotcha," I said. "Hm? Isn't this situation kind of like..."

It was a situation found in a lot in games. The low-level player character would get help in the beginning from a high-level character and proceed through the game. This character would be really powerful and helpful, but would usually end up dying. The death would sometimes be used to close out the opening act.

"'Uuuuuurgh,' I think it is," I said. "That brings back memories."

"...Wait, I'd be the one that dies in that scenario." My brother's voice sounded unsettled.

It was hard to tell if we were in battle, working, or doing a comedy skit, but we traversed the 500 meters and arrived at the remberry field.

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"Who's there?! Y-You're..." As expected, Liliana was engaged in battle at the remberry field with a swarm of insect monsters. She was taking on a countless number of them while protecting her younger sister behind her.

"Yes, we made it!" I said, relieved.

“The bear cavalry (no horses) has arrived!” my brother agreed.

He fired his Gatling gun again in grand style. The insects that had been encircling Liliana started to fall at an incredible rate.

I was worried he might hit the two of them, but he handled his Gatling gun skillfully, and there wasn’t even a ricochet. He easily wiped out the encirclement of insects, and we made it safely over to the two sisters.

“Are you all right?” I asked, repeating back the same words Liliana had said to me earlier.

“You’re the one from before... Why are you here?” She looked at me in surprise.

Hm? She’s reacting as if she just realized who I was, I thought. *So then when she said “Y-You’re” a moment ago, was that directed at... my brother?*

“And you, as well...” Liliana said. “Really, why?”

“We came to help,” said my brother. “My little brother was saying, ‘I can’t leave them alone! I’m going to go rescue her, no matter what!’ so I figured I’d bear with him.”

I didn’t say that! I thought. *I don’t recall saying anything that embarrassing!*

“Your little brother... so that’s why,” Liliana whispered to herself as if she had understood something.

The mood here... I think Liliana and my brother just might know each other.

Liliana turned to me and bowed deeply. “Thank you very much. If you two hadn’t come, I wouldn’t have been able to protect my sister, Milia.”

“O-Oh, no,” I said. “All I did was watch from behind...”

“Still, please let me thank you,” she said. “Even though I caused you trouble, you brought reinforcements to come save me... I won’t forget this kind deed.”

Her words went beyond making me feel embarrassed; they made me feel a sense of guilt. The quest had been automatically accepted for me, and all I had done was stick safely behind my brother like a parasite.

That guilt caused me to avert my gaze from Liliana, and when I did, it landed on her sister, Milianne.

She’s as cute as she was in the picture. No, even more so.

“Loli?” my brother asked. “Lolicon?”

No I'm not! I fumed.

"Sniffle, sniffle..." Milianne was crying.

Well, yeah, she would be, I thought. *She was surrounded by a bunch of insect monsters, and her life was even in danger.*

However, given that there were still about five fruits — most likely the remberries — inside the basket she was holding, she really had her stuff together.

"A-Anyway, let's get out of here," I suggested. "It'll be dangerous if more monsters come."

"Very well," replied Liliana, and a change occurred on my menu screen.

"NPCs have joined your party.
Liliana Grandria has joined.
Milianne Grandria has joined."

Ahh, NPCs can join parties, too. And their stats are...

Milianne's stats were lower than mine were at level 0. Liliana's stats, however, were very high. Her Paladin level was 60, and her total level was 210. She even had over 5,000 HP.

Well, then again, she is the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard, which means she's ranked second out of all the knights in this kingdom, I thought. *So it shouldn't be a surprise she's this strong.*

I then noticed that Bro Bear was silent and his expression was serious. I couldn't actually see it directly, but given how long I had known him, I could tell from the mood.

"Ray, the quest still hasn't been completed, has it?" he asked.

"Um, yeah," I said. "It hasn't changed at all."

"I see." Bro Bear readied his Gatling gun and looked about our surroundings. He appeared far more serious than when he had been mowing down insects earlier.

"Bro...?"

"Ray, the difficulty levels of quests are calculated individually by the control AIs in charge of them. The control AI takes into account information about the surrounding environment and people related to the quest."

"What?" I asked.

So the difficulties are calculated with information on the environment and related people? Control AIs really are impressive to be able to do that for every quest... but what does that have to do with anything?

"So, I was thinking the difficulty for this quest was high due to a time limit." My brother started to put his thoughts into words bit by bit. "I thought we cleared it easily because I'm suited for fighting against large numbers, but..."

His gaze fell to one spot on the ground.

"...we met up with Liliana and eliminated the swarm of insects. And yet, the quest still isn't complete. In other words, this quest has a difficultly of 5 even after taking into account that Liliana's total level is 210."

Right after he said this, the ground where he was looking exploded. Something huge and long flew out from it.

"GYULUUUUUUUUAAAAAAA!" It was a giant centipede almost thirty meters long. "Clink!"

The giant centipede had large, stag beetle-like jaws growing on its face in all four directions. Its skin was also covered in reptile-like scales. The bullet my brother had swiftly fired at it had been easily repelled.

It was completely different from the bugs my brother had been trampling over earlier. Even a beginner like me could tell.

This thing is strong.

I could hear Liliana's shocked voice beside me. "A Demi-Dragon Worm!"

"GIIIEEEEAAAAAAAA!" The ground exploded again, and another Demi-Dragon Worm appeared.

"A Demi-Dragon class monster, huh..." my brother said. "I get it now. If we need to protect this girl while facing off against several of these, then I can see why it has this difficulty rating even with some help. But even so!"

His voice sounded cheerful, almost as if his worries had disappeared. I, on the other hand, was intimidated by the two monsters and was at a loss for words.

"If you're up against me, that amount just isn't going to cut it!" My brother then lifted up both his arms and said, "It'd be fine to just smash them to pieces, but this is a good opportunity! Baldr! Activate your fourth fo—"

"GIIIEEEAAALEAAAAAA!"

“GYULUUUUUUUUAAAAAAA!”

“GYUIIILUUUUAAAAAAAAAA!”

“GYULUUUUUUUULOOAAAAAAA!”

Just then, four more Demi-Dragon Worms appeared from the ground in each direction, trapping my brother.

“Hey, wait, I can bearly move right now!” he protested. “Really though, there are still—” The newly appeared Demi-Dragon Worms locked their jaws onto my brother and then disappeared into the ground.

“.........Huh?” I couldn’t process what I had just seen.

“Ah!” gasped Liliana, as she bit her lip at the unexpected turn of events.

I checked the party status, but my brother’s stats were still blacked out. I couldn’t tell if he was alive or dead.

“Um, Bro, I’m sorry for triggering a flag, but... isn’t this a bit sudden?” I hesitated.

With my brother missing, the remaining two Demi-Dragon Worms drew toward us.

I was terrified. In an instant, I had been cast from the safe zone behind my brother into danger.

The biggest animal I had ever seen in my life was an elephant. Now, monsters far larger than that were bearing down toward me with cold hostility. Even if I knew this was a game, my legs shook.

“...There’s something I wish to ask of you,” Liliana said to me.

“Wh-What is it?”

“I’ll hold back one of them. Both, if possible. During that time, could you please take my sister to safety?”

“But...” I paused.

There are two of them, I thought. *Even for Liliana, by herself that’d be...*

No, I’m thinking wrong, I reminded myself. *At level 0, I won’t be of any help to her. In fact, I’d just get in her way if I stayed behind. That would put not only me, but Milianne in danger as well.*

“...All right.” I pulled Milianne’s hand and started running. Behind us, the battle between Liliana and the Demi-Dragon Worms commenced.

◇

The path where my brother had just recently mowed down enemies with his Gatling gun was clear of monsters.

We can make it to the exit in one go like this, I thought. *I have to say, though...* I only realized this after running desperately, but this game also incorporates the concept of fatigue.

On top of that, my legs were shaking, and the game was kind enough to display that I had the status effect Fear. *Infinite Dendrogram's* absolute realism even went so far as to convey the terror of a giant creature.

Even so, I ran, making sure that I never let go of Milianne's hand.

"Heh... Heh..." Following behind me, Milianne also ran in earnest. Her face was full of dread.

Both scared, we continued to run.

"By the way..." I said to Milianne. It was an attempt to help ease our worries, if even for a bit. I wasn't sure myself just exactly whose mind I was trying to put at ease though. "Milianne... Milia, so why did you come all the way here to get remberries?"

I asked her this half out of curiosity; the other half was for distraction.

"T-Today is Sister's birthday... She loves remberry cake, so I thought I would make it for her..." she stuttered.

"I see," I said.

"But there weren't any for sale at the shops, so I didn't know what to do," she said. "And then, a guy with glasses told me, 'If you have this incense, you can go get some from the orchard outside.'"

...So this is that four eyes' fault, I thought. *I don't know what he was thinking telling her that, but I'd like to punch that idiot for sending a kid to a place this dangerous.*

"Sister came to get me, but the effect of the incense wore off..." she said.

We had covered half the distance while we were talking.

Just the other half left, I thought. *At this rate, we'll make it the rest of the way.*

"...uluuuu!" Just then, I heard a roar and felt the ground tremble behind me.

I made the decision on the spur of the moment. I picked up Milianne and jumped to the side.

In the next instant, a Demi-Dragon Worm burst from the ground and chomped its jaws as it passed through the area where we had just been running.

"She couldn't have...!" An unpleasant thought compelled me to turn around, but I could still hear the sounds of battle.

Liliana was still fighting.

Could this be one of the two she was fighting, and it left to chase after us? I wondered. *Or maybe it's one of the ones that dragged my brother underground? The real issue is that, no matter which one it is, I don't have a way of fighting back.*

My stats were still at their default levels, and the Embryo on my left hand still hadn't hatched. *Even if it did hatch now, I can't imagine a newly-hatched Embryo would be able to stand up against an enemy that my brother's Gatling gun didn't work against.*

My heart pounded in terror and unease, while a cold sweat broke out on my forehead and down my back. I thought I might die just from how realistic it felt.

"GYULUUUUUUUUUEAAAAA!" The Demi-Dragon Worm exposed its long body from the ground and roared, not in an attempt to intimidate us, but rather in triumphant laughter.

"...The end of the road, huh?" I muttered.

The "newbie killer," Old Reve Orchard, I thought. *It looks like I'll also experience my first death here.*

But...

"W-Waaah..." Milianne was crying in my arms.

She's an NPC... a tian. Unlike me, if she dies, she won't come back. The thought left me unsettled. *Bro said that even the king died. I'm sure there aren't any special circumstances just for her. In this world, she'll die just like anybody else.*

"...Like I said, that'd leave a bad taste in my mouth!" I took off the Lifesaving Brooch and equipped it to Milianne. "Milia, can you run to the entrance from here by yourself?"

"...What?" She looked up at me with unease.

"I have to go and beat up this damn centipede for a bit," I said.

Right after I said this, the Demi-Dragon Worm charged at us. I pushed Milianne away, and like getting hit by a truck, I flew into the air.

"Gah... hah..."

It was a powerful impact, even worse than when I had collided with Liliana back in the town.

However, the damage had been 93. My remaining HP was 5... *I'm still alive.*

One of the four Dragonscale Wards I had equipped had broken and disappeared. I'd survived thanks to its ability to reduce the damage of the attack by 90%.

I forced my numb body to move and drank a Healing Potion from the item menu. My HP was fully restored.

I can still move.

As I turned around, I saw that Milianne was still standing there.

"Go! I'll take care of this guy!" I shouted.

It was a big lie; there was nothing I could do. However, I could at least buy some time. If she could run away during that time, that was all that mattered.

Milianne stood up and ran for the exit.

If she can get to the exit and return to the field, there should be other players and tians there. This is for the best, I thought, and was then immediately flung into the air again.

It was my second cycle of near-death, the Dragonscale breaking, healing with a potion, and then recovery.

"Hah! If you include the death penalty, I can take another three of your hits, you damn centipede!" I shouted.

The third attack came, but this time I avoided it. *Even at default stats, if I move, I can dodge it.*

However...

"What?!" I was caught by its tail and knocked aside.

The damage was nearly the same. My HP was dangerously low again, and another Dragonscale broke.

"Damn... it."

Only one more left.

Milianne still hadn't made it to the exit.

At the very least, I have to bide my time until then, I told myself. As I thought this, the Demi-Dragon Worm changed its focus of attack.

"GYUUUUEAAAA!" It twisted its large body around and laid its sights on Milianne.

"Hey, you bastard! What are you looking at?" I shouted.

It ignored me and charged after her.

“Waaaiiiitttt!”

I chased after it, but I couldn’t catch up with it at my speed. The large Demi-Dragon Worm struck Milianne, sending her small body floating upward into the air like a leaf. The basket she had been holding so dearly was forced from her hands, and tumbled to the ground.

“Aaaaahhh!” I dived headfirst and caught her falling body. There was a large impact as I caught her, and the last Dragonscale shattered.

That’s not the real issue right now.

I was frightened to do it, but I looked at Milianne’s face. A pain different from physical pain was stinging at my heart.

She was unconscious... but unhurt. In exchange, the Lifesaving Brooch I had placed on her had shattered.

It apparently works even when equipped to Milianne, I thought, relieved. *However, now that the brooch is broken, there won’t be a next time.*

My last Dragonscale was also gone. We no longer had any means to withstand the Demi-Dragon Worm’s attack.

Liliana’s still fighting, I thought. *Bro still hasn’t come back since disappearing into the ground... I’m all out of options.*

“GYUUUUAAAAAAAA!” The monster in front of me had become irritated at its tough prey, but it now appeared to be shaking in joy at finally being able to finish things.

In a last-ditch effort, I tried drawing the knife I had received with my starting equipment. However, after removing the knife from its sheath, I discovered that its blade was broken. Before I could even use it, it seemed the repeated collisions had caused the knife to break.

The chances for us to survive were now at zero.

I looked at the unconscious girl in my arms.

Her weight, her warmth, her breathing, and the emotions she had showed me — they were no different from real life. She was alive, so realistically alive.

And like death in the real world, that life was about to be lost.

“...Damn it.” I couldn’t give up.

For me, this world was a game. It wasn’t a problem if I died.

But even if I know this world is a game, it’d leave a bad taste in my mouth if this girl were to disappear from it forever. I clenched my fist in frustration.

On the back of that hand... was my Embryo in its egg-like zeroth form.

“Hey...”

I...

“If they say an Embryo is supposed to offer a player... If you’re supposed to offer me infinite possibility...” I pleaded, “...then give me that possibility.”

The monster in front of me raised its head to deliver the final blow.

“Give me the possibility for a happy ending, the possibility to save this girl!” I cried.

To my left hand I pleaded. To the incarnation of this world of possibilities known as *Infinite Dendrogram*, I pleaded from the bottom of my heart.

“Wake up already and give me even 1% of a possibility!” I cried.

The Demi-Dragon Worm launched its last attack.

“You’re an unexpectedly overbearing Master, aren’t you?” said a voice. “However, I am one that is born from you. I don’t dislike that part about you.”

In an instant, the fatal charge was blocked by someone.

“...Huh?”

Just like when my brother had disappeared into the ground, I couldn’t process what was happening before my eyes.

I couldn’t understand why in front of me was not the tragedy that should have taken place, but instead, a miracle that shouldn’t have occurred.

The Demi-Dragon Worm that was supposed to kill us had been repelled by a wall of light and was bent over backwards.

My Embryo had vanished from the back of my left hand, and in its place was a glowing, blue crest.

Between the Demi-Dragon Worm and us now stood a girl I didn’t know. Her jet black hair waved in the wind, and her skin glistened like white porcelain. She swung her gothic skirt made of black fabric and white frills as she turned to look at me. Her eyes were made of the black of night and a white that reminded me of the stars.

“Morning,” was the first thing she said.

I couldn't say anything.

"Hm, you seem out of it," she said. "Good grief, aren't you something? I forced myself to wake up because you told me to, and yet..."

The way she spoke almost made the mystique she had disappear, but her words made me think of something.

"Are you my..." I began. *...Embryo?*

"Of course," she said. "Well then, Master, that damn centipede is still in good health. To cheer things up in celebration of my birthday, what do you say we finish it off in style?"

"How?" I burst out.

Before I could even finish asking this, the girl had disappeared. She lost her human form and turned into a swarm of black, shining lights that enveloped my right arm, and then transformed into a black greatsword. It was organic and sinister looking, but in some way, still beautiful.

"I'll leave the timing to you," she said, her voice coming from the sword. "Swing down when the damn centipede comes charging at us. We're all going to die if you screw up, got it?"

It felt like she was telling me, "I gave you your chance, now the rest is up to you."

"...Got it." I was aware there were things that needed to be done before asking any questions.

The Demi-Dragon Worm seemed to be furious as it charged at us faster than it ever had before. It was a straight shot at a speed I was able to see, but not avoid.

However, I still had time to swing my sword.

"The three times Master almost died, and the one attack I absorbed... The four attacks you made with everything you had..."

Right before the jaws of the Demi-Dragon Worm could reach me...

"I'll double them and pay you back," said the girl as I swung down the black greatsword.

"Vengeance is Mine!" she shouted.

There was an impact the moment the greatsword made contact.

Then a moment of stillness.

Right after, the Demi-Dragon Worm, almost as if it had been crushed by a monster several times its size, shattered into pieces starting with its head.

Just exactly how many times today am I going to see something I *struggle to understand?* I wondered.

While I was thinking this, I looked at what was in front of me. The Demi-Dragon Worm's large body was gradually breaking into pieces that turned into light and vanished.

Behind me was Milianne, still unconscious, and beside me was the girl. She had changed back from the black sword.

"Success, success," she said happily. "Isn't that great, Master? You grabbed hold of the possibility you'd hoped for."

"You really are my Embryo, aren't you?" I asked.

The girl lightly lifted her frilled skirt and bowed with contrived respect. "I'm Nemesis, a Type Maiden with Arms Embryo. I was born from your heart, body, and soul." The girl — Nemesis — introduced herself like that and grinned broadly. "It's nice to meet you, Master."

Chapter Two: Dinner and Intentions

Outside Old Reve Orchard — Ray Starling

After I defeated the Demi-Dragon Worm, I picked up its drop item, a Demi-Dragon Worm Treasure Coffer, and escaped from Old Reve Orchard while carrying Milianne.

I didn't think about going to aid Liliana.

On the window screen displaying our party members' status, I could see that she was doing fine. Moreover, there was no way that a miracle like what had just happened would occur a second or third time. I had the feeling that if I were to get full of myself now, then it would definitely ruin things.

"Withdrawing is the right choice." Nemesis, who was apparently my Embryo, explained the battle situation like so. "That tian girl won't die. She's the stronger of the two, so even if it takes some time, she'll win for sure against that damn centipede."

"Even though you were just born, you seem to be more informed about this world than I am," I said.

It appears she even knows about Liliana, so maybe she has memories from before she hatched.

"That's because even if I take the form of a human, I'm not one," she said. "Mysterious things like that exist. More importantly, Master, if you possess a thing called curiosity, then isn't it about time you had something to ask me?"

Nothing sprang to mind. I didn't respond.

I'm starting to get a handle on it, but Nemesis seems to be the type that likes to speak in a roundabout way, I thought. *Well, I guess I'm not one to talk, since I'm able to understand her.*

In other words, she was saying, "Hurry up and check out my abilities on the status screen."

I looked at the status screen and saw that a category for Embryo had been added. I clicked on it right away and a window appeared displaying

Nemesis and her parameters. Displayed on the window was the name "Maiden of Vengeance Nemesis," and "Type Maiden with Arms."

Additionally, there were ATK and DEF stats listed, as well as modifiers for each stat. The ATK and DEF stats applied when equipping Nemesis as a weapon.

So this is the same as normal weapons and armor.

The stat modifiers, however, appeared to always be in effect just by having Nemesis around, and they apparently weren't just a set value boost to my stats. When leveling up, increases in my stats would also take these modifiers into account.

As an overall evaluation, her stats weren't that strong. The modifier for HP was a bit high, but the rest were low. The ATK stat for equipping Nemesis was only about 50.

It's strange to compare this with Bro Bear's costume, but even after taking that into account, my stats themselves don't seem like they've gone up that much, I thought. *Well, I guess that goes without saying since Nemesis was only just born as an Embryo. But in that case, how was I able to defeat the Demi-Dragon Worm?*

As I pondered this, I found the section for skills. Listed there were the two skills "Counter Absorption" and "Vengeance is Mine."

The Counter Absorption skill was the wall of light that Nemesis had used. It had a max stock of two uses, and with each use, a wall of light could be created to nullify attacks. It replenished one of its stock every 24 hours.

And then there was the skill that had defeated the Demi-Dragon Worm, Vengeance is Mine.

This skill took the total damage received from an enemy within 24 hours, doubled it, and then unleashed that damage as an attack that ignored all defense. Even damage that had been reduced by other skills and items, or nullified by Counter Absorption, was added to the total.

But once the skill is used, it looks like the damage counter is reset for that enemy, I noticed.

"Okay, I get it now," I said. "So that's how I was able to defeat that Demi-Dragon Worm."

Although the damage was reduced by the Dragonscale Wards, I did take three of its hits, I thought. *On top of that, Nemesis nullified one attack with* *her other skill, Counter Absorption. So that's four in total, and the damage would come out to roughly 3,600. Plus, the ability for Vengeance is Mine then doubled this to around 7,200.*

I don't know how much life that Demi-Dragon Worm had, but this must mean that it wasn't more than 7,200 HP. Or maybe its head was a weak spot, and landing a direct hit on it had some effect.

"...Even if I know how the trick worked, it's still a miracle," I thought aloud.

The one-hit killer move had only worked because I had been weak, and my opponent had been strong. What had also played a big role was that I had overcome several near deaths thanks to the items my brother had given me. But more than anything, Nemesis's skills had been a perfect match for the situation.

"The end result sure seems convenient," I said to myself.

Embryos are supposed to be unique and based on things like one's personality, biorhythm, and attributes, right? I thought. *Looking at the results this time, it almost seems like it was set up. Also, a skill that gets stronger the more damage I take... I feel as if I'm getting treated like a huge masochist.*

"A masochist, huh... I'll have you know, this is the result of my having observed you, Master. There were no mistakes," said Nemesis, seemingly offended.

Wait, can she hear my thoughts?

"But anyway, you said 'observed'?" I asked.

"The zeroth form is a time period for Embryos to observe their Masters," she said. "After observing their psychology and behavior, an Embryo's first form is then born based on this."

I see, I thought. *So in other words, my experiences since starting have more or less been factored in.*

...Now that I think about it, I collided with Liliana right after I started, and then I also fought a Demi-Dragon Worm. I feel like I've been taking a lot of near-fatal damage. So I guess these skills are the end result of all of that, huh?

"Well," continued Nemesis, "even if the experiences and behaviors are the same, there will be differences in an Embryo's form and skills based on each Master. Also... I think Counter Absorption was derived from your personality."

"Hm?" I asked. *I wonder what she means by that.*

"Oh, and another thing," she went on. "I'll go ahead and say this myself, but a Type Maiden Embryo is quite rare, you know? You should be grateful to me and reflect upon how blessed you are."

Oh yeah, that's right, I realized. *Maiden wasn't one of the normal categories Cheshire mentioned. She seems to be a rare type, and it's a big help that she's explaining various things to me, but it's still somewhat of an iffy feeling having a girl come out of an Embryo that's based on me.*

"Iffy? Did you say 'iffy?'" she asked huffily.

Ah, that's right. She can hear my thoughts.

"I *can* hear them!" she shouted. "Iffy? What do you mean by 'iffy?' You hit the jackpot with me! This beauty! This rarity! What could there be to complain about?"

"No I didn't mean that you were iffy, Nemesis, but the fact that you emerged from me, you see..."

As we went back and forth, Liliana appeared from the exit of Old Reve Orchard. The armor she was clad in was dirty with mud and dust, but Liliana herself seemed to be unharmed.

"Milia!" Finding us, Liliana quickly ran to our side, and after looking at her sister's sleeping face, she let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you very much... for protecting my sister... Truly, thank you!" Liliana burst out as tears fell from her eyes.

"Um, yeah..." I said. *This is troubling. I don't know how to respond.*

"That's right," said Nemesis. "You should be grateful to my Master, and even more so to me."

And that's Nemesis for you...

"Is she your...?" asked Liliana.

"Yeah, umm... my Embryo."

Liliana looked at Nemesis, slightly surprised. "I see. So, after all, as his brother, you're also a Master chosen by an Embryo. But a Maiden, it's almost like that..."

Just as she was about to say something...

"All right! I've escaped from the bearied underground world!" Bro Bear jumped out from the ground together with a loud sound effect.

"...Ummm," I said. *You were still alive, Bro? Well, his stats were* *displayed the whole time, just blackened out so I couldn't tell, but still...*

For some reason, Bro Bear wasn't carrying his Gatling gun, but instead had a shovel in his right hand.

That can't be how he moved through the ground, can it? I wondered.

"The underground tunnel is now open!" he proclaimed.

Right after he said this, the ground shook slightly, and the sound of something caving in could be heard. The hole Bro Bear had come out of then closed.

"And it caved in right away!"

Oh, shut up.

"You were all right, Bro?" I asked.

"Oh yeah! Me and Baldr's fourth form tore them to shreds!"

"Fourth? Not the Gatling gun from earlier?" I asked.

"That's the second form."

I guess that means there are various forms.

"For some Embryos, you can use their previous forms at will," Nemesis chimed in. "Brother Bear's Embryo must've been one of those types."

...Is "Brother Bear" referring to my brother? I wondered.

"Ray, is that blali your Embryo?" he asked me.

He meant "black loli," shortened to "blali"... *Neither of those terms are all that great.*

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said. "I'm Nemesis, Ray Starling's Maiden with Arms Embryo. I hope we get along, Brother Bear."

It appears Nemesis is determined to push through with calling him "Brother Bear."

"Setting that aside... Bro, if you were alive, I wish you'd come out sooner," I said. "I was this close to dying."

A total of about four times, actually.

"That would've been difficult," he said. "Because the whole time, I was locked in battle underground with all the Demi-Drags."

All the Demi-Drags?

"There were swarms of Demi-Drags bearied in an underground cave," he continued. "I don't hate bugs, but that really sent shivers down my spine."

I stayed silent.

That thing?! Swarms of them...

Good thing I didn't stick around for long.

"An outbreak of those centipedes... the 'newbie killer' is way too scary," I said. *I guess that's just what you'd expect from a trauma-generating machine.*

"Normally there shouldn't have been even one Demi-Drag living there..." said my brother.

"Huh?" I asked.

"Oh, well. I took care of every one that I found, so they shouldn't multiply anymore," he said. "More importantly, let's head home."

"You're right," I agreed. "Let's head back."

And so like that, Nemesis, Bro Bear, Liliana, Milianne, and I all started on our way back.

Due to our close proximity to the royal capital, we arrived in no time. After we passed through the gate, we then parted ways with Liliana and Milianne.

Before leaving, Liliana said, "I'll be sure to repay this debt of gratitude."

Milianne, who had woken up, gave each of us a remberry from the basket she had held onto so dearly, and said, "Thank you."

As I watched the two sisters walk home hand-in-hand...

The message, "Quest 'Search for Milianne Grandria' has been completed," was displayed, and I finally felt like the quest had ended.

"It's over..." I said, exhausted. *I feel like I've gone through some crazy danger and chaos right off the bat.*

“The reward is one remberry, huh?” asked Nemesis. “A tad shabby considering what we went through, I’d say.”

If I recall, it’s a fruit worth about 500 yen.

However, I felt that it had more value than that.

I wiped the remberry on my clothes and took a bite. It had the taste of a strawberry and the texture of an apple, but that one bite was more delicious than either one.

It was the taste of accomplishment.

“All righty then, it’s time to party,” said my brother. “It’s dinnertime. Since today is Ray’s first day playing, I prepared a feast.”

“You did?” I asked.

“I have heaps of meats and vegetables ready. Not that bear-bones stuff, either! Top-grade stuff.”

“Ohh, that sounds fascinating,” chimed in Nemesis.

That does sound tasty, I thought. *Nemesis seems to agree, as well... Wait, Embryos eat food too?*

“And for dessert I’ve got remberries.”

“Ohhh...” I said. “Wait, what?”

“For dinner, I bought up all the remberries available at the market this morning. It’s all-you-can-eat.”

“.........You.”

If I remember correctly, the reason Milianne went to Old Reve Orchard was because all the remberries were sold out, right? I thought. *Which means...*

“Damn it, Bro Bear, you were the start of this whole mess!” I couldn’t stop myself from shouting, and it echoed about the royal capital as the sun began to set.

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After chewing my brother out for a while, we made our way to the restaurant he had made reservations at. It was run by a player, and not only did they serve their own food, they also allowed customers to bring their own ingredients that chefs from the restaurant would then cook. My brother had apparently already handed over a mountain of ingredients.

“All right, in celebration of Ray’s first day and completing his first quest, cheers! Thank you beary much!”

“Cheers!” said Nemesis and I, as we all clinked our drinks together. My brother had a rem liqueur (made from remberry), while Nemesis and I had a drink that was similar to orange juice.

Infinite Dendrogram checked age restrictions based on each player’s citizenship, so I apparently wouldn’t be able to drink alcohol until I turned twenty. If I were to go into further detail, sexual material was R 18, while alcohol and tobacco was R 20.

Since these things exist in the game, I’m not sure if I should call this wholesome or indecent.

“Hmph. Thanks to my kiddy Master, I can’t drink any alcohol, either,” Nemesis griped. “Six years in our time... that’s long.”

“Based on appearances, when it comes to who shouldn’t be drinking, you’re number two,” I pointed out.

Number one would be my brother... for various reasons, I thought. *...Don’t drink alcohol from a glass while in a bear costume.*

“Chomp, chomp,” grunted my brother. “Go on now, eat up. Meat. Eat some meat. Chomp, chomp, chomp, chomp.” My brother ate the food laid out on the table and encouraged us to do the same.

Really, you can eat and drink while wearing that costume? I thought. *It’s high-spec, even in weird ways.*

“Okay, okay... What is this? It’s delicious!” I cried. I was surprised at the taste after trying the unknown food I had been recommended. It had been made using ingredients and cooking methods I didn’t know, and yet it had all come together in a tastiness I could comprehend. On top of everything, it was incredibly delicious.

“The owner of this place is a Star Chef,” said my brother. “It’s the top class fur the Cook Job. His cooking skills would be about a three star in our world.”

“That’s amazing,” I said. “But after eating a feast like this, it’ll be tough to deal with the difference between this and what I eat in the real world.”

It should be about dinnertime for me back home, and I should be getting hungry.

“By the way, my body back in the real world should still be lying down, right?” I asked.

“Yes. But you’ll get a notice if something happens in the real world.

Like fur bathroom breaks or hunger, for example."

Right after he said this, a window appeared at the edge of my sight.

"Notice: urge to urinate.

Notice: hunger."

Oh, I see. "Okay, then I'm going to log off for a bit," I said.

"All right. Try to come back as soon as you can."

"Do return quickly, Master," said my Embryo. "I can't help myself to the food until you come back."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, and then selected the Logout option from the Main Menu.

"Logging out. Should your next log in point be your save point or current location?"

"Current location," I replied.

"Understood. We await your return."

And like that, my avatar disappeared from the world, and as if waking from a dream, my consciousness receded from *Infinite Dendrogram.*

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"...Ohh." The first thing I did after logging out of *Infinite Dendrogram* was check the clock. The time was about three hours later than when I had started the game. I was impressed to see that time really had only advanced by a third of what I had spent in the game world.

I then went to the bathroom. After that, I ate a balanced nutrition bar and drank some mineral water to replenish my body's nutrients. Although I had eaten inside the game, my actual stomach hadn't been filled.

I checked my cellphone in case I had any missed calls or messages, but there were none. I also looked at the news on my computer, but there wasn't anything that stood out.

After about ten or so minutes, I logged back in.

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"Welcome back."

“...You,” I said.

Upon arriving back, I saw that the food on the table was all different. It appeared that he’d eaten everything that had been there initially.

...For him to eat all that food by himself... is my brother really a bear? I wondered.

“Waahh?! The a la carte I was looking forward to is gone!” As I logged in, Nemesis materialized and let out a scream.

“Don’t worry,” said my brother. “There’s still plenty of food left. What you’ve seen so far is only about 10% of it.”

“That’s too much! Just how many people is this for?” I exclaimed.

If Nemesis hadn’t been born, then it would’ve been just the two of us. Why did he prepare so much?!

“...Oh well,” I said finally. “By the way, Bro, I still have a few things I want to ask you.”

“How I got this costume?”

“No... well, I am a bit interested, but no.”

There were two system-related things and one thing about Liliana that I was curious about. *I guess I’ll start with the easier questions.*

“Embryos change form as they evolve, don’t they?” I asked.

“That’s right. My Baldr increased its weapon-y-ness. It also got beary much bigger.”

I thought that Gatling gun was quite large, but... that was only its second form, right? Anything bigger than that and I don’t think you’d be able to carry it.

“By the way, I wasn’t able to show it to you, but the fourth form I used today is a tank,” he said.

“A tank?!” *Is that even allowed?* “So Nemesis will also eventually turn into something different from her current human form... like maybe even a tank.”

Nemesis, who was eating beside me, became scared and said, “Th-That’s so ominous.”

“How they evolve depends on their Master, but in your case, Nemesis will probably always be a Maiden,” said my brother. “Although the ‘with Arms’ part might change to a different type.”

“Speaking of that, Nemesis turned into a sword. What would she be regarded as?” I asked.

“Like I was saying, she’s a Maiden Embryo that turns into an Arms. Maidens are generally hybrids... A mix of various types.”

“Really?” I asked. *That seems like kind of a bargain.*

After I thought this though, Nemesis complained, “What do you mean, I’m a cheap girl?!”

“There’s one person I know that has a Maiden Embryo,” my brother explained. “She stayed as a Maiden while the ‘with’ part changed into various things. It’s even become a Superior Embryo now.”

A Superior Embryo?

“The first to third forms of an Embryo are called low-rank, while the fourth to sixth forms are called high-rank,” explained my brother. “And then the current highest level that can be reached, the seventh form, is called a Superior Embryo. It’s called this because it surpasses the limits of the high-rank forms.”

“The final form... Superior Embryo,” I murmured. *I wonder if Nemesis will reach that one day. She’s still in her first form, though, so I don’t know how long it’ll take to reach that.*

“By the way, out of all the players, there are fewer than a hundred that have reached this form,” my brother added.

The game has over 100,000 active players, and yet there are less than a hundred?! I thought. *Just how difficult of a path is it?*

“Those people are way too hardcore,” I said.

“It’s not like they all achieved it solely through their play time,” my brother said. “There are a lot of players who started on release day and still haven’t reached it, while there are those who were able to do it in half a year.”

Does that mean it requires some special conditions?

“Oh yeah, Bro, you started playing on release day,” I said. “So how far has your Embryo evolved? What form is it up to?”

“That’s a bearied se-cr-et.”

That’s annoying.

Also, Bro Bear mostly spoke normally when he was explaining things, but used bear puns when he was teasing me. It was irritating, now that I had caught on to this.

While Bro Bear and I had been talking, Nemesis had cleaned off all the food on her plate before I had even realized it.

...We were talking about you, you know.

"Okay, on to my next question," I said. "It's about our standing in this world."

"And by that you mean?"

I was thinking over how Liliana had spoken and acted. "Liliana called me something like 'a Master chosen by an Embryo,' and not a player. I don't really get what the circumstances are regarding that... or what the status for us as players is within the setting."

Somehow, I didn't get the feeling she was thinking of me as a player in a game.

"Hmm," said my brother. "You can find out about that by reading the background setting on the official site, but... you'll lose several hours of time if you do, so I'll give you the short explanation." My brother then began his lecture on the world's setting.

"In this world there are Masters and tians. All of us players are called Masters here. The meaning is something like, 'One chosen by an Embryo.' So a Master is someone who raises and uses an Embryo that possesses infinite possibilities. Due to this, a Master's power is enormous, but in exchange, they are burdened with one condition."

"Condition?" I asked.

"Their bodies are frequently spirited away to a different world."

...Hm?

"A Master may vanish from this world for as little as a few minutes, or for as long as several months," said my brother. "Also, there are times when they return to the place where they vanished, as well as times when they are flung to a special location called a save point."

Wait, isn't that...

"At the moment before death, a Master can also use the power of an Embryo to send their body to another world and survive," said my brother. "However, if this happens, they will not return for at least three days."

"So what that means is that logging out and the death penalty for players have been incorporated into the foundation of this world?" I asked.

"That's right," he said.

"...Wow."

As far as I can tell from interacting with Liliana and Milianne, the way tians think is at the same level as real humans, I thought. *So in order to* *allow those tians to go about without realizing this world is a game, they've defined how players return to the real world and their immortality as truths of this world.*

I see. There's a lot more to it than I thought.

"By the way," my brother continued, "sometimes there are players that go around saying, 'this world is a game,' but the tians view them as 'pitiable Masters that have gone mad from being sent to different worlds.'"

"...Ahh," I said.

"Also, since Masters disappear so irregularly, for the most part they don't take on important positions in the kingdom," he added. "Even if you join the knights in order to get the job Knight, you won't be given regular work. Instead you'll get tasks specific to Masters."

In other words, you're given jobs where it'd be fine even if you disappeared during it.

"Well," said my brother, "in terms of strength, we're stronger because of our Embryos, so the jobs that get sent our way usually pay higher rewards than the ones for tians."

I wonder if I'll be asked to go slay a monster by myself, I thought. *Well, okay then, that resolved the bigger questions I had regarding the game's system. Which just leaves...*

"Bro, did something happen between you and Liliana?" I asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't try to dodge the question. Liliana clearly knew who you were." *And if I were to add to that, it didn't feel like it was a good impression she had, either.* "What did you do?"

Surely he didn't make a move on her, right? For example, saying something like, "Yaay! It's a real female knight! I just can't get enough!" and then hugging her?

"I didn't do anything." Contrary to my expectations, my brother answered in a serious tone. "It's because I didn't do anything... that she probably resents me."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It'll be another long story," he said. "And unlike before, it's not going to be a fun one."

"I don't mind."

After I said this, my brother let out a sigh and then began to talk. "Two months ago in real time, half a year ago in *Dendro* time, there was a war. The machine Imperium Dryfe invaded the Kingdom of Altar."

The machine Imperium Dryfe: it was one of the nations a player could choose when first starting. It was at odds with this fantasy world as it had an advanced mechanical civilization.

...Although I don't have the right to talk about being at odds, given that I have a tank-riding bear in my family.

"The reason given by their nation was to obtain the Kingdom of Altar's fertile land," my brother said. "As for the game's side... it was a war event."

The manual had mentioned war events. They were large-scale battles between nations, and big quests with the fate of each nation on the line.

"It was a large battle involving Masters and tians," said my brother. "Well, it was a type of event that doesn't happen very often and one of the game's bigger features, but..." he sighed. "The result was a crushing defeat for the Kingdom of Altar. A third of our territory was lost, and among tians, the court magician Arch Wiseman, half of the knights, and the king died. Put simply, many of the key people running this kingdom perished in battle."

"...Why did they lose so badly? Is Dryfe that powerful?" I asked.

No, that's hard to believe, I thought. *It'd be different in real life, but since this is a game, I'm sure they've taken measures to balance this.*

"The strength of both countries was essentially even," he answered. "This includes the nations' power, the soldiers' levels, and the fighting ability of important tians. However, the strength of Masters on top of that is a different story."

"So you're saying they lost to Dryfe because of the difference in the number of players?" I asked.

Dryfe certainly seems like a nation where those who like it would really like it, so maybe a bunch of players joined it, I thought. *...No, that can't be it. If that were the case, this kingdom would also...*

"The reason they lost is because out of all the Masters that were eligible to join the war, most didn't participate," he said.

"What?" It was an answer I didn't expect.

The fate of the kingdom was at stake, and it was a big-time event, yet they didn't participate?

"The king of Altar was, how to put it, an old-fashioned person," my brother said. “He said, ‘This is a crisis for our kingdom. Warriors of this nation, now is the time to rise up!’ It was great that he gave this speech and joined the front-lines, but that was it.”

“That was it?” I asked.

“There were no rewards. Essentially, he felt that if you belong to this nation, then it’s a given that you should rise up during its crisis.”

...I get that the fate of the kingdom was at stake, but I still feel that’s being a bit cheap, I thought. *Is that how it’s normally done?*

“Of course, for Masters... for players, they’re enjoying this world but they aren’t staking their lives on this game,” my brother said. “If they die, they just can’t log back in for 24 hours. That’s why even if the kingdom was in a crisis, there were many who thought that if there wasn’t anything to gain, then there wasn’t any meaning in participating.”

I would be just the opposite, I thought. *If the login restriction was the only negative that came from dying, then I would consider joining the war, but I guess everyone thinks differently. There is the cost of the healing items you use during battle, and it’d be a huge minus if you fought some strong enemy and your equipment got destroyed.*

“Regarding this issue, the fact that Dryfe on the other side clearly stated their rewards was a big factor,” he explained, and went on to describe them.

Apparently they had been quite exceptional.

They had offered 5,000 lir for every Kingdom of Altar soldier defeated. For each Embryo holder — in other words, each Master — the reward had been 50,000 lir. In addition to this, they had offered various rewards for defeating key people, such as rare items and a privileged status within the nation.

As a result, the morale of Dryfe’s players had risen, while the motivation of players in the Kingdom of Altar had dropped considerably.

“There were even some players saying things like, ‘I want to fight on Dryfe’s side,’ and ‘There might be a rare event if this kingdom gets destroyed,’” my brother said.

I wasn’t sure what to say. *As a gamer, I can’t say I don’t understand how they feel. I can understand them, but...*

“And the real decisive blow for the crushing loss was that the Kingdom of Altar’s Big Three — the top players for the kill rankings, duel rankings, and clan rankings — all passed on participating.”

"Rankings?" I asked. "They have those?"

"That over there," he said and pointed outside the window.

This restaurant faced the square with the water fountain where I had met up with my brother. He pointed at a splendid-looking notice board in front of the water fountain.

"That's the Kingdom of Altar's ranking board. It's updated every three months in game time. There are the kill rankings where you compete with your accomplishments defeating monsters. Then there are the duel rankings for PvP achievements, and the clan rankings that compare the size of clans. The top thirty ranking players for each of these is listed there."

"Hmm," I said.

"And this part is important: the only players that can participate in wars are the ones in those rankings. As for the clan rankings, if you're a member of a clan within the top thirty, then you can participate. So you could temporarily join a clan as a mercenary and fight in a war."

So in any case, that means a player can't fight in wars unless they make it into those rankings.

And at the time of the last war, the top-ranking players for each category, known as the Big Three, had supposedly said the following when the kingdom sought their participation:

The top of the kill rankings, King of Destruction (name unknown), had said, "I don't want to participate in a big event and carelessly expose my face."

The top of the duel rankings, Over Gladiator Figaro, had said, "I'm not interested in sloppy fights."

The leader of the top clan on the clan rankings, High Priestess Tsukuyo Fuso of The Lunar Society, had said, "We were unable to reach an agreement with the Kingdom of Altar."

As a result, the other ranking players' already low motivation had been brought down even further.

I'm sure they could see it'd be a losing battle, I thought. And like that, the war had started without many of the ranking players.

The ones that had participated had included some of the ranking clans, players that had temporarily joined them, such as members of fan clubs for popular tians like Liliana, as well as naive players.

The result had been a terrible sight.

The scene on the battlefield could only have been described as a massacre. The overall number of players had been disparate, and most devastating of all was that the top-ranking players on Dryfe's side had all participated.

Top of the Dryfe Imperium's kill rankings, King of Beasts.

Top of the Dryfe Imperium's duel rankings, Hell General Logan Goddhart.

Top of the Dryfe Imperium's clan rankings, Giga Professor Mr. Franklin, leader of the clan, Triangle of Wisdom.

Two out of the three had Superior Embryos, and their fighting power had been enormous. The Knights of the Royal Guard Commander and the Arch Wiseman had died at the hands of these three. Even the king had been killed.

"If things had kept going as they were, without a doubt, this kingdom would've been on a straight shot to ruin," said my brother. "But after being forced to give up a third of our territory, the nation of Caldina began their invasion into Dryfe. Except for some troops they left behind in the territory they took, the rest of Dryfe's forces retreated back to their homeland, and so the Kingdom of Altar managed to survive by a hair."

However, my brother continued to explain, since Caldina had already pulled out of Dryfe, Dryfe would likely attack again in a few months.

...He was right, I thought. *This wasn't a fun story.*

"So what's this about you saying that Liliana resents you?" I asked.

"That's because I was one of the ranking players listed there that didn't participate," he said. "Moreover, the former commander of the knights that died in battle was Liliana and Milia's father."

"...Man," I said. *This really isn't a fun story.*

"And so, having heard this not-so-fun story, what do you plan to do, Master?" Nemesis, who had been engrossed in her food this whole time and hadn't joined our conversation, asked.

"There's nothing I can do, right?" I asked.

What will I do when Dryfe attacks again... well, for now, I've already made my decision.

"Even if there's no reward, I'm not too keen on refusing to participate," I said. "Even if there's a cost, I would think there's some value in taking part." *Even if you were to just view it as a game event.*

"Yeah, well, you're right about that, but the players' mood at the time was more of a boycott against the cheap nation," said my brother. "I even get the feeling that Dryfe might've prepared their crazy rewards as a way to create this mood."

If that's the case, then the Kingdom of Altar probably lost to Dryfe strategically before the battle even began.

"Why didn't you join, Bro?" I asked. "Was it because of the lack of reward for you, too?"

"...In my case, it was because having my equipment break would equal exposing my real face."

"...Ahh, yeah."

Well yeah, that would be a huge problem, but still...

"Well, I've changed my equipment since then, so I'll be joining next time," he said.

That costume's DEF stat and physical damage reduction are certainly impressive, I thought. *Although it's still a gag item, no matter how you look at it.*

"The next time we do fight, though," he continued, "the strength of their nation will have increased, while ours will have weakened. So it'll be tough."

"Weakened?" I asked.

"Since losing the war, there have been a lot of players switching to different nations. There are even tians leaving the kingdom. People on online chat boards have been saying things like, 'The Kingdom of Altar is past its prime,' and 'It's game over.'"

I remained silent.

Defections, refugees, and rampant resignation... That's the path of a country headed towards collapse in the real world.

"With the latest update to the rankings, about 70% have been replaced," he said.

"Hmm..." I said. *Put another way, now might be the chance to get on the ranking boards.*

"In that case, I guess I'll start from there," I said.

Listening to all this has helped me solidify my plans... no, my plans are still the same, but my goals have increased.

"Have you decided on a new objective?" asked Nemesis.

I nodded. “As things stand, there aren’t a lot of things I can do, and I can’t take part in the war.”

Which is why...

“First I’ll raise my level,” I said, “and then I guess I’ll aim to get onto the rankings.”

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Earth — Undisclosed Chat Room

Members: Professor

General has joined.

Beast King has joined.

Members: Professor, General, Beast King

Professor: Good evening.

General: good evening

Beast King: eve

Professor: Gentlemen...

Professor: Did you both watch the video I sent you through Infinite Dendrogram?

Beast King: saw it

General: thats why we’re here, obviously

Professor: That’s true.

Professor: Now then, regarding our plan to eliminate an important tian. To put it simply...

Professor: It failed.

General: ya, fail

Professor: Those things I released in the dungeon...

Professor: The horde of Demi-Dragon Worms got wiped out, didn’t they?

General: werent there holes in this plan from the start?

General: giving the targets sister bug repellant incense and directing her to the orchard

General: and then springing a trap on the target there

Professor: Originally, I had a different set of steps planned.

Professor: But for some reason all the remberries had disappeared from the market.

Professor: Even the portion I intended to use for my plan was gone. lol.

Professor: Tis a real shame.

Professor: The plan was to give a poisoned remberry to the little sister...

Professor: and use that to kill the older sister.

Professor: Lil Sis, "Big Sis, congratulations."

Professor: Big Sis, "Thanks. Guhah!"

Professor: Lil Sis, "Big Siiisss!"

Professor: This was how it was supposed to go, so what a shame, riiiiiiight?! boo hoo, lol.

General: what u think is a shame isnt important

General: the issue is that the new plan got thwarted

Professor: Wasn't that bear scary? To go up against almost 100 Demi-Dragon Worms by himself...

Professor: and even more, to win unscathed.

Professor: Just one of those things should be a match for a player with a high-rank job. lol.

General: thats not that big a deal

General: its possible if ur leveled up and strong...i could do that too

General: but...defeating a demi dragon worm at lvl 0 with no job

General: i dont remember anyone being able to do something that absurd

Professor: My, my. So does that mean his Excellency the General is more concerned by that newbie than the bear?

General: pfft...i look forward to crushing him

Professor: As usual, way to play the stereotypical evil top brass character.

Professor: Me too though! lol.

General: whatever. this is how i am

Professor: lol.

General: but i cant deny it if u call me evil

General: the destruction of a nation...its this games first big event

General: i look forward to the chance when dryfe, no, when WE get to accomplish that

Professor: Well, last time ended with us just taking out some key people and gaining a portion of their territory, so that was a bit hard to stomach.

General: i had fun fighting with the knight commander

Professor: The king was boring.

Professor: It would’ve been better to fight a bunch of soldiers instead.

General: the arch wiseman...was it beast king that took him out?

Professor: That was pretty awesome. Just what I’d expect from our strongest player.

General: hey

Professor: Oh, okay, okay. His Excellency the General and Beast King are both the strongest. lol.

General: ya whatever. i’ll prove it to u in the next war

General: this time i’ll put an end to the kingdom of Altar

Professor: Yes, please do let me see that. lol.

General: btw, beast kings been silent the whole time, but dont u have something u want to say?

Beast King: the bear, was really, cute

General: ....

Professor: .... lol.

General: ...i dont understand ur taste, beast king

Chapter Three: Starting Point

Heaven's Three Star Restaurant, Royal Capital Altea — Ray Starling

Last night, after I had talked about various things with my brother, the dinner had turned into a normal banquet.

My brother and Nemesis, who had eaten more than double what I had, had given up partway and had left more than half the food untouched. So we'd passed out the remaining food and drinks to the other customers in the restaurant, and the entire scene had morphed into a party.

If an observer were to look about the restaurant, they wouldn't be able to tell who among those partying was a player (Master), and who was an NPC (tian).

The one saying to my brother "Hey big spender" is probably a player, I thought. *That was a joke from a retro game. The one with a glass of wine in one hand and an exaggerated way of speaking is probably a tian.*

Other than the distinction of who had an Embryo crest, these were the only sorts of vague differences... *They all look human to me.*

The whole scene made me appreciate again just how amazing *Infinite Dendrogram* was, and along with this, I felt there was something I needed to think about.

I felt this, however...

"My head hurts..." I groaned. The headache made it impossible in my current state to think about anything philosophical.

"Is this a hangover?" groaned Nemesis from beside me, holding her head like I was. I looked about the restaurant and saw that every person at the party who had consumed that drink was in the same state as us.

A hangover... I thought. *Yeah, this must be a hangover.*

Normally, underage players couldn't drink any alcohol. However, among those who had joined the party yesterday, there had been a Master with a skill that could change water into "an alcohol-like drink." To which I'd just like to ask, "Why would there be a skill like that?"

"This isn't alcohol, okaaay?" the person who'd offered me the drink had said. "It's just juice, okaaay? Drink it and you'll just feel as light as air, okaaay?"

It had tasted great, so I had drunk several cups. And so when the sun had risen, I found myself in this state.

"Ugh... Why does it have to show up here, too?" I muttered.

"Hangover" was also displayed on my status, and even though the pain setting should had been turned off, my head was throbbing.

"That drink, it was similar to alcohol but it was probably actually poison," said Nemesis.

"Ahh, a poison disguised as alcohol that gives you status effects, huh?" I responded.

In that case, it made sense that a skill like that existed, as well as why I had been able to drink it while ignoring the underage restrictions.

There was a folk tale about something like that in Japan, so there might've been an Embryo based on that.

The person who made the drinks was just fine after drinking it, though.

"Why would you drug someone like this...?" I wondered aloud.

"It's Lei-Lei's beary special way of welcoming you." Bro Bear, who had been passing out water to those suffering with a hangover, said this with a strained laugh.

"Welcoming?" I asked.

"She makes sure to get every newbie to drink that Divine Oni Poison Sake (light)."

"Why would anyone do such a thing...?"

"She's teaching you the lesson, 'Surprise attacks like this exist, so you need to be careful, okaaay,' by letting you experience it."

Oh, I see, I thought. *No wonder I thought the people who didn't drink her alcohol seemed like they were grinning or looking on with nostalgia. I'm sure they received the same welcome earlier.*

"...I learned a good lesson, then," I said.

"By the way, she's one of the Masters I mentioned yesterday who bears a Superior Embryo," said my brother. "She's also known as the Prodigal of Feasts Lei-Lei."

"Prodigal of Feasts..." I murmured.

She seems like an extraordinary person, but I wonder how she got a second name like that?

"Oh, also by the way, she wasn't able to participate in the previous war due to a schedule conflict in real life, it seems," said my brother.

I guess it goes without saying, but there are people who're too busy to participate in the game's events.

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In the end, I wasn't able to move during the morning until my hangover had passed.

...The item someone from the restaurant gave me to cure the Hangover effect didn't work, I thought unhappily. *That's some pretty nasty poison for you not to be able to cure its status effect...*

Putting that aside, we were back to normal, so we had decided to go shopping in town.

"Hey, Bro, I want to sell the drop item I got from the Demi-Drag and buy some beginner equipment, Dragonscales, and brooches. Do you know where they sell those?" I asked.

"What? You're going to stock up on those?" Bro Bear's expression looked troubled.

Nemesis's skill requires that I take damage, so I was thinking that the Lifesaving Brooch and Dragonscale Ward were a must, but...

"Is there some sort of problem?" I asked.

"Those accessories are beary expensive," he said. "The Dragonscale Ward is the top ward-type accessory and costs about 300,000 lir for one. The Lifesaving Brooch goes for about 5,000,000 lir."

"Say what?" I burst out.

That's 3,000,000 and 50,000,000 in yen. Those items were that expensive? I was taken aback. *However, thinking about it, I guess that's reasonable. It is on the level of determining life or death for you. I would've died several times if it hadn't been for them.*

"...I'll hold off for now," I said. *Also, sorry for breaking them all yesterday...*

"That'd be for the beary best," my brother said. "As for beginner equipment, I know a player-run shop that's fair. By the way, did you already open the Demi-Drag's drop item?"

"Open it?" I asked.

"For boss monsters like the Demi-Drag, the items they drop are usually crates. Inside should be one item derived from the boss you defeated, and then one to five random items based on the boss's level."

"Oh, really?" I asked.

Come to think of it, the item it dropped was a Demi-Dragon Worm Treasure Coffer, I remembered. *I'm pretty sure "coffer" is another word for "chest."*

I selected it from the item list and the message "Will you open this item?" was displayed.

"Would it be better to open this?" I asked.

"Hmm... There's a chance it'll be a miss, so you could just sell it as-is," said my brother. "But if it's from a Demi-Drag, then it might have something quite good in it. So I think it's okay to open it."

"Okay, then 'yes' it is."

Acquired Natural Demi-Dragon Worm Full-body Armor.
Acquired Ementerium.

"It says I got natural full-body armor and Ementerium," I said.

"Full-body armor is beary nice," he said. "It should have a skill that reduces physical damage by 150."

Wow, that's really good... I think, but I'm not sure anymore after having seen Bro Bear's costume.

"What does 'natural' mean?" I asked.

"Oh, it means that it's a naturally-made full-body armor."

...What does "a naturally-made full-body armor" mean?

"All right, then I'll equip it right away..." I said. "Huh? I can't."

I looked closer and saw that the following messages were displayed: "You do not meet the level requirement," and "You must have a total level of 150 and a job level of 51 in order to equip this item."

"...I guess I can't use this for a while," I said in disappointment.

"It looks like it'll be some time before you can equip it, so I think it'd be fine if you sold it," said my brother. "It'll fetch you at least 400,000 lir. Also, Ementerium is an item you sell. It's worth about 20,000 lir."

Ohh, those are pretty good prices, I thought. *Although they don't even come close to reaching the brooch.*

"Ementerium though... For the Demi-Drag's drop item that you're supposed to sell, it only goes for 20,000?" I said to myself.

If, for example, the full-body armor that he said was a winner hadn't been in the crate, and instead it had been an item based on the Demi-Drag with the same value as Ementerium, then that'd be a total of 40,000, I thought. *I'm finally starting to understand how extraordinary Dryfe's rewards were that I heard about yesterday. I'm sure it'd be much easier to defeat eight soldiers than one Demi-Drag. I bet it was a* profitable *battlefield for those that took part.*

...In any case, I've acquired some war funds, so I guess I'll go buy some equipment.

At the shop my brother had recommended, I had them choose a few items for me that I could equip even at level 0.

The equipment was supposedly part of something called the Riot series, and they were widely used by lower level players. It was a set consisting of light armor, bracers, pants, and boots.

The equipment I had bought happened to be the quality product of an armor craftsmen. Due to this, the Riot light armor had received the following bonus effects: Increased HP, HP +200; and Reduced Damage, which reduced physical damage by 10.

This will probably be a big help while my level is still low.

"Nemesis will do fine for my weapon, so I should be good to go grind levels now," I said.

"Not 'Nemesis will do fine!' You should be saying, 'Nemesis is the greatest!'" my Embryo shouted.

"Ne-me-sis is the grea-test," I intoned.

"Don't say it so monotone!"

I had also sold the drop items to this shop for the market value of 420,000 lir. Buying the set of equipment and some healing items, by the way, had cost me only about 20,000 lir. I still had the complete amount I had received for selling the full-body armor, but as there was no need to use it, I decided to just keep it.

At any rate, I was now prepared to go grind levels.

"Ah, hold on a sec," said my brother. "Before you go grind levels, you should equip a job. You'll be at level 0 forever if you don't."

"...Ohh," I said. *I forgot. I'm still jobless.*

"Should I explain a bit about jobs?" asked my brother.

"Please do," I replied.

My brother explained the following things to me.

Jobs in *Infinite Dendrogram* were divided into three large categories: low-rank jobs, high-rank jobs, and Superior jobs.

Low-rank jobs were ones that jobless players acquired first. They were easy to get, and had a level cap of 50. High-rank jobs had set conditions for acquiring them, and they were capped at 100. Six low-rank and two high-rank jobs could be equipped at once, giving a player a total level cap of 500.

So then what about Superior jobs?

Superior jobs were extremely difficult to acquire, and on top of that, only the first player that acquired the job would be allowed to equip it. Also, the greatest feature of Superior jobs was that they had no level cap.

That's right. With Superior jobs, your level, that was normally maxed out at 500, could be increased as much as you liked.

There was no balance whatsoever to this. But of course, as your level rose, so did the amount of experience needed for each new level. That was why even without a cap, there apparently weren't many people with ridiculously high levels.

...Which is to say, there are *a few players with ridiculously high levels,* I thought. *Given how there were also those Superior Embryos that came up last night, I feel like the development team is deliberately setting up different levels of strength.*

Also, it appeared that there were even cases where tians had Superior jobs.

This is somewhat of a digression, but the terms "low-rank job" and "high-rank job" used their translated versions in each player's language. The term "Superior job," however, was unified across all countries and cultural regions.

Given how this overlaps with Superior Embryos, I wonder if the development team is trying to give some deeper meaning to the term "Superior," I thought.

By the way, when using just the word "Superior," this apparently referred to a Superior Embryo and its Master.

...Like I thought, it's confusing.

"What'll happen if I choose a job that doesn't mesh well with my Embryo?" I asked.

"If you're at a save point, you can reset your job whenever you like," replied my brother. "And even if you reset your job, your Embryo's growth won't change."

So that was why there were apparently some players that would repeatedly reset their jobs in order to try various ones. You could repeat this process until you found a job that suited you. After finding it, your Embryo would have developed due to the time spent up until then, so you'd then be able to level up even easier than before.

"Speaking of jobs... what are the jobs of the ranking players you talked about yesterday?" I asked.

"If they came up in yesterday's conversation, then they all have Superior jobs," said my brother.

"I thought as much," I said. *Titles like "King" and "High Priest" certainly seemed like ones only one person could acquire.* "Do you know what kind of requirements they had?"

"Oh... The requirements for King of Destruction were: surpassing 100 million total damage dealt, defeating a certain number of high-rank boss monsters solo, and also completing a special quest," said my brother. "The rest probably had something similar."

100 million damage... I could use the same skill I used against the Demi-Drag, Vengeance is Mine, 10,000 times and it still wouldn't be enough, I thought. *The jobs for ranking players are as impressive as I'd expect.*

"By the way, the stat modifiers stack for all the jobs you have equipped, but you won't be able to use some skills if the grouping of your main job changes," said my brother. "So that means you won't be able to use Gunner skills while you're a Cook."

"Oh, really?" I asked. "Being something like a Cook and Soldier seems like it'd work out, though." *Like in that one movie.*

"Well, you can also change your main job at save points, and you can still use skills if they're within the same grouping," said my brother.

It's probably best to keep that in mind when choosing which jobs to equip.

"Okay, then what jobs can I equip now?" I asked.

"Ta-daa! The Suitable Job Diagnostics Catalog," he said in a voice as if he were going to take out some sort of secret tool. What he did pull out, though, was a thick book. “If you read this catalog, you can find the job that best fits you out of all the ones you can equip right now.”

“That’s useful,” I said.

“Since the format is a questionnaire, I don’t know if it’ll really be the best fit, but this’ll work just fine when you’re not sure what to do,” he said. “Because at any rate, there are over a hundred low-rank jobs that you can equip in this town from the beginning.”

“That’s way too many!” I cried.

“Well, you’ll probably be using this going forward, so I’ll give this to you.” He handed me the book.

“Thanks,” I said. *At any rate, let’s give it a try.*

And so, after five or so minutes the results came in...

“A Paladin?” I thought aloud. *It’s certainly a staple in games, but I’m not so sure it fits me.*

“Ahh,” said my brother, “Paladins get a boost to their HP, STR, and END. Also, they can learn damage-reducing skills and healing magic.”

I see, I thought. *In that case, it’s perfect. As long as I’m using Nemesis, then it’ll probably be a great match.*

“That’s strange, though,” he continued. “Paladin isn’t a job you can get from the start. I mean, it’s a high-rank job.”

“A high-rank job?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “You can’t get it unless you meet certain conditions.”

“What kind of conditions?” I asked.

“First, you need to defeat a boss of a certain strength... a Demi-Dragon class monster, while also doing more than half the damage to it.”

“I did that,” I said. *I cleared that in the battle with the Demi-Drag.*

“Next, you need to donate 200,000 lir to the church.”

“I can do that,” I said. *Right now I have around 400,000 lir.*

“And last, you need the recommendation of a key person related to the knights,” he finished.

“A recommendation... that I don’t have,” I said. *I just started playing* Dendro, *so I don’t think I’ll be able to get a recommendation.*

“Wait, wait. Didn’t something along those lines happen just yesterday?” Nemesis, who had been quietly listening the whole time, suddenly cut in.

“I see,” said my brother. “So that was the real reward from yesterday’s quest. Well, of course they wouldn't display such a tactless message as, 'Your relationship with so-and-so has deepened.'"

"Huh?" I asked. *Somehow, the two of them seem to have gotten something I didn't.*

"Master... have you forgotten just who it was you helped yesterday?" asked Nemesis.

"...Ah."

We then made our way over to Liliana's house. Liliana was the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard, and likely because of what had happened yesterday, she was at home with Milianne.

We received a warm welcome and thanks for the day before. After we chatted with the two, I mentioned to Liliana that I wanted to become a Paladin. She readily agreed and wrote a recommendation letter for me right away.

I took care of the donation at the church as well, and within the day, I had become a Paladin.

And with this, I was finally prepared to go grind levels.

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"All right, then this is where I'll take my leave," Bro Bear struck up his hand and said.

"What? You're not going to help us grind levels, Brother Bear?" asked Nemesis.

"I had planned from the start to go separate ways after the welcome party was over," he said.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"If you do power leveling, then a gap will develop between your status and actual playing skill," he said. "A player's skills and ingenuity are beary important in *Dendro*, so you need to set out on your own to develop these as well."

"I'm here too, though, so it'll be the two of us," said Nemesis.

Power leveling was a method of easily grinding levels by getting help from a stronger player. An example of this would be letting the stronger player take all the hits from a strong monster, during which you would chip away at its health, defeat it, and then instantly gain levels.

Yeah, I guess if I did that, my level would go up, but my skills wouldn't improve.

"Also, *Dendro* has the Embryo system," said my brother. "If you constantly ask fur others to help you, your Embryo won't develop in a good way."

"Is that how it works?" I asked.

"It's possible," answered Nemesis.

Since Nemesis was born this way as a result of my play style since starting, I guess it is possible.

"And so, I'll say adios to you here-," said my brother. "But if you get into any serious trouble, contact me."

"Yeah, if I get into serious trouble," I agreed.

"That's all right, but for starters, try to do your best on your own," he added.

"Got it," I said. "And, um, thanks for all your help since yesterday."

"Don't worry about it. I bearlieve it's only fair to help you out a bit. Oh, and also..." Bro Bear brought the head of his costume closer to me. "If anything happens with a ranking player, make sure you contact me right away." His voice had taken on a more serious tone again.

"Bro?" I asked.

"Well, that thing from yesterday might've been just an anomaly. But crazy things shouldn't happen that often, so just relax and enjoy *Dendro*." Bro Bear said this and left, leaving just me and Nemesis behind.

At the same time, a message was displayed saying, "The party has been disbanded." My brother's status, which had been showing the whole time, also disappeared.

"Well then, Master," said Nemesis. "It's finally time for you — no, for us — to stand on our own feet, but have you decided on where to go?"

"Bro told me about some low-level hunting grounds, so I think I'll go check those out," I said.

"I'm looking forward to grinding levels," said Nemesis. "Heh heh heh! Tonight I starve for blood."

"It's still noon, you know?" I said.

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The first hunting ground we headed to was Easter Plains, right outside of Altea's East Gate. It had a very clear view, and I could see monsters leaping about here and there, as well as the players fighting them.

That reminds me, this is the first time I've seen other players fight.

"All right, then let's get started too, shall we?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Nemesis, and she then changed into the same black greatsword as yesterday.

I swung the greatsword up and down as I held it in my right hand — or rather, it was wrapped around my whole arm.

"This really isn't as heavy as it looks," I commented.

Even at my STR level, I can swing it with no trouble, I thought. *It's about the same weight as that fake sword I bought as a souvenir a long time ago on my school field trip. Or maybe about the same as a metal pipe.*

"Isn't it rude to mention a lady's weight?" asked Nemesis.

"But this is clearly lighter than when you're in your human form," I said. *What happened to the law of conservation of mass?*

"...You're concerned about the law of conservation of mass in a world with magic and where time flows differently?" she asked.

Well, yeah, that's true, but...

"And besides, it shouldn't feel light to anybody else," she said. "It'll only feel light for you."

"Is that how it is?" I asked.

"That's how it is."

Okay, then I guess I'll leave it at that, I thought. *My level isn't going to get any higher if I spend all my time asking questions.*

"All right then, time to start grinding levels," I said.

"I'm itching to get started."

Two hours later.

My level had gone up by 3, and I hadn't taken any damage yet.

"...How come I'm not taking any damage even though I've been getting pummeled?" I wondered.

Since I had arrived here, I had been fighting monsters like Little Goblins and Pashi Rabbits. They were the type you could take one glance at and say, "Ah, these are the small fry monsters you find in the beginning." However, no matter how many times they had attacked me, I hadn't taken any damage.

"You shouldn't be surprised," replied Nemesis. "You have fairly good equipment for your level. Also, wasn't there a Reduced Damage skill? Isn't all the damage below 10 becoming 0 because of that?"

So that means the monsters here can't do more than 10 damage to me.

My initial HP had been a little under 100. Taking into account that this was a hunting ground for beginners, it was possible they had only placed monsters here with low enough strength that they wouldn't kill a player with that amount of HP.

Incidentally, my HP was now over 700 at level 4. Liliana's HP had been in the 5,000s with a Paladin level of 60 and a total level of 210, but at this rate, by the time I reached Paladin level 60, my HP would probably be well over 6,000.

"This may get crazy down the road," I said.

"It might be because it's a high-rank job, but its stat boosts are nice," said Nemesis. "Also, HP is the highest out of all my stat modifiers."

So the large growth in my HP was apparently the result of the total modifiers from the Paladin Job and my Embryo. *The modifier for Embryos is pretty big,* I realized.

Although it wasn't as much as my HP, my other stats had of course gone up, as well. In addition, I also learned the healing magic skill First Heal.

With this, I can heal myself to some degree now.

"Hmm... I guess I'll change spots, then," I said. *As things stand, I should be okay somewhere with enemies that are a little stronger.*

"Yeah, I agree," said Nemesis. "I also felt things were a bit underwhelming."

Well, yeah, that's because it only takes us one hit to slice the goblins and rabbits in half, I thought. *Even though I was the one doing it, it was still kind of scary. The monsters' corpses don't remain behind, but if they did, it'd be one extremely gory sight.*

"Let's see," I said, "the next suitable hunting ground would be Noz Forest, just past the North Gate."

"Then shall we first return to the royal capital?" asked Nemesis. "It's almost time for sweets, after all."

Time for sweets...

"I'm okay with paying for some drinks," I said, "but..."

What will I do if she eats as much as dinner last night? I wondered. *I would like to keep the remaining money I got from selling those items to get my next set of equipment.*

At any rate, we headed back toward the royal capital. On the way, I watched the other players as they fought. There were a lot of players with outfits that were in the catalog from the tutorial, so they were probably beginners like me. However, even if they had the beginner outfits, they all had at least one thing other players didn't.

One player had a sickle and chain. The player would hurl it in the air and the chain would extend on its own to attack the monster — or so I had thought, but for some reason, it was the sickle that would travel underground and then attack the monster instead.

Another player had a baby carriage. Inside the carriage was an egg-like object, and for some reason, the player was pushing the carriage with their left hand, while desperately swinging a sword in their right hand to fight off monsters.

Another player had a stone hut. There was an opening at one section in the wall, and the player was attacking monsters from there with a slingshot. Monsters that bit onto the hut stopped moving as if they were stunned.

Another player had a red barrier. Monsters that entered the barrier would blow up as if they had stepped on a mine.

Ah, the player got blown away as well, I noticed. *I wonder if all of those are Embryos like Nemesis.*

"...There are a lot of different types," I said, amazed.

"The sickle and chain is an Arms, the hut is a Castle, and the mine field is a Territory," explained Nemesis. "The baby carriage is... what exactly? A tool that's an Arms? Or maybe a Chariot?"

So those are the non-Maiden base category Embryos... they look really interesting.

"Are you cheating on me?! Are you thinking about cheating while you're embracing me with your right hand?!" cried Nemesis.

...Does this count as embracing?

"I'm not thinking about cheating or anything, I just thought it was interesting how they all have their own abilities and personalities," I said. "It's really fantasy-like."

Bro Bear's Embryo was such a heavy firearm, the issue went way beyond whether or not it was fantasy-like, I added silently.

"Well, having something solely unique to each Master is the fundamental principle of Embryos, after all," said Nemesis.

"Also, compared to the others, your first form is fairly rugged, Nemesis."

"Rugged?!" she exclaimed.

Yeah, your greatsword mode, that is.

As we continued to walk like that, we came across another player engaged in battle with monsters. Unlike before, however, I could see the silhouettes of two people.

One of them wore a coat that appeared to be starting equipment. He was a player of about middle or high school age. He was dirty with mud and blood from battle, but even still, he was an attractive young boy that you could get away with calling either cool or cute.

As for appearances, the other person was quite unique, as well. She had a demon tail and bat wings, and was a beautiful, imp-like young girl.

"Haaa!"

"Take that!"

The two of them were fighting with all they had, but they were surrounded by four Little Goblins, and the odds were slightly stacked against them.

Now, I'd like to help, but it wouldn't be good to just cut into their battle.

"First Heal," I said, and healed both of their HP. I did it partly as a way to test the new healing magic I had just learned but hadn't yet used. It was what you might describe as a drive-by heal. I couldn't see their HP since we weren't in the same party, but their wounds noticeably disappeared.

"Ah! That helps a lot!" one of them cried.

"Thank youuu!"

The two regrouped and resumed fighting.

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After about five minutes, the two managed to wipe out the Little Goblins.

“Good work out there,” I said. “First Heal.” I cast the healing magic one more time on the two after they had finished fighting.

“Thank you very much for healing us! That really helps,” one of them said.

“Thanks,” the other added gratefully.

“I just wanted to try out my healing magic, so no need to worry about it,” I said. *If anything, it feels awkward to be thanked.*

“Well, you have been getting thanked non-stop since yesterday...” said Nemesis. Her weight then unexpectedly disappeared from my right hand, and she was standing next to me in her human form.

“Huh? What?!” one of them gasped.

“Oh? Are you...” asked the other.

The two of them appeared to be surprised, but Nemesis paid no mind to that and just stared at the imp girl.

“I see, I see,” said Nemesis. “A fellow Maiden... no, a Guardian, huh? However, it’s rare for a Guardian to look this close to a human.”

“Hey, stop staring at her, Nemesis,” I said. “That’s rude.”

“My apologies,” she said. “I was just curious about something.”

Just what that something was... well, I was curious about it, too.

“I’m sorry, my Embryo was being rude,” I said.

“Please don’t worry about it,” said the other player. “That’s amazing, though. There are even Embryos that transform!”

“That’s right. I’m Nemesis, a Type Maiden with Arms Embryo!” Nemesis introduced herself with such vigor it seemed like a sound effect should’ve accompanied her.

...This is embarrassing.

“Oh, sorry for the late introduction, but I’m Ray Starling,” I said. “I started playing *Infinite Dendrogram* yesterday.”

“Ah, I’m Rook,” said the other player. “I also just started playing yesterday.”

“I’m Babylon! A Type Guardian Embryo! Call me Babi, okay?” the girl announced.

“Rook and Babi,” I repeated back their names. “I have to say, though, weren’t Guardians supposed to be a type of monster?”

Other than her tail and wings, Babi looks exactly like a human. You could even say that there’s no difference, since I’m pretty sure tails and *wings can be added when creating a character. If I had to say which she looked more like, between a monster and a human, I would say a human.*

"That's because I'm a succubus!" she declared. "I'm sexy and cute and everyone falls head over heels for me!"

Succubus......... a succubus?

"Babi, I told you not to be so open about that in front of people...!" Rook wailed.

"Whaaat? But I'm an Embryo that takes pride in being a succubus, so it's not embarrassing at all."

"It's embarrassing for me!" he cried.

"...Rook, you're embarrassed by me?" Babi looked at him with puppy dog eyes.

Even as someone on the sidelines, I thought that looking up at him with teary eyes was just unfair.

Rook became flustered in an instant. "You see, umm, I'm not embarrassed by you, Babi. It's just that it'd be embarrassing if people were to start prying into my inner thoughts since you were born from me, you see..."

What is this sense of deja vu? I thought. *Also, I feel like I could get along with Rook.*

"Now, now, you shouldn't cause too much trouble for your Master, Babi," Nemesis scolded.

"You're one to talk," I muttered.

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Rook and Babi were done with their hunting, so we decided to band up and make our way back to the capital as one group. And, since we had no reason not to, Nemesis and I invited them to our little sweets party.

They gladly accepted, but...

"Peaches sure are delicious this time of year." Despite it being her first time eating peach tarts, Nemesis spoke as though she knew everything about it and hastily sank her teeth into her seventeenth serving.

"No sweet thing is complete without *this*." Babi poured chili sauce all over her strawberry parfait.

"...No, chili sauce shouldn't even be an option," I said.

“I think so, too...” Rook agreed. “But the speed at which Nemesis eats is also quite...”

“Yeah, I know exactly what you mean...” I said.

The scene before us was strange in many ways. For example, despite not being older than a day, Nemesis and Babi were familiar with the concept of seasonal fruit, they had their own tastes, and they expressed awareness of flavoring.

Yesterday Nemesis had told me that, despite being humanoid in form, she wasn’t really like us. But that didn’t stop the sight before me from seriously throwing me off.

“When born, we Embryos make use of our Master’s memories,” she had explained after reading my mind. “Our knowledge of this world came from the world’s system, but our knowledge of worldly affairs came from our Masters.”

Oh, so that’s how she knows about peach seasons and the like.

“Basically, we Embryos know *everything* about our Masters,” she added.

“What kind of girls do I prefer, then?” I asked.

“Ones like me, of course!”

“Wrong.”

“Why?!” she howled.

So, to sum it up, they didn’t know *everything*, but merely came equipped with common sense.

“Still, what kind of common sense would make Babi eat something so... blasphemous?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Perhaps she does it *because* it’s blasphemous, no?” Nemesis answered. “After all, her name is Babylon, right?”

The Whore of Babylon was a figure from the Book of Revelation, often portrayed riding a seven-headed beast as she spread depravity, adultery, and defilement, making her a sworn enemy of the martyr. I had no idea if any of that applied to Babi, but Nemesis had the name of the Greek goddess of vengeance or divine punishment, and befittingly, her ability was a counterattack. There was reason to believe that Embryo names were related to their powers.

“That aside, Babi, being a succubus, you must know many ways to express your sexuality and make men go crazy about you,” Nemesis commented.

What the hell are you saying, you damn goth loli?

“Of course I do,” said Babi.

D-Does she really?

Babi’s words actually made Rook choke on his food a bit.

“Ho ho...” Nemesis said gleefully. “Care to share?”

“Umm, there’s the shoulder massage, the massage where you lightly step on the lower back, and the best one — the lap-pillow and ear-cleaning combo! Sexy, right?!” Babi exclaimed.

“...Hm?” Nemesis asked.

Sexy? I thought. *None of that goes beyond normal massage. I wouldn’t even call it “lewd.”*

“That’s not what I wanted to hear. Don’t you have anything befitting the name ‘Whore of Babylon?’” Nemesis asked.

“Like?” Babi looked puzzled.

“W-Well, I-I’m not one to know...”

Don’t give her a question that flusters yourself, you damn goth loli.

“Umm... I’m underage, so I think that Babi is just acting accordingly...” Rook stopped choking on his food and gave us a highly agreeable reason.

“Ahh, age restrictions, huh.” I expressed my understanding. Just like they affected alcohol and tobacco, age restrictions reduced the sexiness of succubi to the point of making it equivalent to girls giving massages to their dads.

Man is it hard to tell if Infinite Dendrogram *is wholesome or indecent.*

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Before parting ways, Rook and I — both being newbies — made a little promise to party up and go adventuring sometime.

Also, Rook didn’t have a job yet. In fact, he’d started playing without having read anything about the game, so he didn’t even know how to get one.

I let him take a look at the Suitable Job Diagnostics Catalog my brother had given me, and he quickly found a job he was interested in. To make it into a little surprise for the next time we partied up, I chose not to ask what it was.

Anyway, after Rook and I went our own ways, I walked to the northern Noz Forest.

“Shall we?” I asked Nemesis.

“Yes, let’s raise your level.”

With Nemesis already in her greatsword form, I entered the second easiest hunting ground in the capital’s surroundings.

Unlike Easter Plains, this place had a number of trees that took a toll on visibility. The forest was so dense that it was hard to see twenty meters ahead. However, I could hear the sounds of battle coming from the distance, so it clearly wasn’t *completely* inaccessible to us players. The sounds were probably being made by beginners like myself, who were no longer satisfied by the Easter Plains.

About two minutes after we began searching for monsters, we found some wolf-like beasts. Right when they entered my vision, the name “Teal Wolf” was displayed above them. There were three in total.

“Man, this is sudden,” I said. As in most RPGs, fighting multiple enemies right after entering a higher level hunting ground wasn’t the best idea, but I had no choice.

Quick and nimble as they were, the wolves made the first move as the one closest to us jumped and bit into me. The hit dealt 22 points of damage, and it was the first time I’d felt pain that day.

Since I would be able to take about thirty such attacks, I decided to go on the offensive.

As the Teal Wolves surrounded me, I targeted only the one straight ahead. They all began attacking, slightly out of sync with each other. I ignored the two coming from behind and intercepted the one right ahead.

The hit from my black greatsword made the wolf whine in pain. Unlike Little Goblins and Pashi Rabbits, it didn’t get split in half, but the damage I gave was great enough to make its movements more dull.

“Yeah, this isn’t anything I can’t handle,” I said.

I continued the grind.

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Several minutes later, with my health at 50% and a level higher than I’d had before, I stood surrounded by drops from three monsters.

“All right, so we can take on three of these at once,” I said.

“Indeed we can,” Nemesis agreed.

In preparation for the next battle, I restored my health with First Heal. Possessing both high HP and an ability to self-heal, Paladins were simply ideal for leveling.

“All right, I’m healed.” I said.

“So, now you’re just level 5 and already have over 800 HP,” Nemesis commented. “Your defense has increased, too, so you might even be able to bear a Demi-Drag’s attack without any accessories. Don’t you think so?”

“...Even if I can, I’d like to avoid boss battles for now,” I replied. Endlessly repeating events *that* intense would simply drain my life away. “I’ll hunt standard monsters until I reach level 20.”

“That’s a good idea.” said Nemesis. “I might’ve evolved into my second form by that point.”

“What will happen when you evolve, anyway?” I asked. “My brother said that Embryos don’t change *too* much.”

“I imagine it won’t go beyond new skills and changes to the weapon,” she answered. “Though, I do not know if the same can be said for the evolution between the third and fourth form.”

“High-rank evolution, was it?” I asked.

“Yes,” Nemesis confirmed. “First to third forms are low-rank, while fourth and above are high-rank. As far as I understand it, high-rank forms display a whole different level of uniqueness. There are even cases where the focus on certain skills leads to Embryos entering their own, unique categories.”

The fourth form of my brother’s Baldr was a tank, which was categorized as a “Chariot.” However, it had originally been an Arms-type gun, meaning that it had evolved into a different category.

“If high-rank forms display a lot of uniqueness, what about the seventh — Superior — form?” I asked.

“There are no details on that in the knowledge I was granted with my birth,” she replied. “We’re simply not given this kind of information, it seems.”

“I think I see how it is,” I said. It was top secret knowledge not meant to be seen by the average person. Not surprising that there were fewer than a hundred people who got there.

“However, I *do* know that Embryos of fourth or higher forms get called ‘high-rank’ not just for classification, but for power, as well,” Nemesis said, giving more details. “That’s why you must hurry and uplift me into the fourth form... and beyond, if you can.”

“Well, that’s the plan, anyway.”

The rankings were probably full of people with high-rank Embryos, so if I wanted to get there, I had no choice but to get on their level.

“For now, I have no choice but to do some honest leveling,” I said. “I’m gonna reach level 13 and move on to another hunting ground while it’s still today.”

The orange patches of sky I saw between the trees clearly showed that it was getting late, but I had no intention of ending the hunt just yet.

Hell, more monsters spawn at night, so it actually makes me excited.

“That’s the spirit,” said Nemesis.

“All right, then, let’s g—”

Suddenly, my vision slanted.

No — it wasn’t just my vision, but myself.

The numbness — the remnant of an impact — on my forehead was a sign that something had just hit my temporal region. My status display showed me that it had taken away a whole 80% of my HP.

“...The hell?” I’d been struck by sudden critical damage with no rhyme or reason behind it. Since it’d hit my head, I was left dizzy and unable to properly move my limbs.

“Master!” Nemesis raised her voice.

I thought she was simply worried about me, but I was wrong. It was a warning.

“Hh! Counter Absorption!” she cried. Twenty-four hours had passed since she’d used it yesterday, so Nemesis could use Counter Absorption again. Right as she did that, the newly-created wall of light was hit by something.

“Gyaghg, ghgee!”

It was a small monster that combined the aerodynamic shape of a bullet with the dreadful visage of a preta. It writhed — to no avail — as it tried to break through the wall of light. More likely than not, the damage I’d taken a second ago had been dealt by this thing.

“Is this a monster?” I asked.

...No way, I thought in disbelief. *This monster's offensive ability is way too great compared to the Teal Wolves I've been fighting. However, it didn't seem like it was a boss monster like the Demi-Dragon Worm, either. I mean, it doesn't even have the name pop-up that appears over every monster in sight. Could it be...*

"Kh!" Counter Absorption's wall of light vanished, and so did the monster that had hit it.

"A suicidal-type monster that dies right after its first attack," Nemesis explained. "It's both a monster and not at the same time... Master! This is a...!"

"...Guardian!" I completed her sentence.

Type Guardian... A monster-type Embryo. Unlike Babi, who was of the same type, this one was a *real* monster.

"Master, retreat! Someone is targeting you!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Don't have to tell me twice!" I cried.

With my dizziness gone, I dashed towards the North Gate while healing myself.

Soon enough, I became fully aware of the situation. Screams of players were echoing all over Noz Forest. It wasn't just one or two people, either, but dozens of them. Since that monster was an Embryo, the one responsible was another player.

PK — Player Killing. Just as the name implied, it was the act of killing other players — a concept that had existed since the dawn of MMOs. The person who had attacked me was attacking other players, too, increasing his number of victims with every passing second.

With Nemesis's buff and stat increase due to the high-rank job, my HP was significantly larger than that of most people close to my level, and yet a single attack had been enough to bring me to the verge of death. No player without similar circumstances could survive it.

It was no longer a "newbies' hunting ground"... but a "*newbie*-hunting ground." We had become the hunted.

"That Guardian died right then and there, so why are the victims increasing?!" I cried.

"They're probably part of a high-rank Guardian categorization. Type Legion," Nemesis answered. "It's an Embryo that's basically a colony. As far as I know, the quantity comes at a great cost to quality!"

“You’re saying that the attack that almost killed me was ‘low quality?’ Nice joke,” I said.

Wait, if the Embryo is a high-rank, the Master must be high-rank, too, I realized.

“We’re at a disadvantage!” cried Nemesis.

We have to hurry back to the capital, I agreed. *This player-killing asshole shouldn’t follow us there.*

However, before I could act out my thoughts...

“Gyaghghghghghghgh!” I heard it behind me — a monster flying towards me like a meteor.

“Mast—!”

It’s going to kill m—

“Like hell!” Turning around, I swung my black greatsword at the bullet monster.

“Ghh...ghghghgh.” The impact made the bullet monster blast away into the trees, ending its life and role.

“...I did it!”

“Well done, Master!” Nemesis cried. “Now, you just have to—”

—run to the city. Nemesis didn’t get to finish her sentence. In her greatsword form, Nemesis didn’t have a face. However, I could easily tell what she was looking at.

Someone was standing there beyond the trees, lightly veiled by a dark haze. I couldn’t tell whether it was a man or a woman, young or old, or even if it was actually human or not. Though light, the haze distorted the silhouette to the point of making me unable to see such basic things. All I could tell was that the figure held a gun-like object in its right hand...

...and that an Embryo crest was shining on its left.

At that point, it couldn’t have been more obvious.

It was this person. This person was the one trying to kill me.

“Run away! Master!” Nemesis exclaimed.

Before I could even respond, I began dashing with all I had. The distance was twenty meters. It was much smaller than the distance I had to run when escaping the orchard, and the city was right beyond it.

I kept on running.

However, I suddenly heard a gunshot. At the same moment, I felt a dreadful, daunting sensation.

I had to keep running.

But the terrible chills running down my spine made me turn around. The sight that awaited my eyes was beyond anything I could expect.

Nemesis and I had been able to fend off a mere two of those bullet monsters, and still only barely. And, upon turning around, I was greeted by a hellish *swarm* of the very same creatures, numbering so many that they blocked out the view behind them.

A moment later, before I could even blink, the monsters charged at me and pulverized my body.

[Fatal Damage]

[Party Eliminated]

[Resurrection Period Expired]

[Death Penalty: 24 Hour Login Ban]

◇◇◇

Reiji Mukudori.

"...Ghh!"

Right after they destroyed me, my consciousness was ejected to reality as if I had been only dreaming. Unlike how people felt when waking up after a good night's sleep, my mind was completely clear. However, I wasn't sure if I could properly process and accept what had just happened.

Sure, I'd heard the final message loud and clear. And I was fully aware that the penalty for dying was now in effect. But I still couldn't wrap my head around what had actually happened back there.

"Let's just test it and..." Sure enough, I wasn't able to log in to *Infinite Dendrogram.*

As I made my attempt, I noticed the message on the display fixed to the side of the device. It said "Penalty Active. 23h:55m:16s remaining."

"...Well, damn," I said.

I looked outside and realized that dawn had yet to break. The clock said that it wasn't even five in the morning. There wasn't much I could do at this time of day.

"...Guess I'll sleep for now." I spread myself out on the bed and tried to pass out. However, when I closed my eyes, I couldn't help but picture the moment I'd been killed. That led to me trying to imagine what I could've done to survive.

It was a case of Tetris Syndrome. Just like people would imagine what block placement would get them to a higher score, I ran my head through various survival strategies.

As such thoughts dominated my head, I realized just how shoddy my movements had been. With the regrets and considerations of what I could've, should've, and would've done spinning in my mind, I eventually fell asleep.

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I woke up at about eight in the morning and had my breakfast while watching the morning news. They were discussing something about the entertainment industry and the world tour of that famous singer — Rachel Raymuse. It wasn't anything I could bring myself to care for.

"...Man, this is dull." I was referring to the taste of the food I was eating.

Since I had all the time in the world right now, I'd decided to make something myself, but the result had been far below the fancy meals I'd had in the game. I had a feeling that continuing to live like this would quickly drain away my excitement for real food.

After I finished eating and took care of the dishes, I went to an online message board and looked for info. It didn't take long for me to find something on the incident I'd been involved in.

The tragedy at Noz Forest was actually big news in the message board dedicated to *Infinite Dendrogram.*

Normally, simple player killing would never get this much attention, but this was a special case. That was because players were still being hunted in all the beginners' hunting grounds. However, this was only happening in the Kingdom of Altar.

Simultaneously and continuously, the kingdom's newbies were being killed off. It was clear that it was an operation executed by multiple members of an organized force. The only question left was: Who was behind it?

Most people on the message board suspected the Dryfe Imperium, which was rumored to be planning to attack Altar soon. The reasoning behind the suspicion was the idea that Dryfe was trying to keep Altar's war potential low for when they decided to make their move. Since it was only happening in the kingdom, the possibility of that being true was high.

As one would expect, the kingdom's players were responding to this. Some volunteered to act as vigilantes and hunt down the player killers. A number of bigger battles had happened between the two sides. However, the vigilantes had failed to get even a single victory. That made it quite obvious that the player killers were made up of highly proficient players. Just like the others, the one who had killed me at Noz Forest remained undefeated, but there was a slight difference. The vigilantes weren't even able to find the player killer.

The beginner hunt showed no sign of stopping, but no one could even find the person responsible, let alone defeat them.

"...It had to be that person, right?" I said. Back then, I'd seen both the bullet monster Embryo and its Master. Due to the strange mist surrounding them, I hadn't been able to tell if they were male or female, young or old. That might've had something to do with the vigilantes' inability to find them.

I ran my eyes through the comments, which were many and varied. Some said, "Welp, the Kingdom is screwed," others went "Dryfe players are such scumbags," and some saw this as an opportunity and said, "If you're thinking of deserting, I recommend Caldina. Noobs welcome."

Among them, I saw complaints from unrelated people.

One said, "Man, I got killed while I was just passing by. My Embryo was *this* close to evolving and the death penalty messed it all up."

Another replied with "Same here, and I was about to start living the high-rank dream..."

Were there more death penalties than the login ban? It got me curious, so I typed up and posted a message saying "Noob here. Just started and died for the first time. What's this about death penalties?"

Replies came quickly.

One simply went "Get lost, noob."

Another was fooling around and said, "Let me teach you my ways. Step one: You get naked..." but there were those who properly explained it to me.

Apparently, there were rumors that a high number of death penalties decreased the speed at which Embryos evolved. Most players believed this information and treated it as truth.

It was hard to gauge, considering that Embryos were unique to each player, but rough comparisons showed that Embryos belonging to players with many death penalties evolved slower than those with less. This demerit might've been one of the reasons why the kingdom's players weren't enthusiastic about participating in the war.

After giving my thanks for the info, I switched to another board.

I thought I'd be seeing grim posts about war and player killing everywhere I went, but Tenchi and Huang He were full of people talking about the tame events going on there.

Cherries were blooming in Tenchi, so people were talking about the cherry blossom viewing sponsored by the tian "Conquest General."

In Huang He, panda-like monsters were breeding so much that a whole mountain had become black and white. It was possible to use a camera item to take photos or films and send the output to external media. Someone had posted a screenshot of the panda event, and the heartwarming sight made me smile.

The only battle-related event I found was in Legendaria. There was a great battle royale to compete for tickets to the concert where "everyone's idol" — Fairy Queen Titania — was the main event. Though it was clearly PVP, everyone seemed to be having tons of fun.

"...Why is the Kingdom of Altar the only place that's getting terrorized and reaching the verge of death?" I began to understand why some players would want to defect.

Reading it all was a real buzzkill, so I just turned the PC off.

All right, what now? I thought. *My death penalty ends before dawn tomorrow. I guess it's a good time to take care of some stuff.*

I had to stock up on household supplies and food, not to mention that I'd yet to unpack all the things I had brought here upon moving. Plus I had to start getting ready for college, which would begin in just a month.

There were lots of things I had to do in reality.

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By the time I was done shopping, unpacking my stuff, and finishing up dinner, it was already past ten o'clock. I checked the message boards, and sure enough, the player killers weren't taken care of even after two days of in-game time. If the rumors were true and Dryfe Imperium players were really the ones responsible, they would likely try to keep the situation like this until right before the war started. That put me in a bit of a pickle, since I wouldn't be able to use any of the standard places for leveling. All the hunting grounds close to the four gates of the capital were occupied by player killers. That meant that I couldn't even leave the capital.

Even if I somehow broke through their blockade and got to another town, the only hunting grounds that fit my level were around the capital.

If there's one place I can go to...

"Guess I have no other choice," I said aloud.

...it's that special beginner's hunting ground that my brother told me about.

All of the hunting grounds he'd told me about were beyond the four gates of the capital, but there was one exception. I'd been told it was a place that the player killers couldn't reach, and since I hadn't seen anyone posting that it was affected, it was probably true. However, that hunting ground had problems of its own.

My brother had told me what those problems were, and I'd become averse to the idea of going there. However, since I couldn't use the standard hunting grounds, that place was my only real option.

I went to sleep early, woke up at dawn, confirmed that the penalty was gone, and hastily logged in.

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Three days had passed in the game. The time of day was evening — just like when I'd died.

The place I'd spawned at wasn't Noz Forest, but the large fountain where my brother had waited for me on the first day. While we had been walking around the town and shopping, he had told me that it was one of the capital's save points, so I'd set it as the place where I'd revive.

All is as it should be, I thought. *The death penalty ends and you automatically revive at your save point.*

"...I see you're back, Master." Before I realized it, Nemesis was standing next to me in her human form. She'd left the crest without me noticing it.

"Yeah. I'm back," I said.

She said nothing.

"...Hmm."

Man, this is awkward. The fact that I had gotten the death penalty made our reunion really unpleasant. I'd gotten killed because of my own ineptitude, so I had to apologize to her...

"Sor—"

"No need." She stopped me before I could finish.

Oh, yeah, she knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"Stop thinking such ludicrous things," she said. "I'm the one who feels awkward and needs to apologize."

"Eh?"

Why?

"...Before the incident, I went on and on about how I was the greatest and nothing could ever match me, but the very first time we fought against an enemy Embryo, I could do nothing to protect you from dying. I am infuriated by my own lack of worth and power." Nemesis expressed her frustration by biting into her lip so hard that I could see a small trail of blood go down her chin. *That* was just how guilty she felt.

But...

"But you're wrong." I said. "If you hadn't protected me against the second attack, we would've been defeated way earlier. Seriously, it's my fault for being bad at the game. It makes me look pretty pathetic when you consider that I want to join the rankings."

"No! It's my fault because my skill wasn't strong enough to protect you from the final attack!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Don't be stupid! It's my fault because I couldn't operate in a manner appropriate for our ability!"

Nemesis hit me in the chest. The punch was very weak. And the words that left her mouth...

"It was my lack of power. If you hadn't been a Master — a player — I... you and me both... would now be gone forever... and that scares me beyond belief..."

The words that left her mouth displayed a fragility far greater than the fist on my chest. The same girl that hadn't stopped talking about the extent of her greatness was now showing her weak side.

"Nemesis..." I said.

She only sniffled in response. Nemesis was crying. Her permeable tears were a sure sign of fragility and transience. When she cried, Nemesis didn't seem like a mere game character.

"...you might be right."

My words made her shoulders shiver. As if to calm them down, I placed my hands on them.

"However, Nemesis, I really don't think that this failure is only your fault," I continued. She was one or two heads shorter than me, so I bent down a little bit and looked her straight in the eyes. "And... just as you said, it wasn't only my own powerlessness, either."

"Master...?" Nemesis asked.

Nemesis wasn't the only one who was inept. Nor was my powerlessness the only thing to blame for this.

"This failure... is *our* fault," I concluded. That was the only correct answer. "My level was low. You haven't matured as an Embryo. And most important of all — we both lacked experience. That's why we were killed by him."

That defeat was in the past, and the past wasn't something you could change.

This death penalty might leave a stain on our record.

"Even so, both of us are alive," I said.

I had gotten killed, but since I was a player — a Master — my life continued as normal. And, if you ignored the possibility of her evolution slowing, Nemesis was okay, too.

"Which means it's all fine, isn't it?" I said. "We can still go on and become stronger than before."

We Masters and Embryos can get back on our feet countless times, I thought. *Who cares about a stain on our record, anyway? I don't want the path I travel to be a bed of roses. Even if we're slightly hurt, we're still standing on our own two feet, aren't we?*

"Let's become strong and have our revenge on that scumbag," I said.

In fact, we have a new goal now, I thought. *We'll level up, evolve, become better at the game, and eventually grind him into paste, fair and square.*

"...You are an unexpectedly demanding man." My words made Nemesis adopt a wry smile. "However, you couldn't be more right," she went on.

"Indeed, not letting go of the past when it hinders your march to the future is the height of folly. We still have a road in front of us."

She wiped away her tears. All that was left on her face was a familiar, indomitable grin.

"I don't know his name, but that Master will get what's coming to him." Nemesis raised her right hand. "Let's go, Master! Let's become strong — no, the strongest! No one will be able to harm us then!"

"Hell yeah!" I cried. "Let's do this, Nemesis!"

And so, we linked our arms together. I didn't get any inelegant messages saying something along the lines of "Your bond with Nemesis has deepened," but I could feel it having happened. Nemesis and I were closer than ever before.

That moment was our true starting point.

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By the way, I didn't care about it while talking to Nemesis, but since the fountain was a save point, we were surrounded by many other players. They could see and hear our exchange with no problem, and when Nemesis and I joined hands, we were greeted by a round of applause.

With our faces red from embarrassment, we chose to leave the place, giving our conversation an unsatisfying ending.

Chapter Four: Tomb Labyrinth

Royal Capital Altea — Paladin Ray Starling.

After running away from the fountain plaza, we went out on a large road surrounded by shops on both sides.

“All right, so we both want to become strong,” I said. “Our best option would have been to level in the hunting grounds surrounding the capital, but the current situation doesn’t allow that.”

“The player killers are still active, after all,” Nemesis agreed.

If we wanted to have our revenge on the player killers, we’d have to level in Noz Forest, but with them still being there, we’d end up getting PK’d the moment we left the capital.

“That’s why we’ll go to the last available hunting ground that my brother told us about,” I said.

“The Tomb Labyrinth, correct?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

Tomb Labyrinth. Out of all the hunting grounds surrounding the capital, it was the only one that was *inside* it. It was a great, maze-like dungeon that extended below the capital’s graveyard.

While my death penalty had been active, I’d taken a look at the walkthrough wiki and found out some important things about it.

First, it was an underground dungeon with a theme and set of monsters that changed every five floors down.

Second, the deeper you went, the stronger the monsters became.

Third, the lower floors were swarming with monsters so powerful that they put Demi-Dragon Worms to shame.

Fourth, the monsters in the upper floors were weak — about as strong as those appearing around the capital.

Fifth, the walkthrough wiki’s volunteers had confirmed 415 floors so far.

The most important point was the fourth one. In the upper floors, we newbies could level without worrying about getting killed by players.

“Normally, the other beginners would completely flood it, but that won’t happen here, right?” Nemesis spoke.

“Yeah, most of the other beginners should be unable to get in,” I replied.

“...Tough world, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Seriously.”

Once we remembered the reason why the other beginners couldn’t enter, Nemesis and I heaved a long sigh.

After dinner, we arrived at the graveyard where we could find the Tomb Labyrinth.

As obvious as it might’ve been, the graves here were Western-style, not Japanese. We were surrounded by countless tombstones, displaying the names of the deceased and the years they had been born in and died. It was a large graveyard, so there was a map at the entrance. It showed that the Tomb Labyrinth was quite a distance inside. There was even a guardroom for the soldiers stationed there.

Making our way to our destination, we walked through the graveyard.

I’ve gotta say... this unfamiliar sight of a Western graveyard at night is pretty creepy, I thought. *Though I guess thoughts like that will only get Nemesis to make fun of me and... hm?*

“Nemesis?” I asked.

She didn’t respond. There was no expression on her face. In fact, she was making an active effort to not display any emotions.

It’s gonna be our first battle since coming back from the death penalty, so she might be a bit on-edge, I thought.

“Nemesis,” I said.

“What... is... it...?” Nemesis spoke so clumsily that I could almost hear her voice creak like the mouth of some rusty old doll.

“...It’s nothing.”

“I... see...”

I wondered, *Is she on-edge or just tense? I can’t tell. Well, I don’t mind if she’s on-edge. We just recently revived, after all. But man, this graveyard is really grim.*

Well, nighttime graveyards weren’t lit up by anything, so it was only natural for them to be grim. It was the perfect place for one of those generic horror movie scenes in which zombies crawled out of their graves, banded up into an army, and closed in while losing parts of their bodies.

“...Hm?” I asked.

Right after I pictured a horror scenario, Nemesis took hold of my hand. I could feel it shaking, and when I looked at her face, I saw nothing but anxiety.

...Oh, I see how it is.

"Are you... afraid of ghosts and stuff?" I asked.

She didn't respond. Instead, she simply looked away.

I guess she is and doesn't want to say it, I thought.

Nemesis always spoke in a proud manner, ate a lot, and was slightly arrogant. Yet, she was afraid of ghosts. Despite us becoming closer, I still didn't have a good grasp of her character.

"If you're afraid, why not just change your form right now?" I suggested.

"...Okay." Still holding on to my hand, Nemesis transformed into a greatsword. For some reason, I could feel her becoming more composed.

I guess her form has an effect on her mental strength, I thought. *Keeping her psyche safe comes at the cost of making me look like a weirdo who hangs around graveyards with an unsheathed greatsword in hand, but whatever. I'll just go to the entrance before anyone notices.*

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I finally arrived at the entrance to the Tomb Labyrinth. It took me about ten minutes, which spoke volumes about just how large the graveyard was.

Well, there's a large labyrinth underground, so it's only to be expected, I thought. And since I was near the entrance to a dungeon now, no one would tell me off for holding a weapon.

The gate to the Tomb Labyrinth was made of stone and looked really sturdy. There was a soldier stationed right next to it. He quickly noticed us.

"Master, are you wishing to explore the Tomb Labyrinth? You need to have a 'Tomb Labyrinth Exploration Permit' to do that," he said.

A Tomb Labyrinth Exploration Permit. This item was the very reason why no beginners were exploring the Tomb Labyrinth.

It was a possible reward for quests of difficulty level three or a random drop from boss monsters. They were being sold on the player market, too, but one went for an average of 100,000 lir. It wasn't an amount an average beginner could easily procure. Basically, this was a harsh beginner's hunting ground that required the players to pay a kind of toll.

Luckily for me, I'd had the leftover money I'd gotten from selling the Demi-Dragon Worm's drops. So, before going to this graveyard, I had bought my permit. I'd even finished filling it in and actually making it effective, so I was good to go.

When I reached for my items and dug for the Permit with my left hand...

"Oh? You're a Paladin, aren't you?" the soldier asked. "Then there's no need for that. Please go inside."

He moved away from the gate without me having to show my permit.

...Excuse me? I thought.

"...What about the Tomb Labyrinth Exploration Permit?" I asked.

"Paladins don't need one," he answered.

...Are you for real?

"Oh dear, what a waste of 100,000 lir," Nemesis chimed in.

"Oohhh..." Groaning, I fell to my knees.

Not even the death penalty could do it, but this loss of money had made me collapse in an instant.

The shock was huge. If I had to gauge it, it was about three times worse than playing one of those retro RPGs, spending tons of time getting enough money to buy an iron sword, only to get it from the next treasure chest you found.

Goddammit, that money is the equivalent of 1,000,000 yen... I thought. *I filled it in, too, so it's exclusive to me and I can't even resell it now...*

Why didn't my brother tell me about this...? Well, I guess he wouldn't know, not being a Paladin and all.

As I kneeled on the ground due to the shock, the soldier called out to me in a worried tone. "A-Are you okay, sir?"

Nemesis chimed in, "I know you're shocked, but nothing will come out of moping about it."

"...Y-Yeah, you're right," I said.

Time to get a grip, I told myself. *I simply have to raid this dungeon with the intention of making up for the lost money.*

"So, can I go inside?" I asked.

"Y-Yes. Be careful, sir." The soldier spoke a spell that opened the gate. Beyond it, I saw a gloomy darkness and a staircase leading down.

"Let's go, then," I said.

"Onward," Nemesis agreed.

We made our first step into the Tomb Labyrinth.

My brother told me about the Tomb Labyrinth during a little break we had while we were buying my gear.

"Here's something to bear in mind: the largest dungeon in this country is *inside* the capital," he'd said.

He had just finished telling me about the beginner's hunting grounds surrounding the city, so this info was like a little bonus.

"*Inside* the capital? What do you mean?" I'd asked.

"Bear-ly a few dozen meters below us, there's a dungeon called the 'Tomb Labyrinth,' and it's the largest one in the Kingdom of Altar — no, this whole continent," he'd explained.

Nemesis and I had stared darkly at the ground we were standing on.

"It doesn't seem like Dryfe even needs to do anything for this country to be destroyed," said Nemesis.

"Just bear with me here. The Tomb Labyrinth is a created dungeon," my brother had continued. "The monsters inside will never crawl out — you can be paw-sitive about that."

"'Created dungeon?'" I repeated the unfamiliar term, and my brother instantly began explaining it.

"*Dendro* has two bear-ly similar types of dungeons," he began.

You really like giving explanations, don't you, bro? I thought.

"The first type is a 'natural dungeon,'" he continued. "It's used fur places that weren't dungeons before, but that got the function due to various circumstances. The Old Orchard is the bear-fect example."

He went on to add that natural dungeons also included dens created by intelligent creatures and fortresses felled by monsters.

"The other type is a 'created dungeon,'" he went on. "Just as the name implies, these are places that were created fur the sole purpose of being dungeons. Bear with me if I sound a bit meta here, but they're basically dungeons made by the devs."

"Oh?" I asked, expressing my desire to know more.

"There are three main differences between natural and created dungeons that you must always bear in mind," he answered. "First of all, monsters in created dungeons never go outside."

That makes sense, I thought. *Living in the capital would be too* *dangerous otherwise.*

"The second difference is that monsters automatically respawn regardless of any ecosystems and reasonable causes," he continued.

The people of this world had realistic personalities and lives, and monsters normally weren't different in that regard, since they adhered to proper ecosystems. They wouldn't simply appear with no rhyme or reason. Just as dead tians wouldn't come back to life, entire species of monsters could be made extinct.

However, that didn't apply to created dungeons, where monsters respawned without limit. It was perfectly natural for there to be undead-type monsters despite the lack of corpses.

"The third difference is that every few floors you run into a boss monster that — along with its standard drops — gives you additional rewards," he added.

Unlimited monsters meant unlimited treasure. The grade of the drops increased the lower you went, and — in the deeper levels — items that could be sold for 1,000,000 lir weren't uncommon.

This dungeon was a real cornucopia.

"There are other created dungeons, but the one with the most bear-able entry requirements is the Tomb Labyrinth," my brother added. "When you look at *Dendro* as a game, this is obviously the best reason to choose the Kingdom of Altar. After all, to get in, you only need to have a permit and be aligned with the kingdom."

He paused for a moment, then continued.

"Just like the fertile land around these parts, it's one of the reasons why Dryfe wants to conquer this country. They can't enter the Tomb Labyrinth until they do that, you know?"

So, to Dryfe, the Kingdom of Altar is like a treasury with an endless supply of commodities, eh? I thought.

"Did you stay with the kingdom so you could raid the Tomb Labyrinth?" I asked. "Is this the reason why you didn't switch to the country you like once you got your suit?"

"I've bear-ly been there," he answered.

Not the reply I'd been expecting.

"Why?" I asked.

"...Baldr's fifth and higher forms are too large to use in the dungeon," he admitted.

I had no words. The saying “less is more” crossed my mind. I didn’t know if it fit his case, but it was a clear example that there were pros and cons to everything.

And holy crap, what kind of Embryo is larger than a tank? I thought.

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And now, Nemesis and I were exploring the very same Tomb Labyrinth my brother and I had talked about. Since it was underground, I expected it to be pitch black inside, but it was actually relatively well-lit. This was because the walls and ceiling were covered in luminescent minerals.

The labyrinth’s hallways were quite wide — enough to let about ten people walk side by side. The ceiling, however, wasn’t too high. Just as my brother had said — it would get in the way of anything particularly big.

I thought that simply breaking the ceiling would solve that problem, but my attacks couldn’t even put a scratch on it. This dungeon was clearly indestructible.

“Despite having the eerie word ‘tomb’ in its name, it’s quite a clean dungeon,” Nemesis commented.

“It’s probably being cleaned automatically,” I said. I could only assume that, instead of realism, the main force at work in this dungeon was the will of the developers.

“I wasn’t sure if I could handle a tomb, but if all of it is like this, then there’s nothing to worry about,” Nemesis said. She was getting increasingly motivated. “I’ll split apart all the monsters this dungeon sends our way!”

“Hate to rain on your parade, but the only monster type that spawns in this floor is undead,” I said.

“...Eh?” She let out an expression of shock and confusion.

I pointed further into the hallway. *Speak of the devil.*

Clad in tattered clothing, there was a person — or, rather, a monster that looked like a person’s bones. The fact that it was a monster was proven by the name above it — Civilian Skeleton.

Just as the name said, it was clearly the skeleton of a civilian, rather than that of a soldier or knight. It had no weapon, so it merely extended its empty hands and closed in on me while making a rattling sound.

Due to *Infinite Dendrogram* having such realistic graphics, the skeleton was quite a scary sight. The hints of red and yellow on the bones — likely left behind by dried bodily fluids — made the sight a bit too vivid and slightly unpleasant.

Things like this make me wish I had chosen anime or CG as my visual setting, I thought.

Despite the gross presence, Nemesis wasn't saying a word.

"Nemesis?" I called out to her.

More silence. She didn't respond at all.

I guess she's trying not to think about anything, I thought. After all, I was about to use her to attack it.

"Let's do this," I said and brandished my greatsword. I had my reservations about attacking a person's bones, but since I had to, I charged at the monster.

My attack made the skeleton's arm and shoulder shatter into many pieces. I then swung towards its head with the flat of the greatsword.

The skeleton's skull got easily pulverized, turning the monster into shining dust that vanished.

"Can't you do it without making me touch it so much?" Nemesis complained.

"Are you saying we have some means of fighting besides slashing and smashing?" I asked. I had no offensive magic, and Nemesis's only skills were the defensive Counter Absorption and the counterattack Vengeance is Mine. Though I'd bought some consumable magic items, they were limited.

Physical melee attacks are my only option with these enemies, I thought.

"That is true, but... it's hard on my mental health," Nemesis complained.

"Well, at least we're fighting skeletons here, not anywhere else," I said.

By "here," I was referring to the fact that we were in a created dungeon. The Civilian Skeletons here weren't actual remains of people, but monsters made just for the sake of being monsters. Even though they were eerie, they weren't haunted or anything.

When you think about it, these monsters are strangely sanitary, I thought. *They even come out dry and fresh.*

"Hmm... that makes it a bit easier to bear," Nemesis agreed.

"Good to know," I said. "Ah, there's another monst—"

I cut my sentence short and could hear Nemesis gasp. The creature that had come from the corner of the hallway made us both lose our words.

Just like the skeleton, it was an undead-type monster. However, unlike the bare, bony frame from before, this one was... fatter. That was because its bones were covered in rotten, maggot-infested flesh.

However, the covering wasn't complete, and you could see yellow and dark red liquids dripping out of the places where its flesh was missing. Since my five senses in the game were about as strong as they were in reality, I could even smell the indescribably bad stench it was emitting.

Above its head, I could see its name — Wounded Zombie.

And so, the sight of the otherworldly, revolting creature made the explorer cast a D6 for a sanity check and...

"...Whoa! This thing is so grotesque it made my mind drift away into another game!" I exclaimed.

This is a bit much, honestly, I thought. *Though I guess it's natural for an undead lair to have zombies right next to its skeletons.*

Unlike the skeleton from before — which had been silent except for the rattling — this zombie was closing in on us while groaning and splashing its fluids on the ground.

"Looks like we have another fight on our hands," I said.

"Huh?! W-Wait! Are you seriously going to use me to cut *that*?!" Nemesis yelped.

"...Like I said, that's not a dead person," I said. "It's just a monster made for this dungeon."

"No no no no! I don't care how it was born, I simply *do not* want to cut that!" she insisted.

"Nemesis..." I began. *It looks like she really doesn't want to do this, so...* "I'll polish you when we get back, so just bite the bullet for now."

"Nooooooo!"

I raised Nemesis as high as the pitch of her scream and charged towards the zombie.

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Silent sniffling resounded through the hallways. Its source was none other than Nemesis. Still in my hand, she was weeping like some cursed weapon as I continued walking through the Tomb Labyrinth.

Since we'd entered, we had defeated twelve zombies, thirty skeletons, and five monsters known as "Haunted Spirits." That had gotten me two level-ups, making me level 7. My total HP was now above 1,000.

"Th-The rotten flesh... the maggots..." Nemesis continued weeping. The battles with the zombies had taken a toll on her sanity.

If there was a silver lining to this cloud of hers, it was the fact that the monster corpses completely disappeared, leaving nothing but the drops. Otherwise, both Nemesis and I would look terrible due to all the flesh and fluids covering us.

"Ohh... I never expected you to be such a sadist..." Nemesis moaned.

"Hey, I didn't do it because I wanted to," I responded. "It was necessary."

"...I feel like you performed a strangely high number of full swings, though," she snapped suspiciously.

"It's just your imagination," I said. Though doing them had made me look like the villain from some splatter flick, full swings with my greatsword had been extremely effective at shattering the fragile undead around here. It had made me feel like I was in a Western action game.

Also, although unrelated, the groans of the zombies had all been drowned out by Nemesis's screaming whenever she had their scattered flesh on her. I eventually got used to it, making it much like background music.

"Damn, the last battle cost me half of my Gems," I said. A Gem was an item type I had prepared for battles against spirits.

As the name implied, spirits were ghost-like monsters that had the annoying property of being immune to physical attacks. Not only that, they also drained MP or SP instead of HP and had attacks that applied debuffs to their targets.

I had no offensive magic, so I couldn't do much against them. And though Vengeance is Mine could harm spirits, it could only counter based on the HP I'd lost — not MP or SP. I was woefully underequipped to battle them.

However, I'd read the wiki info on the Tomb Labyrinth, and I'd known I'd run into spirits here. So I'd been aware that I'd need a countermeasure against them, and bought the Gems for this very purpose.

When used, a White Lance Gem would release a shining spear of holy magic, making it really effective against spirits.

However, they could only be used once, and each cost a whole 1,000 lir. I'd bought a total of ten, but the encounters so far had already cost me half of them.

But there's a little problem... I thought.

"I wonder how much we will get for the drops we've gathered so far," Nemesis said.

She'd finished the thought in my stead. For one, it was clear as day that I'd yet to gather even 10% of the money I'd spent on the Gems. To be able to continuously hunt in this dungeon, I wanted to make up for the lir I'd lost, but the returns here were far too small.

Zombies and skeletons dropped items such as Tattered Clothing or Bone Pieces, and I wasn't even sure if they could be exchanged for money. Spirits were even worse, since they didn't drop anything at all.

If, at the very least, the monsters here had been animal-type, I could have made some nice money selling their pelts or fangs. But as things actually were, my wallet was in serious trouble.

"Let's try going a bit further," I said. "We didn't even find the stairs to the next floor, after all."

Maybe we'll find a treasure chest if we keep it up, I thought. Despite being in a dungeon, we'd yet to see a single one of those.

"Understood," Nemesis agreed. "...By the way, Master?"

"What?" I asked.

"Once we're back, I will hold you to your word, and you *will* polish me," she said.

"Well yeah, sure," I replied.

I guess the fact that the fluids and pieces of flesh disappeared didn't do much to better her mood.

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A few minutes later, we came across a set of stairs of the same design as the ones we had used at the entrance.

"Well, this seems like the end of this floor," I said.

"No boss to be seen here," Nemesis added. "I was told that you encounter them every five floors."

The floors in the Tomb Labyrinth came in sets of five. The first five floors were the haunt of undead monsters, and the fifth had an undead boss.

Defeating it would open the entrance to the sixth floor, which was infested by an entirely different monster type until floor ten, and from there, the pattern repeated seemingly endlessly.

The walkthrough site described floors until 415, which was in the domain of dragons. The boss on that floor was too strong for anyone to defeat, so anything beyond was simply called uncharted territory.

That term wasn't appropriate, though, since it actually referred to the fact that no one among those managing the walkthrough site or contributing to the wiki had ever made it past that floor. It was entirely possible that someone knew what was beyond floor 415, but kept it secret to have a little advantage.

Man, I have absolutely no business pondering places I can't even get to, I thought. *I'll just leave for now. But man, what should I do about this dungeon's high cost and low returns...?*

As I got lost in thought, Nemesis called out to me. "Master!"

Her quiet voice was a signal for me to be cautious.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Someone is coming up the stairs," she answered.

I instantly shifted my attention to the staircase.

I strained my ears and could faintly hear the echoes of someone's footsteps as they went up the stairs.

Monsters couldn't go between floors, so it was clearly a player. Done with their business here, someone was taking their leave by using the stairs.

Strangely enough, however, there was only one set of footsteps. If someone had come here to explore the dungeon instead of — like myself — grinding levels in the low-level floors, they would surely come with a party.

As I considered that, the footsteps suddenly stopped.

A moment later, from the darkness below, something extended towards me. It was almost too fast for me to perceive.

There was some distance between me and its source, so I could sense it coming. However, right when I came to realize what it was, it was already right in front of me.

The thing coming straight towards my face was an attack against me.

"Counter Absorption!" Nemesis and I shouted, and something slammed against the newly-created barrier of light.

That something... was a chain.

Its end had the shape of a pyramid. Though blocked by the Counter Absorption barrier, it continued applying an immeasurable amount of pressure to it, making me fully aware that it could have pulverized my head in a single hit.

"Th-This power...!" Nemesis's voice made it obvious that it was hard to bear. She hadn't reacted like that when defending against the Demi-Dragon Worm's attacks, or the bullet monster's.

That means that this attack is far greater than those two! I thought in disbelief.

"I... I can't take it...!" Nemesis groaned. The barrier of light that had defended me against such powerful attacks began to crack, and...

A sudden turn of events. Right before the barrier shattered, the chain returned to its source.

We got a moment of reprieve.

However, such an action from this opponent could only mean one thing.

"They're going to attack again! Prepare yourself!" Nemesis shouted.

Just as she'd said, they were preparing for a second attack.

I hastily jumped back, creating some distance between us.

"...What do we do now?" I asked both Nemesis and myself.

We had one more Counter Absorption use, but that was the extent of it. We couldn't handle anything beyond the next attack.

I got into a battle-ready posture and waited for the chain to come at us again.

Some time passed, and I grew confused. The next attack showed no sign of happening.

I couldn't sense the chain coming, but I could hear the footsteps as the attacker resumed going up the stairs.

"Master... which do you choose?"

I instantly understood what Nemesis had in mind.

There were only two options for me: to turn back and run away, or to face whoever was coming up.

If the first attack was anything to go by, the power difference between us was so great that I couldn't ever hope to win. I had a feeling that this person was stronger than the player killer we'd sworn to get revenge on.

If it was possible, I didn't want to fight them, but the possibility of having that chain attack me from behind crossed my mind, rendering me unable to move from my battle-ready posture.

If I can't move, running isn't even an option, I thought.

Hesitant as I was, I couldn't expect either choice to bring me much success, so I could only go with a certain gamble.

When he comes up, I'll nullify his next attack, multiply all the damage he was supposed to give me, and launch a counterattack, I laid out the plan in my head. *I have no idea if I'll land the hit or if it'll be enough to kill him, but it's my only chance.*

Knowing my thoughts, Nemesis readied herself and aligned her attitude with mine.

The footsteps became louder, and — sooner than later — the person was in sight.

It was a young man who looked several years older than me. Though he had a nice face, he looked as though he was glaring at something. I would have even gone as far as to call him slit-eyed.

His apparel was simply bizarre. Though the metal armor on his upper body was from the Riot set — the same as mine — for some reason or another, his lower body was covered in a hakama. Then there were his metal greaves, six familiar chains — three in each hand — rings on all of his fingers, and a feathered hat on his head.

But the most extreme article of clothing he wore was the blue long coat hanging on his shoulders.

None of his clothes were strange by design, but the coordination between them resulted in something truly bizarre.

It seemed like a generic case of “I equipped only the highest quality items and ended up looking weird” that every gamer was familiar with.

The reason I assumed the gear was high quality was simply because it all *looked* masterfully made, even to my inexperienced eye.

The man in strange clothing threw me a glance...

“...So it *was* a person.”

...and spoke up with a sigh.

A moment later...

“I attacked you because I thought you were a monster! I’m so sorry! My bad!” He bowed before me and apologized.

“...Huh?” I said.

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Still in the room with the staircase, the strangely-dressed man and I began having a little chat.

Nemesis had returned to her human form.

The room we were in was protected by a barrier item — placed by the man — that kept monsters at bay, so we were safe.

The first thing I found out upon speaking to him was that he wasn’t a PKer. Also, his mannerisms and the way he spoke gave me the impression that he was a... reasonably good person.

As for why such a man would attack me...

“So, you confused me with a monster, huh?” I repeated his excuse.

“Yep... I’m really sorry,” he said.

As he’d been making his way up here, he had felt someone examining the hints of his presence. The light shining behind me had made my silhouette look inhuman, so, just to be on the safe side, he had attacked me.

...I couldn’t really blame him. After all, in her black greatsword form, Nemesis would reach right up to my shoulder. My silhouette could easily look monstrous.

“Monstr—?!” Nemesis yelled.

My observation seemed to have been quite a shock to Nemesis, but I chose to ignore it.

“So tell me, why are you going solo in such a shallow floor?” The strange man asked.

“Oh, I’m just leveling,” I replied.

“Leveling? Why here, of all places?” He seemed puzzled. “Your total level is... 7, huh? Shouldn’t someone your level be leveling outside? It’s both easier and more profitable. I know you’re a Paladin and didn’t have to buy a permit, but still.”

...I did buy one, though, I thought and lamented the wasted money once more. I also couldn’t help but notice that he’d been able to see my level.

“Didn’t you know? No one can use the beginner’s hunting grounds due to the terrorism there,” I explained.

“Terrorism?” he asked.

“Yes, player killers are terrorizing the beginner’s hunting grounds around the capital. It’s been going on for three in-game days now.”

“...I’ve been in this dungeon for five, so I had no idea.” He added that he didn’t even check the Internet for game-related news.

I couldn’t hold back my surprise. “You’ve been in the Tomb Labyrinth for five whole days?! What where you doing here?!”

“Just a little marathon,” he said. “I wanted to see how far down I could go while playing solo, and then I simply came back up.”

A bit of a tryhard, isn’t he? I thought. His gear and the power behind his attack were proof that his level was really high.

“How deep did you get this time?” I asked, just out of curiosity.

“I got to floor 418,” he said. “That’s one more than my previous record.”

The young man had spoken a number that was nigh impossible to believe.

“...What.” That was about the only way I could react. Even while in a party, the tough guys from the walkthrough site could only reach floor 415.

It was quite hard to accept that he had been able to go beyond where they’d gone and reach the uncharted ground while going solo.

“You are...?” Nemesis asked for his name.

“Oh, my name is Figaro,” he replied. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Ray Starling,” I said. “This is my Embryo — Nemesis — and... ah!”

As I introduced myself, I finally realized where I’d heard his name before.

Figaro — Over Gladiator Figaro.

That was the name of the one sitting at the top of the Kingdom of Altar’s duel rankings.

“Are you *that* Figaro? From the rankings?” I asked.

“Yep, that’s me,” he answered. “I go through lots of matches in the arena.”

“Arena? Matches?” His words slightly confused me.

“Yep. The arena,” he said. “In the kingdom, it’s in Gideon, city of duels. When dueling in the arena, you don’t die, even when you’re killed, and you can even win money depending on the audience you pull. It’s fun.”

“‘Don’t die, even if you’re killed?’” I raised an eyebrow.

“There’s a magical field that makes it work that way,” he explained. “It’s like a recreational activity with some betting on the side. There are some other tourist attractions, and the town is always lively, so I recommend you visit it someday.”

I guess people’s tendency to cling to their desires is fully functional even when their country is on the verge of ruin, I thought.

“Gideon is not too far after you pass the mountain in the south, and... oh, right.” He suddenly stopped. “If the terrorists are preventing the use of beginners’ hunting spots, then the Sauda Mountain Pass is blocked, as well. The idea of there being less traffic there is... troubling.”

Figaro fell silent, pondering something...

“All right, then. I’ll do something about it.”

...and said that.

“I also have to make up for the attack I did, after all,” he added. “I’ll take care of the player killers in Sauda Mountain Pass.”

“Take care? How?” asked Nemesis. “...Negotiation?”

The question mark behind that word was almost audible.

“You should be able to use the pass by tomorrow, so you just get some levels and come over to Gideon,” said Figaro. “Most of the time, you can find me there or in this dungeon.”

“Ah, okay,” I nodded.

“All right, I’ll be going, then,” he said, getting ready to leave. “Oh, have this.”

Figaro reached into his bag and took out a small stone. It was a Gem — just like the ones I’d used — but this one was of a different color and carried a different kind of magic.

“It’s imbued with ‘Escape Gate’ — a spell that lets you leave created dungeons," Figaro explained. "Get all the levels you can and use it to leave this place."

"Are you sure I can have this?" I asked.

"Sure am," he said. "It's another thing I'm doing to make up for the attack I did. After all, it would've been really bad if I'd given a death penalty to a newbie like yourself."

"Thank you so much," I said. I was sincerely grateful. With this item, I could continue the hunt without having to think about the dangers I'd face on the way back.

Figaro really is a good guy.

"But man, you two are pretty good," he added.

I raised an eyebrow.

"You were able to withstand my attack, weren't you?" he asked.

"Well, yeah, but that's what our skill is," I said.

"I wasn't talking about the damage," he said. "You didn't break when I came up the stairs."

Didn't break? I thought. *What does he mean by that?*

"I'm fond of people who don't break," he continued. "I like you. Hope we get to fight in the arena someday."

"That'd be nice," I said. If — as Figaro had said — there was no death penalty there, I could act on my curiosity and fight him just to find out how strong the top of the rankings really was.

"Yep. I'm looking forward to it," said Figaro. "I'll dedicate this cleaning to the pleasures of the future."

"Cleaning?" I asked.

Figaro stood up.

"See ya later, then," he said, instead of elaborating on the strange term.

"See you, too. Thank you for the Gem," I said, choosing not to push it.

With a bright smile on his face, Figaro waved us goodbye and left the room.

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"Over Gladiator Figaro, huh?" Nemesis spoke. "Not the kind of person I expected him to be."

"Same here," I agreed. "Based on what my brother said, I expected him to be more rebellious."

He'd told me that the reason Figaro hadn't joined the war was because he "wasn't interested in sloppy fights." That had made him sound really obstinate and rebellious, but upon meeting the guy, I could only assume that he'd had his reasons.

"All right, let's get started, then," I said. "We've got a Gem that lets us leave this place with no problem, so let's go all out."

"Yeah, let's do it," Nemesis agreed. "No undead can be as scary as that attack from before."

Apparently, that event had made her sense of fear go numb.

Perfect, I thought. *We'll be able to progress at a faster pace.* Up until that point, a part of me had been holding back — for Nemesis' sake. *Now I can turn this little adventure into a real splatter flick.*

"Let's resume the hunt!" I roared.

"Bring it on!" she joined me.

A few hours later, I was polishing Nemesis — still in her sword form — as she silently wept.

This continued until the break of dawn.

◇

It was ten in the morning, the day after we'd explored the Tomb Labyrinth.

It was time to check out, so I walked out of the inn while drowsily rubbing my eyes.

The reason for my drowsiness was the fact that I had stayed up until dawn polishing Nemesis, who had still been asleep.

Instead of being in her human or sword form, she was currently inside the crest on my left hand. Nemesis was outside of it most of the time, but for most people, Embryos were something to keep in their crests.

That was obvious, of course. Otherwise, my brother would have to walk around with a Gatling gun in his hands or ride around in a tank.

And that's something that'd have him taken away by the police for questioning, I thought.

Nemesis's personality kept her outside most of the time, but now, she was focused on sleeping inside the crest.

Seems like the R-18 zombie fest took quite a toll on her mind, I thought.

However, thanks to that, I'd gotten to level 12 and gained two new skills. They were "Paladin's Aegis" and "Instant Equip."

Paladin's Aegis was an always-active defensive skill. It was pretty good, too, since it reduced all incoming damage — magic or physical — by a whole 10%. A Paladin simply wasn't complete without it. Since it cost absolutely no MP, it was possible to just activate it and treat it as a passive skill.

The other skill — Instant Equip — allowed the user to quickly switch to wielding another weapon from their inventory. There was no need to dig through the items in the 4D bag to find it. The skill wasn't unique to Paladins — everyone who used any sort of weapon would get it sooner or later.

There were downsides to both skills, though. For example, Paladin's Aegis could only be used by jobs in the knight grouping, while Instant Equip had a cooldown of five minutes.

...Well, it's not like I have a weapon I could switch to using Instant Equip, I thought. Nemesis wouldn't shut up about it if I did.

"I won't let you... cheat on me... with another weapon..." Nemesis murmured in between her breaths.

...Is she talking in her sleep? I wondered.

The first thing I did once I went outside was search for info regarding the player killings in the beginners' hunting grounds.

Figaro had said that Sauda Mountain Pass would be open by now, but I had to confirm it for myself. And, sure enough, the player killing terror in that area was over. In fact, it was disappearing in the other areas, too.

"I can understand the south, but the others...?" I whispered. It even included the place I had died at — Noz Forest.

If the timing was anything to go by, the south had been taken care of by Figaro, but what about the others? As such questions went through my mind...

"Ah, Ray!" someone called out to me. "Hey there!"

"Hm?" I turned to the familiar voice's source. It was coming from the front of a store next to the street.

In a mere moment, I realized that it was Rook — the guy I'd met in one of the beginners' hunting grounds. Unlike last time, his graceful face wasn't covered in dirt, and he was smiling at me while — for one reason or another — wearing the uniform of a shop run by tians.

"Hello," I greeted him. "Why are you wearing that?"

"Getting skills while working part-time," he answered.

Apparently, the suitable job Rook had been diagnosed with and had chosen was close to the merchant grouping. Due to that, he'd been able to learn various mercantile skills by working at shops. Just like me, he'd gained skills without having to rely on the hunting grounds.

"So, what job did you pick?" I asked.

"Pimp!" he answered with excitement.

Pimp... as in... Pimp? I wondered. *Why does that job even exist? And why is an underage boy able to take it? In fact, why is that his "suitable job" in the first place?*

"...My guess is that it's because he has a succubus with him," Nemesis said sleepily, still in the crest.

Well, that makes sense, I thought. *Look at those bright eyes of his, though. Does Rook even know what the word "Pimp" means?*

"...What kind of skills do you Pimps have, anyway?" I asked.

"I've got these ones so far!" Rook said eagerly and showed me his skill summary.

Wordlessly, both Nemesis and I ran our eyes through it.

In conclusion — he was a true pimp.

There was Male Temptation — a skill that Charmed females and had a chance to tame monsters. Then there were Female Monster Strengthening and Female Slave Strengthening, which did exactly what the names said. I couldn't ignore Influence, either, which increased the rewards from doing work and made the whole picture look very... "master"-oriented.

The only normal skill among those was "Insightful Eye," which seemed to have come as an extra.

But man, "Charm" is quite a scary debuff, I thought.

According to the game's help files, it was a stronger form of the "Confuse" debuff. Charmed creatures would protect the one who Charmed them and attack their enemies. Basically, it made them guard the enemy and fight their allies. Players weren't excluded from its effects, either — their bodies would simply start moving on their own.

"There's a theme here, isn't there?" said Rook. "I guess Pimp is a monster-taming kind of job?”

“...Something like that, I guess,” I replied. Women were a strange kind of monster, after all.

In exchange for him showing me his skills, I showed mine, too.

Upon seeing my Paladin’s Aegis and Instant Equip, Rook’s eyes lit up. He yelled out, “That’s so cool!”

...Why must such an earnest, good young boy be a Pimp? I wondered.

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Rook quit his part-time position at the shop, so I waited for him to take care of whatever he needed to, and then joined him for lunch. He had only been working there because of the player killings, so no one had had any problems with him quitting now that they were over.

In fact, the owner thanked him. That was because — during the three days Rook had spent standing in front of the shop — they’d gotten five times more customers than usual. One thing to note was that all the new customers were women — Master and tian alike.

As we walked through the streets, I could feel a lot of people staring at us. To be specific, the women around us were staring at Rook.

“Just look at that pretty boy... he’s so cute, I might faint,” one of them said.

“That’s some amazing character creation skill. Wait, how do you even make a boy *that* pretty?!” another joined in.

“He seems a bit too natural for it to be character creation,” a third one added.

Hearing their comments made me throw a glance at Rook.

“...Hmm,” I pondered. When I’d first met him, he’d just seemed like a pretty boy covered in dirt from battle, but now that he was clean, it was obvious that he was among the most handsome men in the world. It felt as though he’d been the result of some miracle that had happened in his ongoing transition from “boy” to “young man.” The silver hair covering his head made him look like a fairy representing the ephemeral nature of snow.

“...Master,” Nemesis said, having read my mind. “Is it just me, or is your description of his appearance better than the one you gave me when we first met?”

No comment.

“By the way, Rook,” I said, “how much did you work on your character’s appearance when starting the game?”

“I changed my hair color,” he answered.

“...That’s it?”

“Yes.”

So a guy *this* handsome actually existed in reality, meaning that his Embryo being Babi and job being Pimp could all be attributed to him being handsome.

I can only assume that the Pimp industry is limited to handsome people, I thought.

“What do you think his relationship is with the blond guy next to him?” the girls continued their chatter.

“Well, I’d say that they’re *doing it*,” one of them concluded.

“Which one takes it?” a third one asked.

“The blond one,” the other two replied in unison.

“I think so, too!” the third squealed. “The pretty boy’s smile is that of a sadistic top!”

The exchange made a chill go down my spine, but I pretended to not hear it.

“Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen Babi yet. Where is she?” I asked. *Is she in the crest? Like Nemesis?*

“Babi is working part-time, too,” Rook answered. “She’s in a massage parlor nearby.”

“Massage parlor...?” The implications of a succubus doing such services made me imagine only the most indecent of things.

However, once I got there, I became made aware that it was a wholesome place that didn’t even need to operate from a back alley.

“...Yep, it’s a massage parlor, all right,” I said.

“Yes,” Rook confirmed. “What about it?”

“Rook! I’m done with my job here!” With perfect timing, Babi ran out of the massage parlor and stood right next to Rook.

“Ah, hello there, Ray! Hey there, Nemesis!” she added, noticing us.

“Hello.” I returned the greeting.

“It has been a while.” Nemesis, who was no longer in the crest on my left hand, now stood beside me in her human form.

With all of us back together, it was time for lunch.

My brother had told me about a nearby shop, so I chose it simply because I had no reason not to. His recommendations rarely disappointed, after all.

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As we dug into our meals, we continued exchanging information and chatting.

Rook and Babi spoke about their time working, while I told them about the hunting grounds and the Tomb Labyrinth.

“I got a new skill today!” Babi announced.

She’d gotten a skill despite being away from Rook. Humanoid Guardian type Embryos were able to gain new skills by working, training, and learning while separated from their Masters.

Babi’s current setup had a skill called Lilim Temptation, which could Charm males. It was the opposite of Rook’s Male Temptation, which was effective against women. When together, they could Charm both sexes, giving them a great advantage in countless situations. Another interesting skill she had was Lilim Drain, which allowed her to drain HP, MP and SP from Charmed enemies.

As for the skill she’d gained in the massage parlor, it was Angelic Massage, which could take away the effects of Exhaustion.

“By the way, Nemesis’s skills got me curious. Can she use Counter Absorption and Vengeance is Mine when she’s all by herself?” Rook asked.

That was a good question. I could recall her having used Counter Absorption on her own volition, but what about Vengeance?

“I cannot use Vengeance is Mine by myself,” she answered. “It can only be used when I become a weapon and get equipped.”

“Oh, I see,” I said, understanding. According to Nemesis, Counter Absorption was closer to a Guardian type skill, while Vengeance is Mine was more of an Arms type ability. Guardians had autonomy, but Arms and Chariots had a lot of skills which could only work when they were equipped.

“It just hit me that I asked to see your skills, but didn’t ask for your level. What is it now?” I asked Rook, looking at him. *He hasn’t been able to* *grind much these past few days, so if our last meeting was anything to go by, he should be at about level 5.*

"I'm level 25," he said.

"25?!" I couldn't hold my shock. *That's more than double my level!* "How?! Where did you raise your level? The hunting grounds weren't an option, so—"

Hell, I don't think he could get that many levels even if he could use the hunting grounds! I thought.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I couldn't go hunting, but I got lots of XP for completing a Pimp guild quest."

"A Pimp guild quest?" I repeated, dumbfounded.

I hadn't been aware of it, but taking a job unlocked quests from the guild of that particular job grouping, and clearing them rewarded the player with experience. However, with the exception of those given to non-battle jobs, most of the quests in guilds required the player to defeat or defend something, so newbies like myself couldn't do much there.

Hell, I'm a Paladin — a high-rank job — so it's probably even worse for me, I thought.

"I see... but..." There was something I was curious about. "...A job that only a Pimp can do?" I asked.

Is there anything in that vein that isn't R-18?

"The one I cleared was a quest to find a model for a painting," Rook explained. "Here's a copy."

"Let's see here..." I said and looked at it.

Maestro Grantzian Valleno is looking for a model, difficulty level 6.
One of the Kingdom of Altar's greatest artists — Grantzian — is looking for a model for a new painting.
Please bring someone that he would be satisfied with.
Depending on the model, they might be asked to pose nude.
Be advised that Grantzian is a fastidious sort and that his standards are sky-high.

I had no words. The difficulty of this quest was actually a level higher than the one where I'd had to help Milianne.

"So, you went and cleared it by showing Babi to him, right?" I asked.

“No. Well, that was my original intention, but...”

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“Pardon the intrusion. I am Rook from the Pimp guild, and I came here with a model.”

“Hmph, another one of you useless cretins who are only good at handling your crotches. All you wretches ever bring to me are atrocious hags. So, where is the...”

“Umm, is anything the matter?”

“You’re hired!”

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“For some reason, *I* had to be the model,” said Rook. “Well, it got me some levels and it made Mr. Grantzian happy, so I didn’t mind it at all.”

“...I see. Good for you,” I said.

Man, this world is really kind to handsome people...

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By the time we’d finished our lunch, my exchange with Rook was nearing its end.

I’d thought *I’d* had some strange experiences since I’d started the game, but his adventures had been quite something, too. I had no idea if we were unique in that regard or if getting entangled in unusual events was the norm in this world.

“By the way, Ray,” Rook addressed me.

“Hm? What?” I responded.

“We just talked about the player killers, and there’s something that I can’t get out of my head,” he said.

...It’s probably the same thing that I’m interested in, I thought.

“When you met Figaro, he said he would do something about the player killers in the south, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, he said something about the hunting ground there being the passage to the city of duels,” I answered.

“But the player killing is over in all the hunting grounds, isn’t it?” he asked.

Exactly, I thought. That had been the question on my mind before I'd met up with Rook.

There would've been no surprise if Figaro — the top of the duel rankings — had ended the player killing in the hunting grounds. In fact, if he'd simply given them all the death penalty, the player killing wouldn't be happening for a whole three days. However, Figaro had only mentioned the Sauda Mountain Pass in the south. Therefore, it was strange that the player killings in the other places were over, too.

"I have three possible scenarios in mind," I said.

"Do tell," Rook said, looking interested.

"Scenario number one: Figaro did something about the other three, as well," I said.

This scenario is quite unlikely, though, I thought. He'd probably taken care of the southern player killers to secure the means of travel between the capital and the city of duels — his main haunt. However, he'd had no reason to take care of the problems in the other areas.

"Scenario number two: upon finding out that someone took care of the player killers in the south, the others ceased their activity, as well."

This one seems a bit questionable, I thought. Sure, getting killed would disable the player killers' activity for a whole three days here, but this particular event was organized terrorism meant to prevent Kingdom of Altar's players from growing stronger.

From the way they'd sealed all four sides of the kingdom, it was obvious that they were acting as one. Due to that, it was hard to believe that they'd stop just because one side got neutralized. In fact, I would expect them to make up for the loss by sending over some of their killers from the other areas.

Suddenly, another possibility came to mind.

What if the countermeasures Figaro took aren't as small-scale and haphazard as I think they are? I thought. *What if he actually negotiated with the player killers?*

If that was the case, it was no surprise that all the player killing had stopped.

However, that's quite a questionable assumption, too, I thought. *Figaro was a good guy, but he didn't seem like the type to act like that. I didn't talk* *to him for long, but the impression he gave me didn't seem to fit that scenario. After all, he almost killed me just because he couldn't see what I was. That brings him closer to "musclehead" territory... or just makes him seem like a person who is rough in the way he operates.*

"Umm, Ray," Rook said, "what's the third scenario?"

Whoa, I got lost in thought, I realized.

After a short process of elimination, I voiced the third possibility.

"Scenario number three: at the same time as Figaro was doing his thing in the south, the other places were taken care of by other people," I said.

If Figaro wasn't the one who'd taken care of them all and if the others hadn't just backed down, it could only mean that someone else had gone to the other hunting grounds at the same time as him. After all, they were player killers, so there must've been many people who wanted them gone. Therefore, it was fair to assume that someone had gone to take care of them at about the same time as Figaro.

I felt it reasonable to believe that the single cause led to a coincidence in timing — a synchronicity, of sorts.

"And you are completely right!" an unfamiliar voice broke in.

It was way too sudden. Before I realized it, a woman I didn't know was sitting down at our round table — on a chair between myself and Rook.

Despite her being right next to me, I hadn't noticed her at all until she began speaking. Which was odd, because her appearance was strange and unique, making it nigh impossible to ignore her presence.

Her hair was black and long enough to cover her neck, while her face was that of someone around my age, but neither of those points were what made her seem strange. All of her oddity was in her apparel. However, the reasons were completely different from Figaro's.

That guy had had clothes befitting a fantasy setting, but there had been no uniformity in his overall appearance. This woman's clothing, however, was completely uniform. It just happened to be a men's business suit that didn't fit the fantasy setting at all.

Not only that, but her eyes were covered by a pair of sunglasses. I wouldn't have found her appearance the least bit weird if we'd been in reality, instead of the game. Though, even in reality, it would be pretty strange to wear sunglasses indoors.

"Umm... You are...?" Rook asked as I examined the woman.

“Oh, do forgive me,” she said. “I found your conversation so interesting that I couldn’t help but join in. This is who I am.”

As I noticed that she was talking in a slightly tomboy-ish way, she took out a business card... which was actually just a status window with her name, job, et cetera, but whatever.

Name: Marie Adler.
Job: Journalist belonging to the company known as “DIN.”

The existence of the job “Pimp” is surprising enough, and now I run into a Journalist, I thought. *This game sure has great job variety.*

“What’s DIN?” I asked.

“Short for *Dendrogram* Information Network,” Marie answered. “Some call us newspaper reporters. However, when we want to sound cool, we like to go for ‘intelligence agency without borders.’ We gather information from countries all over and sell it to other countries.”

“...Is that a safe thing to do in the current environment?” I asked. The kingdom was at war with a neighboring country. People who could leak info to the enemy seemed like prime candidates for arrest.

“Well, we have many DIN fans in the upper echelons of every country,” she answered. “Though I’m just an underling, so I specialize in info for citizens and Masters.”

“Any examples?” I asked.

“For the citizens, we recently took photos of and wrote about the pandas that were breeding so much they covered an entire mountain in Huang He.”

...Oh yeah, I saw that in the message boards, I thought.

“As for Masters, we recently gathered info about the player killers that were terrorizing the Kingdom of Altar’s surroundings,” she continued.

“...Hmm,” I pondered. If she handled info like that, she might know how it all played out and ended.

“You said that he was completely right. Do you know the truth behind the event?” asked Nemesis.

“Do you want to know? 600 lir per area, please,” Marie said. “You can also buy the info on all four of the places at once for 2,000.”

I see. So she only appeared before us to sell some info, I thought. *As much as I hate to admit it, I’m interested in what happened, so...*

“...I’ll pay,” I said.

“Ah! Ray, let me pay half of the money!” Rook joined in.

We both gave 1,000 lir each.

“Thank you for your business,” she said. “I’ll start with the conclusion: the player killers who occupied the hunting grounds around the capital city of Altea have been completely annihilated.”

Now that’s a rough word, I thought.

“Annihilated?” I asked.

“Almost all the player killers in the hunting grounds are on their death penalty now,” she answered. “With something so extreme happening, I don’t think they’re gonna do this dirty work again. Some of the relevant clans might even split up.”

Work? Clan?

“Umm...” I expressed my confusion.

“Oh, forgive me,” she said. “The player killer group responsible for this event was actually a union between several player killer clans.”

“A union...?” I raised an eyebrow. *I was told it wasn’t a solo effort, but an actual union between player killer clans?* I thought. *...Wait, our country actually has enough player killer clans to create a union?*

“Yes,” she answered. “Easter Plains at the east was occupied by K&R. Sauda Mountain Pass to the south was occupied by Mad Castle. Wez Sea Route to the west was occupied by Goblin Street. These three clans were responsible for the recent player killing.”

Two of those clan names sound really villainous, I thought. They’d probably chosen them on purpose. *What about the north, though? That one’s the most important to me.*

“As for their motives... Apparently, they did it because someone hired them to do the player killing,” Marie added.

“Was it Dryfe?” Rook asked.

The question made her slightly raise her arms and shake her head. “That’s the rumor, but we at DIN don’t have any conclusive proof of that, so I can only say that I don’t know,” she answered.

Well, as things are now, the only one who could be happy about Altar being damaged in such a way are Dryfe — the country we’re at war with — so it’s quite likely, I thought. *Though it does seem a bit too direct.*

“From their perspective, it was probably just an attractive scenario where they could get some extra rewards for their player killing by merely switching their hunting grounds, but the world wasn’t too kind to them,” she continued. “They were annihilated by a certain four Masters.”

“Four...” I repeated the number. Just four Masters had destroyed the player killers in all four areas.

Is that even possible? I wondered. *Well, I guess the south made sense, considering Figaro was involved.*

With that in mind, the other hunting grounds had been...

“Yes, it was made possible by the work of the four Superiors loyal to the Kingdom of Altar,” she said. “They were the ones who exterminated all the player killer clans.”

Superior.

That was the term used to describe the ones who had made their Embryos evolve to the final — seventh — form. They were the elite of the elite among players, and the total number of them didn’t even cross a hundred yet.

“King of Destruction the Unknown, Figaro the Endless Chain, Tsukuyo Fuso of the Lunar World, and Lei-Lei, the Prodigal of Feasts,” she said, naming the four. “They all went to a separate hunting ground and exterminated all the player killer clans occupying them. Oh, but Tsukuyo Fuso had her clan with her.”

“Oho...” I said, interested.

So Figaro’s nickname is “Endless Chain,” huh? Is it because he uses chains? I pondered. *Also, is the King of Destruction’s nickname seriously just “Unknown?” What the hell? We don’t even know his name, so he could be a serious weirdo.*

“Now, take a look here.” Marie took out a crystal ball and placed it on the table.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Well, it’s basically an item to display visual media,” she explained. “It shows what you record on magical cameras.”

Magical cameras? I raised an eyebrow. *Well, it’s obviously a camera that works magically, but I can’t help but wonder if the devs think anything goes as long as you put “magic” next to it.*

“Due to all the recent happenings here in the Kingdom of Altar, we at DIN increased the numbers of secret cam... I mean, information-gathering equipment we place here,” she said.

...Illegal spying, eh? I thought.

“Some of them happened to film the end of these terror events,” Marie continued as if it wasn’t a big deal. “This thing has it all in full detail.”

She activated the crystal ball.

“Since you two were talking about it, let’s begin with a look at the south, where Figaro the Endless Chain went...”

Chapter Five: Superior

Clan Leader of Mad Castle — Full Armor Giant Barbaroy Bad Burn.

In *Dendro,* there were two ways for players to fight amongst themselves.

The first one was dueling.

Players would gather in an arena, agree on a set of conditions and rules, decide what items the victor would get and begin fighting. Since no one would die even if their HP hit 0 and all the damage done would be reverted the moment the battle ended, duels were much like a casual pastime.

The other means was player killing.

Players would attack other players outside of an arena and give them the death penalty. Players who died this way would drop money and items at random... just like monsters.

One of the differences between losing a duel and dying from player killing was that the former allowed you to choose what items you lost, while the latter randomized it. The other difference was in whether the defeated side died or not.

That was the reason why there were those who specialized in dueling...

...and those like us, who specialized in player killing.

I, leader of the clan 'Mad Castle' — Barbaroy Bad Burn — love player killing.

In fact, my clan and I are enjoying some wholesome player killing right at this very moment, I thought.

"Uaahhh! Waaahhh!" A newbie player who looked like — and probably was — an elementary schooler was crying as he attacked me with his starting gear. However, no matter how many times he tried, the damage he did was always 0.

"Khahah! Come on! Damage me for at least 1 HP and I'll let ya go!" I laughed.

Not that that could ever happen. Mine was a high-rank job focused on endurance — Full Armor Giant.

Not only that, but I had Damage Decrease, which decreased all incoming damage by 20%, and Damage Reduction, which took away 500 damage from all attacks, so a newbie like him couldn't damage me even if he landed a critical hit.

"Uohh! Uohhh!" Still crying, the newbie attacked me while making an attempt to run away. However, I quickly stood in his path before he could complete his escape.

Despite having a heavy, non-agile job, I was still much faster than a newbie, not to mention that I had my Embryo's ability. I also made sure to prevent him from logging out.

To log out in this game, a player needed about thirty seconds of free time. No one could do it unless they were able to spend those thirty seconds without being touched or attacked by someone else. It was a fact of the game that was meant to prevent crime, but it could easily be used *for* crime.

Well, player killing wasn't actually forbidden, so it wasn't really a "crime" in any sense of the word.

Also, for one reason or another — likely as a means against harassment — players were able to commit suicide. Even if players were rendered unable to move even a single finger, they could give themselves the death penalty at will. However, by doing that, players dropped way more money and items than when killed by a player killer, so there weren't many who used that function.

"All right, time's up," I said.

"Ah!" the newbie gasped. As he continued his fruitless struggle, I held my large shield in both hands and swung it down on him.

My shield — which was one meter in diameter — became a giant stamp and left a mark on the ground. The ink was the player. Of course, since he'd died, what was left of the newbie quickly disappeared.

Good thing I'd set my visuals to CG. The sight would've been pretty damn grotesque if I'd set it to realistic.

There's something seriously wrong with those who pick realistic visuals, I thought. *Battles with undead monsters get really grim from that perspective.*

"Eheehee! You sure are a scumbag, boss! You even made me feel bad for the kid!" laughed one of my clan members.

"Khahah! Holy shit, I sure won't be eating any tomatoes today," another joined in.

"What do you say to cheeseburgers for dinner, then?" I grinned. "As you can see, I can get the mincemeat as if it's no big deal."

"I think I'll pass, LOL." The clan members working with me began their usual banter, and I joined in, making sure to sound as scummy as possible.

Roleplaying as a bad guy sure is fun, I thought. *Probably has something to do with being able to show off a side of you that you can't show anywhere else.*

For example, in reality, Ban-blu — the one grinning at my side — was a public service worker with a husband and kids, but that couldn't have mattered less here.

Mad Castle's motto was thus: "Forget reality, get hyped up, and kill some players."

It wasn't the least bit enjoyable to the ones getting killed, mind you. However, in this game — where everyone was competing for more power — it was the weaklings' own fault for being weak.

"I've heard of people who got so traumatized by player killers that they stopped playing," said one of my people.

"Like I care," I said. Seriously, I couldn't have cared less if I'd tried. "Killing" and "getting killed" were both part of the game.

"So, boss, including this brat, how many have we killed by now?" asked a clan member.

"Well, I stopped counting the ones I'd killed when I hit fifty," I replied.

My Mad Castle clan was occupying the Sauda Mountain Pass south of the capital, and had been killing any players who happened to pass by. We only went for those we were able to handle, but so far, everyone had been weak enough for me to do it solo.

There had been a group that had come here to stop us, but me and my clan had had no problem taking care of them, too.

"But man, this is a good deal we've got," said one of my people. "All we do is kill some players, and the money comes a-flowing like a fountain."

"Yeah, it's great," I replied.

Deal. That's the word for it, I thought. We were player killing here because we had a deal going on. For every death penalty we gave, we received a flat 10,000 lir reward. And this deal would last for a whole month, game time.

We couldn't ask for better conditions. And that was without mentioning that — being a newbie hunting ground — this place was full of scrubs we could crush like insects.

The first day we'd started had been so damn good that it'd gotten us more than 1,000,000 lir. It'd been hilarious.

What was just as funny was the fact that it had become big news.

Unlike the clan in the north, we didn't hide our identities. That led people to find out who we were, but to us villain roleplayers, that was only a blessing.

"Though, man, we sure don't get as many players now as we did at the start," one of my people said. "Guess they're all scared shitless now. Oh, yeah. Last night, at the tavern, I heard that the guys in the east don't have much to do, either."

The other three hunting grounds surrounding the capital were occupied by other player killers. Just like our clan, the ones in the east and west were full of delinquents who didn't give a damn about what people thought and just wanted to kill some players.

"Though I've heard that Goblin Street — the guys in the west — are getting some serious extra cash," another one added.

"Well, that's because they go after NPCs, too," I said.

"Ain't that just scary?" he said.

"Maybe," I said.

Player killing wasn't a crime. *Dendro*'s laws ignored all conflicts between Masters. However, killing NPCs was a serious offense.

Ending an NPC's life without a valid reason — such as self-defense, them being criminals, or taking part in a war event — would cause them to recognize the offending player as a criminal and put them on a wanted list.

Getting on a country's wanted list made the player unable to use the country's save points.

If that had been all there was to it, simply switching to another country's save points would solve the problem, but overdoing it with the killing would get the player on the wanted list of *every* country. When on all the seven lists, the player would be simply *done*. They wouldn't be able to use any countries' save points.

Considering that getting the death penalty in such a situation would send you to *that place*, the risks were way too high.

The guys at Goblin Street probably had save points at Caldina or something, but we had no intention of going through those lengths just so we could kill NPCs.

In fact, killing NPCs didn't make me feel good.

Once, I'd killed a criminal NPC, and it'd made me feel like crap — as if I'd broken an expensive vase. That was why we chose to not touch any NPCs trying to pass through this hunting ground.

Well, we're too scared to try, anyway, I thought.

"Yeah, I'll stick to player killing. It's both comfortable and fun," one of my clan members spoke up again.

"True," another replied. "Something's seriously wrong with the guys in the west. Even if we're all player killers, I wouldn't want to get involved with that lot."

I simply listened to them. *In all honesty, I'm more afraid of the one in the north than the ones in the west,* I thought.

The person in Noz Forest was bad news.

Unlike in the other places, it wasn't a clan there, but a single player killer. I didn't know his name. All I knew about him was that he was a trickster good at hiding himself, and that what he was doing was his day job.

There was no better term for it — day job.

He'd been playing as a hit man for as long as he'd been known in *Dendro.*

Players who were killed by other players or received some sort of harassment would sometimes grow vengeful and develop grudges. Killing players based on the requests of such people was part of his daily life. I'd even heard that he'd once gotten a request to assassinate a Superior that was on wanted lists.

"Superiors" were players that had made their Embryos evolve to their seventh forms — the elite of the elite. No one in their right mind would even think of fighting someone like that. I was no exception.

However, though he'd received serious amounts of damage, that player had been able to give the Superior a death penalty and send him to *that place*. Due to that, he'd gotten the title of "Superior Killer."

Though we were business partners right now, I didn't really want to meet him.

I didn't think I'd lose to him, but hit men like him — adhesive as they were — just seemed far worse than both player and NPC killers. Not getting involved with them was the right idea.

"Boss, we've got another one," one of my clan members called me.

He was contacting me by using an item that allowed communication between members of the same clan.

We had six parties consisting of six people each. Every member of every party had split up and formed groups of six with members of other parties before positioning themselves in different places all across the area.

With this setup, if one group got destroyed in some sort of surprise attack, the actual party members would be able to tell that something was wrong by looking at their party status. It was a large-scale battle tactic that we were all accustomed to using.

"Whoa, damn. This sucker has some good-looking gear on him," he spoke through the long-distance contact item.

"Well then, if he's not a newbie, he's here to hunt us down, huh?" I asked.

"Seems like it," he answered. "He's alone, though."

"Alone? Then there's no problem," I said. "Just attack, threaten him into taking his gear off, and kill him."

"Hee hee hee, sounds good, boss," he laughed. "Today, we'll sell that gear and have a wild part—"

[Party Member "Jordan α" Has Died]

[Resurrection Period Expired]

[Due to the Death Penalty, "Jordan α" was Logged Out]

Huh? was all I could think. "H-Hey! Stop with the jokes! Shit like this freaks me out when it's so sudde—"

[Party Member "Lowered Beltmars" Has Died]

[Resurrection Period Expired]

[Due to the Death Penalty, "Lowered Beltmars" was Logged Out]

Another party member I'd been in contact with had died.

The "resurrection period" was the time in which resurrection items and magic could have an effect. If someone successfully resurrected the player before the period ended, the player would avoid the death penalty. However, the time given was dependent on the state of the corpse.

The two deaths had been instant and had left basically no resurrection period. I could only assume that they'd been turned into mincemeat in but a single moment.

Upon looking at the clan members at my side, I noticed that they had all turned pale.

Once I asked what was up, they said their party members who'd been in the same places as Jordan α and Lowered Beltmars were also dead.

Basically, the twelve clan members positioned at those two places had all met a nearly simultaneous and swift death.

Did they all get ganked by a group of players? I thought. *There's no way.*

After all, each place had had a person with a great "Enemy Detect" skill. It should've been impossible for a group of players to prepare such an attack without getting noticed.

But if the one who did it was already spotted... and if it's really just one, then...

"I-It's a player! A player from Altar!" one of my party members from another position contacted me. "I saw a chain! It took Marlo and—"

[Party Member "Ma-mdoh" Has Died]

[Resurrection Period Expired]

[Due to the Death Penalty, "Ma-mdoh" was Logged Out]

The screams coming from the other side before getting cut out were a sign that the third group had been eliminated.

However, before dying, the party member had left me some valuable information. He'd mentioned that the player used a chain. There was little doubt that it was the same well-equipped "sucker" they'd seen before dying.

Well, now this "sucker" is massacring our members as if it's nothing, I thought. *This one clearly isn't your average Joe.*

The Kingdom of Altar happened to have a famous player who used chains. His name was...

"I-It's Figarooooo!" shouted another party member. "Why is the Over Gladiator here?! He—"

[Party Member "Mohawk X" Has Died]

[Resurrection Period Expired]

[Due to the Death Penalty, "Mohawk X" was Logged Out]

...Over Gladiator Figaro.

"The Endless Chain," "One of Altar's Big Three," "The King of Hanging Around the City of Duels," et cetera... He had many names and was one of the strongest players in not just the Kingdom of Altar, but in the whole game itself.

He was a Superior, and there were even rumors that that weirdo raided created dungeons *solo*.

That lunatic was now with us, on this mountain...

...and he clearly had it in for us.

It wasn't an unexpected scenario.

Since we were committing acts of terror against the kingdom's players, it was only natural for the ones sitting at the top of the kingdom's rankings to come take care of us.

However, the rumors had suggested that Figaro wasn't the type to get involved in such events. I'd heard he spent most of his playing time either raiding the dungeon or dueling in the Colosseum.

After all, he hadn't even participated in the war, and yet...

[Party Member "Goro Mushoku" Has Died]

[Resurrection Period Expired]

[Due to the Death Penalty, "Goro Mushoku" was Logged Out]

Suddenly, I heard some rattling. A frustrated grunt escaped my mouth. Right after I got the message that the members in the fifth position were eliminated — meaning that we were the last — my "Killing Intent Perception" skill went off and warned me about the attack coming my way.

I didn't know the direction it was coming from. Still, I only needed to know it was coming to be able to do something about it.

A moment later, I saw a chain with a pyramid-like tip flying right at me.

"Astro Guard!" I activated a Full Armor Giant defensive skill. It rendered me unable to move in exchange for multiplying my defense by five.

With this, my total defense was now over 15,000 — the greatest I could reach.

The chain hit my shield with a dreadful amount of power behind it.

"...Whoa!" I exclaimed. My HP had gone down.

My defense was over 15,000, I had a skill that decreased all damage by 20% and another one that took away another 500, yet he had been able to break through all these walls and deal damage to me. It was only natural that the guys positioned at the other places had gotten slaughtered without even getting time to heal.

Thus, the chain that I deflected...

“Gyeeaahhh!”

...went towards and pulverized Ban-blu.

She wasn’t the only one, though — besides me, everyone positioned here was attacked by the chains and scattered into a thousand pieces.

“...Sorry,” I said. “I can’t move, so I couldn’t protect you.”

With that, the survivors around me disappeared, and I could no longer contact anyone.

Looks like they’re all dead and dealing with the death penalty now, I thought. Still immobile, I kept up my Astro Guard stance.

Besides the chains — which were making metallic sounds as they hit and slightly damaged me — the only thing moving was the Over Gladiator, Figaro. I saw him walking up the mountain road when I tried to trace where the chains were coming from.

He had a well-proportioned face, so if — unlike me — he hadn’t spent a significant amount of time on character creation and had just gone with the defaults, it was fair to assume that he was handsome in real life, as well.

His apparel was strange, but by using “Identification” — a skill that allowed me to see item names and values — I discovered that everything he was wearing was highly powerful and extremely rare. In fact, some of them were so rare that my Identification level wasn’t high enough to identify them.

“The bastard’s even wearing some UBM special rewards as if it’s no big deal...” I grumbled.

Special rewards for MVPs in UBM battles — Unique Boss Monster — were bound to the MVP and thus couldn’t be transferred or dropped. So, despite being damn strong, they were worthless to us.

Though Figaro’s face and apparel were deserving of a comment or two, there was something about him that just couldn’t be ignored. It was the red chains — several of them — wrapped around both of his arms.

This game had a limit to how many weapons you could wield. The standard amount was either one for both hands or one in one hand and another in the other — like me with my shield. Besides that, normal players could use throwing weapons or items like Gems, but that was the extent of the weapons they could utilize.

However, this Figaro guy was wielding six chains — three on each arm.

And yes, I was completely certain that there were six chains — not just two that seemed separate. They all had the same name — Crimson Dead Keeper — but they weren't connected in any way.

Though Figaro didn't seem to be moving them, all the chains automatically extended and went straight towards me.

Most would think this is a joke, but they'd be wrong, I thought.

According to the Identification results, Crimson Dead Keepers had the skills "Auto Enemy Detect" and "Range Extend." You'd be hard pressed to find a more user-friendly weapon.

From the fact that Identification worked on them, it was obvious that they weren't his Embryo. Which made it all the more obvious that he was actually wielding a total of six weapons.

It was way over the standard wield limit, but I had been aware that the Gladiator job grouping had a skill that allowed the player to wield more weapons. The ultimate maximum was supposed to be a mere three, but since Over Gladiator was a Superior job of that grouping, it wouldn't have been strange for it to have a stronger version of that skill.

Basically, it meant that he'd eliminated all of my clan without using his Embryo and by relying only on his Over Gladiator skills and weapons in hand.

"I'm sure getting blocked a lot today."

Figaro's first words didn't make even a bit of sense to me.

"You have some good defense, but I guess it's normal for a Full Armor Giant," he continued. "Still, it's rare for anyone to be *this* tough. Is your Embryo focused on defense or something?"

I stayed silent. He was stating his impressions, but I had no reason to respond in any capacity. I could try bluffing, but if he had Truth Discernment — a skill that informed the user if another person was lying — he'd see right through me and I'd only end up giving him info...

...such as the fact that my Embryo's power wasn't defensive at all.

"...Hm. Looks like I've taken care of every player killer besides you," he said.

Either by simply feeling it or by seeing that his chains' Auto Enemy Detect weren't picking up anyone but me, he'd concluded that I was the last. And with those words, it became obvious that he'd come here to kill us — the player killers near the capital.

“So, can I assume that you’re this PK group’s leader?” he asked.

“...What if I said ‘yes?’” I replied.

“My only goal here is to secure the means of travel between the duel city and the capital,” he explained. “If you promise to leave this mountain pass, I’ll gladly let you go.”

“...Is that something you say after killing every single one of my clan members?” I asked.

“If I hadn’t done that, you wouldn’t even be willing to negotiate.”

He’s not wrong, I thought.

Until he’d eliminated us, we’d all considered him to be just another sucker for easy pickings, so we would’ve attacked him even if he’d had something to say. After all, we’d had no idea that there was such a huge gap in power between us and a Superior.

However, that made me consider something.

Just how much stronger is he compared to me — a Master with an Embryo in its sixth form? If I can land a perfect hit with my Embryo’s ultimate skill... I might be able to kill him. Sure, with him having a Superior job, his level is probably far greater than mine. My level is 500 — the maximum I can reach with low-rank and high-rank jobs — and his can easily be two times higher than that. However, the results of PvP battles aren’t decided by level or stats. What matters is how well you can prevent your opponent from using their powers effectively while attacking them with your own. The Superior Killer got his name for a reason. It shouldn’t be impossible for me to do it, too.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll leave this place as soon as I can. We, Mad Castle, won’t be hunting any more newbies here.”

That wasn’t a lie. With players of this caliber now coming after us, our little PK feast in this area was all but done.

We’ll back away... right after I kill him, anyway.

“I have a Contract here. Wanna use it?” I reached into my item pouch and took out a piece of parchment.

It was a Contract — a type of item used in agreements between players. Anyone who went against the conditions would receive either a temporary loss of stats, some debuffs, or even the death penalty.

“Well...” Figaro said. “I don’t see why not. Let’s do it.”

“...Okay, I’m done filling it in,” I said. “Take a look at it.”

Saying that, I began to bring the Contract to Figaro.

Five meters.

Four meters.

Three meters.

Two meters — he was now in range.

A magic circle appeared below my feet and spread around me. It was my Embryo — Atlas.

“Heaven’s Weight!” One of Atlas’ skills was the increase of weight.

It was able to apply continuous damage to everything in the effective range by increasing the gravity of the surroundings.

The effect was stronger based on distance, reaching its peak at two meters, where the gravity was 500 times greater than usual. At the same time, it applied the “Binding” debuff, rendering Figaro unable to move even a single finger.

The chains automatically tried to attack me, but the overwhelming gravity forced them to the ground, where they could only crawl.

So far, no one had ever been able to break out of this combo between Binding and super gravity.

A standard high-ranking player would have already been crushed to death, but I wasn’t naïve enough to believe that the Superior before me would die as easily.

It was time to use Atlas’s ultimate attack.

“Astro Guard!”

I used Astro Guard again to multiply my defense by five...

“Emancipated Giant, Atlas!”

...followed by the skill named after Atlas itself.

It converted my defense to offense and multiplied my attack power by ten for ten seconds. My attack power was now over 150,000. A clean hit from that should’ve been enough to instakill anyone — even a Superior.

And as Figaro was still unable to move, I began barraging him with Atlas’ strongest attack.

“Break and die!” I roared.

The ground below me shattered, caved in, and became a large crater. But I didn’t give a damn.

For all I knew, he could have multiple resurrection or related accessories. I had to spend each and every one of these ten seconds attacking him.

Suddenly, a sound.

As I continued my barrage, a chain wrapped around my neck. It shocked the words out of me.

I looked down. What I saw was the ground I'd shattered with my barrage, but Figaro was nowhere to be seen.

If he wasn't before me, there was only one place he could be at. By that, I meant "at the other end of the chain tightening around my neck."

It was going upwards, so I looked up and saw Figaro hanging about ten meters up in the air.

"H-How?!" I howled in shock. He'd been affected by five hundred times the normal gravity and had had the Binding debuff — there was no way he could've jumped that high.

"...Ah," I said.

Suddenly, a realization.

I had heard many things about Figaro. Among them was that, for the Over Gladiator, raiding a created dungeon solo was part of his daily life. The very idea of solo raiding was stupid, but any lunatics who attempted it had to make sure they met a certain condition.

It wasn't high stats.

Nor was it the means of healing.

It was all about countermeasures to debuffs.

Paralysis, Sleep, Petrification, and, of course, Instant Death.

When going solo, players didn't have any allies that could help them with such debuffs, so getting one of them would be the equivalent of dying.

Thus, anyone raiding solo would have to have a means of dealing with debuffs. Therefore, it was only obvious that this solo-focused Superior would have been prepared for that.

He had some equipment I couldn't identify. One of them probably nullified all Binding effects.

"No... There's no way!" I shouted.

I'd been about to accept that conclusion, but I simply couldn't. The Binding from my Heaven's Weight was a personal skill from a high-rank Embryo. There was no way it could've been nullified so easily.

Suddenly, another realization.

I thought that he wasn't using his Embryo. But what if I'm wrong? What *if his Superior Embryo is already active? What if it's the reason why he was able to nullify my Binding and jump as if the 500 times greater gravity doesn't matter at a—?*

Another sound. I instantly looked up at Figaro.

Due to the light behind him, I couldn't make out his expression.

However, it gave me chills I couldn't describe.

When he landed, I got a good look at his face, which made the chills turn even worse.

The sound again. His narrow eyes were open wide and shining red. His mouth was in a smile — sharp like a crescent moon and open wide enough to see his throat. The sounds coming from his throat were downright inhuman. It was reminiscent of growls that your average monster would sound — meaningless and thick with bloodlust.

A short scream escaped my mouth. At that moment, he raised both of his chained hands up into the sky.

That motion made the chains wrapped around my neck begin to pull upwards.

My body — more than two meters worth of armored flesh — was separated from the surface and got distanced from the earth.

My ears were overwhelmed by the sound of air grazing my whole body.

Likely by using his chains' Range Extend skill, he made them raise me up at incredible speeds and didn't seem to know where to stop. Figaro was now but a dot on the surface. A moment later, I was higher than the mountain peak, reached the clouds and went beyond.

Soon enough, I no longer had any air around me. I made my lungs work at full capacity, yet nothing was coming in. The word "suffocation" came to mind.

Though *Dendro* allowed the player to reduce all pain to nothing but dull impacts, it didn't do anything about the anguish of oxygen deprivation.

However, there was no need for me to worry about suffocating, because something far scarier happened.

As if it was only obvious, the chains began to get pulled back down to the ground.

The sights I'd seen on my way up now went by me at an even faster speed, making me feel as if someone had rewinded my life.

"HYAAAAAHHHHHH!" A scream of despair escaped my mouth.

It didn’t matter that I was in a game. The fall I was experiencing was thick with fear of death.

It didn’t matter that there was no pain. The shape of fear living beings feel when faced with imminent death was unrelated to that.

The game’s realism conveyed the fear of death all too well.

From sky high and at a ridiculously high speed, I was falling to my death.

Still with a monstrous smile on his face, Figaro was waiting for me on the surface.

Once again, he made that sinister, incomprehensible sound. One of his chains was replaced by another weapon — a chainsaw-like greatsword.

He swung it straight at where I was falling.

A moment later, a twisted, crunching sound ripped from my own body, and I...

[Fatal Damage]

[Party Eliminated]

[Resurrection Period Expired]

[Death Penalty: 24 Hour Login Ban]

Rangyu Restaurant, Kingdom of Altar — Paladin Ray Starling.

“...That was one brutal fight.” After watching the clip in Marie’s crystal ball, I was seriously taken aback. It was paused at the frame where the huge, armored guy — the PK leader — was getting split in half.

According to Marie, the armor guy was an infamous player who had had high defense and a counterattack-like ultimate skill that dealt serious damage.

Due to that description, I found him somewhat relatable and began to feel that his demise — that mangled corpse — was a glimpse of my future if I ever fought Figaro.

“And that’s how everyone in Mad Castle met with a sad end,” said Marie. “Even if they recover from this, they’ll never return to player killing in that area.”

Makes sense, considering that stopping the traffic there would make Figaro get involved again, I thought.

“If I ever find myself in the duel city, I’ll have to remember to thank Figaro for this,” I said.

“Indeed,” mumbled Nemesis.

“Hm?” I looked at her.

For some reason, she seemed a bit sulky. Instead of looking at the crystal ball, she was merely eating with Babi, who didn’t seem to care about any of this whatsoever.

The amount Nemesis consumed was as great as always, but it almost seemed like she was stress eating.

Why, though? I thought.

“Okay, now let me show you the next one.” This time, Marie’s crystal displayed a familiar place. It was the first hunting ground I’d ever leveled at — Easter Plains.

Sure enough, there was a group of player killers there. Though they were hiding from players and waiting for their next prey, they weren’t hidden from the camera.

A few moments later, another group — and quite a strange one, at that — came from the direction of the capital.

I couldn’t tell the exact number, but there were surely more than a hundred of them — all marching towards the player killers.

Each and every single one of the group had an outfit with a crescent moon and a closed eye on it. The design seemed familiar, but I couldn’t recall where I’d seen it.

In response to the group’s sudden appearance, the player killers became visibly perplexed and only continued hiding.

Soon enough, a single lady walked out of the strange group.

She had black hair that was reminiscent of nightly darkness and reached as far as the back of her knees, which were hidden by her ceremonial kimono. Her beauty made me feel as though I was looking at Princess Kaguya, straight out of the children’s tale.

Suddenly, the beauty raised her hand, making the world go through what seemed like a theatrical blackout.

Mere moments ago, it had been daytime and the sun had been shining, but she’d somehow brought forth a “night.” It was complete with a blue moon that was downright impossible in reality and perhaps even the game.

A moment later, the player killers who were bathed in the blue moonlight grabbed hold of their throats and began to writhe in pain, which rendered them unable to move properly.

As if they had been waiting for this, the strange group split up and began systematically killing the writhing player killers. With their victims unable to move in any capacity, it seemed less like a battle and more like a tedious job.

However, there was an exception.

A certain player killer — a Beastman type female player with wolf-like ears and tail — could still move even when exposed to the moonlight.

According to Marie, that was one of K&R's two leaders.

Using her claws and fangs, she savagely clawed her way through the enemies surrounding her and closed in on Princess Kaguya.

However, it was all in vain.

The hundreds surrounding her were too much for her to handle, so she ended up dying at the edge of a spear.

The sight made the beauty reminiscent of Princess Kaguya cackle in a discomforting manner.

"That's Tsukuyo Fuso of the Lunar World," Marie explained. "She is the owner of the clan known as The Lunar Society... though I guess the term 'founder' or 'spiritual leader' is more appropriate."

"Spiritual leader?" I raised an eyebrow. It was a strange title, but it reminded me that her job was "High Priestess."

Nevertheless, I found it to be somewhat questionable...

"Um, is this Lunar Society related to the Japanese cult of the same name?" asked Rook.

"...Oh." His words reminded me of where I'd heard that before. "The Lunar Society" was the name of a cult that existed in reality.

"Yes," answered Marie. "The clan 'The Lunar Society' is a part — or, rather, the headquarters — of the cult of the same name."

"...Why are they advancing their religion in a game, of all places?" I asked.

"The Lunar Society's first teaching is 'Escape the shackles of flesh and betake yourself to the true world of souls,'" she explained. "I guess they consider *Dendro* to be that world."

...I'm fully aware of this world's realism, I thought. *Our five senses and the tians we interact with can't be distinguished from the real thing. But... is that really enough reason to take it that far?*

"If their goal is to 'betake themselves to the true world of souls' and they accomplished it by getting here... what are they doing now?” I inquired.

“Oh, yes. Their second teaching is the main one,” Marie said. “It goes something like, ‘Embrace this free world and celebrate your liberty to your soul’s content.’”

...Sounds like the dogma of some dark god, I thought.

“The Lunar Society is quite feared among the players,” she continued. “Not only are they more than a thousand strong, they also have roots in reality, so many players are afraid that getting on the cult’s bad side might get something done to them in real life.”

Well, that’s a scary thought, I thought. *If there’s the possibility of them abducting me or something, I’d rather not get involved with them, either.*

“By the way, as far as we know, their reason for going after the player killers was the fact that one of their followers was killed by them,” Marie added. “It’s scary that such a thing can get the entire clan to go after you, isn’t it?”

...Would I be wrong to assume that — right next to the war — the cult is another reason why people are leaving the kingdom? I thought.

Next, Marie displayed what had happened in the west.

What I saw first was Lei-Lei — the girl that had participated in the party we’d had on my first day. Just like that time, she was wearing a Chinese dress despite having a northern European face. From what my brother had told me, she was from there in real life, too.

Lei-Lei’s fighting style as I saw it in the crystal ball was simple. She didn’t bring them up to the sky just to have them fall on a chainsaw, nor did she make them writhe just to have a group come up and impale them.

She simply walked up to the hiding player killers and punched them. That was all. However, the results were downright ridiculous.

Figaro’s chains basically turned his opponents into mincemeat, but this was on another level.

The player killers were completely liquefied. They were bursting so easily, it almost made me think that they weren’t people, but people-shaped water balloons. The moment Lei-Lei touched them, their flesh simply collapsed, leaving only a blood and entrail-colored liquid and the skin that released it.

Speaking of skin, it was flying around everywhere, decorating just about every surrounding tree. Because they instantly died, it would quickly disappear, but the sight itself wouldn't leave my mind as easily.

I think I can see why she's called the Prodigal of Feasts, I thought. *No proper feast is complete without meat and drink, and she provided both. ...What a grim thought, though.*

Despite seeming like a really jovial character in the party, Lei-Lei had a seriously scary fighting style.

Marie didn't know why Lei-Lei had decided to eliminate the player killers.

With what happened in the south, east, and west now being clear, all that was left was the north — Noz Forest.

It was the place I was the most curious about. After all, I had died there once.

"Now, about the north..." Marie seemed somewhat reluctant.

Just what is she about to show us? I thought.

"Well, I'll just play it, then." Marie controlled the crystal ball and made it show the forest.

It had been filmed during nighttime, when I'd still been raiding the Tomb Labyrinth. Apparently, this was the earliest of the four eliminations.

However, I couldn't see the player killer anywhere.

Sure, the trees and the night's darkness made it hard to see, but there was absolutely no sign of him.

As I continued intently looking at the crystal ball and searching for him, the screen suddenly turned red as the footage ended.

It quickly changed to a recording from another camera, but just like the last one, it quickly got cut off, as well.

The next recording wasn't a clip of the inside of the forest, but an overhead view of the whole area. The camera was probably placed on the capital's outer walls.

Anyway, it showed with great clarity what was happening in the forest.

The forest was being bombarded by artillery shells and set aflame by a rain of incendiary bombs.

Not showing a single person, the clip ended with just that — a flaming forest, making it feel like a scene cut from some war movie.

"Um... what is this?" Rook's question made Marie smile awkwardly.

"Ahaha... This is, uh... the battle between King of Destruction the Unknown and the unidentified player killer widely known as the 'Superior

Killer'..." The tone of her explanation made it seem like she had no confidence about what she was saying.

I can see why, I thought. *The clip shows neither the player killer nor the King of Destruction eliminating him. It's nothing but a display of environmental destruction.*

"...If it doesn't show the King of Destruction, how can you be sure that he was the one who did it?" I asked Marie. "Hell, we don't even see the player killer, so it might not be this 'Superior Killer,' either."

"Good point," she replied. "From what we know about him, it's all but confirmed that the PK is the Superior Killer, but we don't have any conclusive proof about the one who attacked him being the King of Destruction. This is only an assumption based on the extent of the destruction displayed here. But you see, the King of Destruction has always been an enigmatic figure that doesn't let anyone know much about him..."

Oh yeah, I thought. *His reason for not participating in the war was that he "didn't want to stand out." Though that's not very convincing when coming from someone who just turned an entire forest to cinders.*

"Oh, but there are rumors that the King's Embryo is a battleship! Take a closer look here!" Marie pointed her finger at a certain spot on the crystal ball.

Beyond the burning forest, shrouded by the darkness of night, there was a large, black silhouette. Its outline was too acute to be the ridgeline of a mountain, and indeed, many would assume it to be a battleship.

"So battleship Embryos exist, huh?" I said, not particularly surprised. My brother's was a tank, so this wasn't outside the realm of expectation.

In fact, I'd been more startled by Tsukuyo Fuso's Embryo. I had a feeling that it was the "night" itself.

"But wait, wouldn't such a large-scale attack harm more than just the Superior Killer?" I asked. *What if it actually killed some tians...?*

"I don't think we have to worry about that," Marie answered. "With all the player killing, almost no one dared to go through there. In fact, I think the King of Destruction only took such a flashy approach because he was certain that no one else would get caught up in it."

"I see." I nodded. Or maybe he'd turned the whole forest to ash simply because he couldn't find anyone. From what I had read on the Internet, no one besides me had even seen the Superior Killer.

Now that I think about it, how did DIN get ahold of information that led them to believe that the player killer was the Superior Killer? I wondered.

"Do you know the reason why the King of Destruction attacked the Superior Killer?" I asked.

"We have no clue whatsoever." Marie raised her hands up in resignation. "Despite being a player that gets strongly involved in many events across all countries, his identity and most of the reasons for his involvement are completely unknown."

"And that's why he's called 'The Unknown,' right?" I asked.

"Yes," she nodded. "We are completely clueless as to what drove him to cause such large-scale destruction..."

...I wonder if something pissed him off, I thought.

"Wait, aren't there too many holes in the information about the north? Isn't this intel a bit too vague?" Rook asked.

I couldn't help but agree with Rook. The price had been 600 lir per area, but the information for Noz Forest seemed worth a lot less than that.

"Oh...?! Now that you mention it..." Marie muttered. "Ah! But wait! There's some extra info that comes with this!"

"Extra info?" I asked.

"Indeed! It's this: the Superior Killer left these flames alive!"

In response to Marie's words...

"Oh?"

...Nemesis — who, up until that point, had been eating with Babi while barely looking at the crystal ball — finally showed some interest.

I could somewhat understand why this was the only piece of info that had gotten a reaction out of her.

In fact, I'd finally realized why Nemesis was behaving the way she was. She was frustrated that the player killers had all been eliminated. She didn't like having the one she'd promised to get revenge on be taken away by someone else. I could relate to that, as well.

However...

"That's great news," said Nemesis.

...he was still alive.

Chapter Six: The Cat’s Tea Party

Noz Forest — Paladin Ray Starling.

After Rook and I bought Marie’s info and made a plan to meet up later, Nemesis and I went to the place that used to be Noz Forest.

“This is just...” I said.

Beyond the northern gate, there was a great wasteland as far as the eye could see. The forest had simply disappeared, leaving only felled trees reduced to nothing but charcoal.

Noz Forest could no longer be used as a hunting ground, nor was it deserving of the name “forest.” In a city-building sim, the wasteland before me would’ve been a great place for building.

Sadly, *Infinite Dendrogram* was an RPG.

But man, it’s hard to believe that a single player can change the map this much, I thought.

I saw bullet holes, explosion marks, and could even smell the lingering stench of gunpowder. I had no clue if the King’s Embryo really *was* a battleship, but there was little doubt that — just like my brother’s Baldr — it was either heavy weaponry or something greater in the same vein.

Another thing I noted was that — while the other three had targeted the player killers directly — the King of Destruction had, well... destroyed the map. Sure, he’d lived up to his name, but it didn’t make it less of a bother. It seemed as ludicrous as removing the whole arm in response to a diseased finger.

“...This is gonna have bad aftereffects — no doubt about it,” I said.

“People have already started leaving here at an even faster rate,” added Nemesis.

We were talking about the local tians.

Yesterday’s bombing had put the entire capital into a state of panic. Thinking that Dryfe’s army was launching a surprise attack, the knights had moved out through the northern gate. By that point, however, the bombing had already been over, leaving nothing but a burning Noz Forest.

Though it didn't seem like the flames would spread to the capital, they couldn't have just left them burning as they were, so the knights had spent the entire night putting them out, and were still taking care of the aftermath.

All of this had been told to me by Liliana.

We'd met by accident a short while ago, and she had palpable bags under her eyes. She'd even said, "If you became a Paladin, then come and help us out..." in a slightly whiny manner.

"I know we were underground when the bombing happened and all, but I'm still surprised we didn't notice it," I commented.

"I had other things to worry about back then," said Nemesis. "You, on the other hand, were simply tired and had your senses dulled by fatigue."

Anyway, the event that had reduced Noz Forest — a place the capital's citizens took for granted — to ashes had been enough to make the already-tense populace go into panic mode. Since morning, the amount of people leaving the capital had been increasing by the hour.

Another reason for the increase was the fact that the four PK groups were taken care of. Though the player killers had been primarily targeting Masters, tians were also in danger of getting attacked if they weren't lucky, which had made traffic around the capital grind to a complete halt. Today, the roads were opened again, making the people practically flood out of the city.

Now that I think about it, tians can't differentiate between Masters and other tians, I thought. *Though we Masters use Embryos and are basically immortal, both tians and Masters share the basis of being human. Therefore, to tians, player killers are nothing but murderers. That goes double for the player killers who also go for tians.*

"Man, taking care of this PK business sure came at a cost," I said.

"One of the hunting grounds became unusable, after all," Nemesis agreed. "Also, the horror experience back in the Tomb Labyrinth was all for naught."

Despite all the money we'd spent on it, the advantage we'd gained had lasted for only a single night. Though I *did* feel fortunate to have met Figaro.

"I've gotta say, though..." I spoke. "This 'Superior Killer' guy escaped from an attack that destroyed the entire forest."

From what Marie had told me about the player killer in Noz Forest, the source of DIN’s information about him had been Marie herself. Though a bit late, she had gone to gather material about yesterday’s calamity right as it was happening. While doing so, she had happened to see the Superior Killer escape from the onslaught that was turning the forest to ash and run off into the distance.

In her own words, “He was using a skill with a concealment effect that hid his identity, but from the features of the Embryo he was using, I couldn’t be more sure that it was him!”

Once I asked for those features, she said that it was a handgun-shaped Embryo that shot bullet-like animals. The description matched the one who had killed me.

Apparently, the Superior Killer had been using those bullet-like animals to cancel out all the attacks coming his way. By doing that, he’d been able to safely reach the capital. Despite all he had already done up to that point, the King of Destruction couldn’t attack the capital, and had given up on pursuing the Superior Killer.

When all of that was considered, he had been successful where I hadn’t — in a battle with the sole goal of retreating from a stronger force.

I was glad to not have the target of my revenge get taken away from me by the King of Destruction, but that notion made me slightly vexed.

“...Let’s go back, then,” I said. “We have plans with Rook, after all.”

“True... hm?” Nemesis said.

As we were about to make our way back to the capital, Nemesis focused on a single point of the landscape as if she’d just noticed something.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“What do you make of *that*?” Nemesis pointed at something, but I couldn’t see anything there.

“What do you see?” I asked.

“There’s a heat haze despite it not being hot,” she said. “Wait, is that... distorted space?”

Nemesis walked over to where she was pointing... and simply disappeared.

“...Huh?! Nemesis!” I called out, ran over to where she’d vanished, and passed through an invisible curtain.

I described it as a “curtain” simply because — even though there was some sort of resistance — it was extremely weak. Once I’d walked through the invisible curtain...

“...Huh?!”

...I was in a mysterious space that was neither dark nor bright, and didn’t even seem to have the concept of up and down.

The space was littered with countless blue, permeable windows and was already occupied by two familiar faces.

Once of them was Nemesis, who looked back at me as I confirmed that she was completely unharmed. “Master, this place is...”

The other person — no, the word “person” didn’t apply here.

“...Ohh? Why are you heere?”

The creature skillfully operating the windows was Cheshire — the control AI I’d met when I had begun playing *Infinite Dendrogram.*

◇

A few minutes had passed since we’d found ourselves in the mysterious space beyond the invisible curtain.

Nemesis and I were sitting in chairs and drinking the tea Cheshire had prepared for us.

As we had turned perplexed, Cheshire had said, “I’ll explain it all, but just standing around while I do that isn’t fun, riight?” and made the tea for us.

At first, this space had had nothing besides the windows — there hadn’t even been a floor — but Cheshire had reached into a pocket and taken out chairs and a table as if it was nothing.

It reminded me of that cartoon about a cat robot I had been watching since I was a child. Though, unlike that cat robot, Cheshire had a set of ears.

“So, what is a control AI doing here?” I asked.

“Preliminary arrangements for environmental maintenaance,” it answered. “The real work here will be done by control AIs numbers 3 and 5 — the ones responsible for monsters and the environmeent. This space is basically an impromptu operating rooom.”

Like a prefab used in construction sites, huh? I thought.

“Though, only we can see and enter these placees,” said Cheshire. “But the Embryo girl here seems to be a Maiden-type, and I guess things like this can happen with theem. She basically dragged you in here, didn’t she,

Raay?”

“What’s so different about Maidens?” I asked.

“They’re closer to us in some waays,” Cheshire answered. “They even keep the *** functionalityy.”

Hm?

“What did you say just now?” I was perplexed.

“Oh, sorryy,” it apologized. “That’s information I can’t verbaliize. It’s nothing big, though, so don’t mind iit.”

That answer only left me with more questions, but the AI probably had some developer-set duty of confidentiality it had to protect. We were already behind the scenes, anyway.

I also had other things I wanted to ask, so I decided not to push it.

“So you’re gonna fix this area?” I inquired.

Infinite Dendrogram prioritized realism. That was the reason why places such as the Old Orchard could be invaded by bug monsters, but beginners’ hunting grounds such as the Noz Forest could be an exception.

However, Cheshire shook its head.

“Noo. We will not directly recreate the now-lost Noz Forest. However, we can arrange some factors that would allow it to take the form of a similar environment. My job is to prepare for thaat.”

Cheshire stopped speaking for a moment and took a sip of the black tea before continuing.

Not that it matters, but you’d think a cat wouldn’t be able to handle such a hot drink, I thought.

“This is a free world, after aall. We — the control AIs — will never undo the effects a creature’s autonomous actions have on this world — be they player, tian or monsteer. The results of freedom are none of our conceern. However, there are some exceptions. After all, we have a control AI meant for punishmeents.”

“Punishments?” I asked. “If PK is perfectly fine, then what is actually deserving of that?”

“Hmm... Getting on a country’s wanted list, I gueess,” Cheshire answered. “You know how this world has laws, right? However, when arrested, players easily can escape jail by simply logging out or killing themseelves. Neither the police nor the knights have any means of preventing thaat. That’s why we have a control AI operating a jail for players, nicknamed the ‘gaol.’ The AI also processes the player’s inability to use save points when on a wanted list.”

That makes sense, I thought. *If getting arrested or receiving the death penalty were the only demerits to committing crimes, some would just go about repeating them.*

“That’s part of the setting, tooo,” Cheshire continued. “‘A Master who has sinned and cannot return to a save point shall be transferred to the gaol,’ and all thaat. That’s why you should register on save points in as many countries as you caan.”

“...I have absolutely no intention of doing something that’d get me on wanted lists, though,” I commented.

“That’s good, tooo,” said Cheshire. “Well, even if you get on one, you won’t be sent to the gaol as long as you don’t diee.”

...This system sure is lenient on strong criminals, I thought.

“Hmm... If there are control AIs responsible for punishments... what are *you* responsible for, cat?” asked Nemesis.

“I’m the control AI handling chooores,” Cheshire answered.

Chores? I thought.

“We AIs also have things we’re good and bad aat,” Cheshire explained. “For example, I’m horrible at management functioons. Especially when it’s related to environment managemeent.”

“That’s not what you’re doing right now?” I asked.

“This is just a preliminary arrangemeent,” it answered. “A proper environmental simulation would include management of the cloud particles’ entropyy.”

I was silent. Just thinking about the scale of it gave me a headache.

Though I guess being able to do that is part of being a proper control AI, I thought. *Well, Cheshire said it’s not capable of that, though.*

“My primary work is to be the tutorial guiide,” it continued. “It’s work given to control AIs with unallocated calculation resourcees. I welcome half of the players coming heere.”

That sounded like an impressive amount.

“I’m doing the tutorial work right now, in faact. Like soo.” Upon saying that, Cheshire split into five.

Five, differently-patterned cats spoke while handling the windows around them.

"Like soo," said the first.

"But there's no reason to split in heere," said the second.

"Even if there's five of me, it doesn't affect my work speeed," said the third.

"After all, the calculation volume I use doesn't change at aall," said the fourth.

"In fact, it slightly increases the calculation time and slows me down," said the fifth. And thus, the five became one again.

I was silent again. All this talk about calculations had made me remember that we were in a game server. This might've the first time I'd been presented with a display of cyber technology.

"I get to handle the chores because I'm good at processing the splitting I just shoowed," said Cheshire.

"I see," I nodded. "So, if you take half of the newcomers, the other half is taken by other AIs, right?"

"Yees," it answered. "There's even an AI that doesn't allow you to redo your character's appearance after you set it once."

"...Yeah, I *really* think it should allow that," I said.

That might've been the control AI that my brother had been assigned to.

◇

After an approximately twenty-minute-long chat with Cheshire, we chose to take our leave.

"Not counting the welcoming, it's been so long since I met a person while being in this foorm," said Cheshire. "I'd love to present you with some souveniir... but since I'm part of development, that would be favoritism — a big no-noo."

"No need for that," I said. "The tea and sweets are more than enough. Thanks."

"Indeed," Nemesis agreed. "They were delicious."

...With how much she ate, a part of me feels like we're already in the "no-no" territory, I thought.

"Oh, my. Having you say that makes me feel like making them was really worth iit," said Cheshire.

Those cookies were handmade? I thought. *That's unexpected. ...Okay,* *hold on now. How the hell can those cat hands make cookies?*

"You should consider selling them on the market." said Nemesis.

"I'll think about iit," replied Cheshire. "Oh, right. You're heading to Gideon soon, aren't you, Ray?"

I'd talked a bit about that during the tea party.

"Yeah, I am," I said.

"...Take care noow." Cheshire's words seemed ominous.

"Is there something I should know?" I asked.

"There is, buut..." It seemed apprehensive about saying it.

Is it something it can't reveal? I thought.

"I'll just keep it in the safe range, theen: 'The demon's heart lies in its stomach.'"

"Hm?" I raised an eyebrow.

"That's aall," said Cheshire. "Though, it's not like you're guaranteed to meet iit."

Cheshire had given me a riddle... or a clue you'd find in a mystery novel. I couldn't tell.

...Well, guess I'll record it in my memo window, I thought and did exactly that.

"I don't know if we'll ever meet again, but if we do, then until next tiime," Cheshire waved goodbye.

"Yeah, see ya," I reciprocated.

We passed through the exit the cat had created and returned to the previous map. Beyond it was the same wasteland we'd been in before. When I asked Nemesis about it, she said that she could no longer see the entrance to Cheshire's workplace.

I looked at the time and found out that it was a bit past three o'clock in the afternoon. We had planned to meet Rook at four, so we still had enough time.

Nemesis and I made our way to the meeting spot — the facility known only as the Adventurer's Guild.

◇

Infinite Dendrogram had three types of quests a player could accept.

The first type was like the first quest I'd ever gotten — "random event quests.”

The second type was like one Rook did for his job — “job quests.”

The third type was “guild quests.” In other words, the ones received at a facility known as the “Adventurers’ Guild.”

Due to the word “guild,” some could confuse it with job guilds, but the quests were different in nature. The Adventurers’ Guild was a service that managed many and varied requests, such as elimination, escorting, collection, or miscellaneous matters. Once registered, anyone could accept quests, regardless of their job or even if they were Masters or tians.

Of course, I was no exception.

My level was decent, so I decided to continue progressing through the game while making some coin from the requests there.

Also, ever since we’d met, Rook and I had been talking about how cool it’d be to party up, so we decided to do that while taking on the same quest.

And so...

“...There are so many requests that I have no idea which one to choose,” I muttered.

“True...” Rook agreed.

Inside the Adventurers’ Guild, Rook and I were letting our heads lie on a round table as we both eyed a thick book... and honestly, I was tired beyond words.

The books we had were quest catalogs that displayed every request the guild had available.

It was magically enchanted to add new requests and remove taken ones in real-time, making the number of quests being displayed grow and drop without stop. Also, it didn’t display quests from a difficulty level the players couldn’t take.

To us, it displayed all quests up to difficulty level three, and apparently, access to levels four and higher was based on the amount of completed lower-level quests.

Despite the lack of requests we couldn’t see, the catalog was far too thick. It had approximately one thousand pages.

The catalog’s thickness, too, had been caused by the King of Destruction and other Superiors. Due to the King destroying Noz Forest, the amount of people wanting to escape the capital had increased. Not to mention that the emancipation of the roads leading to other cities had revitalized the trading routes. As a result, there was a great spike in requests for escorts that could protect those travelers.

The problem *we* were faced with, however, was that...

"...The rewards and difficulties for requests from those going to Gideon are so all over the place that I can't choose," I said.

"True..." Rook agreed.

There were dozens of escort quests where the destination was the city of duels — the place where we could find Figaro. However, there were requests that had different rewards despite having the same difficulty, and vice versa.

Since we couldn't accept any quests without thinking things through, the ones with favorable conditions often got picked by other people and disappeared from the catalog right as we were considering them.

"Also, escort quests aren't even appealing," I said.

"True..." Rook agreed.

The ones who took the escort quests had to protect the requesters for the entire journey. However, Rook and I were players. We had to log out every now and then, and we couldn't do any protection when we weren't in the game.

In the game's setting, we Masters got "sent to another world every now and then," and the tians were fully aware of that. Therefore, we players weren't suited for escort quests, so most of them were taken by tians. Though, there were some exceptions made for Masters of a particularly high level.

"Maybe we should look for quests where we have to kill or deliver something," I suggested. "Though the rewards would be smaller."

"True..." Rook agreed.

"...Rook, that's all you've been saying for a while now," I said.

"Oh, sorry," he said, finally speaking a different word. "Reading this made me remember some things..."

From the fact that he looked like a middle-schooler, I could only assume that he was remembering a time he'd studied for his exams.

"Father's handmade textbook was even thicker than this..." he mumbled as he went through the pages with an empty look in his eyes.

If Rook's face was really the same as it was in reality, he was of Western descent.

I guess the exam struggle is severe all around the world, I thought. *The college entrance exams I had to go through were so damn hard...*

"Hmm..."

"Mmm..."

Nemesis and Babi were intently looking at books, too. However, they weren't quest catalogs.

Nemesis was examining the bounty list, while Babi was staring at the guild's food and drink menu.

"Master," Nemesis spoke up. "It says here that those traveling on the road to Gideon sometimes encounter two boss monsters with bounties on them — King of the Wolf Pack, Lobohta and Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda. I hope we meet them."

"I'm not sure if I want to experience something so blatantly dangerous..." I replied.

"Hey, Rook," said Babi. "Don't you think that this Special Pudding a la Mode would be great with Death Sauce? Want to order it?"

"I don't think I want to experience something so blatantly dangerous..." Rook replied.

We shifted our attention away from their... disturbed suggestions and focused on our quest catalogs.

First of all, it was already set in stone that we would accept a quest we could do on the way to Gideon. Rook wanted to go there because the city of duels had a beast market.

On the subject of Rook, though... In our little information exchange, I had found out that — despite being twice the level I was — he had low stats. Though his MP and SP were higher than mine, I had double or more of every other stat.

It was less about me being a Paladin — a high-rank job — and more about Rook's Pimp being a low-stat job. A Pimp's playstyle seemed to be focused on a gamble — you either Charm or die.

At this point, I had absolutely no doubts that it was Rook's vocation. If not "Pimp," the only possible thing he could have been was "Angel."

"Master, get ahold of yourself," said Nemesis. "You're acting as though you're Charmed."

"W-Whoa," I said, and snapped out of it.

Of course, Rook wasn't using his Charm skill on me. He couldn't even if he wanted to, since it only worked on females. However, he was just so handsome that he made the mind drift away every now and then. Even the other adventurers in the guild were throwing glances at our table. Hell, some were downright staring.

Rook wasn't the only reason for that, though — both Nemesis and Babi were exceptionally beautiful, too. With three out of five of us here being so attractive, it was only natural to become the center of attention.

...Five? I thought.

"Man, it's been a while since I've visited the Adventurers' Guild. There's quite a large pile of quests today, huh?" Marie — the Journalist who sold us info about the PK incident — was sitting at our table.

...Okay, just how long have you been here? I thought. I could've sworn that we'd started with just me, Rook, Nemesis, and Babi. *Do you Journalists have some skill that allows you to sit at tables without getting noticed?*

"Oh? Why are you here, Miss Marie?" asked Rook.

"I had business that involved going to Gideon, so I decided to pick up a quest I could do on the way and noticed you two talking about going to the duel city, too," answered Marie. "I figured that I simply *had* to join. May I come with you?"

Had to join, huh...? I thought.

"...Well, I don't really mind," I said. "What about you, Rook?"

"Same here," he answered. "In fact, having her join us would be reassuring."

"...That's true," I agreed.

It was going to be the first time Rook and I ever traveled to another town. Marie, on the other hand, had been as far as Huang He, so there was no doubt that she was used to long-distance journeys. That alone was enough to make her presence reassuring.

Marie joined us in looking through the quest catalog. "I found one that's named 'Elimination Request — Sauda Phantom Sheep,'" said Rook. "The reward is high, too."

"Oh, that one's no good," said Marie. "Though weak, Sauda Phantom Sheep are extremely hard to find. It would take you three days of searching."

"Elimination Request — Blue Lemmings. This one also has a nice reward," I said. "We'd have to kill a whole fifty of them, though."

"They're weak, mouse-like, easy-to-find monsters that come in flocks," Marie explained. "It should be eas—"

"No mice," said Rook.

"Rook?" I looked at him.

"No mice," he repeated himself.

"O-Okay..."

About ten minutes passed as we continued glaring at the catalog, when suddenly...

"Oh! What would you say to this one?" Marie pointed at a certain page.

Difficulty Level Two, Delivery Request — The Guild in Gideon, City of Duels.
Reward: 30,000 lir.
Please complete a delivery from the capital's Adventurers' Guild to the Guild in Gideon.
There is much to be delivered, so it is recommended that only those with a storage bag accept this quest.
You have three days to complete it.
P.S. If you take the delivery and run, we will send an assassin after you.

"This request is from the guild itself," Marie explained. "We only have to take the delivery to the other guild, so it's nothing complicated. The reward is good, too, so it's a really nice deal overall."

...The P.S. is a bit questionable, but I guess there's no need to worry about it if we play it fair, I thought.

"I'm up for this quest. What about you, Rook?" I asked.

"Yes, it seems agreeable," he answered.

"Then it's decided," said Nemesis.

"Already? I didn't get to eat my pudding yet," Babi complained.

Everyone replied in their own way.

Whatever the case, we had chosen the first quest we would do as a party.

"With that settled, you go on and accept it, Ray." said Marie.

"Hm? But you're the one found it, so shouldn't you be the one to do it?" I asked.

"When several people accept the same quest, the proper procedure is to create a party and have a representative go through the acceptance process," she explained. "That involves the representative writing down his main job."

"Which means...?" I raised an eyebrow.

"The guild's receptionist wouldn't be too keen on giving the quest to a Journalist or a Pimp, right?" Marie elaborated.

She wasn't wrong. The request had come directly from the guild, so there was a chance that they wouldn't give it to anyone who was questionable in terms of ability. However, that would never apply to Paladins such as myself.

...But wait, my level is the lowest out of us three. Won't that be a problem? I thought.

"The first thing that comes up is your label, after all," said Rook. "I also think that you should be the one to do this, Ray."

First Marie, now Rook. They were both fine with it, so there was no reason for me not to do it.

I took the catalog to the guild's receptionist and showed her the page of the request we'd decided upon.

"Understood," she said. "Please give us your card and fill in this form."

I gave her my freshly-made Adventurers' Guild member card and filled in all the fields I had to.

"We have processed your acceptance of this quest," said the receptionist. "Please go to that counter and retrieve the items."

Doing as I was told, I went to take the delivery and placed it into my storage bag.

With that, the preparations were done and we officially had a guild quest — a new step in our *Dendro* career.

Difficulty Level Two, Delivery Request — The Guild in Gideon, City of Duels.

Our destination was obvious.

And so, we began the quest.

◆◆◆

Kingdom of Altar, ???

Cheering.

Cheering as far as you could hear.

It represented nothing but delight.

Countless goblins were fiercely expressing their overwhelming joy.

It was all because they had seen some creatures. Though four-limbed — just like the goblins — they were different from them... for they were human.

The goblins hungered. These past few days, no humans had passed through their territory.

Thus, the goblins — with their love for human flesh and the things they hauled — had become hungry beyond words.

They survived by eating other monsters, but compared to the taste of humans and their food, those were simply unsatisfying.

Thus, the goblins were overjoyed.

The human traffic through this area used to be stopped by something at the mountain, and they couldn't be more pleased that it was revived. For, once again, they had access to the food they loved.

The strangely-dressed human that had recently gone through their territory was too scary for them, so they could have only waited for him to pass. However, the humans passing before them now weren't scary at all.

Thus, the humans themselves and the food they carried were nothing but a feast for them.

"Ghgheeeee!"

"Geghyaaaaahhh!"

Letting out their war cries, the goblins began running towards the carriage before them.

"Goblins?! Why are there so many...?!" shouted a human.

"Sir, this is too much for us to handle! Make the horses go as fast as they can!" roared another.

"A-All right!"

"We have to run, too!"

The merchant man increased the carriage's speed as the tian adventurers responsible for guarding him and his goods ran after it, trying not to fall behind.

They were fleet of foot, so it was obvious that the goblins wouldn't catch up.

Thus, the goblins roared. They roared out their cheer and delight.

"What are they doing?! Are they trying to threaten us?!" asked a human.

"Ignore them! Just keep on running away!" howled another.

The goblins weren't threatening them. They might've done that before an enemy, but when faced with food, such acts were meaningless. They were simply calling.

"Ha ha, looks like we escaped... Huh?"

A moment later, the merchant — along with his carriage — was crushed by *something* that fell from the sky.

As the *something* trampled on the corpse — now reduced to fruit-like mush — it faced the nearby adventurers.

"Wh-Wha?!"

"I-Is this actually... the UBM... Gar—"

They weren't even given the time to say anything coherent.

The *something* before them and the goblins that had caught up quickly overwhelmed them all.

"GOOOAAAAAHHHHH!"

And so, after a satiating feast, the *something* and the horde of goblins returned to their den.

All of them were full of excitement for the next time they'd become hungry and have another feast pass their territory.

◆

The area's name was "Nex Plains."

It was south of Sauda Mountain Pass and north of Gideon, city of duels.

...And anyone making their way to Gideon would simply *have* to pass through it.

Chapter Seven: The Ordeal of Rookies

In Royal Capital Altea, in the front of the Adventurer's guild — Paladin Ray Starling.

After we had taken the quest at the adventurer's guild and began getting ready to go to Gideon, Rook spoke up and raised his right hand.

"You can leave the means of travel to me," he said. There was a pale, gem-like object on his hand.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a 'Jewel' — an item where you keep your monsters," he answered. "It's the reward I got for my modeling."

Rook began explaining. In the process, he also answered a certain question I'd had while looking at his skills.

Being a Pimp, he had a skill that strengthened his underlings, and seeing that had made me curious about what happened to them outside of battle.

Since we were players, we would return to reality every now and then. Thus, I wondered what his little minions would do while we were away. I was saddened by the very idea of a player who stopped playing after having left some monsters or slaves in a cage or something.

Such problems were solved by Jewels, such as the one Rook had.

Jewels were basically the animal version of the item boxes we always used. It allowed the storage of any underlings you owned, and it was possible to set it so that time inside wouldn't flow at all.

The storage would work even while the player was logged out, and if they didn't log in for two months of real time or half a year of game time, the Jewels would automatically release the creatures inside.

I see, I thought. *Having underlings in such a realistic world would be really difficult without these things.*

Well, there was a need to feed and have them rest outside the Jewel, but that was all part and parcel of being an underling owner.

It was also possible to make the time inside the Jewel go on as normal. Logging out while the underlings were released was an option, too. However, while being outside, the underlings could always get into some sort of trouble, so whether it would be done or not depended entirely on the owner.

"So, you already have a monster in there, huh?" I asked as I pointed at the Jewel.

"Yes," Rook answered. "Mr. Grantzian told me choose one reward out of a few, but since I had a skill that strengthened monsters, I chose this one."

Pimp was a job that had a low combat ability, but compensated for it with the use of monsters, so that had been the right choice to make.

"Let me show you," said Rook. "'Call' — Marilyn."

Following his words and the unique roar, the Jewel began to shine.

"MMHOOOOOO!"

And, sure enough, a monster named "Marilyn" appeared before us, but...

"...Marilyn?" I raised an eyebrow.

...it was arguable whether the name "Marilyn" was appropriate.

A succinct description of Marilyn would go as such: a triceratops pulling a carriage. Its gigantic body was covered in a blue, solid shell, while its back and shoulders could easily be compared to heavy armor. The very real horns on its head were intimidating enough to make me feel as though they could topple the castle walls.

It was far too obvious that the monster was stronger than us. The thing could even put up a fight against a Demi-Dragon Worm.

Hell, I wouldn't even be surprised if it came out on top, I thought.

"This is Marilyn — a Trihorn Demi-Dragon," Rook introduced the monster. "The dragon carriage came as a bonus."

"Demi-Dragon?" Seriously? I thought. *It actually is on the same tier as the worms, then. That name has some serious power behind it.*

I was momentarily taken aback by the fact that you could get such a thing as a reward, but since the difficulty of the quest had been higher than the one where I'd saved Milianne, it wasn't *that* strange.

"Why 'Marilyn,' though?" I asked.

"It's a girl, so I named her after a famous actress," Rook answered.

I see. It's a girl, huh? I guess it's all fine, then, I thought. *...Marilyn Monroe might or might not be turning in her grave right now.*

"Wow, what a sight!" Marie commented. "Though, something this strong might exceed your Minion Capacity."

"Minion Capacity?" Rook and I asked simultaneously.

"Oh, let me explain it, then." Marie reached into her item box, took out a sketchbook-like item, and began her explanation while drawing something on it.

A sketchbook? I thought. *Why does she even have something like that? Is it because she's a Journalist?*

"First of all, in *Infinite Dendrogram*, the maximum number of people you can fit in a party is six." Marie finished drawing and showed us the result — little chibi versions of me, Rook and herself. All the detail on them made the drawings seem strangely high-quality.

"In our case, three of those slots are already taken," she said. "Now, the other three slots can be taken by tamed monsters or Guardian-type Embryos." Marie added chibi versions of Babi and Marilyn.

"You say they 'can' be taken... Does that mean it's possible to make the monsters fight without doing that?" asked Rook.

"Yes," she answered. "It's possible to not count them as party members and instead treat them as an extension of the owner's power. That's where Minion Capacity comes in."

Underneath Rook's picture, Marie drew a small tree diagram that led to Babi and Marilyn.

"With this method, they won't use party slots, but there is a limit to it," she said. "Minion Capacity is basically the name for that limit."

“I see,” I nodded.

“Open your status screen and look at the additional entries.”

I did as she’d said and took a look at the auxiliary screen. Sure enough, I saw an entry that said “Minion Capacity 0/50.”

“Is this it?” I asked.

“Yes, monsters that fit the Capacity can be used as part of your own power,” she explained. “The amount of the Capacity taken depends entirely on the individual monster. For example, one level 1 Little Goblin would take 1 point.” That meant that I could control a total of fifty level 1 Little Goblins. A nice number, but questionable overall. I could just picture them all getting blown away by a single area attack.

“My Capacity is 500, so I can own five hundred of them,” said Rook.

That’s ten times more than mine, I thought.

“Pimp is a job with a high Capacity,” Marie said. “Though, Ray, since your job is in the knight grouping, you will have to use mounts, so I think that your Capacity is above the high-rank class average.”

Mounts, huh? I thought. *I should get one of those someday.*

“Anyway, I see how it works now...” I said.

If it was impossible to call your monsters without using party slots, jobs such as Tamer and Pimp — both of which had low base fighting ability — would have a hard time getting into parties. With the use of Capacity instead, they could count their monsters as part of their own power, making them no worse — if not better — than any other job.

“What happens if you exceed the Capacity?” I asked.

“You get a limit on your abilities and stop gaining XP,” she answered.

That’s quite a huge demerit, I thought.

“Miss Marilyn here is too much for your Capacity, Rook,” said Marie. “Demi-Dragons are strong and have a cost that represents that.”

If I had to choose between fighting 500 Little Goblins or one Demi-Dragon Worm, I’d pick the former without a moment’s hesitation, I thought. *That’s just how much stronger the latter option is.*

“With that in mind, let’s place Marilyn in the party,” Marie suggested. “There aren’t many of us, so we have some free slots, after all.”

“Hey, I have a question! What’s my cost?” asked Babi.

“An Embryo’s cost is always 0,” she answered. “If it weren’t, then Masters who evolved Guardian-type Embryos wouldn’t be able to draw out their full potential.”

That was true.

“Well, that sure took a while to explain. Now, let’s return to the matter at hand,” Marie continued. “By riding Marilyn’s dragon carriage, we could reach Gideon in about one whole day.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to give up on doing it now and depart tomorrow morning, instead,” I said. “Do you two have any plans?”

I was referring to real-life stuff. Our journey to Gideon would take us a total of three days, which meant that we’d have to dedicate an entire real-life day to this.

“Not really,” said Rook. “I’ll be free the whole time.”

“Same here,” said Marie. “I’m jobless right now.”

...I’m having trouble figuring out if I should laugh at that or not, I thought.

◇

The next day, we were riding Marilyn’s dragon carriage on the road to Gideon.

The road was wide enough to let two Marilyns ride side-by-side without any problems. Her size had made me wonder if she would block the road, but my worries seemed to have been completely unfounded.

Marilyn’s walking speed was greater than I’d expected, too. She could pull the dragon carriage uphill without even the slightest drop in speed, which reminded me of four-wheel drive off-road cars.

Looks like our journey to Gideon will be smooth, I thought.

Although we had to take care of the occasional monster attack, so it wasn’t like we could get there without stopping. However, since we were going through a newbies’ hunting ground, the monsters never attacked us in large groups. The most we’d had to fend off at once was three.

In fact, Rook, Babi, and I had just defeated such a group. Marie, meanwhile, stayed sitting in the dragon carriage and cheering for us while sipping on some tea. There were things to be said about this setup. Still, she wasn’t doing nothing without reason. Honestly, it was my own fault for not asking her about it beforehand.

“Journalist” wasn’t a battle job in any sense of the term. However, Journalists had a characteristic skill called “The Pen is Mightier than the Sword,” which increased the XP gain of the entire party in exchange for rendering the Journalist unable to fight. The skill couldn’t be turned off, either. With that in mind, it was safe to conclude that Journalists were like a decoration that were of absolutely no use in battle.

Sure, I appreciated the bonus XP. And yes, we were going through a newbies’ hunting ground, so the enemies weren’t something we couldn’t handle ourselves. She was also more knowledgeable than us. The advice she gave was useful, and her monster info was accurate.

Still, I can’t help but feel that... well, whatever, I thought.

“The skill is called ‘The Pen is Mightier than the Sword,’ so I was expecting it to be an attack with a pen,” said Nemesis.

“That saying’s meaning isn’t physical,” I said.

Though I wouldn’t be surprised if this world had a pen that was stronger than a sword, I thought.

All the same, the journey was going smoothly. Due to the XP bonus, both Rook and I had already gotten some levels. I was now level 16, while Rook was level 27.

The battles were coming and going in a satisfying manner, and it didn’t look like we’d have any trouble with the monsters of this level range.

Speaking of “no trouble,” the mountain pass before us had once been blocked by a bear-like monster. Just from appearance alone, it had seemed like the boss monster of this area. However, before we could even begin our fight with it, Marilyn — seemingly angry at it for blocking her way — had defeated the bear as if it wasn’t a big deal at all.

Rook had retrieved the drops, which had come in a “box,” so yes, it had been an actual boss monster. A boss’s loot was always a welcome thing. However, as a rule of thumb, boss monsters were always the most powerful creatures an area could offer.

And it sure didn’t seem like that when Marilyn handled him, I thought.

Another thing to note was that most boss monsters were multiple-of-a-kind and took part in the ecosystem, but according to Marie, there were some monsters that were unlike any other. They were called UBMs — Unique Boss Monsters.

All of them — without exception — were equipped with special abilities, and some were even powerful enough to eliminate high-rank parties without much difficulty. However, since they were one-of-a-kind, even encountering them was rare.

Once out of the wavy Sauda Mountain Pass, we entered an area of nothing but wide plains. The area was named “Nex Fields,” and the road leading through it was supposed to take us to Gideon.

As we all were thinking about just how smooth of a journey this was, something entered our vision.

On the road ahead, there were several carriages which looked like they belonged to peddlers. They were all under attack by a throng of goblins that easily numbered more than a hundred.

◇

The goblins in this horde had a significantly better physique than the Little Goblins Rook and I had fought back on Easter Plains.

While the standard Little Goblin was about half my size, the ones here reached approximately 80%. Not only that, but they also wielded swords and bows, and were clad in proper armor. Some of them were even riding some small monsters resembling carnivorous dinosaurs. The names above them — Goblin Warrior, Goblin Archer, and Goblin Rider — made it all the more obvious that they were superior to the ones we were familiar with.

And a proper throng of them was attacking the peddler carriages.

I could see some tian-looking people try to fend them off, but alas, the numbers were against them.

“...That sure is a lot of goblins. And it seems like every single one of them is stronger than the monsters in the Mountain Pass. What shall we do?” Marie evaluated the enemy, asking whether we should join the battle or not.

I began to ponder. We were rookies, and calling us strong would be nothing but a mistake. Marie was a veteran, yes, but she couldn’t participate in any battles, not to mention the fact that the opposing force greatly would outnumber us even if she could.

We clearly had a low chance of victory. The safest option would be to turn around, retreat to the Mountain Pass, wait for the goblin horde to go away, and return on the path to Gideon then.

However, that would mean leaving the people there for dead. And that...

would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

“Rook, Marie,” I spoke up. “We might get the death penalty and fail the quest because of it, but...”

...if you guys don’t mind that, then...

“Let’s do it,” Rook said before I could finish. Then he freed Marilyn from the dragon carriage...

“Run them over.”

...and set her on the goblins.

“MMHOOOOOOO!” she roared and burst into a dash.

Keeping her three horns at the forefront, Marilyn charged into the goblin throng with all she had. Once they noticed the presence of something other than the carriages — their prey — it was already too late. Nearly fourteen goblins got pulverized by Marilyn’s horns.

“Let’s go, Ray,” said Rook. “Marilyn might be strong, but that’s still too much for her alone.”

“...Yeah!” I agreed.

“I see.” Nemesis seemed to realize something. “Just like my unexpectedly fiery Master, this Rook fellow seems to have a dangerous side to him, too.”

“Mrrgh!” grumbled Babi. “No fair, Marilyn! I was with him first, so I’m supposed to do the most!”

Rook, Babi, and I all jumped through the space opened by Marilyn and began fighting the goblins around us.

“Hghaah!” I tightened my grip on Nemesis — who was already in her greatsword form — and swung her at the Goblin Warrior before me with all I had. The blade sank into the top of the Warrior’s shoulder, but the armor he wore made it stop after going only about ten centimeters.

“Ghghee!” The wound wasn’t fatal, so the Warrior still tried to swing his weapon at me.

“Then how about... this?!” I raised my greatsword upwards — lifting the Warrior along with it — and quickly swung it down to the ground. The momentum added to my attack made the Warrior — and his armor — split in half.

Thanks to the levels I’d gained recently, such feats weren’t particularly hard for me.

But it takes a while to do it, I thought. *So next time, I’ll be aiming* *straight for the neck.*

"Heh heh heh, what an aggressive battle," chortled Nemesis. "It's to my liking."

Well, someone seems to be having fun, I thought. *I find it a bit strange that she can't handle zombies, but she's just fine with all this gore here.*

"Behind you!" she warned me.

"...Whoa!" I turned around, swung my greatsword sideways and decapitated the Warrior that had tried to attack me from behind.

Sadly for him, having Nemesis at my side basically let me see from every direction. Being surrounded wasn't a big problem for me.

"What are you people?!" one of the escorts fighting to protect the carriages exclaimed.

I chose to make our explanation succinct.

"We're Masters heading to Gideon," I said. "We're here to help. That Demi-Dragon is with us, so don't attack it."

"I see! We will make sure not to harm it, then! Thank you for your help!" Convinced, he began telling his comrades about us.

With that, it was now established who was on whose side. Of course, since the only enemies were goblins and their mounts, simply telling them about Marilyn was more than enough. However, we were still seriously outnumbered.

Surrounded by goblins, Marilyn couldn't get enough speed to kill them as quickly as she had at the start. The carriage escorts were doing their best, but it still wasn't enough to make up for the difference in numbers.

Suddenly, I realized something. Rook and Babi weren't with us.

I looked around and found them both standing in one place.

That was all they were doing. Despite all the chaos around them, they were just *standing* there, back-to-back.

However, they soon began to move.

"Male..."

"Lilim..."

Rook extended his right hand... while Babi — her left...

"...Temptation!"

...and — while simultaneously saying that word — they motioned their hands as if beckoning something.

The next moment, a particularly fierce female Goblin Warrior decapitated the goblin next to her.

Another one — a Goblin Archer who seemed to have a commanding role — suddenly crushed the head of the mount he was riding on.

“Ghgheee?! Sis! W-What did you dooo?!”

“Captaain?!”

Screams, confusion, and — most important of all — chaos began to spread throughout the goblin army. The number of victims was increasing by the second. One after the other, goblins lost their minds and began attacking their own.

The Charmed goblins were attacking those who weren’t, while those who weren’t Charmed were hesitant about fighting back and could only get Charmed themselves or simply die.

The damage done to the horde increased exponentially, and when all the goblins were either dead or Charmed...

“Lilim Draaain!”

...Babi started draining the life out of every single Charmed goblin.

The process made some of them come back to their senses, but just like before, they either got killed by the Charmed goblins or simply got Charmed again.

“Thank you for the meeaal!”

Considering just how hellish the situation was for the victims, the nonchalance in her voice was quite inappropriate. Nonetheless, those words were what marked the end of the battle.

The throng of goblins had been completely annihilated. Excluding those that had been defeated by me or the carriage escorts, all the goblin corpses had been either killed by their own or sucked dry to the point of making them look like mummies.

“In contrast to our counterattacks — which are effective against single bosses like those damn centipedes — their abilities are frighteningly good at exterminating large groups of vermin,” commented Nemesis.

She was right. Our strengths and theirs were strikingly different in nature. By using Charm, Rook and Babi had created scattered allies within the enemy ranks. That had rendered the enemies unable to focus their attacks, and had destroyed any semblance of cooperation they had.

As they had been trying to recover from that, the effects of Charm had spread and gotten even more of them on Rook’s side. Cue repeating downwards spiral. It was a nightmare scenario in any group-based battle.

"I'm glad he is not our enemy," said Nemesis.

I couldn't agree more.

The tian escorts and even peddlers in the carriages were shocked stiff at what Rook and Babi had just done. That was only natural.

We were fully aware that they weren't bad guys, but there was no arguing that what they had just done had been downright villainous.

Charm was scary — end of discussion. It reminded me of why I was afraid of Rocbouquet.

"This was the first time I've used it in battle, and I'm very glad it was useful," said Rook.

"It wasn't very tasty, but I'm sooo stuffed right now!" declared Babi.

The fact that they are a Master with a low-rank job and his first form Embryo makes me dread imagining how they'll be in the future, I thought.

"Ah! Rook, Rook! I have a new skill! I reached my second form!" Babi squealed.

"Really?!" he exclaimed.

And that was exactly when I heard them say that.

Although her appearance didn't change, this battle — or rather, "extermination"— had caused Babi to evolve. That wasn't unexpected, considering just how many goblins there had been.

I looked at Rook's basic stats and saw that he, too, was quite a bit over level 30 now. I, however, was level 20.

"Congratulations," I said to Rook.

"Thank you!" he replied. "So, Babi, what kind of skill did you get?"

"Umm... It's called 'Drain Learning!'"

Rook took a look at his Embryo window and examined the new skill. He let me have a gander, too, so I read its description.

It said "Gives a low (1%) chance to learn a random skill from the monster being drained."

"...Learning, eh?" I said to myself. It was much like the blue magic from that famous RPG series. Basically, it allowed the user to learn and utilize the skills of enemy monsters.

In Babi's case, the chance of that happening was a mere 1%. However, if my calculations were correct, that meant that she had a greater than 60% chance to get a new skill after draining a hundred times. Since there was no limit to the amount of skills one could have, it had the potential to be an extremely useful ability.

...I have a feeling she's gonna be really formidable in the future, I thought.

Suddenly, Nemesis sounded a groan that seemed really troubled. "Mmrgh..."

"What's wrong, Nemesis?" I asked.

"I feel like you and I didn't do much compared to them, and I find that a bit troubling," she answered.

"...Come on, now. No one cares about that," I said.

Well, it was true that we hadn't gotten to be particularly valuable players since we'd defeated that one Demi-Dragon Worm. We'd even died once. Then again, if all we ever faced were beasts such as the Superior Killer or Figaro, we would be dying all the time.

That's why it's all too bad when we don't get to show off, I thought.

And so, though it was likely unrelated to Nemesis' worries and my sentiments...

"GOOOAAAAAHHHHH!"

...something screamed and landed on the goblin corpse-littered battlefield.

No — the word "landed" wasn't appropriate, for it made the action seem soft. Something large — a demon — *crashed down* on the battlefield.

The demon's feet cracked open the ground — making it tremble — and yet the monster itself was unharmed.

In awe, I looked up at its daunting appearance.

It was monstrous in every sense of the word. I lacked the words to describe it. Most of it was brown and black in color. The horn on its head — combined with a stature that surpassed five meters in height — made it appear exactly the way I expected a demon to look. However, it had a feature that was wholly unnatural and nothing short of discomforting.

It had large mouths on its head and both of its shoulders. All of them were leaking a dark purple smoke, the very sight of which made a cold chill go down my spine.

Last but not least, the words "Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda" were hanging above it.

The intimidating presence of this "Gardranda" was enough to affect our reaction speed. Before we could even realize, it raised its right leg, crushed one of the escorts... and followed it up with a punch from its huge fist — directed straight at me.

"Counter... Absorption!"

Nemesis spawned the barrier of light just in time to stop Gardranda's fist from hitting me directly, which greatly lowered its damage.

Since she'd had experience in suddenly activating that skill, Nemesis was quick to react. That was about the only good thing about the current situation.

"This one has more power than those centipedes...!" she exclaimed.

"So it's actually above the Demi-Dragon Worms, huh?" I asked.

"Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda." This monster had both a title and a name.

I've never seen a monster with this kind of presentation before... I thought. *Wait, wasn't his name on the bounty list Nemesis was reading yesterday?*

"Ray! Rook! Be careful!" Marie — who was standing outside the battle — suddenly shouted to us. "That's a Unique Boss Monster!"

Her warning made me remember a certain bit of information I'd seen on the wiki.

UBM.

Just as it said in the name, it was a term that referred to boss monsters who were unique — unlike any other creatures in this world.

Standard boss monsters, such as the Demi-Dragon Worms, often came in groups. But UBMs were different. There was only one of each UBM in the entire world. No current UBMs have ever existed before, and no past UBMs would ever come again. All of them — without exception — were really powerful and even came equipped with their own unique abilities. In a way, they were like the "Masters" of the monster faction.

Thus, they were several tiers stronger than any bosses of the same level.

"Why would such a monster appear here...?" I couldn't help but ask. Considering the power of the goblins surrounding us, Gardranda was simply far too powerful to be here.

Wait... the goblins? I thought.

"I see how it is..." said Nemesis. "This demon is like the ringleader of the goblins. It came out because its subordinates were annihilated."

In other words, it had come here because we'd enraged it. However, there was something else on my mind.

I shifted my gaze and fell silent. My vision was fixed on a single corpse. It belonged to the carriage escort who'd been attacked at the same time I had. It was the same one I'd spoken to not too long ago.

His corpse — the body flattened by the demon — seemed somewhat inauthentic.

Obviously, I only felt that way because my experience with destroyed corpses didn't go beyond fiction. However, the extent of this world's realism was great enough to replicate the weight...

...the *gravity* of a lost life.

I had fought undead before and had caught glimpses of players vanishing into the dusk-veiled forestry as they were massacred by the Superior Killer. In fact, some of the escorts here had died at the hands of goblins before we'd joined the battle.

However, the one that had gotten pulverized by Gardranda was the first person that had died right before my eyes.

I was at a loss for words. I didn't know his name, nor was I aware of what kind of person he had been. I even had trouble remembering his face.

But... I'd been talking to him just a short while ago.

He was beyond helping now. This world wouldn't allow him to come back. He was simply *dead*.

"This'll leave a bad taste in my mouth..." I said with a palpable anger in my tone, and looked up at the demon's sizable frame.

I saw veins popping out and pulsating on its head. No — it wasn't just the head. That was happening on the skin around its shoulder-mouths, as well.

"It's releasing some sort of breath!" shouted Marie. "Back away from it!" I couldn't tell if her warning come too late or if *it* happened too fast.

With great intensity, Gardranda's three mouths simultaneously sprayed out a dark purple smoke.

"...Huh?!" I exclaimed.

It was somewhat reminiscent of insecticide. The sprays that instantly killed the irritating, buzzing pests we were all so familiar with. I had used such sprays myself, of course. However, I'd never once expected to have someone use something like that on *me*.

The poisonous breath was launched in three directions — at me, at Rook and Babi, and at Marilyn and the escorts — and it quickly covered us all.

The dark purple miasma didn't do any damage at first. However, it soon made me go dizzy and forced me to drop to my knees.

I looked at the status window, where I saw that I was under the effects of three debuffs — Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness.

Poison made my health gradually decrease, Intoxication made it hard for me to even stand up, while Weakness cut my stats to less than half their original value, making it so that even my gear felt heavy to me.

I shifted my gaze and saw that the escorts and peddlers were on the ground, as well.

Rook, however, was above us. Babi had raised him up before the miasma could reach him.

"Mh-mhoooooo...!"

I heard the familiar roar, but it was far weaker than before. Its source was Marilyn. She, too, was under the effects of the miasma's debuffs. And yet, she mustered all she had, pushed her feet on the ground, and charged towards Gardranda.

It was the very same charge that could trample fourteen goblins at once and even instantly pulverize lower level bosses, and yet...

"GOAAAAAHHHHHH!"

...Gardranda stopped it.

The demon extended its log-like arms and grabbed on to the outer two of Marilyn's three horns. Though it was pushed a few meters back, Gardranda was able to stop Marilyn's — a Demi-Dragon's — charge.

Then, the demon added a bit more power...

"GeeeeYYAAAAHHHH!"

...and threw Marilyn into the air.

Drawing an arc through the air, the several-tons beast flew about ten meters before hitting the ground with an unpleasantly strong sound.

"Marilyn!" Rook seemed slightly panicked.

"Mh, mhoo, mo..." Marilyn released a weak sound.

With the damage from the fall and all the debuffs weighing down on her, it was obvious that she was at her limit.

"Recall!" Rook's words made her return to the Jewel. Time stopped for the animals within it, so Marilyn was safe for now.

“Mrrgh! It’s not workiiing!” Babi had been trying to use Temptation on Gardranda for a while now, but since the demon’s level, MP, and SP were so high, Charm simply had no effect.

“Suitability, huh?” I whispered to myself. Rook and Babi weren’t cut out for boss battles.

If there was anyone here who *was*, however...

“Master!” In response to Nemesis’s shout, I shifted my attention back to Gardranda.

As I knelt there — barely mobile due to all the debuffs — the demon swung its right hand at me as if crushing a fly.

“Don’t underestimate me!” I forced my heavy body to move, swung Nemesis into Gardranda’s palm...

“Vengeance is Mine!”

...and activated the skill the very moment the sword landed.

The damage from the nullified Gardranda’s punch mixed with the HP I’d lost to Poison, got doubled, and made the demon’s right hand burst.

The attack tore the palm apart and made three of the fingers fly straight off.

“GUUUOOOAAHHHHH?!” Gardranda screamed in agony.

But the damage I’d done was low. Since the damage I’d accumulated from Gardranda at that point hadn’t been particularly great, Vengeance is Mine hadn’t done that much damage, either. Also, the attack on the palm had used up all the damage I’d accumulated by then. To use another Vengeance is Mine, I’d have to accumulate damage all over again.

“Ghh!” Following the attack, I swung Nemesis once again and launched a standard attack. However, it was a few tiers weaker than it usually was, and had none of its usual brilliance.

The reason for that was obvious. The debuffs were still affecting my body.

The Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda had both the physical power to let it throw something as heavy as Marilyn and the ability to weaken its opponents in three different ways.

The gradual HP reduction from Poison wasn’t much of a problem as long as I made sure to observe the HP bar. However, Intoxication paralyzed the semicircular canals and thus negatively affected my ability to control my body, while Weakness cut my stats by more than 50% and turned the most basic fighting into a struggle.

"This is bad..." I muttered. *Damn it, my chances were low even without these debuffs.*

Suddenly, Marie called to me from behind. "Ray!"

I turned around, expecting her to warn me about something, and instead got a glass bottle to hit me right on the face and shatter.

"Khah...!" I exclaimed.

"Master?!" Nemesis was confused, as well. As the impact made me throw my head backwards, I got showered by the bottle's shards and contents.

My pain settings were set to "off," so it didn't hurt at all, but I couldn't help but wonder what had brought this about.

Marie had the stance of a pitcher who had just thrown a ball, so it was pretty obvious that she had been the one who'd thrown it.

As I was about to yell at her for messing about during a battle, I noticed something.

"...I'm healed, and the debuffs are gone," I muttered. My HP was at 100%, and the three status effects were no longer on my status window.

What is this? I asked in my head.

"It's the Elixir I'd prepared just in case! With this, you should be immune to disease-based debuffs for the next 180 seconds! However, I don't have a spare, so use it well!" Marie explained.

Elixir? So that's what was in the bottle. Apparently, it's quite a powerful drug. However, with this...

"Looks like we're at our best again," I said.

"Indeed," agreed Nemesis. "With no debuffs hindering us, this Gardranda is the equivalent of one of those damn centipedes — except with hair."

With my current HP and defense, I could bear the demon's attacks, and if I could bear them — I had a chance of winning.

"For the poison, for Marilyn, and for those who died... you'll get what's coming to you, you demon bastard!" I brandished Nemesis and charged towards Gardranda.

The Elixir's effects would last for another 154 seconds. That was the amount of time I had before I returned to being vulnerable to Gardranda's miasma and got the three debuffs again. Thus, I had to settle it before that time expired.

“Rrraaaghhh!” I held the greatsword aloft and swung it at Gardranda’s knees. It cut through his skin and spilt some blood, but the wound wasn’t deep in the slightest. Though it bit through the skin and sunk into the muscle, it wasn’t even close to reaching the bone.

Even when I was at my best, my standard attacks weren’t good enough to do any proper damage to him.

My STR wasn’t particularly great, and though Nemesis might’ve been a great weapon when I’d been level 1, she was among the weaker ones now that I was level 20. If I tried to beat it with just my standard attacks, not even 1,500 seconds would be enough, let alone 150.

However...

“GUUOOOAAAHHHHH!” Gardranda retaliated with a kick, and I chose to let it hit me.

“Ghh...!” I got blasted away about seven meters, but was able to make a smooth landing.

Though it sent me flying, the attack didn’t hurt me all that much.

The damage it did was about 600. That was approximately a quarter of my total HP.

I was level 20. With the bonus HP I’d gotten for leveling up while being a Paladin, the bonus from my Embryo, and the skill “HP Increase,” my total HP had reached 2500.

One of my skills — Paladin’s Aegis — reduced all incoming damage, and my equipment was far better than it had been when I’d fought the Demi-Dragon Worm. Thus, a creature that hit a little bit harder than them could never kill me in one hit. And if I couldn’t die in one hit, I had the means to earn victory.

“First Heal!” I ran while casting my healing spell on myself and complemented it with a use of one of my Heal Potions. With that, my HP was almost back to full.

“Rrraaghh!”

Then I simply repeated what I’d done before. *Attack. Get hit. Heal.*

I merely had to repeat this for those 150 seconds. That was my only chance at winning.

One repetition took about twenty seconds and got me 600 damage, which became 660 when I considered the damage nullified by Paladin’s

Aegis. I could do it a total of seven times and gather 4620 damage. Vengeance is Mine would double that amount and damage for 9240.

Can you survive getting that hit on your head, you damn demon? I thought.

“That is our only optio— Master!”

As I calculated the remaining time and the damage I could gather, Nemesis called out to me. Being familiar with her tones, I instantly knew that it was a warning.

“Look above!” she shouted.

I quickly did as she told me. In the sky, hazy with Gardranda’s miasma...

“KIIIAAAAAAA!”

...I saw a large, crimson bird of prey as it dove towards me at high speed and readied its talons.

“Whoa!” I hastily jumped to the side, making the crimson gust go by me.

Seemingly annoyed due to failing to grab me, the bird of prey flapped its wings once and suddenly rose back up into the sky.

Before it completely got away, I caught a glimpse of the name displayed above it: “Crimson Roc Bird — Mount Owner: Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda.”

“A... a mount...?!” I stuttered.

The description made me realize something. When Gardranda had come here, he’d simply fallen from the sky. However, the demon had no means of flying or jumping particularly high, and these flat plains didn’t have any places that would give it the necessary height to make such an entrance. Thus, there was only one reasonable explanation: Gardranda had been brought here by something that could fly. And that something had been hanging above us ever since we’d started this battle.

“...This is bad,” I muttered. I was no longer able to focus on Gardranda.

The bird’s speed and physique made it obvious that it was quite a powerful monster. If I had to guess, I’d assume that it was just as strong — if not stronger — than the Demi-Dragon Worms. It could even grab me with its talons and drop me from a great height, rendering me completely unable to fight back.

This bird was a dangerous enemy, indeed.

However, if I kept focusing on trying to avoid it, the Elixir’s effects would wear off, and I'd no longer have any means of achieving victory.

"What do I do...?" I asked myself.

"Ray!" Before I could figure out how to handle the new enemy...

"We'll take care of the Roc Bird!" Rook shouted.

"I can fly, so leave it to me!" Babi called out to me.

"You just focus on Gardranda, Ray!" added Rook.

"But...!"

Rook and Babi couldn't do anything against a monster *that* powerful. It was probably immune to their Charm skills. Before I could tell that to them, Rook spoke up.

"We'll buy time until you defeat Gardranda!" he shouted.

"Yeah! So don't worry about us!" added Babi.

Holding Rook, Babi rose up and flew towards the Roc Bird. I silently watched them.

"Master," Nemesis spoke to me. "You are not thinking of letting their conviction go to waste, are you?"

"...Like hell," I replied. I brandished Nemesis and once again ran towards Gardranda.

The reason why I could continue fighting was because Marie had used her Elixir on me. The reason why I could focus on the fight was because Rook and Babi were holding back the Roc Bird. Nemesis and I weren't alone in this battle.

It wasn't like the time we'd been killed by the Superior Killer. I... no, *we* were fighting as a party.

"57 seconds left," I said. "By lowering our focus on healing, we can do this three, preferably four times."

"Let it be done, then!" Nemesis expressed her enthusiasm.

We ran, attacked Gardranda, got hit back, stood up, and ran again. It was to not waste the opportunity our comrades had given us... and to uplift our chances of victory. I didn't care how tattered I would become doing this.

Soon enough, we only had 10 seconds left.

"Nemesiiiis!" I shouted.

"Accumulated damage: 4973! We can do this!" she cried. "Master!"

Everything slotted into place when Gardranda hit us for the final time. I had less than half of my total HP, but I could still move. All that was left was to hit the demon with Vengeance is Mine.

I dashed towards Gardranda with the sole purpose of landing this lethal hit.

7 seconds left.

6 seconds. 5 seconds. 4 seconds.

“Guuuhhh— GHHAAAAAAAAGHHHH!”

We had only a few more steps to take until the demon was within our range.

That was the moment when the mouth on the head opened wide and released a crimson-red flame.

It wasn’t the miasma this time.

This breath was meant purely to damage anyone it touched.

All this time, Gardranda had been hiding this trump card from us, and there was no way I could survive a direct hit from those flames.

However...

“Take... it... *all*!” I shouted. “Counter Absorption!”

The barrier of light summoned by Nemesis stopped the purgatorial fire and absorbed the damage it did.

“Vengeance is... Mine!”

The attack carrying the doubled weight of the damage from Gardranda’s hits *and* fire completely pulverized the demon’s head and ended its life...

...or so it seemed.

The loss of its head made Gardranda turn silent. However, its body continued moving around and attacking me as though it was only natural.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

Despite losing its head — and brain — Gardranda swung its left arm at me, making it obvious that it simply didn’t care for the damage I’d done. And I — fresh out of my means of defense and tired due to having just used my most intense attack yet — was unable to evade the demon’s arm.

“...Gh!” It hit me head-on, sent me flying, and had me slipping on the ground for about ten meters after landing.

However — likely because Gardranda had lost its head — the damage it’d done wasn’t as great as before, and it didn’t kill me.

“First... Heal...” I stumbled to my feet while casting healing magic on myself.

However, the time was up. 180 seconds had passed since I’d been put under the effects of Elixir, and the effects were now gone.

The air around me was still thick with Gardranda's miasma, so I was instantly put under the effects of all three debuffs.

"Damn it..." I couldn't even fight properly in this state, yet the demon was still perfectly fine.

At least he can't see without his hea— my thought was cut short.

"Just how much of a monster *are* you?" I yelled, not expecting an answer. On both of Gardranda's shoulders — right above the mouths — appeared a gory orb — obviously an eye.

It didn't seem like the shoulder-eyes worked yet, but it was clear that they'd soon gain vision and let the demon see and kill me without much trouble.

"Why is this happening?! We clearly destroyed it!" shouted Nemesis in confusion. Our Vengeance is Mine attack had created an explosion with Gardranda's head at its center.

Naturally, the head was gone without a trace, and even its chest had a hole carved out of it in a semicircular shape.

It looks like we even got its heart, and yet...

"...Heart?" I felt something off about my words, that word in particular.

Suddenly, it came back to me.

I controlled my hands — shaking due to Intoxication — went to my menu, and opened my memo window.

There, I found the memo saying, "The demon's heart lies in its stomach. — Cheshire"

"...So that's what that meant," I muttered.

"Master?" Nemesis sounded confused.

Cheshire's words fit the situation perfectly.

The cat had probably known that I'd be facing Gardranda the moment I'd said that I was heading to Gideon. Cheshire had given me those words just in case I got into a situation such as this one.

Gardranda's heart — the core that governed all of its life functions — was in neither the head nor the chest, but the stomach. Thus, Gardranda wouldn't die until said "heart" was crushed.

To this demon, the head was nothing but another means of attacking. Even if I destroyed the remaining "faces" on the shoulders, Gardranda would continue to move as long as the core in its stomach was intact.

My previous attack should've been aimed at the stomach instead of the head.

But even if I figured that out, I'm all out of power to—

"...Like hell," I muttered.

"Out of power?" Who gives a damn? I thought fiercely.

Rook and Babi were still holding back the Roc Bird. Therefore, I — who had been entrusted with the role of defeating Gardranda — had no business giving up while they continued to struggle.

"Not yet..." I said, gritting my teeth.

I couldn't give up. Even if I couldn't move or if my stats were brought down to the gutter, giving up simply wasn't an option. I had to bear through it all for as long as I could and land another hit on Gardranda's stomach.

It wasn't a matter of whether I "could" or "couldn't." My friends had given me this role. They'd entrusted it to me. Thus, I would to do it even if it meant breaking through my limits.

I would grab hold of the chance of victory.

"If I can't do that much, I can't even dream of getting my revenge against the Superior Killer!" I said fiercely. Despite being on the verge of defeat, I gathered my resolve.

"Master!" Nemesis shouted.

"Nemesis, the odds are against us, but it's not over yet," I said to her. "You don't mind continuing this, right?"

"That goes without saying," she replied. "However, that's not what I want to say."

What?

"What do you make of this?" she asked.

On the corner of the windows I had opened, there was an unfamiliar red window.

[Master's life endangerment: confirmed]

[Master's intent to live: confirmed]

[Embryo Type: Maiden, "Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis," accumulated XP — green]

[* execution available]**

[Preparing * activation]**

[If you wish to cancel, please do so within the next 20 seconds]

[Do you wish to cancel? Y/N]

What is this? I thought dumbly.

“Nemesis?” I addressed her, hoping for an explanation.

“I know nothing of it, either,” she said.

“What *is* this...?”

The window was red, making it seem much like a warning.

From the text, it was obvious that it was related to Nemesis. However, the most important part of it seemed to be corrupted — no, my head couldn’t even process it as proper language.

What, exactly, did it mean?

I silently watched as the countdown’s timer continued to go down. When it hit 10 seconds, I began to worry, and reached towards the window with the intention to stop it...

“CUUAAAAGGHHHHHH!”

...but before I could complete the motion, Gardranda’s shoulder-eyes became able to see, and the demon charged at me while roaring from its shoulder-mouths.

“Why *now*, of all times...?!” I shouted.

The timer on the red window before me was going down as Gardranda got closer to me by the second.

I was left with no choice but to ignore the window and face the demon.

However, with Weakness reducing my stats and Intoxication making it hard for me to move, brandishing Nemesis was about all I could do.

I have to use my defense and healing to create another opportunity to use Vengeance is Mine, and...

[Countdown Complete]

[Acknowledged intent to initiate the emergency evolution process via * protocol]**

[Examining the 172 patterns made available by the accumulated XP and calculating the optimal solution to the current situation]

[Target Embryo: “Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis.” Initiating emergency evolution via *]**

[To reduce load, the interval until the next evolution will be extended]

Right after I saw that message, Nemesis lost her physical integrity and was reduced to floating particles.

“Eh...?” I gasped.

That was the exact same phenomenon that had always happened whenever Nemesis transformed from her human form to her greatsword form. This time, however, she neither returned to her humanoid shape, nor did she become a sword again. Instead, the particles whirled around my surroundings.

"CAAAAAAGGHHHHH!"

As I became unable to process the situation, Gardranda only continued to get closer to me.

[* complete]**

Not giving me a moment to understand anything, the window output displayed a new line.

[Form 2: "The Flag Halberd"]

Nemesis's particles whirled around me and began to gather in my hand.

After having turned to floating grains of light, Nemesis returned to me in a completely different form than before.

"Jump, Master!" It was her voice.

I hastily listened to what she said, kicked my feet off the ground... and left Gardranda a long distance away from me.

"Huh?!" a voice of surprise escaped my lips. Before I realized it, I had jumped a whole twenty meters.

The surprise was aimed at both my unbelievable jumping power and the fact that...

...Nemesis wasn't human.

Nor was she a greatsword.

She was a spear.

Though, since she had an axe popping out from one end of her grip, the word "halberd" was more apt.

The part opposite of the axe blade was leaving a trail of black light, making the whole of her look somewhat like a battle flag.

I looked at the equipment window and saw the name "The Flag Halberd."

"Nemesis... what happened to you?" I couldn't help but ask.

"I'm not sure I'm able to answer that question," she replied. "I happened to become like this before I could even realize it."

I guess she was unconscious while she was turned into particles, I thought.

"However, there is one thing I'm certain of," she continued.

"And that is?" I asked.

"I've evolved into my second form," Nemesis revealed. "The power inside me is greater than ever."

Evolution.

That was the primary feature of every Embryo — the function that gave them powers from infinite patterns.

The red window had also said something about "emergency evolution."

Is that how it normally goes? I asked myself. *It didn't seem that way when Rook's Babi evolved, though...*

"...Well, this ain't the best time to think about this, anyway," I muttered. I had to focus on only one thing right now.

"COOAAAGHHH!"

After having lost sight of me once, Gardranda noticed me again and roared with both of its shoulder-mouths.

"By the way, Nemesis," I said.

"What is it, Master?" Nemesis replied.

"You said that your power is 'greater than ever'... to what extent, though?”

I could almost see her put up an intrepid smile.

“Enough to make it possible for us to defeat that damn demon,” she answered.

“Perfect,” I smiled. The possibility was there.

The fact that she’d only said that it was “possible” made me remember the first time we’d met. However, that was all I really needed. If the possibility of us winning was there...

...then, for the sake of Rook, Babi, Marie, and the tians in danger of dying...

...we only had to bet on that possibility and give it all we had.

“Let’s do this, Gardranda,” I said.

Since Gardranda’s appearance after we’d annihilated the goblins, the demon had possessed the upper hand, it had even been able to corner us after getting its head smashed. But now, we had a new way of achieving victory.

I know how you work, I thought. *I’ll end it soon.*

I brandished The Flag Halberd above my head and roared at the headless demon. “This... is the final round!”

After spinning the halberd above my head, I charged at Gardranda.

Though Weakness was supposed to have lowered my stats, I was running much faster than I could have run while in my normal state. And though Intoxication was supposed to be making my vision turn dim, I felt like I could perceive far more than I ever could.

Gardranda attacked me with a swing from its right arm — the one with fewer fingers on the hand — but I was able to smoothly evade it and sink the halberd’s axe into the demon’s wrist as I did so.

My attack bit through the skin, sunk into the meat, and cleared its bone. I cleanly cut the demon’s hand off, causing crimson blood to burst from the wound.

“We’re doing well,” I said. It was obvious that her evolution had improved Nemesis’s stats and bonuses, but the difference between this and her previous form was just too great.

Yeah, I think we can handle this... Oh, wait... I thought, and remembered something.

I was still under the effects of Poison.

If I’m not careful, my HP might decrease a whole lot, and... Huh?

“...we’re doing *way* too well,” I muttered.

Though Poison was supposed to be gradually lowering my HP, it was actually going up instead.

The increase in my physical ability, the clarity in my sensations, and the continuous HP regeneration. It was as though the debuffs had been reversed.

“I see, so this is your...” I said slowly.

“Indeed,” said Nemesis. “This is my new skill: ‘Like a Flag Flying the Reversal.’”

Nemesis opened a window that showed the skill’s name and described what it did.

Basically, it reversed the effects of debuffs received from an opponent.

Instead of dealing continuous damage, Poison healed me.

Instead of lowering my stats, Weakness increased them.

Instead of paralyzing my senses, Intoxication made them clearer.

“Like a Flag Flying the Reversal” was a buff skill that reversed all and any afflictions that affected me.

“It’s quite ideal for this situation,” said Nemesis. “It honestly seems a bit overly-convenient.”

“...You’re not wrong there,” I said. “However...”

According to the message on that red window, out of the possibilities available to her, Nemesis had been equipped with the “optimal solution.” However, that message had merely described what happened.

For some reason or another, I was convinced that *I* was the one who’d summoned this result. Regardless, this skill made it possible for me to find a way out of this situation... It was much like the first time Nemesis and I had met.

Thus...

“For now... I’m betting it all on this possibility!” I shouted.

“Then we are of the same mind!” she called back.

Nemesis and I released a battle cry as I made my way through Gardranda’s arm attacks and continued chopping away at the demon.

The three debuffs it had given me had originally been simply the worst. However, now they were making me stronger and closing the power gap between me and Gardranda.

I was effectively buffed with HP recovery, perception, and physical strengthening, while the demon had lost its head and practically had its miasma's ability completely negated. Our power balance was now equal — no, in fact, it had been reversed.

"CUUUOAAAGGGHHH!"

Seemingly upset at this turn-around, Gardranda began randomly releasing miasma in every direction.

However, to me and Nemesis, those fumes were nothing but a smokescreen.

"Rraagh!"

As Gardranda continued to release the miasma, I pierced into its stomach. The Flag Halberd dug through the demon's meat and touched the weak spot — the core — within it.

"CEEEAAAAGHH...!" Gardranda roared out in anguish. That was proof enough that the stomach was where I had to aim.

However...

"It's regenerating!" Nemesis shouted.

The wound I had just given it disappeared with a dark purple smoke.

"Hah," chuckled Nemesis. "It appears that only the weak spot is protected by regeneration."

"That means it'd take us forever to defeat it if we relied only on weak attacks," I said.

"It's not like we can keep fighting for particularly long, anyway," she said.

I knew exactly what Nemesis meant by that. Due to the effects of Like a Flag Flying the Reversal, my HP was continuously regenerating. However, my SP only continued to decrease. That was the cost of keeping the skill active.

Compared to my HP, my SP wasn't particularly high. It wouldn't last for long. Thus, I had to figure out what I had to do to win.

Upon considering the regenerating core, the limited amount of time and our abilities...

...there was only one answer.

"I have to stop evading and simply let him hit me," I said.

"Nothing else would work," agreed Nemesis.

I would accumulate the damage the demon did to me and hit it with another Vengeance is Mine. This time, however, it would go straight to the weak spot in the stomach.

"There is something to keep in mind, though," said Nemesis.

"What is it?" I asked.

"This form doesn't allow the use of Counter Absorption and Vengeance is Mine," she answered.

"We're already out of Absorption uses, anyway," I said.

"No," she said, refuting that statement. "My evolution increased its stock to three, so there's one more use left. However, just as Reversal can only be used by The Flag Halberd, those two can only be used when I'm in my greatsword form."

Basically, to use Vengeance is Mine, I had to change The Flag Halberd into the greatsword. That meant losing the effects of Like a Flag Flying the Reversal.

To be able to land a clean, lethal hit while under the effects of the debuffs... I have to kill its mobility! I thought.

"Nemesis, let's go for the legs!" I shouted.

"Understood!"

I swung The Flag Halberd and repeatedly damaged Gardranda's ankles.

The demon retaliated with swings from its arms, but I simply let them hit me.

Naturally, I got damaged, but the reversed Poison quickly healed me back to full health.

Things were going much like they had when I'd been under the effects of the Elixir. Except — thanks to the continuous regeneration — I could attack, get hit, and heal much more smoothly than before.

"...3250... 3784."

As I listened to Nemesis speak the amount of damage I had gathered, I looked at the edge of my status window and checked on my SP.

53... 52... The amount of time I could keep the Reversal active was already below one minute.

"...4265, Master!" she called.

All right, I'm betting it all on this!

"Hhaaaagh!"

I dashed through the miasma — which was nothing but a smokescreen to me — dove right next to where Gardranda was standing, gathered my resolve, and horizontally swung The Flag Halberd at the demon's legs.

Both of its tendons had been severely damaged by my attacks up to that point, so with that deadly swing, the ax-head split both of them apart.

"CUEEEEEEEGHHH!!" Gardranda screamed and fell to its knees, making the ground tremble.

"Do it now, Nemesis!" I shouted.

"Form Shift — Black Blade!" she called. Her command made The Flag Halberd lose its integrity and scatter into particles of light, which soon gathered once more to create the familiar black greatsword.

At that very moment, I was put under the effects of the three debuffs. However, it didn't matter anymore. I only had to land my final attack.

As my legs were shaking due to Intoxication, I dashed towards the demon. Gardranda was still kneeling, and when I raised my sword and readied myself to strike...

...I noticed something.

The dark purple miasma smokescreen was hindering my vision. However, it did nothing to hide the fact that both of the demon's shoulders were emitting a bright red light.

"CHHHHGHAAAAHH!"

Deadly flames.

They weren't limited to the head I'd destroyed — Gardranda could release them from its shoulder-mouths, too.

However, I refused to stop.

"Counter Absorption!" Nemesis spawned the third barrier of light — the one she'd gained from evolving. It stopped the flames and absorbed the damage they were meant to do.

Though it was unnecessary, that made the damage I'd accumulated reach the greatest amount ever.

I couldn't be more certain that I had it in the bag.

"Now, Master!" she called.

Once I passed the flames, the barrier of light dispersed.

Finally, I began to swing my sword at Gardranda's stomach...

"CHHHGHAAAAHH!"

...and was suddenly faced with the demon's left shoulder-mouth, ready to spit more fire.

"What...?!" I gasped.

“Huh...?!” Nemesis exclaimed, as we realized that Gardranda had actually learned something from the battle up till now. The demon had used the lethal flames from both its shoulder-mouths separately...

...just for the sake of getting past Nemesis’s Counter Absorption.

All the miasma it had previously released hadn’t been meaningless, either — it was a preparatory action meant to render us unable to see that the demon had separated the flame bursts.

“Master!” shouted Nemesis.

I was already swinging the sword.

The blade was slicing through the air for the sole purpose of striking Gardranda’s stomach with Vengeance is Mine. Even with the debuffs, I could land the hit in a mere three seconds. However, the demonic flames would reach me faster.

As if on the verge of death, I began seeing the world in slow-motion.

The left shoulder-mouth opened wide and was about to bathe me in flame. “Gyaghghghghghgh!”

But before it could do so, something resembling a bullet broke through the miasmic veil and hit Gardranda’s left shoulder.

The familiar object exploded and the demon’s left shoulder — when caught in the burst — blew up before it could release its fires.

The moment the heat waves caressed my cheeks...

“Vengeance is Mine!”

...Nemesis and I shouted the name of the skill, landed the hit on Gardranda’s stomach, and pulverized its core.

Epilogue

Gardranda's body got split in half and fell to the ground with a loud thud before getting reduced to shining particles and vanishing like any other monster.

With the demon's disappearance, the lingering miasma began to fade, as well.

The dense fog vanished into the sunlight as if it was only natural.

[UBM, "Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda," was defeated]

[Selecting MVP]

[Ray Starling was selected as MVP]

[Ray Starling is presented with an MVP special reward — "Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda"]

The disappearance of the miasma and the system message made it clear that the battle was over.

I read the message while lying on the ground.

"It appears that... we've won," said Nemesis.

"Not yet!" I rejected that notion. Rook was still up high, fighting the Crimson Roc Bird.

I had to go help him...

"But Master! You still have the debuffs..."

I looked at my status summary and, sure enough, the three status effects were there. Poison was draining my health, while my MP and SP were at a perfect 0. However, the battle wasn't over yet.

I didn't mean just the Roc Bird, either. There was also the attack that had hit Gardranda before I'd destroyed it.

That was obviously the...

"Ray! Are you okay?!"

I turned to the source of the voice and saw Marie — who I hadn't seen since she gave me the Elixir — running up to me.

She was probably approaching me because the miasma was no longer there.

"Your status screen looks horrible," she said. "Give me a second."

Saying that, Marie reached for her inventory and took out a few medicine bottles. Unlike my inventory — which was bag-shaped — or Cheshire's — which was pocket-shaped — her inventory had the appearance of a wristband.

Some of the bottles she took out were HP potions, just like the ones I'd used. There were also some that had the labels "MP" and "SP."

"Here's some first aid for you," said Marie. "It would be great if I could also remove your debuffs, but I don't have anything that could treat Intoxication or Weakness... And I've already used up all the Antidotes I had..."

With those words, Marie looked at the people at the carriages, who had also been affected by the miasma.

Everyone — including the escorts — was down on the ground due to Intoxication and Weakness, but none of them had died of Poison.

From her words, it was safe to assume that Marie was the one who'd helped them.

"I had quite a lot of Antidotes, too," she said. "But there's a total of twelve people there, and treating them all required all I could give. Walking around and making people drink medicine made me feel like I'd switched my job to Pharmacist," she laughed.

Apparently, Marie had been doing her best to protect the people — the tians at the carriages — from dying.

"Heh..." I smirked a little bit.

"What? Why the smile?" she asked.

Whoa, did I really make it that apparent? I thought.

"Well, it's just that... you're pretty kind, aren't you?" I asked.

"I don't think that kindness has anything to do with that," Marie responded. "I just... wouldn't like it."

"Wouldn't like what?" I asked.

"When killed, we players only get the death penalty, so that's all okay, but tians don't come back to life, right?" she explained. "I simply don't like the idea of them being lost forever."

"...I know what you mean," I said. It was probably akin to the bad taste in my mouth I'd feel whenever tian deaths were involved.

Though she basically just said that player killing is okay, and as *someone who was killed recently, I... wait...*

"Marie, it just came back to me," I spoke up. "When looking around this place... did you happen to see the Superior Killer?"

"Oh! Yes yes! I almost forgot!" Realizing something, Marie put her hands together. "I saw him! The same man I saw in Noz Forest — the Superior Killer — fired at Gardranda's left shoulder! ...He left right after that, though."

So that thing was actually the Superior Killer's Embryo...

But why had he only shot the left shoulder? If his goal had been to kill Gardranda — a UBM — he'd surely have fired the same way he did when he killed me. With the way he'd gone about it, I could even assume that he'd helped me.

"One more thing about him..." Marie continued. "From the direction he disappeared into, I think it's fair to say that he's heading to Gideon."

"I see..." I said. If that was the case, I could expect to meet him again.

"Oh, are you healed?" asked Marie.

"Yeah," I replied. My stats had replenished while we were talking. Though my HP was still going down due to the Poison, my MP and SP were at max.

Nemesis changed into The Flag Halberd. However, unlike before, the skill Like a Flag Flying the Reversal didn't activate. It was probably because I'd defeated Gardranda — the source of the debuffs.

"Well, whatever," I said. "I can do just fine without the Reversal."

"Indeed," Nemesis agreed. "...By the way, Master."

"What?" I raised an eyebrow.

Nemesis raised the halberd's spearhead upwards...

"How, exactly, are you planning on joining an aerial battle?"

...and asked something that I'd completely failed to consider.

"..."

"..."

"..."

We all turned silent as I realized that there was nothing I could do.

Clearly, I didn't think this through, I thought. There was literally no way for me to assist them.

"Umm... how about hurling some rocks?" asked Marie.

"There's no way I can throw that high..." I said.

They were so high up that even the Roc Bird — with all its great wingspan — looked like a small point in the sky.

And Rook and Babi aren't visible at all... Oh! I thought and noticed something.

"They're coming down," said Marie.

The Roc Bird began to look bigger as it began losing altitude. However, something seemed wrong.

Instead of diving down at high speed — as it had when it'd attacked me — it was descending in a strangely gentle manner.

When the Roc Bird in my sight was large enough for me to make out its details, I finally realized what was up.

Rook — who was supposed to be fighting it — was riding it, instead.

The Roc Bird gently landed on the ground and let Rook dismount.

"Ray! Marie! Are you all right?!" he ran up to us.

"Yeah, we're fine, but... how about you? And where's Babi?" I asked.

"The battle exhausted her, so I had her return to me," Rook answered while showing the crest on his left hand.

"I see." I nodded and shifted my gaze to the bird. "And this is...?"

"Audrey!" he replied with enthusiasm.

"CAAAW!"

Audrey? I thought. *Oh, I think I know what that refers to.*

"So, does the fact that you've given it a name mean that..."

"Yes!" Rook said before I could finish the question. "I Charmed and successfully tamed her!"

Well, it was true that Rook's Male Temptation skill had a low chance of taming female monsters.

...So this thing's a girl, too, huh? I thought.

"Hey, wait..." I said. "I'm quite sure this bird is Gardranda's mount."

"The Charm skill didn't have an effect on her at first, but it suddenly started to work when the miasma cleared," he explained.

That was basically the moment when I'd defeated Gardranda.

So, with the demon's death, Audrey had no longer been a mount, making the difficulty in Charming and taming her drop significantly.

I looked and saw Audrey rubbing her wings on Rook's back...

Is that some sort of courtship behavior? I thought. Whatever the case, she seemed to be quite attached to him.

I also felt that the name “Audrey” fit her far better than “Marilyn” fit the Trihorn. *Though, for all I know, Audrey Hepburn might also be turning in her grave right now.*

“The miasma was too thick for me to see what was going on, so I was pretty worried about you guys,” said Rook.

“Well, as you can see, we won,” I stated. “It’s all thanks to you guys.”

“And me, of course!” Nemesis interjected.

“I know that much,” I said. “Thank you, Nemesis.”

“...Y-You’re welcome,” she muttered. “I-It’s fine as long as you’re aware.”

Hm? I thought. *What a strange response.*

“So everything’s taken care of now,” said Marie.

“Seems like it,” I agreed.

I still had the Superior Killer on my mind, but if he wasn’t here anymore, worrying about him was meaningless. Thus, I left that matter for later.

Using my healing magic and Marie’s potions to restore my HP, we waited for the debuffs to go away. Because the cause of them — the miasma — was gone, the debuffs on me and the carriage people disappeared within ten minutes.

Their leader — a merchant named Alejandro — was beside himself with gratitude. When the people got teary-eyed and thanked us with words like “Without you, my whole family would’ve died,” “You’re lifesavers,” or “We can’t thank you enough,” Rook and I both became a bit bashful.

They, too, were heading towards Gideon, so we offered join them. Personally, since they’d lost a number of escorts in the previous battle and the ones that had survived were not in the best of shape, I was kinda worried about them.

Alejandro instantly — and with great joy — agreed to have us tag along.

After we’d raised up the overturned carriages, I saw the survivors take something out of the pockets of the deceased. Upon further inspection, I realized that they were box-shaped inventories.

A moment later, the survivors stored the remains of the deceased into those boxes. Each and every dead person got stored into their own inventory.

I asked Marie about it, and she said that it was how traveling tians treated their dead — by putting them into those “coffins.”

With monsters terrorizing the roads, tians took the danger of death as a given. If some lost their lives while others survived, the dead would be put into those “coffins” so that they could be sent to their homes and families without decaying. That was why they all carried inventories where they could store themselves.

It made me more aware of how tians — who were always in danger of dying — perceived life and death.

“...Coffins, huh,” I whispered. I’d never cared much for any NPCs who’d died in other games, but it was different here.

It gave me a lump in my throat.

Even if I knew this was a game, I didn’t think I could ever get used to seeing people die here. That might’ve been because *Infinite Dendrogram* was simply far too realistic.

Or perhaps...

“I... I’ll just leave this for later.” I stopped that train of thought and returned to helping prepare the carriages.

◇

Half a day had passed since we’d gotten back on the road again. Marilyn’s dragon carriage was gently shaking me when I suddenly began to feel extremely sleepy. It was probably caused by me pushing my limits during the battle against Gardranda.

“Why not take a nap? I’ll wake you up if something happens,” offered Marie, and I gladly accepted. Logging out would’ve resulted in me being left behind, so I took a nap while logged in, just like I did at the inn.

Sitting down, I placed my back against the carriage’s cargo and closed my eyes.

Not even five minutes had passed before I felt someone sit next to and lie against me.

Wondering who it was, I opened my eyes and saw Nemesis sleeping with her head placed against my upper arm. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who was tired enough for a nap.

“Man, you sure are quick to fall asleep... Nemesis,” I said. Then I tried to follow her example and closed my eyes again.

However, probably due to having opened my eyes once, I couldn't fall asleep, and instead began to think about things. Specifically, I remembered the many and various things that had happened since I'd started *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Despite the fact that only three days had passed in real time, they'd felt extremely dense.

The most vivid memory I'd had so far was the battle against Gardranda. In terms of danger, it might've even surpassed my encounter with the Superior Killer.

Not only that, but — probably because Nemesis and I had told each other how we felt about it — the regret I had been haunted with after getting PK'd had faded, and it wasn't nearly as strong as before.

At the current moment, the dominant feeling in me was the vague pain I felt after seeing the bodies of the tians killed by Gardranda and the goblins.

They were nothing but characters inside *Infinite Dendrogram* — a game. And yet, my heart was grieving for them as it would grieve for those who'd died in reality.

A part of me felt that such sentiments were wrong. I didn't know what to say to that idea. Before I realized it, I'd opened my eyes and looked at Nemesis.

She was my Embryo, my partner... and an existence that was limited to the game known as *Infinite Dendrogram.* However, the longer I looked at her sleeping face, the more I felt like I was looking at a living, breathing girl.

She's alive, I thought to myself. *I just can't think otherwise.*

"'AI with intelligence equal to that of a person,' huh?" I murmured. My brother had said that tians — the inhabitants of this world — were recognized as such. "But..." The drowsiness that I'd thought was gone came over me again and slowly overwhelmed my brain.

As my consciousness became more and more vague, I once again began to run my mind through the things I'd thought at the party on my first day.

Liliana and Milianne — tians.

Demi-Dragon Worms and Gardranda — monsters.

And...

"Nemesis..."

...Embryos like her.

They all felt... so *alive* to me.

"Is this really..."

...just a game?

Before I could voice those words, my consciousness was finally lost to the realm of slumber.

◇◆◇

Undisclosed Location

["Polaris Bear, Polar Star" was defeated]

[Final level: 83]

[MVP: "God Hunter" Carl Lourlou, level 263 (total level: 763)]

[Embryo: "Indestructible and Everlasting, Nemean Lion"

[MVP special reward: Ancient Legendary item, "Ultimate Suit Series, Polar Star"]

["Ore Dragon King, Dragnium" was defeated]

[Final level: 64]

[MVP: "Giga Professor" Mr. Franklin, level 198 (total level: 698)]

[Embryo: "Magic Beast Factory, Pandemonium"]

[MVP special reward: Ancient Legendary item, "Ore Dragon King's Complete Remains, Dragnium"]

["Navalport Strikefish, Portorpedo" was defeated]

[Final level: 42]

[MVP: "Great Admiral" Koukin Shoyu, level 229 (total level: 729)]

[Embryo: "Great Flame Brewer, Abura-sumashi"]

[MVP special reward: Epic item, "Come-and-Go Torpedo, Portorpedo"]

["Fox-eyed Charcoal, Enryou" was defeated]

[Final level: 56]

[MVP: "The Glaive" Aono Hokugenin, level 335 (total level: 835)]

[Embryo: N/A]

[MVP special reward: Legendary item, "Incinerating Fox-eye, Enryou"]

["Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda" was defeated]

[Final level: 24]

[MVP: "Paladin" Ray Starling, level 20 (total level: 20)]

[Embryo: “Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis”]

[MVP special reward: Legendary item, “Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda”]

“Hm?” Surrounded by darkness, still recording and doing its preset activities, *it* suddenly tilted its head.

Considering that it always did nothing but work without as much as saying a single word, that was a rare occurrence.

“How curious,” it said. “To defeat an UBM that’s above you in level... that is quite rare.”

Its confusion was only natural. UBMs were exceptional creatures far beyond the norm. They all had multiple times the power of any boss monster at the same level. Even high-rank Masters had a hard time fighting them.

Thus, it was extremely rare for a UBM to be defeated by someone of a lower level.

Thinking that this defeat had been the result of a large number of low-level players and that the person had only been selected as an MVP by accident, it opened the battle log. However, the reality was far beyond its expectations.

The person — Ray — had defeated the UBM all by himself.

“Hoh?”

That person was equipped with abilities that were optimal for giant-killing. The mid-battle evolution caused by *** had given him a new ability that was simply perfect for the situation. That person was equipped with an indomitable will.

There were many reasons for his victory, but there was one that particularly stood out.

“He realized it right after destroying the first head,” it said. “That is far too early.”

The creature it acknowledged as an UBM — “Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda” — was a gathering of traps.

First, there was the head that flagrantly released miasma and flames.

The player would think that to be its weak point and destroy it, but that would cause it to create two new faces on the shoulders.

All of those visages were traps.

Getting rid of them would not only fail to destroy Gardranda — it would cause it to be strengthened even further.

Even if all its heads were destroyed, it would go through more transformations and become even more powerful than before.

It was completely indestructible as long as the core within its stomach was intact.

Due to that, *it* had expected Gardranda to grow into a particularly powerful UBM. In fact, it wouldn't have been surprised if the demon had reached level 100 — the apex of UBMs and the greatest level available to monsters — and broken through it to join the ranks of the exceptions known as SUBMs — Superior Unique Boss Monsters.

However, in reality, this low-rank Master had been able to miraculously defeat Gardranda and stop its growth process.

"Well, there's no use in overthinking it," it said. "Such cases aren't unheard of. I will keep this in mind in my future work."

It finished analyzing the battle and closed the battle log window.

However, its thoughts suddenly escaped through its mouth as words.

"Whatever the case, this is reason to be joyous. It's all meaningless if only the current Superiors grow stronger. If no new powers emerge, we will never have a hundred Superiors... and never reach Infinity."

After nodding at its own words, it took another glance at Ray's log and continued talking.

"Now... I wonder if he will make good use of Gardranda."

Imagining the future, it formed a faint smile.

"Whether you do or not... just grow stronger while having fun. To you people, this world — from start to finish — is nothing but a game."

And so, control AI No. 4, Jabberwock — the one tasked with handling UBMs — returned to its busy, busy job.

Afterword

Bear: “Time for the afterword!”

Cat: “Thank you very much for buying the first voluume!”

Bear: “As you all can surely tell by the words next to our speech, this afterword will be presented by yours truly — his bearliness Shu Starling...”

Cat: “...and the only *Dendro* cat so far, Control AI no. 13 — Cheshiire! Just so you all know, at first, the author was thinking of acting proper and greeting his dear readers directlyy...”

Bear: “...but changed his mind and figured that *Dendro* is best represented by its mascot duo!”

Bear: “Now, bear with us as we tell you how it got published.”

Cat: “Good ideaa. It happened about 11 months ago. The author looked into his inbox on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* and found a message from a sender whose name was in red... The red name caused him to quake with fear, but he somehow got himself to read the subject line. It said **‘Publishing Offer.’** It was actually an offer from Hobby Japan’s editor, K!”

Bear: “Naturally, the author was surprised, fur he never expected to get contacted by a publisher whose releases he’d read in his school years.”

Cat: “The author replied with a cautiously optimistic message, soon after which he had to go to a preparatory meeting...”

Bear: “...where he received an explanation and quickly sealed the publication deal with a contract.”

Cat: “However, there was a problem after that... Well, ‘problem’ might not be the right word.”

Bear: “Basically, Editor K raised his expectations and standards so high that the author’s heart couldn’t bear it.”

Cat:

“‘The illustrations will be done by Taiki,’ said the editor.

‘The one who does *those* designs? I’m so happy!’ replied the author.

‘A month before it releases, we’re putting *Dendro* leaflets in *HJ Bunko,*’ said the editor.

‘Wow! That’s so much advertising!’ replied the author.

‘It’s also getting a dedicated site and a preview video,’ said the editor.

‘Y-You’re going *that* far?!’ replied the author.

‘I’ll also get fifty artists to draw something in support of *Dendro,*’ said the editor, and at this point, the author could only shake uncontrollably.”

Bear: “All of this is completely true.”

Cat: “The author will be at ease if the work sells well enough to meet Editor K’s expectations. I earnestly hope that this afterword is read by many people, and that means the book is selliing.”

Bear: “Last, but not least, put your paws together for the author’s words of gratitude!”

Hello there.

I would like to give my thanks to everyone who bought *Infinite Dendrogram* Volume 1, everyone who supported my work on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō,* my sister — who checked on every part before I uploaded it — and, of course, Hobby Japan and their editor, K, for picking my work for publication.

I will keep on writing *Infinite Dendrogram* and do my best to live up to your expectations, so I would be thankful if you continued to support me.

Regards, Sakon Kaidou.

Cat: “Now that that’s over, let us meet again in volume twoo!”

Bear: “This afterword was brought to you by Brother Bear...”

Cat: “...and Cheshiire!”

Bear: “The second volume is planned to be released in the coming months, so grin and bear it until then!”

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 1
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson and Nick Nomura
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2016 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2017 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2017

Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite Dendrogram

2. The Beasts of Undeath

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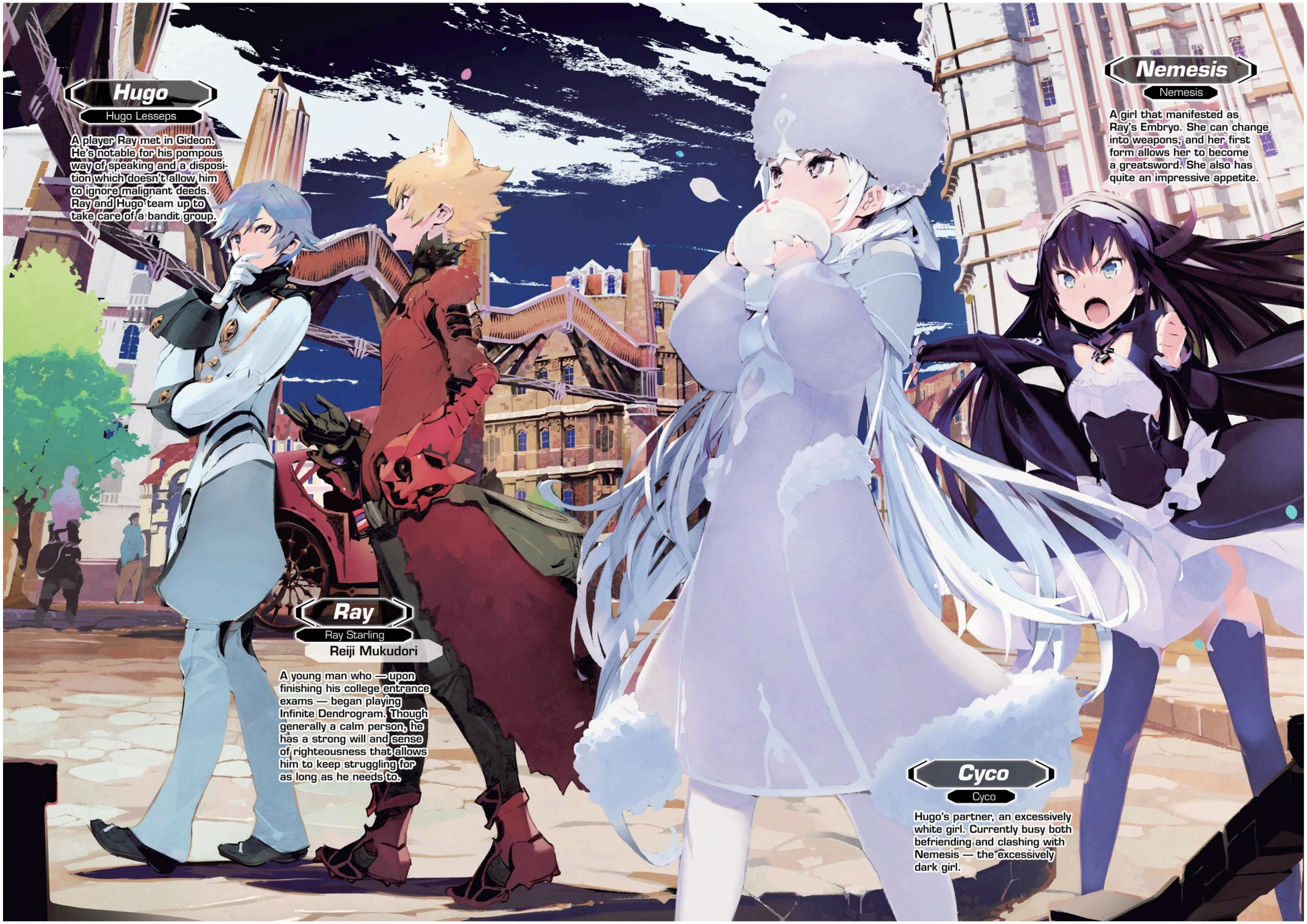


Hugo

Hugo Lesseps

A player Ray met in Gideon. He's notable for his pompous way of speaking and a disposition which doesn't allow him to ignore malignant deeds. Ray and Hugo team up to take care of a bandit group.

Ray

Ray Starling

Reiji Mukudori

A young man who — upon finishing his college entrance exams — began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.

Cyco

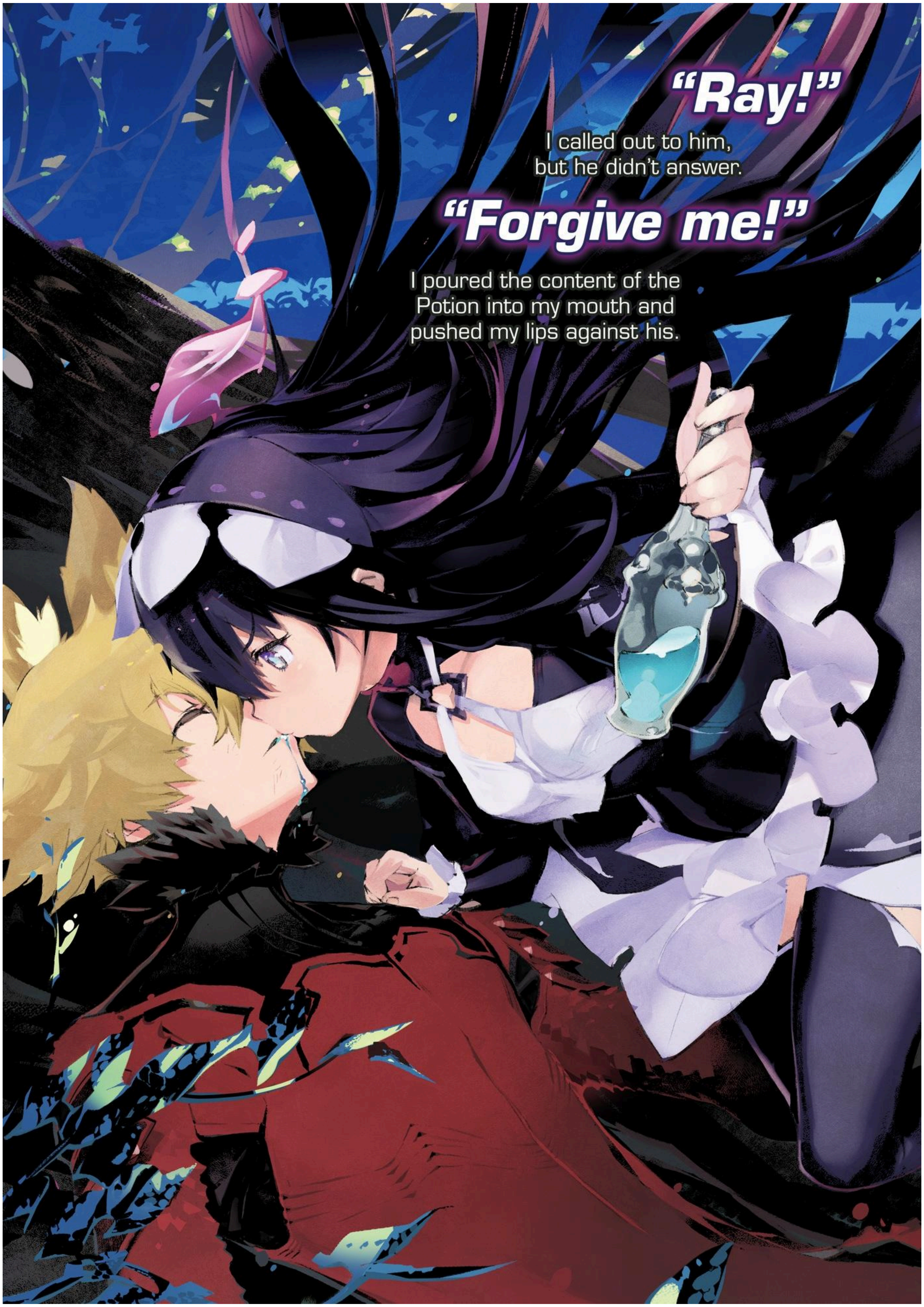
Cyco

Hugo's partner, an excessively white girl. Currently busy both befriending and clashing with Nemesis — the excessively dark girl.

Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She can change into weapons, and her first form allows her to become a greatsword. She also has quite an impressive appetite.



"Ray!"
I called out to him, but he didn't answer.
"Forgive me!"
I poured the content of the Potion into my mouth and pushed my lips against his.

Prologue: The Emotions of the Dead

Kingdom of Altar, Cruella Mountain Belt

To the east of Gideon — the second largest city in the Kingdom of Altar — there was a mountainous area known as the Cruella Mountain Belt. It was the kingdom's border with Caldina — a country of expansive, desertlike wastelands.

For years, this border area had been a popular place for bandit gangs and their hideouts. Even if some group on a quest from the Adventurers' Guild eliminated one of them, they would soon be replaced by others.

There were two reasons for that.

The first was that the kingdom couldn't do any widescale and thorough bandit hunts due to the possibility of the neighboring country of Caldina seeing it as an act of war and thus provoking them.

The second was that the belt was on the primary trade route between Gideon, one of the kingdom's largest cities, and Caldina — a nation known for its mercantilism. A bandit couldn't ask for an area more plentiful with prey. Thus, the bandit problem in the belt was neverending.

However, it actually wasn't a bad thing for the Adventurers' Guild.

The new bandit gangs were always made up of people who went broke and got reduced to brigandry. Their jobs were low-rank and their levels weren't even maxed. Most active adventurers could eliminate them without much effort, and since it was a net positive for the adventurer economy, the guild wasn't averse to the idea of the problem's continued existence. The only real victims were the peddlers unfortunate enough to be marked by the brigands.

However, at one point, this bandit problem — already reeking of bloody money — took a turn for the worse.

One of the bandit gangs started kidnapping children from Gideon and the nearby villages.

They demanded ransom money for every child, and those with unpaid ransoms were simply never returned. Some relatives didn't get their children back even after paying, while others only received shredded pieces of their corpses. It all seemed like a sick joke.

Naturally, the parents of the children requested to have the Adventurers' Guild eliminate those bandits, and, of course, the guild accepted it.

The officials of the Adventurers' Guild believed that the kidnappers had someone particularly powerful among them. Thus, they gathered and dispatched a party made up of several excellent tian adventurers. It was a group that could even fell a Pure Dragon.

Everyone believed that — regardless of whether the kidnappers had capable people among them — the party would eliminate the bandit gang and bring back any children that were still alive. The party members themselves were certain of that, as well.

The party's leader — famous for his dashing looks — set out on the quest while waving goodbye to the people seeing him off. The intrepid smile on his face made everyone — the guild's officials, other adventurers, and, of course, the inhabitants of Gideon — all the more certain that they would return successful.

The following day, the leader's half-eaten face was placed outside the steps of the guild hall. It was accompanied by a paper saying "Seconds, please," along with a number of small fingers, one finger for every kidnapped child.

Though perplexed by this unexpected turn of events, the Adventurers' Guild quickly made their next move. Their plan was to gather several adventurer parties and annihilate the bandit gang through human-wave tactics. Among the adventurers — numbering nearly a hundred — there were even some Masters. The guild's Masters were absolutely certain that they would emerge victorious.

Three days later, a resurrected Master came back to report what happened. "They killed us all. It just can't be done," he said.

According to him, most of the enemies were absolute weaklings, but two of them were ridiculously strong.

One was a horse-man undead, while the other was a large, ox-headed man. Their power was far beyond that of normal tians, and it was fair to say that they were what had killed most of the adventurers.

With that report, the guild's master realized that this wasn't a job for adventurers. He contacted the knights responsible for the area around

Gideon, but the army couldn't act due to the area being close to the border with Caldina.

Even Gideon's local champion — Super Gladiator Figaro — rejected the request, despite being able to take care of the matter all by himself.

The Adventurers' Guild had exhausted all their options, leaving them unable to do anything. Every now and then, some stronger sorts would accept the request and head out to eliminate the bandits, but they would always end up as corpses and were sent back to the guild along with fingers of the children.

This tragedy continued for a year, and the Adventurers' Guild eventually stopped making the request appear in their catalogs.

Thus, the bandits in question — the Gouz-Maise Gang — were still active in the Cruella Mountain Belt.

◆

It was happening in the gloomy cellar of an abandoned fortress.

"Third this month. Payment received. No relevant materials. To be returned." The man mumbled something while looking at an old desk in a piercingly-cold room thick with suffocating moisture.

"Fourth this month. Payment not received. Relevant materials found. Turned to materials."

He looked through the documents, spoke those words, and wrote something down on the ledger in his hand. It was much like a ledger one would use in a business, and the one under his hand wasn't the only one on the table.

Gloomy as the idea might've been, it seemed as though he had only placed them there just for the sake of having them around, and the man wouldn't deny that idea.

"Fifth this month. Payment received. Relevant materials found. Head to be returned after turning to materials." With those words, the man stood up and walked to a neighboring room.

The way he walked was curious. His upper half was that of a human, but the bottom half was that of a horse. The man was a humanoid creature known only as "horse-man."

Just as there were human-horse mix *monsters* known as centaurs, so there were human-horse mix *humans* known as horse-men. An average monster would have its name pop up above its head, but that didn't apply to the man.

Therefore, this horse-man was, in fact, humanoid...

...regardless of just how inhuman his appearance and mental workings were.

"This is the one," he said.

The room had cages in it, and inside there were a number of small animals. They were the man's commodities. The small animals were all asleep and thus completely oblivious to the man's presence.

The horse-man removed the small animal from the fifth cage and placed it on the stony floor of his own room. On the floor, there was a magic circle the man had drawn. The man fixed the shackles, which were chained to the floor, on the small animal's limbs. He took out a black crystal.

"______"

As he whispered something, the magic circle began to shine, and it released small amounts of purple lightning.

At the very same moment, the small animal woke up.

"GYAAAAHHHHH!"

The shriek that escaped its mouth was thick with anguish.

It tried to raise its body up, but the manacles binding it were not so accommodating. As the metal on its limbs tore through its skin, the small animal's body spasmed and hit its back to the stony floor in a futile attempt to break out.

This continued for a long five minutes...

"Mo...mmy..."

...and at the end, the small animal — the miserable little human child — breathed its last.

"This is less than I expected," the horse-man said, looking at the crystal in his hand.

Then he cut off the corpse's head with a large blade he had prepared, stuffed it into a bag, and threw it into a basket that said "To be returned." The rest of the body was carefully put into a container saying "Materials."

Then — as if what had just happened was nothing special — the man returned to the table and continued filling in the ledger.

No one who knew the ledger's contents would ever compare it to those used in business. At this point, it was nothing but a cursed book containing the fates of countless children.

“Sixth this month. Payment not received. No relevant materials. Dispose. Gouz!”

In response to the man’s call, something within the darkness began to move. “Ahh...”

The creature referred to as “Gouz” — a large man with an ox’s head and demonic fangs — reached into one of the cages and grabbed a little girl by her arm. She was sleeping and continued to do so even as he dragged her across the floor.

Many would say that she would’ve been better off if she continued sleeping. However, Gouz didn’t allow that. Gently — like a parent or a close friend — he tapped on her cheek.

The little girl stirred and woke up...

“They taste better when they’re scared, y’know,” he grinned.

...and her flesh was rendered from bone. Eaten alive.

By the time Gouz was done with his snack, the horse-man was done filling in the ledger.

“Gouz, don’t make such a mess,” he said.

“Gahahah!” the ox-head laughed. “Maise, this place is basically painted with the brats’ blood and other fluids! I couldn’t make it worse if I wanted to!”

“I’m talking about your saliva. It reeks.”

“That so? Well, I’ll try to be careful, then.”

The horse-man — Maise — sighed at Gouz’s half-hearted and unreliable response and changed the subject.

“That’s today’s set done,” he said. “Gouz, after we go through tomorrow’s set, we’re leaving this place.”

“Huh? We are?” asked the ox-head.

“Yes,” answered the horse-man. “That event is starting in Gideon in just two days. Some of those who will gather for it might try to eliminate us. It would be far too troublesome.”

“Masters, huh?” sighed Gouz. “Why not just kick their non-serious asses?”

“Because we can’t,” curtly replied Maise. “We could handle those with high-rank jobs, but Superiors and their Superior jobs would be far too challenging. Also...”

He momentarily stopped talking, merely to emphasize the words that followed.

“...they stand where we are aiming for.”

Maise’s words — which had some sort of certainty to them — made Gouz laugh out loud. “Gehahahaha! You’re not wrong there.”

“Ah, it just hit me,” added the ox-head. “You said we’re leaving, but what about our underlings? There are, like, a hundred of ‘em, and they’re still working hard getting the brats and whatnot.”

Gouz’s question made Maise’s eyes — empty sockets where a wisp-like fire popped up and disappeared — light.

“We’re taking them with us, of course,” said the horse-man.

“Gahahah! Hope they all fit!”

Gouz was a man-eating ox-head demon with a high-rank job from the gladiator grouping: Strong Gladiator.

Maise: a grudge-wielding undead horse-man with a high-rank job from the necromancer grouping — Lich.

They were the Gouz-Maise Gang.

They were Gideon’s most feared band of kidnappers and murderers.

Chapter One: A Morning in Gideon

Paladin Ray Starling

Most large cities in the Kingdom of Altar — the royal capital included — were encircled by a large wall. Not only was it a necessary structure that protected against monsters and attacks from other countries, it also separated the worlds inside and out.

Duel City Gideon, where we had just arrived, was no different.

“Whoa...” I couldn’t help but voice my amazement. Beyond the walls — which were similar to the ones in the capital — waited a radically different scenery.

It made me remember how I’d felt when I had first entered Altea. The atmosphere of a hyper-realistic fantasy town was moving, to say the least, and Gideon was making me experience it all over again.

The air here was thick with people’s enthusiasm. I had a feeling that most of it came from the very middle of the metropolis — the Great Central Arena of the duel city, towering right before my eyes. Ancient Rome’s Colosseum was 200 meters in diameter and 50 meters in height, yet Gideon’s pride and joy seemed to be more than twice the size of that.

According to a sign hanging near the gates to Gideon, there were twelve smaller arenas evenly spaced out around the city, and every single one of them was active daily. The sign also said that the Great Central Arena was often used for various events.

With all the liveliness here in Gideon, I found it hard to believe that this city was part of a kingdom that had recently experienced a crippling blow in a war and was forced to the verge of defeat.

I looked around and saw a number of humanoid races I didn’t encounter much back in the capital. Some had beast-like ears, others had dragon-like horns... There were even some fairies, so petite they only went up to my knees. They seemed to be this world’s Demi-Humans — a staple for every fantasy work.

As I watched them, I noticed that there were both tourists and those who actually lived and worked here. Figaro hadn't been lying when he'd said this place was lively.

"What an energetic city," said Rook.

"It's only natural, since this area isn't close to the kingdom's border with Dryfe, which is in the north," Marie said. She began explaining why. "The countries close to Gideon are Caldina and Legendaria. The latter signed a treaty of commerce with Altar, while the former is a full ally, so this city gets many tourists from both."

She showed us a map to illustrate what she'd explained. In the center of the map was Gideon; to the east, a mountain belt, followed by Caldina; and to the south, there was Legendaria. To the west, there was a small patch of land followed by the open sea, while to the north, there was the capital.

"Not only is Gideon positioned in a safe spot — you can also count all the gladiators fighting in the arenas as its soldiers," Marie continued. "It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Gideon is the strongest city in the kingdom."

I see, I thought. *That makes it the safest city in the Kingdom of Altar.*

I could only assume that many people who'd escaped from the capital had chosen this as their destination. After all, in the catalog of the capital's guild, there had been many escort requests from people searching for a safe refuge.

However, there were still merchants like Alejandro, who would go out of their way to stock up in the capital. We and that merchant had gone our separate ways at the entrance to Gideon, but since he'd wished to thank us properly, he'd invited us to visit his shop whenever we had the time.

"Now, let's go to the Adventurers' Guild," said Marie. "We have to finish the quest and report that Gardranda was eliminated."

Rook and I were quick to agree, and we all made our way to Gideon's Adventurers' Guild.

The ceiling inside it was higher than it was in the capital's guild. The entrance was larger, too. The designers were probably being considerate of the larger races inhabiting and visiting this city.

Anyway, we completed the delivery quest without any problems. The reward was 30,000 lir. We split it evenly and got 10,000 lir each. It was a nice amount, no doubt about it. However, we ran into some problems when claiming the reward we were supposed to get for taking care of Gardranda.

Proving that we'd done it wasn't difficult at all. We simply had to go to a special counter and show them the MVP special reward: The Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Items of this type were always named after the defeated UBM, had qualities that fit the MVP, and couldn't be transferred in any way. Thus, the fact that I possessed the item with Gardranda's name on it could only mean that I had been the most valuable player in Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda's elimination.

Of course, it was also possible to prove such things by going through a thorough inquiry. It was only natural, considering that not every bounty was a UBM.

And so, though we got the reward money without any trouble, we found the amount to be quite problematic.

It amounted to a total of 1,000,000 lir. That was the equivalent of 10,000,000 yen, which was quite a fortune. It got us to sit around a table in the guild and intensely argue about how we would split it.

"Oh, come on, now!" I raised my voice. "Let's just all take a third and be done with it!"

"No!" said Marie. "I already took the money for the potions I used, so there's no reason for me to have any more! I didn't participate in the battle at all! You two should just split it in half!"

"I didn't fight Gardranda, either!" cried Rook. "I could never accept the same amount as Ray! He should just take it all, honestly!"

The three of us were fiercely arguing in favor of reducing the amounts we would get.

First, Marie had been given approximately 100,000 lir of the reward to make up for the Elixir she'd thrown at me and other medicines she'd used on the people in the carriages. She'd been apprehensive about accepting it, saying that she'd chosen to use those items on her own volition, but I'd insisted, and she'd soon caved. With that settled, we'd had 900,000 lir left, and that was when things had gotten fiery.

I had argued that it had been the result of us acting as a party, and insisted that we all take a third each.

Marie had insisted that she didn't deserve or need more than what she'd gotten for the medicine.

Rook had stated that he didn't deserve any money because he hadn't participated in the battle against Gardranda.

I sincerely believed that they both were invaluable in the victory against the demon, so I really wanted them to take what was rightfully theirs.

"Honestly, I already got the MVP special reward, so maybe I shouldn't take any of it," I said.

"That would take you beyond simple selflessness and quickly make you look like an unreasonable lunatic," commented Nemesis.

I was being completely serious, yet Nemesis looked at me like I was an idiot. Rook and Marie, too, seemed thoroughly perplexed by my suggestion.

"Hey, these things are downright insane," I said. "I really can't let myself take much after getting something *this* good."

I raised my hands to show off the things on them. These two-tone colored bracers — one red, other dark purple — were inside my inventory after we had defeated Gardranda.

The description in the equipment window went like this:

Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda
Legendary item
A legendary item embodying the concepts surrounding the three-faced demon of flame and miasma.
In addition to being extremely tough, it increases the physical strength of the wearer.
This item cannot be transferred or traded.
No level limit.

It actually gave a 100% bonus to STR, and had more defense than all my other armor combined. Not only that, but it also allowed me to use the skills "Purgatorial Flames" and "Hellish Miasma," which were probably much like the attacks used by the UBM itself. There was also a skill that I couldn't read for some reason, one that simply said "???".

They were insanely good, no doubt about it.

Not only did they seem to be worth more than 300,000 lir — they'd probably go for more than the whole reward for defeating Gardranda.

I mean, it's a "legendary" item, I thought.

"I know I'm the MVP and all, but taking the reward after getting *these* would be far too much," I said.

We would have lost the battle against Gardranda if Marie hadn't provided support with her items. Rook, too, had done a great job holding back Audrey — who had originally been the demon's mount.

We wouldn't have achieved victory if it hadn't been for them, so I thought I was fair in insisting that my contributions were worth only a third of the reward.

"...I understand," said Marie. "But I think I have a better idea." She lightly hit the table. "First of all, Ray, you're getting 300,000, and that's final. If *you* don't accept that money, no one here has the right to have any of it. Now, Rook, I know you don't want to take as much as Ray, so let's cut it by half and give you at least 150,000. And before anyone tells me off for not taking anything, I'll be satisfied with just 50,000, thank you very much."

Rook and I weren't against that split, so that was 500,000 lir taken care of. However, there was still 400,000 lir left.

"We shall use the rest as a party," said Marie.

"By that, you mean...?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You could call it a little lesson for future reference," she answered.

What is she talking about? I thought.

"For now, just leave it all to me," she continued. "I would like you to gather here in the afternoon after three days game time. Is that okay with both of you?"

Three days game time was just one day in reality.

"No problems here," said Rook.

"I don't have any plans for tomorrow, either, but what are you planning?" I asked.

"Let's have it be a little secret for the sake of surprise," said Marie. "Oh, but if you don't like this idea of mine, just say so. I'll give your money back at once."

"No, it's fine by me," I said. I had absolutely no intention of taking any more, so I just let Marie do her thing.

"Then with that, we're done splitting the money," she said. "Good job on finishing this quest, you two."

"Yeah, thanks for the help," I said.

"Thank you very much," said Rook.

And so ended the first quest we had taken up as a party.

We had a small celebration, and by the end, I was so tired that I immediately logged out.

◇

The next day, I logged in soon after waking up.

I'd slept long enough for a whole day to have passed in the game. *Infinite Dendrogram's* tripled time feature was useful and all, but situations like these made it seem a bit confusing and even bothersome. The time here was six o'clock in the morning, and the sun was just beginning to rise.

As soon as I logged in, Nemesis jumped out of the crest on my left hand and greeted me. "Good morning, Master. You sure are early today."

"...Funny, considering that I basically overslept in terms of real life time," I said.

"So what are you doing today?" asked Nemesis. "It's too early for shops to be open."

"Well, I was thinking of doing it after getting some new gear, but I guess I'll have to do the testing first," I answered.

"Testing? Of what?" she asked again.

I raised both my hands before her. "These." They were covered by two pieces of armor. My Miasmaflame Bracers.

Just like the royal capital, most of the kingdom's cities always had their gates open. There were many reasons for that, but one of them was the fact that there were many Masters who were active at night. It would be extremely inconvenient if they were only allowed to pass during the day, and there would be many people who would go out of their way to try to climb over the walls. Thus, the gates were open 24 hours a day. There were three guard shifts, and it reminded me of part-time jobs in convenience stores.

When I passed the northern gate and greeted the guards standing there, they greeted me back in a slightly sleepy manner.

Soon after leaving the city, I was standing in Nex Plains, the same place I had passed through yesterday.

I roamed about looking for a monster I could do the test on, and it didn't take long for me to find a lone Goblin Warrior. I was familiar with this monster, so I could defeat it even if the test failed. A good target, no matter how I looked at it.

"You said you were going to test the bracers, but is there anything specific you had in mind?" asked Nemesis in her sword form.

“Well, these Miasmaflame bracers have skills on them, right? I want to see if they’re of any use,” I said. “I don’t like the idea of having to try them out on something stronger than myself.”

I had gotten Vengeance is Mine during the fight with the Demi-Drag and Like a Flag Flying the Reversal while fighting Gardranda, but I couldn’t continue to rely on skills I wasn’t familiar with to always match my situation and lead me to victory. Testing was important.

Therefore, I decided to test the two skills on the item — Purgatorial Flames and Hellish Miasma. I couldn’t use the skill named “???”, so that was on hold for now.

One was a flamethrowing skill, while the other was a release of poisonous gas. If I could master them, I would finally have attacks other than standard blows and Vengeance is Mine. Having to use Gems just to cast spells was quite a waste, after all.

“...Oh, it just hit me that I still have some of those Gems,” I muttered.

Suddenly, the Goblin noticed I was here and charged at me while swinging his weapon.

“All right, then... Purgatorial Flames.” I stretched my hand out to the Goblin and opened my palm flat facing towards it.

A moment later, a demon’s mouth opened up on the back of my hand...

“Eh?”

...and it released a fierce stream of crimson fire, painting my vision red.

“AAAGHHHHH!”

Damn, that made my HP go down so fast! I thought. *It’s my own attack, so it’s not affected by Paladin’s Aegis and other defensive skills! Oh, crap! I even got the “Burns” debuff!*

“You fool! Are you trying to kill yourself?! Oh! The Goblin is coming!” shouted Nemesis.

“OAAGHH!”

The damage I’d caused myself had turned this into an extremely dangerous battle. I desperately defended myself against the Goblin’s attacks, used a number of skills and healing items, and barely emerged victorious.

Lesson learned. As important as testing was, one always had to consider safety.

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"...All right, time to pull myself together and test the Hellish Miasma," I said.

"Are you sure it will work right this time?" asked Nemesis.

"It will," I answered. "...I think."

After a short while of looking for a new prey, I had stumbled upon a bipedal, plant-like monster. The words above it said "Walking Grapevine," and just as they implied, it was literally a walking vine with grapes hanging from it.

"Is that thing even breathing?" asked Nemesis. "Wouldn't it be better to burn it?"

"I'm testing the Hellish Miasma right now. And yes, plants *do* breathe, so it should work," I answered. "Hellish Miasma! Release!"

This time, I made sure to make the back of my hand face the enemy and thus prevent the smoke from hitting myself.

Just as I'd intended, the miasma surrounded the Walking Grapevine... and then a strong gust of wind made it go back to me.

"GYAAAAHHH!"

"I knew this would happen!" shouted Nemesis.

Trying to not breathe any of it in, I escaped the noxious cloud.

Man, that was close, I thought. *I almost got destroyed by my own skill.*

"Now, let's see what the monster thinks of it," I said. I looked as the wind made the miasma disperse to reveal the Walking Grapevine, clearly suffering due to the debuffs.

"It seems to be effective," said Nemesis. "However, it's hard to make it work on windy days, and trying to use it indoors isn't even an option."

"Yeah, I can't deny that it's a difficult skill to use," I said.

As we were having that exchange, something flew right into my mouth.

"Hghuh?!" I accidentally bit and gulped it down. The aftertaste — both sweet and sour — was that of a grape.

A grape, of all things.

Yes, that Walking Grapevine was actually attacking me with its grapes.

"Whot kind ohf attahck ish that?!" I exclaimed in confusion.

"Master, don't talk with your mouth full," said Nemesis.

Seriously, though, what am I supposed to think about this attack? I thought. *The grapes are pretty good, and even if they hit me on the body, they only get me a bit dirty and don't hurt at all—*

"Guh..." My face suddenly contorted.

"Master, what's wrong?! Was that attack poisoned?!" asked Nemesis in perplexion.

Poison? I thought. *Yeah, it was poisoned.*

My stats clearly showed the debuffs that were affecting me. Their names were Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness.

"They're the same debuffs I just gave it...!" I said. Apparently, its fruit had become poisoned by the miasma and I'd gotten its effects transferred to me by ingesting them. I'd had no idea that debuffs could travel like that.

"M-Master!" exclaimed Nemesis. "There's a number of monsters coming this way!"

I looked around and saw some Goblins and beast-type monsters here and there. They were all here because of me — or, rather, the fruit juice on my body.

"I see, so that's the aim of that attack..." I muttered.

And so, still under the effects of the debuffs, I was attacked by a group of monsters which numbered to more than ten.

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"We ran into some unexpected trouble, but I think I know how these skills work now," I said.

Despite the tremendous failure on its first use, I had soon found out that Purgatorial Flames was an exceptionally effective skill.

First of all, it was very powerful. It actually did more damage than my standard attacks. I could also continue to channel it as long as I had MP, not to mention that it could apply the Burns debuff or its upgrade — Charring. Just as the name said, it was a debuff that could reduce a burned Goblin's arm to charcoal.

Strong as it might be, however, Purgatorial Flames affected friend and foe alike.

Heck, it includes myself, as well, so I'll have to be really careful when using it, I thought.

Also, its power was lower than that of Gardranda's flames. If it had been the same, the first failure would've blown my head away. I could only assume that Purgatorial Flames was weaker than the original either because it had been reduced to equipment, or because I was simply a weaker creature. Due to the fact that there was a skill I'd yet to unlock, it was quite obvious that I wouldn't be able to master the Miasmaflame Bracers just yet.

And though it had gotten me into the unexpected predicament of getting surrounded by more than ten monsters, the Hellish Miasma test had been successful, as well.

Man, that was tough, I thought. *If I hadn't activated the Reversal, I would be dead by now.*

The only reason I'd survived was because I'd fought the monsters while powered up by the reversed debuffs.

By the time it was over, the Walking Grapevine had succumbed to the Poison and died. I was lucky to have found out that debuffing a monster and then getting those debuffs by ingesting its body parts was counted as a negative effect from the monster.

Though I have no idea if I'll ever find a use for it, I thought. *I don't eat monsters while fighting, after all.*

Whatever the case, I had to be extra careful when using Hellish Miasma.

Oh, I almost forgot to mention. Since the Walking Grapevine had died, the Reversal was no longer effective. Thus, I was currently being tortured by the debuffs.

"Uoghh..." I moaned. "First Heal."

While lying on the ground due to Intoxication and Weakness, I used healing magic to restore my HP, which was being drained by Poison.

Since the Purgatorial Flames were weaker, I had hoped that would apply to Hellish Miasma, as well, but that clearly wasn't the case. It was just about as bad as it had been when Gardranda'd given me these debuffs.

"Perhaps it becomes less effective on stronger creatures," pondered Nemesis. "Your level is low, so it seems like its effect on you is still powerful."

"Y-You might be right..." I muttered.

When examining the way the debuffs were applied and the relationship between Burns and Charring, I began to believe that some debuffs could change depending on how great the cause was. Say someone got attacked by something that applied debuffs, causing the attacked person's debuff “level” to rise and make a debuff appear. Would it really be strange for a continued barrage of such attacks to stack the debuff level and make the illness more serious?

In other words, breathing the miasma for too long might cause some new debuffs to appear, I theorized. *...Not that I’m willing to try it.*

“But man, this is bad,” I said. “I might have to go back to the city by crawling on all fours.”

“That would be quite unsightly,” said Nemesis. “Oh...?”

As I looked to where Gideon was — still lying on the ground — a shadow came over me.

I realized that someone was standing behind me, so I slowly got up and looked at who it was. I wasn’t in a hurry because I was still under the effects of the debuffs and could simply feel that the presence wasn’t hostile, unlike the Goblins and such.

“...Eh?” I said, startled.

That assumption of mine had turned out to be both correct and wrong. The thing was definitely not a monster. However, it was clearly a creature one had to be cautious with.

“...”

It was a penguin. A large, bear-sized penguin suit was looking down at me.

“Huh?!” I hastily tried to back away, but the debuffs rendered me unable to move as I pleased. Even as I began to panic, the penguin did nothing but continue to watch me, completely immobile.

“...Did Brother Bear get himself a new suit?” asked Nemesis.

“No, it’s not my brother,” I answered.

However, it didn’t seem like a monster or a player killer, either.

It seemed like all it did was observe me.

“What the hell *are* you?” I asked.

“What am I, you ask? Heh heh heh heh... Oops!” In response to my question, the penguin completely destroyed his — the voice was male — silence and immobility and jumped upwards.

After making a number of mid-air spins, he landed and took a V-like pose.

“My name is Fla...MINGO! Call me Dr. Flamingo, if you will.”

...What a weirdo. I thought.

“Would you say that suits are a signal for oddballs?” asked Nemesis.

We only have two so far, I thought. *If we find a third suited weirdo, I’ll accept this theory of yours.*

Putting that aside, however...

“Flamingo?” I raised an eyebrow. “That’s a penguin suit, isn’t it?”

It reminded me of Adelie Penguins, common to many aquariums. Its primary colors were black and white, and no one with eyes could mistake it for the flashy, pink bird he’d named himself after.

“Who cares about the details?! What matters here is that you seem to be in a pickle! Do drink this!” The penguin reached for his pocket — which was in the suit’s stomach area — and took out a medicine bottle with liquid inside it.

“And this is?” I asked.

“A drug that removes debuffs!” he answered. “It instantly takes care of all disease-based status effects!”

I didn’t know how to respond. If he wasn’t lying, I would gladly chug it down, but I had basically no reason to believe such a blatantly suspicious penguin.

“Isn’t this a trap?” asked Nemesis.

I had gone through Lei-Lei’s lesson with the fake alcohol and knew the dangers of such offers, but if this penguin had had any intention to hurt me, he would’ve done it while I was writhing around due to the debuffs. He’d had no reason to prepare a trap for me.

“Thanks.” I took the drug from the penguin’s hand, activated Reversal just to be on the safe side, and slowly drank it down.

...Hey, this is pretty good, I thought. It had the taste of mixed fruit juice.

Soon after I drank it, the debuffs burdening my body quickly faded away...

“Drank it all, didn’t you?” spoke the penguin.

...and, at the same time, I was attacked by a sudden, powerful headache.

“Huh?! You little...!” I growled.

“So it *was* a trap!” exclaimed Nemesis.

The headache made me fall to my knees and grab hold of my head.

“I’ve been watching you and thinking...” said the penguin. “...‘What kind of drug would suit him best?’” The pain continued to get worse.

“It didn’t take long for me to come to a conclusion! It simply had to be *this* prototype!” he declared.

Soon enough, the headache became completely unbearable... and then it disappeared as if it had never been there.

“Huh?”

What was that all about? I thought. The headache had faded away and not caused anything to happen.

The penguin that drugged me seemed to be strangely satisfied. Not that I saw his face, but still.

“Hey, what the hell did you make me dri—?!”

“M-Master!” Nemesis cut me off. “Ears! Your ears!”

In response to her words, I reached for my ears, but didn’t find anything wrong with them.

“Not *those* ears! The ones above!” she exclaimed.

The ears above? I thought. *But I only have one set of ear—*

Suddenly, I felt something fluffy.

“Hm...?”

What was that strange sensation? I once again reached for the place I’d just touched — the area between the temporal region and calvaria. And again, I felt something fluffy. It was actually kinda pleasant to the touch. It reminded me of the ears of a Siberian husky I used to have...

“YES! I knew those ears would look great on you!” From seemingly nowhere, the penguin took out a full-length mirror. In it, I saw myself...

...with dog ears — as golden as my hair — sticking out of my head.

“...” *...Wha—* “WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!”

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"I happen to be a humble Researcher, and I merely wanted to test my very own Animal Ear Drug," the penguin explained. "When I went around to look for a convenient guinea pig, I stumbled upon you, just lying there on the ground. Not letting this divine opportunity go to waste, I mixed and blended a drug that removed your status effects with the drug I wished to test. My evaluation didn't fail me! The Animal Ear Drug was a success, and the dog ears look absolutely perfect on you! ...I'm sorry, I am *so* sorry! I'll genuflect and apologize, so could you please withdraw your sword? You'll tear my suit! Please stop! It might reach my throat!"

I pushed Nemesis against the mad scientist penguin's throat as I found out that I'd been used as his guinea pig.

Forgive me, Lei-Lei, I thought. *I deserve this for failing to follow your advice. But man, isn't this a bit too much?*

"I'm not too big on fashion, but there are three things I've decided to never wear under any circumstances," I spoke.

"A-And those are?" asked Nemesis.

"Glasses, girl's clothing, and animal ear headbands."

Naturally, this turn of events was quite upsetting.

"Master," said Nemesis, "you are more averse to glasses than girl's clothing?"

"Glasses are great," said the penguin. "This pair, for example, gives you various skills and—"

"Shut up!" I cut his words short.

"Th-That sounded like you intend to kill him," commented Nemesis.

"I'm shorryy!" cried the penguin.

No glasses, not ever, I thought.

"Well... what the hell do I do now?" I tried to hide the dog ears with some random headgear, but I couldn't equip anything. They all got rejected like magnets of the same pole. I brought up my equipment window, and it said that I already had "Dog Ears" equipped on my head. Apparently, as is normal in most such games, you could only wear a single piece of equipment in each slot.

By the way, these Dog Ears had no bonuses or skills on them. It was an item that only changed my appearance. However, just like a generic cursed object straight out of your average RPG, it couldn't be removed through the equipment window.

There were also no relevant status effects to accompany that function, and Reversal couldn't do anything about it, either.

"How do you fix this?" I asked.

"It's growing out of your head, so you can't just take it off," said the penguin. "It's like a sub-type of hair makeovers."

Man, that's annoying, I thought.

"Oh, but it should disappear after some time," he continued. "If I had to guess, it will happen sometime in the evening."

"By which time standard?" I asked.

"This world's, of course."

That was the equivalent of ten hours here or three hours in reality.

"Then I guess I'll just log out until that time comes," I said. I didn't want anyone I knew to see me like this.

"Oh no, time when you're logged out wouldn't count," the penguin said. "It would be boring if it did."

...This mad penguin just said the word "boring," didn't he?

"Hhaah... All right," I sighed, resigned. "Guess I'll just continue like this, then..."

Having to go about with something like this on my head was somewhat embarrassing. *But when compared to having to wear glasses... hey, I guess this ain't all that bad,* I thought.

"Just *what* did glasses ever do to you?" asked Nemesis.

Not gonna comment.

"By the way, Ray, my boy," spoke the penguin again.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I have but one humble request." The penguin looked at me with a serious face — not that I could see it, but it felt that way — and stated what he wanted of me. "I want to take a screenshot, so could you take off your clothes? Just the top would be fine."

Without saying a word back, I slashed at him.

"Fwahahahah! Farewell!"

The penguin evaded my attack and quickly ran in the direction of the city.

Man, is he fast, I thought. *A penguin has no business being this fleet of foot.*

“What do we even make of oddballs like this...?” asked Nemesis.

“No idea. From the fact that he mentioned screenshots, it’s obvious that he’s a Master, but... Hm?” I stopped talking and realized something.

I realized that the penguin had called me by my name before he left. And I definitely hadn’t introduced myself to him...

After that penguin weirdo gave me the dog-ear drug, I made my way back to the city.

Since Gideon was a place where demi-humans weren’t uncommon, the guards didn’t make any comments about my new appearance.

I could hear one of them whisper, “Huh? Did that guy have those ears when he greeted us in the morning...? Guess I wasn’t fully awake,” but that was the extent of it.

“All right, what now?” I asked myself.

Prior to the testing, I’d had plans to go say hello to Alejandro, buy some new equipment, and perhaps even go hunting alongside Rook and Marie, provided they were online. As things were now, however, I didn’t want to encounter anyone I knew. Being seen with these dog ears on my head would be downright degrading.

“I don’t see why it bothers you that much,” said Nemesis.

It’d be weirder if it didn’t bother me, I thought. *Imagine a scenario where a good friend suddenly appears before you with a pair of dog ears coming out of his head.*

I was fully confident that such a sight would be etched onto my brain forever.

I’m strongly averse to the idea of that happening, so I don’t want to see anyone I kno—

“Ah, Ray, Nemesis. Good morning,” a feminine voice reached my ears before I could finish my thought.

I had no words for this situation.

Seriously?! You do this to me right when I was thinking that?! I thought.

“Well, if it isn’t Marie,” said Nemesis.

“Indeed it is,” replied the Journalist.

“Now, Ray, why do you have such a unique look on your fa...” Marie stopped talking and fixed her gaze on the things sprouting out of my head.

Crap, she's staring at them, I silently panicked. *She's seriously eyeballing them.*

I had to clear things up before she thought I was some weirdo who got his kicks from wearing dog ears.

"Marie, just so you know, this isn't my thin—"

"Don't say anything, Ray!" she cut me off.

"Excuse me?!" The vigor in her words made me stiffen up and rendered me unable to continue what I wanted to say. With her gaze still fixed on me, Marie reached into her wristband-shaped inventory and took something out. It was...

"A sketchbook and... a pen?" I looked at the items with questioning eyes.

Just like she had during the minion capacity explanation, Marie began drawing something at an incredible speed. I wasn't knowledgeable about the subject of drawing, but I couldn't help but question if it was really possible for such a coherent picture to have come from such fast movements. With nimble strokes, she drew the outline, the hair, the details on the face and — of course — the dog ears.

"Phew," she sighed. Two minutes later, Marie finally took the pen away from the paper and put up a satisfied expression. On the sketchbook in her hands, there was a ridiculously well-drawn picture of a blond youth with dog ears and no upper clothing.

...Huh? Is this me? But I still have my clothes on, I thought.

"Impressive," said Nemesis.

"Well, yeah, it's good, but... It's good, but I, uh..." I stumbled.

It was definitely a high-quality drawing, but I had no idea how to react to a depiction of a shirtless me with dog ears. The art style was a perfect fit for those monthly magazines that were aimed at teenage boys, but which happened to have a lot of female readers, and that made it even harder for me to comment on it.

"Is there a Drawing skill or something?" I asked.

"It's included among the sense skills, yes, but this is all me," Marie answered.

Oh, so she's good at drawing in real life, I thought.

"So, Ray, how did you end up with such a splendid pair of dog ears?" she asked.

“...A penguin drugged me.” I told her the details of my encounter with Mister Flamingo.

“I must say, that penguin has some great taste,” said Marie. “I’ll make sure to buy some of that Animal Ear Drug if it ever gets on the market.”

“Not that I’d stop you, but... are you serious?” I asked.

“Very,” she answered. “By the way, Ray. Dog ears look great on you, but I think that tiger or fox ears wou—”

“Whoa, now! Don’t think of using it on me!” I cut her off.

“...Tch.”

Did this shady Journalist just click her tongue?! I thought in disbelief.

“Anyway, you said that the effect wears off in the evening,” she said, changing the subject. “What do you plan to do until then?”

“I was thinking of paying a visit to Alejandro’s shop, but I can’t really do that with these things popping out of my head,” I answered. I didn’t want people to see them.

Although it may be a lost cause, considering they’ve already been seen by someone I know, I thought.

“Hmm, I really don’t think it’s such a big deal,” said Marie. “You shouldn’t be so self-conscious about them.”

“But—”

“You’d be hard-pressed to find a tian who’d be surprised by a Master who suddenly grew a pair of animal ears,” she cut me off and explained. “To most tians, we Masters are creatures that exist outside the boundaries of common sense.”

Is that how it is? I asked myself. *Well, now that I think about it, the King of Destruction destroyed a whole forest in a single night, so it’s perfectly reasonable for tians to see us that way.*

“Guess I’ll go to Alejandro’s place, then,” I sighed.

“I’m still busy with something, so I can’t join you,” said Marie.

“Busy?” I asked.

“Various preparations and all that,” she responded, but didn’t make anything clear. “Speaking of which, don’t forget to meet up with me tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yeah, I remember the plan,” I said. “What are you preparing, anyway?”

“It’s a secret,” she answered. “See you tomorrow!”

With those words as her last, Marie ran off towards an uncertain direction. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of surprise she had in store for us.

After splitting up with Marie, Nemesis and I made our way to the shop address Alejandro had given us yesterday, which was located in Gideon's fourth district.

Gideon was a circular city split into twelve districts — making it seem much like a sliced cake — and the fourth was an area focused on trade. Making my way through the bazaars while trying not to get lost among all the people and other things, I somehow arrived at Alejandro's shop.

The large building had a sign that said "The Alejandro Company." I peeked inside and saw a variety of goods being sold. Obviously, there were weapons, armor, and healing items, but I also noticed works of art such as paintings and statues. There were fruit and other foods, as well, and they created quite a contrast with the rows of Jewels on display. The place was much like a department store.

"Good morning," I said as I came in. A moment later, a young girl — clearly an employee — ran up to me.

"Is Alejandro here right now?" I asked.

"Oh! You're the Master from the day before yesterday!" she exclaimed. "Thank you very much for what you did back then! I'll call the owner immediately!" The girl trotted off deeper into the shop.

From her words, it was pretty obvious that she had been one of the tians riding the carriages when Gardranda had attacked. I couldn't tell if I'd seen her back then, though. Things had been pretty hectic, after all.

"What a fidgety young girl," said Nemesis. "From the air about her, I assume that she has the makings of a 'klutz.'"

Not sure how I feel about summarizing people with a single word, I thought. *What word would you summarize yourself with, Nemesis?*

"Goddess," she answered with no hesitation.

Well, your name is that of a goddess, yeah, but I'd say you're better summed up as an "old loli ha-" I thought willfully.

"Hey! What were you about to think just now?!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha, don't be so loud," I said. "You'll disturb the other customers."

"That laugh was so forced!" she shouted, seeing right through me.

As we were fooling around, Alejandro walked out from the shop's inner quarters.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Ray,” he said. “You are most welcome here.”

“Hello,” I greeted him. “Since you insisted that I pay a visit, I came to take a look at your wares.”

“Oh, please do,” he said. “Look at them for as long as you like. You get a discount on everything I have.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I had to get a lot of new gear appropriate to my current level, so a discount was very welcome.

Also, there was something I couldn’t help but notice. The female employee and Alejandro weren’t making any comments about my dog ears. Sure, the girl gave them a few involuntary glances, but she didn’t say anything at all. Alejandro, on the other hand, acted as though the ears didn’t even exist. A pro if I ever saw one.

Perhaps Marie was right about tians not being mindful of such things happening with Masters.

I was thankful for that. Having to explain the dog ears to every single person I encountered would’ve been really annoying.

Now, I can only hope they disappear before I meet Rook again, I thought.

“Oh, look, it’s Ray and Nemesis,” said someone in the shop. “Good morning. Nice to see that you’re already logged in.”

“Helloo,” followed a feminine voice. “Oh? Why do you have those ears, Ray?”

I turned to see Rook and Babi, who had — apparently — been shopping here before we came in.

I had no words. *This is the second time today that my hope has died the very moment I created it,* I thought. *Are these dog ears cursed or something?*

“If you consider everything that’s happened ever since you logged in this morning, the cursed item here might be the Miasmaflame Bracers, not the ears,” said Nemesis.

...You have a point, I thought.

“Ray, how did you end up with that nice pair of ears?” asked Rook.

“It’s a result of this and that happening because of so on and so on,” I said.

"Surely you're not expecting him to understand that," commented Nemesis.

"I see," said Rook. "You ended up like that because a shady person tricked you into drinking some drug, right?"

"He actually got it right?!" Nemesis and I couldn't hide our surprise.

Are you an esper or something? I thought.

"No, this isn't a superpower or anything like that," he answered to my thought. "This level of 'mind reading' is easy once you get the hang of it."

"How can you call it easy when you're talking to my thoughts as naturally as Nemesis does?!" I asked, still perplexed.

"Ohh... what a heavy blow to my identity." Shocked for some reason, Nemesis fell to her knees.

"That's pretty amazing, Rook," I said. "You'd be unbeatable when playing old maid."

"Old maid, huh..." he said. "I don't think this ability of mine would be this precise with anyone I don't know, though. The most I can do with strangers is tell how they feel and notice if they have any ulterior motives."

That's still pretty amazing, I thought.

After Rook surprised us with his special ability, we began looking at the wares on sale here.

"Why are you here, anyway?" I asked him. "To say hi and buy some new gear, I assume?"

"Yes," he answered. "Not just for me and Babi, either. I found out that I can get weapons for Marilyn and Audrey, as well. Also, we went hunting yesterday, so I have some drops to sell."

So there's monster gear here, too, huh? I thought. *This shop sure has a wide variety of items.*

"Hunting, eh?" I said. "What level are you now?"

"48," he answered.

...H-He's about to reach the maximum level a low-rank job can get, I thought. *It's almost two times greater than my level. How am I supposed to feel about this?*

"Looks like someone got real busy during the day I was offline..." I muttered.

I could only assume that having Marilyn and Audrey had made his hunting that much more effective. Heck, Rook and Babi were absolute terrors in large-scale battles by themselves.

"I'm about to reach level 50, so I'll have to start working towards switching to a high-rank job soon," said Rook.

"Do you have anything in mind?" I asked.

"Yes, I did my research and found out that a Pimp's high-rank job is called the 'Lost Heart,'" he answered.

Lost Heart, eh? I thought. It was a reference to the Japanese word used to describe a person who'd lost all the eight virtues as they were presented in works such as *The Eight Dog Chronicles.* The term also referred to people who managed brothels. Quite the unique naming choice.

"Here are the requirements." Rook took out a Catalog and showed me the Lost Heart's page.

Requirement no. 1: Reach level 50 as Pimp.
Requirement no. 2: The sum total of all underling female monster and slave stats must be above a certain point.
Requirement no. 3: The total money gained by making the underling female monsters and slaves work must be above 1,000,000 lir.

"I see," I said. Unlike Paladin, it didn't have any requirements that involved human relations or some special victories. In fact, everything could be achieved by simply playing Pimp for a certain amount of time. These requirements could've been one of the reasons why it wasn't classified as a battle-focused job.

Even though Rook makes it look far more formidable than most battle jobs, I thought.

"I'm about to reach level 50, and the second requirement is already fulfilled," said Rook. "The third one is gonna take a while, though."

"Yeah, that seems like a lot of work," I agreed.

Is it even possible for a Pimp to make money by using creatures such as Marilyn and Audrey? I thought.

"I feel like they would be very efficient in construction sites," said Rook.

I said, "I think that one of the retro games my brother owns had some tamed monster running around a construction site... Hm?"

I belatedly noticed that Rook was wearing a different outfit than he had yesterday. It was a coat that seemed to emit a strange, silver shine.

Well, this looks new, I thought.

“That’s an awesome-looking coat, Rook,” I said. The details on the décor were elaborate, and the metallic gleam was damn cool.

Its sleeves had different lengths, which made it seem very stylish, and Rook — handsome as he was — made it all come together in the best of ways. He hadn’t been wearing it yesterday, so I could only assume that he’d gotten it while I was offline.

“Oh, yes. I like Liz a lot,” he said.

Enough to give it a name? I raised an eyebrow.

Suddenly, the coat seemed to move in an unnatural manner. I had no idea why, but the movement seemed somehow happy.

While doing this and that, I finished choosing everything I needed. Since I was going to wear the Miasmaflame Bracers no matter what, I didn’t go for set armors like the Riot series items.

In my case, one of the most important pieces of equipment was the chest armor, and since Rook looked really cool in that coat of his, I went for a coat-type piece, as well. It had the name "Blaze Metal Scale Coat."

It was created by taking a coat made from the skins of red, wolf-type monsters and strengthening it with many metal scales. It had two skills on it — “Fire Affinity” and “Fire Resistance.” The former increased the damage of my fire-based attacks by 10%, while the other reduced the damage I took from fire by the same amount, giving it good synergy with Purgatorial Flames. Sure, it was a luxury item that’d cost me a whole 80,000 lir, but I had no regrets about choosing it.

I got some other equipment to go with it and made my way to the counter to buy it all.

“Eh?” Right next to the counter, there was a device you’d often see in reality.

It was a rectangular case with many round capsules inside it and a lever on its side. By putting money inside it, you could pull on the lever and make one of the capsules pop out.

It was basically a gacha vending machine.

◇

Gacha vending machines had existed since long before I was born.

I could remember when I used to go to the machines dedicated to my favorite anime or games, pop in 100 yen, pull the lever, and get a random toy related to those series. It was fun because you never knew what you were going to get, and because of that, those memories were dear to me.

However, *in-game* gacha machines were a completely different beast.

Some time ago, there used to be a game genre known as "social games." They could be played on mobile devices and PC browsers, and you could start them without paying any money whatsoever.

Social games were many and varied. Some were fantasy games with equipment systems, while others revolved around monster growing, robot squad creation, or even idol producer work. The games were free, but if the players wished to get high-quality weapons, armor, monsters, robots, or idols, they had to pay additional money.

The most popular method of distributing such treasures was the real money gacha machine. For about 300 yen, the player could pull the virtual machine's lever and get a random item. The items had levels of rarity, and the rarest items of all had the lowest chances of popping out.

Rarity was often related to quality, too. To either win at the games, boast to others, or simply to enjoy their idols, the players would pull the lever. They would do it over and over until they got what they wanted.

However, it was all just data. The companies would never lose anything, no matter how many high-quality, high-rarity pulls the players got. Many players' desire to get the good stuff only increased with every bad thing they pulled, making them throw even more money at the game.

As a result, there had been many players who would spend 100,000 yen on the games every month. Some would even go above and beyond and break the 1,000,000 barrier.

It had been a very real, very dark time, indeed...

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With that in mind, the gacha before me takes lir instead of real money, so it's not a big deal if I pull it once or twice, right? I thought.

"...I see that all those thoughts just now were nothing but a big excuse to do it," said Nemesis.

“Well, yeah, I *want* to pull it, after all,” I said. I really enjoyed the excitement involved in pulling on gachas and buying random card packs.

All right, back to the thing before me... I thought and looked at the machine. Though its shape was familiar, there were several differences between it and the gachas I knew.

First of all, it was possible to choose the amount of money you wanted to put in. There was a short line before it, and I noticed that some threw single 100 lir coins, while others went in with as much as 10,000 lir.

According to the explanation on the machine, the items that could pop out had rarities from S to F.

Rank C items were worth as much as the money put in.

Rank F — the lowest rank — items were worth only 1% of the money put in.

Rank S — the highest rank — items were worth 100+ times more than the money put in.

The minimum amount of money you could put in was 100 lir, while the maximum was 100,000.

As was natural, low risk meant low reward and high risk meant high reward.

“But doesn’t that make it hard to keep track of the items inside and manage the quality of what pops out?” I asked an employee, and the answer I got was one I’d never have expected.

“It doesn’t work the way you think,” she said. “While it is true that we manage this magic item itself, we have nothing to do with the prizes inside or the money used on it.”

According to her, this gacha machine had originally been a rare item found in the Tomb Labyrinth.

It wasn’t a one-of-a-kind, either. There were records of other people getting these, and some had tried to take them apart and take the prizes by force. Apparently, the effort involved was insane, and yet those who succeeded had found out that the inside of the machine was completely empty.

Thus, everyone had begun to assume that the money offered to it made the machine magically summon an appropriate item. And since it was impossible to retrieve the money used, the gacha definitely wasn’t a part of any successful business model.

"However, the owner believes that it works to attract customers, so we keep it here for everyone's convenience," said the employee. "We also made it a rule that only paying customers can use it."

A wise decision, indeed, for it created a decent flow of money from those who only came here for the machine. I now had no doubts that Alejandro was highly skilled as a manager.

"How did he come to have it, anyway?" I asked.

"When its previous owner ran out of money, he had to part with a lot of property," she said. "This was among the items, and our owner bought it."

"...And the reason for the previous owner going broke was...?"

"...Exactly what you imagine," she said.

So he went broke because he pulled on this thing a bit too much, huh? I thought. That might've been another reason why Alejandro was using it for nothing more but attracting customers.

Anyway, I'd grown interested in the gacha machine, so I thanked the employee that told me about it and took my place at the end of the line.

"So, how much do you plan on spending?" asked Nemesis.

"100,000 li—GUH!"

The moment I answered, she hit me with a blow to my stomach. It came from a really good angle, so it actually made me bend forward.

"How can you let yourself use such a great amount of money right after hearing about someone who lost it all because of it?!" she exclaimed.

"I-I know that 100,000 lir is a lot, but I might pull something really good if I'm lucky..." I said.

"This reeks of a scenario where you get something worthless, if you ask me."

Well, if something like that happens, we'll have something to look back at and laugh about later down the line, I thought.

She sighed. "I hope you don't regret this."

"I'm sure I won't," I said.

Soon enough, it was my turn, so I put ten 10,000 lir coins into the gacha. Once done with that, I pulled the lever, making the machine release a single capsule. The thing had the letter C on it. According to the explanation, the thing inside had the same value as the money I'd put in, so it wasn't a loss.

Excitedly, I opened the capsule and made the item inside it pop out.

Tomb Labyrinth Exploration Permit.

Seeing the familiar item made me drop to my knees.

"Ohh... nooooooo..." I groaned. I could almost hear the thing greet me with a smug "Hey there! it's been a while!"

"Oh dear, a double," said Nemesis.

Well yeah, it's worth 100,000 lir, but... but I... I moaned silently.

"Rook... take it," I said, presenting the paper to him.

"Are you sure? Isn't this a decent pull?" he asked.

"It is, but I already have one, and you don't need more than one..."

Hell, being a Paladin, I don't need even one... I thought.

"Th-Thank you," Rook said gratefully. "Umm, shall we go explore it sometime?"

"That's a good idea..." I replied with little enthusiasm. It really *was* a good idea, though, since I hadn't gone beyond the first floor there.

All right, time to pull myself together, and...

"One more," I said.

"Haven't you learned your lesson?!" exclaimed Nemesis.

"Come on! There's no way I'll get another one of the Permits! I'm sure I'll pull something good this time!" I said.

"That's what every gambler thinks before losing it all!"

Despite Nemesis' disapproval, I stood in the line again and got ready for a second try.

Like last time, I went with 100,000 lir. Considering the total cost of the equipment I was buying, this was my last chance.

I pulled on the lever while praying to God, Buddha, or whatever was listening.

And the result was...

"...What?" I raised an eyebrow.

The capsule had popped out as normal, but the rarity displayed on it wasn't even in the range of S to F.

It simply said "X."

Is this above S? Or is the X actually a cross that makes it as worse than F? I was thoroughly confused. There was a little warning on it, saying, "Open only in spacious areas." I asked an employee about it, and she said that warning appeared on any capsules that contained something large, like a carriage. That meant that this capsule had something sizable inside it.

Also, the employee said that this was the first time she'd ever seen a capsule with X rarity on it.

I have no idea how to feel about that, I thought.

Whatever the case, since I could only open it in spacious areas, I chose not to open it inside the shop. I kept it in capsule form and placed it inside my inventory.

Okay, now that I've calmed down, there's something to consider, I thought.

One pull had cost me 100,000 lir.

My new equipment had a combined cost of 110,000 lir.

...That comparison made me aware of just how expensive the pulls were. In terms of rarity, I hadn't really experienced a loss, but I couldn't help but feel off.

"That's what you get for gambling away 200,000 lir," said Nemesis.

I was in no position to say anything to that.

By the time I finished buying my equipment, Rook was trying his own luck on the gacha.

Apparently, seeing me try it got him interested, too.

"...You didn't really have to copy the amount of money I used, though," I muttered. Hoping that his 100,000 wouldn't go to waste, I looked at what he got, and...

And, uh... Huh?

Silence overwhelmed the entire shop. The shock was shared by everyone inside, except Rook.

Nemesis, I, the employees, and the other customers were all at a loss for words.

The capsule in Rook's hand was rainbow-patterned.

It seemed to be made from a mineral so vivid that it looked like a rare item by itself.

Its surface had a large S on it.

Rook had actually pulled something great on his first try.

"Ah, Ray! I think I got something good!" he said.

"C-Congratulations!" My shock made me unintentionally raise my voice.

"Rook, let's hurry up and open it!" Babi cried.

"Y-Yes! Let's find out what you have received!" Nemesis agreed.

Since he'd used 100,000 lir, and the value of an S rarity prize was 100 times greater, the item inside should be worth 100,000,000 lir.

Naturally, something that amazing interested not only us, but the shop employees and other customers, as well.

Rook's capsule didn't have any warnings on it, so he opened it on the spot.

What came out was a pair of gloves, long enough to cover the elbows. Made from a blue, leather-like material, they were decorated by an intricate pattern of golden metal.

"'Touch of the Silencer, Veltboule'?" Rook's mutter made me tilt my head.

That naming style was similar to the one on my special reward — "Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda." Such special rewards should be impossible to gain without defeating an UBM, and there was no way to transfer them to others, either.

"...Whoa," Rook said. He was looking at the details of the item — Touch of the Silencer, Veltboule — and couldn't hide his amazement. His face was downright stiff, and it was probably the first time I'd seen him make such an expression.

"So, what kind of item is it, Rook?" I asked.

Looking around, I noticed that some customers — likely Masters and tians with a high Identification skill — seemed as dumbfounded as Rook was.

Okay, now I'm dying to know more about it, I thought.

"Basically, this is an MVP special reward for defeating a UBM," he said.

"Are you serious?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yes," he answered. "Let me tell you the details elsewhere."

After he said that, Rook and I left the shop. As I walked away, I glanced back inside and saw that the line for the gacha had gotten longer and that just about everyone was preparing 100,000 lir.

Apparently, finding out that you could pull UBM special rewards had gotten them all hyped up.

...I hope no one goes broke, I thought.

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The place Rook took me to was the room he'd rented at the inn. Rook had clearly learned something that couldn't be heard by other people.

"Basically, this is a special reward that no longer has an owner," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He explained.

First of all, standard special rewards could only be used by the owner and couldn't be transferred to other people in any way.

However, there was one exception to this rule... and it happened when the owner was a tian who died.

In such cases, the special reward would be automatically retrieved from the body and become either an ultra rare drop in the deeper levels of created dungeons or — as it had been in this case — a high-risk gacha prize.

From that, I could easily understand why he'd gotten all secretive about it.

"You think there'd be more tian-killing if people found out about this, huh?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered.

I had no idea how many special reward-owning tians there were, but I couldn't be certain that there weren't any Masters who would kill them just to increase their chances of getting such items. At the very least, we sure as hell didn't want to be the root cause of such killings. That was the reason why Rook hadn't said that in public.

"Are you sure it didn't slip?" I asked. "What if someone with a high Identification skill saw that part of the description?"

"It wasn't in the item description, but in a personal message," he explained. "No one knows this, I'm sure."

"All's good, then," I said.

Though, now that I think about it, I doubt there would be many Masters willing to take the risk, I thought. Tian-killing could get you on the wanted lists, and there was no guarantee that items gotten this way would ever end up in your hands.

"Here are the details of the item." Rook showed me a window that described the Touch of the Silencer.

Touch of the Silencer, Veltboule
Ancient Legendary Item
A treasure embodying the concepts surrounding the sphinx famed for

being a “mage killer.”

In addition to increasing the wearer’s magic and special powers, it provides them with a great resistance to mental status effects and attacks.

Just as the description said, the gloves greatly increased the wearer’s resistance to mental debuffs and attacks while also giving a large bonus to MP and SP.

“So, what are the effects of the skills on it?” I asked.

“It’s pretty interesting,” said Rook. “There are two skills on it. I can’t read one yet, but the one that I can use now is called ‘Silence,’ and it cancels any magic-based skills that are in their preparatory stages.”

“Oh?” I asked.

Preparatory stages? What does that mean? I thought.

“Apparently, if an opponent is chanting or getting ready to invoke a magic spell, this skill will nullify it,” he continued. “But it can’t influence any insta-cast skills or magic that has already been cast.”

So it’s the bane of all casters, huh? Seems like it’ll be useful in many scenarios, I thought.

After all, the skill would cancel any spell that hadn’t been cast yet. Magic-based jobs would become powerless when going against him mano a mano.

“If it was originally owned by a tian, then... I see how it is,” I nodded.

The source of this Touch of the Silencer — the UBM known as Veltboule — had clearly been a creature that specialized in killing casters. It had probably been defeated by a tian who had been strong without having to rely on magic. Later on, the tian had died somehow, and this special reward had ended up in Rook’s hands.

“I must say, Rook,” Nemesis spoke up, “You are quite a lucky sort.”

I couldn’t help but agree.

First Marilyn, then Audrey, now this great pull in the gacha... Rook was definitely a very lucky person.

I wonder if that has something to do with him being a good person, I thought.

“But you pulled something good, too, didn’t you, Ray?” he said.

“Oh right, I got this thing.”

Saying that, I took out the X capsule. I couldn't open it here due to the thing inside being a carriage or something, so I decided to do it after going through the northern gate again.

"I'm going to open it. Care to join me?" I asked Rook.

"I can't. I've been getting messages saying that I need to return to reality," he answered.

"Hm? 'Visitor,' I assume?" I asked.

"'Hunger' and 'Lack of Sleep,' actually," he said. "I've been online since yesterday, hunting monsters and leveling. The only food I've eaten was in-game, and I didn't get any sleep at all."

"Holy crap!" I exclaimed. "Get some food, take a bath, and go to sleep already!"

"Ahaha," he laughed awkwardly. "I'll do just that. I'll make sure to wake up in time for Marie's plan."

"Take care of yourself, man."

After I said that, Rook logged out, so I left his room.

I'd never expected Rook to be enough of a no-lifer to forget his own basic needs.

I guess he's just another student using his spring break for some unreasonable levels of gaming, I thought.

And so, I left the inn. The "spacious area" I was most familiar with was the Nex Plains north of Gideon, so I made my way to the city's northern gate.

"Master," Nemesis said, "shouldn't we have lunch now?"

"Oh yeah, I guess we should," I said. "I'll open the capsule after we do that, then."

I'd probably go hunting in the Nex Plains right after seeing what was inside, so having a meal before that was a good idea.

Since it was noon, most of the nearby restaurants were full, so I chose one that seemed somewhat empty by comparison.

"...Huh?" I said in surprise.

Inside the one I'd chosen, I saw that the shopkeeper was being questioned by a certain group. Wearing full plate mail armor and cloaks that had the Kingdom of Altar's crests on them, they asked something of the shopkeeper while showing him a photo-like object.

Realizing that this was why the shop was so empty, I decided to observe

them.

From his ragged voice, I could tell that the one asking questions was in a minor state of panic and that the subject matter was serious. However, looking stumped, the shopkeeper only shook his head in response, making it obvious that he couldn’t help them in any way.

After that, a woman from the group tried to calm down her panicked comrade. She was a familiar face.

“Liliana?” I asked.

“Oh? Well, if it isn’t Ray,” she replied.

It was the Kingdom of Altar’s Knights of the Royal Guard, Vice Commander, Paladin Liliana Grandria. I hadn’t seen her since I’d left the royal capital, and by some twist of fate, we had happened to meet again here in the city of duels.

As I was busy being surprised by the encounter, Nemesis telepathically told me something ominous.

“I feel some trouble brewing.”

Chapter Two: Back-Alley Cliché

Paladin Ray Starling

Liliana was the first tian I'd ever spoken to. Her responses had been so natural and she'd seemed so alive that I hadn't been able to see her as a tian — as nothing more but an NPC. That feeling was still alive, and even though I knew I was in a game, I couldn't see her as just a game character.

"It has been a while," she said. "I didn't expect to see you here in Gideon."

"Well, I've only been here for about two days," I said.

Probably due to her being my first personal — and physical — contact in this world, my manner of speaking automatically became somewhat courteous. She'd said that it'd been a while since we'd last met, but it had actually only been about eight days.

Now that I think about it, since I've started playing, only ten days have passed in this world and only three in reality, I thought. *Man, this world's days sure are dense.*

"I must ask — why the dog ears?" she asked, looking above my head.

"Please don't," I replied. "Way too much has happened. So, why are you here with such a group?"

Liliana seemed to be somewhat troubled, so I decided to ask her about what was going on. She was surrounded by knights wearing similar armor, flags and unit symbols. Liliana was a Paladin and the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard. From that, I could assume that the people with her were part of the Royal Guard, too.

"Well, Ray, we—"

"Lady Grandria!" one of them cut her words short. "We cannot let any outsiders know of this!"

It was the same man who'd been questioning the shopkeeper. He was glaring at me — or, rather, at the back of my left hand.

"But Sir Lindos, he is one of us — a Paladin," said Liliana.

"He isn't the same as us just because we share a profession," retorted the man. “This is something we have to do without relying on Masters.”

It was clear by now that he was Liliana’s comrade — a Paladin from the Royal Guard. He also seemed to have a dislike for us players — the Masters.

“It’s only fair for him to hate your kind,” commented Nemesis.

Indeed. The Kingdom of Altar’s Knights of the Royal Guard had reasons to hate us Masters. Altar’s Masters were the ones who hadn’t helped much during the war, and the Imperium’s Masters were the ones who had done the most damage.

The king had even been killed by a Master, so it was only natural for him to hate us.

“But there are things that only they can know,” said Liliana. “We are not in a situation that allows us to choose who we get help from.”

“...That is reasonable,” he said, giving in. “In that case, please search the way you think is best. We will continue looking for her as we were. However, you should only request assistance from those you trust.”

“I understand,” she nodded. “Be careful in your search.”

“Certainly,” he said. “Come, men, we’re continuing this in the fourth district.”

The man Liliana had called Sir Lindos gave the other knights an order, and they all left the shop.

The only ones left inside were Nemesis, Liliana, me, and the shopkeeper, who seemed visibly relieved.

“I see,” said Nemesis. “From how he expressed his dislike for Masters, I thought he was an impulsive sort, but it seems that he’s malleable when he needs to be.”

Or maybe the situation is just grave enough for a Master-hating knight to accept a Master’s help, I thought.

“I am sorry, Ray. Sir Lindos isn’t a bad person or anything, but...” said Liliana.

“No need for that,” I said. “He seemed to be in a hurry.”

“Yes, about that... there is something I’d like to ask you.” With those words, Liliana took out a single photo.

It gave me a minor déjà vu, making me remember the first time I’d met her. However, the person on the photo was different this time.

“Have you seen this girl anywhere?” she asked.

The person on the photo was a young girl. She looked no older than nine. Her face was a strong contestant for the most good-looking one I'd seen so far here in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Of course, that was only among females. Rook was incontestably at the top if both genders were considered.

The girl in the photo had golden hair done into rolls and coils, and striking blue eyes that seemed to express a strength of heart. I also couldn't help but notice that her clothes were very well-made. I didn't know much about such apparel, but even I could tell that she wore a high-quality dress.

Her appearance, combined with the dignified way she was sitting in the chair, made the photo look like one of those formal marriage meeting photos.

She's a bit too young for that, though, I thought.

Anyway, there was no way I could've missed a person that stood out this much, so...

"I'm sorry, but I haven't seen her," I said. "So, who is she?"

From how the knights were panicking, I could only assume that she was the young lady of some important nobles.

"Eh?! Umm, uhh..." Liliana couldn't hide her surprise at my question and looked at me with a perplexed expression. It wasn't because she had trouble talking about the lady in the picture or anything. The bewilderment seemed too strong for that. She was acting as though I asked her something weird, like the answer to one plus one.

Once she realized that I really didn't know the girl, Liliana gave me the answer.

"This is the Kingdom of Altar's second princess, Elizabeth S. Altar."

"Ohhhhh." It all made sense now.

"When someone asks you something that's supposed to be common knowledge, it's only natural to become perplexed," commented Nemesis. "I'm not one to talk, though. Since we share most of our memories, I didn't know the girl, either."

How unbecoming of a Paladin, I thought of myself. I really should've investigated the ruling structure of the kingdom.

"So," I said. "If you're looking for her, then..."

"Her Highness went missing while we were visiting Gideon, and we of the Royal Guard are now searching for her," she explained.

This seems like some serious trouble, I thought.

Since I didn't know anything, Liliana gave me all the details about the disappearance of the princess.

First of all, she was the daughter of the king who had died in the war with Dryfe. The king had three daughters, but no sons. The missing girl's elder sister — the first princess — was the acting ruler of the country.

The Kingdom of Altar had no rule that prevented females from inheriting the throne, but historically, the country had had more kings than queens.

Due to that, even though a whole six months had passed since the fall of the king, the accession had yet to happen, and Elizabeth was still just "the second princess."

She had come here to Gideon to participate in some official event. She had arrived here and begun staying in Count Gideon's mansion about two days ago.

Yesterday, she had still been there to talk with the count and participate in the preparations for tomorrow's event. Today, she'd had plans to talk with some powerful people of this city. However, when one of Elizabeth's maids had gone to her room this morning, she found no sign of the princess anywhere.

There had been only a piece of paper — marked with the royal seal — that said "I will be back by evening." From the handwriting, it was clear that she hadn't been kidnapped, but had slipped out on her own volition.

Also, it was well known that the princess had wished to look around Gideon, and had become quite upset when she'd found out that she wasn't allowed to.

Additional info: Liliana made sure to be as indirect as possible when saying this, but the princess was whimsical, excessively vigorous, terribly insolent, and so full of curiosity that it was troubling.

Basically, the princess had slipped out of her roles just so she could go sightseeing in Gideon.

Of course, the Royal Guard couldn't just let her walk around the city by herself, so, naturally, they'd begun searching for her.

If there was one thing I could say to this situation...

"Don't you think you should up your security?" I asked.

I mean, they let this little girl slip past them. That's clearly not right.

"You are completely right about that..." she said.

But it turned out they'd actually had a valid excuse.

During the time period in which the princess had made her escape, there'd been a certain bit of trouble.

It had happened in the process of passing the role of protecting the princess from the Third Order of Knights to the Knights of the Royal Guard. It didn't seem like that could ever be particularly troublesome, but there had been a reason for it being so.

The princess' visit to this city had been planned a long time ago. Back then, it had been decided that her protection — from the moment she left the capital until she finished her business in Gideon and was safely back home — would be in the hands of the Royal Guard.

However, the player killer incident had made them postpone the day they'd left the capital.

Once the killers had been taken care of, they had finally been able to leave, but there had been a whole new problem. It was the event that — as we'd confirmed with our own eyes — had reduced Noz Forest to cinders.

Most assumed that the one responsible was King of Destruction the Unknown, but there was no proof of that.

However, it had to be known, so the role of meeting the King of Destruction and asking him about it had been given to the only one in the kingdom who knew him personally — Liliana. Apparently, everyone else who had been acquainted with him had died in the war.

Liliana was the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard. However, since the Commander's seat was empty, she was basically the top of the order.

Since there were some problems with the prospect of the Royal Guard protecting the princess without Liliana's presence, the role had been hastily given to the Third Order of Knights. It had needed to be done because the princess' leave had already been belated due to the player killer incident, and they hadn't been able to afford any more delays. But that was the very cause of the trouble.

After she had finished questioning the King of Destruction about his role in the Noz Forest incident, Liliana and her Royal Guard had made their way to Gideon and arrived today, early in the morning. Right upon arriving, she had tried to take the role of protecting the princess from the Third Order of Knights.

During that process, both groups had looked at each others' documents and found out that there were some inconsistencies. The inconsistencies were so big, in fact, that no one could even believe that they'd actually happened.

They had all had to compare and adjust the documents they had while occasionally using magic communication tools to contact and confirm certain points with the people in the capital, and that had cost them more than an hour of time. Once they had finished that and mentally prepared themselves to protect Her Highness, they'd found out that the princess had disappeared.

"...Oh man," I said.

She had probably noticed the trouble going on and seen an opportunity to make her escape.

Sounds like she's a resourceful girl, I thought.

"The document trouble might've been devised by the princess," said Nemesis.

Ha ha ha, as if... I thought. Then I realized, *Wait, you know what? You might actually be right.*

Though it was slightly unrelated, Liliana's exchange with the King of Destruction had gone like so:

"Were you the one to do it?"

"YES."

"Why?"

"I was angry, so I just did it. I feel bad about it, though."

"I see. By the way, Noz Forest was a kingdom-owned lumbering ground. I would like you to pay to make up for all the wood you have burned. 130,000,000 lir, please.

"...Take it, you thief!"

"Oh, but I am an authority."

With that, the kingdom had instantly gotten enough money to function despite having lost Noz Forest. Apparently, it had helped them a lot.

I was mostly just surprised that people sitting at the top of the ranks could readily part with that much money.

"But man, he was just 'angry'...? What a troublesome guy," I said.

"Indeed," Liliana agreed. "Make sure to tell him off the next time you meet him."

"Eh? Ah... sure?" I didn't know how to respond.

What makes her think I have anything to do with him? I thought.

After telling me all the circumstances surrounding the princess' escape, Liliana ran off to search for her again.

She seemed to spend a lot of her time looking for people. I could only assume that she'd been born under that kind of star.

"Anyway, though it's a pretty big deal, the princess *merely* ran away," I said. "We just have to make sure to tell Liliana if we ever see the girl."

She hadn't been kidnapped or anything — she was just sightseeing. It didn't seem like it was something that could leave a bad taste in my mouth.

"I don't think you should be saying anything so careless," said Nemesis. "Try to consider your experiences so far. You seem to be some sort of event magnet. You get into all sorts of happenings, regardless of whether they're related to tians, monsters, or Masters."

...You might be right, I thought. *I haven't played the game for too long, yet I've experienced quite a lot.*

"I don't know how eventful other Masters' lives are, but don't you think that you're far above the average in that regard?" she asked.

Well, I *had* been thinking that my days here were pretty dense.

"If that knight girl was born under a star that led her into a life full of searching for people, you might've been born under a star of strife," said Nemesis. "I cannot recommend talking in a manner that could summon more such events."

"You're right," I said. "I'll keep that in mind."

All these exchanges had made me a bit hungry. Hunger was the reason we had come to this shop in the first place, so I began talking to the shopkeeper.

"Excuse me. Can we eat here?" I asked.

"Yes, certainly," he said. "We couldn't do any work until a few moments ago. We have to make up for the time lost."

"Oh yeah, you were questioned." I nodded. "Any specific reasons why?"

“Our shop is popular among young girls, so they probably assumed they could find a trace of the little lady here,” he answered.

“Oh?” Nemesis reacted to something. “‘Popular among young girls,’ you say? Does that mean...?”

“Yes, we have a large selection of sweets,” said the shopkeeper.

Nemesis’ eyes lit up. “Excellent!” she cheered. “Master! Let’s eat to our heart’s content!”

“But I just bought some new gear,” I said. “I’m not sure I want to use much more mon—”

“Two gacha pulls, 200,000 lir,” she cut me off.

“I’m sorry. Please eat all you want,” I said, giving in.

An hour later, Nemesis left the shop looking wholly satisfied after having eaten tons of sweets, while I walked out with my hands on my head as I despaired at the state of my inventory, which had less than 10,000 lir remaining.

That’s too much... You ate way too much!

“And yet it still cost less than your gacha shenanigans,” she said.

There was nothing I could say back to that.

“All right, I guess it’s time to go outside and open up the capsule I pulled,” I said.

“Indeed,” Nemesis agreed. “I hope it’s worth more than 200,000 lir.”

...Yes, please, oh God almighty, I thought.

Once again, I went to the Nex Plains, where I’d tested my Miasmaflame Bracers. I distanced myself from Gideon’s walls and stood in the grass several tens of meters away from the main road.

The capsule said, “Open only in spacious areas.” I didn’t know its standards for “spaciousness,” but the place I was standing at was wide enough for an entire house or a ship to pop out without any problem.

“After all, I don’t want to spawn something huge only to have it get stuck on the walls, destroy them, and get me into lots of trouble,” I said.

“Time to open it, then?” asked Nemesis.

I took out the X capsule, twisted it to make it open, and caused something pop out. It reminded me of that long-running game series where you grow monsters and have them fight other monsters.

“It’s a...” I muttered.

I had been steeling myself for the appearance of something as large as a house or a ship, but the thing I'd gotten was nowhere near as big. In fact, it was even smaller than the shop employee's "carriage" example.

It wasn't too far off the mark, though. For what I had gotten was a horse. However, it didn't seem to be a living creature.

The horse was made of a silver-looking metal that was reminiscent of well-polished plate mail. Its shape was blatantly equestrian. It had been forged from what seemed to be armor pieces, and it had glimmering white orbs where its eyes were supposed to be. It could only be described as a "robot horse."

"So, it's not a monster?" asked Nemesis.

I seemed to be its official owner, and its description in my inventory went like so:

Prism Steed, Zephyrus Silver
Special equipment: Mount
One of the five Prism Steeds manufactured by Flagman — an artisan from an ancient civilization.
He who walks inside the wind.
Details unknown.

Details unknown? I raised an eyebrow. All the description had told me was that it was rideable and that it had a relation to the wind. With questioning eyes, I looked at both the window with the description and the Prism Steed, Zephyrus Silver — who I chose to call just "Silver."

Silver didn't seem to care, and only continued to stand in the field.

Upon further inspection, I noticed that his head didn't seem to have a mouth. The description said that he was *manufactured* by an artisan called Flagman, so it was obvious that he was a robot. However, he occasionally released sounds similar to neighs, kicked the ground with his hoof every now and then, and moved his fiber-made tail in a very horse-like manner.

The way it was impossible to tell which part of the sky he was looking at made him seem somewhat cat-like.

"How about riding him?" suggested Nemesis.

Good idea, I thought. Thankfully, Silver already had a saddle and reins, so I wouldn't have any problems getting on.

I closed in on him while being wary of kicks or something like that, but he turned out to be very obedient.

Once I took the reins, he lowered himself in a way that made his stomach partly touch the ground, making it easy for me to get on.

What a well-trained and friendly horse, I thought. It was strange that he was actually a robot.

I was quickly growing fond of him. I wanted to get on and speed through these fields on him.

After I sat down in the saddle, I placed my feet in the stirrups. After I did that, Silver stood up.

“Wow...” I murmured.

The view from atop of a horse was slightly moving. My visual point was much higher than when I stood on my own two feet, or when I’d ridden a pony when I was young.

Silver moved his hooves in a way that made it seem as though he wanted to dash through the fields right now.

“Be careful,” warned Nemesis.

Riding together with Nemesis seemed pretty hard, so for now, I had her wait while I tried riding Silver by myself. I’d give her a chance to try after a short run.

“All right, let’s go,” I said. “Hi-yo, Silver! Away!”

Saying those words I’ve always wanted to say, I threw the reins, and at that moment, the sky and ground were reversed.

Unable to tell which way was really up, I felt as if I was falling upwards.

I could see Nemesis, who looked completely taken aback.

I could hear the sound of Silver running through the fields.

With my five senses in such a state, I fell to the ground — head first.

“Good thing it’s just grass,” Nemesis said that while looking down on me.

With my hand on top of my slightly creaking neck, I used healing magic on myself.

Silver was looking at me, and I couldn’t tell whether he was worried or didn’t think anything at all.

“I never would’ve expected you to fall off on the very first step,” said Nemesis.

Same here, I thought. I’d fallen off the very moment Silver had begun to run.

“You had a small audience looking at you from the main road,” said Nemesis. “They all made expressions much like mine when they saw what happened.”

That seemed like an appropriate reaction, honestly.

“...Why did that happen, though?” I couldn’t help but ask. I hadn’t been riding him in a weird way or anything. The way I’d been thrown off seemed to ignore all laws of physics.

“It’s a wonder, indeed,” Nemesis agreed. “You’re a Paladin, so you should be able ride horses without any problems.”

“Exactly, so... hm?” Realizing something, I took a look at Silver’s skills. There was a total of three — Running, Wind Hoof, and one unknown skill that said “????,” just like a skill on the Miasmaflame Bracers.

I took a look at the details of the “Running” skill.

Allows running while someone is riding. The rider must have either Horse Riding or Riding skills.

“Horse Riding... skill?” I read out loud.

I can’t ride Silver without that skill? I thought. *I can only make him walk around?*

“Well, you don’t have the skill,” said Nemesis. “Strange, considering that you’re a Paladin.”

“There aren’t many skills I can learn from my job,” I said. The only ones I had so far were Paladin’s Aegis and the low-tier healing magic.

“Strange,” she seemed puzzled. “A Paladin is basically an upgrade to Knight, so you have every reason to have the Horse Riding skill.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “...Wait, an upgrade?”

Wait, Paladins were upgraded Knights.

The realization of the implications made me break out in a cold sweat.

“Nemesis, I’m going offline for a second.”

“Hm? W-Well, if you insist...”

After logging out, I went on my PC and began doing research on the Horse Riding skill and the relationship between low-rank and high-rank jobs.

Horse Riding was a skill that practically represented the Knight — the low-rank job that usually came before Paladin. Therefore, anyone who took the normal path and became a Paladin after having been a Knight would naturally have the Horse Riding skill. But, due to some twists of fate, I'd ended up skipping Knight and going straight to Paladin.

Doing so had given me a great stat growth and a head start over most newbies. However, the number of skills the Paladin job had given me was really lacking. In fact, I only had a mere two — Paladin's Aegis and First Heal.

Rook had far more, as a Pimp — a low-rank job. I could only assume that skills from high-rank jobs required the player to learn skills from low-rank jobs of the same grouping.

According to the walkthrough wiki, Knights had no access to Paladin's Aegis or any healing spells — they could only be learned after becoming a Paladin. Other skills that could be learned by Paladin were Grand Cross — which was considered to be the job's ultimate attack — and Purifying Silverlight — which no one really knew how to get.

All skills except for these four were extensions of skills learned by Knights. That included offensive and other skills... such as Horse Riding.

I sat at my PC and silently processed the facts.

I didn't have a single offensive Paladin skill. My level was in the mid-20s. I definitely should've had one by now. But I didn't, which meant that my assumption was correct.

Most Paladin skills required the player to learn the skills from the low-rank job of the same grouping — Knight.

Why didn't my brother warn me about this? I thought. *...Oh, I guess he just didn't know anyone who'd started with a high-rank job, so my case was a first to him.*

I had a feeling that — like Rook's Lost Heart — many high-rank jobs required the person to have reached the max level on low-rank jobs of the same grouping. Even Paladin requirements weren't ones that could be fulfilled by your standard level 0 newbies, so it was natural for him not to know about this.

"...I see," I muttered. It all made sense now. I couldn't learn the skill and ride Silver without switching to the low-rank job, Knight.

I didn't care much about the offensive skills. I had Nemesis with me, and I'd recently gotten my hands on the Miasmaflame Bracers. However, to ride Silver, I had to find a way to learn the Horse Riding skill.

I searched around for a way to learn it without switching to Knight, and it didn't take long for me to find it.

There was an accessory called "Amulet of the Equestrian Tribe," which gave a +1 to the Horse Riding skill. That was the only thing I would need to be able to ride Silver.

That wasn't all. Jobs which had the aptitude for skills acquired through accessory effects could actually master those skills and make them their own. Since Paladin was an upgrade to Knight, it was obvious that I had the aptitude for Horse Riding.

"Yes! This is it!" I exclaimed.

Quickly concluding that I had to go to Gideon's marketplace and buy one of those accessories, I took a look at how much they went for.

Amulet of the Equestrian Tribe — Market Price: 100,000 lir.

I fell to the ground.

◇

"We *have* to find ways to get money." I logged back in and stated our next course of action.

"Well, we have less than 10,000 lir left," Nemesis nodded. "We would've had to get money even if we didn't have this problem with Silver."

She was right. We were nearly broke, so we had to do something about it regardless.

I seem to have a knack for getting big money and quickly losing it all, I thought. *Strange, considering that I'm not actually wasting it.*

"Gacha," said Nemesis.

A-Again, I-I'm not actually wasting it.

"By the way, unlike the first Permit, the second one wasn't signed, right?" she said. "Why did you just give it to Rook instead of selling it? I can't be sure if you would've gotten the 100,000 lir you spent on it, but you could've received at least half of that, no?"

"...Ah," I said. She had a point.

"You..." Nemesis couldn't find the words to express what she felt.

"No, it's fine," I said. "I already gave it to Rook. A man does not go back on his word. We'll find other ways to make money."

"That's easy to say," she said. "However, Rook is currently offline and asleep, while Miss Sunglasses has her hands full with some other business. There's a limit to how much we can do just by ourselves."

"Yep, that's a bit of a problem," I agreed. I could go and accept some quest, but since I was solo, my choices were limited to the ones with low difficulty and thus low rewards.

There was also the meeting we had planned for tomorrow afternoon, so I couldn't take any quests that would last too long.

"Perhaps we should hunt for a bounty? Like that demon?" suggested Nemesis.

"That'll get us a death penalty if we fail, though," I said. "We wouldn't make it for tomorrow's arrangement."

"I see this world just isn't nice enough to give us a means of getting 100,000 lir in a short amount of time," she said.

Time wasn't a big problem — I'd have had tons of it after the surprise Marie had in store for us tomorrow. However, I wanted to ride Silver as soon as possible.

"What about the arena, then?" asked Nemesis. "It allows fighting without the risk of death penalty and rewards the victor, no?"

"Yeah, well, I looked it up and found out that you can only participate when your total level is above 51," I answered.

During the testing this morning, my level had gone up to 26. I still had a way to go before the arena was open to me.

"Oh, yeah!" Something came to me. "I can still bet on the fighters! I'll put my money on who I think will win and—"

"Don't," Nemesis cut me off. "Fortune might favor you when it really counts, but most of the time, you're just plain unlucky."

...You're not wrong there, I thought.

"Guess I'll have to give up on getting the Amulet of the Equestrian Tribe by today or tomorrow and just do some basic money-making instead," I sighed.

"Good idea," Nemesis agreed. "With that in mind, let's make our way to the Adventurers' Guild."

Nemesis and I began walking towards Gideon's first district, where the guild building was.

"By the way," Nemesis spoke up again. "I know that borrowing from Rook isn't an option, but what about Brother Bear?"

“Having him lend me money would make me feel like a loser,” I said.

“Hmm...” she pondered. “What about your old equipme—”

“Already sold it,” I answered before she could finish. *And all the earnings I got from it have disappeared into your endless stomach,* I thought.

The only property I owned currently was the gear I was wearing and the less than 10,000 lir I had remaining.

“Oh, this talk about equipment reminds me...” said Nemesis. “Why are you so averse to glasses?”

“...What?” I asked.

“I’ve been wondering about it since our exchange with the penguin,” she continued. “I tried looking through your memories, but I couldn’t do it because it’s in the deepest, most private section of all. Honestly, the defenses on it are way too strong, and I can’t help but wonder why.”

...That seems like a strong sign that I don’t want to talk about it and that you shouldn’t be asking me this, I thought. *But okay, I’ll talk.* Nemesis and I were basically one and the same, so there should be no harm in telling her.

“Back when I was a kid,” I said, “my eyesight was very poor. When I got into year 4 of elementary school, I happened to be the only kid in class who wore glasses.”

“Well, things like that happen every now and then,” Nemesis commented.

“My nickname instantly became ‘Noby,’ like the character from *Doraemon,*” I continued.

“...Hm?” she raised an eyebrow.

“My classmates used ‘Noby’ more than my real name,” I went on. “They often pressed me to say his trademark *Doraemon* phrase, even though I didn’t sound much like the character. Not only that, but the theme of the school’s arts festival somehow became *Doraemon,* and, of course, I was given the role of Noby.”

It wasn’t like I had been bullied. Nor had I been some sort of outcast. In fact, I’d had a lot of friends. My classmates at that time had clearly had no ill will, and had only given me the nickname because we were somewhat close. However, the lack of a proper outlet had made a certain sentiment grow within me.

It could basically be summed up with the words “Who are you calling

‘Noby’?” Or, “I love *Doraemon* and all, but this is a completely different matter.”

Nemesis was silently staring at me.

“What wrong, Nemesis?” I asked her.

“The reason is just so trifling that I don’t know how to react,” she answered.

“...Well, even I know that it’s not such a big deal,” I admitted. My big sister had reacted the same way when I’d told her about it.

“You said you had poor eyesight,” Nemesis spoke again. “Do you still wear glasses in real life?”

“No,” I answered. “My vision was corrected over the course of the five years after the school’s arts festival.”

I had eaten things that were good for my eyes and trained them by looking far ahead and by moving my eyeballs daily. It’d been hard work.

“I admire your tenacity, but wouldn’t it have been better to just get contact lenses?” she asked.

“The idea of putting things in my eyes scares me,” I answered.

“Master, you...” She was completely out of things to say.

“Naturally, laser eye surgery scared me, too, so I had to fix my eyesight with steady training and... Hm?”

As Nemesis and I were walking through the streets and chatting, I suddenly heard some unpleasant sounds coming from a nearby back alley.

They made me curious, so I went towards their source.

A short distance away from the main road, between the buildings, there was a slightly larger area where I saw five men encircling a single girl.

The men looked like the most stereotypical, run-of-the-mill, boorish punks. The sight reminded me of what Liliana had told me about the princess who’d run away, which had made me picture a generic scenario where I encountered her being harassed by a bunch of evil bastards. Thinking that it couldn’t be the case, I took a better look at the scene, and... it actually wasn’t.

The damsel in distress had a decent appearance, but her facial features were definitely those of a commoner. She wouldn’t have seemed out of place if I’d seen her standing outside a restaurant and attracting customers. The girl definitely wasn’t the princess, but that didn’t matter, considering how much trouble she was in.

The contents of their exchange could be summed up like so:

The girl had a little brother who had been kidnapped yesterday.

These men had blackmailed her, saying that she had to prepare 200,000 lir if she wanted him back. They had also added that her brother would be killed if she told anything to the knights.

The girl had run around, borrowing money and selling their family's possessions until she'd barely managed to gather the 200,000 lir. She had then brought the ransom money to the place the kidnappers had named — this back alley — and given it to them.

The men had readily accepted the money, but they'd had absolutely no intention of giving her little brother back. Not only that — they were about to take the girl herself as an extra.

Well, damn, I thought. *They're scumbags to the core.*

They were tians, not monsters — at least not in the game sense — but it was clear that kicking their asses wouldn't give me any pangs of conscience.

And letting it slide would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

With that thought, I stood up and showed myself to the scumbags.

"Stop right there!" I exclaimed and instantly realized that my voice was doubled for some reason.

"...Hm?" I said in surprise, and it happened once again.

Okay, what the hell? I thought.

I'd done nothing special — I'd merely jumped out and said something — but my voice had come out as if it was in-sync with another one.

A moment later, I noticed the cause. There was another person standing behind the scumbags and the girl — at the other side of the back alley.

It was a young man who looked about as old as I was and had donned some strangely-designed clothing that seemed to be a mix of a military uniform and a rider suit. The gloves he wore exposed the backs of his hands, and the left one had a crest which made it obvious that he was a Master.

"It matters not," he said. "Back away from that fair lady, you vile scoundrels."

Apparently, he was just a guy who'd happened to be thinking the exact same thing I had been thinking at the exact same time.

"P-Please, help!" pled the girl.

"Heh," he grinned. "Why, certainly. All beauteous flowers have thorns. And it is my mission in life to be the thorn for ladies as lovely as yourself and to sting any ruffians trying to harm you."

Though we seemed to be alike in some ways, I wasn't nearly as pompous as him. The aura around him almost made me imagine roses and unnatural rays of light like in some manga aimed at young girls or a Takarazuka Revue performance.

"Who the hell are you two?" demanded one of the scumbags.

Another got excited. "Huh? Ya wanna go? Let's do this!"

"Hyahaah!" one just cheered in a discomforting way.

"There's five of us, ya dumb shits!" spoke yet another.

"That's two times more than you!" the last one added.

That's not two times, you numbskull, I thought. *It's 2.5 times.*

"Heh," the pompous Master grinned. "Indeed, there are more of you, but what are your levels?"

"Huh?!" One of them got scared.

"From what I can tell, you are all on your first low-rank job," said the pompous weirdo. "*My* total level, however, is 126."

"W-What?!" They all freaked out in unison.

"Heh," he grinned yet again. "Now, bear witness to my power. I'll just summon my Garage and..."

"Get him before he does anything!" shouted one of the scumbags. The other four let out a battle cry and charged at him.

"What?!" the guy was surprised. "Wait, I need to get in my Magingear and... No matter! I will do this with my bare hands if I must!"

I felt as though I was reading a delinquent manga. All five of the hoodlums ran towards the guy in the military uniform with their fists ready to strike.

And so, due to just how much the weirdo was standing out, I was being completely ignored.

"Oh well," I sighed. The timing was good, so I spoke to the girl. "You should run away now."

"Th-Thank you very much!" She thanked me with palpable fear in her voice and ran to the street behind me.

"Okay, that's done," I said. "And the battle is... wait, what?"

I looked to the other side and — to my surprise — saw the guy in the uniform getting beaten to a pulp. The five hoodlums weren't unharmed or anything, but it was still safe to say that the battle was completely one-sided.

Seems like there are too many of them for him to take on by himself, I thought. *But wait, his total level is 126, so how... Oh, I see.*

"Having a high total level doesn't mean that you have high stats, as well," I said aloud. He was probably like Rook, who — due to being a Pimp — had half of most of my stats despite his level being two times greater than mine.

Nonetheless, 126 was a formidable level. If the five scumbags were taking care of him *that* easily, it was entirely possible that I wouldn't fare so well, either.

As that thought went through my head, one of the five raised his fist and charged towards me. "You're next!"

I hastily evaded his attack and countered with a punch directed straight into his face.

The next moment, the man got blasted away to the other side of the alley.

"...Eh?" The other four hoodlums were shocked.

"...Why?" I asked, as perplexed as the scumbags.

Thinking that Nemesis had done something, I turned around and looked at her. She responded by heaving a light sigh and pointing at the back of her hand. That action made me look at the backs of my own hands and reminded me of a certain fact.

I was wearing the Miasmaflame Bracers.

While testing them today, I had focused mainly on their ability to release fire and gas, but those weren't the only features they had. The item could also be used for defense and gave a bonus to my stats. Specifically, it increased my STR by 100%.

Back when I had been level 0, my STR had been somewhere around 10. I hadn't had any problems moving my body back then, so I could only assume that that amount was representative of a standard adult male's strength. I'd leveled up and increased my stats since then, and with the bonus from Miasmaflame Bracers, my STR was now over 400. That meant that I'd just punched a hoodlum in the face with the strength of more than 40 average adult males.

“Is he dead?” Slightly worried, I took a look at the guy, who was lying on the other side of the alley.

He was twitching, so it was safe to assume that he’d survived. I heaved a sigh of relief. It was pretty obvious that their jobs were combat-oriented, so they were probably tougher than the average Joe.

“It’s all good, then,” I said as I closed in on them while bashing my bracers together.

The results wouldn’t have been pretty if I’d used Nemesis, so I chose to settle it with the bad boys on my hands.

“Who’s next?” I asked.

“Eee!” one of them shrieked like a little girl.

I probably looked a bit too menacing, since they quickly turned pale, whirled around, and ran away like roaches.

“D-Damn it!” one of them shouted. “Don’t get cocky, you shits! We still have that bitch’s brother!” With that, they disappeared into the main road.

Man, what a generic set of scumbags, I thought.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “First Heal.”

I walked over to the uniformed guy they’d beaten up and cast my healing spell on him.

His wounds weren’t deep by any stretch of the imagination, and my basic healing magic quickly closed them all.

“Heh, thank you,” he said gratefully. “Hm? Those ears are...” He looked up at the things on my head — the dog ears I’d grown because of the mad penguin.

“What about them?” I asked.

“...Oh, nothing,” he answered. “It’s a nice accessory.”

“Find a penguin and you can get your own pair,” I said.

“Heh.” He grinned yet again. “I will keep that in mind.”

The man stood up and dusted his clothes. Even that action seemed a bit pompous.

“I feel that this meeting is fated,” he said. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Hugo Lesseps. I am a Master and my job is High Pilot.”

“I’m Ray Starling,” I responded. “I’m a Master and a Paladin. And this is my Embryo, Nemesis.”

“I see... Embryos of the Maiden type are quite a rarity,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet such a lovely mademoiselle.”

“Pleased to meet you, too,” said Nemesis.

I found it interesting that he could tell that Nemesis was a Maiden and not a Guardian just by looking at her.

But man, the way he talks sounds like it belongs in a play or something, I thought. *I wonder where he’s from. If his name is anything to go by, then he’s probably French.*

“By the way, why did they beat you up so easily?” I asked. “Is your job not battle-oriented or something?” They’d been pretty weak when I’d fought them, so I would’ve assumed that someone with a total level of 126 could’ve handled them easily.

“Heh.” There was that grin again. “I am a level 50 Pilot, level 50 Mechanic, and level 26 High Pilot. Leveling with these jobs only raises my HP, MP, SP, and DEX, so all my other stats are about what they were when I started out!”

That didn’t seem like something to be proud of. Also, I couldn’t help but wonder just what kind of jobs they were to have such a biased stat growth.

Does he drive a car or something? I thought. *Is he like a character from* Metal Max *or something?*

“U-Umm...” I said.

As I pondered the nature of Hugo’s job, someone called out to me.

I turned around to see the girl we’d helped out. Apparently, she’d chosen to stay nearby instead of running away completely.

“Th-Thank you very much for helping me!” she cried.

“Oh, no need for that,” I said. “I did it because I felt like it.” Also, it would’ve left a bad taste in my mouth if I hadn’t.

“Heh.” Hugo grinned again. "I feel the same way. I don’t know if I could sleep at night after having ignored a lady in distress.”

Isn’t that much like my go-to phrase for these situations? I thought.

“U-Umm... Are you Masters?” the girl ventured.

“Why, yes,” said Hugo. “Myself and Ray here are both Masters.”

The girl dropped to the ground before us and pushed her head against it.

“Lady...” Hugo didn’t seem sure how to react. “Please raise your head.”

“Please... Please save my little brother!” she pled. “I beg of you!”

Oh, yeah, the scumbags said something about that while running away, I thought.

“Save him? As in, from those hoodlums?” I asked.

“Y-Yes!” she said. “They’re the Gouz-Maise Gang... They kidnap children, and if they don’t get the ransom for them, the boys and girls get killed and e-eate— ohhh...”

Her words made me turn silent.

Killing and eating children? I thought in disbelief. *Ohhh, man...*

“They kidnapped my little brother, so please, save him!” she exclaimed. “I can give you this money! And if that’s not enough, I’ll do whatever you want...”

She extended the bag with the ransom towards us and begged while crying her eyes out.

I knew the circumstances from the eavesdropping I’d done before jumping out to help her. As things were, her brother would’ve been killed and eaten sooner rather than later. To prevent that result from becoming reality, one had to act fast, and the only ones who could do that were Hugo and me.

Honestly, I had a feeling it would come to this the moment I showed myself to the scumbags, I thought. *That’s why I’m fully prepared to face the risks.*

“I’m down for it,” I said. “I don’t need any compensation, though.”

“B-But...”

“You went through great lengths to gather this ransom money, right?” I said. “I can’t take it.” I had a feeling that I would’ve done something about it even if she hadn’t asked me to. If I’d ignored it, the aftertaste in my mouth would’ve been downright foul.

“What about you, Hugo?” I asked.

“Heh,” he grinned. “A foolish question. *Of course* I’m doing it. And I don’t need any money, either.”

Hugo went down on one of his knees, gently placed his left hand on her chin, and made her look upwards. He then gently wiped her tears away with the thumb of his right hand.

“Lady,” he said gently. “We shall stop your tears.” And so — as if acting out a scene from a play — Hugo smiled at her. “I promise that you will greet tomorrow’s morning with a smile on your face.”

[The quest “Rescue Roddie Lancarse, Difficulty Level 8” has started]

[Please see the quest window for further details]

A message directed to my ears announced the beginning of an event quest. Apparently, the same thing had happened to Hugo.

“Let us go, Ray,” he said. “The mission awaits.”

“Okay,” I sighed. “I can dance to this tune of yours.” Our target quest was the difficulty level 8 “Rescue Roddie Lancarse.” Our destination was the hideout of man-eaters and kidnappers — the Gouz-Maise Gang.

Our goal... was a morning of smiles.

And so, we began our quest.

Chapter Three: A Maiden's Master

Gideon, the city of duels, Paladin Ray Starling

Nemesis, Hugo, and I got on a difficulty level 8 random event quest called "Rescue Roddie Lancarse." Just like the quest to save Milianne, it was going to be a race against time. However, I had two other worries about it.

First was the quest difficulty. I didn't know just how difficult level 8 quests were, so I asked Hugo about it...

"Difficult enough for level 500 tians going solo to fail spectacularly," he said. "Even a full party of such tians would have a hard time."

...and that was his answer. So, level 8 quests were too difficult for max level tians. Even if we Masters were generally stronger than tians, it was clearly a bit too much for me — someone below level 50 — to handle. However, I had no intention of leaving the child for dead just because it was hard to save him.

"I must say that letting them escape was a grave mistake," said Nemesis.

And that was my other worry — the five scumbags we'd faced.

The one I'd punched was still spread out on the back alley's pavement, so Hugo tied him up with a wire he had on him. We decided to hand him over to the guards, so the girl we'd helped — Rebecca — ran off to the guardroom.

The other four had run away with a threat regarding her brother, unfortunately. We didn't know where their base was. If they got there before us and told everyone about what happened here, the boy's life would be in more danger than ever.

"Man, I should've gassed them," I said. A whiff of the poison from my Miasmaflame Bracers would've rendered them completely immobile.

"We're in the city, so wouldn't that count as terrorism?" asked Nemesis.

You have a point, I thought. *Although I could've also scorched their legs with fire from the left bracer and make them unable to walk, and...*

"I can tell that you're thinking something disturbing," said Hugo. "Let me assure you, though, that there’s no need to worry about them.” He then pointed to the street they’d run off to.

I couldn’t see what was behind the corner, but I could hear something being dragged on the ground.

“What’s that sound?” I asked. The source got closer and closer until it soon entered my vision.

“Shorry for the waith, Hugo.” It was a girl. If you ignored the ushanka hat on her head, she would’ve been about as tall as Nemesis.

The first thing I noticed about her was her *whiteness*. White hair, white cheeks, white hat. Despite it not being particularly cold, she also wore a white felt long coat and a white scarf. And, for some reason, she was also biting into a white manju sweet. The only non-white thing about her were her blue eyes.

“Heh.” Hugo turned pompous again. “Well done, Cyco.”

She gulped down the manju before responding. “It’s a pain, but they were weak, so don’t mind it.”

I looked down and saw that she was holding people — the four hoodlums that had escaped — by the clothes behind the napes of their necks.

The ease with which she was holding two people in each hand clearly didn't fit her appearance, but I soon noticed the Master crest on her left hand.

Well, I guess her strength makes sense if she's a Master, I thought.

The way she spoke was extremely monotone, and I couldn't tell if she was role-playing or if that was her normal way of speaking.

She noticed me examining her and shot a glare at Nemesis and me. "Hugo the girl pamperer befriended a lolicon? You like little girls, mister?"

"Who are you calling a lolicon?!" I shouted.

"Who are you calling a loli?!" Nemesis howled at the same time.

She actually marked me as a sexual deviant with her first words to me! Who the hell does that?! I thought.

"That flat chest and low height are exemplary loli features," she said. "And anyone who has a loli service him is a real lolicon."

Slander if I'd ever heard any. Nemesis was a part of me, so she didn't count.

"No!" said Nemesis. "This form of mine merely prioritizes beauty over function!"

"A Master with an Embryo who claims *that* form to be beauty is a lolicon to the core," said the white girl.

"You little...! Seems like I have to do something about that mouth of yours!" Nemesis shouted.

"Try it."

Nemesis jumped on the girl, who faced her head-on, as emotionless as ever. They began fighting, but I felt like I was watching two cats mess about.

It sure is rare for Nemesis to be this honest with anyone that's not me, I thought.

"So, Hugo," I spoke up. "Who is this monotone and monochrome girl who has no qualms about labeling strangers as perverts?"

"Cyco," he answered. "She's my... party member. I contacted and told her to catch the ones that ran away. The girl's a bit foul-mouthed, yes, but as you can see, she's quite reliable. Oh, and just so you're aware, the things she just said are far from the worst you can hear from her."

"Seriously?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," he nodded. "Especially when compared to the abuse she spouts at our clan owner."

...I don't think I can even imagine that, I thought.

Well, her foul mouth aside, we now had a total of three Masters in our party. Naturally, that increased our chances of successfully completing the quest.

"All right, Cyco, tell us what you found out," said Hugo.

"Okay," Cyco replied while her hands were fixed with Nemesis' as they pushed each other in what seemed like a situation straight out of a pro wrestling match. Still in that state, she turned her face to Hugo and began talking. "After I beat up and interrogated them, they told me where their hideout was. It's beyond the east gate, in the Cruella Mountain Belt. The specific location was in a map they had."

Skillfully using her mouth, she bit into a paper she had in a pocket on her side and threw it over to Hugo using only her head.

"Cruella Mountain Belt?" I repeated the place name. It was an area I hadn't been in before.

"That's the name of the mountains to the east of this city," said Hugo. "The area beyond them is Caldina's territory."

"So it's basically the border between the two countries," I said.

"It's a great place for a bandit hideout," he continued. "Any Kingdom of Altar military operations done in the Cruella Mountain Belt would be taken as acts of war against Caldina."

"Why don't the two countries team up to take care of the bandits, then?" I asked. Bandits lurking near the border seemed like a big problem for both Altar and Caldina, so it would've been natural to team up and exterminate them.

"That will never happen," said Hugo. "Caldina only acts when there's money to be had. In fact, they would do *anything* for it."

"By that, you mean...?" I asked.

"For the right price, the vilest bandit could be a valued customer."

So they're in on this? I thought.

"I would guess they get paid a lot and provide passive cooperation in exchange," he continued. "Caldina probably agreed to react in some way if the kingdom's army made a move. Even if it was all just an act, the kingdom still couldn't do what they wanted."

Hugo opened the map that Cyco had given him. On the left side of it was Gideon. The right portrayed a desert, and the area right in the middle of them had several mountains. The second closest mountain to Gideon had a circle marking something.

"This is the place," said Hugo. "It's beyond a mountain. Seems like we'll have to make haste."

"Yeah," I agreed. "We'll have to run real fast."

For some reason, Hugo gave me a strange look.

"What?" I asked.

"Ray," he said. "You're a Paladin, aren't you? Won't you be riding a mount?"

"I have a horse, but I can't ride it because I don't have the Horse Riding skill," I answered.

"So that's how it is..." he said, looking completely weirded out.

"...Yeah."

Well, this is awkward, I thought.

"Heh," he chuckled. "This is the first time I'm seeing anyone who doesn't have the Horse Riding skill while being in the knight grouping."

"Is it normal for us to have it?" I asked.

"Well," Hugo said. "Let's just say that I feel as though someone just told me that they're a swimmer, but can't do the front crawl, backstroke, breaststroke, or butterfly stroke."

"Is there even anything more to swimming than those four?" I asked.

"The dog paddle and traditional Japanese swimming?" he suggested.

Those didn't seem like they fit.

"Anyway, I see how it is," said Hugo. "Leave it to me. I have a means of travel that allows us to get to their hideout in a short amount of time."

"Thanks," I said gratefully.

In unrelated news, Nemesis and Cyco had become friends during the fight, and were now exchanging a firm handshake.

Friendship is a great thing, I thought. *But man, the fact that one is black and the other's white reminds me of a girl's anime from a few decades back.*

Our party — Hugo, Cyco, and me with Nemesis as my blade — had made our way through the eastern gate in Gideon's third district and were now standing before the entrance to the Cruella Mountain Belt area.

There was a road leading towards the mountains, which was being used by carriages and the like.

We were about to make our way to the gang's hideout by using the means of travel Hugo mentioned, but...

"What *is* that means of travel, anyway?" I asked.

"This isn't the right place for it," he said. "We have to go where there are even fewer people."

He can't show it to anyone or something? I thought. "Does it stand out or something?"

"You could say that, yes," he answered.

And so we walked for about fifteen minutes. We weren't following the road, either. Hugo actually led us into some forest.

All right, this is weird, I thought. We were nowhere close to any proper road that could be used by carriages and such.

If we were about to use something rideable, the mountain road near Gideon would have been much better for it.

"This place seems good," he said upon discovering an opening in the forest. It was circular and had a radius of about ten meters. There was a curious lack of tall trees, and it seemed like the plants here had only just begun sprouting.

"My guess is that someone with a magic-based job used an area-of-effect offensive spell here," said Hugo. "I don't know how it was for those affected, but it's convenient for us."

He reached into his inventory, took out a silver sheet, and spread it out on the ground.

Once he did that, I realized just how big the sheet was. It was a square with sides that were about five meters in size.

"I've prepared the Garage," said Hugo. "Cyco, any hostiles nearby?"

"None at all," she answered. "I'm not picking up any monsters or people."

"Roger that." Hugo opened a window and began doing something on it. A moment later, sounds of machinery began coming out from under the sheet he'd spread on the ground.

"...Wait, machinery?" I muttered. Suddenly, I realized something.

Hugo's job was High Pilot. The noun "pilot" was generally used on people who operated something mechanical. However, this world didn't have any machinery that could be "driven" in that sense...

...unless it was related to a certain country.

“Hugo,” I said. “You’re...”

“Ray,” he spoke up before I could finish. “I am taking part in this quest as a *person* and as a thorn protecting the beautiful flowers we call ‘women.’”

His statement made it obvious that he’d known exactly what I was gonna say.

“Why are *you* on this quest?” he continued. “Is it because you’re a Paladin of the kingdom, or because you’re your own man?”

There was only one thing I could say in response.

“Ignoring this would leave a bad taste in my mouth.” It was the exact same thing I’d thought when I accepted this quest. “At the very least, I’m not doing this because of my occupation.”

“Nor am I.” With those words, Hugo gave a wry smile and pushed down on a button on the window. It said “sortie” on it.

Right after that, the sheet on the ground began to expand. Its surface began to slip and open up like a garage shutter, exposing a cavity that completely ignored the sheet’s thickness.

Four pillars rose up at the corners of the sheet and stopped when they were about five meters tall.

A moment later, a roaring sound came from the bottom of the cavity as a lift began rising up until it reached the surface.

On it, there was a large object. Its two arms and legs gave it a humanoid appearance. However, it was nowhere near human.

It was about six heads tall, but its height was above five meters and it was covered in a dark green steel coating.

On its pelvic area, there was a gun and an army knife that fit its great size, and it didn’t seem like that was the extent of the weaponry it had in store.

Its chest area was open, and inside, I saw a cockpit that bore a striking resemblance to one I had seen in some old anime.

In conclusion, it was a humanoid battle robot.

“‘Magic and Gear,’” he said. “More widely known as Magingear. The main weapon of the Dryfe Imperium.”

Hugo — a High Pilot of the Dryfe Imperium — said that as he got into the cockpit.

“...Hugo,” I said, impressed.

“Right now, I am but a knight fighting for a lady’s tears,” he told me. “You are not a Paladin of the Kingdom of Altar, either. Am I correct, fellow knight?”

“...Yeah,” I nodded.

Yet again, he’d donned that aura straight out of a young girls’ manga or a Takarazuka performance and spoken as if he were a character from a play. Despite how ridiculous it seemed, I couldn’t help but agree with what he’d said.

The Kingdom and the Imperium had been at war once. There was a ceasefire going on right now, but it was rumored that it was going to get heated again within the next few months. The countries we served were true enemies.

However, as we were right now, that didn’t matter to us. It was also completely irrelevant to the girl who’d cried for her brother and the boy we were going to save.

Our standings had absolutely no connection to what we had to do. When we’d taken this quest, we had been acting as our own individual human beings.

“Shall we go?” he asked from his cockpit.

“We shall,” I answered and jumped on the hand of the Magingear he was piloting. The other hand was already occupied by Cyco.

With both its hands full, Hugo’s Magingear stood up.

“Demi-Dragon-tier Magingear, Marshall II... Sortie!”

And so, the Marshall II began dashing towards our goal — the other side of the mountain.

◇

Magingear. That was the abbreviation of “Magic and Gear” — a term used to describe the imperium’s main type of weapon.

As I sat on this weapon’s right hand, all the shaking caused by its running made me think of something.

The first Embryo I’d seen after beginning to play *Infinite Dendrogram* had been my brother’s Baldr. That was a technological weapon, too, but since it was an Embryo — something that was unique to each Master — it wasn't quite the same as something made by technology.

The Magingear, however, were weapons born from Dryfe Imperium's scientific prowess — a part of the world's setting.

As far as I was aware, the imperium was the only country in *Infinite Dendrogram* that excelled in technology and science. That fact made me curious as to why the other countries didn't follow its footsteps.

Technological innovation was something that would normally spread like wildfire. The imperium had been a technological nation for more than a hundred years. Reason suggested that their knowledge should've spread to other countries by now.

When you looked at it as a game, it was probably safe to say that the reason was that the developers wanted to keep each country unique. However, *Infinite Dendrogram's* setting was detailed enough to incorporate the basic function of logging in and out. That made me think that the technological gap between the nations wasn't without a world-building reason, too.

So, as we made our way to the hideout of the Gouz-Maise Gang, I asked Hugo about it. "What do you think?"

"Heh," he grinned. "To know the answer to that, you have to know about a certain civilization."

"Civilization?" I repeated.

"Yes," said Hugo. "It's called either the 'lost' or the 'ancient' civilization."

...That name seems familiar, I thought. *Oh, right. Silver — the horse I pulled from the gacha — had "ancient civilization" in his description.*

"That civilization existed a few thousand years ago," Hugo continued.

According to Hugo, the ancient civilization had been highly advanced in terms of technology. It was similar to the imperium in that regard, but their technology had been superior to anything Dryfe had now.

However, the civilization perished, leaving behind only a few machines and texts that archeologists stumbled upon every now and then.

"You're gonna have to tell me more than that," I said.

"There are theories that the grand civilization disappeared because their technological advancement made the people too arrogant, and therefore it incurred some divine wrath," he explained. "According to the legends, a god and his thirteen servants went around destroying every civilization that existed back then. Every country besides Dryfe and Granvaloa believes that legend, so the people *choose* not to make any scientific and technological advancements."

I see, I thought. *So they're actively avoiding technology because they're afraid of divine punishment. Hm...? Dryfe* and *Granvaloa?*

"That doesn't apply to those two countries, then?" I asked. "And wait, Granvaloa is scientifically advanced?"

"Well..." he said and pondered. "You might say that Granvaloa has science and you might say that it doesn't."

How am I supposed to process that?

"First, let me tell you about Dryfe," he said. "Dryfe has always presented itself as the true successors of the ancient civilization and thus didn't shy away from technology and science. However, all their attempts to recreate the technology of the ancient times have failed, so they had to compromise for machines such as the Magingear, which only functioned by using people's magic.

"People's magic?" I asked.

"Yes, they can only move at the cost of MP. Right now, my Marshall II uses 1MP per minute. In battle, it would be 1MP per second. There are differences in extent, but this is how every Dryfe machine works."

MP per second, eh? Reminds me of my Reversal, I thought.

Anyway, a certain thing made sense now. *That* was the reason why Hugo's jobs — Pilot, Mechanic, and High Pilot — were so focused on MP growth.

"So the machines of the past were different?" I asked.

"Many of the ones that have been excavated had generators installed in them," he answered. "They provided the machines with all the magic they needed to operate, and as far as I'm aware, they're a technology lost to the modern world."

Interesting, I thought. *I wonder where Silver stands in all of this.*

"Can you expand on Granvaloa?" I asked. "I didn't know that they had machine technology." All I knew about it was that it was a country on the sea, so I had always imagined it functioned with sail-based ships, like the ones in the Age of Discovery.

"Heh. That country is less about machine technology and more about ship-building technology," said Hugo. "For example, steamships aren't uncommon among their people, but there are no automobiles to speak of. In a sense, Granvaloa is more unbalanced than Dryfe. After all, though their magic technology is behind that of most countries, their magic ships are unmatched."

"So that's how it is," I nodded. Though it was limited to shipbuilding, the maritime nation excelled in both magic and technology.

Yeah, it's safe to call it unbalanced, I thought.

"Also," added Hugo. "Since they're the only ones salvaging things from underwater ruins, not even Dryfe knows what they really have."

Well, that sure piqued my interest. I should go there someday.

"Hmm... Hugo," Nemesis spoke up. "Did you get the knowledge about this civilization from the world's official description?"

"No," he answered. "I've been told about it by archeologist tians and some trivia-crazed acquaintances who've explored ruins all over the world. The clan I belong to has many people with strange hobbies."

"Your clan?" I asked.

"Yes," Hugo nodded. "It's one of the bigger clans in Dryfe, so there are quite a lot of us. If you ever switch to serving the imperium, I'll help you join."

"Ha ha ha," I laughed. "I don't see that happening."

"Heh. I think that depends on the results of the upcoming war."

He wasn't wrong. That could easily happen if the imperium came out on top and the kingdom became its domain.

"Though it's not impossible that the results lead to me joining *your* clan," he added.

"My own clan, huh?" I said. "I actually don't have one yet."

"Then you should find one that has people you get along with and join it. It'll give you more things to do in this world. You can also make one yourself, if you like."

"I'll think about it... Oh?" I said, startled.

As we made our way through the forest, the Magingear had lowered its engine's output and reduced its noise to a minimum.

"Looks like we're here," said Hugo.

A few moments later, we came close to the forest's edge.

"I see it," Cyco said.

I looked through the spaces between the trees.

Outside the forest was a large building — a stone fortress. With its walls covered in ivy, it stood in the middle of a forest clearing that extended for at least a few hundred meters in every direction.

It was easy to tell that it had been built a long time ago, eventually been abandoned, and was now being used as the bandits' hideout.

"It's just like it was shown on the map," said Hugo. "That's the place, no doubt about it. There're even some guards there."

He was right — I could see some bandits standing on the fortress' walls. However, the boredom in their mannerisms and the occasional yawns made it obvious that they weren't too serious about their job. At the very least, they still hadn't noticed us hiding in the forest.

I had my worries about the possibility of them seeing Magingear, but that didn't seem to be necessary. The trees in the forest were tall enough to hide it without any problem. The dark green coating probably worked as a good camouflage, too.

"What now?" asked Nemesis. "Shall we all charge at it?"

"Don't be stupid," I said. "It'll all be over if they start using the kidnapped children as hostages."

Then again, that was going to happen in any scenario where we made an attempt to fight the bandits and do the rescuing. However, since we didn't know the inner structure of the fortress, sneaking in without getting spotted would be difficult. Also, no matter how negligent the guards were, they'd quickly notice us if we showed ourselves in this wide open space.

"...I happen to have an idea on how to go about this," said Hugo.

"An idea?" I asked.

The Magingear he was driving nodded in a highly convincing manner and pointed at itself.

"Everyone in this world knows that this weapon belongs to Dryfe," he said. That was the reason why we got here through a route on which no one could see us.

"Again, this is *a weapon belonging to Dryfe*," he continued. "The same Dryfe that has *absolutely no reason to save the kingdom's children*."

"Hm...? Ah!" I finally realized what he meant. "If I attack the fortress, they will likely think that it has nothing to do with the kidnappings. After all, there's no reason for a man of the imperium to come rescue the children of an enemy nation. That will prevent the bandits from using them as hostages. They will probably believe that I wouldn't discriminate and kill any children they brought out, and that would be unfavorable for them because less children means less ransom money."

So, Hugo's true affiliation is actually gonna be useful to us, huh? I thought.

"They won't be able to use the children as hostages," he continued. "And they certainly won't just sit and do nothing while I attack the fortress. They will surely come to face me. And while they're busy with me, you can sneak into the building and rescue the kidnapped children. That's the plan I have in mind, anyway."

"Sounds good," I nodded. "Are you sure you'll be okay, though? Being a distraction isn't easy."

"A Marshall II has a strong frame," said Hugo. "It won't go down easily. Also, I have Cyco with me."

"Yep," she nodded. "What do we do?"

"You use Enemy Detect," Hugo said. "Also, ready some Smoke Dischargers to make a smokescreen for us to hide in while we lower their numbers."

"Oui, umm... monsieur."

"You can use the smoke to close in on the fortress," Hugo added, turning to me. "Save the children, and stay out of sight."

"All right," I nodded.

"Understood!" Nemesis declared. "This is nothing Ray and I can't do!"

"It will probably be a battle against time," Hugo added. "You will need to be both fast and precise."

"I know," I nodded again. A battle against time while trying to save children. It was going to be much like my first quest, when I'd had to save Milianne.

However, back then, I'd had Liliana and — most of all — my brother with me. Without him, I couldn't have made my way to where Milianne was, and if he hadn't kept the Demi-Dragon Worms busy, the situation would've gotten much worse.

Also, that had been a difficulty level 5 quest. The quest we were doing right now was a difficulty level 8. I had no idea what kind of monsters I would have to face, and I didn't have the people I'd relied on back when I'd saved Milianne.

Still, this time, I had Hugo and Cyco with me. I was stronger, as well, and Nemesis was more reliable than ever. I didn't know how far that would get me, but...

"...Backing out isn't really an option when the lives of children are on the line."

"Hm?" Hugo asked.

Wait, did I say that out loud? I thought. Hugo had apparently heard what I'd said and stared at me with the Magingear's head camera.

"What?" I asked.

Well, I kinda understood what he wanted to say. He probably thought I was getting a bit too serious about *Infinite Dendrogram*, which — from beginning to the end — was nothing but a game. However, game or not, having children die on me left a bad taste in my mouth.

Hugo stayed silent. He looked at me through the camera while thinking about something.

"If you've got something to say, just say it," I said.

"...All right." Hugo finally spoke up. His words were far from what I'd expected. "It's nothing much... I just realized that you, too, are a real Maiden's Master."

"Hm?" I raised an eyebrow. I didn't see what he meant by that. I wasn't aware of any relationship between what I'd said and the fact that I was the Master of Nemesis, a Type Maiden.

"Do you know what Masters of Type Maiden Embryos have in common?" he asked.

"They have something in common?" I asked back.

"Yes. A Master I know told me that such Masters have a certain common feature."

I had yet to meet a single other Maiden's Master, but I was mildly surprised to hear that we all had a similarity. "Which is...?"

"They don't feel *Infinite Dendrogram* is a mere game."

...What?

"That's stupid," I said. "I'm well aware that we're in a game here."

I had no grand delusions about being in an old light novel type of scenario in which the game I'd started playing was actually a real other world. *Infinite Dendrogram* was a game, and I wouldn't argue against that.

"The Master I mentioned said the same thing," said Hugo. "However, somewhere deep inside, they don’t believe that to be true. And that’s why...” He fell silent.

“Why... what?” I asked.

“It’s nothing. Never mind. Sorry for saying something weird right when we’re about to attack the fortress. I got a bit derailed.”

Damn it, don’t leave me hanging after getting my attention like that! I thought.

“Oh, by the way,” he spoke up again. “The enemies might be tians, but killing them doesn’t count as a crime when they’re criminals or if you’re just defending yourself. Keep that in mind.”

“Yeah... I will,” I nodded.

After that, Hugo fell silent once again.

I’m still wondering what he was going to say, though, I thought.

“Master,” Nemesis spoke to me telepathically.

What?

“Do you know what he was about to say?” she asked.

No, I don’t. You don’t either, right?

“I wouldn’t say so. But if you say you don’t know, it might be best for you if things stay that way.”

“Hm?” I raised an eyebrow. *What do you mean by that?*

“Ray!” yelled Hugo in surprise. “Look over there!” Cutting short my conversation with Nemesis, his Magingear pointed at the fortress. I looked in that direction and saw that its gates were slowly opening.

“Look there,” said Cyco. “A carriage is coming.” I shifted my gaze to where she was pointing and saw a mountain road leading through an opening in the forest surrounding the fortress.

On it, there were several carriages moving towards the bandit hideout.

“Did they kidnap more children?” I asked.

“Seems like it,” said Hugo.

“They’re saying something,” Cyco muttered. She placed her hands on her ears, closed her eyes, and focused her hearing. “‘When we’re back in the fortress’... ‘we’ll kill him’... ‘our buddies’... ‘got caught’... ‘revenge’... ‘we’re killing’... ‘the brat.’”

“Crap!” A realization made me mutter my frustration.

“Wait, do they mean...?!” Hugo seemed to have realized it, too.

They were talking about the five underlings we’d beaten, caught, and handed over to the guards.

"It seems there were more than those five," Hugo muttered. "They've noticed what we did back there."

And if that was the case, then the first child they were going to kill when they reached the fortress was the very same one we had to save.

"It seems like time is short." Hugo made the Magingear go from a kneeling position to standing upright. "I'll attack the ones at the carriages. That should make the ones in the fortress come out and help them. When that happens, I'll create a smokescreen you can use to get in undetected. Cyco, you support me."

"All right!" I nodded.

"Understood!" said Nemesis in her sword form.

"Yes, sir!" Cyco snapped to attention.

As soon as he confirmed that everyone was fine with his plan, Hugo made his Magingear jump out of the forest and charge at the bandits.

This time, he wasn't running like when we had traversed the forest. Instead, he used the wheels installed in its legs to do a rolling dash that made him the fastest I've seen yet. Not slowing down, he took out a gun that was mounted on the robot's pelvic area and began firing at the front of the group of carriages.

A single attack was enough to make the horses drawing the first carriage burst, while the resulting shockwave blew the coachman away and made the carriage fall to its side.

The sudden disaster made the carriages trailing behind it stop, and the Magingear — not letting the opportunity go to waste — began firing at and instantly killing the bandits surrounding them.

"Hm?" The sight actually made me feel strangely uncomfortable. Nemesis seemed to notice my reaction, but chose not to say anything.

After a number of bandits had been killed by Hugo's preemptive attacks, they finally began retaliating and fighting back. However, they weren't coordinated in any sense of the word, attacking independently with the methods each of them were familiar with. Some used swords, fists, and axes, while others took the ranged approach with bows and arrows.

Reason stated that such things would be able to do nothing against the Magingear — which was as tough as a tank — but we were in *Infinite Dendrogram*. The bandits likely had low-rank battle-oriented jobs. Due to that, their stats would be higher than those of normal people, allowing their attacks to occasionally break and pierce through the Magingear's armor.

"Hghh!" Hugo exclaimed as his Marshall II showed no sign of stopping. He used the robot's army knife to cut down anyone who got too close.

Well, the term "knife" was only appropriate when compared to the Magingear. It was equivalent to a longsword for any bandit and it had absolutely no trouble slicing through their armor and splitting their torsos.

Hugo used the gun to shoot down anyone attacking him from a distance. The bullets were equivalent to cannon shots, and they made the bow-wielding bandits burst and scatter in all directions.

Though the bandits greatly outnumbered him, Hugo was far stronger than all of them combined. The sight made me recall the way Marilyn — Rook's Demi-Dragon — had gone rampaging within the army of Goblins. The robot was probably as powerful as she was. When he'd gotten in, Hugo had called it a "Demi-Dragon-Rank Magingear," and it was clear that the description was appropriate.

Hugo was also highly skilled at controlling it, and from what he'd told me on the way here, the Piloting skill he had from being in the Pilot job grouping greatly increased the stats of the machines he rode. As a result of all of that, he had an upper hand in this battle despite the bandits greatly outnumbering him.

"But his advantage isn't absolute," I muttered.

Though the bandits were dying one after the other, some of their attacks were landing on the Magingear. Little by little, the damage done by them was piling up and becoming obvious.

"Flaw," Cyco said from beside me. Then she told me about the robot's greatest disadvantage.

"Magingears can't be healed," she said. "They need to be stored and fixed."

"I see." I nodded.

Though fueled by magic, the Magingears were machines. Healing magic and medicine didn't work on them like they worked on people and monsters. Due to the constantly falling HP and the per-second MP cost, these iron giants could only fight for a limited amount of time.

And yet, for the sake of saving the children, Hugo played his part in the plan by facing the bandits head-on and distracting them.

“That’s why we have to do our best, too,” said Cyco.

“Of course,” I agreed.

All at once, several dozens of bandits ran out of the fortress. They went to help their endangered comrades by joining their battle against the Magingear, but that came at the cost of reducing their numbers at the hideout.

“Now,” Cyco said.

At about the same time...

...the Magingear covered the area in can-like objects it had kept around its waist. After rolling on the ground a bit, they began spinning around while intensely releasing great amounts of white smoke.

“Smoke Dischargers, released,” said Cyco. “We can go now.”

She disappeared from my side. Not only that, she disappeared from the party window, as well. Whether that mattered or not, she’d probably gone to assist Hugo.

“We’re going too, Nemesis!” I said.

“Understood!” she agreed.

As the white smoke covered the surroundings, I tightened my grip on Nemesis in her sword form and ran towards the fortress.

I had to make good use of the opportunity Hugo had given me.

This was all to free the children and make sure they survived.

Letting the smoke shroud me, I broke into the fortress.

◇

We’d saved Rebecca from her predicament in that back alley and instantly begun making our way to the hideout of the Gouz-Maise Gang for the sake of saving her little brother. That was why — by the time I broke into the fortress — I was grossly uninformed about what kind of group the Gouz-Maise Gang was. All I knew about them was that they were a bunch of scumbags who kidnapped and killed children.

I was far too clueless.

However, even if I’d known the kinds of things they actually did, it wouldn’t have changed anything.

All that mattered was whether I was too late or not.

◇

The smoke from the Smoke Dischargers used by Hugo's Magingear permeated even the interior of the fortress, allowing me to go through the entrance and reach the building's inner passages without being detected.

Despite the thick smoke overwhelming the rooms and hallways here, I didn't have any problem seeing which way was which. In fact, I could see right through it by merely straining my eyes a bit. I could only assume that it was made to not affect the vision of the user's — Hugo's — party members. I had no idea how that worked, though.

"Well, we're inside," said Nemesis. "But we don't know the structure of this place."

Since we had to be sneaky while moving through these hallways, Nemesis and I were talking to each other telepathically.

Every now and then, we passed by some bandits running to fight Hugo, but it was clear that they couldn't see us due to the smoke.

"Master, where do you think we can find the children?" she asked.

Either windowless rooms on the second floor or higher, or somewhere below.

"Why do you think that?"

The chances of them escaping would be higher if they were kept in the first floor, and I saw ivy growing on the walls around the windows of the upper floors. They could use that to go down and get out. By simple process of elimination, it's safe to guess that they're either below or above.

"Then they're probably underground," she said. "It's standard for kidnapping scoundrels to keep children locked up in the dungeon."

I didn't know if I could be as sure as her. However, the possibility was there, so I had no reason not to test it.

As those thoughts ran through my head, I came across a split in the hallway. There were three ways to go — forward, left, and right. A short distance up the right path, I saw a flight of stairs leading down — basically beckoning us in.

I chose to follow the call and went down underground.

"Ugh!" The moment I put my foot on the first stair, a strange stench came from the bottom and attacked my nose. It was a vile, yet familiar smell that I couldn't remember — or perhaps didn't want to. However, I couldn’t back away just because of it, so I gathered my resolve and went further down.

The stairs, floor, walls, and ceiling were all made from stone, exactly as you’d expect. The ceiling was two times higher than my full height, while the distance between the walls was even greater than that.

I won’t have any problems swinging Nemesis in here, I thought.

I also couldn’t help but notice the unique humidity permeating the air and the dark green moss growing on the ceiling and the walls.

“How gloomy,” commented Nemesis.

It’s a dungeon, after all, I told her. *Also, this moss and humidity is a clear sign that there’s underground water leaking in from somewhere.*

“Well, it’s an abandoned fortress, after all.”

Staying here for prolonged periods of time can’t be good for the children’s health.

“If the scoundrels cared about the little ones’ health, they wouldn’t be kidnapping or killing them.”

...True that.

A single look at the underlings we’d beaten in the back alley or the ones around the carriages was enough to know that they didn’t care for the children’s lives whatsoever. Just remembering their words and behavior made me sick.

“Gh...”

“Do you feel it, Master?” asked Nemesis. She didn’t say what she meant by “it.” However, I knew without her having to put it into words.

“It started when I began going down the stairs,” I said with my mouth. I finally recalled where I last breathed this stench.

There was no need to speak telepathically anymore. Hiding was unnecessary...

...because something at the other end of the hallway had already noticed us.

“There’s something there...” said Nemesis.

“Yeah,” I nodded.

I was being assaulted by multiple smells. The smell of the wafting humidity, the stuffy air, and the moss covering the walls mixed with the stench of blood and rotten meat. I was familiar with this smell because it had been all around me during my night in the Tomb Labyrinth. There was no way I could mistake it.

"Uuuaaaagghhh..." A groan reached my ears. It was followed by the rattling of bones. The sounds completed the imagery and made me all the more certain that the smell was that of the "undead."

Wounded Zombies were groaning as they closed in on me. Their decaying flesh clung to their bones, vile juices leaking from pustules and boils. The Civilian Skeletons closed the distance between us, their teeth rattling as they shambled ahead.

The sight robbed me of words. That reaction might've been unwarranted, given that I had already faced undead monsters in the Tomb Labyrinth, but there was an important difference between the Zombies and Skeletons there and the ones before me.

It wasn't the number of them. Sure, there were several dozens of them, but the difference I had in mind was far more important.

It wasn't their physical might, either. A single look was enough to tell that these undead were significantly weaker than the ones in the Tomb Labyrinth.

The great difference I had in mind was that they were all *the result of someone's death.*

"...F-Fuck off."

I didn't know who I was talking to — probably the vile reality that had allowed the sight to happen — but those words were the first to escape my lips before I began repeating them in my head.

"How horrid..." Nemesis broke in.

I closed my mouth, rage overcoming me in the form of a dull grind of tooth against tooth, while Nemesis — despite having a phobia of the dead — showed far more pity than fear.

The undead horde was composed of very small skeletons. I was about two times taller than any of them.

They were numerous enough to cover the whole hallway.

Nobody had to say it. I knew exactly who they had been before they were... this.

"I'm gonna be sick..."

The tiny undead closed in on us, extending their little arms. Grasping worn-out weapons, they slowly charged at us — the intruders.

I'd seen similar things in the Tomb Labyrinth, but undead that were made from the corpses of people were far too different from those that were created as undead to begin with. Just looking at them was enough to fill me with emotions that I could hardly bear.

"It appears that the bandits have someone who can use necromancy among them," said Nemesis. "They've repurposed the children they killed."

"Are you okay, Nemesis?" I asked.

"Ha!" she laughed with no humor in her tone. "My fear is irrelevant right now. How could they do this to children?"

"I feel the same," I said.

With my eyes fixed on the undead horde, I couldn't help but wonder whether it was possible to save them. But I already knew the answer to that. The children were lost.

If there was a way to bring people back from the dead, this war-ravaged country would've done it ages ago. That meant that it either didn't exist or it was a method that even the kingdom couldn't do. As things were, I simply couldn't save them.

"Tell me, Nemesis," I spoke up.

"What is it?" she asked.

"What happens to the undead when they die?"

The undead in the Tomb Labyrinth — a created dungeon — weren't actual corpses, but mere creations. However, though they had the same names as the monsters back there, these Wounded Zombies and Civilian Skeletons before me had once been living beings. That made me wonder about what would become of their souls.

"I do not know," said Nemesis with a regretful tone. "Some are being used as nothing but empty corpses, while others still have their souls trapped in the bodies. I am not one to know what would happen to them when the vessels are destroyed."

"I see..."

"However, I believe it's best to end their painful existence as undead," she added.

"...Yeah."

The distance between me and the undead children became a mere five meters.

The dimly-shining lights on the walls lit up the faces of the zombies and made me painfully aware that some of them had traces of facial features from when they had been alive.

I tightly closed my eyes and stayed like that for a few seconds. Then I opened them and directed the back of my left hand at the undead children.

"I'm sorry."

I made my left Miasmaflame Bracer burn them all with a stream of Purgatorial Flames. Their thin bones, decaying flesh, and what little hair they had left were embraced by the intense blaze and quickly burned away. It only took a moment for them to lose their HP and continue burning as actual corpses, rather than undead monstrosities.

A black smoke shrouded the hallway before beginning to follow the ceiling up the stairs and mix with the white smokescreen.

I ended the flow of fire, making them stop burning, and leave behind nothing but cremated remains.

[Successfully eliminated over 100 monsters that fit the condition "Undead of the appropriate total level"]
[Due to fulfilling the job condition, "Paladin" and the elimination total condition, "Eliminate 100 appropriate monsters," the skill "Purifying Silverlight" has been acquired]

A message told me that I'd learned a new skill, but I felt no joy from the news. My heart was bogged down.

I stood silently. I slowly put my hands together. Like I would do while standing before a grave, I prayed for their happiness in the next world.

All of a sudden, an airflow created by the heat made a gust of wind pass through this underground hallway.

"*Thankyou.*"

As the wind blew by, those words entered my ears.

But I was certain it was just wishful thinking on my part. It was an illusion born out of my wish that their souls were saved.

"Master," Nemesis called out to me.

"Is this it, Nemesis?" I asked while placing my hand on my chest and trying to bear the heaviness of the situation. "Is this... Is this the feeling Hugo was going to mention back then?"

"...Yes," she said. "If, somewhere deep inside, Maiden's Masters don't believe this world to be just a game... If you acknowledge this world's lives to be just as real as those of your world...”

I was silent.

“...then the weight of the lives you shoulder in *Infinite Dendrogram* is much too real for you.”

“Too real, huh?” I asked. The harsh reality of the heaviness of life. “You’re probably right...”

This world was so realistic that it was hard to tell it apart from reality. Somewhere deep inside, I even believed that the tians living here actually had minds and souls. Even if my head told me that it was all just a game, I wasn’t able to shake that feeling. That was why seeing tians die to Gardranda had left such a bad taste in my mouth. It was also the reason why I’d gone all out to protect Milianne from such an ending.

This case was no different. Except now, all I had before me were a bunch of people who had reached such sad conclusions.

I didn’t know the courses of their lives. I had no idea how they’d ended up like this. They had been nowhere near me, so there was no way for me to know. However, the way they’d ended was just far too cruel for me to disregard it as your everyday tragedy, and the feelings overwhelming my heart were too powerful to ignore.

An aftertaste so bad that it seemed to burn my throat now permeated my chest, mixing with great amounts of sadness and anger.

“In this world — where lives are lost far more easily than in yours — this disposition you have might bring you great pain,” said Nemesis.

“...That’s true,” I said weakly. I was actually on the verge of crying. It was so bad that a part of me wanted to throw it all away.

I probably wasn’t the first to feel this way. Many of those who shared my nature probably couldn’t stand to experience this overwhelming pain of loss more than once and instead chose to never touch *Infinite Dendrogram* again. A side of me was actually urging me to do the same.

“However, I... Not yet.” I was still unbroken.

I still had to save the rest of the children. I still had a promise to fulfill.

And most of all, I still had to make sure that the shithead who’d created this sight got what was coming to him. I had to make him pay.

I shifted my gaze to the children — now nothing but dust.

Hidden under their remains was a piece of metal that had something written on it in *Infinite Dendrogram*’s common language.

It said “Maise’s Utility Child Civilian Skeleton, Specimen No. 87.”

It was a tag. That was all that child had been to the one who’d put it on.

The words and the number on it made me all the more aware that this enemy of mine was beyond redemption. Whether this was a game or not, I simply couldn’t let him be.

“Let’s go, Nemesis,” I said. “We’re bound to find him at the end of this hallway.”

“Understood!”

And so, we began walking forward.

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One of the two leaders of the Gouz-Maise Gang — Lich Maise.

“Hm?” I said. A drop in my Minion Capacity count made me aware that some of the undead under my command had vanished.

To be more specific, the dead units had just been the trash I’d made to kill some time. I’d left those little things in the underground hallway to act as sentries.

They were weak, so their only use had been as alarms. I had gotten worried about nothing. I’d thought I might’ve lost something of actual value.

It did catch me by surprise, however. I’d been aware that some intruder was causing a ruckus on the surface, but I’d had no idea that there was someone underground, as well.

“Gouz.” I used a magic item that kept me in contact with the surface.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“How are things up there?” I asked.

“I give it five or six more minutes,” Gouz answered. “It should all be over by then.”

“In that case, when our underlings are all dead, move in to crush the intruder,” I said. “I’ll take care of the rat here in the dungeon. Once it’s dealt with, we’re moving.”

“Gotcha,” he said. “Oh yeah, it looks like this’ll get me lots of packed lunches, so take some extra inventories for me, will ya?”

“Of course.” I had some empty inventories meant for corpse retrieval somewhere around here. I intended to take everything with me along with the inventory containing my ultimate treasure and ritual.

"Once you're done with the intruder, wait in front of the gate," I said.

"Sure," Gouz said.

I cut the connection.

That's the surface taken care of, I thought. Though our underlings were all weaklings still sitting on their first low-rank jobs, having faced all of them and surviving was no simple task. It meant that the intruder was quite tough. However, Gouz was on another level.

He'd reached the maximum level, had a high-rank job, and — when it came to the entire gladiator job grouping — he was surely among the top five in this country. If Figaro hadn't existed, it wouldn't have been strange for Gouz to have taken the seat of the Over Gladiator.

I, too, was at the maximum level. Not only that, but I was at this country's pinnacle when it came to necromancy, and had a Superior Job within arms' reach. I didn't know how powerful the intruders were, but as long as they weren't Superiors and didn't have Superior Jobs, there was nothing for us to fear.

However, something about them was highly curious.

"Just what *is* their business here?" I muttered. They should've been well aware by now that trying to eliminate us was not worth the effort.

Are they interested in our treasure? I thought. Even when the amount I sent to Caldina was considered, the money we had with us was great. If someone wanted to get rich quick, taking it would be a perfectly viable method.

However, if they were actually planning to delve into such daredevilry, it told me everything I needed to know about them.

"Well, now... I believe it is time to prepare a welcome to my inhuman intruder."

Chapter Four: The Two Leaders

High Pilot Hugo Lesseps.

The clan I was part of was a gathering of players that mostly focused on crafting.

Engineers, Mechanics, Pharmacists, Smiths... This world had many such jobs that produced all sorts of things, but when the work of tians and players was compared, most of the time, players were the ones that came out on top.

Just like with battle jobs, this was due to the abilities and bonuses to stat growth given to them by their Embryos. The quality of the item and the production success rate were dependent on skill level and DEX — not any real-life ability. Due to that, even a player who was a novice at the craft could produce work showing true mastery.

As my clan leader often said: “Unlike battle — which now involves moving your body — production in this game isn’t too different from how it was when MMORPGs weren’t VR. That’s why even the slowest klutz can do it.”

That wasn’t all, though.

“Mind you, that only applies when they’re making something that has already been made,” he liked to continue. “To create something new, you need the power to imagine it. When making something without the instructions, the necessary materials and inventiveness are on a completely different level.”

Infinite Dendrogram’s crafting came in two types — the production of known items and the creation of new items.

Both methods required the person to have sufficient materials, skills, and stats.

However, while known items could easily be made by following the instructions displayed on Recipes, the creation of new items required the creation of those very instructions.

Naturally, they weren’t easy to make, since they required a deeper understanding of the processes involved, detailed knowledge of this world's science and magic, and a proper grasp of the necessary materials.

Simply put, creating new items was far too taxing. Thus, even after half a year had passed since the game's release, Masters had still been making only known or slightly customized items.

That had changed with our clan.

Our clan leader had made a breakthrough in the game's crafting department. In hindsight, it had been pretty simple, for he'd merely begun gathering people who were skilled and knowledgeable in reality.

The Dryfe Imperium was a country that had machine technology. Though there were many differences — such as the fuel of the machines being magic — the Imperium's technology had similarities to what we had in reality. The clan leader had made good use of that fact.

He'd gathered various people who had knowledge about machines, which included graduate school students that had majored in mechanical engineering, skilled workers from automobile factories, designers of heavy machinery, and even those who were simply nutty about cars, trains, or weapons. And it was all for the goal of creating a new item.

Of course, people hadn't gone to him just because he was recruiting. The clan leader had begun to receive a significant amount of applications when he'd revealed a specific project of his.

Its goal was to create a humanoid battle robot.

Back then, Dryfe hadn't had any humanoid mobile weapon-type Magingears. When the game had begun, the only Magingears Dryfe had had in their arsenal were the powered suits nicknamed "Marshall" and the tanks known as "Geist." While bipedal, human-like robots weren't even being invented. Thus, the clan leader had made it his goal to create them.

Many people had been intrigued by the idea, so by the time the clan had been created, it'd already had dozens of knowledgeable and skilled people. They'd all quickly begun cooperating and working towards the common goal.

"All you need is knowledge, equipment, manpower, materials, money, imagination, skill level, luck, and guinea pigs!" the leader had announced when he'd kickstarted the project.

Clearly, it had been a demanding task. However, they'd been able to prepare everything they needed.

They'd mixed and matched their knowledges of machinery, compared and adjusted their magic technology, and performed lots of trial and error while trying to make it all click. There had been countless failures, great costs, and members leaving one after the other. However, they'd continued despite the many problems.

One of the senior members had compared the whole thing to something called "Project X," and there had been many who'd nodded to his words. I had been uninformed and knew nothing about that show, but it seemed to click with those from his generation — especially the Japanese people.

And so, after two months in real life — half a year in *Infinite Dendrogram* — all the trouble has finally paid off as they completed a new item.

The name given to it was "Marshall II." It was a mass-producible weapon with the power equivalent of a Demi-Dragon. The humanoid battle robot Magingear was a straight upgrade to a Marshall — the powered suit.

Once the Marshall II was complete and the Recipe became public, our clan quickly began growing into the largest one in Dryfe Imperium.

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The battle before the fortress was nearing its end.

"Hugo, five o'clock, one Gunner," said Cyco.

"Oui."

As Cyco scouted the fog and gave me directions, I acted accordingly by turning my frame and firing from the Hand Canon on my left hand.

The Gunner that was aiming at me with a magic gun failed to evade my attack, and the explosive shot from my MRW03 Hand Canon made him burst into little pieces, leaving only the arm that was gripping the weapon.

That gun is one of the Imperium's older models, I thought. *Looks like our technology is leaking through that country's black market again.*

"Six o'clock, two Fighters," said Cyco.

"Got it."

I made my upper half turn around and used the centrifugal force to cut them down with my SRW02 Battle Knife.

The first one was unable to react as it broke through his armor, flesh, bone, flesh, armor — in that order — and split him at his torso. The second one reacted and stopped my Battle Knife with his greatshield.

Unlike in reality, *Infinite Dendrogram's* Fighters of this vein were tough. Though a Marshall II had power that made most heavy machinery pale in comparison, many Fighters could — evidently — block mine's attacks and even harm it.

This one had both reaction speed and power.

However...

"Your legs are wide open," I said.

Making sure he didn't move by forcing him to struggle against the force of my Battle Knife, I used the Marshall II's legs to step on his. The robot's overall weight — which reached a whole ten tons — was far too great for his plated boots to handle, and his legs were crushed.

"HHHH?!"

The moment he released a voiceless scream and lowered the power on his shield arm, I used my blade — now free to move — to split his head in half.

"No enemies nearby," said Cyco.

"Got it," I replied. "Continue keeping an eye out. And dedicate extra attention to the direction of the fortress."

"Oui."

Apparently, I'd handled everything they've sent at me so far. The realization that I'd prevailed made me heave a deep sigh.

My Marshall II was standing in the middle of the battlefield, surrounded by countless bandit corpses. I silently looked around. The one responsible for this horrible scene was me.

I was fully aware that there were things to be said about me killing so many people, but my actions didn't make my heart hurt, nor did I regret them.

I'd known about the existence of the Gouz-Maise Gang before Rebecca had told me about them. In fact, I'd been aware of them before I'd even come to Gideon. During the research we'd done for *the plan*, I'd noticed them among the factions surrounding the city and engraved them onto my mind.

They had killed far too many children and far too many noble souls trying to save them. It was only natural for people who took the lives of other humans to — in turn — be killed by them, as well. I thoroughly believed that to be true.

Though, considering that I was an immortal Master, that belief might be insolent and contradictory.

“All right, now...” I muttered.

Though the result of the battle made it seem like my victory had been flawless, that was far from the truth. My own HP hadn’t dropped a single percent, but the damage to my Marshall II was severe. Due to the attacks it had sustained, about a third of its armor had come off, which had exposed the inner frame to considerable amounts of damage. The movement of its left arm had become quite slow, as well.

Special equipment like cars, ships, and Magingear didn’t have any HP displays, but if they did, my Marshall II’s gauge would be at about 30% of the total. That was a testament to just how difficult the battle had been.

Though a Marshall II was a humanoid robot straight out of science fiction, my opponents were all true inhabitants of this fantasy world. The axes they’d swung could break steel, and the arrows they’d fired had easily pierced through the robot’s armor. If my fellow clan members hadn’t increased the Marshall II’s stats by fine tuning it for better use by the clan’s Masters, and if I hadn’t given it the bonuses from a High Pilot riding it, I would’ve been overwhelmed by their numbers and lost.

I sighed yet again, reached into my inventory and took out an MP Recovery Potion.

Moving and fighting in the Magingear came at a cost to my MP. During the battle, it had dropped to a mere 20% of the total, and if I didn’t restore it, the damage to my Marshall II would be the least of my worries in the upcoming battles.

“Hugo,” Cyco addressed me.

I drank the contents of the bottle and replied to her. “What is it, Cyco?”

“It wouldn’t have been this hard if you’d used your Embryo’s skill,” she said.

“Indeed.” I nodded in response. She was completely right. If I’d used my Embryo’s skill, I could’ve won without getting as much as a scratch on me. After all, it was basically the natural enemy of people such as these.

However...

“I can’t,” I said. “I will only allow myself to use that skill after the plan begins. I am not touching it before that. That’s an order from the clan leader, and I made a promise to follow it."

"But no one's watching — not even Ray."

"Even so," I said. "If I were to use the skill before the plan begins, it would have to be a situation when I simply *have* to do it." And thankfully, it hadn't come to that.

"How stubborn," she said.

"I'm aware," I nodded. "Now, I wonder if there are any kidnapped children in those carriages."

I could easily help them right now, but doing so would made it obvious that using them as hostages would be effective against me. If another battle began while they were aware of that, the scum would begin using them to threaten me.

That would be fine if there were no more bandits left or if Ray had exterminated all the ones still at the fortress, but if some were still alive, trying to help the children in the carriages would be dangerous. I had to leave them there for now.

As such thoughts went through my head...

"...Heh," I grinned.

"Hugo," said Cyco.

"I know."

I sighed slightly and moved the levers to make the Magingear replace the Hand Cannon's empty explosive shot magazine with a full one it had hanging on its waist. Even while doing such a simple action, I couldn't help but be aware that the left arm's movements were noticeably duller.

"I could've put the Marshall II back in the Garage and fixed it up, but it seems I'll have to give up on that," I said. After all — I was all out of time.

Aiming towards the entrance of the fortress, I fired a shot from my Hand Cannon. It went through the open gates and exploded upon hitting the *thing* standing right behind them.

Any normal human hit by such an attack would've burst into pieces so small that none of them would've reached one kilogram in mass. However, that didn't happen to the creature standing there.

"Damn, that hurts!" it said. "It's kinda hot, too."

With those words, the thing showed itself while displaying no signs of injury or pain.

It was a demon of a large stature. Despite its head being that of an ox, the teeth lining its mouth were all hound-like fangs.

Its height almost matched that of my Marshall II. It even had to bend a bit to fit through the fortress' gates, which were twice as tall as the average person. A single glance was enough to know that it was on an entirely different level from the bandits I'd been fighting until now.

The sight of it made me tremble.

"...I assume you're one of the leaders of the Gouz-Maise Gang?" I asked.

"Ayup," it said. "Yer talkin' to one of the two great leaders of the Gouz-Maise Gang — Strong Gladiator Gouz."

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"Hugo, do you know about category-based personality analysis?" the clan leader had asked soon after I'd joined the clan. It had happened about a month ago in terms of reality's time.

The clan had already become the largest in Dryfe. It was known for having played a great role in the war and was flourishing in terms of both budget and human resources. There was no end to the Masters trying to join, and the total number of members was quickly closing in on a thousand.

Back then, I had still been a rookie whose total *Infinite Dendrogram* playtime didn't even break a month — a Master who'd just happened to join at that particular time. However, due to some things in reality, the leader had taken an interest in me and invited me into his clan. Because of those circumstances, he and I often had talks such as these.

"Is it something like blood type-based personality analysis?" I asked. "It certainly sounds like it."

I wasn't fond of the idea behind blood type-based personality analysis. Rather than trying to research my character by examining the traits I was born with, I preferred to strive to be someone I wanted to be. A person's character was best left for the person to decide. Whether here or in reality, I sincerely believed that to be true.

"Blood types, eh?" said the leader. "I don't like personality analysis based on that because the basis for it is extremely weak. I still think that brain — not blood — should be the first thing to look at if you wanted to know how a person ticks. Well, anyway...”

He reached into his inventory and took out a whiteboard. Then he began writing something down on it with a marker. He liked explaining things, so he always had those objects with him.

He also liked scheming, so he often used them to lay out the plans that came to his mind. It wouldn’t have been too bad if the schemes could be laughed off, but he often made plots which — while amusing to us — were nothing short of tragic to those affected.

A part of me was often disturbed by such plans, but the part of me that would stop him simply didn’t exist.

...Back to the matter at hand.

On the whiteboard, the leader drew a humanoid shape which represented a Master and wrote down several Embryo categories to the side of it.

“You know how, in the Zeroth Form, an Embryo examines the Master’s actions, character, and other personal things before using the results to go into the First Form, right? Well, some decided to turn it around, creating this idea that you can find out what kind of person a Master is by looking at the type of their Embryo.”

That made sense. Since Embryos were born from the inner workings of Masters, they were far more reliable than blood types.

“The idea was popular about one year ago in terms of real time,” said the leader. “I tried my hand at it, too. However, High-Rank Embryos and above had so many irregularities that I couldn’t make sense of them at all. There were even some Embryos like mine — completely unique in terms of typing. In the end, the only results that were somewhat reliable were those I got from four of the five base categories and a certain extra.”

The categories he wrote down were Arms, Guardian, Castle, Territory, and just “extra.”

“Boss,” I spoke up. “I don’t see Chariot among the five main categories.”

“Chariot, eh?” he repeated. “I actually didn’t notice anything definite among Masters with those Embryos. That’s why it’s not in my results.”

What a shame, I thought. I was actually quite curious about that category.

“Now, let me describe them for you,” he said. “Arms often belong to people who are courageous and unafraid to get hurt. Reckless, stupid, emotional, hot-blooded. There are many ways to describe them. Guardian Masters are the opposite — they're cowardly, afraid to get hurt, lonely, or just want to have someone protect them. These two fit the general image, don't you think?"

Weapons and defenses. When the nature of those Embryos was considered, that evaluation seemed to be quite correct. Though I couldn't help but wonder where non-weapon Arms were in all of this.

"Castle Masters are introverted, gentle, careful, cooperative, and have an artisan's temperament. Seems right, no?" he said. "Territory Masters have a lust for control, tend to hoard their stress, create rules for themselves, and are self-righteous and lone wolves. By the way, my Embryo's first category was Castle."

I see, I thought. So, depending on the person, there was room for objections. Especially when you considered the leader's personality and aligned it with the description of Castle Masters.

"There are some hybrids that mix several categories at once, so it's hard to be completely sure," he added. "But anyway, that's the main categories covered."

"So, boss," I spoke up. "What's the extra category?"

"Maiden."

His answer made my eyes widen, though only a little bit.

"Type Maiden," he said. "A rare category you will encounter every now and then. These Embryos have two main features. First, they're always hybrids that come equipped with another category. And second, their base form is always that of a human. Sure, there are Guardians that take the shape of humanoid monsters, but Maidens are always humans, through and through."

I was fully aware of those features.

"Just so you know, the term 'Maiden' is only used when their human form is female," he continued. "It's different when it's male, but those are just so damn rare."

"So, leader... what are Maiden Masters like?" I asked.

"They don't think that this world is a game. To them, the weight of the lives here is just as great as it is in reality."

His answer made me silently gasp.

"So, got anything to say about my deductions, Hugo?"

I had trouble formulating an answer to that.

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Finally, one of the two leaders of the gang had left the fortress and introduced himself as Gouz, the Strong Gladiator.

“Strong Gladiator” was one of the high-rank jobs from the gladiator grouping. I’d heard that it focused mainly on hand-to-hand combat. What mattered more than the job itself, however, was the fact that he even *had* a job, which meant that — despite appearing so monstrous — he was actually a Demi-Human. That reality was also supported by the fact that he could hold a conversation.

“Man, did you make a mess here,” he said. “My boys were such a nice little bunch, and you went and killed them all.”

“You say that,” I replied, “but I don’t see a hint of anger or sadness in you.”

“Well, yeah, means I get a buncha free meals, right?”

...This wretch, I thought.

“A kid’s meat is sweet and tender, sure,” he continued. “But every now and then, I feel like sinking my teeth into the bitter meat of an adult. Did ya know that adult flesh actually becomes more bitter and tastier the more of a dreg they are?”

“Sorry, but I’m a vegetarian,” I snapped.

“Really, now? Surprised ya can stay healthy like that. Guess that immortality you Masters have comes packaged with some tough bodies, eh?”

So he knew I was a Master.

“I was watchin’ the whole fight from the fortress,” he went on. “Your movements are too good. Don’t hafta be a genius to see that you’re not the usual soldier.”

“Heh,” I grinned. “Then you could’ve come out before I’d killed every single one of your underlings.”

“Oh, but having you take care of them saved us the hassle,” he said.

“...What?”

“Well, we were actually planning to move out of here,” he explained. “By ‘we,’ I mean me and the other leader, of course. The underlings and the brats were just in the way, ya know? We planned to kill and eat them all.”

The leaders were leaving their hideout and getting rid of their underlings? I thought. *What drove them to do that?*

“So what’s the reason?” I asked.

“Not telling,” he said. “Well, I don’t actually need any reasons. He said we’re doing it, so I’m just tagging along.”

So the other leader was above him, while he merely acted as his right hand man.

...That relationship reminded me of a certain someone.

“Thanks to you killing our underlings, all that’s left is to eat ’em,” he added. “Then just gotta take care of the brats in the dungeon... and the ones the boys just brought us.”

He shifted his gaze towards the carriages behind me... specifically, towards the children inside.

“I won’t allow that,” I said coldly. I made my Marshall II brandish the Battle Knife and aim the Hand Cannon at him.

“Ha ha ha!” he laughed. “Thought as much. But...”

Gouz lowered his center of gravity, and...

“Y’CAN’T WIN AGAINST ME WITH THAT BROKEN PILE OF JUNK, YA DUMB SHIT!”

...with a roar that seemed to shake the fortress — no, the whole ground around him — he charged at me while perking his shoulders.

In response to that unrefined — almost suicidal — attack, I swung my Battle Knife at him. Since the explosive shot from my Hand Cannon hadn’t worked, I chose to use my melee weapon — a means of attack with a more focused type of damage — to hit his weak point. Specifically, I aimed at his carotid artery, which was sure to become a fatal injury when damaged.

However, the result was far from my expectations.

“NOT GONNA WORK!”

My Battle Knife actually broke — not by his horns or claws, but by the skin covering his carotid artery.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

A moment later, Gouz’s large body rammed into my Marshall II and greatly shook the inside of the cockpit.

“MGHHHOOOOOO!”

Though the robot was several times heavier than him, his power was great enough to overcome that difference in weight. After pushing the Marshall II for more than ten meters, Gouz grabbed hold of its torso and threw it in an uncertain direction. Following a momentary floating sensation, the Marshall II crashed into the ground.

"Ghh! Ahhh!" Though the harness fixing me to the machine didn't show any signs of letting go, the force of the impact made the air escape my lungs. I hurriedly tried to regain my breath, but my respiratory system didn't seem to be functioning properly.

I then tried to move the levers to make the Magingear get into a proper position, but it didn't go too well. The Marshall II or myself — I couldn't tell which one was broken.

"Hugo!" said Cyco.

"Heh... ha ha ha," I laughed. "I underestimated him. This ox-head's tough. Clearly among the best high-rank job wielders. He could even aim for a Superior Job if the conditions were right."

However, that couldn't ever happen because the Superior Job of the gladiator grouping — Over Gladiator — had already been taken by that "Figaro" fellow.

Still, there was no denying that Gouz was strong. He could easily defeat high-rank Masters such as myself. Honestly, I wasn't certain if I could've won against him even if the Marshall II had been in perfect shape.

This robot's ability was equivalent to that of a Demi-Dragon. My level 7 Piloting skill increased its power by 140%, but that still wasn't enough to match this man.

"Hugo," Cyco said again.

"Yes, I can hear you, Cyco," I responded.

"Will you use the skill?" she asked.

I was silent. I still didn't know if that was a good idea.

My power was below that of Gouz. The gap between us was made even greater by the damage I'd sustained.

The Marshall II and I can't hope to win against this tough man-eater, I thought. *However, if I use the skill — my Embryo's skill — the result will change drastically. My victory will become certain due to the fact that he* is *a tough man-eater.*

However, I'd made it a point not to use my Embryo's skill until the project, and...

“Man, I’m really workin’ up an appetite here,” he cut my thoughts short with his words.

Hearing Gouz say that, I looked at him through the Marshall II’s cracked camera-eye. Despite being in battle with me, he was facing towards the other direction. Considering my condition, he might’ve been thinking that the battle was over.

Gouz was messing with a corpse of one of his underlings. He removed the armor, stripped off the clothes... and sank his fangs into the flesh.

“Mm, them’s good eatin’,” he spoke while eating, courtesy be damned. “It’s just so... complete. Wouldn’t expect less from my boys.”

With those words, bite by bite, he devoured his underling whole. As the sight filled me with an urge to vomit, I looked at my equipment window and tested the levers to determine the Marshall II’s condition.

More than 70% of the armor was lost, while the damage to the armor that remained was critical. The left arm wasn’t moving at all. The right arm’s movements were dull. The legs, however, were still mobile.

As for weapons... the Hand Cannon had been lost along with the left hand. The Battle Knife had been completely destroyed. The Marshall II had been rendered useless for battle.

“My choices are...”

...to use the skill or retreat without using it, I thought.

I couldn’t use the skill because of the plan.

I couldn’t let myself get the death penalty here because the plan was commencing tomorrow.

Thus, I had to run away...

But if I retreated, Ray was still here. There was the possibility that he could defeat Gouz. Therefore, even if I retreated...

“Main course over — guess I’ll have dessert!” He cut my thoughts short again and took something out of the bag hanging at his waist.

Once I realized what it was... my mind almost blanked out completely.

The thing in Gouz’s hand was about the size of a ball. Small eyes — open wide and filled with terror, swaying hair — long and drenched in blood... It was unmistakably a human head. The head of a little girl.

Gouz threw it into his mouth as nonchalantly as one would a piece of candy. The demonic fangs lining his oral cavity fell downwards, mashing the child’s skull with ease.

"Man, it's so good," he said. "Kid meat's tastiest when they know they're about to die, y'know that? But my appetite ain't quite sated yet."

Saying that, Gouz began making his way towards the carriage, and his intentions became immediately clear.

"Gh..." The deed I'd just witnessed and the realization of what he was going to do made all the hesitation in my mind fade away like it had never been there. What took its place was pure, unadulterated wrath.

"Hugo!" Cyco called out to me again.

"Cyco," I replied.

"Will you use the skill?"

"*You* already know the answer to that."

Though it was still severely damaged, I made my Marshall II stand upright.

"Gouz!" I yelled.

The ox-head turned around when he heard his own name called out.

"Huhh? Ya still awake, ya Master piece of shit?" he asked.

Awake? I repeated the word in my head. *How appropriate.*

Indeed — I had been half-asleep until now. I hadn't used the skill because of the plan. And because of the same plan, I'd chosen to avoid getting the death penalty and run away.

How thoroughly absurd. That wasn't *me* at all.

The Hugo Lesseps I strived to be wasn't this unsightly an individual.

Thus, I made my wrath known.

"I declare that I will no longer tolerate you!"

My words made Gouz laugh. "Ha ha ha! Big words, comin' from a Master who treats my entire world like a little game! You aren't the first of your kind to come here, and let me tell ya — none of the ones before ya were actually serious about whatever they were doing. You shits can't die in this world, so what's it matter to you? You can't ever know the fear of death my kind know!"

"Indeed," I said. "We Masters all enter this world with the intention to play. However, there are some that listen to the voices of those who call this world their home. Some that grieve when hearing the dying cries of the weak. And some who use that to set what they really are."

Thus, I had decided on my role in this world.

I was the thorn of a rose. A spike meant to pierce any and all scoundrels trying to ravage beautiful flowers and precious lives.

That was the true Hugo Lesseps. The role I'd willingly given to myself.

"Be aware," I said. "For the sin of ending lives too many to count, I will send you into the bowels of Hell."

Following the set role, I faced the scoundrel — Gouz — and declared, "My hell will destroy you." He would pay for all his sins.

"DO YOUR WORST, YA PIECE OF SHIT!" Gouz screamed in exasperation, and charged at me once again.

Another attack from him could completely destroy the Marshall II and kill me alongside it. However, that had no chance of happening at this point.

"Cyco!"

Cyco stood up on the robot's shoulder.

"Crest Disguise... Disable," she said. Through the camera-eye, I could see Gouz's face fill with surprise. It was only natural, considering what he'd just seen.

Cyco suddenly appeared on the Marshall II and made the crest on her left hand — the proof of a Master — disappear.

Indeed — Cyco was not a Master.

A Master of that name simply didn't exist.

Cyco's true identity was...

"Cocytus, it's time."

"Yes, Master."

Cyco — Cocytus — disintegrated to become a gathering of white and blue particles that showered the Marshall II, merged with it, and drastically changed its appearance.

The surroundings were momentarily overwhelmed by a whirling blizzard, followed by a brief whiteout.

In the center of it all stood Cocytus and I — taking the shape of a completely reconstructed Marshall II.

The robot was now equipped with new armor reminiscent of transparent, white ice. In its hands and on its head were cross-like blades that were made of blue ice.

Due to its replenished magic, the Marshall II's output was now greater than it had been when it was completely unharmed. Its appearance was reminiscent of an anthropomorphized church made of ice.

This was my Embryo.

The true form of Cocytus — a Type Maiden with Chariot.

“GRRROOAAAAGGHHHHHHH!”

Despite what had just transpired, Gouz didn’t stop his charge.

That was the correct reaction. Not knowing hesitation or fear, Gouz was a perfect example of a true warrior.

He was strong, indeed.

But it was already over for him. The moment I’d decided to use Cocytus’ power, Gouz had lost all chance of emerging victorious. It didn’t matter how tough of a man-eater he was.

The stage was set.

The gates of hell were opening to welcome another sinner.

“Omnes relinquite spes, o vos intrantes.”

After reciting the words etched onto the entrance to hell — “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here” — I activated the skill.

“La Porte de l’Enfer.”

Moments later, Gouz’s life reached a bitter end.

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Paladin Ray Starling

The world of *Infinite Dendrogram* had a job system.

Just as I had my “Paladin” job, so did other Masters and tians have theirs. The only people who *didn’t* have jobs were Masters who had just started *Infinite Dendrogram* and tian children.

Jobs were many and varied. Vanguard roles alone had job groupings such as Knight — which included my Paladin job — Swordsman, Warrior, Gladiator, Pugilist, Samurai, and so on.

Then there were job groupings for rearguard roles, support roles, crafting roles, et cetera... When summed up, they were just too many to properly grasp.

The catalog my brother had given me had the conditions for acquiring every low-rank and high-rank job. The entries there amounted to several thousands, and — naturally — I still had trouble remembering them all. The number of active Masters was several hundred thousand, and I had a feeling that — if jobs had been split evenly among them — there would’ve been fewer than one hundred people on each of them. Of course, the actual job distribution was nowhere near “even.” Rook’s Pimp job, for example, wasn’t too popular among Masters.

There was no denying that the number of jobs available for people in other MMORPGS was incomparable to that of *Dendro*’s freedom. But despite this overwhelmingly great amount, there was one job that was etched into my mind. It was one I couldn’t quite forget about.

It was a job named “Necromancer.”

Its selling points were its many debuff skills, offensive dark magic skills...

...and, of course, Necromancy — the skill that allowed one to turn corpses into tamed monsters at the cost of MP.

It could be used on both people and creatures without any problems.

Of course, the difficulty of turning a corpse into a tamed monster depended on how powerful the creature was when alive.

On the other hand, that meant that children — being nearly powerless — could be turned into undead without much trouble.

The catalog said that one of the conditions to get the high-rank job of the Necromancer grouping was related to the number of successful uses of the Necromancy skill. I’d read on the wiki that some tian criminals were Necromancers who used children and the sickly to increase that counter for that very purpose. Some theorized that getting the Superior Job of this grouping involved a similar condition.

The implications of the idea made me sick, so I’d etched the existence of Necromancers into my memory. And now, it all came back to me.

Trying to make sense of why the Gouz-Maise Gang was kidnapping children, I made my way towards the end of the underground hallway.

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It was a straight path without any branches, so all I had to do was go forward.

Although I didn’t encounter any bandits, I had to face some undead — adults this time — blocking my way.

They’d probably been made from corpses that had gathered here when the fortress had still been occupied by the army. Then again, they could’ve just as well been the remains of the adventurers the bandits had defeated.

I destroyed each and every undead in my way. Even if they had been people once, I couldn't let them stop me. If I did, the dead would just keep piling up.

Finally, I reached the end of the hallway, where I was greeted by a door. A heavy-set thing of wood, secured by a steel padlock, it separated me from the room behind it, where I felt the presence of living creatures.

"Hhgh!"

I swung my Nemesis down on the door itself, rather than the padlock. As pieces of wood scattered all over, I jumped inside and examined the surroundings.

I was fully ready to cut down any gang members that were awaiting me, but the only living creatures here were caged children.

There was a total of seven of them.

From their closed eyes, I could tell that they were in deep sleep. I didn't know which, but I had little doubt that one of them was Roddie — the one we had to save. Of course, I fully intended to save them all, quest-related or not.

I found it a bit strange that the children seemed to be the only people here.

"Not a single gang member?" I said in confusion.

"This room had a padlock on it, after all," said Nemesis. "It might be fair to assume they left the child-watching to the undead."

"I guess that makes sense." I cautiously examined the children and the condition they were in. Reaching through the grates, I gently shook some of them, but they showed no signs of awakening.

"I assume they're either drugged or under the effect of some debuff spell," commented Nemesis.

"Probably," I nodded. It was just my intuition, but I believed it to be magic. After all, the one who'd done it was probably the one who'd made undead out of those children in the hallway.

To him, they were just cards to use to get ransom money. And if it didn't come, he'd readily kill them and use his Necromancy to desecrate their corpses. I was beyond disgusted.

"Master, look to the right," Nemesis said.

I looked, saw another door — an iron one this time. Upon approaching it, I lightly spun the doorknob. The way it felt made it obvious that it wasn't locked and that I'd have no trouble opening it.

"Will you go inside?" asked Nemesis.

"Of course," I replied.

I spun the doorknob and quickly kicked the door open. I had already broken one door. If there was someone in here, then there was no reason for me to act all stealthy.

"Is that a...?" I began.

The first thing I saw after entering was a person. A young boy, to be precise. He was sleeping — just like the children in the cages. In the middle of the room, on the floor under him, there was a highly detailed magic circle.

"There's a lot to be said about the tastes of the owner of this room." Nemesis' voice was steeped in anger.

The magic circle on the floor wasn't the only thing she was referring to. In fact, the magic circle was tame when compared to the rest of the scene.

Stains of blood covered both the walls and the ceiling. *Something's* leather was heaped against the edge of the room. A nearby barrel was overflowing with white bones. The table next to the wall was covered in utensils and materials, but nothing really stood out until I saw a taxidermy construction of a right hand with twenty fingers, which compelled me to shift my gaze away.

I silently suppressed my rage. There was no denying that we were standing in the laboratory of the Necromancer who'd created those undead.

However, the Necromancer himself was nowhere in sight. It was safe to assume that he'd gone out to face Hugo.

The child on the magic circle was probably going to be his next guinea pig. We'd saved him by coming here.

"What now?" asked Nemesis. "Should we ensure the children's safety or go help Hugo with the bandit elimination?"

That was a hard decision to make. Saving the children was our primary goal, but carrying all seven of them somewhere safe would be too difficult for me alone. However, if I left them here and went out to fight, I'd increase the possibility of them being used as hostages.

My other option was to stay here and protect the children while Hugo took care of the bandits, but it'd all go to hell if Hugo got killed.

"Man, this is a tough one..." I sighed.

“For now, I think you should take that youngling to the other room,” said Nemesis. “I don’t know what kind of magic circle that is, but I don’t believe it’s safe for a child to sleep on.”

I nodded and moved towards the child in the circle.

After a few steps, I stepped on something that seemed strange. It was a particularly thick piece of cloth. At first glance, it looked like a thin mattress made of felt, but I soon noticed that it had a pair of sleeves sewn on it, making it clear that it was a piece of clothing — a robe, to be precise. What seemed strange wasn’t the fact that clothing was lying on the ground, but the fact that I could feel something hard under it.

I kicked the robe away to find out what it was.

“These are...”

...bones — that was the source of the hard sensation beneath my feet.

Their presence didn’t surprise me in the least. The nearby barrel was full of them, after all. However, I found it strange that half of the bones were those of a human, while the other half belonged to something else. The non-human bones were thicker and reminded me of a horse skeleton I’d seen in a museum once.

“How did human and horse bones end up lying in the same place?” I asked.

“I would guess they belong to a horse-man,” said Nemesis. “As far as I am aware, this is just about how their skeletal remains look.”

That reminded me that, back in Gideon, I had seen some members of a race that looked much like the centaurs from Greek myth.

I glanced back down at my feet. The upper body and skull bones clearly belonged to a human, while the bones that matched to the lower body seemed about the right fit for an equine. Indeed, there was little doubt that they belonged to a horse-man.

However, there were things to be said about their large size. I didn’t know that race’s average, but at the very least, it was clear that it didn’t belong to a child.

How did the bones of a mature horse-man end up here? I thought.

“The Necromancer might’ve somehow gotten his hands on one of their corpses and used it in his experiments,” said Nemesis.

“He would’ve cleaned it up if that was the case,” I argued. “After all, he’s already preparing his next guinea pig.”

I looked at the child on the magic circle. It didn't take a genius to see that the Necromancer was fully ready for the next experiment. He wouldn't have left the bones from a previous experiment just lying on the floor like this.

I mean, the madman is methodical enough to put all the other bones in that barrel there, I thought.

"Trying to understand the thought process of a madman is a fool's errand, if you ask me," said Nemesis.

"...No point in considering it, huh?" I muttered.

She had a point. My prime objective was to move that child away from here.

After using Nemesis to shatter the magic circle multiple times and making sure that I wouldn't activate some strange magic, I stepped inside and picked the boy up.

Sleeping on the cold floor had made his body temperature drop. Still, he was breathing properly and had a stable pulse. Slightly relieved, I began carrying him on my back and made my way out of the room.

Suddenly, I felt his breath behind me.

That was normal — considering where he was — but for some reason, a chill arced down my spine like lightning...

"Die."

I was unsure of where that word came from. But it was too late. I heard the sound of a blade slicing my neck.

Somehow I'd missed it, but the child on my back had a dagger in his hands.

As my carotid artery began oozing blood, I fell to the cold, stony floor.

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One of the two leaders of the Gouz-Maise Gang, Lich Maise

This world had a power most referred to as "Superior Jobs."

Out of the thousands of jobs available to humanoid creatures, those were the ultimate peak — available only to a select few.

Superior Jobs allowed people to surpass the limits of their corporeal form.

One of the people who had a Superior Job was the Arch Wiseman — the one they called the kingdom's guardian deity. His magic power was nothing short of divine. He could part the ground beneath and even bring down the heavens themselves.

However, in the war with Dryfe, the Arch Wiseman had been defeated by the King of Beasts — a Master and another owner of a Superior Job.

Though that had been nothing but a tragedy for the Kingdom of Altar, a number of people were glad that he was gone. After all — the throne of a Superior Job was exclusive to the one possessing it. With the kingdom's Arch Wiseman dying, the role of the Arch Wiseman became open for those wanting to take it.

I, too, was aiming for a Superior Job. However, it was a job completely unlike the Wiseman's.

The Superior Job I set my sights upon was at the apex of the Necromancer grouping. It was a job known as the King of Corpses.

Its power was far above the magic of common Necromancers... and beyond even the Necromancy of Liches — those who became undead themselves.

Anyone seated in the throne of corpses would be immortal, undying, and commanding power surpassing that of all the deceased. It was the only method to receive the undeath that only Masters had.

That was the King of Corpses.

I started leading the Gouz-Maise gang to further my efforts at getting this Superior Job. The kidnapped children were there to help me practice my Necromancy. The money was necessary for me to get certain magic items and to bribe Caldina.

In that country, money was the start and the end of the conversation. *Everything* in Caldina had a price. A sufficiently-greased palm could even get their army to act in response to movements from Gideon's soldiers.

Since this place was near the border, that made the kingdom hesitant to attack us because it could provoke Caldina.

Also, with all the Conceal and Presence Manipulation magic items I'd bought from them, the kidnapping of materials had become significantly easier. Blessed with abundant ingredients and the perfect environment, I was able to study the path of Necromancy to my heart's content and slowly made my way towards the throne of the King of Corpses.

Getting this Superior Job required the fulfillment of several difficult conditions and then passing a certain test. I had learned the conditions by deciphering an ancient text describing the secret processes.

The first condition there was “Turn 5,000 years’ worth of life into death,” which I’d easily achieved by making this fortress my hideout and having the gang work for me. Since I focused on children — who were both easy to convert into undead and still had long, happy futures ahead of them — it all went extremely smoothly. I needed fewer than a hundred of them for this, but since the undead were a great asset, I continued on doing it.

The second condition — which I’d achieved, as well — was the creation of a Crystal of Resentment. It was made by forcing enormous amounts of fear — or grudge, to be more precise — into a Crystal of Purity — an item that cleansed the corruption of the undead.

Gouz helped me a lot with this. The fear of the children he ate while they were still alive manifested in exquisite, sorrowful grudges.

Of course, the grudge I got from them when using the Anguish Circle to turn them into materials for the undead wasn’t too bad, either.

The once-white crystal that had emitted an irritatingly divine light was now blackened to the very core.

With that, I’d had already fulfilled the conditions to become the King of Corpses. All that was left was going to Legendaria — the place where the job’s throne was sealed — to clear the ordeal quest and make the title my own.

Both the fortress and the gang had outlived their use. Gideon would soon become crowded with some particularly pesky individuals. Before that happened, I planned to take Gouz — my only useful subordinate — with me, then destroy all the knowledge I might’ve left here and leave once and for all.

That was when a particularly reckless intruder sneaked into the fortress.

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“Die.”

A moment after I spoke that word, I heard the sound of a man dropping to the laboratory floor. I couldn’t see the look on his face, but the ground was drenched in his fresh blood.

Standing next to him was a child I’d magically controlled to slice open the man’s throat.

An undead would’ve easily been recognized by the description over its head, I thought. *In such cases, it’s better to use them alive.*

“So a child got you to let your guard down, huh?” I muttered. “What a fool you are.”

I began rebuilding my scattered body. Once my horse-man skeleton came together, I re-equipped my robe. Then, skin and leather began covering my bones before expanding to fit the flesh inside.

A moment before, I had been nothing but bones, which was made possible by one of my Lich skills — Corpsification. To the man now lying on the ground, I’d probably looked like a standard set of skeletal remains.

I was undead and had Lich — a high-rank necromancer job — as my own. Having such trickery at my disposal was only natural.

“Oh? You’re still alive?” I said while looking down at the man. Although he’d lost so much blood that the stream from his neck had significantly weakened, he still seemed to have a pulse. In his right hand, he held a black halberd with a flag trailing from behind. I tried identifying it, but didn’t get any results. That could only mean one thing: the weapon was an Embryo and the man was a Master.

“You’re still conscious, too?” I spoke again. “Well, it matters not. The dagger was coated in a Poison and Paralysis-causing fluid, specially concocted by yours truly. A Lich’s poison is nothing to sniff at, either. You’ll die without being able to do anything about it.”

The Bleeding and Poison was draining his life, while Paralysis sealed all and any movement. Shame that he was a Master — I could’ve harvested a truly potent grudge from him if he hadn’t been one.

Masters were a terrible source for grudges. When killed, they would simply come back to life three days later. Compared to tians, their fear of death and resentment towards their murderers was simply... mediocre. Not only that — their absolute immortality made them live as though everything was just a game.

That was exactly how the party of Masters that’d attacked this place had been. My magic and Gouz’s strength had been more than enough to take care of them, but since I hadn’t even been able to turn their corpses into undead, they’d been absolutely useless to my Necromancy work. Masters irked me to no end. Their treatment of this world as a plaything, and the fact that they automatically had immortality... the one thing I had decided to make my life's work.

...Oh, that made me remember. The first party to come here had been comprised entirely of tians, and the grudges I'd collected by torturing them had been simply superb. Ah, the fun I'd had back then. Their corpses had become some excellent materials, too.

Turning tians into undead was extremely easy. I was rather intrigued by the idea of making undead out of Masters, as well, but for now, I had to make due with merely getting rid of them whenever they intruded.

By now, Gouz had probably taken care of this man's ally on the surface. All I had to do now was leave the fortress, go where I must, complete the ordeal, and become the King of Corpses.

"With that in mind, it's time to move out and head towards Legendaria," I muttered.

As I made my way towards the laboratory door, I noticed the materials... the children I'd put to sleep in the other room. I'd nearly forgotten.

"The gang act is over," I said. "Better kill all the children and turn them into materials for my undea... hm?"

The moment I said that, I saw the fingers of the man on the ground twitch a little bit. That small action — combined with the look on the side of his face — made me realize something.

"Did you actually come all the way here just to save the children?" I asked. "It wasn't for my treasure?"

He didn't say a word. Not like he could, considering his current condition, but his reaction was more than enough.

"Hah... hah... HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" I placed my hands on my belly and laughed out loud.

No other reaction was appropriate. How could I *not* laugh?

"Hahahahahah! An inhuman immortal? Going out of his way to save a few brats? Ghahahahahahah! Oh my, quite a heroic way to play you've found, Mister Master."

Thought you'd roleplay as some champion of justice, huh? I thought. The fact that *this* was where it had gotten him filled me with great bliss.

"Heheheh," I continued laughing. "All right, this is how it will go. I'll create some lovely little undead creatures, and you will watch it happen until the poison kills you. Who knows? You might learn something. After all, I’m quite skilled at it, if I say so myself. But that is only natural, considering that I’ve already created hundreds of them!”

In response to my words, the man on the ground exuded some horrific, traumatic emotions.

Excellent, I thought. *It appears that even a Master can be a good source when properly agitated. But even more than that, as one who will soon be the King of Corpses, I know now that I will thoroughly enjoy the freedom to look down on any and all immortal Masters.*

“Now, then...” I said. “The children with thick-looking bones will be turned into Skeletons, while all the others will do fine as Zombies. Oh, but it might be a good idea to turn these pretty-looking ones into taxidermy pieces and sell them off somewhere. Despite appearances, my hands are quite dexterous, so I’m actually pretty decent at managing the finer details. Some men of culture value my work quite highly.”

In response, I got more angry silence.

Ah, the joy, I thought. *This is pure bliss.*

I’d never have expected to have this much fun with a Master. His sorrow was like the perfect seasoning.

However, it was time to end it.

“Now, let’s start with the brat that cut your neck!” I exclaimed. “First, I’ll have him cut his own neck and—”

Suddenly, a gust of wind...

...followed by the sound of something hitting the ground.

“...What?” Confused, I looked to where the sound came from and saw something very familiar.

It was a left hand, covered in magic rings. Magic rings that had cost me a fortune.

Isn’t that... my own left hand? I thought, stunned.

“If you... are...”

The man whose defeat was all but certain slowly spoke up. His right arm was raised in the air.

“If you... are not among the living...”

The blade of the halberd he held was emitting a noble, white gleam. I recognized it. It was imbued with the bane of the undead — Purifying Silverlight.

“If you... lost sight of what it means to be a person...”

He slowly stood up and faced towards me. The neck wound that was surely there less than a minute ago had disappeared without a trace.

“If you... are the one responsible for *that* scene...”

His expression had neither the weariness of Poison, nor the heaviness of Paralysis.

“If you... claim that you will keep on doing it...”

The only real emotion on his face was in the light in his eyes — a blaze of pure rage.

“...then I *will* kill you.”

It was the first time I had seen a Master — one of those immortal, inhuman beasts of undeath — make such an expression.

I couldn’t articulate it completely, but what I felt was dread. Utter and unmatched dread.

My instincts were screaming, telling me only one thing:

Run! He is going to extinguish you.

“■■■■ — Abyssal Delusion!”

Dead Man’s Bind!

I quickly used the most vile hexes I had at my disposal. They were two high-rank debuff spells — one was vocal and came accompanied by a chant, while the other came from the magic item on my right hand and didn’t need any words.

Abyssal Delusion was a powerful hex that gave the affected the Death Sentence, Weakness, and Deterioration status effects, making them rot and become corpses while still alive. Dead Man’s Bind was another spell with three debuffs — Binding, Curse, and Lethargy. Together, they gave a total of six particularly powerful status effects.

This combination had sent many of my enemies to their deaths. Anyone unlucky enough to receive it was rendered completely immobile.

“Ghaah!”

Yet *he* didn’t stop. As though he’d reversed the effects of my hexes, he became more intimidating and horizontally swung his halberd — shining with Purifying Silverlight — towards me.

“Guh?!” I exclaimed. If I had been but a step closer, his attack would’ve split my torso.

I couldn’t let that happen. Taking fatal damage from *him* was something I had to avoid at all costs.

I was a Lich — an undead master of magic. Most of my wounds would mend a moment after they’d happened. I could lose an arm or get my body split in half — no such damage was critical to me.

However, in this case, the mending didn’t work at all. In fact, the arm he’d cut off had already turned to dust.

That was only natural. After all — he was wielding Purifying Silverlight. It was a gleam used only by a limited number of Paladins and Temple Knights — a light meant for the sole purpose of purging the undead. No matter how great of a Lich I was, I couldn’t come back from a fatal attack by a weapon blessed with that loathsome shine.

The fear of death overwhelmed me. It was a feeling that had become alien to me over time. It was a feeling that would never again strike me once I became the King of Corpses. But here and now, it was raw. It shook my very being.

“Awaken Undead!” Using my Necromancy, I activated the undead monsters I'd stored in the barrel in this room.

Countless Skeleton Soldiers answered my call.

However, they meant little.

There was no chance of them winning against this *aberration*, but it mattered not. They only had to buy the time I needed to run away.

As the undead began charging at him, I turned around and left the laboratory. If I stayed any longer, I knew it would become my grave.

Then — as my breath became ragged — I ran towards the surface through the underground hallway. Once we Liches became undead, our hearts and lungs ceased their function and were replaced by a gathering of crystallized magic. Thus, physical lack of breath was something I should never have experienced again. And yet, I felt as though I was suffocating.

"Why is a Master...?!" Through my ragged breath, I voiced my dread. "Why is one of those immortal abominations... *actually furious*?"

This fear was unknown to me. The fear of *that thing's* emotion. The terror I felt towards that aberration.

Terror — that was the word. Having one of those abominations direct such pure killing intent and rage towards me was nothing short of terrifying. After all, that meant that an immortal, indestructible animal would be hunting me for all eternity.

I had to escape. Anywhere near that aberration was certain death, so I had to leave this fortress and run where he could never find me.

I had to do it — and I *could* do it.

Though I was a Lich, my Agility was greater than his, so it would be perfectly possible for me to distance myself from him.

Reaching the surface would mean regrouping with Gouz. Then, I'd simply have to make him fight the abomination while I made my escape.

"I can do it...!" Picturing that future made me relieved.

Due to me being a horse-man, the underground hallway's soundscape was dominated by the sound of my horse legs hitting the floor.

However, the sound soon mingled with another.

"...What?" I burst out.

Its source was approaching me from behind. Systematic, yet rough impacts on the ground — the sound was exactly the same as the ones coming from under my feet. It was the sound of a galloping horse.

"Gh...!"

Unable to bear the tension caused by the approaching sound, I turned around.

What I saw was far beyond my imagination. It was an artificial, silver horse, speeding through the underground hallway. And to the side of it was the abomination.

For some reason, he wasn't riding it. The aberration was holding the silver horse's reins with his right hand, scraping his leg armor across the ground. It was reminiscent of a Granvaloan water sport.

In his left hand, he was still holding the halberd as the flag flowing out of it fluttered wildly in the air.

Why isn't he using his Riding skill? I thought.

That way of riding it should soon break his legs and render them useless, right? But why doesn't it look like he's taking any damage?

The strange sight left me with several questions, but their answers didn't matter.

What mattered was the fact that he was still chasing me... and that the horse was faster than me, meaning that he would soon catch up.

"AAAAUUUGHHHHHHH!"

Disregarding my shame and reputation, I screamed in fear while running towards the surface as fast as I could.

On the surface, I would meet up with Gouz. He could buy me all the time I needed to run away.

"Awaken... AWAKEN UNDEAAAAD!" Not slowing down whatsoever, I activated the undead monsters I had buried in the walls for emergencies such as these.

They were called "High-End Skeleton Warriors." I had made these high-rank undead by using the corpses of skilled tians. They were the remains of the party Gouz and I had taken care of.

Six High-End Skeleton Warriors stood between me and him. Though turned undead, they had all been owners of high-rank jobs once, so there was a chance that...

"Out of our way!" two voices — his and another, feminine one — said that at the same time. A moment later, the mass of silver went through the Skeletons and returned them all to dust.

The halberd in his left hand and the hooves of the man-made horse ended my undead in a blink of an eye. I then noticed that not just the halberd, but the entire body of the steed was shining with the Silverlight.

"Aaagh?!"

That was no living horse — it was a piece of equipment. Emitting the Silverlight and galloping at a great speed, it pulverized all and any undead that touched it.

It didn't matter if the undead were high-rank. The thing was the bane of *all* undead. It was a silver bullet that brought forth the ultimate end.

"GGGHAAAHHHHH!"

Completely desperate, I used the moment my undead monsters had bought me to climb up the stairs leading to the surface. With the Master being dragged by the horse, he couldn't get up the stairs properly. It ought to affect his speed.

A moment before he could catch up, I ran up the stairs and escaped to the surface.

"GOUZ! GOOUUUZ!" I screamed while dashing through the fortress.

Once I ran through the hallway on the first floor and could see the gates of the fortress, I was overcome with relief. That was because I saw Gouz's face.

A moment later, that relief changed into despair.

That was because Gouz's face... was the only thing there.

I couldn't grasp what had happened, but Gouz's dismembered head — completely frozen — was impaled on the gate.

Wh-Where did his brawny body go? I asked myself. It was nowhere in sight. All I could see were pieces of frozen meat, scattered all over the area outside the gate. Two of those pieces — placed close to each other — looked much like Gouz's feet.

Right next to them stood an anomaly looking much like an anthropomorphized church made of ice — an enemy of my kind if I ever saw one.

"Choose your fate, sinner," spoke the anomaly. "Which end do you desire? Hell, or Divine Retribution?"

I instantly understood what it was talking about.

It was telling me to choose to meet my end, either at the hands of the icy anomaly or the silver aberration.

"No!" I shouted. "This is not happening!"

I can't die here! I've come so far! And now, when the throne of the King *of Corpses is within arms reach, I...*

"Why...?!" I voiced my despair yet again. "What...?!"

What did I do to deserve this?!

"Very well," the anomaly spoke again. "Divine punishment it is."

It then pointed an icy blade towards something behind me.

I turned around and saw the silver aberration.

The abomination had caught up with me.

A sound thick with dread escaped my mouth. I could no longer run or hide.

Th-There must be something I can do! I thought. *Don't I have a teleportation magic item on me? No?! I should have something! I just...!*

"Huh...?" As I dug through the inventory in my robe, my fingers touched something that made me gasp. I slowly took it out. It was a pitch black, crystalline object that emitted no light whatsoever — a Crystal of Resentment.

"No..." I said in despair. I held the obsidian-like object in my hand. It was an item without which I had no hope of becoming the King of Corpses. Creating it had required me to lead the Gouz-Maise Gang and spend nearly a year sacrificing a great number of children.

However, aside from being the condition for becoming the King of Corpses, the crystal was also the ultimate medium for the Necromancer grouping's magic. Using it here was painful, but...

"If I die... it will have all been for naught!" I screamed.

I had to pick between dying and using the Crystal to survive, so I gladly picked the latter. If I didn't, the time and effort I'd dedicated to my cause would've all gone to waste. I simply had to survive and do it all over again in some other town. After all — the time, the work I was willing to dedicate and the sacrifices were endless.

As long as I'm alive, I can restart as many times as I have to! I thought. *Indeed — I cannot let myself die here! Dying to this accidental encounter is unacceptable!*

"YOU DISGUSTING, MONSTROUS CURS!" I roared while filling the Crystal of Resentment — my greatest treasure — with great amounts of magic. **"YOU MONSTERS WILL NOT TAKE MY LIFE FROM ME!"**

After reforming the wicked feelings within the crystal to pure destructive energy, I released it all towards the abomination, fully aware that it would destroy the fortress, as well. After all, it was the strongest offensive magic skill any Lich could have.

“DEADLY MIXEEERRRR!”

With great dread and frenzy overwhelming me, I unleashed the most powerful attack I’d ever cast. It was great enough to instantly eradicate a Pure-Dragon. There was simply no way for him to survive it.

“Counter Absorption.”

And yet...

“Ah...? Ugh...? Eahhh...?” Confusion escaped my mouth in the form of strange sounds. The magic I’d dedicated my entire being to was blocked by a barrier of light he created before it. “Th-This cannot be!”

The shock made me lose my footing and fall to the ground. A moment later, the abomination was right in front of me.

“Ghah?! N-No!”

The moment I attempted to stand up and run away in fear, his halberd — still emitting a silver gleam — penetrated my torso and pinned me to the spot.

“GYYAAAHH!”

I was unable to move — both due to the halberd piercing me and the pain caused by Silverlight — and the aberration stood before me.

“Stop... running,” it hissed through its ragged breath.

“W-Wait!” I said. “I won’t run! You caught me!”

Escape was impossible at this point, but I still had to survive, even if it meant begging for my life.

“L-Let’s make a deal!” I spoke in a panic. “M-Money! I’ll give you money! I still have lots of it! 70,000,000 lir, to be precise! It’s yours! Take it all, but please, let me go!”

The aberration said nothing.

Yes! I thought. *He reacted to my offer! I don’t care if I have to give him all my coins! I have already sacrificed my Crystal of Resentment! Money is a small price to pay for survival!*

“Hhaaahh...” He sighed and extended his right palm towards me.

Excellent! It worked!

“Khah! Hahahah!” I laughed. “G-Give me a moment. I’ll just take it all out of the inventory, so—”

“Your life is payment enough,” he said, cutting my words short.

“Eh?”

As confusion overtook me, his open hand changed into a fist, and the bracer on it began to emit that painfully-familiar silver light.

I heard my own skull crack and squelch. And then I was gone.

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Paladin Ray Starling

The headless corpse of the Lich became dust and began to crumble.

At the same time, my body quickly became too heavy for me to stand properly and I dropped to the ground before I could do anything to soften my fall.

“Looks like... it’s over,” I forced out a mutter. My status window displayed Poison, Paralysis, Death Sentence, Weakness, Deterioration, and a number of other debuffs. There were so many that keeping track of them all seemed like a fool’s errand.

However, the fact that the status effects I’d gotten from my opponent had come back left me with no doubt that he was defeated.

“Like a Flag Flying the Reversal.” That was the unique skill that Nemesis had gained with her second form — The Flag Halberd. It reversed all the debuffs given to me by hostile creatures. On the flip side, that meant that it would stop the moment the relevant hostiles were dead. The return of his debuffs was the ultimate proof of his death.

The moment after he’d manipulated the child into slicing my neck, I’d made Nemesis go from her greatsword form into The Flag Halberd and activated the Reversal. Thus my reaction to the debuffs displayed in my status window. Once the skill was active, Bleeding began to increase my bloodflow, Poison healed me, and Paralysis upped my physical abilities.

The damage I’d gotten from the surprise attack had been healed by the reversed Poison while I was still on the ground. Once that effect had closed the wound on my neck, the Bleeding status effect had completely disappeared.

Later, when he’d hit me with those debuff spells, I’d turned them all into buffs, as well. Though I’d felt that some of them didn’t seem like they got reversed, it was clear that I was under no negative effects.

He’d ended up greatly buffing me and reversing the power balance.

He'd also had the problem of compatibility. The Purifying Silverlight was a skill meant for purging undead, and that was exactly what a Lich was. Also, Silver had been a great help in catching up to him when he'd run away.

Of course, I still didn't have the Riding skill. So I hadn't been *riding* him, per se. I'd merely let Silver gallop towards the Lich while I held on to him, letting my feet get dragged along the floor.

It hadn't been too different from one of those generic Western flick scenes where people got pulled around while tied to horses. In that state, my feet had gotten continuously damaged, but I'd been able to cover it with the healing from the reversed Poison.

Once on the surface, I'd blocked his final spell with Counter Absorption. Though it was far more powerful than Gardranda's flames, we had somehow been able to handle it.

For a moment, I'd thought the debuffs would make me collapse, but after the attack had been done, Nemesis had quickly changed back to The Flag Halberd and re-activated the Reversal, letting me come out of it unscathed. Then I'd pinned him with down with my weapon and ended his life with my fist.

This whole battle had been extremely dangerous to me. I had only managed due to the convergence of several very specific circumstances. This wasn't a feat I'd be repeating any time soon.

"...I got really lucky here," I said.

"I know all the reasons why we emerged victorious, but even I can't help but think the same," Nemesis agreed.

Perhaps fate itself helped me hunt down and punish the scumbag who toyed with the lives of countless children, I thought.

I silently looked at my hand. The sensation I'd felt when I'd pulverized his head was still there. Either due to him being undead or because of my Silverlight, it had felt much like shattering a withered tree, but it'd been there nonetheless.

Though he was a piece of filth beyond any redemption, he was also the first tian I'd killed.

If I — being a Maiden's Master — felt as strongly about this world as I did about reality, this killing might cause me pain.

"I have nothing against such considerations, but you should leave it for later," said Nemesis.

"Nemesis?" I asked, slightly puzzled. She had already returned to her human form and was looking down at me.

She pointed at one part of the status window — specifically, the Death Sentence debuff. Upon further inspection, I noticed that it had a counter next to it, saying "362 seconds."

Is this one of those debuffs that kills you when the counter reaches 0? I thought.

"So, Master, do you happen to have any anti-debuff medicine?" she asked.

"I've got some Antidotes for poisons, but I never expected to get a debuff like *this*," I said.

This is bad... Really bad. At this rate, I'll get the death penalty.

Hugo was here, the children were safe, and the gang was eliminated, so I didn't have to worry about any of that. However, dying would mean missing the time we'd agreed on with Marie. I didn't like that scenario at all.

"Curse you, you wretched horse zombie!" shouted Nemesis. "You just *had* to leave us with this parting gift!"

"...Crap," I muttered. Due to all the debuffs on me, only my mouth worked properly, so I couldn't even hold my head in despair.

Nemesis began rummaging through my inventory to see if I had something that could help me. Silver — who I still hadn't called back — was looking down at me in a somewhat worried manner.

"You should drink this." Something hard was pushed against my jaw.

I looked and saw Hugo — who'd just jumped out of... what I could only describe as a see-through ice robot with a Magingear inside — pushing a potion against my mouth.

Once I gulped down the contents, my body became so light that it felt as though the debuffs were never there.

He followed it up with another potion. Once I drank that one, I looked at the status window and saw that all the status effects were gone.

"I'm healed!" I cried.

"Indeed you are!" said Nemesis. "You have our thanks, Hugo!"

"You're welcome," he smiled.

"What was this medicine, anyway?" I asked.

“An Elixir and a curse-removing High Spirit Water,” he said.

“And you didn’t mind giving them to me?” I asked.

“Not at all. After all, they came out of the inventory of the one I defeated.” Hugo pointed at the ox head hanging on the gate.

I looked at that general direction and saw a number of items lying around the remains.

Some of them were bottles, just like the one I’d just drunk from.

“Why are the items scattered like that?” I asked.

“His inventory broke with my attack,” answered Hugo. “I, uh... might’ve overdone it.”

That made me remember the tutorial, when Cheshire had said that *this* was just about what happened when an inventory shattered. Though the power of the release often left the contents break, it was the easiest way to take the possessions of others. Due to that, some bad guys chose to attack rich people and spread their items all over the place.

The other ways to take someone’s items were the Bandit grouping’s Steal skill — which directly stole the items from people’s inventories — and the Burglar grouping’s Plunder skill — which switched the ownership of the taken items to the user. When I’d learned that, I had wondered why these two skills were in different job groupings despite not being *that* different.

“Hm? Is that a...?”

I noticed the inventory of the Lich I’d defeated peeking out from under his robe. While mine had the shape of a bag, his was a black, cube-like box.

In his last moments, he had been reaching into it to take his money and buy me off. So, by breaking that, I could probably get the money and some of the rare items he owned, but...

“I don’t feel like touching the stuff left behind by that freak,” I said.

His life was more than enough for me. Also, it was easy for me to imagine how he’d come to have those riches, and that didn’t make them look attractive at all.

“I share the sentiment,” said Nemesis. “That money is so dirty that simply picking it up might sully our hearts.”

“I understand,” said Hugo. “Feel free to leave it there, then. Someone will come across and take it eventually.”

“True,” I nodded.

Though, with the defeat of the Gouz-Maise Gang, this fortress was now as abandoned as it had been before they'd made it their hideout. It was uncertain if anyone would ever set foot here again.

Then again, reporting this event to the Adventurers' Guild would probably cause them to launch an investigation. It might be a good idea to tell them to gather any treasure the scumbags had left behind. Perhaps the money would become cleaner if it was used for the good of society... and those who'd suffered due to the gang's vile deeds.

"Oh yeah, Hugo," I said. That thought reminded me of something. "I encountered some kidnapped children in the dungeon. Eight of them are still alive. From what I can tell, they've been put to sleep via magic. I'd like us to band up and carry them outside, so... Wait, where's Cyco?"

We were done with everything here, and yet she was nowhere in sight.

I recall her leaving her party slot before the battle began, but she wasn't showing up at all anymore, so... did she get the death penalty?

"Cyco's fine," said Hugo. "Give me a moment. Cyco, come here... Yeah, it's fine."

He said that while facing the Magingear clad in armor that looked much like an icy church. A moment later, the armor scattered into countless white and blue light particles.

Without the frozen armor, the Magingear collapsed, making Hugo say something about getting a spare one from some "leader." However, Nemesis and I were more interested in where the light particles were heading. They all gathered in one spot and took a humanoid form.

"Hellooo."

It was the Master clad in white — Cyco. However, she no longer had the proof of Masterhood — the crest on her left hand.

Also, the way she'd changed shape was like a differently-colored version of Nemesis' shapeshifting.

"I see," said Nemesis. "So Cyco and I... are birds of a feather."

"Yes," she nodded. "My real name is Cocytus."

"Birds of a feather...?" I raised an eyebrow. "So she's actually a..."

...Type Maiden Embryo — the same as Nemesis. And Hugo was her Master.

"But didn't she have a crest on her left hand before?" I asked.

"It was there because of Crest Disguise — a skill unique to Type Maiden

Embryos," answered Hugo. "It makes their hands and status displays look like those of a Master."

"I had no idea such a skill existed..." I said, slightly surprised.

"They get it after a while of fighting in their human forms," he said.

During my entire play time, I had yet to let Nemesis fight on her own. Obviously, I didn't have it.

"What use is that skill, anyway?" I asked.

"You'd be surprised," said Hugo. "Due to them being unique and unpredictable, Embryos are powerful wild cards. With Crest Disguise, you can make it seem like there are more Masters — and thus, Embryos — than it appears."

So you can use it for bluffing, huh? I thought. *I feel like it might have other uses, too, so perhaps we should learn that skill ourselves.*

"Anyway, now that we're all here, we should go to the dungeon and take the children back to the light of day," I said.

"Agreed," nodded Hugo.

Nemesis, Hugo, Cyco, and I all began making our way towards the fortress' dungeon.

With there being four of us and with me having Silver, there was a chance that we could take them all in one trip. Also, with the Lich being dead, the children might've woken up from his spell, so we had to hurry up and calm them down.

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The surroundings of the abandoned fortress.

"...Are they gone?" a voice asked.

"Yeah, they went in the fortress."

In the forest surrounding the abandoned fortress, in an area that had even denser foliage than the route taken by Hugo's Marshall II, there were five suspicious-looking men.

"I didn't expect the bosses to get beaten," said one of them.

These were the remnants of the Gouz-Maise Gang, and the very same five men that Ray and Hugo had encountered back in Gideon.

After Ray and Cyco had beaten them up and handed them over to the guards, some of their allies had jumped out and rescued them before they could be jailed.

After that, they'd followed the gang's carriages from a considerable distance — just to make sure that they weren't followed — and when they'd reached the fortress, they'd found their hideout and fellow gang members being completely destroyed.

They'd been lucky that they were in a place where Cyco's Enemy Detect skill couldn't reach them. Thus, they'd been able to hide it out and survive the massacre.

"What now?" asked one of them.

"What do you mean, 'what' — we're getting outta here!" answered another. "We can't do shit against monsters that can kill our bosses, who were pretty damn monster-like themselves."

"Crap, that means that we have to leave all the treasure behind." One of the men — specifically, the one that'd gotten punched by Ray — clicked his tongue in frustration. "...Oh, wait." He seemed to have just gotten an idea. "Yeah, *that's* what we should do!"

He nodded, completely satisfied with himself.

"The hell's got into you?" The other men looked at him, completely confused.

"They're in the fortress now, right?" he spoke up. "So it's a good time for us to take all the money and items the bosses left behind! Also, we can easily take the brats in them carriages there. We can use them to get the ransom money or just sell them somewhere in Caldina. Or maybe we can buy our way into some other local gangs!"

"Oh, man!" another man cried.

"That's an idea I can get behind!"

Their fellow gang member's suggestion made the other men turn joyous.

"There's no better time than now, then..." said one.

"Yeah!" howled another. "Let's get the items and the brats and get the hell out!"

They then split up. Some began gathering the items, while the others linked the living horses to the carriages with the children.

However, one of them — the one that'd suggested that they do what they were doing — was tilting his head near Maise's corpse, which was nothing but dust now.

"What's up with you?" asked another man.

"Boss Maise's inventory isn't broken," he answered. It was the very same inventory that Ray and Hugo had decided not to break.

"Huuhh? Break it, then, retard," the other man said. "All of us who had Plunder have already croaked, so that's the only thing we can do here."

As was natural for a band of brigands, the gang had people with Steal and Plunder skills. However, all of them had died to Hugo's Marshall II.

"True that," the man nodded. "Guess I'll do just that, then."

The man took out a dagger and — with great force — pierced through the inventory. Naturally, it broke and released its contents all over the area.

"Whooaaaahhhh! Get a load of all these coins!"

"Seriously! I don't think we even have to be bandits anymore! We can live like nobles with this!"

"We have the brats, too, so maybe we should start being Slave Dealers!"

"Good idea!"

The money Maise had left behind made them all imagine a bright future. They were surrounded by great riches. Just as Maise had said to Ray, the amount he'd had on him was over 70,000,000 lir. Of course, there were many rare gems, equipment pieces, and materials, as well.

With all of this, they could easily make all their dreams come true. Their futures would become even more secure after the next step. Every man was thinking it at this point. Every man wanted to kill the others and make all of the riches their exclusive property.

However... that was completely impossible.

"Huh?" one spoke in confusion. "What's this?"

He picked up an item that was lying on the ground. From its outline alone, it looked much like a hen's egg. However, it was dark red in color and had a single area on it that looked much like an eyelid.

At first glance, it didn't look too different from the materials owned by Maise the Lich, but the man holding it wouldn't have said the same.

He had a high level Identification skill and could identify just about every item he came across, but he didn't get any results for the egg-like object. It confused him, for he'd never had any problems identifying materials or monster eggs. However, it was obvious that he couldn't see what the thing in his hand was. After all, it wasn't an item, a monster, or any other living creature, for that matter.

It was nothing but a *curse*.

“Awakening.”

A voice rang out from every inch of the shell as the egg opened its “eyelid.”

“Eee!”

It surprised the man into attempting to throw it away, but the egg seemed to be stuck to his fingers like a strong vacuum.

“What?”

“What’s wrong?”

The other men called out to the one who’d screamed — their faces still grinning due to the great amount of coin in their hands.

If they’d had the mind to realize that something was wrong and run away, the man with the egg in his hand would’ve been the only one to die.

However, that was hopeless. Anyone with that amount of sensitivity to danger would’ve never touched the belongings of Maise in the first place.

Maise had been among the greatest users of Necromancy in the Kingdom of Altar. Not only was he extremely thorough in his work towards becoming the King of Corpses — he was also a man who made use of people in a way most couldn’t fathom.

He was the type of person to discard his most precious Crystal of Resentment — a necessity in becoming the King of Corpses — just to survive. He also hadn’t hesitated to try prolonging his life by trying to buy off Ray with all the riches he’d amassed.

If a man with such an attachment to life were to be killed and had his treasure taken away...

Just what would he do?

Just how far would he go?

The men were defeated the moment they didn’t consider those questions.

“Destruction of inventory: confirmed,” said the egg. “Search: Lich Maise’s Magical Wavelength... No response. Termination of Lich Maise: Confirmed. Assumption: plundering by hostiles. Invoking final spell — Undead Grudge Construction.”

Once the voice had finished speaking, the fingers of the man touching the egg were sucked into it. Much like sewage going down a drain, his body began falling *into* the egg, his body cracking and spurting out blood as his form was compressed.

“AUGH!! UuGgh!! EeuGH!!”

Leaving only his completely inhuman screams, the thing that was once a man disappeared into the object.

The egg gained in size, becoming about as large as the egg of an ostrich.

“EEEEEK!”

“WH-WHAT THE HELL?!”

The spectacle made the other men panic, and they turned around and attempted to run away.

A moment later, the egg released pipes reminiscent of blood vessels and forced them into the backs of three out of four men that tried to escape. And — as if drinking juice through a straw — the egg began sucking the men into itself.

“GHHHY! JAUHGHH! EIHH!”

“EGGH... UGHAAAHH!!”

“ASSHHDIEDEAAAGAUGHH!!!”

Experiencing pain beyond their imagination, the men disappeared while speaking words that didn’t belong in the realm of the sane.

“AAAAAHHHHH!”

The only survivor — the one who’d suggested they take the riches to begin with — dropped to the ground in fear and tried backing away while wetting himself. He thought the egg would launch a pipe at him, as well, but for some reason, it didn’t happen. Instead, the egg began extending pipes towards the corpses surrounding the area.

The remains were numerous. All of them belonged to the Gouz-Maise Gang members who’d lost their lives in the battle against the Marshall II. The pipes reached into the pieces of meat scattered by cannon shots, the body halves split by knives, the corpses crushed by the robot’s frame, and the head of Gouz hanging on the gate.

That wasn’t all — the egg’s surface also grew a funnel-like organ that began absorbing something invisible — *the grudges* — from both the air and the ground beneath. And — though his body had already become dust — that also included the regrets, hatred, and sorrow of Maise the Lich. All the flesh and grudge it’d gathered made the egg expand once more.

It was now an orb that seemed to mix the size of a gas tank and the fragility of a balloon. The scene before his eyes put the last survivor of the Gouz-Maise Gang into a complete stupor.

Soon enough, the orb cracked.

A moment later, it broke and birthed a beast too foul. A beast too hideous.

It was the ultimate result of the Gouz-Maise Gang and all they had done.

It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that this creature — this gathering of villainous flesh and emotion — was like a being straight out of hell. The corpses of hundreds were linked together like a jigsaw puzzle, forming the shape of an ox-headed horse-man.

Instead of blood, the only thing flowing through its veins was ill will, malicious grudges.

The gathering of the deceased showed nothing but disdain for all living creatures and moved only with the dark intention to make the whole world as dead as they were.

And, of course, the first target of its grudge was...

"Ah... Eh... Aahh?" ...the last survivor of the Gouz-Maise Gang.

The abomination's cadaverous hands grabbed hold of the man. Then it switched to holding him by the arms — with only its thumbs and index fingers — before beginning to pull on them. The action was so slow that it almost seemed gentle.

"AGH! AAGHYAAAAAHHHH!"

Slowly, surely... like a child toying with an insect... it continued pulling until one of the man's arms was torn from his body. Then it did exactly the same with the legs. And when the man was left with only one limb, the ox-headed horse-man opened its large mouth.

Though the pain he was in drove the man to the edge of insanity, he still had enough mind to understand why the creature was doing what it did. After all, he'd seen it happen many times during his days with the Gouz-Maise Gang.

"Ahaha... am I the... dessert...?"

Torn apart like an insect, the man was finally pulled into the ox's mouth and crushed by the countless, lethal fangs there.

And so, the Gouz-Maise Gang became one. Literally as one, they all composed a single being of hatred.

While the metaphorical sense might've been noble and grand, what was actually happening here was nothing short of vomit-inducing.

It was the birth of the most hideous undead.

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[Non-player announcement]

[Discovered a monster that meets the conditions to be recognized as a Unique Boss Monster]
[Confirmed that no similar specimens have existed prior]
[Informed the control AI managing UBMs]
[Received approval from the control AI managing UBMs]
[Recognizing target as UBM]
[Strengthening the target's ability and providing it with the upon-death special reward function]
[Granting the target Epic status. Granting the target the name of "Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise"]

Chapter Five: Revenant Ox-Horse

Paladin Ray Starling

The children had already woken up by the time we got to the dungeon, likely because the Lich had fallen.

At first, they thought we were with the bandits. They began to cry with fear, but thanks to Cyco and Nemesis calming them down, they soon believed that we wouldn't harm them.

As it turned out, Roddie — the child our quest requested us to save — was the very same boy that'd slit my throat back in the lab. He had no memory of ever being controlled, so I didn't see the need to bring it up.

When we were about to take the children back to the surface, I saw Hugo — who'd been looking around the lab — inquisitively examine the documents he'd found on the table there.

"Research on grudge, the Crystal of Resentment... and that's not all," he said. "It looks like he'd been studying the means of creating a Flesh Golem that uses grudge as its power source. Heh, reminds me of that one prototype we had. I guess people thinking the exact same thing exist everywhere in this world. Though I'd never have expected anyone to create something like this completely on their own... It's both impressive and horrific at the same time."

He put the documents he'd been examining into his inventory.

"What are those, Hugo?" I asked.

"Oh, just the research papers left behind by the Lich who made this fortress his hideout — Maise or whatever he was called. The concept is similar to the one behind a robot our clan was researching a while back, so I decided to take it to them. You know — as a souvenir."

"A robot?" I asked. "What does grudge have to do with that?"

"Let's go. I'll explain on the way."

We began walking out of the dungeon, and I was instantly met with a certain problem. Because they had been sleeping for so long, some of the children had become weak, rendering them unable to walk properly. Due to that, we had them ride Silver or carried them on our backs, but...

"Woof woof! Woof woof!" one of the kids cried.

Yep, I still have the dog ears, I thought. *And the kids just can't stop playing with them.*

"Me next! Me next!"

"No, me!"

I'm not sure how I feel about this popularity.

The relatively lively children were pestering me for a piggyback ride just so they could reach the dog ears.

"Looks like they're a big hit," smiled Hugo.

"...Good to see they're useful for *something*," I replied.

But man, they sure last a long time, I thought. Flamingo had told me they'd be gone by sunset, but it was already evening and they still didn't show any signs of disappearing.

"How curious," said Nemesis. "The lack of the Horse Riding skill made you fall down the first time you got on, yet these younglings can ride without any problem."

Getting the children out of the dungeon was a task that needed more people, so Nemesis was in her human form. She held Silver's reins as he was strutting forward like a pony.

Since it was unlikely that they had the Horse Riding skill, I was wondering about that, too. I could only assume that making Silver run while riding and simply leading him by holding the reins were completely different things.

"Okay," I spoke up. "So tell me about this thing about grudge and robots."

"All right," nodded Hugo. "The clan I'm in is focused mainly on crafting, and our current main products are Magingears. In fact, the Marshall II — Dryfe's official mass-produced machine — started out as an original item made by us."

That robot was actually built from scratch? I thought.

"Since Marshall II's completion, we've been developing new models, variation models, and better-armed models, but recently, we've been making plans to merge it with other crafts," he went on. "One of those plans focuses on the creation of a machine that uses dead people's grudge as a power source."

"Well, that sure doesn't sound good," I commented. "Why did that plan even exist?"

"Because all of Dryfe's machines — not just the Magingears — are huge MP sinks," he answered. "Replacing that MP with grudge would allow us to operate for longer and simplify the usage of stronger weaponry. That's the grudge power plan."

"How can grudge become power, anyway?" I asked.

"Heh," Hugo grinned. "You saw the answer to that just a few minutes ago, didn't you?"

I did? What does he mean?

"The last magic skill used by the Lich — Deadly Mixer."

"Oh, that," I said.

That attack had been immensely powerful. If I hadn't blocked it with Counter Absorption, I'd have vanished along with the fortress. In fact, the skill was even stronger than Figaro's chains. It was just that Counter Absorption was tougher now, due to Nemesis being in her second form, so the attack this time just barely hadn't been strong enough to break through it.

"That was a vile skill that turns grudge into destructive physical power and releases it at the target," Hugo continued. "Our craftsmen thought that — provided it was released on a smaller scale and handled more carefully — the same power could be used to power our engines. After all, this world already has Living Armor, which move due to the souls of the dead haunting it."

Living Armor, huh? I thought. *A not-too-uncommon monster type in fantasy RPGs.*

"One of our members said, 'If this goes well, we might create a weapon that absorbs the grudge permeating the battlefields and stays active semi-permanently,'" Hugo quoted. "Our clan was intrigued by the idea, so we got the help of a famous Master from the Necromancer grouping and began researching the utilization of grudge power, but..."

Hugo suddenly stopped talking, making me instantly understand how it must've gone down.

"It failed, huh?" I said.

"And how." He nodded. "The prototype was a failure that was both hard to control and had a tendency to go on a rampage. I helped with its disassembly and disposal. It happened back when I was still leveling up my Mechanic job."

"So, you're saying that the Lich... Maise had the same thing in his research paper?" I asked.

"Not at all," he said. "Though modified, the thing we at The Triangle of Wisdom were trying to build was but a machine weapon, while this is more along the lines of a Flesh Golem."

Flesh Golems were exactly what it said in the name — golems made of joined human or animal flesh. They were common in the more grotesque RPGs.

Now that I think about it, though I've encountered a number Zombies and Skeletons here, I haven't seen a single Flesh Golem... I thought.

"But if the Lich did such research, why didn't he use it?" I asked. "It sounds pretty strong."

"Clearly, it was because he couldn't control it," said Hugo. "The problem with the grudge power plan was that it involved absorbing the grudge from the surroundings. That was the prime obstruction to any success it could've had."

Hugo momentarily stopped talking and made the child on his back sit on his shoulders instead. Then, with his hands free, he raised up both of his index fingers.

"When a Necromancer uses grudge to power a Living Armor or a Flesh Golem, he normally uses a single person's grudge or soul for a single unit."

He then raised all of his fingers on only his right hand, indicating either "five" or just "many."

"However, grudge power absorbs all the surrounding grudge," he said. "And it doesn't matter how many and varied the source creatures are."

That was enough for me to understand the problem.

"So the individual grudges start fighting for the lead, and that makes the thing impossible to control, right?" I asked.

"Right," he nodded. "At least, that's what happened with the experimental machines our clan created. Our people then tried using both magic techniques and programming to ensure control, but apparently, their efforts were in vain."

Grudge-powered creatures seemed comparable to action game characters that were being controlled by tens of people fighting for the controller. There was no way they'd act properly.

"In the end, they went on rampages and began acting based on the consensus of the grudges," he went on.

"Consensus?" I raised an eyebrow.

"It always boiled down to the expansion of the grudge. They'd begin attacking either undead or other grudge power machines and attempt to merge with them. Then they'd react to the grudge — and negative emotions in general — of the living, and attack them instead. They'd continue rampaging like that until they broke."

...Man, that sounds bad, I thought.

"And so, the project was a failure," Hugo continued. "It was made clear that, while the grudge of many could be gathered and used for offense with skills such as Deadly Mixer, unifying and controlling it was a fool's errand."

"I see." I nodded.

As we talked, we finished going up the stairs and finally returned to the surface.

"...Huh?" I said.

A moment later, Nemesis, I, Cyco, Hugo and even the children... all shook with dread.

I could feel weak vibrations below me and heard voices coming from the outside — though it was arguable whether the term "voices" was appropriate. It was more like a choir of the macabre. Weeping, crying, sobbing, bellowing and just about any other possible sound representing negative emotion. That was more than enough for me to grasp that something alarmingly abnormal was happening outside.

"...Hey, Hugo." Urged by the bad feeling I had — or, rather, the very certain chills going down my spine — I spoke up.

"Yes?" he replied.

"If grudge power isn't controllable... what would happen if you used it regardless?"

"Heh, that's obvious," he said.

Beyond the gates leading outside, within the light of the sun sinking to the horizon, I saw the shadow of something massive.

"The uncontrolled grudge-powered thing would start absorbing the surrounding grudge, converting it into power, reacting to negative emotions, killing the source if it’s alive, and once again absorbing the residual grudge,” Hugo said.

I heard a loud roar and felt the ground under my feet vibrate as the massive *thing* shuddered and shifted.

“It would repeat that ad infinitum... and thus you’d have a rampaging monster equipped with a semi-permanent engine.”

The beast outside the fortress came into sight. It looked like it came straight out of hell.

The first thing I saw were its repulsive legs, clearly made from human corpses. Then, as it moved nearer, I became certain of what it was.

The creature with the words “Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise” above its head was a gigantic undead that seemed more abnormal the more I looked at it. It had the head of an ox, the silhouette of a horse-man, and dead, familiar faces mixed in with the parts forming it. And it had a naming pattern used only by Unique Boss Monsters.

The visages of the dead were voicing words or merely sounds that were thick with negative emotion.

They were the Gouz-Maise Gang members that Hugo had killed. I could even see the faces of those we’d encountered back in Gideon.

...That was enough for me to conclude that it was made of the corpses of the gang.

“I see,” said Hugo slowly. “It looks about the same as the predicted result.”

Hugo took the documents out of his inventory and began looking through them. Sure enough, there was a picture of an ox-headed horse-man with countless dead faces on it.

“So he prepared for his own death by making a plan to create that thing by sacrificing everyone in the Gouz-Maise Gang,” I said.

“Or perhaps he merely planned to use the surrounding corpses, and it just so happened that the ones around him were those of the bandits,” added Hugo. “The ox-head, however, was a guaranteed ingredient.”

Well, he’s certainly following the plan, I thought.

“ＦｆＧｇＳｓｓＦｆｆＳｓＤｄｄＷｗＳｓＳＤｄｓＳＤｄｅＥＷｗＤＡｓｓＳａＡＡａａＡａＡ———！！”

Gouz-Maise was passionately smashing something to pieces, letting out a roar no sane mind could comprehend.

Exposed to that noise, and such violence, the children started to scream in fear. Cyco embraced them to make them feel safe and gently tried to calm them down.

"Is that your...?" I began.

I noticed that the thing Gouz-Maise was breaking was the Magingear used by Hugo. Even though it no longer had a hint of its original shape, the monster didn't stop attacking it. Since it was running solely on the power of countless grudges, it was currently on a warpath. Due to that, I'd have expected it to spread its violence with no rhyme or reason, but it seemed to focus solely on the Magingear.

Are most of the ones that became the "ingredients" of that thing actually acting united due to their collective grudge towards Hugo and the robot? I thought.

"I'm the one who killed most of them, after all," he said. "It's only natural for my Marshall II to become its target."

So, even in that state, they haven't forgotten their resentments from when they were alive... Wait, no. It's more like that resentment is all that they are.

"Heh." Hugo grinned. "I feel like I'm looking at Rodin's Gates of Hell."

"Ironic of you to say that, Hugo," said Cyco.

The Gates of Hell, huh? I thought. *Yeah, watching this gathering of dead sinners is much like looking at that sculpture. And on the note of Rodin's sculptures, it's high time I stopped being The Thinker and actually did something about that abomination.*

"Well, Master?" spoke Nemesis. "Do we defeat it?"

"I'd love to if I can, but..." I could feel it in my bones. That thing was stronger than even Gardranda. Hell, I was certain that ten out of ten fights between Gouz-Maise and Gardranda would end in Gardranda's defeat.

"Man, creating UBMs is just unfair," I mumbled.

"Normally, it'd be completely impossible," said Hugo. "I know a person who can do something similar — with a higher standard, too — and even he has yet to create a single UBM. In fact, if it were possible to mass-produce UBMs, someone would be making them nonstop. After all, defeating them gets you special rewards."

So they could constantly create items such as my Miasmaflame Bracers, huh? I thought.

"That 'Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise,'" he continued, "is the result of several unfortunate superimposed coincidences.”

“Accidents?” I raised an eyebrow.

“First of all, this place is bad,” he said. “It’s an abandoned fortress on an ancient battlefield. There are tons of corpses filled with grudge right under our feet.”

He pointed at the ground, then at himself.

“Second, I killed most of the gang. Due to that, the surroundings became thick with the grudge of vile scoundrels and got covered in fresh corpses. Corpses of people from a single group, even. There was even the Strong Gladiator Gouz — a real tough guy.”

Next, he pointed at me.

“Third, you cornered Maise and pushed him into using the Crystal of Resentment — a concentrated gathering of grudge — as a medium to release a Deadly Mixer. Though you survived it, the dense grudge that didn’t get used with the skill was released into the air. And let’s not forget the Lich’s own grudge after you killed him.”

Finally, he pointed at Gouz-Maise.

“Lastly, someone activated the grudge-powered undead creation spell that was mentioned in the papers — Undead Grudge Construction. It used the surrounding grudge and corpses to form a grudge-powered Flesh Golem. However, due to the conditions being far too good, the resulting undead greatly surpassed its original specifications and — because of how abnormal and otherworldly it was — reached the realm of UBMs. With a slight change of perspective, it’s safe to say that this creature is the child born from you, me, and the Lich.”

“Well, that sure sucks,” I said. “So, what now?”

“We simply lack the power to face it,” replied Hugo. “It’s far too strong an enemy for just two high-rank Masters and their low-rank Embryos. Not only that, but — as things are — it’s highly incompatible with Cyco’s power, and... well, just look at my weapon.”

After shifting his gaze at the Magingear — which was reduced to a pile of scrap with pieces so small they could each be held in hand — Hugo heaved a long sigh.

I could still use Vengeance is Mine in the same way I’d used it against Gardranda, but it would be far more complicated in this case. Since the battle with the demon, I had gotten some levels, equipped the Miasmaflame

Bracers, learned Purifying Silverlight, and become stronger overall.

However, the difference between Gardranda and *that thing* was just far too great. Its size alone was at least four times greater. Its height was about the same as that of an eight-story building. And naturally, its stats were much higher. I wasn't confident that I could survive until I charged up the damage needed to kill it. I also had only one more Counter Absorption use.

There's little doubt that I'd die if I fought it, I thought.

"True," agreed Nemesis. "...Hm?"

What's wrong? I asked.

"I just felt something strange... but it instantly went away. Was I just imagining it?"

"Ray," Hugo addressed me. "For now, our priority should be taking the children — including the ones in the carriages — and leaving this place as quickly as possible."

He pointed at the two carriages with the newly-kidnapped children inside them. Unlike the one at the front — which Hugo had destroyed with his preemptive attack — those two were in fine shape.

It was good thing that Gouz-Maise was too busy destroying the Magingear to do anything to harm the children. I could only assume that it was because they were sleeping, and thus weren't releasing any negative emotions that could've attracted it. Whatever the case, it was good that they were okay.

"Yeah, the carriages look ready to go at any time," I said. Both of them were already linked to horses.

Why didn't it attack the horses, though? I thought. *Does it only react to people?*

"Thankfully, both Cyco and I have the Piloting skill," said Hugo. "It works with carriages, too, to a certain extent, so we can both handle one carriage each."

"What about after we escape, though?" I asked. "Just leaving it there to do its thing doesn't seem like a good idea."

"We'll go to the Adventurer's Guild and tell them everything about it," answered Hugo. "It's a UBM, after all. There will be lots of Masters who'll go after it to get the special reward. Though, since I'm with Dryfe, you'll have to be the one to tell them about it."

"All right," I nodded. "Now, let's find the right timing to get to the carriages and... Ah!”

As we were about to act out the plan we’d set up, the situation suddenly changed.

We had been too unobservant...

...and we had failed to consider a certain scenario.

“Mommyyy! Daddyyy!”

It was the scenario in which the children in the carriages woke up and walked out of them.

“ＧｇＨｈｕＵｓＳｓＤｄＳｓｓＤｃＣａＡａａＳｓｓＷｗｇＧｂｂＢａＡＳＡａＡＡ！！”

Releasing a scream that nature surely didn’t intend, Gouz-Maise turned around. Its gaze became fixed on the crying children, all exuding the negative emotion we knew as “fear.”

“ｇＧｏＯｌｌＬｆｆＦｆＡａＳｓｓＡａａＡａＡａａＡ！！”

It was hard to tell whether the action was caused by the consensus of all the grudges, or the *eating habits* one of them had had while it was alive. However, Gouz-Maise’s intentions were clear the moment it began running towards the children. Its right arm was extended towards them, saliva was pooling from its mouth.

“Damn it!” Before I could even think things through, I’d jumped out through the gate, and aimed my left bracer at the abomination. “Purgatorial Flames — full power!”

The Miasmaflame Bracer began violently draining my MP and converting it into fire. Though it was less intense than the deadly flame once used by the Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda, the blaze I launched could easily reduce a hundred standard undead to ash, and it went straight for the arm that Gouz-Maise was extending towards the children.

“ＹｅＥｇａａＡａｘＸＡｘＳｓＡａａＡｆＦｆａａＡａａＡａ？！”

The way it screamed and swung its arm around was enough reason to believe that — despite being reduced to an amalgam of corpses — Gouz-Maise still felt pain.

“Take this! Gahh!!” Making use of the opportunity, I closed in on it and swung Nemesis — blessed with the Silverlight — at its front left leg.

The undead-killing shine split apart the dead faces of the gang and severely damaged both flesh and bone.

Though the leg was too thick for my attack to sever it, it was enough to make the abomination lose its balance.

"Cutting it feels awful!" Nemesis squealed in disgust.

Gouz-Maise dropped to the ground and made it shake like a demolished building would. As I'd somewhat intended, the monster's body landed in the direction opposite to the carriages.

"Hugo!" I shouted. "I'll divert its attention! Leave this to us and get out of here!"

"Ray, but you...!"

I knew what he wanted to say. If the carriages left, I wouldn't be able to run away from Gouz-Maise. Though I had Silver, I couldn't ride him, and my legs weren't fast enough to let me outrun the abomination. My death penalty would be guaranteed, and I'd end up missing the time we'd decided on with Marie.

However...

"There's no other option!" I shouted again. "Hurry up and get the children out of here!"

I brandished Nemesis, kept her blessed with the Silverlight, closed in on Gouz-Maise's head — which was near the ground due to it falling over — and swung at its eyes. Though my prime objective was to buy time for Hugo and the children, I still wanted to try my best to survive... and perhaps even win.

"ＧＥｅｅＨＡａａＡｕＡａｓｓＳａＡｇＧＡａ！！"

As liquid rot oozed out of its eye sockets, Gouz-Maise began to writhe. Due to its great size, the vibrations caused by that action were like a minor calamity.

"This thing's body is unexpectedly fragile," I commented.

"It's a gathering of cadavers, after all. It's only natural for it to not be particularly tough," said Nemesis. "However..."

"...Yeah, I expected it to have such tricks up its sleeve."

Once the fire on its arm faded, new rotten flesh popped up from under the carbonized skin. The leg, too, fixed itself while releasing some filthy fluids. The eyes I'd split fell out of their sockets and were replaced by new ones.

"It has Automatic Restoration," said Nemesis.

But undead hit by Silverlight are supposed have wounds that will not *heal,* I thought. *How can it restore itself from that?*

"I believe the grudge power is being used to sustain and mend its large corpus," said Nemesis.

And that allows it to come back from such great damage in mere seconds? Is it unkillable or something?

"Well, it's already dead," said Nemesis.

"Not the time for such jokes!"

Still on the ground, the UBM swung its left arm at me, which I avoided by jumping backwards.

The swing seemed rather clumsy — probably due to its eyesight not being back yet — but it was still aimed at my direction.

Backing away from the carriages, I focused on evading its attacks.

“What now?” asked Nemesis. “We’ve opened hostilities on the fiend, but we don’t really have anything that would be effective against it.”

“The regeneration is too fast for most of our attacks to have any meaning,” I said. “If there’s something we can do, it’s...”

...the same thing we’d done against Gardranda — a well-charged Vengeance aimed at its weak spot.

“Though the charging process would be really difficult here,” I muttered. The fiend’s defense was much lower than I’d expected, but the way it was rampaging was more than enough to show just how powerful it was. One or two good hits would kill me.

“It would’ve been grand to have a full stock of Counter Absorptions, but... oh, there’s that strange feeling again,” said Nemesis.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s the same feeling as before,” she said. “It has something to do with my accumulated damage counter and... Oh, it’s gone again. What am I supposed to make of this?”

“Gouz-Maise might be up to something,” I said. “Be on your guard.”

“No need to tell me that.”

As I talked with Nemesis, I looked at the carriages at the edge of my vision. Hugo and Cyco were sitting on separate carriages and were about to drive off.

I was about to make sure that Gouz-Maise didn’t attack them by cutting its leg again but... the abomination wasn’t moving at all. Instead, it simply used its freshly-healed eyes to stare directly at me.

“ＧｇｉｉＩＮｎｎＮＮｎＡｓＳａａＡｓＳｓｓａａＳａＡａＡａＳＡｄＤＷｗＤｗＷｄＤａＡＱｑＡｑ！！”

Acknowledging my form made it feel or remember something that caused it to release a furious roar.

“...Oh, I see,” I said. A few minutes ago, the grudge of those who had become materials for Gouz-Maise had caused it to go on a rage and vehemently attack Hugo’s Magingear. However, this monster had been created by the Lich himself, whose grudge was in it, as well. Thus, its primary target was...

“...me, of course!” I yelled.

Gouz-Maise raised its front legs and reared like a horse. Then, with great speed, it threw its pillar-like front legs towards me and the ground beneath.

I quickly evaded it, but the attack was powerful enough to pulverize the ground and sink it slightly. Not missing the opportunity, I closed in to attack a leg again, but unlike before, it nimbly kicked me away.

"GUH!" I blocked it with the broad side of my greatsword, yet I still got blown away about six meters back.

"...Well, looks like someone got in the mood," I said.

Unlike before, when it had simply been rampaging, Gouz-Maise was now moving with the intention to kill me. Apparently, seeing me had caused it to get serious.

"How troublesome," I mumbled.

"However, I now see a glimmer of hope for us," said Nemesis.

"What? How?"

I checked on the carriages at the edge of my vision. They were moving away from here.

Well, that's one success, I thought.

"You know how I told you about my accumulated damage counter?" asked Nemesis.

"Yeah," I nodded.

"The damage we received just now made me understand what was causing it. It was happening because it had already given us a great... no, the *greatest* amount of damage we've ever accumulated against a single creature."

"What?" I asked.

The greatest amount? But we only just started fighting it.

"Remember Deadly Mixer?" she said. "The skill the Lich used before you killed him? We absorbed its damage with Counter Absorption, but we ended up not having to use Vengeance. It's still there."

"Wait, that doesn't make sense," I said. "The Lich and Gouz-Maise are separate... Oh."

I suddenly understood. Lich Maise and Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise were different... but not completely separate.

"The Lich's grudge is in there, after all," Nemesis continued. "Thus, the accumulated damage is still valid. However, it seems to come and go at random. Vengeance will probably only be effective when his grudge is the dominant one."

One Gouz-Maise body. Tens of grudges controlling it. My chance at defeating it existed only when it was being possessed by the grudge of the Lich.

“I see how it is,” I nodded. All I had to do now was find the core and hit it with Vengeance is Mine while Maise was the one in charge. Though still challenging, defeating the abomination was no longer a fool’s errand.

So...

“It’s possible for us to win against this undead,” said Nemesis.

“Good enough for me.” I readied myself.

...There was only one thing left for me to do.

It was exactly the same thing I’d done when I’d fought the Demi-Dragon Worm and the Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda. I simply had to give my all to that possibility.

“ＧＥｅｒＲｒｒＲｕｕＵＵＡａＡＳｚＤｄＳｓＡａａＡＡａ！！”

As the fiend bellowed out the sound of its grudge, the faces and mouths covering its body began to whisper, oozing pus and blood as they did so.

“You won’t escape!”

“You’re dead!”

“Join us!”

“Kill them all!”

“Destroy!”

“Eat!”

“Ravage!”

Those were the kinds of things they were saying.

Even after they’d become a giant abomination, these men were thinking the exact same things they had when they were alive. Thus...

“Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise!” Nemesis shouted. “You beasts who have inflicted great suffering upon countless younglings, taken many lives and are still endangering the living...”

I pointed my greatsword towards it. “We refuse to let you kill anyone ever again!”

I looked straight up into its eyes, and became one with Nemesis as we both proclaimed:

“You will fall by our hand!”

Now, about ten minutes since it had begun, our battle against the Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise reached peak intensity. I was searching for its core, while the abomination tried to crush me beneath its feet. The battle would end the moment either of us were successful.

Both of us had attack potential that surpassed the opponent’s HP. Gouz-Maise’s offensive ability was truly overwhelming. Unlike Maise, it didn’t use undead or cast magic debuff skills, but its physical prowess was incomparable to that of the Lich.

A single punch or kick could put me on the verge of death. I had only one use of my fatal attack. The conditions weren’t in my favor.

“Hhah!!”

To both divert the abomination’s attention and make it lose its balance, I swung Nemesis — blessed with the Silverlight — towards its leg.

“ＧＤｄＥＳｓａａＡａＡＡＳｓＡａＡａ！！”

As the thing howled in pain, I jumped backwards.

A moment after I distanced myself from it, Gouz-Maise swept its leg through the place where I was standing. By that time, the wound had already healed.

I’d been repeating the same attack for a while now. I probably looked stupid, but through such repetition, people could notice things they didn’t before.

“I was wondering why this undead thing could heal from wounds left by Silverlight... and I’ve finally figured it out,” I announced.

I could see small bits of flesh sticking to the area around its injuries. At first glance, they looked like pieces I’d chopped off with my attacks. However, they were actually flesh that had it cut off *by itself*.

“It removes the flesh around the injury and then restores itself by multiplying its cells.”

To undead like Gouz-Maise, wounds from weapons enchanted with Silverlight were unmendable. Thus, the abomination simply killed the cells surrounding the wound, disconnected the wound from itself, and effectively turned the Silverlight injury into normal damage. Since the corpses used in its creation were fresh, the cells were still alive, so making them multiply for healing purposes wasn’t a hard task. That was the reasoning behind the trick.

The restoration was probably done by using the energy of the same grudge driving it. Also, Gouz-Maise was protecting the living cells from dying. This trick was impossible for Skeletons — since they were nothing but bone — and Zombies — since most of their cells were dead.

But man, grudge energy sure is versatile, I thought. *I can see why the Imperium wanted to utilize it.*

“So the cells are alive...” said Nemesis. “Though that comes with the demerit of pain sensitivity, which is unusual for undead.”

“Seems like it,” I nodded.

I’d gained some experience fighting undead during the night I’d spent in the Tomb Labyrinth. Not a single Skeleton or Zombie I’d fought there seemed to care about any damage they’d received. Thus, it was fair to assume that sensitivity to pain was a feature unique to Gouz-Maise.

“Or perhaps the Lich deliberately left the pain sensitivity in to make any damage caused to it increase its grudge,” mused Nemesis.

“I see,” I said. “So it could be less of a demerit and more like a proper part of the equatio—”

Before I could finish my sentence, I had to jump to the side. A moment later, the abomination’s hoof landed right where I’d been standing.

While evading it, I swung my greatsword and cut into the hoof. The injury that caused was weaker than the previous ones, but if Gouz-Maise wanted to detach it and restore itself, it would surely lose its balance.

“Purgatorial Flames!” I complemented that wound with a stream of fire from my left Miasmaflame Gauntlet.

“HhooOSsSDdAASsaaAAaAhh!!”

It staggered and fell over, making the ground shake.

“GAH!!” I screamed, using the opportunity to get to its side. I changed Nemesis into The Flag Halberd and forced her into the area where the heart should’ve been. The Silverlight burned and melted both the faces on the surface and the rotten flesh under them before reaching the heart behind its ribcage.

“GEEEEAAAAAAEEeeEEeeAAaaAAaaEeeEeAAAAA!!”

Though the scream the monster released as it writhed violently was of a higher pitch than the previous ones, it didn’t show any signs of becoming weaker.

Its flesh and skin fixed themselves the moment I pulled Nemesis out.

That applied to the heart, as well.

“Doesn’t seem like the core is in the heart!” I shouted.

“Then it must be the head!” said Nemesis.

Reason suggested that cores had to be put in either the heart area, the head area, or in the stomach area, as it had been with Gardranda. Due to other parts of the body being used in combat, no one in their right mind would put such a weak spot in the limbs.

After all, that would be the equivalent of punching people with your own innards, I thought.

“Or hitting them with your testicles!” added Nemesis.

I’m not fond of that example in any way whatsoever.

“Now, it’s fine if it’s in the head,” I said. “But things would get a bit troublesome if it’s in the stomach.”

Once you included the horse part, the monster’s stomach was pretty damn large. If the core was in there, searching for and destroying it would be extremely difficult. If it was doable, I wanted to use Vengeance is Mine while directly touching the core.

“Why?” asked Nemesis. “With the current amount of accumulated damage, it’ll be possible to destroy a considerably large part of its body.”

Well, it was true that the hit I’d landed on Gardranda’s head had also destroyed its chest, but...

“It’s different this time,” I said. “With this self-amputation thing Gouz-Maise has going on, there’s a chance that it could negate the damage from Vengeance.”

I didn’t know what would happen if I landed Vengeance on the general area of the core and it suddenly detached the part that I’d hit. However, I had a feeling that the spread of the damage wouldn’t go beyond the detached part.

That assumption was based on my experience as one who’d used Vengeance is Mine many times before. No matter how great the damage I’d give back to my enemies, the skill never seemed to have a noticeable effect on the surroundings. Vengeance merely doubled the damage I received from hostiles and gave it back to them — it didn’t do any physical damage on its own. So, if the abomination could detach the part of the body I hit, there was a chance that the damage — no matter how great — wouldn’t reach the core. I couldn’t risk having my one chance go to waste like that.

“The best move right now is hitting the undetachable core and *then* using the skill,” I said. “Now, let’s try the skull!”

“Understood!” said Nemesis. “First, we have to make it fall to the ground again!”

Gouz-Maise was already standing tall, and the wounds we’d given it were gone without a trace.

We’ll get it to the ground, hit its head, see how it reacts and... Huh?

“Ｇｈｕｏｏｈ...”

For some reason, it had completely stopped moving. The creature had shifted its gaze away from me and was staring somewhere far into the distance.

“Master,” Nemesis said.

“What is it, Nemesis?” I asked.

“The accumulated damage counter has disappeared.”

“Wait, you don’t mean that...”

The moment I understood what she meant by that, Gouz-Maise had already begun moving.

“ＧＩｉｉｏｏＵｕＪｊｊａａａＡａＡ！！”

Unlike before, it now completely ignored me and started to run to where Hugo and Cyco had taken the carriages. Nemesis’ words and the abomination’s actions led me to the one reasonable conclusion.

“Damn it!”

The dominant grudge has changed! I thought, panic setting in. I didn’t know if it happened because of the repeated restoration making the total grudge level drop or because I’d destroyed the heart once. However, it was obvious that the body was now being controlled by a grudge that didn’t belong to the Lich.

From the fact that it was going after Hugo, it was safe to assume that it was someone he’d killed. Or perhaps it was only going after the children so it could kill them and stock up on more resentment.

“What now?!” screamed Nemesis.

“We’ll do what we have to!” I yelled back.

To defeat Gouz-Maise, I had to find a means to make the Lich’s grudge the dominant one again. And I happened to have a plan for that.

“Where is it...?” I asked while looking at the ground. “Found it.”

I picked up a certain item and put it into my pocket rather than the inventory. With that, I was prepared. The only problem now was catching up to the monster. I needed something that could let me move fast enough to catch up to that semi-equestrian body.

I don't have the time to hesitate about this, I thought.

"Silver!"

My mount instantly answered my call and ran over to my side.

"...You're doing *that* again?" asked Nemesis.

"Not like I have any other options," I replied. "Though it should be a bit better than before."

I grabbed a piece of detached Magingear armor that was lying on the ground and put it under my feet. Then I grabbed hold of Silver's reins...

"Away!"

...and ordered him to move.

He soon began speeding through the road. Holding on to his reins, I was trailing right beside him while using the armor plate to slide on the ground.

Fortunately, the path we were following was a simple dirt road with no tree-like flora on it. It was good enough for the armor plate to slide on relatively smoothly. Though it was only slightly better than having my feet get dragged on the ground, I didn't mind it. After all, I was certain that I could catch up to Gouz-Maise this way.

"Don't forget to heal when necessary," said Nemesis.

"I know." I cast First Heal on myself.

Water skiing: land edition was a little bit too hard on my legs. If I didn't heal, the damage to my feet by the time I arrived would be severe enough to render me unable to walk.

After a few minutes of such sliding...

"I see it!" shouted Nemesis.

"Me too!"

...we found the giant creature. Its base form was that of a horse-man, but since Maise — the only one there who knew how to move such a body — wasn't the one in charge, it wasn't running as fast as it could. Silver's speed was more than enough for us to catch up to it.

"But man, this is bad," I said. "I can see Hugo's group less than a hundred meters away from it."

"At this rate, it will..." Nemesis cut her words short. "Can't you use the Miasmaflame Bracers' flamethrower?!"

“No.”

I couldn’t launch Purgatorial Flames because Silver’s movement speed was greater than the projectile speed of the fire. Not only would it not reach Gouz-Maise, it’d end up burning *us*.

However, the creature was going to reach the carriages before we caught up with it.

“Hey, wait,” I said. “I still have some of those, don’t I?”

As I held the reins with my right hand, I used my left to reach into my inventory and take something out.

“Those are...!” Nemesis seemed surprised.

“Guess leaving some of these unused worked in our favor!” I cried.

And so, I threw the items — the leftover White Lance Gems I’d used against Spirits while leveling in the Tomb Labyrinth — towards the abomination. Mid-air, the Gems changed into spears of light and went straight towards the back right leg of Gouz-Maise.

These Gems were basically the market’s substitutes for offensive magic. Though the spell inside was a skill from low-rank jobs, it was purely anti-undead. Its effects were evident the moment the White Lances hit Gouz-Maise’s leg as it ran. A fist-sized hole opened up in its flesh, causing it to completely lose its balance and fall to the ground.

“Go!” I shouted.

Silver closed the distance between us and the abomination. I brandished Nemesis in my left hand, enchanted her with Silverlight, and had Silver go parallel to the creature.

Syncing my attack with my horse’s running, I sunk the blade into Gouz-Maise’s body. Breaking through the many faces on its skin, my silver sword cut through its back.

First, it was the horse-like back, then the part linking the horse and human bodies, then the back of the human-like body. I evenly split the spinal cord.

“GaEiIruUrRuuOuuUeeEAaaEKeeaAA!!”

Releasing a scream from all the mouths it had, the abomination writhed and tried to crush us, but Silver quickly fixed the distance between us and went out of its reach.

“It’s not over yet!” I roared.

My blade went through its back, cervical vertebrae, skull, and finally reached the brain.

“GhH!! DaSqQ! AaSz! wQaA?!”

It released cries of pain that were completely unlike any previous ones and quickly got up with an intense jump. That action made me release the reins, and I was thrown several meters away, dropping to the ground with a roll. The impact made me turn off the Silverlight. However, it was fully worth it.

“That reaction was...!” said Nemesis.

“Found it!” I shouted.

It had reacted to that damage in a completely different way than before. There was no room for doubt that the core was in its skull.

“This is where we’ll end the battle,” I said.

I took out the thing in my pocket and threw it upwards. It was a piece of a shattered crystal. Specifically — a piece of the Crystal of Resentment that the Lich had so treasured.

“HEEIYAAASAASAGAAAAAAAA!”

Upon seeing the shard, Gouz-Maise released a roar that seemed somewhat unlike the others. I felt like it was thick with desolation, frustration, and regret.

“The accumulated damage counter is back!” shouted Nemesis. “He’s the one controlling it!”

Just as planned.

“Let’s bring it down to the ground!” I yelled.

“All right!”

I channeled the Silverlight again and used all of my STR, buffed by the Miasmaflame Bracers, to jump. The shock caused by me preparing for the jump made the ground under my right foot crack, but I paid it no heed. The jump covered more than ten meters worth of distance and put me right next to Gouz-Maise’s legs.

“Ghh...!”

Going all-out took a toll on my muscles and brought them close to tearing, while my right leg turned somewhat numb.

Still, I’ll end it here and now! I thought.

Using my left leg — the one I’d landed with — as the origin, I put the impact and speed of the jump into my greatsword and swung it at the abomination's front right leg.

"SPLIT APAAAAAART!"

With the sounds of a slash and Silverlight's light burning, the blade smoothly cut through its skin, flesh, and skeleton. Gouz-Maise's leg bone was completely cleaved open. The skin and flesh on the opposite side of the cut wasn't enough to let the leg function and made the creature lose its balance. Obviously, it instantly tried to detach the wound and fix it, but...

"Not happening! Haaaahh!!!" I followed up my attack with another slash aimed at the injury, causing its leg to break off completely. Without its support, Gouz-Maise lost all the balance it had left and fell to its right.

I used my left leg to jump away from there and then ran straight towards the place where its head was about to land.

The plan was simple — hit it with Vengeance is Mine.

"With this..." I screamed.

...it's done! I added silently. *Victory is ours! We've won!*

I suddenly had a feeling that we weren't the only ones to think that. As the distance between me and Gouz-Maise's head shortened, an inexplicable chill went down my spine, and not for the first time, either. It was much like the one I'd felt when I was about to launch my final attack on Gardranda.

My eyes met with the two eyes on its face... and the third eye on its forehead.

No. There was no such thing. That wasn't an eye.

The thing peeking out of its torn forehead was a gem-like stone that didn't reflect any light.

What is that? I thought.

But I knew exactly what it was. It was the abomination's core.

Why had it revealed it to us — the ones trying to destroy it?

"...!"

The answer to that came in the form of great gathering of energy that started to whirl around its forehead. It was reminiscent of something I'd already experienced today — the transformation of grudge into unbridled, overwhelming power.

The *Deadly Mixer*.

The magical destructive force the Lich had used for his last stand.

I'd been too careless. The fact that Gouz-Maise didn't manipulate undead or use magic debuff skills had made me believe that it couldn't use this, either. However, Hugo had said that Gouz-Maise operated by transforming grudge into energy. Thus, it was perfectly reasonable for it to be able to use Deadly Mixer, which worked on the same principle.

Still on the ground, the abomination fixed its aim on us as we closed in on its head. Just like myself, the thing was looking for a good opportunity to finish me off. Its grudge helped...

No — its grudge was the very reason why it was able to gather its shattered intelligence and devise a plan to end the life of the one it was compelled to kill.

“DdEeAaADddLlLyyYyy MmMiiIxxXeeeEEerRrrRRr!”

Due to Gouz-Maise being an amalgam of grudge, the sorcery that it released, which converted grudge into destructive power, was nearly instantaneous.

“Counter Absorption!” I screamed.

I hastily extended Nemesis and used the last Counter Absorption I had in stock. That was enough to block its Deadly Mixer. However, that didn’t save me from being placed into checkmate.

After all, the distance between us had become short...

Short enough for its arms to reach me.

Guarding against the Deadly Mixer had rendered me unable to move. Gouz-Maise used the opportunity to swing its boulder-like fists at me. The next moment, my body was launched into the air... and my consciousness faded.

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Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis

Right after we used Counter Absorption to block Gouz-Maise’s Deadly Mixer, its large fists hit Ray’s body. Still holding me in my greatsword form, my Master was blasted to the side. Passing between the trees in the forest, he flew through the air like a leaf in the wind.

The scene was reminiscent of a truck accident from Ray’s memory... and the time the Superior Killer had given him his first death penalty.

“Ray!” I called out to him, but he didn’t answer.

He had already lost consciousness. And his unconscious body was heading straight for a tree.

“Ah!” I quickly went into my human form, held him from behind, and tightly closed my eyes. A moment later, I felt a strong impact and pain spread through my back. As the tree we hit shook, we both fell to the ground beneath.

“Khh... Ah...” The pain was still there after we hit the surface. The impact I’d felt when squeezed between the tree and Ray — who was considerably larger than me — seemed to have made my ribs crack. However, I was certain that it prevented Ray from feeling any of that pain. That was more than enough for me.

“Ray!” I called out to him, but he didn’t show any signs of waking up.

Looking at his status, I saw that his HP was below 10% and that he had status effects such as Fainting and several Bone Fractures. Reaching into his inventory, I took out an HP recovery Potion and poured it over him. That healed some of his HP, but it didn’t take care of a single one of his status effects. The wounds were simply too deep. Also, Potion-type consumables were more effective when ingested, and due to being unconscious, Ray couldn’t drink any Potions I tried giving him.

“Forgive me!” I poured the content of the Potion into my mouth and pushed my lips against his. I then did it two more times. With that, I got Ray to swallow an entire bottle’s worth of medicine.

It became effective almost instantly, healing about a third of his HP and fixing the lighter Bone Fractures. His HP stopped going down, as well.

Though Ray was still unconscious, it was clear that he was no longer on the verge of dying. However, I was unsure if I could look him in the eye after this.

“Now’s not the time to think about that!” I cried desperately.

We were still in a particularly dire situation. I could hear tremors encroaching towards us, warning me that Gouz-Maise was getting closer. If the aberration saw Ray in this state, it would instantly kill him.

He would die a second time.

“I won’t allow that.”

I couldn’t stomach the idea of Ray being killed by that *thing*.

“Ray,” I said.

Still unconscious, my Master was lying near the tree we’d hit.

I gently caressed his cheek and turned away from him. “I will buy you some time.”

I believe in you. The evening after we lost to the Superior Killer, we made a promise. Back then, we were both weak and could do nothing against him. Thus, we agreed to become stronger and emerge victorious. Now, we both fight as one. I know you will wake up soon. So I will buy you all the time you need... because that is what will lead us to victory.

“Here I go!” I transformed my right hand into a black blade. Though relatively small, it was about as strong a weapon as my sword form.

I shoved myself in front of Gouz-Maise before it could find Ray. “You’re not getting past me, Gouz-Maise!”

“ＤＨＩＳＳＳＳＩＩＩＩＵＡＡＡＡＡＡＡ！！”

Every face on its body screamed. Each and every eye on its body swiveled and fixed on me.

The counter within me didn’t react, which meant that it wasn’t being controlled by the Lich’s grudge. It had noticed me simply because I was a living creature.

I had to face it and keep it occupied long enough for Ray to wake up.

“Augh!” I used my right hand-blade to attack Gouz-Maise.

My strategy was the same as Ray’s. I attacked it, was attacked back, and evaded.

Though Gouz-Maise was tough and powerful, it wasn’t fast at all. Even I didn’t have any problems dodging its attacks.

However, unlike when Ray had swung me, I didn’t seem to be able to hurt it at all. Without Silverlight, the most I could do was give it the most meager of cuts.

My stats were far below Ray’s. Not only that, but I was out of uses of the one skill I could do by myself — Counter Absorption.

Gouz-Maise, on the other hand, attacked me with nothing but blows that could kill me instantly. Unlike when I was a sword, a single direct hit would make my body shatter.

Though a single mistake could be fatal, I pressed on. If I gave up, the possibility of Ray waking up and us emerging victorious would become zero.

Neither Ray nor I could accept that. Thus, I fought to keep the possibility alive.

This feeling had been within me ever since I was born. I was certain that

Ray had it, as well.

It was the one true thing that kept us tethered and connected.

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Paladin Ray Starling, within a dream

I instantly understood that I was dreaming.

I still had the appearance of my *Infinite Dendrogram* avatar, but everything felt somewhat *hazy*, making me feel like I was in a lucid dream.

Despite that, however, I had no trouble processing my situation and the state of my surroundings. For example, I could clearly see a child — a young me, to be precise — running somewhere.

"Oh... I remember this," I said.

I could easily tell that this dream depicted the past. I even knew the time. It was the summer of 2035 — nearly ten years ago.

Obviously, *Infinite Dendrogram* hadn't been out yet, so my brother and I were playing different games.

Back then — when he was 16 — Shu had been all about retro games and martial arts. He'd gradually improved his fighting skills by frequenting a long-running dojo run by the family of our sister's friend, and he'd eventually become a considerably famous contestant through U-17 — a tournament for minors.

My days back then had consisted of playing retro games with him while looking forward to seeing his matches. On days when those happened, I'd tended to head to the venues they were held in while being all giddy about it.

Just like in this memory.

"Man, what *is* this?" I muttered.

My question was only natural. After all, I — as my avatar, Ray — was following my younger self. Not only that, but I had something unknown standing next to me. If I had to describe it with one word, it would've been "silhouette."

Yes — a humanoid silhouette was just floating in the middle of this normal-looking midsummer day. Its color was a mix of red and black, making it seem somewhat sinister. In my Ray form and still wearing all my armor, I was walking through this standard Japanese day with this silhouette by my side. The strangeness of this situation was another reason why I'd concluded that I was in a dream. Something this weird would only happen in a dream.

The silhouette was completely silent.

"How about you say something?" I spoke to it.

"Replay," it said.

R-Replay?

"So this is your doing?" I asked.

Since the silhouette's voice was feminine, I momentarily assumed it was Nemesis, but I quickly got the feeling that it wasn't.

"I want to ask."

Hey, I have several questions, too, I thought.

"Turns."

Turns...? So we'll take turns asking questions? I thought.

"Okay," I nodded.

And so, myself and this dark red silhouette that seemed to be able to read my mind had a little information exchange.

"Where is the boy going?" asked the entity.

"The venue where my brother's having a tournament match," I answered. "This is when, uh..."

Of course, I knew exactly where I was heading, what was supposed to take place there... and what would actually happen.

"This is when he participated in Un-kra's U-17 tournament."

"Un-kra?" The dark red entity questioningly tilted its head, but now it was my turn to ask a question.

"Tell me," I spoke up. "If this is a dream, then what's happening to me? I'm quite sure I was in the middle of fighting Gouz-Maise. Did I get the death penalty?"

That seemed unlikely, since it seemed like I was still in the game.

"Alive... Fainted."

So I'm unconscious, huh? I thought. *...Wait, doesn't that mean that I'm open to getting hit by a finishing blow at any moment?*

"What's Un-kra?"

"A death match-type martial arts tournament with no weight limit, no style limit, no rules besides the use of weapons and threats, and no end without KOs and give ups — Unlimited Pankration. Also known as 'Un-kra.'"

It was a popular tournament that had begun — if I recalled correctly — in 2027. With it allowing karate, judo, boxing, kickboxing, sumo, wrestling, Muay Thai, capoeira, koryu, and countless other styles, it seemed like an event from some fighting manga. The level of violence earned it lots of criticism, but it continued to be popular regardless.

". . ." The silhouette looked somewhat excited.

Does it like martial arts? I asked myself. *Or death matches?*

"My turn to ask," I said. "How do you not know what Un-kra is if — as you said yourself — you're the one replaying this scene?"

Nemesis had had some of my memories since the moment she was created, so I found it weird that this entity didn't.

"O n l y . . . r e p l a y i n g . . . n e c e s s a r y . . . m e m o r i e s."

So it's replaying only the memories deemed necessary, huh? I thought. *But man, if it can scan my memories, yet isn't an Embryo... just what is it? I guess I could ask it directly...*

"W h a t w i l l h a p p e n n o w . . . ?"

I'd expect someone replaying the scene to know that much, I thought.

"Keep watching and you'll see in a few minutes," I said. "Now, my question: have we met before?"

"Y e s," it replied. "H e r e , w e a r e a l w a y s t o g e t h e r . . ."

"What...?" I said, baffled.

"Here," as in, within Infinite Dendrogram? *But the only person I'm always together with in this world is Nemesis.*

"B o y i s a l o n e , n o t d a n g e r o u s . . . ?" the silhouette asked while pointing at young me.

"The security system observing public roads was already there ten years ago, so no, I wasn't in danger of getting kidnapped or anything," I said.

I had trouble remembering when the security guard machines had become widespread. I had a feeling they'd already been there by the time I was born.

"S t i l l , a c h i l d b y h i mself . . . ?"

"It might've been my summer holiday, but it was still a normal weekday for adults, so yeah. ...Wait, wasn't that a second question?"

"Ask t w ice , t o o , Ray." Though its words were still monotonous, it was gradually getting better at talking.

"How can I regain consciousness?" I asked.

"Wake up when finished watching."

"Finished watching what?" I asked.

"Your birth."

M-My birth...?

"Watch why you became the Ray you are."

"...I see," I said.

The reason why I turned out to be the way I am, huh? Seeing the events that are about to transpire will be more than enough to know that.

"Won't be long now." Saying that, I pointed at young me, who was walking before us.

He was already near the venue and only needed to walk through a pedestrian crossing to get to the entrance. As eight-year-old me waited for the traffic light to change, there was an even younger girl standing right next to him. She had a childish accessory in her hair, but due to the poor way she'd put it on, it flew off the moment a stronger gust of wind went by. It fell on the road.

The light was still green for traffic, and when the girl tried to go and take her accessory, she didn't notice the truck headed right for her. A few moments before it could hit her, the young me ran in, took her hand, and tried pulling her off the road. However, he was too slow and weak.

At eight years old, he was far too powerless to take her to safety before the truck hit them both. As a result, all young me did back then was simply increase the number of victims. And so, the truck was about to run over two children.

However, a moment later, a person who'd come over from the other side of the road took them both and jumped out of the way.

Normally, that person wouldn't have made it. In fact, normally that person wouldn't have made it even if he'd come over the moment the girl ran out to the road. However, the feat was perfectly possible for this person. Due to his astounding leg strength, he'd closed the distance in but a moment and swiftly taken the girl by the hand.

However, there was also me — who was nothing but a burden at this point. Due to me jumping out to the road, the person needed to take both of us. And though he was capable of jumping while holding two children, it — naturally — slowed him down.

I remembered it clearly. After a moment of being airborne, there was another impact. Then — while still being held — I rolled on the ground.

Even so, I didn't feel any pain. The person holding us did a great job protecting us. I could hear some people nearby start to scream. I, on the other hand, was at a loss for words.

That was only natural. After all — the one who'd saved us was my brother.

Knowing I was coming, he'd walked out to meet up with me. And it just so happened that he'd saw us in great peril and saved us. He'd paid a price for that — his right leg was hit by the truck. With how blue-black and swollen it was, you didn't need to be an expert to know that it was broken.

Shu was about to participate in the final match of the tournament. However, right before it happened, his leg got shattered...

...and it was all because of me trying to save the girl while being completely powerless to do so.

Chapter Six: Beyond the Radix Point

At a certain place in the City of Duels, Gideon.

“Heyoo! Haven’t seen you fur a while, Figgy.”

“Oh? I know that voice, but not the face. A new costume, Shu?”

“You assume correctly. This is an MVP special reward called ‘Hind Bear.’”

“...Another costume, I see.”

“Yeah, it’s another costume. Got a problem with that?”

“How many do you have by now?”

“Sorry, but that’s not something I bear in mind. All I know is that I only have one that *isn’t* a costume.”

“...I see there’s a bit of a bias.”

“*Every* special reward besides the thing I got from Gloria is a costume! This makes bearly any sense!”

“It’s quite unusual to be able to defeat so many UBMs, though.”

“Sorry, but those words have bearly any weight when said by *you*, of all people.”

“You’re probably right. Oh, it just hit me... You’ve worn bear costumes since that time, right?”

“‘That time,’ as in...?”

“The time we met.”

“Oh yeah, I was beary ursine back then, too. Though that one was store-bought.”

“It was also the first time we fought UBMs, right?”

“Yeah. That takes me back.”

“We sure had a hard time handling them.”

“It happened when *Infinite Dendrogram* had only been out for only ten or so days, right? Our levels were still pretty low.”

“Yep, that sounds about right.”

“I’m still impressed that we were able to win... To be honest, looking back at it, it’s actually beary weird that we did.”

"But you didn't show any signs of giving up back then, right?"

"Ha ha ha! As if I would. Like I said back then: 'The possibility is always...'"

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Paladin Ray Starling, within a dream of the past

On that summer day of 2035, my brother had gotten into an accident while protecting us. His life hadn't been in danger. However, his right leg — hit by the truck — had been seriously injured. The flesh was swollen, the blood vessels under the skin had burst, and the bone was broken. In a game, healing magic or items would've made short work of such a wound, but in reality, it was a grave injury that would need quite a while to be fixed.

It was bad enough for him to be hospitalized. And the tournament's final match was supposed to happen about an hour after he'd received it.

"Nothing t h a t cou l d be done?" asked the entity.

"Indeed," I nodded. "It was hopeless for him."

...If reason had its say, anyway, I thought.

I could see the passersby begin to surround us and make a stir. Some were panicking, others were calling ambulances, while some journalist-looking sorts who were focusing on my brother as a fighter in the final match called out to him with a "Mr. Mukudori!"

Standing next to my brother — who was lying on the ground — was young me and the girl, both crying. The girl was probably crying because of the fear of being involved in such an accident, while I was crying due to the fact that Shu had gotten injured because of me.

I could clearly remember the things I'd thought back then. It could be summed up as guilt about what I'd done to him mixed with begging someone to help him.

In response to all the sympathetic looks and my sentiment, my brother — still on the ground — looked at young me for a moment and...

"Owie!"

...jumped up after saying that in a tone one would use when accidentally hitting their head on a ceiling frame.

Everyone was dumbfounded.

The young me, the girl, and the passersby all looked at him with eyes open wide with shock. To add to that — even the silhouette right next to me seemed surprised.

"Well, darn... This sure looks broken," he said as he looked down on his broken right leg while standing on his healthy left. Yet again, his tone was unfitting, making him sound like he'd broken a piece of a plastic model rather than his limb. And no, it wasn't "better than it looked" — his leg was severely injured.

"That r e a ction is s t range." The silhouette made a comment.

"Well, it's him we're talking about, so yeah." I was used to seeing my brother act and talk like that by now. But the young me still hadn't had much exposure to his eccentricity at that point in time, so he was reasonably shocked.

"I-I just called an ambulance! It should be here soon! Please don't move too much!" one of the passersby told my brother.

However, in response, Shu said, "Eh? Oh... Well, thank you for the concern. But there's no need for that right now."

"'No need'?" a number of people simultaneously repeated his words in disbelief.

"I have a final match to participate in over at that building, so I'll go to the hospital after that's done," he said.

The moment he'd said that, I'd felt as though time had stopped.

It seemed like I and everyone else on the scene — except for my brother — was thinking exactly the same thing: *What is this guy saying?*

From its reaction, it was safe to assume that the silhouette shared the sentiment.

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The place of the dream changed, and we were now in Shu's waiting room.

Moments before this scene, this place had included doctor who'd given my brother some first aid and the master from his dojo who'd tagged along to see the fight, but they were no longer here. The only ones present now were me and Shu.

His right leg was covered in a compress and bandaged. But that was all. There was no cast or any kind of support on it. After all, Shu was about to go fight in the match. He'd refused casts and supports because they would've been counted as weaponry. The injury was bad enough to need an operation, and yet...

"... H e w ill fight?" asked the entity.

"Yeah," I nodded.

Due to the lack of expression on the silhouette, it was hard to tell what it was thinking, but even I could tell that it was half amazed and half shocked. "No one s t o ps him?"

"In a normal martial arts tournament, the fight would've been called off due to doctor's orders, but this is Un-kra we're talking about."

Again, Un-kra allowed anything besides the use of weaponry and threats, and would only end with KOs and give-ups. It was actually strange that such a tournament could exist in this day and age.

"But it's b roken," the silhouette protested. "He ca n win? Doesn't nee d right l eg?"

"The koryu martial arts dojo my brother went to is based around blows, rather than throws and such," I answered. "Naturally, kicks are a crucial part of it, and proper leg control while punching is highly important, as well."

Now that I think about it, that style is ridiculously manga-like, I thought. *Seriously, during the demonstrations I saw, their kicks were breaking logs as thick as people's torsos. What was the name of that kick, again? All I can remember is that it sounded pretty cool.*

"Is h i s opponent w eak?" asked the entity.

"The opponent in the final match was Gregory Asimov Kaiser," I said. "He was nearly two meters tall and weighed over a hundred kilos, most of which was well-trained muscle. Being well-versed in blows, holds, throws, and locks, he was easily the strongest student participant at that time. He's now doing his best to be the top professional martial artist."

"Student... c h ild... child?"

"He was seventeen at that time, which is underage, so yeah." Also, even after ten years had passed, Gregory was still a well-known face in the end-of-year martial arts shows. Last New Year's Eve — when my brother had returned home for the occasion — I could recall us both watching TV and seeing Gregory still doing his thing.

"Brot her can' t wi n, n o?"

"He would've had little chance even if he was in top form, and yet he went in with a broken leg," I said. "It's only reasonable that people tried to stop him."

Not like he listened, I thought. *Now that I think about it, the master from his dojo was one of the few who didn't try to make him reconsider.*

"Shu, don't! If you fight someone so strong with *that* wound, you'll die!" The young me was still trying to get him to withdraw from the match.

That was only natural. After all, when Shu had gotten injured because of me, I'd been overwhelmed by great fear. And yet, despite his state, he was about to go on and do something reckless, if not downright crazy. My fear back then hadn't allowed me to stay silent and let him do it.

"Well, I guess doing the Kodachi with my leg like this isn't the best idea," said Shu, completely nonchalant.

Oh, yeah, I thought. *That's what the kick from his school is called.*

"Kodachi," the wood-splitter or "battle ax," was a frontwards roundhouse kick aimed at the opponent's head. My brother was particularly good at it. The kick which — as the name implied — was strong enough to split wood and seemed capable of doing the same to people's heads was feared as much as Gregory.

However, with his right leg broken, my brother couldn't do it anymore. He couldn't do it with his left leg, either, since he would've had to use his right as the pivot leg. Shu was going to have to fight without his ultimate kick.

That meant only one thing — he had no chance of winning.

He'd gotten the wound because of me. And since it was going to be the reason for his defeat — or perhaps even death — I couldn't stop blaming myself. Thus, I was trying to stop him.

However, Shu showed no sign of changing his mind. He was always like that. Though facetious and eccentric, my brother wasn't one to easily let go of something he'd resolved to do.

Once the young me came to understand that trying to convince him was useless, he bowed his head in sadness.

"I shouldn't have jumped out to the road..." he muttered to himself.

"Hmm." Hearing that, Shu thought about something, leaned over to the young me, placed his hands on his shoulders, and looked him in the eyes. "Honestly, Reiji... I think you would've regretted it more if you *hadn't* tried to save her."

"B-But you're the one who actually saved her!" the young me protested. "I couldn't do it by myself! All I did was get you hurt!" The young me wept about his powerlessness. All he felt was regret, grief, and anger at himself.

"You're right. I got hurt." Shu agreed with me. "But you know, it's entirely possible that I wouldn't have saved her if you hadn't tried it."

"Eh?" That surprised the young me.

"Because you tried to save the girl, I — without thinking — jumped out to save both of you," he explained. "In the end, she was saved because of *your* choice."

That might've been the truth, or just a lie to make me feel better. However, there was sincerity in his eyes.

"That's good enough, Reiji," he said. "There's no need to regret the act of choosing something. After all, it's the ultimate premise to grabbing hold of the possibility leading to the future you desire."

He added a lot of emphasis to the words that followed.

"After choosing something, all that matters is whether you can see it or not and grab hold of it or not."

"Grab hold of it or not?" the young me asked.

"Yeah. The possibility is always..."

These words of his...

"The possibility is always there — *with your will*. No matter how small, no matter behind how many zeros beyond the radix point it lies — it *always* exists. The only time the possibility isn't there is when you've given up on grabbing hold of the future you desire. As long as you don't give up and keep making choices towards the future you want to see, the possibility won't disappear, even if it's far beyond the radix point."

These words of his were still etched onto my very core.

"That's why your choice to save the girl back there wasn't a mistake," he added.

"Shu..." the young me said.

He gave the young me an intrepid smile and stood up. "Today's the perfect chance, so I'll show you the ropes. You'll soon see what it means to give your all to grab hold of the possibility."

With those words as his last, Shu left the waiting room and used his crutches to make his way to where the match would take place.

◇

That was when the dream portraying my memories reached its end. The venue we were in vanished, leaving only an empty dreamscape vaguely reminiscent of a pale haze.

The young me and my brother were nowhere in sight, meaning that the only ones here now were me, as Ray, and the silhouette.

“Is it over?” asked the entity.

“Well, the match was supposed to happen right after this,” I replied.

Though, if the dream’s objective was to display my roots, it makes sense for it to end with the exchange between me and Shu, I thought.

“Can I ask another thing?”

“Sure.” I knew exactly what it was gonna ask.

“Did he win?”

“He did.”

Indeed — Shu had gone into the final match against Gregory and actually emerged victorious.

“How?” the silhouette asked.

Man, I really don’t wanna say it, I thought. *Though I don’t want to keep the silhouette in suspense, either, so I guess I will.*

The news about my brother’s right leg being rendered useless had already spread among the people in the venue. Even the spectators around my seat had been talking about it. Also, the way Shu had gone towards the ring — crutches and all — had made him look extremely pitiful. While he was climbing into the ring, he hadn’t let his right leg touch the floor beneath him. Having to use his left one alone had given him a really hard time and gotten people to understand just how bad of an injury it was.

For some reason, the people already knew that it was caused by an accident he’d gotten into while saving children, making him get lots of sympathetic glances. Some martial artists were praising him for not withdrawing from the match after getting such a grave wound, calling him “a true fighter.”

His opponent, Gregory, shared the sentiment. “It’s a shame I don’t get to fight you at your best,” he said. “Though I’m sure that one day we’ll get to go all-out on each other.”

Though he looked menacing, Gregory was actually quite a gentle person.

“I’m sure we will,” replied my brother in a rather cheerful manner.

There was a difference in height. In weight class. And a critical problem with the state of one contestant. The outcome was clear. What was about to happen was nothing but a ritual-like event meant only to preserve my brother’s pride and honor as a martial artist.

That was what everyone present thought.

Thus, the gong sounded... and Shu launched from his right leg, performed Kodachi, smacked Gregory across the jaw, and knocked him unconscious.

The match had ended there.

The fifth Unlimited Pankration U-17 had ended with my brother’s victory.

“That was nuts,” I said.

“...It *was* broken, right?” asked the silhouette.

“Yes, he actually used his broken right leg to launch a jaw-cracking kick that gave his enemy a cerebral concussion and won by one-hit KO,” I said.

Naturally, no one had expected Shu to do something *that* intense with his injured leg. Gregory certainly hadn’t seen it coming and hadn’t been ready to guard against it, letting my brother land a clean hit.

“...Unfair.”

“You can say *that* again,” I said. He’d made all the sympathy he’d gotten from the audience go to waste.

Now that I think about it, it was kinda suspicious how the very reason for that sympathy — the news of him getting into that accident — spread throughout the whole venue, I thought. It had allowed him to perform the perfect surprise attack. That was enough reason to believe that Shu had actually done something to make it happen.

And with that in mind, it was possible to assume that even his cheerfulness before the match had actually been a strategic move in preparation for the kick.

Whatever the case, that reckless attack had naturally made the injury worse, extending the recovery period from one month to three months.

Once I’d met my brother after the event, he had put up the most obnoxiously proud face and said something along the lines of “*This* is what it means to give your all to grab hold of the possibility!”

To which I had replied with, “Bro, you idiot! What are you doing?!” while throwing a towel at his face.

Oh yeah, I thought. *That was actually the point when I started calling him “bro.”*

“What an intense brother,” commented the silhouette.

“Indeed he is,” I nodded.

Even though he’d seriously ruined the words he’d said back in the waiting room, they were still etched deep into my heart. That was the reason why I was always ready to reach for the possibility leading me to a future without regret or bad aftertastes.

“That was probably why the replay ended after the talk in the waiting room,” I said. The match itself wouldn’t have added anything of value.

Though it was probably a good show of his “grab hold of the possibility no matter what it takes” stance, I wasn’t the type to take the mentality *that* far. I’d also never thought I’d get into a situation where I’d have to, but...

“Desperate times, desperate measures,” said the silhouette.

“Yeah,” I said.

With the memory replay being over, I was about to wake up. Once that happened, I would have to face Gouz-Maise in an even worse situation than before. Thus, if I was going to seize the possibility, I’d have to get some new methods.

“Well, I’ll have a go at it, anyway,” I said.

“I see,” nodded the silhouette. “Then, wake up.”

It seemed to me as though the entity smiled.

“Ray, have a question?”

Well, there’s one thing I want to know, I thought.

“All right, I’ll ask directly... What are you?” My own conjecture wasn’t enough to figure out its identity.

“...Eheheh.” I couldn’t see any eyes on the dark red silhouette, but I could easily tell that it looked into mine and laughed. “You won’t master me if you only use the flames, Ray.”

Those words were enough for me to understand what the entity was. “Y-You’re Gardran...?”

Before I could finish that sentence, the world of dreams began to fade.

“I am a fragment. A power left unused because of you defeating us while we were incomplete. I am the life and mind that the demon failed to birth.

The life that was reborn as your item. I am the ‘me’ that wants to know the man who slaughtered my mother.”

The silhouette — Gardranda — spoke while its appearance gradually became less vague. Its form wasn’t that of the great demon, but that of a small girl with horns.

“I understand you now,” she said. “So please, understand *me*, too.”

And so, our world of memories and dreams began fade.

“Wake up, use all you have, including me and Nemesis, and grab hold of the possibility, okay?” She spoke those words, and reality came flooding back.

◇◇◇

Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis

As I had evaded its attacks and used feints, I’d bought about five minutes of time. My body was covered in many light wounds. Though I was able to dodge its legs and fists, I was getting damaged by the pieces of the ground and trees that it shattered.

Though it hurt to admit it — my non-weapon form was weak. Since I had no means of healing myself, I wouldn’t last long.

Gouz-Maise, on the other hand, was completely unharmed. Since my blade couldn’t even give it as much as a scratch, it didn’t even need to use Automatic Restoration.

“ＢｏＵｓｙｕＳｓＡｄａＳＡＡ ａａＡ!” Even though it wasn’t hurt, Gouz-Maise was irritated that it couldn’t kill me and expressed it by letting out enraged roars and secreting some indescribable bile from the faces all over its body.

The sight was downright vile.

The creature was the very embodiment of the vileness involved in any gathering of corpses. Both its appearance and way of existing were revolting enough to turn the very sight of it into something that made my mind creak. That was how I felt about undead in general.

Back when Ray and I had visited the Tomb Labyrinth, I’d been scared beyond words. I didn’t know why, but undead were extremely dreadful to me. When looking through Ray’s memories for an answer, I’d thought that I was simply weak to horror.

However, that wasn't it. I had come to understand it after facing the undead in the dungeon and the abomination before me. I wasn't afraid of their appearances. What I found dreadful was their very existence.

They were dead, yet they didn't go to any afterlife, nor were they reborn.

They were dead, yet they continued to walk among us.

That nightmarish state was so frightening it made my heart tighten.

I didn't know the reason why.

However, my heart was telling me that I simply couldn't let it continue on like this.

"My heart, eh?" I murmured.

How peculiar, I thought. *According to Ray's knowledge, I am nothing but an AI inside a game. Do I really have a heart? Wait.*

"At the very least, I have enough of it to feel one thing," I said.

It was certainly there. I had a heart that felt something for Ray.

"Heh heh." I couldn't help but laugh. There was no denying that it was quite comical. After all — he was the very cause of my existence. Yet, the way my heart felt about him was no falsehood.

I...

"ＤＡｓｄａＳＡＡａＡａａａＡ!"

"You just *had* to ruin the moment, didn't you, you uncouth lout?" I snapped.

Lengthy protrusions squirmed out of several mouths all over Gouz-Maise's body.

They were tongues. The rot dripping down from them wasn't the only thing suggesting that they were quite unlike those of humans — their very shape was reminiscent of the tongues used by chameleons or frogs from Ray's memory.

It was obvious what it was planning to use them for.

Clearly, it had grown sick and tired of my constant evasion. Much like snakes raising their heads, the tongues were readied to strike at me.

"I won't be able to dodge this," I said. Not only was I injured — I simply didn't have the skill and ability to evade such an attack. There was no way for me to stall it any longer.

"...Heh heh."

Look at me, Ray, I thought. *This is how strong I am by my lonesome. This is the extent of what I can do when I'm just by myself. While alone, I* *can't go any farther than this. So...*

"So just come here already."

The moment Gouz-Maise was about to pierce me with its tongues...

"Sure."

...I heard that single word, which was followed by a stream of dark red fire that burned the fleshy extensions.

The fire on its tongues made Gouz-Maise wail in anguish. At this point, the blazing, dark red flames were familiar to me. After all, the one commanding them was my Master.

"You sure took your time, Ray," I said.

"Sorry, a little dream made me oversleep," he replied.

"You shouldn't keep a lady waiting too long," I scolded. "But, well... you made it in time, so I don't mind."

"Thanks, Nemesis."

Hearing that made my expression turn softer, but I made a conscious effort not to show it.

"So, shall we continue?" I asked. "We're out of Absorption uses and have wounds all over us. The situation is worse than before. Do you think we can do it?"

"Yeah," Ray nodded. "I remembered something... no, two things. We'll use them to defeat this thing."

"Remembered two things? Care to share?"

Before answering my question, Ray wore an intrepid grin. "Something I neglected to use... and my brother's words."

The moment he said that, I instantly understood what he was thinking and came to know his plan.

Oh my, I thought, both impressed and slightly shocked.

"Heh heh! Are you insane?" I asked.

"Nope," he answered.

"This will be an act of pure madness with a low probability of success. It will be as dangerous as a walk on a tightrope, won't it?!" I was thoroughly puzzled by his thought process.

"If the possibility is there, I'll just give my all to seize it," he said.

I see, I thought. *Then I shall accompany you.*

"Though, the chance of this plan leading us to victory is about... 30%, and that's being generous," he added.

About a third, eh?

“Seems enough to me,” I said.

“More than enough,” Ray agreed. After that exchange, I took my sword form and became Ray’s weapon.

“Let’s win, shall we?” I said.

“Yeah, let’s win.”

And so, turning to face the abomination that was Gouz-Maise, Ray and I became one.

◆◆◆

Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise

The creature the world proclaimed to be “Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise” was enraged.

Since the moment it’d been born, Gouz-Maise had felt only indescribable amounts of hatred. That was because the creature was an actual amalgam of the rage and resentment left behind by the deceased. It was the *result* of those who had left nothing else behind but regret.

“ＧＵｄｓＦＤｇａａｄＡＳａａＡＡａＡｄＳｄＡＡａ！”

That was *all* that Gouz-Maise was.

The dead that were its base were those who had lived by avarice and vice — people who had failed to leave behind anything but their grudge. If at least one of those inside had died with love in their heart, this amalgam of death probably wouldn’t have grown this powerful and might not have become a UBM. But alas, that hadn’t happened, and Gouz-Maise — as it was now — would never reflect upon itself. The grudge boiling within the creature was enraging it, compelling it to use its might against the living and forcing them to join the grudgeful chaos within it.

However, at this point in time, Gouz-Maise was even more enraged than usual. That was because the puny, mouse-like living creature below it couldn’t die.

It was a Master.

Masters were immortal.

Killing them just made them momentarily disappear. However — that was the extent of it. These living creatures would simply brush off that transient death as if it was nothing and then just continue existing.

This one, in particular, had faced Gouz-Maise and tried to prevent it from drowning other living creatures into its grudge.

Even if hurt, left alone, or shattered with a punch, the Master would continue getting in its way.

Gouz-Maise couldn't stomach that. It didn't have a mind to understand why, but it just couldn't tolerate that Master.

However, it was about to be over. Gouz-Maise had a means of ending it. It was a powerful spell used by one of those who'd become the creature. The undead intended to finally kill the Master by casting it once again.

Once that was done, it intended to go to town. A significant part of its grudge wished to kill the people inhabiting the places within its memory and make them join the grudge within it. It believed that — in doing so — it could become more powerful and thus become able to sink even more living creatures into its grudge. And it would continue until the whole world was sunk.

Yes... yeah, I... we are all dead here. So, a world where people still live is a mistake. It's... wrong, it's so wrong! All of it, all of it, all of it, all of it, all of it must sink into the abyss. Kill and consume everything there is in this world.

Gouz-Maise's consciousness was like a colored marble that mixed objectivity and subjectivity. Chaotic as its mind was, however, it could still become puzzled. Not by its own thoughts, obviously, but by the actions of the puny one below.

The puny one used his left hand to push a cloth against his mouth... while the bracer on his right was directed at Gouz-Maise.

Those bracers released fire. Gouz-Maise already knew that much. However, so far, only the left bracer had released the flames, and it had no recollection of the right one ever doing the same.

As Gouz-Maise's chaotic mind tried to figure out what the right bracer released...

"Hellish Miasma... full power!"

...the blond man declared something, making a dark purple smoke gush out of his right bracer with great intensity.

Gouz-Maise wasn't familiar with this attack. It didn't know what it was, its effects, or what the enemy was planning. Using its limited reasoning power, Gouz-Maise tried to understand what it was, and it didn't take long for it to come to a conclusion.

The smoke was harmless to it — beneficial, even.

It was miasma. A poisonous mist that afflicted, weakened, and led the living through a slow death.

To Gouz-Maise — an undead — it wasn’t much of a problem.

Because it had living cells, it couldn’t avoid the debuffs, but their impact on its body was insignificant. In the first place, slight amounts of Weakness and Intoxication were meaningless against an amalgam of corpses. Even if Gouz-Maise received the debuffs, their effect was negligible. Though Poison damaged its cells, it wasn’t anything that couldn’t be taken care of by its Automatic Restoration.

Thus, because it only pushed living people closer to death, the miasma was a net positive for Gouz-Maise. Trying to figure out why the man had done something so foolish, it finally became aware of a certain fact.

It couldn’t see anything. The dark purple smoke had spread all the way up to the base of its throat, and not even the use of the eyes on the faces all over its body could help it make sense of the surroundings.

This smokescreen was exactly what the man had intended. Even though the miasma was dangerous to him, he’d used it regardless just to hinder Gouz-Maise’s vision.

“ＤａａＤＦｄＺｆａａＡＳｓａＤＡＳａｓＡａＡａａＡＡ！” Gouz-Maise roared and began rampaging wildly. Its ground-shattering, indiscriminate movements were meant to crush the man, who was surely still around. Gouz-Maise kept stomping for a while — not minding the damage it was doing to both the surface and the faces on its legs — yet it didn’t feel anything living under its feet.

It couldn’t hit the man. Nor did it know where he was. That situation made it both angry and uneasy, but within its chaotic grudge, there was a composed part that came to a certain conclusion.

The man is aiming for the head. However, he’s both puny and cannot fly. To attack the head, he will try to cut the legs. At that moment, we must cast the ultimate spell and kill him along with the limb he attacks.

The plan involved sacrificing a part of itself. However, due to Gouz-Maise possessing Automatic Restoration, it wasn’t a heavy price. Even if the man had hidden himself, there was still only one way for him to emerge victorious. As long as Gouz-Maise didn’t let him do that, its victory was assured. The man could still use the flames, but they only gave it pain and never came close to being fatal.

Next moment... The next moment we feel pain, we will launch the spell towards it, thought Gouz-Maise. *The cost of using it a second time is heavy. However, it's a small price to pay to kill him.*

With those thoughts, it focused its attention on its legs and gave the body's control to the grudge that could use the spell.

Then, it exposed the core in its head and readied itself to cast the magic.

Suddenly, Gouz-Maise's back left leg was touched, causing its semi-rotten neural system to send it a signal.

"ＤＥｅｅＥａＡＤｄＬｙｙＹｙＭｉｘｅＥＥｅｅＲｒｒＲＲＲｒＲ!!"

A moment later, it launched the spell with the intention to disintegrate both the man and its own leg.

The speed at which it had turned its head to do that caused the rotten skin on its neck to rip and shred apart, but it didn't care. Though its aim was extremely forced, the power of the attack was great enough to make its back left leg disappear. Gouz-Maise lost its footing and screamed due to the searing pain it felt, but the damage wasn't something that couldn't be handled by its restorative ability.

What's important is that we killed hi—

The second that thought went through its head, the man that was supposed to be disintegrated jumped up on Gouz-Maise's back.

It couldn't understand what had happened. Countless grudges within it became astir and caused it to momentarily stiffen.

Then, it noticed the man's state.

His right hand was covered in blood and held a familiar piece of flesh. It was a part of Gouz-Maise's body, and — by looking at his mouth — it was easy to tell that he'd *taken a bite of it*. Lastly, he held a halberd with a black flag flying behind its ax blade.

Just now, with abnormal swiftness, he'd jumped on Gouz-Maise's back, and he was now getting ready to charge towards its head. His speed was far greater than it had been a few moments ago, or even when he'd been completely unhurt. It was hard to believe that he was heavily hurt. In fact, his wounds were disappearing right before its eyes.

Suddenly, the grudge that controlled Gouz-Maise shuddered with fear.

After all — it was reminiscent of the chase back in the dungeon.

“Looks like... it worked,” said the man through his ragged breath. The deathly faces all over its body heard the man’s mutter. “If you get a debuff by eating a part of a debuffed opponent’s body... Reversal recognizes it as a negative effect caused by the enemy. That was proven by the Grapevine I fought this morning.”

Gouz-Maise didn’t understand what the man was saying.

“I didn’t know if Hellish Miasma had any effect on undead, and there was a chance that the thing with the Grapevine only happened because it was caused by its attack,” the man said. “If that was the case, I’d have ended up dying from my own attack... but it worked.”

Gouz-Maise couldn’t make sense of the man’s current state.

“Ha ha... What a disgusting gamble,” the man laughed.

Gouz-Maise just barely had enough mind to understand that the man had created this situation by consuming its rotten flesh.

“ＧｇｉｉＩｉｉｅＥｅ!?ＤｄＧｇＡａａＡＡａＡｑＱａＡａ!?” it screamed through its head and all the mouths all over its body.

“You scared?” the man asked.

Indeed — Gouz-Maise was afraid. All as one, the consensus of the Gouz-Maise Gang — the group of scoundrels that had taken many lives and consumed great amounts of human flesh — feared the man before them.

“Guess it’s the first time *you’ve* gotten eaten, huh,” the man said. This was the man who, as if to give it payback for its sins, had consumed Gouz-Maise’s flesh and drawn ever closer to end its deathless life.

Naturally, the amalgam of undead was afraid of the way the man functioned.

He was truly a God of Death.

His hands — one blood crimson, other a deathly black — held a dark flag. On his head, there were wolf-like ears. He didn’t hesitate to consume the flesh of man-eaters. If he wasn’t the reaper sent himself to end them — no one was.

“ＫＡｄｓＦａ！？ＡｓａＳＡＤａａＡｑＡＳＱａ!”

Gouz-Maise began wildly swinging its arms down at him, but the man was able to evade it all, making it seem as though the amalgam of corpses had become pitifully sluggish. Not only that — he jumped on the left arm it swung down and began running up towards its head.

Little by little, the god of death... the Grim Reaper... the ultimate end... approached Gouz-Maise.

Overwhelmed by despair, it used its final card.

“ＤｅＥｅＡＡ—ＤｅＥａａＤＡａａ—ＤｄｄＤＬＹｙｙＭｉＸｅＥｅｅＥＥｒｒＲＲｒＲ!?!?”

That was the third time it cast the ultimate spell.

It didn’t care about what would happen because of that. Since the spell consumed great amounts of grudge — which was the core of Gouz-Maise’s being — there was a chance that using it thrice in such a short period of time could made itself self-destruct. However, its fear of the man running up its arm was just too great for it to hold back.

The burst of destructive magic made the god of death and everything below the elbow completely vanish. Though Gouz-Maise’s arm was thicker than a large tree, the spell disintegrated even its bones.

The pain signals were abnormally powerful, and due to the loss of its grudge, its Automatic Restoration didn’t work at full capacity. The grudge flowing through its corpus was reduced to just that of the one who could cast Deadly Mixer and a few others. Despite that, however, the faces covering its body and the few remaining grudges all smiled in relief.

One leg, one arm, and approximately 80% of the grudge composing it.

The losses were great, but they had been enough to make their bane — the reaper himself — disappear. The battle was over. Now, it simply had to wait for the Automatic Restoration to complete, head to town to stock up on new grudge and...

“ＡａＨｈＨｈ?” All of a sudden, a shadow came over it from above its head.

Gouz-Maise looked upwards.

Before the sunset, bathed in the light of the sinking sun, there was the source of the shadow.

The black silhouette held a black sword in the hand behind him. And, with great speed, he closed in towards Gouz-Maise’s head.

“You beasts, wallowing in undeath...” a feminine voice began.

“...go to sleep... forever!” the Reaper finished.

The tip of the black greatsword pierced through Gouz-Maise’s forehead and touched its core.

“VENGEANCE IS MINE!”

Thus, a strike worth all the damage Gouz-Maise had ever given the man... no — a retributive attack avenging all the people that had suffered because of those composing the amalgam of death...

...completely destroyed its core and ended its very existence.

Epilogue: A Morning of Smiles

Undisclosed Location

[“Maw of the Desert, Azmore” was defeated]
[Final level: 56]
[MVP: “The Earth” Fatoum, level 1,157 (total level: 1,657)]
[Embryo: “Overflowing Divine Vessel, The Grail”]
[MVP special reward: Legendary item, “Bag of the Desert, Azmore”]

■

[“The Crimson Armor, Exademon” was defeated]
[Final level: 63]
[MVP: “King of Termination” Albert Schwartzkaiser, level 620 (total level: 1,120)]
[Embryo: “Seven Star Turnover, Septentrion”]
[MVP special reward: Ancient Legendary item, “Crimson Armor-Piercer, Exademon”]

■

[“Four-Dimensional Kaiju, Todoghilas”]
[Final level: 51]
[MVP: “Commander-in-Chief” Gray α Centauri, level 490 (total level: 990)]
[Embryo: “Unidentified Flying Stronghold, Laputa”]
[MVP special reward: Ancient Legendary item, “Ultimate Suit Series, Todoghilas”]

■

[“Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise”]
[Final level: 34]
[MVP: “Paladin” Ray Starling, level 35 (total level: 35)]
[Embryo: “Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis”]
[MVP special reward: Epic item, “Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise”]

“...Hm?”

In a space enlightened by countless data windows, *it* sounded a voice of confusion.

At first glance, it appeared to be an adult male human, but upon further inspection, one would notice that the skin covering its body had patches of draconic scales and beastly leather, while its head was decorated by devilish horns. Overall, it certainly looked more like a “humanoid monster” than a person, but the glasses it sported successfully moved the impression it gave off into the “human” territory — if only barely.

It was doing one of the jobs it was assigned to — the checking of the data concerning the defeat of UBMs over a set period of time. In *Infinite Dendrogram*, its role was the acknowledgement of UBMs.

Though UBMs were abnormally powerful and had abilities just as strong, their primary unique feature was their transformation into special rewards upon defeat.

Many non-UBM boss monsters also had great strength and unique abilities. When defeated — either by people or other monsters — they dropped Treasure Coffers or items they possessed before death.

However, the special rewards left by UBMs were completely unlike any basic boss monster drops. They were the materializations of the image — the concepts — surrounding the abilities of the defeated UBM, adjusted to best suit the most valuable person in the battle.

Indeed, it wasn’t their strength or abilities. That very transformation was the prime feature of UBMs.

No standard monster possessed it. But if the control AI responsible for UBMs acknowledged a unit as a UBM, it would become exactly that — a monster with the function to transform into a special reward upon death.

The creature working in this space was Jabberwock — the very same control AI responsible for acknowledging, giving features to, and sometimes even designing UBMs.

“‘Ray Starling,’” it murmured. “Going by Earth time, I saw this player name yesterday.”

It was the very same player that had, at an unreasonably low level, defeated the Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda — a UBM of Jabberwock’s design. Naturally, Jabberwock was slightly surprised to see the same person become an MVP in a UBM fight two days in a row.

In this world, the UBMs Jabberwock had either designed or acknowledged were many. However, the same couldn't be said for MVPs.

Many people couldn't defeat them. Others couldn't even encounter them. Others just plain couldn't become MVPs.

Not to mention that the strongest of the strong — Superiors — were actively hunting UBMs. As a result, only the few lucky enough to encounter *and* successfully defeat them could become MVPs.

Thus, Jabberwock was quite intrigued by an entity that had faced UBMs two days in a row and — through hard struggles — emerged victorious both times.

"Fascinating," it said. "If only most defeated UBMs like he did. I'm quite dissatisfied by how Superiors hunt them as if it's a chore. Truly, treasure is best when earned through harsh struggles and intense drama. No good saga or epic is complete without those things, after all." Jabberwock continuously nodded to his own words before beginning to ponder. "I believe I should make my designs even more tenacious."

Saying that, he closed his eyes in thought...

"Let's start by giving it atomic breath. Like Godzilla."

The moment Jabberwock said something truly foreboding, something gave a response. "No radioactive pollution, pleease!" Before he'd realized it, a cat-like mascot was sitting in the space behind him.

It was Cheshire — control AI no. 13. Shaking its head at just how troublesome its colleague was, it began commenting about what Jabberwock was trying to do.

"Leave the unreasonable amounts of power to SUBMs. They create enough calamities as it iis. We don't need anything that could cause irregular evolutioon. Do you have any idea how much trouble we had with the last two irregularrs? Even Humpty's favorite and Granvaloa's Superiors could barely stop the Corpse Stronghold, while the Disaster Bioweapon is still space-sealed in Red King's 'gaol,' you know? The ones who do all the work to take care of your UBMs are the tians, us, and the players, you know?"

"I'm aware," said Jabberwock. "Now, what is your business here, thirteen?"

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot," said Cheshire. "The control AI responsible for monsters, Queen, has a message for you."

"Which is...?"

"'Explain your previous acknowledgement.'"

"What am I supposed to make of that?" Jabberwock demanded.

"She gave me a letter, but — just as you'd expect from her — it was both overly emotional and too verbose, so I shortened iit," said Cheshire. "Also, it's about Gouz-Maise — the last monster you acknowledged as a UBM."

"I see." That was enough for Jabberwock to understand Queen's problem.

"If I had to add a bit more detail to that, it'd be, 'It wasn't born naturally, nor was it created or arranged by us. Why are you giving UBM status to an undead born from human sorceryy?'"

"Gouz-Maise had interesting unique abilities," said Jabberwock. "Its stats and the circumstances behind its birth were more than enough to give it Epic status. Also, by looking at the series of events that led to its creation, it's safe to say that there will never be another Gouz-Maise."

Thus, Jabberwock believed that acknowledging it as a UBM had made perfect sense.

"That's truue," said Cheshire. "Queen is probably just complaining because she's upset that not many of the boss monsters she singled out and improved are being acknowledged as UBMs."

"I'm just doing my job," replied Jabberwock. "Also, does it actually matter to us whether I acknowledge something as a UBM or not?"

"...I think she's just being peevish because she doesn't feel appreciateed," said Cheshire. "But oh weell."

While thinking about the relationship between this thickheaded fellow AI and the Queen, Cheshire heaved a sigh.

"Also, no. 3's designs are unrefined at best, and overly predictable, at worst. Too lacking in both inventiveness and potential," added Jabberwock. "When it comes to those points, this Gouz-Maise creature and some player designs make far better UBMs."

"Queen is a simple and straightforward girl, after aall... Wait, what?" Cheshire realized that Jabberwock had just said something that simply couldn't be ignored. "Player designs? What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said," said Jabberwock. "I'm talking about that Superior from Dryfe.”

“...Ohh.” The mention of that single person was more than enough for Cheshire. The Superior in question was more than capable of creating a monster that could catch Jabberwock’s eye.

“A part of me feels like Ray will get involved in thaat,” said Cheshire.

There was no basis for the cat’s assumption. One could write it off as standard intuition, but with the control AIs all having calculational capabilities that no human could match, it was difficult to call it “standard.”

Jabberwock wondered why Cheshire’s mutter had included the name of the player he’d been intrigued by just a moment ago, but chose not to react to it in any meaningful way.

The cat in question, on the other hand, became curious about something relating to its own murmur and chose to ask about it. “Oh, yeah. Thinking of Ray made me remember. Hey, Jabberwock.”

“Yes?”

“Remember the ‘Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda’ that he defeated recently?” said Cheshire. “What would’ve happened if it had reached completion? It died when it was only in its second form, so I’m kinda curious.”

I know it’s my own fault for telling Ray its weak point, but still, it thought.

In response...

“It would’ve been born.”

...Jabberwock said something far too concise.

“...Sorry, but I don’t get iit,” said Cheshire.

So concise, in fact, that not even an AI with inhuman calculational capabilities could make sense of it.

“Its final form was the creature that was supposed to be born based on the demon’s accumulated fighting experience,” elaborated Jabberwock.

“A separate unit?” asked Cheshire.

“No.” The UBM control AI shook his head. “It’s better to look at it this way: the ‘mother’ was only a cover, and the child that was supposed to be born was the true Gardranda. Sadly, it didn’t get a chance to reveal itself.”

Power left unused — a life and mind that had failed to be birthed. That was exact same thing that the silhouette in Ray’s dream — the non-mother Gardranda — had told him.

So that's why the demon's weak point was the stomaach, Cheshire thought and nodded to itself. "By the way, what kind of creature would it have been born aas?"

"If I recall correctly, the mother fought and ate primarily humans," said Jabberwock. "Thus, it's fair to assume that it would've been humanoid."

"It's also fair to assume that it won't get another chance at being born, riight?" Cheshire asked.

"Yes, indeed."

However, Jabberwock thought to himself, *that might change depending on the final skill it received when it became an item.*

There was a chance that the effect of the skill Ray had yet to unlock could give another chance to the creature that'd failed to be birthed. However, due to there not being any similar cases, Jabberwock concluded that it was highly unlikely.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to return to," he said.

"Sure, I have some tasks to do, tooo."

Jabberwock ended the conversation and faced a window displaying a stream of information.

Cheshire left his colleague's work area and went to do his own work.

◇◇◇

Paladin Ray Starling

[UBM, "Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise" was defeated]
[Selecting MVP]
[Ray Starling was selected as MVP]
[Ray Starling is presented with an MVP special reward — "Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise"]

"So that's done, huh...?" I murmured.

With Gouz-Maise's body disintegrating into particles of light and me receiving a message window similar to the one I'd gotten after defeating Gardranda, I could finally be relieved that I'd killed the abomination. However, my situation didn't allow it. After all, since Gouz-Maise was about forty meters tall, defeating it from the head had left me to fall the entire way down.

Not to mention that I couldn't move my body, either.

To win this fight, I'd used a downright insane method of activating Like a Flag Flying the Reversal. Thanks to the debuffs I'd received getting turned into buffs, I had become more powerful than I was at my best, and had been able to emerge victorious against the abomination. However, just like it had been with Gardranda, the switching of weapons or the defeat of the enemy, Gouz-Maise, had caused the skill to get canceled. Thus, I was left burdened with a number of debuffs. My status window displayed Poison, Weakness, and Intoxication — the three effects of Hellish Miasma — along with Curse and Food Poisoning, which I'd most likely gotten for ingesting Gouz-Maise's flesh.

Well, I ate a part of a goddamn undead's body, so I can't really be surprised, I thought.

Moments after I canceled the Reversal by switching Nemesis to her sword form, I was able to move my body long enough to activate Vengeance is Mine, but the debuffs had gotten worse since then. I could no longer move so much as a muscle.

As things were, I was seconds away from crashing to the ground, and I would be able to do nothing to break my fall. With my current HP and the general state of my body, it was highly questionable if I could survive the hit.

"Better say my prayers, then..." I murmured.

A moment after I closed my eyes and braced myself for impact, I felt the touch of something unnaturally light.

The sensation repeated a couple of times. After the gentle swaying, I felt my body land on the ground.

I was thoroughly confused.

Fearfully, I opened my eyes and saw a shining artificial horse, Silver, standing at my side. Just like the first time I'd fallen off of him, he was looking down at me, seemingly worried.

It was apparent that Silver had gently caught me as I'd fallen and softly dropped me to the ground. I had no idea how he'd done it with his equestrian frame, but there was no other explanation.

"Ha ha," I laughed. "Thanks, Silver."

Not being an animal, he had no mouth and thus couldn't make any natural sounds, so he responded to my gratitude by simply rubbing the end of his “nose” on my cheek. That action made him seem much like a real horse.

With how he’d helped me chase down the Lich, it was safe to say that Silver had been an invaluable asset in this event. And if I hadn’t had the Miasmaflame Bracers and hadn’t seen that dream, there would have been a large chance of me losing this fight. However, there was someone who’d done more to help me than anyone else.

“Thanks, Nemesis,” I said. “If you hadn’t persisted like you did, it would’ve all been over for us.”

If I hadn’t had Nemesis and she hadn’t bought the time I’d needed to regain my consciousness, I’d have been given the death penalty, and that pile of corpses would’ve been free to attack someone else. Nemesis was the sole reason why that hadn’t happened, so I expressed my thanks.

However, all I got in response was peaceful, systematic breathing. Before I knew it, she’d disappeared from my weapon equipment slot, returned to her humanoid form, and had fallen fast asleep. It reminded me of a similar moment back in the dragon carriage after the battle with Gardranda.

The peace in her expression felt like the ultimate proof of the hard work she’d done today.

“Well done... Nemesis.” I touched her with my left hand, causing her to instantly return to the crest.

Left alone and unable to move, I kept my HP up by casting healing magic on myself, and looked through my items to find a way how to neutralize the status effects. The misadventure from today’s morning had made me learn my lesson, so I’d prepared for the three Hellish Miasma debuffs by buying the appropriate items when shopping.

After taking those, I lessened the effects of Food Poisoning by vomiting a few times, and made it go away completely by following that up with a swig of the right medicine.

The last status effect — Curse — went away by itself as I was busy taking care of the others.

Since I hadn’t gotten attacked at all while doing any of that, I assumed that Gouz-Maise’s rampage had probably caused all the local monsters to scatter, letting me completely heal myself and remove the debuffs completely unbothered.

Even though my status screen now said that I was in perfect shape, I certainly didn't feel like it. The entire time interval from the moment I'd infiltrated the fortress until I'd ended the battle with Gouz-Maise had been a great drain on my mental and physical energy. My HP might've been at 100%, but I wasn't confident if I could wring up even 60% of my usual performance. Not to mention that Nemesis was in no state to fight, either.

Anyway, it was as good a time as any to check out the MVP special reward I'd gotten from Gouz-Maise.

As it said in the name, the "Grudge-soaked Greaves" were a pair of boots made of a malicious-looking purple metal and some leather — hopefully not human leather — and its description in the window went like so:

[Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise]
[Epic Item]
An epic item embodying the concepts surrounding the ox-headed horse-man clad in grudge.
In addition to converting surrounding negative emotions into pure power, it grants the wearer an understanding of the unity between man and horse.
[This item cannot be transferred or traded.]

"'Epic Item'?" Those were the first words that escaped my lips once I saw the status screen.

Given that the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda was a "Legendary Item," I was now curious about what kind of difference those descriptions referred to.

I looked through the help window and found a section on "MVP special reward ranks." I couldn't recall it being there the last time I checked over this general area of help sections, so I could only assume that it had appeared there only recently. If I had to guess, it had probably appeared there after I'd acquired the Miasmaflame Bracers.

As for the content of the help section, it said that UBMs and the MVP special rewards received upon defeating them had several ranks. Those ranks were primarily decided based on the UBM's strength and threat level, and from lowest to highest, they went like so: Epic, Legendary, Ancient

Legendary, Mythical, and Superior.

Though I'd gotten stronger since my battle with the demon, I still felt that Gouz-Maise had been more challenging than Gardranda. However, the rank on the Miasmaflame Bracers was above that of the new special reward.

The stat bonuses reflected that, as well. While the Grudge-soaked Greaves increased my AGI by 30%, Miasmaflame Bracers increased my STR by 100%. Clearly, Gardranda had been above Gouz-Maise.

I felt that she herself might know something about this. After all, she'd called herself "a power left unused" and "the life and mind that the demon failed to birth."

With that in mind, I tried talking to the Miasmaflame Bracers on my hands, but I didn't get any sort of response.

That dream had been more than enough for me to confirm that her mind was still intact, but apparently, she had no means of talking to me in reality.

Suddenly, I was hit with the terrifying idea that Gouz-Maise, too, still had its mind. However, after a moment of consideration, I concluded that the greaves were completely devoid of any sort of consciousness. Though the assumption was based entirely on intuition alone, for one reason or another, I didn't feel that it was the least bit wrong.

If I had to add reasoning to this, I'd simply say that the boots simply lacked the grudge that had permeated every inch of everything relating to the creature known as Gouz-Maise.

With that settled, I began examining the two skills on the Greaves of Grudge.

The first was Grudge Conversion, which was a downgraded version of the grudge power that had fueled Gouz-Maise. It absorbed the grudge from the surroundings, stored it, and turned it into either SP or MP. Though I assumed it had been part of the monster's functionality, the skill didn't come with the Automatic Restoration ability.

...Upon further thought, I realized that having my lost limbs regrow would be downright freaky, so I was kinda glad it wasn't there.

The second skill — Rider and Horse, As One — was clearly based on the fact that Gouz-Maise had been a horse-man. It increased the Horse Riding skill level by one.

Wait...

Increased the Horse Riding skill level by one.

"I can finally ride Silver!" Overcome with emotion, I shouted out my joy.

This is great, I thought.

It was exactly what I needed to no longer have to ride Silver like I was performing some circus act.

The skill also increased AGI while riding a horse by 10% for every Horse Riding skill level. That was pretty good, too... in fact, that was probably the primary effect of the skill. However, since I hadn't even been able to begin to ride, I appreciated the bonus effect far more.

With that, I got on Silver and began following the road which Hugo and Cyco had used to get to Gideon. I rode the mechanical horse as its hooves rhythmically hit the ground, and I couldn't help but be moved by the fact that I wasn't falling off.

Feeling exceedingly comfortable, I relaxed and head towards Gideon as I let Silver canter as he pleased.

I hope I can run into Hugo along the way, I thought.

More than an hour after equipping the Grudge-soaked Greaves, Silver and I were still on a mountain road.

"Are we there yet...?" I asked no one in particular.

During this time, my Horse Riding skill had already increased by one, and I'd gotten a message saying that the quest "Rescue Roddie Lancarse" was complete. It seemed safe to believe that Hugo had arrived at Gideon and handed the children over to the quest giver girl and the parents. I, too, wished I was in Gideon with them.

"I honestly think we should be close by now," I said. The uncertainty in my tone was due to the fact that I wasn't sure if the road I was following was the correct one.

When going from Gideon to the Gouz-Maise hideout, we had used a Magingear, and — to avoid getting spotted — traversed a path where we wouldn't meet any people. Now, however, I was following a mountain road that was well-maintained enough to not have a single blade of grass growing out of it. When taking my and Silver's comfort into consideration, this path was far better than the former, but it wasn't without its problems, either.

The Cruella Mountain Belt was a net of many roads of various sizes.

According to the area's description in the help window, while some of them had been made on the kingdom's or Gideon's orders, many had been randomly created by the local gangs.

With all the magic in this fantasy world, road-related public works weren't a hard task. There were even spells that allowed the caster to make vegetation simply move away, so it might've even been easier than using heavy machinery.

Due to that, there were countless roads, which made it difficult for me — a person with no knowledge of the lay of the land — to find my way back. Since I hadn't gotten to the hideout by taking these mountain paths, my map didn't display which one led to Gideon, and thus didn't help with the pathfinding all that much.

However, since I knew the approximate location of the city, I could make good use of the map window's cardinal directions. With that as my compass, I was able to make my way to where I thought Gideon was.

Considering our speed and the amount of time that had passed, the city should've — at very least — been in sight by now...

"Oh." Just as I thought that, I noticed Gideon's outline peeking through the spaces between the trees.

Since we were still on the mountain, I got to look down at it from a particularly high point. Though it was already turning dark, the city was emitting lots of light, making it obvious that its people were still full of energy.

"Hm?" I murmured.

A certain sound reached my ears. It was the sound of hooves hitting the ground beneath — something I'd grown familiar with throughout today. Except this time, there were many such sounds, and their sources all seemed to be in one group. Not only that — they seemed to be getting closer to me.

"What?"

As I imagined the unlikely and, frankly, silly scenario in which I was being chased by a group of horse-men Liches, the sound suddenly mixed with the sound of metal armor fittings scraping against each other. Soon enough, I saw a group of horses being ridden by people in full plate armor.

It was a highly familiar group — Liliana's Knights of the Royal Guard.

"Hello, Liliana," I said. "We sure see each other a lot to—"

"Ray!" she exclaimed before I could finish. "Are you all right?!"

"...day?" *Okay now, why is she looking at me so intensely?* I thought. *And why are her knights turning all alert and battle-ready? Might I get an explanation?*

"Where is the giant undead?!" she continued. "Were you able to escape it?! Or is it still nearby?!"

...Oh, okay, I get it now.

I first explained Liliana that there was no need to worry, and went on to have an exchange of information with her. She gave me a detailed explanation of what had happened on her end.

After we'd split up at the sweets café, Liliana had gone on to continue her search for the second princess, but come evening, she had received a grim piece of information. One of her people had told her that "The second princess seems to have been kidnapped by a suspicious individual."

Liliana had been aware of the vile deeds committed by the Gouz-Maise Gang, and had concluded that it was entirely possible that the second princess had become another one of their victims.

However, Gouz-Maise Gang's hideout had been in the mountain belt that acted as the border between the kingdom and Caldina. Moving out with larger groups of soldiers could've been seen as an act of war.

That was why Liliana had formed a party comprised only of the best of the best of the Royal Guard, and planned a raid rescue mission to the Gouz-Maise Gang's hideout.

The moment they had prepared themselves and began heading out, two carriages had entered Gideon.

Due to it being late, the speed at which they'd entered had made them stand out. Once Liliana had asked them to state their identity and business, the coachman, a Master, had told them something that was nothing short of surprising.

He had said, "I am a Master who accepted the request of one of this city's citizens to rescue a kidnapped boy. We exterminated the gang and brought back all the children that were still alive. However, as we did that, some strange sorcery made the corpses of the gang merge into a giant undead UBM. We were able to escape using the carriages, but my fellow Master is still holding the beast off somewhere in the mountain belt."

The story had been so absurd that some knights simply hadn't believed it. However, a knight with the Truth Discernment skill had concluded that the Master wasn't lying. Not to mention that the requester — who'd been waiting for them by the gates — had confirmed that it was all true.

The shift from a kidnapping event to a UBM assault had made their situation turn quite chaotic. Also, Liliana had gone on to ask for the name of the Master holding back the UBM, causing her to find out that it was someone she was highly familiar with — me.

She had hastily departed the moment she'd found that out. The knights that had been supposed to join her in the rescue operation had gone after her. Some time after that, they'd run into me, still on edge and ready to face the UBM.

"I see," I said. "So Hugo safely got the children to the city. What a relief."

I'd known it from the message I'd received, but now that I'd been told the circumstances surrounding it, I could be certain that there was no need for worry.

"What do you mean, 'What a relief?!'" Liliana exclaimed. "What happened to the UBM?!"

"I defeated it," I curtly answered.

"Oh, I see, so you... you defeated it?!"

"Here." I showed her my boots and opened their informational window.

"...Ray, if I am not mistaken, you became a Paladin about a week ago and were only level 0 before that, correct?" she asked.

"That seems about right," I said. Time went thrice as fast here, after all.

"Why are you able to defeat an UBM a mere week after starting?! Also, I just realized, but those bracers are...!"

"Oh. Yes. I got these the day before yesterday..." Saying that, I showed her the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Liliana froze solid.

"The scale of what they're talking about is just ludicrous," muttered one of the knights to the others. "The only person I know who can defeat a UBM by his lonesome is our late commander."

"You need to be kind of insane to even attempt it, honestly," said another.

"This is just off. Our vice commander is forced to act out the 'straight man' type of character," commented the third knight. "I mean, she's normally the ‘natural airhead’ type, isn’t she?”

“Hhaahh...” sighed Liliana. “Truly, common sense does not apply to you Masters.”

“Well, it’s not like I won just because of my own abilities,” I said. “I had my comrades, lady luck, this horse named Silver, and Nemesis with me.”

“Speaking of Nemesis, where is she now?” Lilliana asked.

“She’s currently resting,” I said. “The things she had to do left her completely drained.”

I unequipped the Miasmaflame Bracers and gently rubbed the crest on my left hand, where Nemesis was sleeping.

“Ray... Nemesis...” Liliana spoke again. “I cannot express how valuable your actions are. Because of you, the awful series of kidnappings in Gideon are over and the UBM disaster was prevented. I believe I speak for all the people of the city when I give you my gratitude. Thank you very much.”

“Well...” I had trouble reacting to that. “It just happened to turn out this way, for some reason.”

I had accepted a quest, gone to save a child, gotten mentally overwhelmed by the tragic sight in the dungeon, let my fury drive me into killing the Lich, and gone on to struggle against the Revenant Ox-Horse. Seriously, I was completely confused as to why things had turned out this way.

Thinking back on it, there had been events which got me all choked up. I’d felt both deathly dread and disgust. My heart had burned with a fire strong enough to sear my very being.

However, once I’d found out that the children had all returned to the city, safe and sound, the aftertaste of this whole event had become a bit better.

Once we were done with the information exchange, we grouped up and made our way back to Gideon.

Since there was no need to worry about any UBM attacks, Liliana and her knights decided to accompany me. Apparently, she’d noticed how tired I was and had chosen to see to it that I returned to Gideon safely. I highly appreciated that.

“...Ah.”

Suddenly, a certain question went through my mind.

“By the way, what happened with the search for Her Highness the princess?" I asked. "I appreciate your company, but shouldn't you be focusing on that, instead...?"

My questions made Liliana's expression turn stiff. At the same time, I felt a strong air of nervousness envelop the other knights.

D-Did I say something bad? I thought.

"Based on what you told me, Her Highness was kidnapped by the gang, right?" I continued. "I didn't get a chance to take a look at the faces of the children in the carriages, so..."

"Her Highness wasn't in the carriages." Liliana's voice as she said that seemed somewhat... flat.

"Does that mean that...?" I asked slowly.

Are there actually more gang members? Did they take her to some other area in the mountains...?

"The kidnapping itself was misinformation," she said. "A short while ago, one of our people contacted me via communication magic and told me that she'd returned home, safe and sound."

"That's grea—"

"I was also told that she was carrying a store-bought mask, sweets, a goldfish, and a painting. She looked thoroughly satisfied."

"I... uh..."

"The one thing she said to the people of the place she is staying at was, 'It was most riveting!'"

I was dumbfounded.

...Your Highness, could you please read the mood? I thought. *These people spent the entire day searching for you.*

Though the way she'd explained the situation to me was highly smooth and matter-of-fact, I could see Lilliana's forehead twitching in anger.

"Eheheheheheheheheh..." she laughed ominously.

"A-Ahahahahahahah..." I reluctantly joined her.

"Eheheheheheheheheh... Let us change the subject."

"Good idea."

Both the mood of the situation and my very instincts told me that delving into this was a bad idea.

We switched to doing some idle chatter and continued following the road towards Gideon.

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When we finally reached the city, I couldn't help but notice that its atmosphere was exactly the same as it had been back when I'd entered it for the first time. One of Liliana's fellow knights used a communication magic skill to inform the guards about the defeat of the Epic-rank UBM — Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise — causing them to no longer stand on alert.

Once we passed the gates, I looked around, but Hugo and Cyco were nowhere in sight.

"Liliana, there's something I'd like to ask you," I spoke up. "Have you seen Hugo...? He's my comrade. The guy who brought the carriages with the children here."

"Do forgive me," she said. "I ran out the second he told me of the situation. Give me a moment to ask about him."

After saying that, Liliana began speaking to the guards stationed around the gates.

A moment later, one of them took a step forward. "After explaining the situation and handing the children over to us, the person in question said, 'I must return to the other side' and vanished."

Vanished? I asked myself. *What did he mean by "other side"? Dryfe? No...*

"So he logged out, huh?" I said. He'd probably done it to avoid getting questions he wasn't allowed to answer. The guy hadn't gotten cuffed or anything, so he would have been able to go offline with no problem.

I wonder if I'll meet him again tomorrow, I thought.

"Also, he gave me this," said the guard and handed me a letter.

"Thank you." I opened it and instantly realized that it was a message he'd left for me.

"Dear Ray Starling. I leave this message to you just in case you choose to stay in this world and either return here safe and sound or your death penalty expires.

First of all, I would like to thank you. Without you, I couldn't have brought the children back to their parents or the lady we'd met in that alley.

You will likely be offered many rewards for acts such as defeating the

Gouz-Maise Gang, and you can rest assured that it all belongs to you. I have no need for any of it. In fact, I’m incapable of taking any rewards from the kingdom’s public institutions.

It hasn’t been long since we’ve met, but I believe I have a good grasp of what kind of person you are. You will most likely hesitate to accept what you’re offered. However, with you having been the only one capable of doing it, you *must* be the one to take the rewards.

Also, you can rest easy knowing that I have already received my prize. My rewards were lady Rebecca’s smile and the tears of joy that she shed when I brought her little brother to her.

That was more than enough for me.

If you still feel apprehensive about it, you can pay me back by treating me to lunch the next time we meet.

Please excuse the fact that it’s in written form, but this is my goodbye to you.

Farewell. I hope we meet again. *Au revoir. À bientôt.*

The machine knight of ice and roses, Hugo Lesseps.”

I was speechless.

In case I choose to stay in this world, huh? I thought. *I...*

“Umm... Ray?” As I got lost in thought, Liliana looked at me with worry in her eyes.

“Are you sure you are feeling well?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry about that,” I said. “I’m quite fine, thank you.”

“Well, if you say so... Anyway, since you have defeated the Gouz-Maise Gang, please take some time within the next few days to report it to the Adventurers’ Guild and the knight offices. The Adventurers’ Guild is for the bounties, while the knights need to know about the elimination of a criminal organization.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“The day is getting late now, and I believe you are exhausted beyond belief, so please go have some well-deserved rest,” she said.

“I really should,” I agreed. “It’s been a really long day, after all. What will *you* do, Liliana?”

“I will go back to protecting Her Highness.”

“...Clearly, I’m not the only one here who deserves to be thanked for all their efforts."

"Oh, there's no need, eheheh..."

"All right, I will take my leave now," I said.

"Feel free to," she said. "Let us meet again."

With that, Liliana and I parted ways.

Still logged in, I went on to take a nap in one of Gideon's inns. Once I let myself fall on the bed, all the events of the day flashed through my mind. However, due to how exhausted I was, the sandman took me before I could think about any of it.

This time, I didn't have any dreams.

◇

The next morning, I woke up surprisingly early.

There was no sunlight flowing through the window and the sky outside only looked mildly bright, so it was probably before dawn. I placed my hand on my head and instantly found that the dog ears that had tortured me throughout all of yesterday were gone. With me spending the night in-game, they'd likely gone away due to the time limit.

"Have you awoken, Ray?" a voice asked.

I looked to where I'd heard the voice — the side opposite to the window. There, I saw Nemesis, who was sitting in a chair and looking at me.

"Morning, Nemesis," I greeted her.

"Good morning, Ray," she responded.

After that, we both just wordlessly looked at one another.

Eventually, I broke the silence and invited Nemesis for a walk. I took her to the plains right beyond Gideon's northern gates. With it being my third time here, the area was already becoming familiar to me.

Nemesis and I were speeding through it while riding Silver. I held the reins and controlled the steed while Nemesis sat behind and held onto me by my waist.

"This is truly pleasant," said Nemesis.

"Sure is," I agreed.

As I had such meaningless exchanges with Nemesis, I continued making Silver gallop through the plains. After about thirty minutes had passed, I saw the sun begin to show itself from behind the eastern mountains.

"Will you leave this world?" That was when Nemesis asked me that question.

I said nothing. She was referring to what I had been considering back in the fortress' basement.

If I processed *Infinite Dendrogram* the same way I did reality, it was questionable whether staying in a world so filled with death would be a good thing for me. The sight of the corpses of children I didn't even know had been enough to make me feel as though my heart had been gouged out. If they were people I was familiar with, like Liliana or Milianne, it would probably hurt me as much as a loss of a friend in reality.

However...

"There's more to this world than just loss," I said.

If I hadn't started Infinite Dendrogram*, I would've never met the sisters, Rook, Marie, Hugo, Cyco and — of course — you, Nemesis. I simply couldn't have come to know any of them if I'd only stayed there, and Nemesis wouldn't even have been born.*

"You *are* aware that you might go through something painful again, no?" she said.

Of course I am, I thought. *You're completely right about that. Events like what we went through yesterday are probably a daily occurrence here. But still...*

"If something that would leave a bad taste in my mouth starts happening before me... I'll just stop it," I said.

This time, it had been all over by the time I'd gotten there. However, if I was ever in the right place at the right time, I would do everything I could to prevent such a tragedy. After all, the possibility leading to the desired future was there, as long as you didn't give up.

"I would give my all to grab hold of the possibility," I said.

"I see," Nemesis spoke from behind me. "I feel like you are shouldering far more than you should, but I cannot say that this is unlike you. Yes — you should fight to protect. And while you do that..."

Still behind me, Nemesis gently patted me on the head.

The softness of the hand made me turn around.

"...*I* will be the one protecting *you*."

Nemesis, covered in morning light, gave me the most gentle smile.

That expression made me face forward again and swing Silver's reins to make him canter ahead. For some reason, I had become bashful enough that I was unable to look at her face again. Still, I felt that I had to say something back to her.

“Thanks... Nemesis...” That was all that came out.

As she held onto me, I felt as though she smiled once again.

After that, neither of us said anything more.

Still on Silver’s back, we dashed through the fields as we let that gentle morning of smiles embrace us.

Conjunction Episode: The Night Before

The surroundings of the east gate of Gideon, the city of duels

Midnight.

The day when Ray had fought and prevailed against the Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise had reached its end.

The surroundings of the east gate of Gideon — which were completely devoid of people with the exception of the few guards on their night shifts — were suddenly intruded by the appearance of a pair of people emitting a faint light.

One of them was a man clad in a military uniform reminiscent of a pilot suit — Hugo Lesseps, High Pilot of the Dryfe Imperium. Next to him was his Embryo, Cocytus.

After the last event, Hugo had logged out to avoid further questioning from the kingdom, and had now logged back in again after waiting for the right time.

After logging in, the two of them quickly walked away from the gate, entered a small alleyway, and began waiting for something. Less than a minute passed until someone came.

It wasn't a drunkard or some hoodlum.

Instead, it was a person wearing a penguin suit.

It was the very same penguin that had appeared before Ray last morning, pronounced himself "Dr. Flamingo," and gotten rid of Ray's debuffs while also giving him a pair of dog ears.

"Kept ya waiting," said the penguin.

"Not at all," replied Hugo. "I spent most of the waiting time offline."

"You were pretty busy today, weren't ya? Took care of the gang that was troubling this town, eh?"

"You're aware?" Hugo asked.

"Indeed I am," said the penguin. "I was doing some wiretapping on Ray, you see."

"Wiretapping Ray? How?"

"Not telling. I've been listening on him like I would a radio drama, and boy, was it a good one. He's as much of a Maiden's Master as you are, Hugh." The penguin made his body sway and chuckled.

"Well, if you know what he was doing, there's something I'd like you to tell me..." said Hugo.

"Yep, he won," the penguin answered the question before it was even asked. "Victory is his. He actually solo'd a UBM."

"I see. That's good to know." Hugo wasn't lying when he said that. However, that sentiment was followed by thoughts that completely contradicted it.

If the UBM had given him the death penalty, we probably wouldn't have to face each other today. After all, a person so straightforward in nature will surely try to stop the plan. Wait, in the first place, should I really be taking an active part in a plan that Ray would try to stop?

Little by little, hesitation began to envelop Hugo's mind.

"So, Hugh, are you ready for tomorro— no, today's plan?" the penguin asked, as if it was fully aware of Hugo's inner struggle.

Hugo quickly held back the hesitation, and reported something. "The Marshall II was destroyed."

"I see," said the penguin. "Here's a Garage with a spare one, then. It's Marshall II Revised — an improved version of the Marshall II you were using before. Its defense and AGI are 30% higher. The fine-tuning is done, too."

The penguin reached into his inventory and took out a large, rolled up, metallic scroll much like the one Hugo had used in the afternoon.

"Thank you very much," Hugo said gratefully. "Oh, I just remembered this."

Hugo took out a bundle of papers from his inventory. It was the sorcery blueprint that he'd discovered in the hideout of the Gouz-Maise Gang.

"Oh yeah, the sorcery that created that UBM, eh?" said the penguin.

"Well, with the clan already having scrapped the grudge power plan, I think it's probably useless to us," Hugo commented.

"Well, you think right," said the penguin. "After all, we got help from the King of Tartarus for that one, so the sorcery of a high-rank tian is just a bit..."

"Leader?"

The penguin was looking down at the blueprint and silently examining the text. “I see... So just because it’s grudge, it doesn’t have to... This needs to be verified, though...”

After making some conclusions, the penguin put the blueprint into his inventory.

“Back to the matter at hand,” he said. “With that Garage I gave you, you are prepared to be the heart of this plan. Other preparations are just about complete, as well.”

The penguin began counting down his fingers to confirm what was done or not. Since the suit didn’t have any fingers fit for counting, he obviously did it with the human fingers inside.

“The deployment of Castling and the gadgets is done. The arrangements to allow us to influence the device are done. The club, Veldorbell, has been taking root there for a few days now. And of course, my — the diamond’s — preparations are done... or so I’d like to say. But there’s something I still have to do. Well, it’s not like I won’t make it in time for the plan.”

Adding the names of playing card suits here and there, the penguin shared info with Hugo.

Though it seemed like some sort of coding, it was far simpler than that. When creating plans, the penguin simply had a habit of giving the codenames based on card suits to those who had important roles.

“The only real cause of worry here is whether the imperator’s joker is actually gonna do her job or not, but it all depends on luck,” said the penguin. “Still, she’ll probably act as long as our sources are correct and the first princess actually comes.”

“Umm, what’s this plan’s spade?” Hugo realized that that suit hadn’t been mentioned, and decided to ask about it.

That was because, whenever using suits as codenames, the penguin always gave spade to either the trump card or the most destructive role in his plan.

The penguin’s answer was simple. “Ah, well... I don’t have one. No spade this time.”

It seemed as though he was hiding something, but Hugo didn’t bother to doubt him.

“But man, am I glad. The event is actually happening.” As if to change to subject, the penguin nodded and continued talking. “Seriously, I can’t be more glad. I have no clue what retard was responsible for it, but the blockade caused by the PK happening almost ruined the event and our plan with it."

The PK happening. That was the event in which three player-killing clans and the Superior Killer had created a blockade in the four newbie hunting grounds around the capital. Though the kingdom's four Superiors had taken care of the problem, it had already affected the kingdom's overall power.

On the internet, it was rumored that it had been done by the imperium, which was on the verge of war with the kingdom. However, the penguin knew better than everyone that it wasn't true.

"Who do you think was responsible for that?" asked Hugo.

"No clue," curtly answered the penguin. "They went about it so well that they didn't leave any proof behind. Though the PKs were rewarded with pretty nice sums of money. And besides our country, there weren't many groups that relied on using coinage like that."

"Caldina, then?" asked Hugo.

Caldina, the commercial city-state union.

It was a mercantile country that covered the entire desert in the center of the continent and claimed that the presence or lack of money was everything.

Its national characteristic was that people there could get special products from all the other countries — albeit for large sums of money. Due to that, many high-end players had moved there, causing it to become the strongest country in terms of the amount of Masters.

"For what purpose did they do it?" asked Hugo.

"Well, I think there's more to it than just sullying the imperium's reputation," answered the penguin. "That place has both tians and Superiors that really know how to use their heads. They could have just used Sefirot — their pride and joy — yet instead they messed around with these indirect methods. What a pain."

Sefirot was the name of the top clan in the commercial city-state union of Caldina. Though it was only a mere ten members strong, a whole nine of them were Superiors.

Among those nine were The Earth AKA the "Magically Strongest," King of Termination AKA the "Seven Death Transformation," God Hunter

AKA the “Multifariously Invincible,” and Ace AKA the “Blue Sky Songstress,” all of whom were famous for their battle prowess.

Because of that, Sefirot was considered to be the strongest clan in all of *Infinite Dendrogram.*

“What is the likelihood of Sefirot showing up while the plan is commencing?” asked Hugo.

“I’m pretty sure they’re unaware of it,” said the penguin. “After all, if the plan is successful, it’s likely that the kingdom will give up before the war even happens. It’s like the imperium’s decisive blow. If they knew about it, they would’ve already done something.”

After saying that, the penguin began to consider.

“However, there’s a chance that one or few of them came to see the event... The Clash of Superiors. If that happens, I’ll just have to wreck their shit with the spade.”

The penguin’s words made Hugo begin to ponder.

Upon seeing that, the penguin talked to him with a gentle tone. “No need to overthink it, Hugo. If this goes well, the war will end with only minimal casualties.”

“Minimal?” asked Hugo.

“Indeed. His Excellency the General(lel) wants an all-out war, but that would be a waste of all kinds of resources. Such things are best handled in ways that are both smart and exciting.” Saying that, the penguin removed his suit. At the same time, he reached into his inventory, took out a lab coat, and put it on.

The result was a lean, spectacled man clad in a lab coat. He extended his hands to the sides and made a sonorous declaration.

“Tomorrow, we — The Triangle of Wisdom — will put a decisive end to the war between the imperium and the kingdom.”

To be continued next episode...

Afterword

Bear: “Heyo! Time fur another afterword! (Been awhile since the last one.)”

Cat: “And so, volume 2 was able come out without any probleems.”

Bear: “This is all thanks to the readers who bought volume 1, the stores that sold it...”

Cat: “...the editors, and Taiki and all the wonderful illustrations he drew!”

Bear: “Now, you might be aware of this, but a lot has happened between the releases of volume 1 and volume 2.”

Cat: “First, there was the great *Dendro* festival on Twitterr!”

Bear: “It had all this unbearably good *Dendro* art drawn by a whole fifty illustrators!”

Cat: “You can go and check it out in the gallery of the official *Dendro* siite!”

Bear: “Also, it was announced that *Dendro* is getting a manga adaptation.”

Cat: “The one working on it is none other than Kami Imai of *Needless* faame.”

Cat: “Though that still wasn’t revealed at the time this afterword was written.”

Cat: “However, when volume 2 comes out, the first chapter should already be ouut.”

Bear: “It’s highly recommended that readers of these novels get their paws on that!”

Cat: “Search for it on Comic Firee!”

Bear: “Now, a word from our author.”

Hello, this is Sakon Kaidou.

First of all, I would like to thank you getting your hands on *Infinite Dendrogram* volume 2.

Because of everyone involved and the audience, volume 1 sold well and we were able to release volume 2 into the world without much trouble, and I couldn’t be more grateful for that.

Now, as you might be aware, the first volume had some typos and mistakes (in the Japanese release) which — unlike with webnovel uploads — couldn’t be fixed after they were done. That made me painfully aware of my own lack of experience.

Releasing books into the world and having an audience buy them involved a level of responsibility completely unlike that of a webnovel author. I will try to become familiar with it and continue publishing *Infinite Dendrogram* to the best of my ability.

With that settled, it's planned that in the upcoming volumes 3 and 4, you'll be presented with the climax of the first part of *Infinite Dendrogram.*

New characters, a great event in the city of duels, Superiors making their moves, and the first clash between Ray and a certain person who's been involved with him since the very beginning.

I would be a very happy author if you, the readers of volume 2, became reasonably excited for what's to come.

Thank you once again, and I hope this continues.

Sakon Kaidou

Cat: "...I suuure hope volume 2 doesn't have any typos."

Bear: "Well, according to head editor K, 'typos happen.'"

Cat: "And with that, it's time to end volume 2's afterwoord."

Bear: "It was brought to you by Brother Bear the bear..."

Cat: "...and Cheshire the caat!"

Bear: "Volume 3 is set to come out this year, so bear with us until then!"

Cat: "...It would be pretty surprising if it doesn't come out in 2017, right?"

Bear: "I-I'm sure it'll come out just fine."

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 2
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2017 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2017

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Infinite Dendrogram
3. Clash of the Superiors

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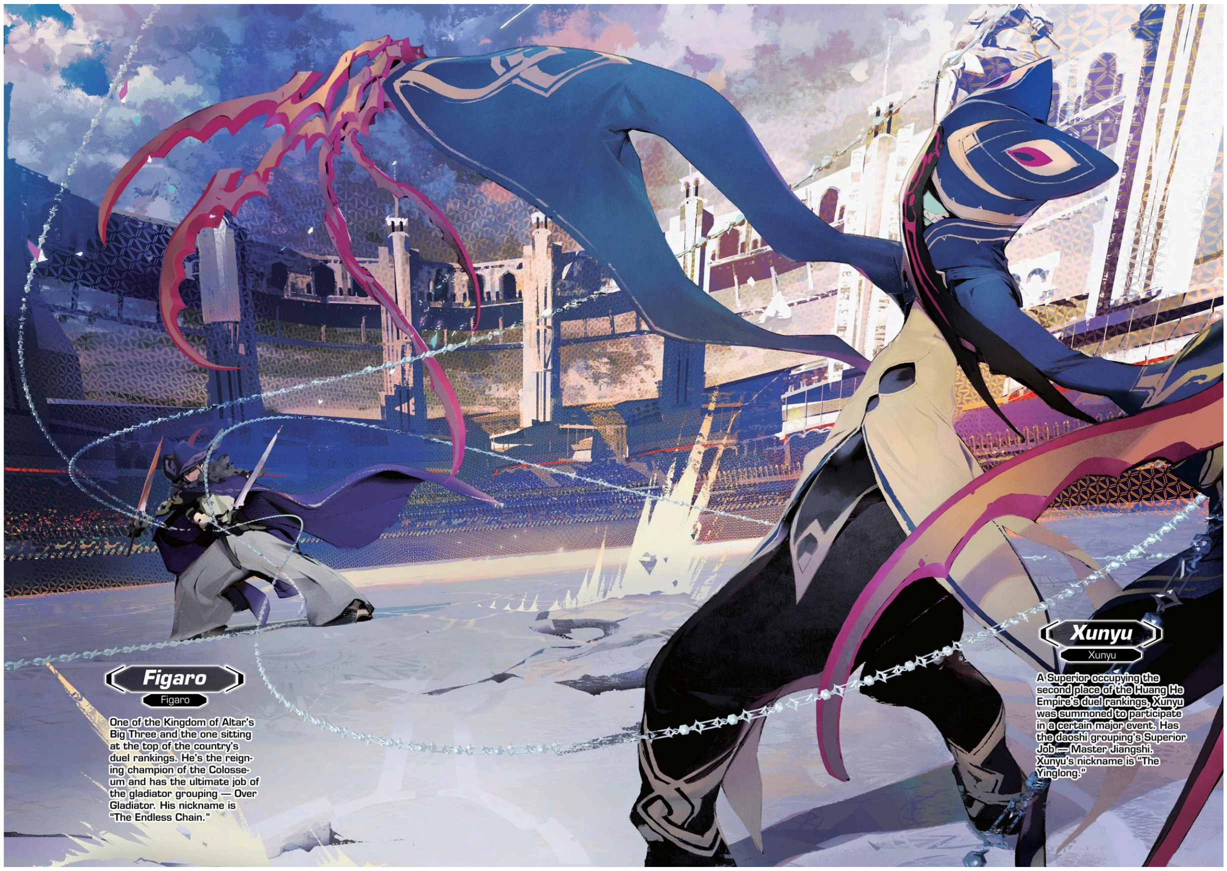


Figaro

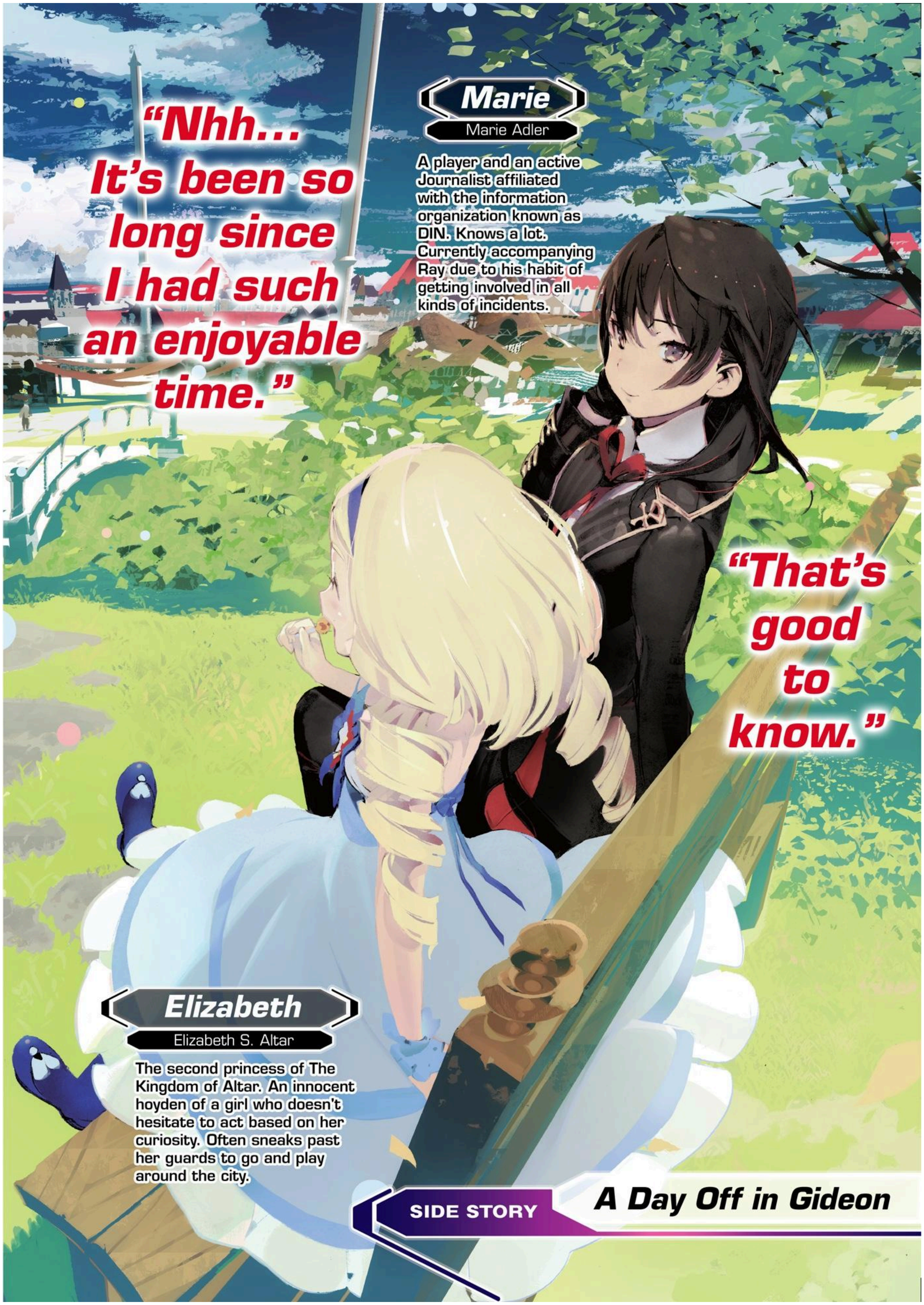
Figaro

One of the Kingdom of Altar's Big Three and the one sitting at the top of the country's duel rankings. He's the reigning champion of the Colosseum and has the ultimate job of the gladiator grouping — Over Gladiator. His nickname is "The Endless Chain."

Xunyu

Xunyu

A Superior occupying the second place of the Huang He Empire's duel rankings, Xunyu was summoned to participate in a certain major event. Has the daoshi grouping's Superior Job — Master Jiangshi. Xunyu's nickname is "The Yinglong."


"Nhh… It's been so long since I had such an enjoyable time."
"That's good to know."

Marie

Marie Adler

A player and an active Journalist affiliated with the information organization known as DIN. Knows a lot. Currently accompanying Ray due to his habit of getting involved in all kinds of incidents.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth S. Altar

The second princess of The Kingdom of Altar. An innocent hoyden of a girl who doesn't hesitate to act based on her curiosity. Often sneaks past her guards to go and play around the city.

SIDE STORY

A Day Off in Gideon

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Prologue: One of the East’s Mightiest

Western Caldina, Valeira Desert — an area bordering the Kingdom of Altar

Before the break of dawn, a wind was blowing through a dimly-lit desert, gently shifting its sands. It was an east-bound sea breeze that came all the way from the western ocean, crossing the entire Kingdom of Altar in the process.

Caldina was a country of sands. 99% of it was desolate wastelands, while the remaining 1% contained oases.

A land so lacking — if not downright deadly — wasn’t a good environment for any country to thrive, but Caldina was located in the middle of the continent. It prospered due to being in the center of all transactions between the two eastern countries (Huang He and Tenchi) and the three western countries (the kingdom, the imperium, and the fairyland). But it was also abundant in underground resources, ores, and ruins full of various magic items. Any food problems it might’ve had due to lack of fertile land were easily fixed by trading such riches.

Caldina could be summed up with the words “sand,” “wealth,” and “trade.” The deserts that comprised its territory became a road that connected the east and the west, creating an immense flow of riches.

It was similar to what people of Earth had once called the “Silk Road.”

On one such road, there was a row of about ten sizeable dragon carriages, so called because they were drawn by Demi-Dragons.

From their design, it was obvious that the carriages had come from Huang He rather than Caldina. Though it was uncommon for the eastern country to make deliveries to the west without stopping in the desert country, it definitely wasn’t unheard of. However, there were two things about the carriages which many would find odd.

The first was the fact that each and every single one of them was flying the flag of Huang He. While some merchant dragon carriages bore patterns that indicated what country they belonged to, none of them ever hoisted a flag.

The second oddity wasn't with the carriages, but with the person sitting on the roof of the one carriage at the very back. The person was looking at the trails the wheels left on the road and the predawn desert scenery passing by. Enjoying the scenery, the person blew into the tobacco pipe-looking item at the edge of what passed for a mouth and continuously released soap bubbles into the wind.

If that had been the only notable thing, many would have passed off the person as merely "eccentric" rather than "odd." However, it wasn't any conduct that warranted such a description, but a matter of overall appearance.

The person's limbs were far too long. Though the long, daoshi-like clothing did a good job covering them, it did nothing to conceal their abnormal length.

The eccentric's total height was above four metels, and the legs made up more than half of it. They were reminiscent of the classic stilt-walkers you might see at a circus. However, the person's arms were inappropriately long, as well. There was more than length to them, though — the five "fingers" grasping the pipe looked more like thin, sword-like blades than anything else.

The arms were far too long and had to be bent in a peculiar way just to let the person keep the pipe in the mouth and blow into it as they enjoyed the passing scenery.

The state of the person's face was quite bizarre, as well. The hat they wore had a talisman attached to it, which hung downwards and hid the eccentric's visage. When combined with the daoshi clothes, it made the person look like a jiangshi from Chinese movies.

The palpably strange appearance made this person stand out from the rest of the world. At the same time, the person emitted a shapeless aura of intimidation that had nothing to do with what you could see with the naked eye, yet was definitely there for those who could feel it.

This eccentric was both abnormal and awe-inspiring enough to appear like a threat to the world just by the virtue of existing. Despite being so menacing, however, the person did nothing but silently enjoy the desert scenery and the bubbles floating in the wind.

"Master Xunyu!" Soon enough, someone called out to the jiangshi-like character by using that name.

The source of the voice was a boy who looked about ten years old. He was trying to get on the same roof Xunyu was sitting on. Since the dragon carriage had no ladder, the youngling found it to be a particularly hard task.

In fact, with the vehicle moving, him falling off was a perfectly plausible scenario.

Noticing that, Xunyu used one of those long arms to take the boy by the nape and pull him to the roof. And thus, the child got safely onto the same platform as the eccentric jiangshi. Though the fingers that held the boy were like blades, neither the boy's luxurious-looking clothing nor his frail skin were damaged in any way.

"Ah! Thank you very much, Master Xunyu!" he said.

"You sure are eaRly, Cang," the jiangshi replied.

Though Xunyu's intonation was peculiar, the boy referred to as "Cang" didn't seem to care about it and spoke his response with a smile. "Not as early as you, Master Xunyu."

"...Ya know, having you call me 'master' makes me feel pretty uncoMFOrtable."

The boy looked at the jiangshi with gleaming eyes, which made Xunyu exhale a heavy sigh and blow some more bubbles.

Cang's real name was "Canglong" — meaning "Azure Dragon." In the Huang He Empire, the only people allowed to bear names with references to the sort of dragons that Masters would refer to as "oriental" were the direct male descendants of the emperor, meaning that this Cang boy was of imperial blood. Specifically, he was the third child of the current emperor.

Indeed — the reason why these dragon carriages were so unlike those belonging to traders was because they were a mission escorting the empire's royalty to the kingdom.

"We're about to reach the boRDer," said Xunyu.

"Indeed we are, Master Xunyu!" said the boy with glee. "Speaking of which, have you visited the Kingdom of Altar before?"

"Can't say that I haVe, but the guy in the alien costu— the 'Spirit Turtle' or 'Linggui' or whatever he wants to be called — said that he's been there onCe."

"Master Gray α Centauri? What did he say about it?"

"...Apparently, and I quote, 'There was an interesting costume there.'"

“Costume?” The boy looked reasonably confused.

As they were having such exchanges, the row of dragon carriages eventually reached the border of the Kingdom of Altar.

The kingdom’s officials went through the necessary formalities to allow their entry into the country. They looked seriously tense through the entirety of it, while the two people on the roof seemed completely unaffected. The tenseness was present even among the empire’s own officials and chamberlains. It was obvious that they wanted to say something, but their reverence for Cang’s royal status and Xunyu in general made them hesitate.

Cang was an upfront boy brimming with curiosity. Due to that nature of his, he often addressed non-royalty in a highly nonchalant manner. However, not many of them replied the way Xunyu did. Most would turn humble and abase themselves, and considering the boy’s status, they were completely right to do so. Xunyu, however, was special — even among Masters — and thus was allowed to respond differently.

About an hour had passed since they had crossed the border between Caldina and Altar and begun traversing the Cruella Mountain Belt.

The kingdom’s people had already told them about the Gouz-Maise Gang that had their hideout in this area. They’d said that the group was led by a powerful undead-gladiator duo, and that — though they focused primarily on kidnappings — the possibility of them attacking dragon carriages wasn’t zero and suggested that they be on their guard.

The problem clearly wasn’t something that could be ignored just by upping their alertness, but the kingdom’s officials had said nothing more. Still, it hadn’t been negligence on their part. They simply hadn’t said anything more because “being on their guard” was *more than enough* for this group of carriages.

“...Something reeKs.” Xunyu suddenly spoke up while sniffing. “It’s not undead stench, thoUgh Cang, get down for a biT.”

“All right!” The boy listened to the jiangshi’s words and slid down prone on the carriage’s roof. A moment later, Xunyu’s long arm released a flash.

Two seconds after that, they both heard the sound of something sinking into the damp ground nearby.

Those with the appropriate knowledge would instantly know that the object was a rifle bullet.

Not saying a word, Xunyu glared through the talisman covering the visage that passed for a face and observed the rocky area several hundreds of metels away from them.

◆◆◆

Caldina was a land connecting the east and the west, creating an immense traffic of gold and other riches.

Also, with the encroaching possibility of the Kingdom of Altar's demise, many wealthy merchants had begun abandoning the country for the eastern nations and Caldina itself. Whether they were heading towards or out of the desert country, those going through the border always had treasure on them.

Due to that, many hungry wolves with a taste for wealth would bare their fangs at those passing the area.

"First bullet failed to land on the target. I'm sorry. It seems I missed."

In the rocky area Xunyu was looking at, a woman was lying down with a large, scoped rifle in her hands.

She wasn't alone, for over twenty other people were hiding in the rocks around her. Each had their weapons at the ready as they fixed their eyes on the dragon carriages several hundreds of metels ahead.

They were outlaws. That alone didn't make them special by any means, but this particular group all shared a certain feature.

On the backs of each of their left hands were unique crests. They marked the people as Masters — players of the game known as *Infinite Dendrogram* and immortal beings commanding special powers known as "Embryos."

The group's name was Goblin Street. It was the very same PK clan that had taken part in the blockade surrounding the Kingdom of Altar's royal capital, attacking anyone trying to go through the Wez Sea Route leading to the harbor town to the west of the city. That incident had been caused by someone who'd hired three PK clans and one solo player killer to do it. Though the four — Goblin Street, K&R, Mad Castle, and the Superior Killer — all focused on player killing, their motives were different.

Mad Castle's goal was to rob and exert dominance over other players while role-playing as villains.

K&R's goal was to hunt other players.

The Superior Killer acted as a hired hit man who gave players the death penalty according to people's requests.

And finally, Goblin Street was a band of bandits that attacked and robbed *anyone*.

During the blockade incident, the only one of the four areas where tians were harmed, robbed, and killed was the Wez Sea Route — the one handled by Goblin Street. Due to that, the clan was the only one of the four guilty entities that had gotten on the kingdom's wanted list.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, murder and robbery between players wasn't considered a crime. That was because tian laws had no power over Master disputes.

However, the same couldn't be said about cases where Masters committed crimes against tians.

Just like criminal NPCs, such players were put on the country's wanted list, or — provided the crimes were severe enough — the wanted list of every country in the game.

If a Master's respawn points were all in countries that had them on the wanted lists, getting a death penalty would cause the player to respawn at the save point in the gaol.

That was the reason why Goblin Street's activities now took place near a border.

Once they had become unable to use the kingdom's save points due to being on the wanted list, one of the kingdom's Superiors — Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts — had given the death penalty to everyone who was online at the time. Though some went on to respawn in other countries, many didn't have save points outside the kingdom and got sent to the gaol, causing about half of the clan's members to leave.

Obviously, the damage the group sustained was severe, and it wouldn't have been strange for it to have ceased its activities or split up altogether. In fact, that was exactly what happened to another clan that had taken part in the blockade: Mad Castle. Despite not being on the wanted list, the group had split up after they'd been annihilated by Figaro.

Goblin Street, on the other hand, had simply moved their save points to Caldina and still continued their hunt in the kingdom. They'd sneaked through the eastern border of the country and begun their activities once again. Due to how close the area was to Caldina, it was far more convenient than the Wez Sea Route from last time. In fact, the Cruella Mountain Belt was so good for bandits that even the infamous tian group, the Gouz-Maise Gang, had had their hideout here. Truly, finding a more bandit-friendly environment would be no small task.

Of course, with Goblin Street being a band of player killers and criminals, there was the possibility of them getting hunted down by adventurers or attacked by other nearby gangs such as the aforementioned Gouz-Maise Gang. However, Goblin Street wasn't the type of group to be afraid of such scenarios.

"Hey, what the hell?" one of them said. "Didn't you say that switching your job to Sharpshooter turned your effective range into 1,000 meters?"

"I seem to have miscalculated the carriage's movement speed," the woman replied. They were talking about the sniping that she'd attempted on the person on the dragon carriage. Everyone — including herself — thought that she'd missed.

No — not everyone. There was one exception.

"You're wrong there, Neeala. You didn't miss. The bullet just got deflected."

"What do you mean, boss?" she asked.

The man who had spoken up was young and had red hair. The upper half of his body was covered by a similarly-colored jacket that had lion mane trimming on it. However, while the red of his hair seemed natural, the crimson on his jacket made it seem as though it was merely showered in something of such a sanguine color.

"You shot a bullet, and that freak deflected it," he said. "There's nothing more to that."

"But that's impossible," replied the girl. "The bullet was faster than sound."

"*I* can do it, you know? And it just so happens that there's someone else who can," the red man said in a nonchalant manner.

His words caused a stir among those surrounding him. It wasn't caused by the claim that the boss himself could do it, but by the assertion that the opponent was capable of it, as well.

They believed and were well aware that their leader could deflect bullets. He was King of Burglary, Eldridge. Having the throne of the burglar grouping's Superior Job as his own, he was considered to be one of the kingdom's strongest player killers.

When his clan had been purged by the Superior, he had happened to be offline. Due to that, he'd survived the event completely unharmed. However, the members of Goblin Street were absolutely certain that not even a Superior could defeat their leader, and that things would've turned out differently if he'd been online back then.

In fact, Eldridge's strength was the sole reason why the clan still continued to function, despite being forced to change hunting grounds. The members were confident that Goblin Street would remain alive and well as long as they had him.

Eldridge looked at the group of dragon carriages hundreds of metels ahead.

"That freak probably has one of Huang He's Superior Jobs," he said. "We're not letting that stop us, though. I can handle that one by myself. You guys attack all the weaklings that come out once I'm done. That'll be enough."

He then opened his hands and extended them behind him. Soon enough, his palms were filled with power and murderous intent, making it seem as though he was drawing a bowstring to the absolute limit.

His muscles creaked as he closed and opened his hands. It was a subconscious, habitual action that was nothing but a show of his innate desire to grasp and rob his targets' belongings.

"Greater Pickpocket... Greater Takeover... set!" he shouted.

The King of Burglary had three unique skills, all of which used his hands.

In his right hand, he set a skill that robbed people of their items: Greater Pickpocket. It allowed him to pick any transferable items within the effective range, a radius of 100 metels, and forcefully store them in his own inventory. Even a dragon carriage was a viable choice, making it a particularly fearsome skill.

In his left hand, he set a skill that robbed people of their lives: Greater Takeover. As long as they were within the effective range, he could use it to remove his opponents' body parts. Anything that fit into his hand could be plucked from a distance and end up in his possession.

I've gotta aim for the dragon carriage with that long freak sitting on it, Eldridge thought. Due to his maxed-out Identification skill, he could easily tell that that particular dragon carriage was special. *It's a mobile save point.*

The Huang He Empire was highly advanced when it came to the creation of magic items, but this vehicle stood out even when that was considered. For Eldridge, who had lost his save points in the kingdom, it was something that he was simply compelled to rob.

The dragon carriage was about three hundred metels away. From its speed, he calculated that it would take between one and two minutes for it to get into his effective range.

Eldridge planned to take the dragon carriage the "long freak" was sitting on, forcefully ruining the tall eccentric's posture and giving him a window of opportunity to take the *head*.

He was confident that it would be over with just that.

It had to be noted that Eldridge's calculations weren't off the mark.

If the conditions had been as he'd set them to be, things probably would've gone exactly as planned. However, there was a certain condition he'd gotten wrong.

He'd assumed that Xunyu was merely an owner of a Superior Job from Huang He.

Alas, there was a decisive difference between his assumption and the reality.

"The freak got off...?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

Just as he'd said, Xunyu was no longer sitting on the dragon carriage.

The jiangshi's limbs appeared to be even longer than they had seemed back when Xunyu had just been sitting.

From a distance, the overall impression the eccentric gave off was closer to "utility pole" than "person."

"Are we about to get attacked?" one of the bandits cried.

"Did the first attack give off our position?!" another yelled.

"Be on your guard! The jobs you can take in the east of the continent are different than those in the west! You don't know what to expect!"

As his clan began making a fuss about the change in situation, Eldridge silently observed Xunyu.

...This might be bad, he thought, and not without reason. Whether it was caused by the Danger Sense skill he'd acquired or the instincts he'd been born with, he felt that he was in peril.

However, he'd felt the same way about many a boss monster, Master, or tian he'd encountered during his entire playtime, and on countless such occasions, he'd come out on top.

Even with the danger considered, Eldridge — owner of the Superior Job known as "King of Burglary" — didn't think that the eccentric could emerge victorious.

Now that the freak is off the carriage, it's safe to expect an attack, he thought. *Still, I just have to wait until the shithead enters my effective range and take their head before anything happens.*

With that in mind, he instantly switched the skill on his right hand to Greater Takeover.

Due to the jiangshi's long clothes, Eldridge couldn't tell how the body looked under them, but he figured that Xunyu would die the moment he removed the head.

There was nothing wrong with that line of thinking. Losing their vitals meant death to just about anyone. Having killed countless people like this, Eldridge knew that better than most.

And so did Xunyu.

"The freak's not mov— Ghuh... Ah?"

Eldridge began to speak his confusion about the lack of activity from the jiangshi. But before he could finish his sentence, his voice was replaced by a powerful flow of blood.

In fact, the sanguine liquid began to flow out of every orifice on his head — mouth, nostrils, ears, and eyes.

The blood trailing down from the seven holes painted his face crimson.

"U-UAAAHHH!" one of his underlings screamed. "B-BOSS?!"

"Hey! Where's our healer?! Wait, no, someone get him an Elixir!"

As his clan members began to panic, Eldridge was surrounded by a mysterious silence. He could barely make out even the most loudest of sounds anymore. Tilting his head to the side, he touched his chest.

...Oh, I see, he thought as he shifted his gaze to Xunyu. In the jiangshi's right hand — which was more like a menacing, metallic claw — there was a dark red object.

It looked very much like *a heart*.

...I've been robbed.

A moment after he realized what it was, the man known for being one of the Kingdom of Altar's greatest player killers was reduced to particles of light, and vanished.

"B-BOOOOOSS!"

"Wha...? E-eh?!"

The sudden and mysterious death of the man they so relied on made the remaining members panic and scream.

"Too slOw."

Before they could even finish doing that, however, Xunyu — who had been about three hundred metels away just a moment ago — suddenly stood in the center of their group.

A woman hastily tried to aim her rifle, a man quickly brandished his sword, and others hurriedly tried to use their Embryo skills, but the jiangshi acted faster than anyone present.

The action was a simple spin. Xunyu bent that tall frame and spun those long arms. A second later, the people surrounding the jiangshi were *sliced into fine discs* and fell to the ground like tinned chunks of pineapple.

Some of them were wearing accessories that prevented fatal damage, but Xunyu made sure to slice them so thoroughly that it meant nothing.

The immense damage quickly killed them, and the severe destruction of their bodies left no time for resurrection, almost instantly making them vanish.

With them gone, all that was left was the sound of trees dancing in the wind and the ridiculously long shadow made by Xunyu standing in the morning light.

That was how the PK clan known as Goblin Street experienced their second annihilation.

All of it happened in less than two minutes after Xunyu got off the dragon carriage.

"Man, that was boRing," said the jiangshi while taking the familiar pipe out of the inventory and putting it in the mouth again. "Is this the par for the kingdom's SupeRior Jobs?"

Blowing bubbles and sighing, Xunyu used those sharp claws, the Superior Embryo that had just sliced over twenty people, to skillfully scratch their head. "This makes me wonder if I should expect much from the country's SuperiOrs."

Yet again sighing from boredom, Xunyu, the Huang He Empire's Superior, returned to the dragon carriage.

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“Well done, Master Xunyu!” said Cang.

“What a splendid display!” said one of the chamberlains. “A Geomancer said that the bandits were a group of dozens of Masters, and yet you were able to take care of them all by your lonesome!”

“I would expect nothing less from one of the Huang He Si Ling — the empire’s greatest four!” added one of the country’s officials. “Truly, only Master Xunyu is deserving of the nicknames ‘Landmine,’ ‘Divine Speed,’ and ‘Yinglong.’”

Upon returning to the dragon carriage, Xunyu was showered in such praise. Despite the positive appraisals, however, everyone besides Cang seemed to be somewhat afraid of the jiangshi.

“It ain’t muCh,” said Xunyu. “Still, though, a job’s a job, and with it being so early, it made me pretty sleEpy.” Those words made the chamberlains and the officials hastily leave Xunyu’s dragon carriage. Cang, too, lightly bowed and excused himself.

Left alone, Xunyu sat down on the custom-made, long sofa and sighed yet again. “With Cang being so genuine, the way he flatters has a certain chaRm to it, but the shameless brown-nosing from the adults is just unSightly.”

However, no one could really fault them for their behavior. They were delivering royal blood — Cang — to the Kingdom of Altar for a mission so important that not even Xunyu had been told about it. They had expected the journey to be filled with many attacks such as the one that had just happened, and the jiangshi’s protection was invaluable.

However, Xunyu was a Master — one of the wielders of unique powers due to which their very existence in this world was fickle. If Xunyu happened to leave this realm — to “log out” — for a long period of time, they could never complete their task. Not to mention that their heads would roll the moment something bad happened to Prince Cang.

Originally, the role of protecting this mission hadn’t been anywhere in Xunyu’s schedule, and the eccentric would’ve surely left them to their own devices. The only reason why the jiangshi had accepted the role was the fact that the mission had headed out for the kingdom’s royal capital at the same time Xunyu had some unrelated business in the same country. Of course, it would've been a lie to say that the jiangshi didn't find the reward — this custom-made dragon carriage — to be attractive, as well.

"HmPh." Still lying on the sofa, Xunyu reached for the inventory and took out two pieces of paper.

The first was a written request directed to Xunyu, while the other was a leaflet.

The written request had come through the adventurers' guild in Huang He, and displayed a reward good enough to make the journey to the kingdom worth it.

It asked Xunyu to have a match in the arena of the duel city known as Gideon. The requester was Count Gideon — the ruler of the city.

It wasn't hard for Xunyu to understand why the man had requested that. The jiangshi had the second place in Huang He's duel rankings and was a Superior, a wielder of a Superior Embryo.

According to the information Xunyu had gathered, the situation in Gideon wasn't the best, so the count was probably trying to dispel the gloomy atmosphere with a grand show fit for a duel city.

That was displayed on the other piece of paper — the event leaflet with the words "Clash of the Superiors" written on it. It informed people of the duel between Figaro — one of the Kingdom of Altar's Superiors and the so-called king of the duel city — and Xunyu, another Superior.

A match between two Superiors. It was an unprecedented event that had yet to happen in any duel city in any country, giving it lots of attention from both in and out of the kingdom.

Count Gideon is probably thinking of having the local hero, Figaro, win and heighten the spirits of his people... Sadly for him, my loss isn't part of the request, thought Xunyu as a grin spread across that terrifying face.

Though the talisman hanging down from the hat and covering what passed for a face made it hard to see, the grin was brimming with ferocity.

I don't know whether he just didn't think this through or if he simply trusts Figaro's strength, but I'll do the same thing regardless — fight with all I am, enjoy it for all it's worth, and beat him with all I've got. Still covered by the talisman, Xunyu laughed in a menacing manner.

"Khahahahah. Here's hoping you can entertAin me, Altar's SuperiOr."

That was how the dragon carriages carrying one of the east's mightiest and the Empire's prince crossed the border and entered the Kingdom of

Altar.

The Clash of the Superiors — Figaro and Xunyu — was just a few days away.

Unknown to most, however, the battle would act as a trigger to an even greater happening.

Chapter One: Lectures and Reunions

Paladin, Ray Starling

It was the morning after the hellish day during which I'd fought the Gouz-Maise Gang and the Revenant Ox-Horse.

Before dawn broke, Nemesis and I were dashing through the Nex Fields on Silver's back while talking about what we would do from now on and hunting the local monsters.

Defeating Gouz-Maise had made me level up to level 39, and this hunting had increased that number to 40. My HP now crossed the 5,000 mark.

Becoming able to ride Silver increased my speed and hunting effectiveness with him. What I found particularly effective was firing Purgatorial Flames at groups of monsters as I passed them by.

"A red-black man on horseback releases a stream of fire without as much as a 'hello' and leaves, just like that," said Nemesis. "No matter how you look at it, that seems like a description of a real villain."

"I'm aware," I said.

Still, I feel that killing a large number of normal monsters is a better way to level up than going through the hassle of killing a single boss monster, but whatever, I thought.

Momentarily satisfied with my level, I stopped the hunt and decided to do some tests. Specifically, I wanted to see what Silver and the Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise could do. The stats bonuses on the Greaves were exactly what the item said they were, while the energy gathering caused by Grudge Conversion seemed to work just as intended.

Also, I noticed that it wasn't necessary for the grudge to come from the dead. The negative emotions released by the living were significantly weaker than those of the deceased, but they could still be converted to MP and SP.

That meant that keeping the enemy alive and torturing them was a good way to stock up on both of those stats. As useful as that seemed, however, the idea of actually doing it just freaked me out.

The other skill on the greaves — Rider and Horse, As One — had proven to work just fine yesterday, when I'd begun using its Horse Riding skill bonus to ride Silver. Thus, it was time to test Silver's own skills.

There were a total of three — Running, Wind Hoof, and one unknown skill that showed up as only "???" on there. The Miasmaflame Bracers also had an unknown skill on them, so I could only assume that unknown skills weren't *that* rare.

First up was Running, which — as it said in the name — was a skill that allowed Silver to run while someone was riding him. The speed and quality of the running was dependent on the rider's Horse Riding skill level. *How horse-like,* I thought.

Then there was the other skill, Wind Hoof. It could only be used when the rider's Horse Riding skill level was above 3 or Riding skill level was above 6. The description said that it "Allows air-travel by compressing the air under the hooves" and "Uses the rider's MP to create a barrier of compressed air."

The difference between Horse Riding and Riding was the fact that the former was exclusive to horses and thus allowed better use of them for less levels, while Riding could be used with anything ridable in exchange for needing more levels.

With all the riding I'd done while going back from the Mountain Belt to Gideon and the dashing we did since predawn today, my Horse Riding had reached level 2. The +1 bonus from Rider and Horse, As One made it level 3, allowing me to use Wind Hoof.

I tried it out and... sure enough, we flew. Though it was less like "flying" more like "running on invisible platforms in the air."

"Whoa." I couldn't help but be moved.

"What a view." Nemesis shared my sentiment. It was something that I could never have experienced in real life.

As great as the experience was, however, the act's similarity to riding a horse over glass made me feel a bit anxious and scared. Still, I got somewhat used to it after about an hour or so. Thankfully, Silver himself covered the cost of this air-running ability, leaving my MP completely untouched.

However, the skill could be used in a way that *did* drain my MP.

It was the barrier of compressed air. According to the skill's description, I could use it to protect myself from attacks.

There happened to be a Goblin Archer right below me, so I used it to see how well it worked.

"Go on, shoot!" I shouted. The result was simple — the arrow broke through the barrier as if it wasn't even there and sunk into me.

Slightly panicking, I used Purgatorial Flames to burn the Goblin Archer below.

Man, I know I'm the one doing it, but hanging in the air and raining fire on those on the ground is pretty messed up, I thought.

The Goblin tried fighting back, but all its arrows got burned before they could reach me.

Once I overcame this unexpected predicament, I began to analyze what had just happened. The problem was obvious — Wind Hoof's barrier was just way too weak.

I began thinking about why it was like this, and it didn't take too long for me to find the root of the problem.

I simply hadn't used enough MP. With my maximum MP being so low, I had subconsciously used it sparingly and — naturally — hadn't gotten the results I'd wanted.

When trying it again, I used all of my MP. My next opponent was a Goblin Warrior.

"Bring it on!" I shouted.

The result was simple — its ax broke through the barrier as if it wasn't even there. I'd expected there to be a wall-like patch of air, but the ax had cut through it like it would paper.

By a hair's breadth, I avoided getting split in half and began fighting the Goblin Warrior. Naturally, I emerged victorious, but not having any MP made it a harder battle than it should've been.

"It's no good," I said.

"No good, indeed," agreed Nemesis.

Wind Hoof's air-running effect was great and all, but with my meager amount of MP, the barrier aspect seemed completely useless.

"The efficacy seems quite poor, if you ask me," she added.

Yeah, seriously, I thought. Miasmaflame Bracers — a special reward — allowed the use of powerful skills such as Purgatorial Flames and Hellish

Miasma for far less MP than Wind Hoof. I could only assume that it was a testament to just how great special rewards were, and...

"Ah," I said as an idea came to my head. I had a certain combo available to me.

So I tried it. And the result was simple — a great success. Not only did the barrier stay intact, it increased my defensive ability so much it was immense.

The only problem was an unexpected side effect that got me all covered in mud.

Also, there was something I had to keep in mind.

"I can't use this in the city," I said.

"It's a quick way to get on the wanted list, no doubt about it," commented Nemesis.

This new way of using the skill was so dangerous that we decided not to touch it unless the situation called for it.

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After we were done with the testing, we went back to the city, I took a shower at the inn, and then I made my way to Gideon's knight offices. I went there because Liliana had told me to report the destruction of the Gouz-Maise Gang to them.

I entered the offices in Gideon's first district and saw many Knight-like people busily running around. They seemed about five times busier than high schoolers getting ready for a school festival.

It appeared like there was some event coming up soon, and they were hard at work preparing for it.

Trying not to get in their way, I went through the less crowded hallways and made my way to the office Liliana had told me about.

However, before I could get there...

"Ah."

...I ran into a white armor-clad knight whose face I recognized — the one that Liliana had referred to as "Sir Lindos." From the way he stopped and stared at me, it was fair to say that he recognized me, as well.

"Hello," I greeted him. However, all I got in response was silence.

Well, I already know that he doesn't think too highly of us Masters, so *whatever,* I thought.

Not minding his attitude too much, I began heading to the office again.

"I hear that you defeated the Gouz-Maise Gang," said Sir Lindos before I could walk away.

"Yes," I replied. "I can't say that I did it alone, though."

In response, he silently closed his eyes. "Thank you."

Then he left after saying just that.

"Huh?"

What am I supposed to make of that? I thought.

"Maybe he just wanted to express his gratitude?" said Nemesis.

"But why him, of all people?"

"I'm not one to know."

Slightly confused at what had just happened, I went towards the office again.

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Gideon's knight offices had a free-to-enter area dedicated to the citizenry's appeals and the like. Naturally, there were lots of secretive areas where civilians weren't allowed to enter, but the office I was looking for was in the open area. There were guides to help people get around, so I had no trouble getting to my destination, where I quickly began going through the relevant procedures.

During the process, I was told something about merit or whatever, but I didn't remember most of it. Almost the whole of my visit consisted of me looking at and signing some documents.

Most of them looked fine, and I didn't hesitate to put my signature on them, but I refused to sign the one that gave me "The Right to Acquire the Treasure Plundered by the Gouz-Maise Gang."

There was no denying that I had monetary troubles. Sure, with me getting the Grudge-soaked Greaves, I no longer had to buy an Amulet of the Equestrian Tribe to get the Horse Riding skill, but the thinness of my wallet was a problem nonetheless. However, I was highly averse to the idea of possessing money the scumbags hoarded by preying upon children. That was why I asked the office to donate that money to charities that helped children.

With Hugo also having a right to those dirty riches, my only regret was the fact that I'd decided this without consulting him. Sure, his letter had said that he needed no reward, but it still didn't feel right to not get his input on this. If he didn't agree with this decision, I was fully intent on giving him the reward I'd get from the guild.

However, I felt that this would never happen. Hugo and I hadn't known each other for long, but I was certain that he'd have done the same thing as me if our positions had been reversed.

We were alike, and not just because we were both Maidens' Masters.

Once I was done signing the papers, I was told that I was probably going to be contacted sooner or later, so I gave them the address of the inn I was staying at here in Gideon. With that, the procedures were done, and we began making our way out of the offices.

Before we left, however, one of the workers there stood up.

Facing me, he bowed and said one thing: "Thank you for avenging my little boy."

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I didn't know what to say in response to that.

I'd had such gratitude directed at me back when I saved Milianne and protected Alejandro's people against Gardranda, but the situation was completely different this time.

Specifically, there were two main differences.

The first was the fact that I had only taken part in this incident's end. I had only seen the conclusion of the tragedies surrounding the Gouz-Maise Gang. I hadn't seen anything but the results of what they'd done, and the final end Hugo and I had delivered upon them.

To the people living in this city, the tragedy had been a process that had constantly tortured them. Since they hadn't been able to do anything about it, that suffering had probably extended to the country's knights, as well. In fact, that might've been the reason why Sir Lindos had thanked me. However, I knew nothing about this painful process these people had been involved with.

The other difference was the fact that I wasn't being thanked for saving anyone. I had been thanked for avenging the son the worker had lost. The tragedy had already happened, and many children kidnapped by the Gouz-Maise Gang had lost their lives.

Though we'd successfully saved the boy that our quest had indicated, and a number of other children along with him, the number of undead I'd burned in the dungeon had been at least ten times greater.

Far too many children would never return home. Thinking of that made my heart ache.

I felt unreasonably guilty about all that was lost and the fact that I had been too late to do anything about it. I couldn't forgive myself for that, and felt that I had to make up for it somehow.

But...

"What can I even do about this?" I murmured.

"I certainly don't know," Nemesis responded, with a wry smile on her face. "I can see that you're seriously troubled about this, but there isn't much I can say to you as you are now. If I have to, however, I'll merely suggest that beating yourself up over a tragedy that already occurred and wondering whether it could have been prevented or not is best left to protagonists of time loop stories. It's better to be troubled by what has yet to come. After all, you don't have the power to go back in time. You are only human... and my only Master."

"'What has yet to come,' eh?" I asked.

"Things will probably be the same as they always were," she said. "You'll happen upon an incident, and if you feel like letting it happen will give you a bad aftertaste, you'll intervene and help those you feel should be helped. I am fully certain that this will keep happening to you."

After a moment of thought, I realized that I'd been doing primarily that ever since I'd entered *Dendro*. No, in fact, such events had been with me ever since I was a child.

"That makes me seem like a highly haphazard individual," I said.

I didn't have a plan most of the time, and I often let the flow lead me to all sorts of trouble, which I'd often dive into headfirst. It never came to me when the incidents actually happened, but when I looked back, it often seemed like I'd gone straight for them of my own accord.

My words made Nemesis smile.

"There's a number of things I like about you, and that's one of them," she said.

"'That,' as in...?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You don't run away when you feel like you have to save someone."

"You like me for being foolhardy?"

"No, I like you for not hiding your courage, no matter how fearsome your opponent is. That part of you makes you very cool, if you ask me."

I was silent.

Well... You're gonna make me blush, I thought.

"However, even if it's par for the course for you to face opponents far greater than you, it would be far better if *you* were the stronger one," Nemesis said. "So, if you feel like you *must* do something, you should start by raising your base power."

"Base power, eh?" I said.

It was obvious that I'd become stronger than before, but I was still among the weaklings of this world. Even with my trump cards Vengeance is Mine, Like a Flag Flying the Reversal, and my special rewards, I'd still needed lots of luck to emerge victorious against all the formidable foes I'd fought so far. After all, the PK, the Superior Killer, had ended me as if I was nothing.

"However, if you want to talk about becoming stronger in that regard, you have a far better person to turn to than myself," said Nemesis. "Look, you have a friend that's far more experienced than us. If we ever want to give the Superior Killer what's coming to him, we should ask her for advice."

Nemesis pointed at the café where our group agreed to meet. The "her" she was referring to was the woman sitting in the café's open terrace as she waved at us — Marie.

"So you want to become stronger. I see, I see," Marie said as she nodded in a pondering manner.

While I was telling the Journalist about what was troubling me, Nemesis got herself a pile of sandwiches for breakfast and dug into them.

Well, there goes the money I made during this morning's hunt, I thought.

"Indeed we do!" said Nemesis. "We need your advice if we ever want to give the Superior Killer what's coming to him."

"...Right," Marie said. She covered her face for some reason.

"Since you've played *Dendro* far longer than me, I imagine you're pretty knowledgeable about it," I said.

"Oh, believe me, I am," she said. "I'm unemployed, and I've been doing this for more than a year now. Been going hardcore, so to speak."

...Is your life all right? I thought.

"Anyway, you want to know what you must do to become strong enough to win against the Superior Killer, correct?" Marie asked. "Hmmm." She put her hand against her mouth and pondered something before speaking. "What do you think are your weak points?"

"Weak points?" I asked.

I feel that I'm still weak in many ways, but if I have to converge on something specific, then...

"My range is too short, and also everything goes to hell if I mess up Nemesis's skills," I said.

"Indeed, that's more or less right," nodded Marie. "Can you explain why?"

The problem with my range was obvious. Vengeance, my trump card, was limited by the reach of my greatsword, and though my Purgatorial Flames went a bit farther, the distance still wasn't particularly notable.

Given that, it would be hard for me to do anything about those who used guns or magic and attacked from hundreds of meters away. Sure, I could defend myself against such opponents by using Counter Absorption, but the skill's maximum stock was very limited. The tough enemies I'd defeated so far — Demi-Dragon Worm, Gardranda, and Gouz-Maise — had all been close-range fighters, just like myself.

Meanwhile, the Superior Killer, who stood at a distance and shot monstrous bullets at me, had killed me without getting as much as a scratch on him. If that wasn't a weak point, I had no idea what was.

There was also the lingering possibility of me failing to use my skills properly. That included scenarios where I used Counter Absorption against the weakest of attacks — basically wasting it — or where the enemy stopped the damage conduction from Vengeance is Mine by removing the part of the body I'd landed it on, which was something I'd thought about during the Gouz-Maise fight.

If my enemies were aware of these possibilities, they could easily nullify Nemesis's unique skills. It wouldn't usually be a problem on the first fight, but that would change the moment they figured out how my skills worked.

"Yes, you seem to know why those are big problems," said Marie.

“However, you forgot another weak point.”

“Which is?” I raised an eyebrow.

“The lack of speed or toughness.”

Yeah, I’m gonna need an elaboration, I thought.

“All right, Ray,” she said. “You want to get stronger, so I’ll tell you what you must do from the game’s perspective,” she continued. “‘Raise your AGI or END.’ That’s it.”

...What?

“Now wait just a second,” I said. “That can’t be all there is to it, is it?”

“Of course,” Marie nodded. “There are job and skill builds to consider, not to mention their synergy with your Embryo. However, when looking at the way the game works, you simply *must* raise either of those stats.”

“‘Must’?” That word seemed kinda off in this context.

“Now, Ray,” she spoke up again. “Have you ever felt that the surroundings slowed down when you were fighting?”

“...Yeah, actually,” I answered. That sensation was especially palpable when I was strengthened by Reversal. The world seemed to be in slow-motion, making it far easier for me to evade the enemy’s attacks.

“That happens because of the greatness in difference between AGI in normal situations and battles,” she explained.

“‘Difference’?” I repeated.

“Yes. First of all, when you don’t have a job, you’re much like a standard person on Earth. You know how your stats were at about 10 or 20 back then?”

“Yeah, I remember them being around that range.”

“So, as you already know, when you raise your job levels, that number can go to 100, 200, or even break the 1,000 mark if you pick a high-rank job with a focused stat growth. Those numbers become ten times greater when they’re about HP, MP, or SP.”

“I’m aware.”

By the time I maxed out my Paladin job, my HP would likely be far above the 10,000 mark. But it wasn’t like this job was focused *only* on HP, and from what I could tell by looking at Liliana’s stats, standard Paladins didn’t get that much of it, so my stat growth was probably greatly influenced by Nemesis. It was fair to assume that other Masters could easily get to those numbers with their own Embryo bonuses.

"All right, so," Marie continued. "The amount of time experienced by a person with 10 AGI is different to that experienced by a person with 100."

"Hm?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Right now, when we're not doing any fighting, we're experiencing time the same way someone with normal AGI does," she said. "However, when you enter a battle or merely make a conscious decision to switch it, that stat instantly changes. Why not try it?"

"Hm..."

With the bonus from the Grudge-soaked Greaves, my AGI was about 100. Just like Marie suggested, I consciously changed my stats. In that state, I looked down the street and, sure enough, the people there were walking at a slightly slower pace.

It was the first time I'd experienced it outside of battle, and the results slightly impressed me.

"It's not like the time perceived scales directly with AGI," Marie added. "However, this function is a part of the game's system, and no Master, tian, or monster is an exception. I think it works like this because a constant slowing down would affect people's day-to-day lives."

"So AGI affects the amount of time experienced during battle, huh?" I said as I pondered.

By now, it made sense why Marie had suggested that it was a "must." Experiencing more time gave those with greater AGI a huge advantage in battle.

"It doesn't matter all that much to rear guard roles," she continued. "Vanguard roles, however, *must* have enough AGI to allow them to act faster than their opponents or enough END to survive their attacks. Those focusing on the latter also need to find ways to fight back."

With me being a Paladin, my build was leaning towards END. However, it still wasn't high enough for me to survive attacks from those more powerful than myself. Also, Paladin was my very first job, so I didn't have the stats that most people would normally have after maxing out low-rank jobs such as Knight.

Clearly, my situation wasn't the best.

"By the way, riding fast mounts and the like has no effect on the time you experience," Marie added.

I was fully aware of that. Riding Silver had increased my movement speed, but I didn't feel like there was much of a change in the time I'd perceived.

I said, "But man, I'm surprised I was able to win such tough fights without being aware of this difference, and..."

Suddenly, I realized that the tough enemies I'd fought against so far hadn't had that much AGI. The Demi-Dragon Worm, Gardranda, and Gouz-Maise had all excelled in endurance rather than agility.

"Remember that you can take six low-rank jobs and two high-rank jobs," Marie spoke up again. "Your overall power is greatly affected by how many of them you have."

"So, with me being on my first job and my level not being all that great, I still have a long way to go, huh?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Oh, just so you know, AGI-focused Superior Jobs can get their AGI to five digits."

"Five?!" *Superior Jobs seem to have a serious stat inflation problem,* I thought.

"People with such jobs can move at supersonic speeds and even block or catch bullets mid-flight," Marie continued. "Also, this is merely something that I happened to hear through gossip, but they say that the so-called Superior Killer has an AGI-focused Superior Job, so you should really raise your AGI or END if you want to stand a chance against him."

Well, if that guy's an AGI build, getting my stats up is pretty much a necessity, I thought. *Wait, speaking of stats...*

"What if I focus on STR?" I asked. Increasing offensive ability seemed like a very simple, reliable way of becoming powerful.

"STR build?" she asked. "You'll die."

D-Die?!

"Focusing on STR would have you sacrifice AGI and END, after all. No matter how hard you hit, you won't be able to dodge or bear many attacks, leading you to dying pretty quickly. The fate of all glass cannons."

"So that's how it works..."

"There are some well-balanced builds that merely happen to have high STR, and there are people such as the King of Beasts — the 'Physically Strongest' — whose *every* stat is so high, it's stupid. However, your average STR builds are just fodder."

I see, I thought. *Also, if I recall correctly, the King of Beasts is one of the* *imperium's Superiors. I didn't know he had "Physically Strongest" as a nickname.*

"That just about settles the talk about the basic power relations in fights," said Marie as she took a cup into her hand. "Now, let me tell you about player skills."

After gulping down some of her tea, Marie took a breath and began talking again.

"There's so much to player skills that I'm not sure where to begin. Well, for example, if you're good at martial arts in reality, you can use those techniques in *Dendro* just fine. Or if you can draw, you can do it here without getting the skill for it."

"Martial arts, huh?" I said.

Naturally, with him being a person who had won Un-kra, the one that came to mind was my brother. However, instead of applying those skills to his *Dendro* fighting, he used a minigun and even rode a tank.

Can he even do any martial arts in that suit, though? I wondered. *It sure didn't look that comfortable to move in. And hell, bears are usually the targets of martial artists, not the other way around.*

"Well, the subject of real skills involves too many person-to-person differences, so let's leave it aside for now," said Marie. "In battle — especially against other people — there are three main things one must always consider."

"Which are?" I asked.

"One: you must know the conditions in which your opponent is strongest; two: you must know the conditions in which you are weakest; and three: you have to be able to predict your opponent's ultimate attack."

"Hm..." I could understand the first one. Basically, I had to avoid being where the enemy wanted me to be. The thing that came to mind was my fight against the Demi-Dragon Worm. Though I'd emerged victorious, there had been the lingering possibility of me getting pulled underground, like my brother was. Even with Nemesis with me, the chances of me winning while fighting in absolute darkness — their natural habitat, at that — would have been extremely slim.

The second one made sense, too. It reminded me of the time I'd gotten killed by the Superior Killer. While being outside my attack range, he'd attacked me with countless bullets against which I'd been able to do absolutely nothing. With my only defensive option having limited uses and my offense being exclusively melee, it was only natural that I'd died back then.

By now, I could move far better than before and my range was slightly greater. However, it would be hard to say that I'd stand a chance against a long-range fighter such as him.

All that said, I didn't know what she meant with the third point.

"'Ultimate attack'?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Just about every strong battle-oriented creature has one," said Marie. "Masters, tians, bosses such as UBMs... They all have some trump card which they have absolute confidence in. Enough to think that the battle would be over the moment they use it."

The term "trump card" reminded me of my and Nemesis's Vengeance is Mine skill.

"So, it's basically a strong skill?" I asked.

"It could be a skill, a weapon, or maybe even a tactic. The stronger the creature, the more of these they have. Embryos even have skills that are actually called 'ultimate skills.'"

"'Ultimate skills'?" I repeated.

"Oh?" Nemesis' eyes lit up, and she momentarily stopped eating sandwiches to join our conversation. Apparently, the subject of ultimate skills had caught her curiosity.

"Ultimate skills are the greatest, strongest skills of an Embryo, and they're always named after the Embryo itself," continued Marie. "All of them — without exception — have a powerful effect that strongly expresses the Embryo's dominant characteristic."

Well, that sure makes them sound intriguing, I thought.

"Actually, you saw one in one of the videos I showed you — the one where Figaro fought against the leader of Mad Castle," she added. "It was the last skill that the leader used."

Yeah, I remember that, I thought. It had been a rush of attacks that the leader had done after momentarily binding Figaro in place. In the end, Figaro had evaded it, but the skill had left a giant crater where he'd stood.

"Hmm... So my ultimate skill would be called 'Nemesis,' correct?" asked Nemesis.

"Yes, that's exactly how it would be," nodded Marie.

“Nemesis” worked pretty nice as a skill name.

“But I feel like some Embryo names wouldn’t really work as skill names,” I said. “For example, ‘Momotaro.’”

“Oh yes, such cases definitely aren’t unheard of,” said Marie. “For example, one of Granvaloa’s Superiors, ‘The Great Seven Embryos of Granvaloa,’ has an Embryo called ‘Abura-Sumashi.’”

“A-Abura-Sumashi...” I repeated the name and, sure enough, I didn’t feel a hint of power behind it. If I recalled correctly, it was just the name of a yokai with a big head.

“Oh, the name probably makes you think it’s weak, but just so you know, Abura-Sumashi is actually among the top ten strongest Embryos I know,” said Marie.

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Very,” she nodded. “After all, it turns any liquids it touches into explosive material. Seawater, bodily fluids — you name it and it can turn it into an explosive that makes nitroglycerin pale in comparison. There was a time when the Master used it to turn all the seawater in a radius of 500 meters into explosives and blew a horde of monsters to bits.”

That’s just freaky, I thought.

“Also, I’ve heard that back when he had a dispute with a certain pirate clan, he fought one of its members, changed the pirate’s bodily fluids into explosives, let the pirate run away, and then *used* him to blow the clan’s hideout to bits.”

Savage.

“Due to that, Abura-Sumashi’s Master got the nickname ‘Human Bomb’...”

Sounds like trauma material, I thought. *I feel like I won’t be comfortable looking at abura-sumashi illustrations ever again.*

“Well, just keep in mind that a name has no relation to strength,” concluded Marie.

Yeah, you don’t need to tell me twice.

“Anyhow, I’m really looking forward to the time I get my own ultimate skill,” said Nemesis.

“As you should,” said Marie. “However, at the earliest, you would get it after becoming high-rank, so it might take a while.”

“I imagine it will,” I nodded. “Wait. Marie, you said you’ve been playing *Dendro* for more than a year, right? That's three years in this world, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"If you've been at it for that long, you should have your ultimate skill already, right?"

"Hm? Now that you mention it, I've yet to see Marie's Embryo," said Nemesis.

Marie's reply to that was silence. Though she was smiling in the same way she always did, for one reason or another, a great amount of sweat was running down her face.

I guess wearing a suit in this spring-like weather made her heat up a bit, I thought.

"Uhh... I, umm... my Embryo is... it's called uh… Arc-en-Ciel and, uh..."

"French for 'Rainbow,' huh?" I said. "That's pretty cool."

So Embryo names aren't limited to myths and fairy tales, huh? I thought. *Of course, rainbows are common in legends, so maybe it's not actually an exception.*

"As for what kind of Embryo it is, well... uh..." muttered Marie, for some reason showing hesitation about saying it.

"Hello! Sorry we took so long!" Rook cried.

"I'm sooo hungry! Let's have some food, Rook!" Babi added. At that moment, the other people we were waiting for arrived at the café.

"Now, wheeere aaare they?" asked Babi while looking around.

"Oh!" exclaimed Marie. "If it isn't Rookie and Babi! Good morning! Are you hungry?! You are?! Let me get you something, then! The sandwiches here are really good! I'll go and order some right now!"

After saying all that in one breath, Marie stood up and ran to the café's counter.

"Ah ha ha! Looks like Marie is in high spirits today," said Rook.

"She was nowhere near like that until just a second ago..." I commented.

Well, it's not like being in a good mood is a bad thing, I thought.

Marie, still in that weird state, came back with even more sandwiches than Nemesis had eaten, and we all had to do our part to make sure the food didn't go to waste. However, the exchange of information continued even as we ate, and I ended up telling them about what had happened yesterday.

"Eh? Ray, you can use the Purifying Silverlight?" Marie cried.

“Well... yeah?”

Marie looked absolutely puzzled. Rook heard me, as well, but with him not being the type to eat all that much, the sandwiches he’d forced himself to consume had made him drop his head on the table and thus not take part in the conversation. Nemesis and Babi were merely too focused on eating.

Anyway, the current subject was the Purifying Silverlight. It was the skill I’d learned when I’d cremated the undead children in that underground hallway.

Purifying Silverlight was an anti-undead skill, and a ridiculously good one, at that. It had been simply invaluable in the grueling battles I’d won yesterday. After all, it had not only made my attacks do holy damage, which worked even on spirits, it had also multiplied all damage done to undead by 10.

Again — 10 times greater damage on undead.

Though it hadn’t worked with Vengeance due to its damage being fixed, it was still an insanely good buff for my standard attacks. And that wasn’t the end of it, either. If an undead was hit by Purifying Silverlight, the wound could never be healed.

Though Gouz-Maise — the affront to sanity that it was — had been able to heal by removing the entire injured part, all the other undead had vanished before they could even exhibit the toughness unique to their kind.

Yesterday’s battles wouldn’t have gone nearly as well if I hadn’t had Purifying Silverlight at my disposal. As useful as Vengeance and Purgatorial Flames were, it was doubtful if they would have been enough for me to even live long enough to face Gouz-Maise.

Marie silently stared at me. That reaction weirded me out. She looked seriously surprised about something.

“*How* did you become able to use Silverlight?” she asked.

“Well, I got a message saying ‘Eliminate 100 appropriate monsters...’” I answered.

“Can you show me your counter?” she asked.

“My counter?”

...*Of what?* I thought.

“Open your menu window, go to the battle history screen, and you’ll find the creature type kill counters among the extras.”

“Oh, this, right?” I opened it and, sure enough, there were creature types such as undead, beast, avian, dragon, devil, elemental, demon, human, etc. with appropriate numbers beside them. My greatest one was undead: 158. It was followed by beasts and demons.

"So, are these the total numbers of monsters I've defeated?" I asked.

"Yes," Marie nodded. "Supposedly, the condition is 'defeat a certain amount'... but this number seems way too small."

As she muttered things like that, I shifted my gaze back to my kill counters. "There's one for humans, too, huh?"

On the window, my human kill count was 0. Apparently, though originally being human, the Lich Maise had counted as undead.

"What kind of creatures does the human counter cover, anyway?" I asked.

"A human is any creature that can have a job," answered Marie. "So if you see someone with a job, it's a human. Or 'humanoid,' as they're technically called."

"Then why didn't the Lich I killed count as human?"

"Oh, that's because the job comes with the effect of turning the human that takes it into undead, so he stopped being human the very moment he became a Lich. It's one of the very few exceptions."

That made me assume that there were scenarios where unfortunate humans that merely happened to look like monsters got attacked for that very reason, and I didn't know how to feel about that.

"Oh, but it's not like a Lich is *completely* like your usual, monster undead," added Marie. "You know how monsters have their names hanging above their heads? Well, with them originally being human, that doesn't apply to Liches."

Oh yeah, I totally forgot about that, I thought. *Guess those scenarios are pretty rare, then.*

"But man, it actually keeps track of the number of humans you kill," I said.

"Just so you're aware, it includes the kills made within the barriers of duel cities such as this one," Marie explained. "So a high human kill count doesn't always suggest that the person is a murderer. After all, once the duel is over, things go back to being the same way they were before."

"Oh, I see," I nodded.

"So many of those who frequent this city have probably killed hundreds of people," she added.

Well, that sure is a grim way to put it, I thought.

"I have a question." Rook raised his head and joined our conversation. "How do kill counters for tamed monsters work?"

"When they're used under the minion capacity, their kills are counted as the owner's kills," answered Marie. "When they're used as party members, however, their kills are counted as their own. You can see it for yourself by looking at their stat windows. Oh, also, kills done by autonomous Embryos such as Guardians are automatically counted as the Master's kills."

"Then what happens when a Charmed creature kills something?" Rook asked again.

"Umm... Those count as the Charmed creature's kills. The kill count of the one who did the Charming stays the same. Also, in scenarios where someone Poisons the opponent, escapes the battle, and merely waits for the Poisoned enemy to die, it still counts as the poisoner's kill." Apparently, it was dependent on who landed the finishing blow. Tamed monsters within the minion capacity were considered to be like the limbs of the owner, so their kills went to him. While in a party, however, their kills went to their own kill counters.

With status effects such as Poison, the kill went to the one who was directly responsible for the poisoning. Indirect kills, such as the ones done by Charmed opponents, went to those who had done the killing, rather than the Charmer.

"So, if I want to, like Ray, fulfill a condition that has me defeat a certain number of something, I have to avoid using Charm or party slots and instead fight with my own strength or with those that fit in my capacity, right?"

I see why he was curious, I thought. I recalled that Guardians used 0 minion capacity, so he would have been able to use Babi to increase his kill counts even if she hadn't been his Embryo.

"This is so strange," muttered Marie after a while of serious pondering.

"What's strange?" I asked.

"This is the first time I've seen a Master with Purifying Silverlight."

"...What?"

"The skill's existence itself is quite well-known due to tians, especially the famous users such as the previous knight commander or the current vice-commander. However, there hasn't been a single case of a Master getting it. Which is really strange. It's right next to Grand Cross as one of Paladin's greatest skills, and there have been tons of people who've tried to get it, due to its great effects."

"Huh? But you only have to kill 100 undead," I said. *That's what the message said, anyway,* I thought. It definitely wasn't a hard condition for your average Paladin to achieve.

"That's true," nodded Marie. "Tians were asked about it and said that it was unlocked by the undead kill count. However, there are Paladins who have killed over 5,000 undead, yet still don't have it. They even finished leveling all their low-rank jobs before they got the skill and... huh?"

Realizing something, Marie put her hand on her chin and slightly tilted her head.

"Ray, what's your Paladin level?" she asked.

"41," I answered. I'd leveled up during the testing I'd done in the morning.

"And your total level?"

"41, as well." I didn't have any other jobs.

"That's probably the answer. This is only an assumption, but I think the condition only counts undead of the same level range as yourself. Total level range, to be precise."

"Level range, huh?" I murmured.

Now that I think about it, there was also a message saying something about the requirement being "Undead of the appropriate total level," I thought.

"It likely goes by 50, based on low-rank and high-rank," Marie continued. "Meaning that, if your total level 50 or less, the condition's target is low-rank monsters — those under and including level 50. And if you're in the 51-100 total level range, that changes to high-rank monsters — those who are also in the 51-100 range."

"I see," I nodded, fully understanding why I'd been able to learn the skill. After all, my total level was below 50. However, that condition didn't seem like it was unachievable by other people.

I mean, they simply have to max out Knight, switch to Paladin, and fight against undead over level 51 and, uh...

"...Huh?" Something didn't seem right about that thought of mine. The person's total level would be 51, but it was questionable whether they could put up a fight against high-rank undead while their Paladin level was so low. The High-End Skeleton Warriors that had popped out of the hallway while I was fighting the Lich had probably been among such high-rank undead, but I felt that I would've had no chance against them if I hadn't had Silverlight and Silver. I'd completely crushed them exactly because I *did*.

"This is pretty awful," said Marie. "To get Purifying Silverlight, you basically have to throw away everything else."

"It's *that* bad?" I asked.

"Normally, high-rank jobs have you max out one, sometimes even two or three low-rank jobs. Paladin is a prime example of a difficult-to-acquire high-rank job."

"You might be right," I nodded. Not only did it require you to have the gold for it, you also needed to do a certain amount of damage to a Demi-Dragon class boss monster. I'd been told that a Demi-Dragon's power was equivalent to a full party of people with low-rank jobs.

There was also the recommendation you had to get from a member of a knight order. Anyone trying to clear these job conditions in a normal manner would probably max out more than one low-rank job in the process.

"And by the time the person is a Paladin, fulfilling the conditions for Purifying Silverlight would be difficult... no... impossible, actually," said Marie.

"Is there something about monsters with a level above 100?" I asked.

"100 is actually the maximum level for all normal monsters — including bosses," she said. "The only ones that go beyond that are SUBMs, Superior Unique Boss Monsters, such as the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria... but that's irrelevant to the subject at hand. The fact is that the level problem makes acquiring the skill completely impossible."

"Wait, wouldn't it be impossible to the tians, too, then?" I asked.

"The tians that become Paladins are most often the sons and daughters of influential people. They have no money problems to speak of, are well-trusted, and get tons of support when going out to defeat the boss."

"I see," I said.

A high-level person would act as a tank and keep the boss busy while the one wanting to get the Paladin job — perhaps assisted by support magic — would slowly chip away at its HP until it died. Clearly, it wasn't impossible. If luck was on their side, they could probably fulfill the Paladin job conditions before maxing out Knight.

"But wait," I said. "Can't Masters get such help, too?"

"It's very hard for us to gain the trust of the knight order's top people," answered Marie. "They're really picky about who they let in. Most who get accepted have really long lists of favorable deeds under their belts."

Deeds during which they reached a total level that was too high to let them acquire the skill, eh? I thought. *Man, I don't even know what to make of all the luck that was involved in me getting Paladin and the Purifying Silverlight.*

With its conditions being so strict, I could totally understand why it was so powerful.

"Playing normally makes it impossible to acquire the skill, but there's a way that would allow you to get it pretty easily," said Marie.

"Which is...?" I asked.

"Resetting every job besides Paladin."

My brother had told me about job resetting back when I was choosing my first job. Just as it said in the name, it was a function that allowed people to reset the jobs they didn't like or need.

Marie was right — it was a very easy way to get the skill. After becoming a Paladin, a person could reset all the other jobs to cause their total level to drop. Then they could spend some time killing low-rank undead in the Tomb Labyrinth to acquire the Purifying Silverlight. In fact, that might even be the reason why Paladins were allowed to enter there without the need for a Permit. However...

"Resetting the jobs means losing all their stats and skills, right?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," nodded Marie. "It would even include Knight — a job from the same grouping."

Daaamn, I thought, summarizing my reaction quite perfectly.

"I'll put this info on the wiki, but I can only wonder if anyone will be willing to go through with it," she said. "Considering how long they will have spent leveling those jobs, the risk involved is just too great."

Though Silverlight was unmatched in usefulness when fighting undead, it was pretty meaningless in just about every other scenario. Also, though we knew that this info was true, the people on the wiki wouldn't, and a scenario in which they dropped all their other jobs for nothing would probably leave them crying. When that risk was considered, it was obvious that there wouldn't be all that many people who would go through with it.

On a related note, I later asked Liliana about how she'd gotten Silverlight, to which she replied, "I reset all my jobs besides Paladin, acquired Purifying Silverlight, and then raised my other jobs — such as Knight — from square one."

When I considered the fact that tians weren't exactly in a position to reset their jobs so willy-nilly, I was quite impressed by her resolution.

"I must say, though," Marie spoke up again. "The path you're walking is quite something, Ray. People who go through the things you do are few and far between. Yesterday was quite a day for you, wasn't it?"

"Seriously. I thought I was gonna die," I said. "The whole thing was worse on my nerves than the time I got the death penalty in Noz Forest."

Though, unlike that time, I'd actually come out alive.

Speaking of which, I wonder what the Superior Killer was doing after escaping the King of Destruction? I thought.

"'Thought I was gonna die,' you say?" Marie repeated my words. "Well, you *are* a Maiden's Master, after all."

"From the way you're saying that, I assume you know about our common characteristic," I said. "Maidens' Masters..."

"'Maidens' Masters don't think of this place as a game,' correct?"

Yeah, that, I thought.

"Weird, isn't it?" I said. "In my head, I'm fully aware that this is a game, but..."

...my heart just doesn't agree.

"I wouldn't call it 'weird,'" said Marie. "Many long-time players share that sentiment, after all."

"Really?"

I would never have expected there to be enough for someone to use the word "many."

"After all, though this place has countless things that don't exist in reality, the five senses work in the exact same way," Marie continued. "Not to mention all the tians living here."

That was true. Aside from pain, the bodily sensations experienced here were the same as in reality. In fact, it was possible to turn pain on by going into the options window, so even that could become real.

There were also interactions with tians, something that no player could avoid. It was only natural for there to be people who had been in the world and watched its inhabitants for so long that they'd stopped thinking that it was just a game.

"At the same time, there are people who treat this place as a game all the way to the end," said Marie.

"Well, of course there are," I nodded.

It's sold as a game, after all, I thought.

"Stances on tians, their civilizations, and even *Infinite Dendrogram* itself differ based on who you ask, but there are quite a lot of people who take its status as another reality, or as merely a game, for granted."

"I see," I said.

"The ones who see it as another reality are 'worlders,' while those who see it as just a game are 'ludos.' To the former, the latter are inhumane, while to the latter, the former are just cringy."

So that's how it is, I thought. As I was now, I could somewhat relate to both sides.

"What other kinds of people are there?" I asked.

"Well, there are tons of those who just aren't certain about which side they're on," answered Marie. "Oh, and let's not forget those who try *Infinite Dendrogram* and then quit it for one reason or another."

"Like?" I asked.

"Well, many think that it's just not worth the trouble. *Dendro* encourages players to interact with people, move their avatar as if it were their own body, and make some serious decisions, all of which can be pretty taxing. It makes them feel like, 'This isn't what a game is supposed to be.'"

That seemed like a perfectly reasonable stance. Regardless of whether it was a world or a game, taking part in *Infinite Dendrogram* was a radically different experience from playing with a controller while looking at a screen.

"There are also those who quit after being emotionally scarred by some painful event," said Marie.

I was silent.

"Those two are the primary reasons why people who've been in *Dendro* for longer decide to quit, but some people stop right after starting. Specifically, right after their first battle. After all, fighting other living beings can be really scary and stressful. There are many of those early quitters among those who didn't chose anime or CG as their visual setting."

"Well, I can see their point," I said. My first fight against the Demi-Dragon Worm had been a terrifying experience, and I already knew what it was like to die in this world. There was nothing strange about there being people who distanced themselves from *Infinite Dendrogram* after getting to know the fear of being eaten or murdered.

Some of those who'd stayed regardless might quit after experiencing something painful. And those who continued their existence here after going through such filters would all look at this world in their own way.

"I wonder if the Superior Killer is a worlder or a ludo," I said. With him being the player killer responsible for my only death so far, I couldn't help but be curious about his stance on this world.

"Who knows?" Marie shrugged. "If you don't know, it's best to think that he's somewhere in between."

"That's true."

I knew far too little about him. He'd killed all the newbies, including me, in Noz Forest. Then he'd gone on to help me out in the Gardranda fight when things had gotten dire.

I didn't know what motivated him to act the way he did. In fact, due to the mist that had been covering him back then, I didn't even know what he looked like. His personality, height, and even the age of his avatar were all a mystery to me.

I was silent.

"Hm?" Suddenly, I realized that Rook was staring at Marie for some reason. His gaze was reminiscent of the one my brother would adopt when solving a crossword puzzle.

Thinking about it, I wonder why the crossword was in Arabic, I thought.

"Oh, I just remembered," Marie spoke up again. "I have something to give you two."

Marie reached into her inventory, took out two tickets, and handed them over to me and Rook. On them, there were flashy letters saying "Clash of the Superiors," along with some numbers and a precise date. The day was today, and the time was tonight.

"And these are...?" I asked.

"Well, you know how I asked you to leave the use of the remaining money from the Gardranda reward to me, right?” said Marie. “This is the result — box seat tickets to today’s event in the central arena.”

“Event?” I asked. “Is something happening?”

“...Oh? You’re unaware?”

“Yeah.” Way too many things had happened since I’d arrived at Gideon. Although I would’ve been lying if I’d said that I hadn’t seen any leaflets with the same title as on the tickets here and there.

“I see,” Marie nodded. “Just so you know, this is not something you’d regret seeing. After all — it’s a match between Superiors.”

“Superiors?” I asked.

“Yes. Though battles between Superiors aren’t a new thing, this is actually the first public match ever.”

“Who’s fighting?” I asked.

“Naturally, one of them is the king of the duel city — Super Gladiator Figaro — while his opponent is the one with the second place in Huang He’s duel rankings, Shi Jie Xian. Or as he’s better known: Xunyu, the Master Jiangshi.”

A match involving Figaro, eh? Now I’m intrigued, I thought. I’d yet to go to him and say hello due to all that had happened after I’d arrived at Gideon. I felt kinda obliged to thank him for taking care of the player killers that were blocking the way here.

“This is where most of the pooled reward money went to. Are you two okay with this?” asked Marie.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m sure it will be worth it.”

A clash between Superiors — the greatest of players — was surely something I wouldn’t regret seeing.

I was sure that just seeing it would have little effect on my overall strength. And it would help me gauge just how powerful we — Masters — could become.

“I am okay with this, as well,” Rook approved of Marie’s decision. “I’ve wanted to learn more about battles against people.”

“Good to know,” said Marie. “Make sure to be there when the time comes.”

“All right,” he said.

And so, we split up. We would be doing our own stuff until the event started, at which point we would meet up again.

I still had to go to the adventurers' guild and report to them that the Gouz-Maise Gang had been eliminated.

Apparently, Rook had something he wanted to talk about with Marie. I tried asking what it was, but all I got was, "It's a secret." He then whispered something into Marie's ear, making her face turn stiff as she muttered something along the lines of "How did you know?" Naturally, I was curious, but a secret was a secret, and I didn't want to pry.

By the way, about 90% of the vast number of sandwiches bought by Marie had ended up in Nemesis's stomach. The blatant increase in the amount she could eat in a single sitting made a chill go down my spine.

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"What do we do with this?" I wondered.

"What, indeed," Nemesis agreed.

Nemesis and I were sitting at a table in the adventurers' guild's bar. Our faces were close as we discussed something, making it obvious that we were troubled. With all that had happened since yesterday, I was becoming quite familiar with trouble. However, one would think that a person would get a break every now and then.

"This is just *way* too much..."

"But we can't just refuse it, can we...?"

The thing troubling us this time was the window I had opened.

It was my item screen, but the important thing about it wasn't an item. It was the field displaying the money in my possession. The amount displayed there was a whopping 80,000,000 lir.

Needless to say, it was a real fortune. In fact, it was equivalent to 800,000,000 yen. As to why I'd come to receive such a great amount of money...

It had happened when I'd arrived at the adventurers' guild to report the elimination of the Gouz-Maise Gang.

Unlike how it had gone in the knight offices, showing the special reward wasn't enough. I'd also had to answer a few questions and explain how it all went, making the whole process seem strangely long and thorough. Though I'd found it to be more annoying than the basic marking and signing I'd had to do with the knights, I didn't hesitate to give them the answers they'd wanted. Sure, I'd hid the fact that my comrade in this event, Hugo, had been a Master belonging to Dryfe, the enemy of Altar, but I'd said nothing but the truth.

As a result, I was recognized as the one who'd eliminated the Gouz-Maise Gang and received the reward. Before I'd gotten the money, I'd thought something along the lines of, *I should find Hugo and split it. With me getting the special reward, his portion should be bigger and...*

However, such thoughts were completely overshadowed by the 80,000,000 lir that'd been placed in front of me.

Excuse me? 80,000,000 lir? Not 800,000 or 8,000,000? Eighty times more than we got for Gardranda?

80,000,000L

As confusion overwhelmed my brain, the person at reception began explaining why the reward was so great.

Originally, the reward the adventurers' guild had set for the Gouz-Maise Gang's two leaders had been 1,000,000 each, while its normal members had gone for 10,000 each, making the total about 3,000,000 lir.

However, each and every person that had gone to eliminate the gang had gotten killed. Due to that, it had become known as a highly fearsome group that couldn't be underestimated.

There was also the fact that each and every failure to defeat them resulted in the death of the kidnapped children, so the risks had been too great for any party to attempt it again.

Naturally, there had been many people who were unsatisfied with that state of the situation. That included the families of the kidnapped children and even Count Gideon himself — the ruler of the city.

With Gideon being so prosperous, many of the kidnapped children's families were wealthy. A number of them had paid the ransom, but only received their children's corpses. Driven by grief and anger, many such people had wished for revenge and added money to the adventurers' guild's reward.

Due to the Gouz-Maise Gang's many crimes in his domain, Count Gideon himself had grown to hate the group with a passion and had wished to eliminate them by using the local army. However, with them having their hideout at the eastern border, he wouldn't have been able to go through with it because using the army might have been considered an act of war against Caldina.

Thoroughly upset with the state of the situation and hoping for a strong party to defeat the scoundrels, Count Gideon had used his own riches to increase the reward. Due to such reasons, the money had reached the great amount of 80,000,000 lir.

"It's surprising that nobody did anything until now," I said.

A fortune such as this would've attracted many people to this quest. Especially Masters, since there were few risks for us in getting involved in such perilous business.

"Any failures would reduce the chances of the children returning home, so the guild decided not to show any wanted posters for the gang and instead chose to hand-pick the people that looked like they could certainly do it," said the receptionist. "Specifically, the Superiors."

Ah, so they kept it a secret to not make the situation worse, I thought.

I wasn't completely sure if that decision had been a good one.

"The guild expected the great event happening in the central arena today to attract lots of powerful people from all across the land, so we were aiming to use it as a chance to find our person..."

...and have them do the quest, huh? I thought. From what I'd heard the Lich say, the gang had seen that coming and planned to leave yesterday.

"That is why we were quite confused to find out that the Gouz-Maise Gang was eliminated before we found someone to do it..." she added.

They'd been watching, waiting for an opportunity, and then Hugo and I had come out of nowhere, saying we'd already taken care of the problem. I could see why it was hard for them to believe.

In the end, the fact that I wasn't lying was proved by my Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise. Anyway, that was how I'd ended up with a reward that was way too big for my pockets.

"I have to meet up with Hugo," I said.

"Indeed," nodded Nemesis.

Though he'd said in his letter that the money was mine for the taking, I couldn't let myself accept these riches without consulting him. I also wanted to talk to him about the decisions I'd made back in the knight office. However, I had no means of contacting him and had neglected to put him on my friends list, so I didn't even know if he was online.

"Whatever the case, I'll decide where the money goes after I meet him," I decided.

Sure, I have monetary issues, but still, I thought.

"They said that the reward for the horse undead was 1,000,000 lir," said Nemesis. "Why not let yourself use that much, at least?"

"...You have a point."

That was completely reasonable. 1,000,000 lir was the same amount we'd gotten for defeating Gardranda, and it was more than enough for shopping done by a newbie such as myself.

However, I wasn't quite sure about what to buy. Due to level restrictions, it was far too early for me to get new equipment.

My only real shopping options are accessories and... weaponry, I guess, I thought.

“Are you thinking of cheating on me?” demanded Nemesis.

“No, damn it,” I answered. “Remember what Hugo said? About how Maidens can get skills after fighting in their human form?”

“That he did say, yes.”

“So yeah, I’m thinking of getting a weapon for you and for me when you’re in your human form.”

“Well, that certainly sounds like something we need,” Nemesis nodded, fully understanding my point. “All right, if you’re to wield a weapon that isn’t me, I’ll have to make sure that it’s fully worthy!”

...Well, someone’s excited, I thought. *Oh right, if we’re gonna go to Alejandro’s shop, I should also—*

“Surely you’re not about to think that you should pull the gacha again, are you, Ray?” demanded Nemesis.

“Ha ha ha, whatever do you mean, Nemesis? Do I look like someone who doesn’t learn from his mistakes?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Let me take a better look at you by *looking you in the eye when we talk*.”

“...I’m sorry.”

But come on, I know that it’s possible that I’ll draw another Permit or an item that’s worth less than I put in, but wouldn’t it be great to land something as great as Silver or Rook’s Touch of the Silencer? I mean—

“Huh?”

As I was making my way towards the shop, I saw a familiar silhouette standing in the plaza before the central arena. At first, I thought that my eyes were deceiving me, but once I got close, I became fully aware that they weren’t.

Black fur covering the whole body, a stature greater than that of the average person, a fat waist and limbs that were relatively short. It was a bear suit, surrounded by a large group of children.

“Ohh! This popularity is so great it’s almost unbearable! I feel like a star! Ursaa!”

The one wearing it, obviously, was my brother.

I said nothing.

Again, the one in the bear suit was my very own brother.

Likely due to being in the plaza, he had probably gotten mistaken for some performance artist or a mascot, causing him to be surrounded and jostled by many children.

"I don't even have anywhere to stand! Ah! Climbing on me is fine and all, just make sure not to fall!"

"...Bro, what the hell are you doing?" I asked as he became overwhelmed by children and was about to evolve into a walking adventure playground.

"Hm? Who is it fur whom I am a brother dearest...? Oh! It's Ray!" He greeted me by raising his arms, but his appearance made me feel like I was being menaced by a wild beast.

"Brother dearest" was quite an exaggeration. I had no recollection of ever having that much respect for him, and that included the days before his Un-kra fight.

"I feel like I haven't seen you for a while, Brother Bear," said Nemesis.

"A beary good afternoon to you, too, Nemesis," my brother greeted her as he slowly waved his arm. The reason for the slowness were the children hanging on to it.

"But man, you're as popular as always," I said. "You were in a similar state when I met you back in the capital."

"Costumes like these are beary rare, after all," he said.

"They are?"

"No one wants to wear them because they're terrible as equipment."

"Really?"

"Wearing these things takes up all the slots except the ones fur weapons and accessories," he explained.

Okay, the lack of popularity instantly makes sense, I thought.

"Suits that make up for that huge minus are unbearably rare," he continued. "I don't even know five Masters who wear them on a regular basis."

"...So you're saying that you know four?" I said. With my brother Shu included, that number became five.

Sounds like a wacky hero group, I thought. *...Oh yeah, he was actually a part of one once.*

"What do you mean?" Nemesis asked telepathically.

It's no big deal. He just had a role as a member of a hero group in a certain tokusatsu show.

"I can't say that I am knowledgeable about that world, but based on the common sense I received from you, isn't that quite impressive? Wait, wasn't he a martial artist?" she asked.

Oh yes, he was during his middle school and high school days. In his elementary school days, however, he was a child actor and a singer. That was when he got the role as an extra — the sixth — in a certain hero group. But that ended before I could even think properly, so I don't know the details.

"Just *what* is he?" she demanded.

My big brother. Currently unemployed.

"So, bro, did you come to Gideon to observe the Clash of the Superiors?" I asked.

"Bearily, yes. I came to see my buddy Figgy fight."

Figgy? As in, Figaro? I thought. *I didn't know they were friends.*

"Well, I'm planning on watching it, too, so maybe we'll meet there?" I said.

"Eh? You bear a ticket?" he asked.

"Yeah. A friend of mine got me one," I answered as I reached into my inventory and showed it to him.

"Oh, it's for a box seat, too. I'm impressed you... Hm?" After glancing at it, he focused his eyes — the eye parts on the suit, anyway — on a certain part of my ticket.

"What?" I asked.

"Look here," he said as he took out his own ticket.

I looked at it and noticed that it said "L-001."

The L referred to the box itself, while the 001 was the number of the seat inside the box.

It was relevant because my own ticket was L-004.

"We're in the same box?" I asked.

Different seats, obviously, but we were still next to each other.

"A pawsitively amazing coincidence," my brother declared. "We'll be watching it together!"

"I didn't even think this could happen."

"Your friend probably bought it from the same scalper as me," he said.

That seemed entirely plausible.

"But oh, the fact that you've already made some friends here in *Dendro* makes me oh-so-beary happy," he said as he took out a handkerchief and pretended to cry while putting it against his suit's eye parts.

...I'm quite sure that no tears are coming out of there, I thought.

"Also, by looking at your gear, I see that you've already been on some big adventures," he added while looking at my bracers and boots — the Miasmaflame Bracers and the Grudge-soaked Greaves.

"Well, things happened, all right," I said. "I kinda want to talk about it, but this doesn't seem like the situation for long chats."

Shu had been surrounded and jostled by children for the entirety of our conversation so far.

"Good point," he said. "All right, children! This bear has to go now! Here's something to help you bear this farewell!"

He reached into his inventory, took out a huge amount of candy, and began tossing it around and at the surrounding children. Naturally, the kids were overjoyed, expressed their thanks, and went away from him, one by one.

"You did this back in the capital, too," I commented.

"Heh, it's a bare necessity when wearing this suit."

I was about to suggest that he take it off, but then I remembered that he couldn't. The face under it was his real face, after all.

"Why aren't you wearing some sort of mask or a disguise instead?" I asked.

"I don't want to look like a weirdo."

...Do you really think that wearing a bear suit isn't weird? I thought.

"Then why not do what you're good at and use the appearance of a hero, instead?" I asked.

"There's a clan focused entirely on that, so things could get beary annoying."

"...There's actually a hero group clan?"

"And a masked hero clan, too."

"Well, *Dendro* sure doesn't seem to lack freedom," I muttered.

Soon enough, Shu finished distributing the candy, and there were no longer any children around. Indeed, the *children* had left, but...

"Isn't there something on your head?" I asked.

"Well, I'll be. There actually is," he said.

Something was holding on to the top of his head. It definitely wasn't a human child. Though caricaturistically distorted, it looked somewhat like a hedgehog or porcupine.

The way it clung to Shu made it look like some sort of mascot, but I was fully aware that my brother didn't come with any such extras. It had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

There's no name above its head, so it's clearly not a monster. Is it an Embryo, then? I thought.

"Oh, sorry about that," I heard someone say.

I turned to the direction of the voice and saw a woman. She looked like she was in her early twenties. Her clothing, despite fitting the fantasy setting, gave her the appearance of a secretary. The crest on the back of her left hand was proof that she was a Master.

"Apologies. My Behemot seems to have troubled you," she said.

"Behem...? Oh, this thing," my brother said.

"Behemot" was one way to refer to Behemoth — a creature from the Old Testament. That meant that it was an Embryo and that the lady here was its Master.

"Go on now, little lady. Big lady's here to pick you up," said Shu as he took the hedgehog, Behemot, and tried to remove it. But it didn't show any signs of letting go.

"Little lady?" It's a girl? I thought.

"xD!" Behemot emitted a strangely irritating chitter of joy and grabbed hold even harder. Apparently, she had taken a liking to Shu's head.

"Behemot, get off the bear's head," said the lady. "We have to go or we won't make it. We're in the standing area, so we have to hurry up."

Behemot complied, jumping off my brother's head and into her Master's chest.

"Now, if you'll excuse us, we will take our leave," the woman said and began walking away.

"Oh, wait a second," said Shu before reaching into his inventory, taking out some candy, and giving it to them.

"I bear gifts for all!" he exclaimed. "Enjoy it to your heart's content, you two."

"...Thank you very much."

"thx!"

With that, Behemot and her Master walked away from us. From the mention of a "standing area," it was fair to assume that she was going to see the event in the central arena.

"So it's not just children, eh? You seem to be popular with small animals, too," I said.

My words made Shu tilt his head for some reason. Though it wasn't too noticeable, with him not being a real bear and all.

"Well, I guess you can just say that I'm beary popular among the little ones," he said. "Everyone loves bears!"

"Whatever you say, bro." Though he'd said that he'd started wearing it because it was necessary, he seemed to enjoy it quite a lot.

"In fact, this bear suit is so popular that I don't really feel up fur wearing any other suit," he added.

"You have other ones?!"

"You don't have enough fingers to count the number of suits I have, and that's just for special rewards."

"That many?!"

I didn't know what was more surprising — the fact that he had that many special rewards or the fact that they were all suits.

Man, my brother is quite the barrel of laughs, I thought.

"Let's go and have a nice chat somewhere," he said.

"Sure. Let's go, Nemes— Wait, what's with that face?"

For some reason, she was just standing there. I suddenly noticed that she hadn't spoken a word for a while. I didn't know why, but she was looking at the direction where Behemot and her Master had gone.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said. "I'm probably just imagining things. She has an Embryo, after all..."

I couldn't make out what she was so concerned about.

"Hey! Why are you just standing there?! Don't make me wait fur you!" exclaimed Shu.

"Oh, he's right. Let's go, Ray."

"Yeah."

We caught up with my brother, and we all decided to go to a café. He let us choose the place, so — by Nemesis's suggestion — we ended up go to the same sweet-focused café as yesterday.

I dread to imagine how much she'll eat, I thought.

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“Well then, Behemot. Are you quite satisfied?” she asked.

“lol...”

“Excellent. You did say that you found the bear cute and wished to hug him. Though I found it a bit improper, it’s good to see that you had your fill. Now, let’s hope that you can also get what you want from today’s fight, as well.”

“yeye.”

“Truly, I hope the Superiors in this nation are powerful… It would be great news indeed.”

“git hype.”

Chapter Two: Catching up

Paladin, Ray Starling

"Gardranda and Gouz-Maise, huh?" said Shu. "Looks like you've been through some beary strange things, Ray."

"You think so?" I asked.

At the familiar sweets parlor, my brother and I were having a little talk about what had happened so far. Since I was still full from the sandwiches from before, the only thing I ordered for this chat was tea.

Nemesis, on the other hand, was eating as she always did.

What the hell is up with your stomach? I thought.

"Encountering UBMs is rare, and even Epic ones are damn tough," he said. "It's not every day you get someone who fights and kills them not too long after entering *Infinite Dendrogram*."

Shu put some honey-covered pancakes into his mouth. Of course, he didn't neglect to use a fork. I was impressed that he could do it with those bear hands of his, but then I figured that it was probably easier than using a gatling gun.

Also, the overall image of a bear sitting on a chair and eating honey-covered pancakes was quite lavish. It seemed kinda cute, as well. At least, to anyone who didn't know that the person inside the suit was a man in his late twenties.

"Well, I'm probably not the one to talk, considering I killed my first UBM when I was on my first low-rank job," he continued.

"Huh?"

"It was also the time I met Figgy," he said. "We happened to get lost in a certain field and had to fight two UBMs..."

"TWO?!"

I instantly began imagining myself fighting both Gardranda and Gouz-Maise at the same time.

Nope, it'd be hopeless, I thought. *Even as I was now, they'd kill me easily.*

“So you and Figaro went two-on-two against them?” I asked.

“Nope,” he answered.

“Oh, so Figaro wasn’t the only who helped, then.”

“Wrong again. We both went against them one-on-one.”

Excuse me?

“Separating them was a real pain, and I really had to use my head to beat mine...”

“Wait. You said you were still on your first low-rank job, right?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“What about Figaro?”

“He, too, was on his first job — Gladiator. Not even level 50, either.”

“...What about your Embryos?”

“Both were in their third forms. And no, neither of them had any giant-killing abilities like your Nemesis does.”

I was stunned into silence. *I’m probably not in a position to think this, but how the hell did they do it? I mean, they didn’t even have the support I did. Also, he says it happened when he — one of the first players — was on his first job. Doesn’t that mean that they were among the first Masters to have beaten UBMs?*

“Anyway, going any deeper into this would mean revealing Figgy’s Embryo’s abilities,” he said. “I’m beary averse to the idea of giving this info away myself, so I’ll only explain it to you after you more or less understand it yourself.”

“Well, then I guess I won’t push it,” I shrugged.

This duel city was Figaro’s hometown, and with him being the local king of the arenas, the people here had lots of info about him.

However, there was a decisive lack of knowledge about his Embryo. Its powers, shape, and even category were all a great mystery to everyone. The other two in the Kingdom of Altar’s Big Three weren’t like this in that regard. The King of Destruction’s Embryo was assumed to be a battleship, while the High Priestess’s was widely known to be the moonlit night. However, there was absolutely nothing known about the Embryo of the Over Gladiator.

I had seen Figaro fight the player killers in the video that Marie had shown me, but even then, I hadn’t seen a hint of his Embryo’s abilities.

If the event Shu was referring to was linked to the truth behind it, I could totally understand why he didn't want to talk about it.

"But you *do* know it, huh, bro?" I asked.

"Figgy and I have been acquainted fur a long time, after all," he answered. "A whole four years by *Dendro* standards."

"I see. So I guess you also know why he's so fixated on going solo?"

"I do, but going into that would mean compromising his privacy, so I won't explain it," he said.

"All right. I won't push it, then."

It was probably the core of the reason why Figaro had said he wasn't "interested in sloppy battles" and refused to participate in the war. I wanted to know, but if it was something private, I couldn't really delve any deeper.

"I must say, you seem to be quite well-connected, Brother Bear," commented Nemesis.

"Well, it happens kinda naturally when you've been a long-time player," he shrugged.

"This has been bothering me for a while... How many hours a day do you spend here, anyway?" I asked.

Being the unfairly rich neo-NEET that he was, Shu had all the time in the world, so I couldn't help but wonder.

"I know what you're thinking, but no, I'm leading a beary healthy life," he said.

"'Healthy,' as in...?" I prompted.

"I never neglect to have three meals a day, take a bath, go to the bathroom, and spend an hour training to keep myself muscular and aesthetic."

"You're basically saying that you spend the rest of your time here!"

That's not too different from a basement-dwelling sweaty tryhard! I thought.

"Well, I don't really have anything I want to do outside of here, so whatever," he said.

"With the time and money you have, you could easily get into a relationship."

Mom probably wants to become a grandmother by now, I thought. *I was a high school student until recently, so it was too early for me. As for my elder sister... well... uhh... Anyway, Shu is the closest one to getting married... but from the looks of it, that won't happen for a while.*

An hour passed by as we were talking about this and that.

"Anyway, I have somewhere to go to, so I'll be leaving now," Shu said at last.

"Well, all right," I replied. "See you at the show."

"Yeah. I'm beary excited to meet your friends."

And with that, he left.

On the table, there was a considerably large sum of money. Considering the huge reward I'd gotten, I'd planned to be the one to pay for us both, but he'd wanted to show off and had ended up doing it before I'd even gotten the chance. I gladly accepted his generosity.

Also, about 90% of the money we owed was due to Nemesis's eating. It was quite troubling how the amount she ate seemed to gradually increase. For someone named after a goddess of divine punishment, she sure enjoyed indulging in the deadly sin of gluttony.

"Oh, but you're wrong there, Ray," she read my thoughts and said.

"How?" I asked.

"Gluttony refers to the wasting of food through reckless consumption. I, however, savor and enjoy every bite before it becomes a part of my flesh. Thus, I am not a glutton, but a gourmet!"

"All right, that's fine, then," I said. "However, let me ask you one thing."

"Do go ahead."

"Just how much weight would you gain if it all actually became part of your flesh?"

Talking to girls about their weight isn't the nicest thing I can do, but seeing your eating habits is kinda troubling.

"Heh, there's no need to worry," she said. "I am an Embryo, remember? My shape and weight do not change easily."

"Riiiight. Ain't that greaaat."

"What's with the sarcasm?!"

Your shape and weight change a lot when you go into your other forms, though.

"So, wait, are all Embryos big eaters or what?" I asked.

"Wrong," said a voice coming from my side. "Being an Embryo has nothing to do with being a big eater. I'm not one, after all. Nemesis being gluttonous is her own problem. Which is good, since I really wouldn't like having such a monstrous stomach as part of my base stats."

"I see," I murmured. *Now that I think about it, despite liking things ridiculously spicy, the Embryo Babi eats normal amounts of food. In all honesty, her blasphemous tastes seem a bit more normal than Nemesis's big eating —*

"...Wait, what?!" I burst out, startled.

"Hm?!" Nemesis added.

"Hellooo," said the fully white girl now sitting at my side. She was Hugo's Embryo, Cyco. "The number of plates stacked next to Nemesis is terrifying. I don't think I could handle even 5% of it," she said before biting into a pure white no-bake cheesecake.

Her tone was as monotonous and disinterested as the last time I'd heard her speak. It seemed as though she'd been in this establishment for a while now, but despite her appearance standing out so much, I hadn't noticed her at all.

Was I really that preoccupied with my meal with Shu and Nemesis? I thought.

"You seem confused," she said. "The secret to this is the fact that I have the Presence Manipulation skill. To a certain extent, I can prevent myself from standing out."

"Why did you do that, though?" I asked.

"I surprised you, didn't I?"

"Well, yeah."

My answer made her put on the most smug and self-satisfied smile before she bit into her cake again.

...Huh? Did she really only want to surprise us?

"As hard to read as always, this girl," commented Nemesis.

Seriously. Though she was a friend who'd helped in the elimination of the Gouz-Maise Gang, I still had little grasp of what kind of person she was.

"Cyco," I addressed her. "Is Hugo not with you?"

"He should be here soon," she answered. "We split up for the search, but I just telepathically told him where we are, so just wait."

As I was about to ask what they were searching for, I heard the door open and the shop's bell ring. The one who entered the establishment was a familiar man wearing a militaristic rider suit.

“Greetings, Ray,” he said. “I believe I should thank God for meeting you again, safe and sound.” It was Hugo, acting as exaggerated, affected, and pompous as always.

Man, I’m sure meeting a lot of familiar people today, I thought.

The shop had entered its peak hours, and the more packed it became, the more Masters and foreign-looking people I saw.

“It’s delicious! The wiki was right! The sweets here are great!” a young girl squealed from behind me.

“...I-Io, y-you’re too loud...” one of her friends said.

“Peach tart, 80 points. Shortcake, 76 points. No-bake cheesecake... 95 points.”

Those young girls were getting noisy at the table behind me.

To the left of me, an Arabian-looking man, wearing a turban and everything, was noting something down. “Oh, there’s take-out here. I believe I found my souvenirs for Yumeji and Carl. Though perishable, they will last just fine in an inventory with good preservation ability. As for Albert... I should get him something other than food.”

Then there was a crude-looking group with beastly leather armor and a bunch of macho men in bandanas surrounding a girl in a pirate hat. Clearly, the customers were far more varied today than they had been yesterday. I could only assume that they’d all gathered to watch tonight’s event. And with this shop being in the same city as the arena, even those who didn’t fit in among its usual customers had come to enjoy some sweets.

“This is a pretty popular place, isn’t it?” I said.

“Indeed it is,” nodded Hugo. “Tians and Masters alike recognize it as a great sweets shop.”

“No-bake cheesecake, yogurt mousse, soft serve ice cream... Delicious,” agreed Cyco.

They both seemed quite satisfied with this establishment. *Even though it looks like Cyco is only eating white things, for some reason.*

Anyway, since Hugo and I had happened to meet up again, I told him about the reward.

“I never would’ve expected the bounty to be that great,” he said. “Truly surprising.”

His reaction was only natural. 80,000,000 was an astonishing amount of money.

“Now, about the split...” I said.

“Like I wrote in my letter, I intend to refuse it... but it doesn’t seem like you will agree to that, will you?”

“Hell no,” I said. Keeping such vast riches for myself was too much for me to handle. “Let’s split it in half.”

“No, I’ll be fine with just a quarter,” Hugo said. “I already refused it once, after all. And even then, it feels too much for me.”

“Really?” I asked. When it came to the Gouz-Maise Gang bounty, all I really deserved was the part for Maise, so I really wanted him to take more.

“You’re selfless and honest to a fault, aren’t you?” said Hugo. “You could’ve chosen to not inform me and keep the money for yourself.”

“Why would I lie to a friend like that?” I asked.

For some reason, my question made Hugo avert his gaze.

What’s wrong? I thought.

“Oh, also, this is something that happened at the knight offices...” I told him that I’d asked the knights to use the treasures the gang had left behind for charity.

“That’s fine by me,” he said. “I would’ve probably done the same.”

Well, that’s a relief, I thought. *Just as I figured, he and I share a way of thinking.*

“Indeed,” agreed Nemesis. “You two are quite alike.”

We’re both Maiden’s Masters, after all.

With that, the conversation about the bounty was over, and I gave Hugo his share of money.

Good thing none of it got stolen by a Thief or something... I really hope there are none of them in the shop... I thought.

“There, I now have my part of the bounty,” said Hugo. “Thank you. It will make up for the destroyed Marshall II.”

“Oh...? How much are those things, anyway?” I asked.

“10,000,000 lir.”

“T-TEN?!” I yelped.

I had no idea it was so luxurious!

“With special tuning and extras, it can easily go over 20,000,000 lir,” Hugo added. He pointed at the inventory where he’d just put the 20,000,000 lir I’d given him, his eyes still insisting that the Magingear’s destruction wasn’t going into the necessary expenses and that he didn’t actually need any more of the bounty.

"Still, it's quite an expensive piece of equipment," said Hugo. "Also, that is the original pricing, exclusive to us clan members of the Triangle of Wisdom. On Dryfe's standard marketplace, their price is twice as great. That number is doubled or tripled yet again when we're talking about the machines that have gotten leaked to Caldina." I had no idea whether I should be more surprised by the immense original pricing or by just how much greater it could grow.

"The pricing is the biggest problem with a Marshall II, and humanoid Magingears in general," he added. "The machines are generally as strong as Demi-Dragons, yet actual tamed Demi-Dragon monsters cost only about 3,000,000. A striking difference."

So that's how much Demi-Dragons cost, eh? I thought. *Maybe I should buy one along with a carriage? Then again, I have Silver, so maybe I don't need it.*

"Still, Magingears are not without their advantages," said Hugo. "For example, they don't use any minion capacity and can be mass-produced as long as there are materials and funds."

Anything "Demi-Dragon" was considered to be equivalent to a full party of people with low-rank jobs. Being able to create such things was quite a big deal. I could totally see why they were so costly.

"Yeah," I nodded. "Monsters are living creatures, and you sure as hell can't produce them just by having the materials and money."

"...True," he nodded.

"Also, you said something about Caldina selling them, as well. Can you elaborate?"

"Sure," he said. "Caldina imports and sells special items from all countries, even if they *aren't actually exporting them.* Dryfe's Magingears, Granvaloa's ships, Altar's Tomb Labyrinth drops, Tenchi's weaponry, Huang He's and Legendaria's magic items, etc. Caldina's main selling point is that, as long as you have the money, you can buy goods from every country. Even your social standing is dependent on how much you're offering."

"Money is Everything: the Country," huh? I thought.

"Due to that, many high-end players with fat wallets move over there... which has resulted in them having the most Superiors out of any country," Hugo muttered, clearly troubled by what he'd just said.

"'Most,' as in...?" I prompted.

"Nine Superiors," he answered. "The strongest force at any country's disposal."

"...Damn, that's a lot." The Kingdom of Altar had four, and nine was more than double that number. Thinking about that, I added, "Oh yeah, in the war, Dryfe—"

"Overwhelmed Altar, but was soon invaded by Caldina," he cut me off and explained. "Dryfe's Superiors had to leave the front lines to defend against those attacks, allowing Altar to prevail."

And that was why the kingdom had continued to exist even after a war in which none of its Superiors had participated. Sure, Altar didn't have enough power to retake the land taken by Dryfe, but still.

"Before the war, there was a large feast in Dryfe to celebrate the inevitable victory, yet the result was so inadequate that the one in charge of the country's domestic affairs — Prime Minister Vigoma — was at his wits' end," said Hugo. "Oh, by the way, Dryfe only has enough funds to buy the help of Masters just one more time. Anything beyond that would cause the economy to crash."

"You sure you can say that to me?" I asked.

"That's inside info that's readily available to Masters as lowly as myself. You see it quite often on online message boards, too. Me revealing it to you doesn't mean much."

"Oh, I see..."

"Anyway, to win this war, Dryfe has to either occupy the Kingdom of Altar before Caldina intervenes or merge with the country through peaceful methods."

Well, the latter case isn't impossible, considering that the kingdom has been weakened and is certainly not in a good shape to participate in a long-lasting war, I thought.

For better or for worse, Caldina had acted as a stopping force to prevent Dryfe from doing whatever they wanted.

...Still, I wasn't too fond of them, considering their involvement with the Gouz-Maise Gang.

"Oh, by the way," Hugo spoke up again. "Caldina was also the reason why Legendaria — Altar's ally — didn't participate in the war. Being south of Altar, the country is far from Dryfe while being extremely close to

Caldina, which covers the entire desert area in the center of the continent. If Legendaria had sent its Superiors or tians with Superior Jobs to help in the war, Caldina would've used the opportunity to take it over. The reason why Caldina interfered in the war was to prevent Dryfe from merging with Altar, thereby stopping our country from gaining the momentum it needed to conquer the entire continent. However, Caldina itself is planning the exact same thing."

So there are two countries vying for world domination? These sure are turbulent times.

"The reason why Caldina only invades countries that show an opening is because it's in the middle of the continent," said Hugo.

Basic geopolitics. Besides Granvaloa, which was on the ocean, the countries of the world could be vertically split into three parts, like a French or an Italian flag. To the left were the three western countries: the Dryfe Imperium in the north, the Kingdom of Altar to the south of it, and Legendaria even further down. In the middle, there was the City-State Union of Caldina. And off to the right, there was the Huang He Empire and Tenchi — the island nation that was relatively close to the continent.

The central country, Caldina, shared a border with every nation except the far-east land of Tenchi.

"Dryfe, Altar, and Legendaria to the west and Huang He to the east, not to mention the sea-based nation of Granvaloa," said Hugo. "It's surrounded. If Caldina focused on attacking something, the other countries would use the opportunity to take its land. They have plenty reasons to do so, after all."

"A bit of a deadlock there, huh?" I said. And the only real way for the situation to move out of this stalemate would be the war between Altar and Dryfe.

"...This might be a bit belated, but why are you so casual about looking like that?" I added.

"Like what?" Hugo asked.

"Isn't that Dryfe's military uniform or something?" I asked.

Hugo was wearing the exact same clothing as yesterday — the ones that looked like a military uniform mixed with a rider suit. Considering Hugo's affiliations, it needn't be said what military the uniform belonged to. Thus, wearing it in this country didn't seem like a good idea.

"No, this isn't Dryfe's official equipment," he said. "It's the suit from GodFrame Grand Marshall."

"GodFrame Gra... what?"

"GodFrame Grand Marshall."

Well, if that doesn't sound like a name for a mecha show...

"When did this anime air?" I asked. Assuming that Hugo was French, it might've been a western cartoon...

"It's not an anime," he answered. "It's a manga drawn by a Painter belonging to the Triangle of Wisdom."

"Drawn... here?"

"In this world, yes."

Hugo began explaining how the manga had come to be.

After troubles too many to count, the Triangle of Wisdom had finally finished its first battle-ready robot Magingear, the Marshall II. Being a group of people who'd gathered for the very purpose of creating a robot straight out of a mecha anime, they'd gone absolutely nuts about it.

While most had gotten fired up to continue improving their robots, some had become motivated to do other things. One of the clan members had used the skills from his Painter job to draw a cool-looking Marshall II design.

From that, another member began had begun drawing a manga.

Those who couldn't draw had begun writing novels or creating models, while some had gone as far as composing opening themes and soundtracks.

With the ever-growing number of clan members, this chain reaction had continued until it had become a considerably large production.

The Triangle of Wisdom was pretty much a gathering of mecha anime fans. Having a Marshall II as reference had strengthened their inner fires and urged them to create various creative works. It had gotten to the point where they now dedicated an entire area of their headquarters just for such production. And among the things they produced was the clothing based on the suit of a pilot from the manga — the very same thing Hugo was wearing right now.

"So you're constantly cosplaying, huh?" I asked.

"It was actually made by a skilled crafter, so the stats are good, too," he said. "It's considered to be the uniform of Pilots belonging to the Triangle of Wisdom. Still, that's not well-known outside of our inner circle, so I can wear it in this country with no problem.”

“The stats are good?” I asked.

“Not nearly as good as those on special rewards, but it’s no doubt among the best things I can wear at my level.”

I could only imagine the amount of passion that had gone into the costume. Nothing could really stop a person when they got absorbed in something they liked.

“What about you?” I asked. “Did you join the Triangle of Wisdom because you’re a mecha fan?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I joined the clan because I know the leader. In fact, I started *Infinite Dendrogram* because he invited me.”

Well now, doesn’t that sound familiar? I thought. *I started in the Kingdom of Altar because my brother told me to.*

“All right, I have some things I want to know, as well,” said Hugo. “I’m especially curious about the details of the Gouz-Maise fight.”

“Sure, I’ll tell you,” I nodded. “After you and Cyco escaped with the children, Nemesis and I...”

After that, Hugo and I continued exchanging information or just chatting pointlessly for awhile.

“Oh, it’s time,” I said. Before I’d realized it, barely over an hour was left until the event began. I no longer had the time to go shopping at Alejandro’s, so I rescheduled to tomorrow.

“Is something happening?” asked Hugo.

“Yeah, I got my hands on a ticket for the event,” I said. “In the central arena, there’s gonna be a match between Figaro and Huang He’s Xunyu — two Superiors. Do you know about it?”

“I do. In fact, it’s probably what every Master in this city is here for.”

“Are you gonna see it, too?” I asked.

“...You could say that, yes.”

“Oh, we might meet in the arena, then.”

Hugo said nothing. He seemed to be pondering something.

Did I say something strange? I wondered.

“Ray, there’s something I want you to keep in the corner of your mind,” he said before taking a deep breath and continuing. “It’s west.”

“‘It,’ as in...?” I raised an eyebrow, not understanding what he meant.

“It’s nothing important,” he said. “You know how the fighters in the great arena’s matches enter from the east and west? Well, today’s main deal, the Over Gladiator, Figaro, will go in from the west side.”

“Is that how it works? I’ve never watched a match before, so I didn’t know,” I said, unable to shake the feeling that Hugo was hiding something. “Anyway, I’m going to the arena now.”

“I see,” said Hugo. “Cyco and I will wait a bit longer.”

“All right, then. Guess this is goodbye for now. Oh, should we add each other to our friends lists?” I asked. If we ever had business with each other, knowing whether the other person was online or not could be a great help.

“Not now,” he answered. “Let’s do it next time we meet... or the time after that.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s fine by me.” We seemed to have some sort of bond, so I didn’t doubt that we would meet again.

“Until then, Ray,” he said.

“See you again, Nemesis,” Cyco added.

“Yeah, later, Hugo,” I said.

“Until our paths cross once more, Cyco,” Nemesis added.

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“Hey, Hugo. Was it really okay to tell him that?” Cyco asked.

I said nothing.

“Isn’t that what they call ‘leaking information’?” she prodded.

“It might be,” I admitted.

“You don’t want the plan?” she asked.

“...Maybe, maybe not,” I said. “In all honesty, I’m not sure myself.”

“You’re not?”

I shook my head. “I certainly want to help fulfill his desires. If I didn’t, my very existence as Hugo would be meaningless. However, I also cannot ignore women in distress.”

“What an antinomy.”

“Antinomy... that’s a good word for it. I gave Ray the information, but that’s the whole extent of what I did. Whether he acts on it or processes it as idle chatter is of no matter to me. As a piece in the plan, I will only do what I must.”

"Then I will help you do whatever it is you do," Cyco said.

"Thank you." I nodded.

Interlude: Before the Festival

Royal capital Altea, State Guest House

In a certain part of the royal capital's noble district, there was a building meant to accommodate honored guests from foreign lands. One of its rooms currently had three people in it.

The first of them was a bedridden young boy with a mask covering the lower part of his face. The ice pack on his forehead and the occasional coughing made it obvious that he had a condition similar to a cold or flu.

The second person was a young woman standing by the boy's bed, looking obviously worried. Her thick glasses implied that she was nearsighted, and they made her appear like a fainthearted kind of person.

The third person was abnormally tall, to the point of making someone question whether that individual was actually a person.

The bedroom's ceiling was high — perhaps surpassing four metels — and yet the creature's head was almost touching it. Naturally, it was a weird sight, but the other two people didn't seem to be bothered by it.

The first person was Canglong, third prince of the Huang He Empire. The second was Lan Meihai, Huang He Ambassador. And the third was Master Jiangshi Xunyu, one of Huang He's Superiors.

Canglong coughed and coughed. "I'm sorry, Master Xunyu," he managed at last. "I wanted to watch the match and cheer for you, but I'm clearly not in the state for it..."

"It's fiNe. You just rest till you're healthy aGain," said Xunyu in response. "But man, seeing *you* bedriddEn is just..." The jiangshi heaved a sigh so heavy that the talisman covering the face did nothing to hide it.

"Yes. I find it quite curious, as well..." murmured the prince. "But at the very least, I can be glad that you didn't get ill, as well."

Soon after the long trip from Huang He to the Kingdom's royal capital, Canglong had become part of an Epidemic.

"Epidemic" was a term used to describe any sudden diseases that spread among the weak and strong alike. Masters saw it as an unpatterned, irregular, widespread *Infinite Dendrogram* event. There were many various Epidemics that covered many large areas, creating sufferers among both Masters and tians. Though some went away with the passage of time, some required special healing methods such as vaccines or healing magic available only to Superior Jobs.

Epidemics completely ignored all stats and resistances. Even high-level Masters would become bedridden or simply log out until the disease went away. They were considered to be natural disasters above human knowledge.

Needless to say, it was quite fortuitous that the current Epidemic was more like the common cold or flu than anything else. However, it was an illness nonetheless. Originally, Canglong had been meant to accompany Xunyu to the Clash of the Superiors and observe the battle, but it was clear that he was in no state to do that. The same applied to the first princess of the kingdom, who'd also succumbed to the Epidemic.

"Oh dear... umm... Your Highness, should I change the ice pack?" asked the woman fretfully. "Or would you like an apple?"

Meihai's worry about her country's prince's condition was needlessly excessive.

"Ambassador, you've changed the ice pack five times in the past hour. And I *just* peeled an apPle for him," said Xunyu. "Oh yeAh, this country's queen is sick, too, rigHt? That's the reason why Cang's business got postpoNed, isn't it?"

"M-Master Xunyu!" the ambassador protested. "She's not the queen, but the first princess!"

"...Whatever. She's acting as a queen, anYway."

"She isn't! There are many differences in a diplomatic setting! First of all...!" Meihai began arguing with — or merely lecturing — Xunyu. Though it made her seem quite childish, she was a member a distinguished family and had a lot of diplomatic skill that made her stand out as an ambassador.

Some might have argued that such behavior didn't belong in the presence of her country's prince; however...

"Hee hee. You never change, Mei," said Canglong before coughing again, clearly not minding her inappropriate behavior.

Though he spoke to her in a highly casual manner, Meihai definitely wasn’t in a respectable enough position to have the prince treat her like that. The reason he did was because Meihai’s mother was Cang’s foster mother, making them foster siblings. That meant that the only ones in the room were those who were close to Cang. The other chamberlains and officials were in a different part of the guest house.

“Master Xunyu,” said Cang and coughed. “Shouldn’t you go to Gideon now...?”

He was looking at the clock hanging in the room. The event would begin in about three hours. Normally, that amount of time was far too small to cover the distance to Gideon, which usually took a whole day and night. However, everyone in the room knew that it wouldn’t be a problem.

“You gonna be saFe?” asked Xunyu.

“You’ve no need to worry,” said Cang. “It’s true that I’m not at my best, but I’m sure I can manage.”

“Don’t be stuPid. You’d be overdoiNg it... Give me your hAnd.”

Cang did as he was told and Xunyu gave him a gem — a Jewel, to be precise.

“Master Xunyu?” he asked.

“It’s a spare Jewel. One of the ones I don’t plan to use in this match.”

“Are you sure you won’t?” the prince asked.

“Duels only allow you to use ones that don’t exceed your caPacity. Take iT,” said Xunyu and made Cang close his hand around the Jewel. Though it was done by the jiangshi’s blade-like claws, the action was strangely gentle, and didn’t put a single scratch on the prince.

“Then I shall take it, Master Xunyu,” said Cang.

“GoOd,” the eccentric nodded in response.

Following that exchange, Xunyu went to the window. After skillfully opening it with those blade-like claws, the jiangshi made them clash.

The resulting high-pitched, metallic sound made one of Cang’s chamberlains hastily run into the room.

“Your Highness! Master Xunyu! What is the matter?!” asked one of them.

“After we leaVe, close the winDow.”

“Excuse me?”

Ignoring the puzzled chamberlain, Xunyu extended one arm to the side — making it reach more than five metels in length — and made the metallic claw wrap around Meihai.

“Eh?” she sounded a voice of confusion.

“Well, ambassAdor, we’re goiNg to Gideon,” said the jiangshi. “Don’t bite your tongue on thE way.”

Then, Xunyu’s body bent...

“Umm, Master Xunyu! I-I’m not quite ready yet, so—AAAAAAaaaaahhhh!”

...and they both disappeared beyond the window, leaving behind only the echo of Meihai’s scream.

A few seconds later, they were on the walls of the noble district, so far from Cang’s room that they looked like ants.

“Goodbye, Master Xunyu and Mei,” the boy said as he raised up his upper body from the bed and waved at them.

The chamberlain had no words for what had just happened, so she did as she was told and simply closed the window.

Thus, the Master Jiangshi Xunyu left the capital and went towards Gideon.

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Gideon, City of Duels, ???

The city of Gideon was full of excitement.

With it being the most prosperous town in the Kingdom of Altar, such a mood wasn’t a new thing here. However, the enthusiasm that had enveloped it this evening was on a different level than usual.

The reason for that was the fact that the event happening in the central arena was simply *that* big.

It was a duel between Superiors — something that had never happened in any duel city anywhere.

People gathered from in and outside of the city and even other countries, and everyone was full of enthusiasm and expectations for the event. It seemed as though all of Gideon was lapsing into delirium with excitement.

However, the town also included someone who shared none of that sentiment.

That person was looking down at Gideon with cold eyes, and that was no exaggeration. After all, he was wearing an Adélie penguin suit. Those cold, man-made eyes made it hard to guess what the person inside was thinking.

However, from the way the person was groaning and holding his head in his right hand, it was clear that he wasn't in an optimal state of mind.

"Ohh boy... Ohhh man... Ohhhhhhhhh crap..."

After a moment of writhing, he used the Portable Communication Magic Device in his other hand to contact someone.

Two or so minutes passed before that someone answered.

"Ayy there, Your Excellency," the penguin idly complained to the person on the other side. "There's been a change of plans. One of my boys in the royal capital contacted me and, well... he said that the first princess won't be coming."

The information he was nonchalantly complaining about was a secret that was supposedly only available to a select few officials.

"And when I told it to His Majesty's people... well, just *her*, actually, since she's his contact and all... she actually went, 'Then we will simply enjoy the fight and the sights here,'" he went on. "Ohhhh man..."

The penguin and the person who'd answered the call had a certain plan. That plan was based on the participation of the first princess and the help of another person.

"Well, yeah, with her being the Imperium's strongest, her presence changes a lot. Now we're left without a joker."

The penguin spoke his complaints in a blatantly sad manner. Sad as his tone was, however, he was still smiling.

"Well, it won't be a problem. She was a bit too much for this plan, anyway. Even if I don't have all five of my cards, the other four are more than enough for the job."

He went on:

"From my clan, there's me, Veldorbell, and my favorite. Then there are the betrayers... Yes, the ones that want to switch sides to Dryfe. Sure, they don't want to go to the gaol, so they'll probably fight only Masters, but that's more than enough, honestly. Tians without Superior Jobs aren't a threat... Oh no, I'm definitely not belittling the Imperium's forces. Still, what we have is good enough for a 90% chance of success."

The person on the other side seemed to agree with the penguin's words. However...

"You want the chances of success if there's a Superior that's aware of the plan? 50%." The penguin answered the person's question without a moment of hesitation.

"Ha ha ha! 'Won't it become lower?' you ask?" The person inside the suit then put on a faint smile...

"Have you forgotten who you're talking to?"

He spoke with a menacing voice thick with madness and even bloodlust.

"So yeah, the plan's target will have to be changed, and I'll have to do some other tweaks, but I'm still going through with it. You just sit there and pray for my success."

With that, he ended the call.

"No stops from our sponsor, then. Guess the financial situation ain't the best, so he probably wants it to be over quickly. This means that the plan's failure would likely lead to us doing it the field marshal's way..." The man inside the penguin suit chuckled. "Come what may, I say. Though I have no idea how things would proceed if someone tough showed up. What should I try then? How far should I go?"

As he imagined what would happen next, the suited man's expression changed. It was reminiscent of both an innocent child pouring water or inserting firecrackers into an ant colony, and a cool-headed, calculating adult considering how things could unfold. However, he soon remembered something and reassessed the situation.

Oh, but anyone tough would probably lose to him before I even got the chance to intervene. The penguin remembered the Master he'd brought to the city. It was a person that he knew very well, and a rookie who'd started *Infinite Dendrogram* no more than a month ago. Though being a Maiden's Master made him quite special, he was still far from a veteran.

His Embryo is a joker card in its own right. Anyone who's tough and has a relevant history is at a disadvantage. Honestly, if the situation is right...

"...I wouldn't be surprised if he killed every Master in Gideon all by himself," the penguin said.

Despite that Master being a rookie, the penguin had unwavering trust in his powers, and in the results he would bring.

Chapter Three: Xunyu the Yinglong

Paladin, Ray Starling

Opera halls and the like had a thing called "boxes" or "loges." Half-open, half-closed and fixed to the walls, they were luxury seats which gave the best view of the stage.

Our box in the central arena was much like one of those, but not completely. It was closed off, but the wall facing the stage was all glass, giving us an unbroken view of the fight.

The normal seats in the arena were like those in a soccer stadium. The paths linking those with the viewer benches were all made of a stony material, while those of us in the box seats had a carpet under our feet and some fancy, antique-looking chairs — antique-looking by the standard of this world, anyway.

There was quite a bit of space between them, too, giving each of us the option to ignore the rough duels beneath and just relax. And with the fully-functional air-conditioning, the comfort here was nothing short of perfect.

Man, is this fancy, I thought. *I can totally see why it cost a whole 100,000 lir. Of course, this is actually the equivalent of spending 1,000,000 yen to watch real life sports, which is something I'd definitely never do.*

"For someone with a fortune of 60,000,000 lir in his pocket, you sure are frugal," said Nemesis.

Having money doesn't mean I have to be inconsiderate about how I spend it.

"Gacha."

"Guahh..." I groaned, unable to say anything back to her.

...B-But gacha has a charm that I can't resist, and...

"Ray, won't you watch the match?" asked Marie, who was sitting next to me.

"Oh, yeah, I will," I replied and shifted my attention to the stage.

Before that, though, I took one last look around our box. The ones in here were me, Nemesis, Rook, Babi, and Marie.

Due to Nemesis and Babi being Embryos, the two had gotten in here for free. However, I hadn't known that beforehand, so I'd tried to get in after returning Nemesis to the crest.

"This is not something I like saying, but I felt like a dog about to be carried in one of those portable crates," she said.

What kind of comparison is that? I thought.

"Oh, right. *You're* the dog here," she went on.

"Could you not dig up a memory I want to forget?!"

The dog ears disappeared this morning, and I want them gone from my head, too!

"They looked quite good on you, though," she said.

...Yeah, whatever.

Anyway, we five were the only people here. My brother, the last person in our box, still hadn't arrived yet.

Did he stop by a shop or something? I thought. *Oh, well. I'll just wait for him while watching the match.*

There was a semi-event going on in the battlefield below. It was a perfect chance for me to reassess how duels work.

First, once the people stood on the stage, they set and agreed to the battle conditions. Then, they activate a special duel city barrier and begin fighting.

Inside the barrier, any injuries received, including fatal ones and player death penalties, disappeared after the battle was over. That allowed for deadly-yet-safe fighting.

The safety of the spectators was accounted for, as well. Multiple layers of barriers separated the audience and the duelists, letting through only sound, light, and the fighters' enthusiasm.

Of course, dangerous light like lasers or dangerous sound like destructive sonic explosions were blocked, too. Though apparently, players under level 50 — like me — could pass through the barrier unhindered, which was the reason why I couldn't participate in duels yet.

Also, the box we were in had come equipped with various devices. For example, there were monitors imbued with farsight magic, letting us observe the battle from numerous angles. The battle's sounds reached us, as well, including the words of the participants and the names of the skills they used. All of it made for a highly simple and convenient viewing experience.

These boxes were used by wealthy tian nobles, traders, and Masters who wanted to analyze the fighters on the stage.

"But many are just enjoying the duel, right?" I said to myself.

Due to no one's life being in danger, there were a lot of people who participated in duels. It was a popular activity among Masters and tian fighters alike. However, the main attraction of the arenas was the duels between Masters, and after seeing the fight before me, I could totally understand why. It was simply on a different level.

"Hhaahhhh!" shouted one of the Masters in the fight before me.

She was a black longsword-wielding, gothic-looking girl with black wings reminiscent of fallen angels sprouting from her back, and she freely flew around the space inside the barrier while leaving black feathers all around her.

"Blackwing Orchestra!"

Each and every one of the innumerable scattered feathers released jet-black wind blades. They formed a dark lattice which rent the air as it surrounded the enemy, fully intent on slicing her apart.

However, the opponent, a girl wearing a pirate hat and swinging around a giant golden ax as if it was no big deal, tightly gripped her weapon and forced it into the stage's stony floor. "World Reversal Waterfall!"

A moment later, the seemingly-empty stage's surface released a great flow of water with a force far more immense than a flash flood's.

The jet surrounding the girl was much like the skill's name: a reverse waterfall. It made the surrounding black wind blades completely vanish.

However, at that moment, the black-winged girl broke through an opening in the waterfall caused by the clashing between the water and the feathers, and slashed straight at the pirate girl, who still had her ax stuck in the stage.

The pirate girl used her left bracer to block the attack, but it wasn't enough. It broke through the material and damaged her regardless. But at the same time, the gothic girl bent her body due to injury.

Right as the pirate girl raised her left hand to protect herself, she used a blind spot created by the enemy's attack to launch an offensive skill with her right hand, creating a ball of water which hit the gothic girl right in her abdomen.

The winged girl instantly jumped backwards, and the pirate girl's ax cut through the air where she'd just stood. She'd probably been aiming to make use of the gothic girl's loss of posture, but it hadn't worked.

The two spread out, creating some distance between them, then stared at each other, predicted their opponent's moves, and clashed once again.

"Damn, they're good," I said. I was a bunch of tiers beneath them, not just in terms of basic stats, but playing skill, as well. "But I can still see them."

Which was strange, since Marie had told me that high AGI would make people immensely fast.

"Oh, that's because the flow of time is set to slow down inside the barrier," she said. "From the fighters' perspective, they're moving at their actual battle speed, while we in the audience see it in a speed that allows us to properly observe what's going on. There's a limit to this, though."

"Well, that's convenient," I said.

"Truly," she agreed. "That's how it works from a player's perspective. But according to the setting, this is lost technology from an old civilization."

So the arena itself is the same kind of thing as Silver, huh? I thought.

"I'd say it's necessary, though," she added. "If they fought at their normal speed, not even a tenth of the spectators could see what's going on."

Well, that sure says a lot about just how fast they're fighting.

"They're Juliet the 'Black Raven' and Chelsea the 'Vagrant Golden Sea.' Both are highly experienced Masters with sixth form Embryos. They're also on Altar's duel rankings. The former is fourth, while the latter is eighth."

That made sense, considering how well they were fighting.

"I think I saw the one in the pirate hat when we were eating sweets," said Nemesis.

Now that you mention it, yeah, she might've been there, I thought.

Nemesis turned to Marie. "Are 'Black Raven' and 'Vagrant Golden Sea' their nicknames?"

"Yes," she nodded. "As for jobs, well, the former is a Fallen Knight — a Superior Job derived from the dark knight subgroup of the knight grouping — while the latter is a Great Pirate — a high-rank job from the pirate grouping."

Oh, Black Raven is in the knight grouping? I thought. *I'm not sure whether it makes me feel any affinity for her. I mean, her equipment is a bit* *scary-looking...*

"I sincerely doubt the girl would like to hear that from you, of all people," commented Nemesis.

What's that supposed to mean?

"By the way, are Superior Jobs common?" I asked.

"Not when you look at the whole picture," Marie answered. "Still, there are far more of them than Superiors, Masters with Superior Embryos. If I had to guess, I'd say that people with Superior Jobs are in the quadruple digits. Even tians can get those jobs, after all."

That was a greater number than I'd expected.

"Strong Masters stuck with high-rank Embryos often go for those jobs," she added.

"But despite being strong, this 'Vagrant Golden Sea' lady doesn't have a Superior Job, right?" asked Rook.

"Oh, Chelsea is one of those who've yet to discover a Superior Job she could take," said Marie. "There are tons of jobs with unknown conditions, after all."

Well, her status makes sense now, I thought.

"Having your Superior Job get occupied before you even know its conditions must be tragic," I commented.

"Oh, that happens a lot," said Marie. "Some Superior Jobs have similar conditions, after all. There are even people who have taken two of them."

"What an unfair world... Ah!"

As I listened to Marie's explanation, something big began happening in the match. The wings of the Fallen Knight, Juliet, disappeared, and a moment later, countless black feathers gathered around her hands. Soon, they all began whirling around her arms, accelerating to speeds so great it became hard to differentiate them.

The Great Pirate, Chelsea, swung her ax and made its wide middle part face her opponent. Then the golden ax part vanished, leaving behind a hole which released a powerful flow of golden seawater.

Using all their magic and technique, the two reached the limits of their power and unleashed their ultimate attacks.

"Corpse-Eating Bird — Hræsvelgr!"

"Golden Bull Tsunami — Poseidon!"

The stage became overwhelmed by the clash between a dark whirlwind and a golden tsunami.

Even with all the layers of barriers separating us, the visual pressure and the sound waves reaching us were still overwhelming.

The struggle between a tornado and a tidal wave — likely the results of their trump cards — made for a sight that felt completely otherworldly.

Their Embryos were in their sixth forms, making them four tiers above Nemesis. Naturally, their destructive power was immense. It wouldn't have surprised me if both of those attacks were doing enough damage to instantly pulverize Gardranda.

However, there was more than just power to them. The entire battle that had led to this moment was a show of just how skilled they really were.

"So, is it safe to assume that these attacks are the 'ultimate skills' you told us about, and that their Embryo names are Hræsvelgr and Poseidon?" asked Nemesis.

"Yes," she said. "These attacks are their Embryos' ultimate skills, each named after the Embryo itself. They express the Embryo's dominant characteristics, which is why Hræsvelgr is a dark-wind mixed-element magic attack, while Poseidon is a liquid-summoning skill."

"Is there a difference between liquid-summoning and the water element?" I asked.

"In the simplest of terms, liquid-summoning is physical, while elements, including water, are magic. By the way, the liquid from Poseidon's ultimate skill is basically standard-temperature molten gold, and is far heavier than normal water. It can easily flatten fortresses."

"How luxurious," I said. "Damn freaky, too."

"Well, it all disappears after the attack is over."

That made sense. A person that could constantly spawn gold wouldn't be good for the game's market price.

"But man, I've gotta say, you're pretty knowledgeable about them, aren't you?" I asked.

"They're frequent duelists, after all," she replied. "There's lots of info about them."

That was the thing about duels. Masters who participated in Gideon's duels would receive rewards regardless of whether they won or lost — though, naturally, the victor got more. For those who fought in this arena's main events, the reward could easily reach 5,000,000 lir. With today's event being so special, that number was multiplied tenfold. Naturally, those are some high returns, but they came at a high risk of giving information about yourself to the spectators — other players included.

Marie had demonstrated this cost quite well. Being part of DIN, she knew everything from the two girls' jobs to the details of their Embryos' ultimate skills.

"Still, there are frequent duelists about whom we know absolutely nothing," she added.

I was silent.

"That's why I'm very excited about the next match."

The battle on the stage reached its end, and Juliet the Black Raven proclaimed her victory.

With that, it was time for the main event.

It was a match which would involve Gideon's ultimate king of duels, number one on the Kingdom of Altar's duel rankings: Over Gladiator, Figaro. His opponent was number two on the Huang He Empire's duel rankings: Master Jiangshi, Xunyu.

The curtains were about to rise for the Clash of the Superiors.

◇

The Kingdom of Altar had four Masters with Superior Embryos.

I'd seen them battle — no, completely annihilate — the PK clans surrounding the capital, so I was more than aware that their power was stupidly immense.

According to Marie, low-rank, high-rank, and Superior Embryos were all on completely different levels.

"To compare, low-rank are like dogs, high-rank are like tigers, and Superior-rank are like dragons," she said.

Naturally, this made for a difference so great, it left no room for hope for the lower creature. No normal players could match Superiors and their absolute power, so it was inevitable that they researched and gathered as much info on them as they could.

Therefore, because both dueling Masters were Superiors, most of these curious folks were focusing on their Superior Embryos.

There was so little info on the Kingdom of Altar's Superior Embryos that not even DIN knew much about them. Even the names of three of them were a complete mystery, while their abilities didn't even leave the realm of speculation.

The one Embryo that was known was High Priestess Tsukuyo Fuso's, but that certainly couldn't be said about the other three. Previously, Marie had suggested that the King of Destruction's Embryo was a battleship, but again, that was nothing but speculation. People merely assumed that based on the glimpses of a large shape lingering around the complete and utter destruction he left in his wake.

Due to this desperate lack of info, players were still eagerly searching for hints about their abilities. And, of course, a match involving Figaro was nothing short of a perfect opportunity.

"So that's what's been keeping you busy, huh?" I asked Marie.

"Yeah."

After the semi-event was done, there was a thirty minute interval until the main event began. It was used for maintenance of the stage and the barrier. Marie spent a lot of this time taking out various equipment from her inventory and setting it up. She was going to record the fight for her Journalist work.

Rook and Babi, seemingly tired from something they'd done in the afternoon, were spread out on their chairs and sleeping.

Better wake them up when the match begins, I thought.

Nemesis, as was standard with her, was emptying food she'd bought at one of the stands here.

After watching my party members, I began looking around the arena, when...

"...Huh?" I said.

"Hm?" she added.

Nemesis and I noticed something.

We saw a black shape disappear into the hallway below, and it was highly reminiscent of the black bear suit that my brother wore.

"What do you think?" asked Nemesis.

"Shu isn't the only one in this world to wear a suit, but it looked very similar to his."

However, assuming it *was* him, I could only wonder why he was there and not here in our box.

"I'll go check," I said and stood up.

"I'll come with you," said Nemesis.

After telling Marie that I'd be back before the event started, I went to search for my brother.

The arena's inner hallways were stony and had a design similar to the one used in real life sports stadiums.

Sure, there weren't any vending machines, but there were people selling light food and drinks. With the main event getting closer, many people were rushing to stock up on snacks or to answer mother nature's call, causing the hallways to be pretty crowded.

Though it didn't matter to the players — who logged out and did their business in reality — this world had flushable toilets. They were based on magic and were quite common in middle and upper class households.

Baths existed here, as well. However, they weren't too common in commoner residences, so most people opted for public bathhouses. I was even told that one of the twelve districts here in Gideon was known as the bath district.

First a Colosseum, then bathhouses... this city is strangely similar to ancient Rome, I thought.

"I don't see Brother Bear anywhere," said Nemesis.

"Strange, considering how much he stands out," I commented.

I didn't know for sure whether it had been him or not, but I had little doubt that I'd seen a bear suit...

"Hm? Doesn't this look suspicious to you?" she asked, pausing outside a corridor.

"It says 'Staff Only,' though," I said.

"We can just pretend that we got lost. I can even act out a good lost child."

"...Might I ask how?"

"Meow meow mew meow, meow meow mew meow."

"That's just the mewing kitten from that children's song!"

"I really don't like how it ends with the kitten still being lost."

Well, it asked a crow and a sparrow for directions, so it's to be expected that it didn't find its way.

Now, back to the matter at hand...

Nemesis and I entered the staff-only hallway. I expected to get confronted instantly, but it seemed that the arena staff were too busy preparing for the event in other places, leaving the hallway empty.

After going a bit further, I heard a familiar voice from behind the corner. Stealthily, I took a peek at the two speakers.

"We have two among the spectators. One's the guy from Caldina, and... Dryfe's King of Beasts, I think."

"I see. I'm sure getting some attention, aren't I?"

"Well, it's the first time you've been in an arena battle against another Superior. They're probably thinking that they can finally get info on you."

"I'm not really hiding it or anything, though."

"Yeah, it's just that your Embryo's effects are simple and not flashy at all."

"You might be right."

"Also... overall, the city's enthusiastic, but I'm smelling something really fishy. I saw some shady-looking kingdom people. They might be planning something, so you should be on your guard. I'm warning you because you're usually dense about stuff like this."

"All right... Am I really that dense, though?"

"You're a calm yet hot-blooded idiot, Figgy my boy."

"Really? I'm not sure if I agree."

"What do you do if you see a weird silhouette in the dungeon?"

"Launch a Crimson Dead Keeper from mid-range."

"What do you do if a PK group occupies an area?"

"Kill all the members, face the leader, and demand that they leave."

"What do you do if there's a horde of monsters and all you have is a club?"

"Charge at them."

"Yeah, you're hot-blooded."

"...You might be right."

Behind the corner, a black bear suit was talking to a golden lion suit.

"Why are you so stiff? What did you s—PFFT...?!" The sight made Nemesis burst into laughter, which attracted the two's attention.

"Ayy, haven't seen you fur... however long has passed since teatime," said the black bear. As expected, he was my brother.

"Well, if it isn't Ray and Nemesis," added the golden lion. "I see you made it to this city."

The golden lion talked to me in Figaro's voice. In fact, it *was* Figaro.

"Umm..."

All right, Figaro's pretty weird, too, I thought. *That makes three, so it's safe to conclude that suits are a sign of a weirdo.*

The four of us moved from the hallway to Figaro's waiting room.

"So, why are you in a lion suit?" I asked.

"I'm quite famous in this city," he said. "Walking around like normal can get pretty troublesome."

Oh, so it's like the hat and sunglasses combo that celebrities use.

"It's just a piece of joke equipment I bought at the bazaar, though," he added. "I wouldn't mind having a UBM special reward suit like Shu's, but MVPs only get what they really need."

True. My Miasmaflame Bracers and Grudge-soaked Greaves had been exactly what I'd needed.

"I've defeated many UBMs, and I've yet to get a single suit," he said and faced my brother. "How do you even get them, Shu?"

"Listen, Figgy boy, you wouldn't like it if all the UBM rewards you got except for one were suits, now, would you?" said Shu. "You can't equip more than one of them, after all."

I'm really curious about that exception. I thought. *What could he have a gotten that's not a suit? A portable signboard?*

"Unlike me, getting special reward equipment doesn't mean all that much to you," said Figaro. "The system probably thinks that it's best to just give you another suit."

"Damn you, Humpty... You're unbearable!" Shu complained.

"Are control AIs actually responsible for that?" Figaro asked.

"I care not!" snapped Shu.

There's this and the thing with his first login... Is Shu actually hated by the control AIs? I thought.

"I must say, you two sure get along well," said Nemesis. "Brother Bear already told us that you're friends, but still."

"Friends... well, yes we are," said Figaro in response. "You probably know this by now, but Shu and I are this country's Su—"

"'Super Splendid and Merry Suit Club' members!" Shu broke in. "There are only two people in it fur now."

...Just you two? Also, it's pretty blatant that only Figaro got dragged

into it.

“U-Umm...” Figaro hesitantly spoke up. “Oh, speaking of special rewards, your bracers and boots seem like fine pieces of equipment.”

“Oh, yes,” I responded. “I’ve defeated two UBMs so far.”

“Oho... Hmm... ‘Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda’ and ‘Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise.’ Oh, so you were the one who defeated the gang that everyone was talking about.”

“Yes,” I said.

In all honesty, I wished to have a word with him. If Figaro had done something about the Gouz-Maise Gang, they would’ve been defeated much earlier and there would’ve been far fewer victims.

However, I was aware that there was no use in saying it at this point. Figaro had probably had his own reasons for not going. Also, the idea of demanding that a person should do something simply because they were capable of doing it seemed pretty unreasonable.

“After all, you yourself are the type to attempt something regardless of whether you actually have the power to do it,” said Nemesis.

You might be right, I thought.

The various things that had happened during that quest were now a part of me. Considering what could’ve been if someone else had gone instead of me was a mistake.

“Both of them have good skills... and your own feelings,” said Figaro. “Make sure to treasure them.”

“I will,” I nodded. *But man, he just identified my equipment as if it’s no big deal.*

“When identifying people’s equipment, the information you get is often beary limited, but Figgy’s Identification skill is almost maxed, so the details aren’t hidden to him,” said Shu. “Still, it doesn’t work on stuff like special rewards with a concealment effect on them.”

“Like this thing,” said Figaro as he pointed at Shu’s suit.

It dawned on me for the first time that my brother’s suit, being Ancient Legendary, was a far bigger deal than I’d thought it was. No one could really fault me for that, though. It looked like a mere piece of joke equipment. But now, I knew that it was a piece of joke equipment with ridiculously good stats.

“By the way, why were you in a staff-only hallway?” asked Shu.

I explained that I'd seen him from the box and had come to look for him.

"Why didn't you come to the box?" I asked. "You have a ticket, don't you?"

"Oh, I just had some beary unimportant business to attend to. Been walking around here and there."

"I see," I nodded. "Still, I'd like it if you got there before the match. I want to introduce you to my party."

"Yeah, I'll be there in a minute. Oh, right, I forgot to give this to you during our teatime." Shu dug through his inventory and took out something resembling ear cuffs.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Telepathy Cuffs," he answered. "It bears a power that allows you to telepathically talk to friends who also have this equipped."

"For real?" I took it from him and put it on my ear, filling up one of my accessory slots.

[Can you hear me?] Shu's voice rang out in my head.

I was used to telepathy with Nemesis, but the way I heard this was different.

[Yeah, I can,] I answered.

[Then the test went fine.]

Damn fine, actually, I thought.

From what I could see, his bear ears didn't have any Cuffs on them. *Well, obviously they wouldn't work unless he had them on his actual ears. He's probably wearing them inside the suit.*

"This item's pretty useful," I said.

"Beary useful, yes, but there's a range limit. It should cover all of Gideon and its surroundings, though," explained Shu. "I was actually planning on giving this to you when we split up in the capital."

"I see. I'd say that now is the better time, though. If you'd given me this when I started, I feel like I would've relied on you more than I should've."

"Nice to see such enthusiasm for self-reliance. Still, do call me when you're sure you can't handle something by yourself."

"Yeah. Help me out when I really need it."

"I will," he said as he puffed out his chest. There was pride in that action, but his appearance made it seem somewhat humorous, as well.

“Oh, it’s almost time,” said Figaro.

I looked at the clock and, sure enough, the main event was a mere 15 minutes away. Figaro probably had some preparations to make, so it was time for us to leave.

“Figaro, do your best in the duel,” I said.

“We’re acquaintances at this point, so we’re cheering for you!” added Nemesis.

“Thank you,” he responded. “Oh, by the way, the reception should still be open, so you could go there and bet on me.”

Figaro used some skill or something to instantly switch from his lion suit to the equipment he’d worn when I’d met him in the Tomb Labyrinth. Then, he put on a gentle, yet strong, smile.

“I’ll win, so you will surely make a profit.”

He said that as if it were already a fact.

I felt as though those words carried the pride of an unmatched king and the weight of the entire history that led him to becoming the duel city’s strongest.

“All right,” I said.

If he says it with such confidence, I have no reason to not do it, I thought.

“I’ll come after talking to Figgy a bit more,” my brother said. “Wait fur me in the box.”

“Well, okay,” I said.

With that, Nemesis and I left the waiting room.

◇◇◇

“By the way, what is this ‘Splendid and Merry Suit Club,’ Shu?” Figaro asked.

“That was the only thing that came to mind at that point.”

“Have you actually not told him who you are yet?”

“Leave that aside fur now,” said Shu. “What’s important right now is the upcoming event.”

“True.”

“You pretty much just said that you’re certain you’ll win, but the opponent isn’t that easy, right? If you ask me, your chances are 50%, if not lower.”

“That’s about how I see it, too. I’m facing one of the Huang He Si Ling — the country’s four strongest.”

“And you’re the Kingdom of Altar’s toughest solo player — Figaro the Endless Chain.”

“I probably shouldn’t say this myself, but both sides sure are something,” Figaro said. “I wouldn’t mind watching this fight.”

“Okay, now wait just a second here.”

“Don’t worry. Battles such as these, ones that set my life ablaze, are the very reason why I’m here in *Infinite Dendrogram*. That’s why... I’ll win with all that I am.”

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The arena’s reception counter was split into two — one for battle entries and one for gambling. The window for entries was already closed for the day. Also, with most people already having placed their bets and the match starting in but a few minutes, the hallway was almost completely empty.

The board above the counters — which looked much like an electric one due to the magic it used — displayed the odds for the main event. It said “1.2x” next to Figaro and “5.6x” next to his opponent. The difference was considerably great, but that was a testament to just how much people trusted Figaro’s power.

I spoke to the receptionist and went through the betting process.

“How much are you betting?” asked Nemesis.

“Well, it’s just 1.2x, so I won’t win all that much if I don’t put lots of money into it,” I said. “So let’s go with this.”

I bet 60,000,000 lir on Figaro.

“YOU IMBECILE!” howled Nemesis as she hit me with a dropkick and launched me across the hallway.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” I exclaimed.

“No, what are *you* doing?! Why are you throwing all the riches you’ve been blessed with into a gamble?!”

“Because I believe what Figaro told me.”

“Be honest,” she snarled.

“...I wanted to have an authentic gambling manga experience.”

“All right, sit down right there. I’ll thoroughly teach you about the importance of money!” Nemesis then commenced to scold me right in front of the reception...

“Too bAd, guy. All of that’s going down the dRain.”

I heard a strange mutter and felt someone grab my shoulder. I gasped and hastily turned around, but I didn’t see anyone before me.

Actually, I did, but the person was standing ten meters ahead. It was impossible to grab anyone’s shoulder from such a distance, and indeed, nothing was touching mine anymore.

For a moment, I thought that I only imagined someone touching my shoulder because I heard the voice, but concluded that it couldn’t be true, for the sensation was still there.

The touch was colder than ice, making me feel as though it had grabbed not just my shoulder, but my very heart under my ribcage.

“So Figaro’s just 1.2x, eH?” the creature spoke. “I know I’m the ‘away’ fighter hEre and all, but damn, thEy’re seriously underestimaTing me.”

Even when filtered through *Infinite Dendrogram’s* excellent translation function, the words still came with a strange intonation.

The creature walked while releasing an abnormal aura. As it approached, the people that were still in the hallway backed away or outright ran for it.

The receptionist lady, too, fell out of her chair and sank to the floor, looking like she was about to cry. No one could really fault her.

I had no idea what made the creature seem so unamused, so full of ire, but it was emitting immense amounts of bloodlust all around it.

I silently watched the creature. At the core, we humans were nothing but animals, and my base instincts were warning me that I was facing death itself. However, I kept looking at it regardless. And as I did, I realized that the creature’s very form was as abnormal as its aura.

Also, it *was* more than ten meters away from me. The reason why I’d thought it was closer was its unnatural height, which seemed to surpass four meters.

Though the hallway had been built with tall Demi-Humans in mind, it was still just barely large enough for it.

The creature was wearing a hat with a talisman hanging at the front, making it reminiscent of jiangshi from Chinese movies. Its body was covered in loose clothing that seemed too big for it, only giving slight peeks of its limbs. However, the very fact that those limbs *could* peek from under those two meter-long sleeves was more than daunting.

Its legs and arms were ridiculously long. The nails were metallic, sharp, and intimidating enough to make me absolutely certain that they had been used to kill thousands.

Naturally, the creature was frightening.

“Gh...!” Becoming aware of my fear made my legs shiver.

The Demi-Dragon Worm, Gardranda, Gouz-Maise... not a single one of the mighty creatures I’d faced had ever made me lose my fighting spirit, but the thing before me almost made it shatter. My instincts were telling me that this tall creature was on an entirely different level than anything I’d fought and that my only real option was to run away.

However, before I could do that, I noticed that it was holding a woman as if she was piece of baggage.

“Ah!”

The pained expression on her face rendered me incapable of ignoring them and running away.

“Nemesis!” I shouted.

“Got it!” she replied and instantly merged with me, taking her greatsword form.

Feeling my partner’s palpitations in my right hand instantly revived my will to fight.

“WhAt? You wanNa go?” the creature responded as I pointed my greatsword at it.

The creature raised its right hand in a bored manner while still holding the girl in its left.

The motion was followed by an unamused sigh, after which the right hand bent in a bizarre manner, taking a sickle-like shape.

At the same time, the bloodlust it was releasing into the surroundings was suddenly focused on me, which was a sign of an attack.

“Coun—”

“Too slOw.”

I momentarily envisioned Nemesis breaking and my head soaring through the air.

“STOOOOP! PAWS THIS!” a voice shouted.

However, that future didn’t come. “HuH?” The creature’s bloodlust disappeared as if it had never been there. No — it didn't disappear — it was simply directed at someone else instead. That someone was the one who'd shouted and intervened.

"The hell are yOu?" the creature asked.

"Just a bear passing by!" answered the new target of its hostility — my brother, Shu.

No longer being the creature's target made me heave a sigh of relief. It was all but certain that, if Shu hadn't come, I would've been given my second death penalty.

"A beaR? Hmm, you seem pRetty tough," said the creature.

"Oh no, I'm just someone who's beary enthusiastic about suits."

"HahAh, now ain't that somEthing."

Less than a moment after the creature laughed, a plosive sound, a metallic scraping sound, a crashing sound, and a crushing sound reached my ears, all at the same time. It was bewildering beyond words. I'd heard the sounds, but I couldn't see what had caused them.

Before I'd realized it, Shu's right arm was positioned in a way that made it seem like it had deflected something, while the creature's right hand was aimed at him. One of the nearby pillars had been shattered, and my brother's suit's right arm had released white smoke — a sign of recent friction.

I hadn't seen a thing, but it was obvious that they'd just gone through an exchange of blows. It had simply been too fast for me to see with my naked eye.

Remembering what Marie had told me, I realized that I'd just born witness to supernatural movements caused by ridiculously broken stats — a fight that had happened beyond the sound barrier.

"Kh, he, hahAhah! You sure are somEthing, bear! Is it you, tHen? Are yoU Figaro?" the jiangshi asked.

"Bearily not!" my brother declared.

“Yeah, fiGured! You’re not whAt I saw on the phOto, and I doubt the kingdom’s king of dUels would waLk around looking so wEird!”

...He did, though, I thought.

“SeriouSly, you’re somEthing! You deflected my attacks dEspite being way slOwer than me!”

He did?

“Altar’s dying and all, so I unDerestimated it, but it loOks like coming here wAs worth it, after all! Even if the Figaro guY’s no good, I think it’d be fuN to fight you, iNstead!”

“Yeah. I won’t say no to a brawl with you if Figaro loses,” said Shu. “But that won’t be happening. I mean, he’s gonna beat you.”

“Heh, hehEheheHe! Guy must bE a big deaL to have *you* beliEve in him so much! Guess I now hAve two maiN dishes in sTore for me!” With those words as its last, the lanky creature passed us by and went further into the hallway.

“...Wait!” I shouted before it left.

“HuUh?” the creature turned to me and tilted its head, clearly bothered out of its mind. The murderous intent aimed at me filled me with fear again, but I couldn’t back down.

“What do you intend to do with her?” I asked.

At this point, I was more than aware that I had no chance against this creature. But I couldn’t turn a blind eye to what was happening. It would’ve left a bad taste in my mouth.

“‘Her’? Oh, you meAn this?” said the creature and put the woman it was holding on the ground.

She groaned in pain.

“She’s witH me. The waY we got here wAs a bit rough, so she becAme a bit nauseOus and groggy,” said the creature and heaved a heavy sigh.

“Eh?” I asked in confusion.

They’re together? Seriously? I thought. *Oh.... now that I look at her, she seems a bit pale and her expression isn’t too good, but there’s not a single injury on her.*

“HmM? Wait, did yoU actually staNd up to me bEcause you thought I was a kidNapper or something?” the creature demanded.

“...Sorry.”

Seriously, I apologize. I jumped to conclusions.

I probably just hadn't been rational in the face of all that pressure, but that didn't change the fact that it would've been a really stupid death if Shu hadn't intervened.

Damn, is this embarrassing.

"Kh, heH, khaHahahahAhahahah!" My response made the creature burst out laughing. "You're quite somEthing, too, aren't yOu? You actuAlly tried to fight me whEn I was releasing bloodlust all aroUnd me! First thE bear, now you — therE sure are a lot of fUnny guys among this cOuntry's Masters!" it said and placed its long, metallic claws on my head.

Before I could even see it move, it brought its talisman-hidden face to my ear...

"I like you, sweetcheeks. Let's play together sometime."

...and said that with a voice that wasn't filtered by the talisman's magic.

...Eh? Wait, that voice is...

"HahahAh! See ya laTer!" said the creature before turning around and dragging the woman on the floor to the other end of the hallway.

As it distanced itself from us, I could still hear it say, "Hey, ambasSador, wake up alreAdy. You have woRk to do."

To that, the woman groaned and weakly said, "Please, no more supersonic air travel..."

After they left, the mood around us instantly cooled down.

"Yo, that was damn close, wasn't it?" said Shu.

"...Thanks, bro." I probably would've died if he hadn't helped me out. The creature had had both the power and the killing intent to do it.

"It's pretty cool to be able to brandish your sword against a thing like *that*, but you should bear in mind to use your courage where it actually counts," he added. "It's too early for you to be battling Superiors."

"Superiors... So that's..."

"Yeah, that's Figaro's opponent. One of the four greatest that the land of hermits has to offer — a part of the Huang He Si Ling."

Xunyu the Yinglong. I shivered.

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"We're back," I said.

"Pawrdon the intrusion," my brother added.

By the time Nemesis, Shu, and I returned to the box, Marie had finished setting up her equipment. Rook and Babi were awake, and they all stared at my brother, visibly confused.

Well, the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar guy in a bear suit makes for a very strange scenario, I thought. *Wait... Is it just me, or is Marie more shocked than confused?*

"Umm... R-Ray? Wh-Who is this... bear... man...?" she asked with a stiff expression on her face.

I guess the suit's freaking her out.

"This is my brother," I answered. "We happened to be in the same box."

"Well, that's quite an interesting coincidence," commented Rook. "Oh? What's wrong, Marie?"

"I-It's not... It's nothing, really."

Though she said that, it certainly didn't seem like nothing. Her facial expression was visibly constrained. Also, she was muttering something along the lines of "They're so, so alike... It's a suit, not fur, but the texture is the same... The voice is similar, too... And it's a bear..."

"Marie," I spoke up. "You're..."

"Eh?!" she exclaimed. "I-I'm what?"

The agitation in her voice made me absolutely certain that Marie was...

"You're afraid of bears, aren't you?" I asked.

For a moment, my question left her completely dumbfounded. Then, she nodded in a slightly exaggerated manner.

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes! Th-That's exactly it! I'm just not good with bears! Yes, it's definitely not that I'm afraid of the Kin— I-I mean, your brother!"

For some reason, she wasn't nearly as articulate as usual.

I guess bears scare her more than I thought.

"I guess I shouldn't look like this, then," said Shu. "Bear with me for a second." Suddenly, the bear disappeared and — for some reason — was replaced by a bipedal whale.

But then, it's a question whether a bipedal whale is actually a whale, I thought.

"If you can't handle bears, then perhaps this is fine? Whale?" asked Shu.

"Did you just replace 'well' with 'whale'? Holy crap, what a stretch!" I said.

"Whale, you got any better whale puns for me, wise guy?!"

"No, I don't!"

Seriously, I don't recall ever seeing a whale character that emphasizes his whaleness with whale puns, I thought.

"U-Umm," Marie spoke up. "It's fine. I've calmed down. You can return to being a bear."

"Really? Very whale, then," said my brother before getting engulfed in light and becoming a bear again.

Man, now that I have something to compare it to, his bear appearance seems so calming. I thought. *Really, there's a certain sense of security about it.*

Of course, there was the big question of whether it was really a good idea to feel safe around a guy in his late twenties wearing a bear suit and talking with bear puns, but I felt it would be best to leave that for later.

"All right," I said. "Let me introduce you again. The person inside this suit is my big brother."

"Bearliest of greetings to you all. I'm Ray's brother IRL, Shu."

What kind of greetings are "bearly," anyway? I thought. *Oh, whatever.*

"And these are my party members..."

"I'm Rook, and this is my Embryo, Babi."

"Heyyy, I'm Babi!"

"I-I'm Marie Adler. Pleased to meet you."

"Marie Adler?" Shu repeated her name and tilted his head to the side.

That movement made Marie shake a bit.

Are you sure you're not afraid of the bear suit? I thought.

"Is your job 'Journalist'?" my brother asked.

"Y-Yes it is," she answered.

How did he get her job right just by hearing her name? Is it because of all the equipment here?

"I've read that manga, too," he said.

"Which manga?" I asked.

"*Into The Shadow.* 'Marie Adler' is the name of its protagonist, and she works as a journalist."

"I see," I said. "You like that manga, Marie?"

"Yes, I do," she admitted. "It's the reason why I chose this name and job."

Well, it certainly wasn't uncommon for MMO players to take the names and appearances of characters they liked.

"Is it also the reason for the way you talk?" asked Shu.

"Of course. It's just roleplay," she answered. "None of my peers talk this casually when they're over twenty."

She's sure dedicated, I thought. Also, this was the first time I'd learned that she was older than me.

"*Into The Shadow,* was it?" I said. "Maybe I should read it, too."

"Just so you know, it was discontinued by its magazine," said my brother. "The first part of its story finished and its serialization stopped, just like that."

Well, damn...

"It was pretty popular, though," he added. "I liked it a lot, too, and I'd love it if it restarted sometime."

"Thank you. I appreciate that," said Marie. It seemed she was a big fan.

I should really buy it when I get the chance, I decided. *If they think it's a good read, I might enjoy it, too.*

"Ladies and gentlemen! The wait is over! Today's main event — The Clash of the Superiors — is about to begin!" a voice called, announcing the start of the match. It rang out throughout the arena, accompanied by music.

I'd been told that, just like the toilets in this world, announcements were done by magic.

"Oh, the fight's about to begin," said Shu. "Best get mentally prepared fur it."

"True," agreed Marie. "I have to record it, too."

We all sat down and began preparing for the event.

Man, now that I think about it, an event called the "Clash of the Superiors" is exactly what it says on the tin, I thought. Figaro and Xunyu — two Superiors bearing Superior Jobs — were about to clash.

This would likely be a battle unlike any I'd seen so far. After all, the ones fighting were some of the most high-end, top class beings in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"First, the eastern gate! The entrance of our venerable guest!" the announcer called.

A spotlight focused on one of the entrances.

"A Superior hailing from the land of Huang He! The great martial artist bearing the nickname of 'Yinglong'! The beast from the east! The Master

Jiangshi! XUN... YUUUUUUUUUU!”

There was a boom, a crescendo of music, and even a release of smoke. A moment later, the creature broke the thick veil and showed itself.

Its frame surpassed four meters in length, causing many spectators to scream from shock. A single glance at its abnormally long limbs was enough to send chills down the spine.

To the eyes of those living in this country, which had a Western setting, even the creature’s clothes seemed like they belonged in the realm of madness.

Spreading fear and shock with every step, the Master Jiangshi, Xunyu, entered the stage. The creature raised its arms and released a war cry, which was followed by explosions on both sides of the entrance.

That performance caused the audience to either cheer or scream.

“They really know how entertainment works,” I said.

“Gideon is beary much a showbiz city,” Shu explained. “Also, Masters gave the tians advice on how to set up these presentations.”

Just as I thought. It looked exactly like something from a fighting event on TV.

However, I felt that the announcers on TV were better. The one in this arena didn’t seem too used to it.

“By the way, Xunyu’s number two in Huang He’s duel rankings,” Shu added. “You get used to this if you duel that much.”

Number two? So there’s someone else at the top, huh?

“By the way, what kind of job is ‘Master Jiangshi,’ anyway?” asked Rook.

“Huang He has a job called ‘Daoshi,’ and I hear it’s a Superior Job from that grouping,” answered Marie. “Its counterpart in this part of the world would be... Mage, surely.”

“The main characteristic of Daoshi is that they produce and use certain consumable items — talismans known as ‘Fu,’” added Shu. “Their main advantage is that they allow quick and consecutive spellcasting, while the demerit is the production cost.”

“And don’t forget that greater skills require you to spend time positioning the Fus,” added Marie.

Shu nodded. “I’ve also heard that, while being in the daoshi grouping, Master Jiangshi is a direct upgrade to the job known as ‘Jiangshi,’ which is focused on endurance. With that in mind, it's safe to expect that Xunyu's fighting style is not purely magical, but involves melee, as well."

"Oh, that's true. After all, the daoshi grouping is the type that unlocks different Superior Jobs depending on which jobs you combine it with. In fact, it might be more correct to consider Master Jiangshi to be a Superior Job from the jiangshi grouping."

It seemed we had *two* people doing the explaining. And with Rook being the one listening to them, I basically became part of the background. Not that I minded it.

"Wait, the job is also called 'Shi Jie Xian,' right?" I asked. "That doesn't really mean 'jiangshi,' does it? So why do we read it as 'Master Jiangshi'?"

"Well, not every job translates as neatly as 'King of Destruction,' fur example," answered Shu.

"Superior Job names can be really something," added Marie. "Imagine meeting the 'Death Shadow.'"

I guess their uniqueness comes with unique naming senses, I thought.

"Then how does this player actually fight?" asked Rook.

I was curious about that, as well. I'd had a confrontation with Xunyu at the reception and seen the jiangshi fight Shu, but I hadn't been able to understand a bit of what was going on back there.

"The nickname 'Yinglong' might make you think otherwise, but that's not the name of Xunyu's Embryo," said Marie. "Also, Xunyu sometimes gets called the 'Landmine' or 'Divine Speed,' too."

Those two nicknames gave off completely different impressions. The former was about waiting in place, while the latter was about moving around a lot. Naturally, it made me curious about which one of these applied to this mysterious fighter.

"And in the western gate! We have the pride of Gideon! The unwavering champion of our city!" the announcer called.

The music changed and the spotlight was redirected to the gate at the opposite side.

"The king! The lone explorer! The one bearing the nickname 'Endless Chain' and the title of 'Over Gladiator'! The strongest man of all! FIIIIIIGAAAAAROOOOOOOOOOOO!"

As introduced, the one that walked out of the western gate was none other than Figaro. While he had a gentle smile on his face, his eyes seemed to emit immeasurable pressure, and they didn't give away a single hint about what was going on in his mind.

Naturally, he wasn't wearing the lion suit. Instead, he was clad in the same curious equipment as before.

Figaro's appearance made cheers ring out throughout the arena.

"FI-GA-RO! FI-GA-RO!" the audience chanted as he slowly made his way towards the stage. Just as I'd been told, he was extremely popular around these parts.

Well, I can see why he needs to wear that suit, I thought.

"All right! Let's prepare for the fight of the century!" the announcer called.

Now that the participants were both on the stage, they opened up a settings window. I'd seen one of those at the semi-event, too. The windows were used to configure the barrier. Like in the semi-event, both sides looked through the rules displayed and confirmed if they were okay with them before starting the match.

Most duels here in Gideon were 1v1 and didn't have many rules. All attacks and tactics were allowed. What *wasn't* allowed were accessories that prevented instant death damage — such as the Lifesaving Brooch and the Dragonscale Ward I was familiar with — and consumable healing items. Healing from equipment skills was perfectly fine, and I was still too much of a noob to see any reasons why they were treated differently.

"Figgy would've had a serious advantage if they were allowed to use accessories like that," said Shu.

"Eh? But the rules are the same for both fighters, so would it really make that much of a difference?" I asked.

"Trust me. With Figgy, it would."

So Figaro has something that greatly benefits from those accessories? I thought.

"Both duelists are done checking the rules! Now, let's activate the barrier and... oh?" The announcer was about to signal the start of the battle, but stopped when he saw Xunyu raise one of those long arms.

Were the rules unsatisfactory or something?

"One one, teSting. You people heAr me?" said Xunyu, the voice resounding throughout the arena.

"So yeah, I'm about to duEl this Figaro gUy, but let me juSt say something to make the fight mOre interesting."

Well, that definitely sounded intriguing. I readied myself for the words...

"I won't move a siNgle step until Figaro falls to his knEes."

Xunyu's words were something that no amount of readiness could've prepared me for.

For a moment, everyone in the arena was completely dumbfounded. It seemed as though every single member of the audience became of one mind, thinking nothing but *What did I just hear?*

"Did any of yoU even hear me? I'm saying that I won't move a siNgle step, *and* I'll make this Figaro gUy fall to his kneEs."

After another moment of silence, the spectators realized that Xunyu's words were a provocative insult towards Figaro — and the duel city of Gideon, which hailed him as their champion. Suddenly, the whole arena was drowned out in anger and booing.

However, it only made Xunyu laugh. "Great! Now I'm a pRoper bAdDie! Oh, the laUghs I'll have WheN I beat you in tHis situation!"

Instead of responding, Figaro just silently looked at his opponent. I couldn't tell whether his silence came from confidence or due to some other reason.

However, I was almost completely certain that the scenario Xunyu described wasn't impossible. At the very least, if I were in Figaro's position, I'd definitely get killed before the jiangshi moved even a single step. That exact situation had almost happened a few minutes ago. Still, I had a feeling that Xunyu's words weren't just a provocation.

"Those certainly are some abrasive words," said Nemesis. "Do you think there's any meaning to them?"

"If you're asking whether I think that was just a meaningless provocation or a meaningful preparation for something... it's definitely the latter," I answered.

Facing Xunyu once was enough for me to know just how murderous and relentless the jiangshi was. That certainly wasn't all, though. There was more to this Superior than met the eye.

From the incident at the reception and entrance and the words just now, I could easily tell that Xunyu was clever enough to calculate and manipulate people's impressions. The jiangshi's battle tactics and preparation covered even the very mood of the surroundings.

“We will now turn on the barrier!” said the announcer.

The booing towards Xunyu subsided and the barrier became active, setting the stage for the match.

“And so! Let the main event, The Clash of the Superiors... COMMENCE!”

A split-second later, a booming sound rang out as something golden flashed across the stage. It was merely a moment. However, it was a moment during which way too many things had happened.

At least, I assumed it to be so. After all, I could only see the results.

Before I knew it, Figaro was wielding two swords and had deployed four chains, three of which were already broken.

He was swinging his dual blades at an immense speed, using them to deflect “something.” The “something” seemed to cover the whole stage at this point.

When it became spread out like that, I could finally see it with my eyes.

It was extremely long and moved at a speed so great, it was reduced to nothing but a blur. I probably couldn’t have even known it was there if it weren’t for its length. The very tip of the “something” was completely invisible to me. By following its long trails, however, I realized that it was connected to Xunyu’s sleeves.

At first, I thought that the “something” were chains, like the ones Figaro used. It only took a moment to realize I was wrong. Xunyu’s sleeves didn’t hide any hands that could hold such things.

There was only one “something” attached to those sleeves — Xunyu’s arms.

Reaching speeds my eyes couldn’t follow, the arms reached for and attacked Figaro like a duo of serpentine dragons.

“It’s too fast,” I muttered.

“They put the wrong setting on the barrier,” Nemesis spoke to me telepathically. “The time inside is slowed down, but their speed is so great that it means nothing.”

She’d said exactly what I was thinking. I looked at my brother sitting next to me, and wondered if *he* could see it.

Suddenly, the last of Figaro’s chains flew straight towards Xunyu. Its speed was immense, but before it could even reach its target, it was sliced into five pieces in less than a blink of an eye.

The chains that had almost killed me back in the Tomb Labyrinth were just too slow in comparison to Xunyu's arms.

"Supersonic, extension-based attacks... They're faster than..."

Those were probably Marie's words, but I wasn't certain.

A bit belatedly, I finally realized that the booming sound that had rung out at the beginning of the battle was an actual sonic boom. Also, I came to see that, despite the ludicrous speed, the jiangshi's arms were properly controlled.

While realizing just how well-deserved Xunyu's title of "Divine Speed" was, I couldn't help but notice that the extending arms were much like the snake-like dragons from Chinese myth.

It made me more than certain that, if our fight in the reception had continued, I'd have been killed before I could even use Counter Absorption. Even in the off chance scenario of my being successful, Xunyu would've probably killed me by moving one of those arms around the barrier and simply lopping my head off.

While I could make out the trails of the extended arms, their very ends — the hands — were completely invisible to me. The fact that this was their speed after they were *slowed down* by the barrier made chills go down my spine.

However, Figaro was impressive, as well. Though he was exposed to a barrage of those supersonic attacks, it didn't look like a single one of them had landed on him yet. He saw, dodged, and deflected them all.

Also, little by little, it became harder and harder for me to see his movements, too.

"A certain old manga had a term for how I'm feeling right now," I muttered. *I think it was called "Yamcha Vision,"* I thought.

Nemesis, Rook, and Babi seemed to be in the same state as me. But that didn't seem to be the case with Shu and Marie. From his demeanor and from the movements of her eyes, I could tell that they could see and follow Xunyu's arms.

"You two can actually see them?" I asked to confirm.

"To an extent," answered Shu. "I'm not an AGI build, so sometimes I can, sometimes I can't."

High AGI allows you to see this stuff? I thought.

From the battle at the reception and the fact that he was on the rankings, I was pretty certain by now that Shu's level was pretty high. However, it didn't make sense that Marie could see it, too.

"I can follow the movements because we Journalists have a passive skill that improves our sight," she answered my question before I could even ask it.

I see. So there are non-battle jobs with such skills, huh?

"This is barely visible at all to me," I said. It was my first exposure to a battle between two top players, and my first glimpse into the speeds they could reach. I wasn't even sure I could really say that, in fact, considering that they were slowed down by the barrier.

"We will now slow down the battle speed inside the barrier even further!" said the announcer, and — sure enough — the two fighters' movements lost a lot of speed.

And yet, they're still faster than the semi-event fighters, I thought.

"So they set the slowdown to max, huh?" said Shu. "Well, way too many spectators couldn't have seen what was going on if they didn't."

"Yeah. I'm one of them, to be honest," I said.

Now, I could somehow see the details of the battle. A golden right hand was going for Figaro's head from his left side. He evaded it by bending backwards.

The hand that passed him made a U-turn and attacked his head yet again. This time, Figaro deflected the attack with the sword in his right hand.

The battle that had been completely invisible was now sufficiently slowed for my inexperienced eyes, and yet it still made me feel like I was watching a video on fast-forward.

Seriously, just how fast are these two fighting?

"You can't even land a hit if you can't keep up with this speed, huh?" I asked.

"Well, you could try surprise attacks while they're not in battle-mode," said Marie. "That's impossible in duels, though."

Of course. Duels began when both sides agreed to a set of rules and were ready to fight. There was no room for surprise attacks. They were 1v1s where both sides fought with everything they had until the stronger one emerged victorious.

Figaro was the one sitting at the apex of Gideon, the city of duels. That meant that he was the greatest 1v1 fighter the kingdom had to offer. And yet, Xunyu was fast enough to force him onto the defensive.

I was about to assume that Master Jiangshi was a Superior Job focused on AGI, but then I remembered what Marie had said about it: *Its counterpart in this part of the world would be... Mage, surely.*

"Wait, magic!" I burst out. "Xunyu still isn't going all out!"

A moment later, the stage was overwhelmed by thunderous roars and a crimson light that dominated the entire area behind the barrier.

I looked and saw that the extended arms were releasing countless crimson heat rays. They were boisterously dancing as they burned the air and scorched the stony floor of the stage.

The origin of the heat rays were the *pieces of paper* covering Xunyu's arms whole.

"Are those...?"

"Daoshi's Fu," said Shu.

"Xunyu covered the arms in Fu enchanted with offensive magic and is now using them to cover the stage in heat rays," explained Marie.

"That's nuts," I muttered.

Naturally, with there being so many heat rays, some of them hit Xunyu's long arms. But the arms seemed to be extremely tough, not taking any damage whatsoever. The rays did make some of the Fus get detached and slowly drop down to the stage, but the arms continued their relentless attack.

Just how tough are they? I wondered.

"If they weren't tough, our slit-eyed friend would've severed them by now," said Nemesis.

Arms that were unaffected by heat rays and possessed a hardness that even Figaro had trouble breaking through. From the fact that Xunyu could fight at supersonic speeds while being the Master Jiangshi, a primarily magic-oriented job, I could only assume that...

"...those arms are Xunyu's Superior Embryo," I said.

Prosthetic limbs that emitted a golden gleam and attacked the opponents at speeds that broke the sound barrier. This Embryo's characteristic abilities could be described as "strong arms that reach far at great velocity." Though that sounded basic, seeing it in action in the display before me awed and scared me.

Strength, speed, range — it had the whole package. It was simple, but that was exactly what made it nigh impossible to counter.

"If there's any power that *can* counter it, though..."

"...it must be something simple, as well," Nemesis finished for me.

As Nemesis' words entered my ears, something else entered my vision.

Crimson light and countless freed Fus danced all around as Figaro broke through the hell of supersonic destruction and came out of it completely unscathed.

He didn't do anything special. Figaro simply dodged, deflected, and dashed.

Avoiding the heat rays and parrying the arms, he gradually closed the distance between him and his opponent.

The battle itself was simple, but the level at which it was happening made it seem beyond abnormal.

"Amazing," I said, lacking any better words to describe the battle I was seeing.

At first, I thought that Figaro was completely on the defensive, but I was wrong. He was closing in on Xunyu, growing faster with every passing moment, and dodging every single one of the jiangshi's attacks.

It was only a matter of time until Xunyu would be within his attack range. That made it pretty obvious that the odds were right, and that Figaro was going to win.

However, I suddenly noticed something. Not about the two fighters, but about two of the people sitting next to me — Shu and Marie.

The aura about them was different.

It wasn't the first time I'd been exposed to such an aura. I'd felt it when I'd fought the Demi-Dragon Worm, gotten killed by the Superior Killer, and faced Gardranda and Gouz-Maise. Looking at them made me feel as tense as I'd been during those deathly encounters.

Soon, I realized that both their gazes were directed at the same thing.

It wasn't anything on the stage, but one of the monitors installed in our box — specifically, the one showing a close-up of Xunyu's face.

The visage was still hidden by a jiangshi-like talisman. However, there was an instant in which it was raised by the battle winds, revealing an indomitable grin.

"Call — Baolei!"

Right after the jiangshi spoke that word — meaning "raging lightning" — there was a new development. The back of Xunyu's hand suddenly burst open, revealing a Jewel used to store monsters. From it came a creature that seemed to be wrought of lightning.

Released at nearly point-blank distance from Figaro, it instantly bared its electric fangs at him.

"An elemental," said Shu. "A rare kind, too."

"Seems like a type of Lightning Elemental that's focused on speed and offensive ability," added Marie. "It's just a fancy distraction, though."

Before I could even ask what she meant by that, Figaro swung the swords in his hands in the shape of a cross and sliced the monster apart.

It happened in but an instant. Just as Marie said, the elemental ended being nothing but a momentary distraction. However, that moment was enough for Xunyu to safely retract one of those golden arms.

It returned to its original size, and between its index and middle fingers, there was a single Fu. It was detailed and elaborate, making it reminiscent of a painting, but rather than finding it beautiful, I felt mostly fear.

Then, the hundreds... no, thousands... of Fus that had fallen on the stage during the fight began emitting a crimson light.

The main characteristic of Daoshi is that they produce and use certain consumable items — talismans known as "Fu," I thought, remembering what Shu and Marie had said. *And don't forget that greater skills require you to spend time positioning the Fus.*

"Zhenhuo Zhendeng — Baolongba!" Xunyu called.

Those words — meaning "True Flame True Light, Explosive Dragon Dominance" — caused most of the duel field to be engulfed in a pillar of fire.

The scene made me remember one of the jiangshi's other nicknames: "Landmine."

The pillar of fire had no trouble breaking through the upper part of the barrier separating the fighters and the spectators.

In fact, it went high enough to make it seem as though it would scorch the very heavens themselves. Though not great enough to cause damage, the pillar's heat reached us and just about everyone else in the audience, causing many to scream in fear.

The panic might've made it seem otherwise, but no harm came to any of them. If anyone was hurt by it, it would be the two fighters on the stage.

But the pillar didn't extend to its caster, Xunyu. Before I'd even realized it, the jiangshi's right arm was retracted back to its original length, just like the left one, sparing it from the flame.

The same couldn't be said for Figaro. Dealing with the elemental had rendered him unable to evade the attack, and it obviously wasn't something that could be deflected with mere swords.

Just about everyone in the audience held their breaths as the pillar of fire faded and allowed them to see what was happening on the burning stage.

What we saw was Figaro, completely surrounded by a searing hot heat haze and a spherical barrier that shielded him from all harm.

"He survived it completely unharmed?!" Marie voiced her shock, and I couldn't agree more.

"Is that one of Figaro's Embryo's skills?" I asked. "Or is it an Over Gladiator ability?"

"Neither," answered Shu. "It's an item skill. That longcoat he's wearing is a special reward. Its active skill allows him to prevent all and any outside influence for a short time."

So it's a special reward skill. Like the ones on my Miasmaflame Bracers and Grudge-soaked Greaves, I thought.

"Oh, but it has a cooldown of 10 minutes," Shu added. "Meaning that the attack cost him his ultimate means of defense."

"I think that Xunyu is also out of viable moves, though," Marie said. "The elemental can't fight anymore, and I don't believe it's easy to recast a spell that costs so many Fus, which means that the same trick can't be repeated, and that..."

"...Figaro will win!" I cried with certainty.

"All that's left is to figure out the effects of the last skill that Xunyu used," Rook said.

Nemesis and I, and even Babi, didn't understand what he was talking about.

Shu — clearly noticing something — was looking at Xunyu. A bit belatedly, Marie joined him in that.

"What do you mean by 'last skill,' Rook?" asked Babi.

"Xunyu used a skill besides the one that created the flame pillar, no?" Rook asked.

"Well, I... Really?" I asked. I hadn't seen that happen.

"Figaro's defensive skill's about to end," said Shu, and sure enough, the shield protecting Figaro from outside influence disappeared.

I fully expected the duelists to start clashing at supersonic speeds again, but what actually happened was the complete opposite of that.

Neither Xunyu — the one used the fearsome skill — nor Figaro — the one who negated it — were moving a muscle.

Naturally, that was strange, for it was clearly time for the former to get into a proper stance and for the latter to charge. Despite it all, however, Xunyu was still grinning.

"'Arms and Legs Reach for the Horizon — Tenaga Ashinaga,'" Rook broke the silence.

"Rook?" I asked.

"That's what Xunyu said right after creating those flames," he said.

I didn't hear anything like that, I thought. The soundscape had been dominated by the fiery roaring, and Xunyu didn't have a mic or anything of the sort.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I saw his lips move," he answered. "The mouth movement for proper nouns here is the same as it is in reality."

He was lip reading? When did he get this skill? Or wait, is it like Marie's drawing? Did he bring it over from reality? More importantly, is "Tenaga Ashinaga" the name of Xunyu's Superior Embryo?

The name referred to a certain type of yokai from Japanese myth — one that would be a perfect fit for the jiangshi's abnormal frame.

A skill bearing such a name could only mean that...

"...Xunyu used the Embryo's ultimate skill — the one named after the Embryo itself!" I cried.

Suddenly, the jiangshi raised the right leg, which was hidden by cloth. The one which hadn't moved an inch since the battle had started.

Just like the arms, the leg was a golden, prosthetic limb — a Superior Embryo.

Its toes were as sharp as the fingers on the arms, and there was something between them. Unlike the Fu from before, its shape was indistinct.

The same could be said for its color. It looked white, pink, and red at the same time, which — combined with its apparent softness — made it look much like *a human organ*.

“I missEd your heaRt,” said Xunyu. “This iS a damn luNg.”

A moment later, blood splattered from Figaro’s mouth as he dropped to his knees.

Chapter Four: The Clash of the Superiors

Paladin, Ray Starling

“Arms, Guardian, Chariot, Castle, Territory. Those are the five base categories in Embryo evolution. Which, do you think, is the most common?” asked Shu.

It had happened on my first night in *Infinite Dendrogram* — specifically, at the welcoming party. I’d forgotten most of what we’d talked about after he’d told me about the war, but this part had stuck with me.

“Arms, I think?” I answered his question, not having much basis for it.

Nemesis was both a Maiden and an Arms type, while my brother’s Baldr was a gatling gun. I didn’t know any Masters besides myself and him, so my answer was just a guess based entirely on the fact that both our Embryos were Arms.

“That’s right,” Shu nodded. “Arms is the most common category in *Infinite Dendrogram*.”

And my guess ended up being correct.

“It’s also the most varied one,” he added.

“What do you mean?”

“The Arms category covers all sorts of Embryos. It’s not just weaponry like your greatsword or my gun — there are utensils like pots or lamps, and even artificial eyes and limbs that replace parts of the body.”

“So there’s lots of strangeness in this category, huh?” I asked.

“Yeah, there certainly is.” He momentarily turned silent, then seemed to remember something. “Still, I don’t think that any Arms is stranger than *his*.”

Back then, I’d had no means of knowing what he was referring to.

Gideon’s central arena was shrouded in silence.

Not a single member of the audience seemed to understand what had happened.

The only people who did were probably the ones on the stage, Figaro and Xunyu.

"So this is the result of all of Xunyu's groundwork," Shu said.

No — my brother seemed to understand it, too.

"First, there was the 'I won't move a single step' declaration," he said. "It was actually meant only to make it not seem weird that Xunyu wasn't using the legs."

One of those legs was now grasping one of Figaro's lungs.

"Then, there was the long-ranged barrage of supersonic attacks. It was meant to make it seem like the declaration was based entirely on confidence, nothing else. Figgy probably knew that it was just a bluff, though."

However, he still hadn't been able to avoid it.

"The Fu magic attacks were just used to position the Fus needed for the great spell that followed. That 'Baolei' elemental was just a momentary distraction. As for the great spell itself..."

The skill that had used the hundreds of Fus littered all over the stage and created a pillar of fire strong enough to break the barrier.

"'Zhenhuo Zhendeng Baolongba,' was it?" Shu continued. "From its power, it's pretty clear that it's among the strongest Master Jiangshi skills — probably the ultimate one. However, Xunyu used it to do nothing more but keep Figaro in place."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The spell had both immense power and range. It would've damaged Figgy a lot, but he couldn't escape to safety due to the presence of Xunyu's arms. The rules prevent them from using accessories that negate instadeath damage, and that's why he had to use an omni-directional defensive skill."

So it would've been over for him if he hadn't used the special reward's skill, I thought.

"However, that was exactly what Xunyu wanted him to do," said Shu.

"What?" I asked.

"Most powerful omni-directional defensive skills prevent the users from moving or using any other skills. That leaves them stiff and open to attacks, and Xunyu simply took advantage of that... just like planned."

So the jiangshi was waiting for that moment from before the fight even *began... I can see where the nickname "Landmine" comes from.*

"But wait," interjected Marie. "If the special reward's skill's effects are like you described, no attacks should've reached him, right?"

I could see her point. After all, it was supposedly a barrier that protected from every direction.

"Yeah," Shu replied to Marie. "Attacks from *the outside*, at least."

Apparently, that was enough for Marie to understand everything.

"So you've already figured what that ultimate skill does?" Rook asked my brother.

"Yeah," nodded Shu. "You seem to have guessed, too, Rook."

"It's based on circumstantial evidence, though," Rook said.

Apparently, I was the only player here who was still lost about this.

"Brother Bear, might you tell us what kind of attack could've given Figaro such a grave injury?" asked Nemesis, clearly as confused as I was.

"It's pretty simple when you observe," said Shu. "Look. Figgy lost an organ and is hurt enough to spit blood, but there's not a single scratch on his skin."

Though covered in blood that had escaped his mouth, Figaro's equipment was completely intact, too.

An attack that gouged out a lung would normally leave a hole in both apparel and the flesh.

"Also, an ultimate skill is the culmination of an Embryo's main trait," he added. "You can figure it out from here, right?"

"Oh, I see!" I cried.

Ultimate skills were the greatest show of an Embryo's dominant characteristic. It was safe to call them the crystallization of an Embryo's and its Master's power. Due to that, they were extremely varied, causing them to include oddities such as tornadoes of darkness and tsunamis of gold.

With that in mind, I had to figure out what the culmination of Xunyu's Embryo would be, an Embryo that had speed and range as its main traits.

Its velocity had already broken the sound barrier, so it might've been safe to assume that the ultimate skill approached or surpassed the speed of light. However, superluminal velocity was an insurmountable barrier for anything that had the least bit amount of mass, so there was a limit to how great the speed could grow. But if such limits meant nothing for the

Embryo, the culmination of speed and range would be something that was found in science fiction.

“Warping,” said Shu.

That was the only answer — a superluminal, super long-distance, ultradimensional movement ability.

“Xunyu warped the right leg directly into Figaro’s body and tore out the lung,” he explained.

Figaro’s equipment had prevented all outside influence from every direction. However, it had been able to do nothing against Xunyu’s ultimate skill. It was like a scenario in which a piece of paper had two points on it — A and B. Even if there was a circular barrier around A that prevented B from getting to it, one could simply bend the paper to make B touch A directly. Walls and barriers meant absolutely nothing.

“If that’s how it is, wouldn’t it have been more effective to place a Fu in the body and blow it up?” asked Rook. “Also, instead of taking just one, couldn’t Xunyu have torn *all* the organs apart?”

You have some freaky ideas, man, I thought.

“The skill probably has limits that prevent such things,” said Shu. “Maybe it can only warp the Superior Embryo itself? Or perhaps the time during which it’s connected to the other side is very severe?”

“I see,” nodded Rook.

One of the duelists on stage, Figaro, finally began to talk.

“A forced teleportation attack that goes straight *into* the body, eh? A true ultimate skill if I ever saw one.” The words leaving his bloody mouth made it obvious that he, too, understood the nature of Xunyu’s attack.

“I’ve been waitiNg for you to stop in plAce,” said the jiangshi. “Though, hOnestly, it would’ve been better if you’d just leT my insult go to your hEad and chosen not to move. I’ve actUally fought some iDiots who lost like that! GheaHahAhah!” Xunyu’s laugh echoed throughout the silent arena.

“It’s normally a super long-distance skill, isn’t it?” asked Figaro. “You sure went through a lot of trouble to make it viable in a duel.”

“Well, tHat’s just how I rOll.” Just as Shu had said, Xunyu had been waiting for the right moment to use the ultimate skill.

However, I was pretty certain that the jiangshi had intended to kill Figaro with every move that’d come before it. The supersonic nail attacks, Fu magic, Baolei, Baolongba — each and every single one of those would've instantly killed most lesser creatures.

The ultimate skill was but a trump card Xunyu kept for anyone who was capable of withstanding it all. And its effects were obvious. Figaro — though still alive — was greatly hurt.

"Can he heal that injury?" asked Nemesis.

"This isn't just an external wound or a broken bone — he lost an entire organ," answered Marie. "That lowers a person's maximum HP, limits their movements, and continuously damages them... Not even magic would have an easy time healing that."

"I know that duels don't allow them, but would an Elixir work?" I asked.

"Elixirs don't do much about injury-based status effects. To fix organ loss quickly, you would need a healing skill from a Superior Job. However, if normal healing is your only option, fixing it would take a long while. You might as well get the death penalty. Mind you, they're fighting in the barrier, so that won't be necessary."

From Marie's words, it was safe to assume that Figaro wouldn't be healed for the duration of the battle.

"Wait. Why are they still not moving?" asked Rook, bringing that fact to my attention.

Figaro's lack of movement was likely caused by the injury, but I didn't see a reason for Xunyu to become immobile, as well.

"Is it a side-effect of the skill?" asked Nemesis.

"No," answered Shu. "Xunyu's just being cautious."

"But why?" I asked.

Figaro is completely cornered and... Oh, I see, I thought.

"Xunyu's being careful about the thing that Figaro has never yet shown in any of his many matches — his Superior Embryo," said Marie. "He's yet to use it in this duel, too."

Hearing those words, I nodded. Figaro still hadn't used his Embryo, and if he did, he'd probably have a chance at victory.

"But Figaro *is* using his Embryo," said Shu.

"Huh?" Nemesis, Marie, and I simultaneously expressed our confusion.

"He is? Since when?" I asked.

"Ever since the duel started," Shu answered. "Hell, he probably used it in all his other matches, too. Guy's not one to hold back all that much."

That was probably a fact that no one in the audience was aware of. Figaro's Superior Embryo's name and details were a complete mystery to everyone. And yet, he was *always* using it.

"So, is he wearing it?" I asked.

"That can't be," said Marie. "I'm constantly checking him with Identification, and I can assure you that everything he's wearing and wielding is an item."

That made sense. Identification skills had no effect on Embryos, after all. If there was something that couldn't be Identified, it would obviously be that, but Marie had said that there was no such item on him. Thus, it was safe to conclude that his Embryo wasn't a piece of equipment. But in that case...

"Then what *is* his Embry—"

Before I could finish my question, the audience became astir.

I hastily looked to the stage and noticed that something strange was happening with Figaro.

He was still on his knees, but his apparel was changing.

First, his coat was engulfed in light and vanished. Next was his light armor and the shirt underneath. Then disappeared the ten rings on all his fingers and even the hat that stayed on his head even as he fought at supersonic speed.

All that was left were the leg armor reminiscent of a hakama, his greaves, and the swords in each of his hands.

For a second, I thought that Xunyu was responsible for this, but the jiangshi seemed as puzzled as everyone else.

Wait a second, isn't that the same light that covered him when he changed in his waiting room? I asked myself.

"Instant Wear," said Marie. "It's a skill that does exactly what it says — allows instant switching of armor."

I remembered the skill I had, but hadn't used yet: Instant Equip. It allowed the user to instantly equip weaponry from the inventory, and I could only assume that Instant Wear worked the same way.

"But..." I said.

Figaro had used it to simply take the items off, instead of switching them for something else. Switching to better equipment would've made sense, but as things were, it looked like he'd only made it worse for himself.

As just about everyone in the arena became confused, Figaro stood up. With his upper clothing gone, his toned chest was completely exposed. His skin and pectoral muscles did little to hide the fact that he'd lost his lung. The area had become unnaturally dark due to all the internal bleeding.

"Was it *tHat* hard to bReathe?" Xunyu asked — not mockingly, but with genuine curiosity.

Instead of responding, however, Figaro merely grinned.

"GuesS this duel's over, tHen," Xunyu muttered before launching the supersonic arms again.

However, again, Figaro deflected it with one of the swords in his hands.

It was just like the start of a battle before Xunyu had used his ultimate skill. Yet again, Figaro was on the defensive.

"Hm...?" I murmured.

The sight made me puzzled. After all, it barely made any sense. The result of Xunyu's attacks simply *couldn't* be the same.

Figaro had lost a lung.

Sure enough, his movements were a bit duller, causing him to get a few scratches here and there.

But in what world did it make sense for a person who'd lost a lung to *just* become a bit slower? It needn't be said that it was a fatal injury. Though Masters were superhuman and could survive through it, it should've taken a *huge* toll on his mobility.

Thus, I could only question why the injury had such a light effect on Figaro.

"ShgHh!" Xunyu attacked with both arms at once while increasing their speed, causing them to become a blur, even with the barrier acting at its maximum.

"■■!" Figaro released an inhuman sound as I noticed that his expression changed.

He was now making the same berserker-like expression I'd seen him make in the crystal.

"Physical Berserk," said Marie. "That skill gives an immense bonus to physical stats while rendering the body uncontrollable and preventing the use of any other active skills. Is this really a good situation to use it?"

"He nullifies the uncontrollability with another passive skill," answered

Shu. "The mad expression and the bloodlust might make you think otherwise, but he controls himself just fine. Also, he simply chose to focus on increasing his stats rather than using some tricks."

Indeed, Figaro was even faster than before.

"Not a baD face you're mAking, Figaro!" shouted Xunyu while launching those golden arms behind the Over Gladiator.

Figaro momentarily looked behind him, then dodged one of the arms and charged at the other one. He didn't deflect it this time — he actually hit it head-on.

As a result, both Figaro's sword *and* one of the Superior Embryo's golden nails shattered into many pieces.

As Xunyu became overcome with shock, Figaro used Instant Equip to take out another sword. What followed was another clash, and the result was the same as before.

No — this time, both of Xunyu's arms lost a metallic nail each.

"WhaT did you dO?"

I couldn't help but relate to Xunyu's confusion. It was very clear that the question wasn't directed at the results of the Physical Berserk skill.

What puzzled the jiangshi and me was the fact that, despite being weakened by the loss of a lung, Figaro had been able to damage Xunyu's Superior Embryo, which he'd only been able to dodge and deflect before.

I didn't know how strong the skill was, but I couldn't believe that a single power-up skill could turn the tides like this. Also, even before using the skill, he hadn't really seemed to be behaving like he was severely injured. Which was made even stranger by the fact that he'd been weakened due to removing most of his equipment.

Was he really weakened, though? I thought. "Hmm."

Does he have a skill that strengthens him when he unequips his items? No, he would've done it at the start, then. Still, it should be something that relates to the act of equipping stuff and...

"Is something wrong, Ray?" asked Nemesis.

"Hey, Nemesis," I said. "Remind me how many equipment slots there are in *Infinite Dendrogram*."

"Equipment slots? Well, there's headwear, upper and lower armor, innerwear... no, it doesn't count. Then there's the cloak, armwear, boots, five accessories, and weapons for each hand... That makes 13. No, special equipment like Silver makes it 14."

"What about Figaro?" I asked.

"Our slit-eyed friend has skills that give him more slots. He had accessories on every finger and can clearly equip six weapons at once. There might be more, but I'd assume it's somewhere around 25."

At this moment, however, he only had his lower armor, greaves, and a weapon in each hand, making for a total of 4.

"Bro," I said.

"Do you address me bearing questions?" he replied.

"What are the effects of the hakama and the greaves Figaro's wearing?"

"The hakama is called 'War Might Cloth (lower),' and it gives a bonus to STR, AGI, and DEX, while the greaves are a special reward called 'Unbound Sabatons, Unchain' and they give a large bonus to AGI and a resistance to movement limitations."

Equipment that strengthened him. A reduced amount of equipment. Increased fighting ability. An Embryo he'd been using from the start.

And the thing Shu and Figaro had been talking about in the hallway. When all of that was considered...

"...Oh, so that's how it is," I muttered. If I was wrong about this, him taking off his clothes would've been completely meaningless.

"Bro."

"I'm listening."

I voiced my guess. "Figaro's Embryo's trait is 'strengthening equipment worn inversely proportional to the number of items equipped,' right?"

My words made everyone except Shu look at me in surprise.

"Why do you think that?" he asked.

"Normally, you're stronger the more items you have equipped, so if someone becomes stronger *after* taking them off, I can only assume that it's a skill like that."

That said, the fact that he hadn't taken them off right at start was proof that it wasn't just a skill that made him stronger the less he wore. I assumed it was a skill that split a 100% total bonus among all the items he had equipped. When using 25 items, that bonus would be 4% on each, while equipping just 4 items would make it 25%.

He'd taken off the unnecessary equipment to make his power more focused.

“Is that all the proof you have?” asked Shu.

“No, there’s more,” I said. “Figaro goes through the Tomb Labyrinth solo, but that’s not exactly doable, is it?”

“You’re saying you don’t think it’s pawssible for *anyone* with Superior Embryos?” my brother asked.

“If it were, other Superiors would do it, too. But Figaro is the only one who’s famed for being a solo explorer. That has to be because he has something others don’t.”

“Which is?”

“Utility and countermeasures.”

“Hoh.”

The equipment Figaro usually had on him was probably a utility-focused combination that strengthened his body, increased defense, gave resistances to status effects, and helped him with healing. However, no matter how strong Figaro was, such equipment made him nothing more but a jack of all trades, yet master of none.

It might work fine against normal monsters, but it was clear that it would be difficult for him to fight bosses that way. That went doubly for UBMs, like the ones I’d beaten, which often had highly specific, unique abilities.

When fighting Gardranda and Gouz-Maise, I’d miraculously emerged victorious because I’d had powers that fit the situation. Though I’d gotten into those fights by chance, I’d been equipped with the right countermeasures.

That was the keyword here — countermeasures.

This was merely an assumption, but I believed that Figaro fought and beat his enemies by adjusting and improving his equipment based on his opponent. For example, when facing an ice monster that was weak against fire, he’d use only a fire-based weapon and equipment that increased his frost resistance.

That was exactly what he had done to that player killer in Sauda Mountain Pass. He’d reduced the number of chains he used to strengthen the “resistance to movement limitations” effect on his greaves, allowing him to break free of the binding and emerge victorious.

And now, he’d concluded that defense and resistance to debuffs were useless against Xunyu, leading him to focus exclusively on equipment that increased his speed and damage.

He fought in full gear to safely see what kind of enemy he was dealing with, then switched to wearing only the equipment he really needed. That was Figaro's battle style.

"You're half right," said Shu.

So there's more to this, huh? I thought.

"Just so you know, when he's fully geared, all his equipment's starting numbers are multiplied by two."

"Multiplied by... *BY TWO?!*"

That meant that now, when he was wearing less than a fifth of his total equipment, that number ought to surpassed ten. Clearly, that was more than enough to cover for the loss of a lung.

Wait... 'starting numbers?' I thought.

"...Bro."

"What?"

"You said I was half right because...?"

"You know how you were talking about the total bonus?" Shu said and then went silent for a moment before continuing. "*It increases in proportion to battle time*."

Cheers echoed throughout the arena. Figaro's slash had broken another one of Xunyu's metallic nails. This time, however, his sword didn't break.

"He becAme even stRonger!" panicked Xunyu.

If we were to assume that the equipment strengthening increased by 1% every second, the difference that would cause when in full gear would be negligible. But, as Figaro was demonstrating, the same couldn't be said for when he was using only a few items.

Figaro grew stronger with every passing second and with each exchange of blows. He had already surpassed Xunyu's supersonic speed and dealt enough damage to break Superior Embryos.

The constant growth in his power became all the more obvious now that I knew how it worked.

Strengthening proportional to battle time.

Strengthening inversely proportional to the number of equipped items.

Those two were the main traits of Figaro's Superior Embryo.

They were qualities that could only shine in a long battle. Thus, now that the battle had gone on for quite some time, Figaro was in top shape even after having lost one of his lungs.

A man who grew endlessly stronger the more he fought — Figaro the Endless Chain.

“That’s nuts,” was all I could really say about it.

Nemesis, sitting next to me as she’d read my mind, nodded in agreement.

So that nickname wasn’t actually referring to the chains, huh? I thought.

From the fact that it also covered the true nature of Figaro’s Superior Embryo, I could only assume that Shu, who’d known the truth about it, was the one who’d thought of the nickname and made it popular.

“Still...” I murmured.

There was something I found strange. Even though I’d had hints from my brother, I’d been able to figure out the nature of Figaro’s Superior Embryo just by watching him fight once. And yet, all this time, it’d been considered to be a great mystery.

It didn’t take too much thought to figure out why. Figaro — being exclusively a solo player — did all his explorations by himself. He was alone in his boss battles, and most of them happened in the Tomb Labyrinth. Obviously, no one ever saw him fight after removing his equipment.

As for duels... Well, the large audiences had never noticed his abilities because each and every single one of his opponents so far simply hadn’t been strong enough to force him into focusing his gear.

Perhaps he *had* powered up by removing one or a few of his accessories, but he’d never had to take off so much of his equipment that the spectators would’ve found it weird. Today was the first time that had ever happened in a duel. Figaro had had to go all out because his opponent was the strongest he’d ever faced in a duel.

Xunyu *was* truly strong.

“Hah! You surE are somethiNg, Figaro!” shouted the jiangshi as his left arm was completely severed.

If that wasn’t a show of just how strong Figaro had become, nothing was. Even with a critical injury, he surpassed Xunyu at just about every front.

The tables had turned.

Figaro evaded the nails with little effort as the jiangshi’s legs distanced the body from him. Xunyu attacked even while backing away, but none of it seemed to work.

Though both were fighting at supersonic speeds, there was now a clear difference in velocity between them.

And, of course, that difference only kept growing.

“Damn, I mesSed up!” said Xunyu. “I shouLd’ve aimed for thE head, even if the riSk of you dodgiNg would’ve been biGger!”

Though cornered, Xunyu showed no signs of using the ultimate skill again. It probably had a cooldown or a limited number of uses.

Xunyu was strong and had certainly had a chance at victory. However, that chance had disappeared the moment the jiangshi had failed to grab hold of Figaro’s heart.

“■■” Figaro voiced another inhuman sound as I noticed that he now held only one weapon instead of two.

It would probably be categorized as a broadsword. But it was definitely not *just* a sword.

It was hard for me to say what made it so different from the other weapons he’d used. Its presence was simply unmatched. I felt as though merely looking at it for too long would reduce me to nothing.

“That sword... Figaro’s going for the finishing blow!” said Shu.

“You know what that weapon is?” asked Marie.

“You can’t Identify it?”

“I can’t. Using Identification doesn’t even give me its name.”

I understand not being able to Identify stats, but not even seeing the name? I thought.

“The Zenith Dragon’s Brilliant Fang, Gloria α.”

“Ah?! So that’s...?!” Marie became shocked, and yet I didn’t know why.

The intimidating air about it made it obvious that it was a special reward. However...

“It’s on a completely different level,” said Nemesis, and I couldn’t help but nod.

It was above any and all equipment I’d seen so far. I wouldn’t have been surprised if it was a greater weapon than Xunyu’s Superior Embryo.

“That’s a cooL toy you hAve, Figaro! GheAhahaHahahahhah!”

And yet, the jiangshi was still laughing. Despite it all — despite being the very target of that menacing blade, Xunyu was still laughing.

The two duelists were no longer fighting, allowing the laugh to freely echo throughout the arena, which had turned silent with anticipation. And once the echoes subsided...

“Then I’m goNna use tHis!” Reaching into a sleeve, Xunyu took out a dagger and gripped it with the right prosthetic arm.

A second later, a menacing air came from the jiangshi. Specifically, from the dragon fang-like dagger.

“Yinglong’s Fang, Suling Yi. It’s just like youRs — a Superior Item. I got it wheN we dealt with the SUBM thAt attacked our Huang He.”

SUBMs and Superior Items.

When I’d checked the help window, I’d learned that was the highest tier of special rewards. The two duelists were owners of Superior Jobs and Superior Embryos. And now, they wielded Superior weaponry, as well.

“Still, it’s nOt like I can surpaSs you when you’re so bUffed,” Xunyu said.

Of course, Xunyu was aware. It was something that I’d been able to figure out. There was no way that an experienced Superior facing Figaro couldn’t realize the nature of his Embryo.

“Don’t worrY, though. My Yinglong’s Fang deals moRe damage the more MP and SP I giVe it,” Xunyu said while baring the fang at Figaro. “I’ll give mY all to this one attack. Next time’s goNna be the laSt.”

That declaration was followed by more silence, which created a thick air of tension.

Figaro’s Superior Embryo was sending more and more power into Gloria α.

Xunyu the Master Jiangshi, a Superior Job with immense MP and SP, was giving it all to Yinglong’s Fang.

The air became so tense that it felt as though the very space around them would crack.

Nemesis, Shu, Marie, Rook, Babi, I, and just about everyone else in the audience looked at the menacing duelists while holding our breaths in anticipation.

Now that the tension had reached its apex, I was so immersed in the scene that I didn’t even notice that I’d pushed off the glass that was on the table. Right before it shattered, I heard the high-pitched sound caused by it touching the stony floor echo within our box.

At that moment, the Over Gladiator charged, while the Master Jiangshi launched his right arm.

Both their speeds surpassed and went far above supersonic. Even though they were slowed down by the barrier running at full capacity, I still couldn't see what had happened. All that entered my vision were the results.

Figaro's left arm and Xunyu's right arm — still holding Yinglong's Fang — had been severed from their bodies and were now airborne.

Still holding Gloria α in his right, Figaro dashed to Xunyu's side, to which the jiangshi responded by instantly launching the left arm, the one with a hand that had lost its metallic nails, towards the Over Gladiator.

At that particular moment, Xunyu was faster than the opponent and quickly forced the *golden nail* into Figaro's chest.

"Got ya nOw!"

Before I'd realized it, one of the very same golden nails that had been broken and dropped to the stage was affixed to the hand once again.

Xunyu's claim about giving it all to Yinglong's Fang had been merely but a setup for this surprise attack.

The jiangshi had predicted that Figaro would focus on speed in exchange for defense and took advantage of that.

Xunyu the Yinglong was *both* the Landmine and Divine Speed.

And still, the Over Gladiator came out ahead.

I could see shock on Xunyu's partially concealed expression. It was caused by the fact that the golden nail hadn't pierced through Figaro's body.

The golden nails were supposed to break through the skin, tear the pectoral muscle, rip the heart, shatter the ribcage, and come out on the other side. However, *something* had stopped it right after it tore the pectoral muscle.

It was an object capable of withstanding an attack from a Superior Embryo.

It was...

"...a heart," I muttered.

An Embryo that no one could see, despite Figaro always using it.

An object that Xunyu had failed to grab with the ultimate skill and couldn't pierce with this surprise attack.

They were the same thing.

A heart-shaped Superior Embryo.

“Thank you,” said Figaro. “You were a wonderful opponent.”

He’d taken off the Physical Berserk and sent his praises to his fellow duelist...

“Fang of Gloria!”

...and then split Xunyu in two from the top of the head.

“GHH!” the jiangshi groaned, and then struggled to try to do something.

“OVERDRIVE!”

Figaro swung Gloria α back upwards while making it release a pillar-shaped burst of light that greatly surpassed Baolongba in terms of heat.

The light was blinding enough to cause a whiteout. Though we couldn’t see anything, it was easy to tell that it was silently evaporating everything within the barrier. And once the light faded, all that was left was Figaro, while Xunyu had vanished without a trace.

I heard a belated announcement of Figaro’s victory.

Once the audience realized what happened, the arena was engulfed in applause.

Nemesis and I and everyone else in our box were cheering, as well.

The Clash of the Superiors — a duel that would be sung for a long time to come — had ended with Figaro’s victory.

Conjunction Episode: The End of the Match, the Beginning of Madness

Central Arena, audience seating

The moment Figaro won, ovation roared throughout the building.

"What a great duel..." A certain young spectator seated in the west side couldn't hold his honest opinion about the battle he'd just witnessed. The spectators around him were standing up as they sent cheers and applause to Figaro — no, the spectacular battle itself — and he was no exception.

"Truly a wonderful fight," he said, clearly moved.

"Yeah!" agreed a middle-aged man standing next to him. "I've seen many arena battles in my life, but a duel *this* good is a first!"

"Really?"

"You'd better believe it! The best match before was the one between Figaro and Tom Cat, the previous champion, but this was above that one!"

"I suppose I am quite lucky, then. This makes the journey through the desert all the more worth it."

The middle-aged man then noticed that the youth next to him was wearing a turban and loose, skin-concealing clothing that was popular in Caldina.

"You came here all the way from Caldina?!" he exclaimed. "Wasn't it hard?"

"Oh yes, it was," nodded the youth. "But again, it was worth it. I now have a good story to tell my friends back there."

After forming a satisfied smile, he then tilted his head in confusion.

"Oh?"

Gradually, more and more people in the audience became as puzzled as he was.

"What's wrong, lad?" asked the middle-aged man.

"Umm, Mr. Figaro is..." He told the man of the oddity that he had noticed.

Eventually, the confusion spread all across the arena.

"What a joke," said a woman in the eastern part of the audience. Obviously, she wasn't as ecstatic about the battle as everyone else in the audience.

Though what she'd said were pure fighting words to all the duel enthusiasts around her, they were drowned out by the cheering and failed to reach anyone's ears.

It there was anything that could hear her voice, it would be the porcupine sitting on her lap.

The woman was deeply unsatisfied with the battle she'd just witnessed.

A battle between two Superiors. I would be lying if I said that I wasn't expecting anything. However, both of them ended up being complete eyesores. It made me wonder if they are really Superiors. Nothing but trickery and gimmicks. How trifling. The only worthwhile thing was at the end. Are they that useless because they're based on such shoddy things as hearts and limbs? And yet you're supposed to be the same as...?

Her expression turned stern as the woman's irritation became even denser.

Right when it was about to turn into murderous intent and be unleashed upon her surroundings...

"know your place, and shut your mouth" the porcupine on her lap suddenly said.

The woman knew exactly what it meant.

"My apologies," she said. "Pardon my abusive thoughts. I almost let them out, but I'll hold them back now."

"k"

After apologizing, the woman petted the porcupine.

Then, she looked at the stage with a bored expression on her face.

"Oh, its begun," she said. "Well, with the first princess not being here, it has nothing to do with us."

"spec"

"Very well. Let us spectate. This might be good *entertainment*."

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Paladin, Ray Starling

Something was very off.

Figaro was stuck in the very same position he'd been in after finishing Xunyu off with that upwards swing. Also, despite the match being over, Xunyu showed no signs of reviving.

The inside of the barrier was completely still in every sense of the word.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Hey, br—"

Before I could call out to Shu, I cut my words short. That was because of what I felt when I looked at him.

Even though he was clad in a full bear suit, I could easily tell that he was extremely pissed.

The others here — Nemesis, Rook, Babi, and Marie — seemed to feel it, too, causing them to back away a bit.

That was completely understandable. After all, at that moment, Shu was actually a bit scary.

"Bro, what's up?" I asked, feeling that I had to be the one to do it.

That was enough for the air of intimidation to disperse.

"Hm," he said. "Looks like someone went and did something unnecessary."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, the reason why Figaro is immobile is because the time inside the barrier got stopped."

"The time is stopped?"

"Yeah, the barriers here have that function, but it's rarely used. There's just no reason to, unless maybe if some show monsters went a bit too crazy," he said. "During the match, the time inside the barrier was slowed down to the very limit, but time stopping is a different thing entirely. Just like with slow playback and pause on videos."

"If time is stopped, what about their consciousness?" I asked.

"I've never been through that myself, but I think they're conscious. Tian and monster thoughts would probably stop, but just like with mental status effects, the player preservation function keeps every Master's mind active. Otherwise, players couldn't log out when they really needed to. However, the light and air movement is stopped, too, so they likely don't see or feel anything. Though, honestly with the evaporation that happened, I can't even imagine the state that Xunyu's in."

That's certainly not something I like to picture, but the two fighters are *experiencing it right now,* I thought.

“This timing...” said Marie. “Was it set up to stop the very moment the duel ended?”

“Most likely,” nodded Shu. “Now we just have to figure out what kind of asshole is responsible for—”

He cut his words short.

A thing had appeared on the top of the barrier, gathering everyone’s attention.

“That’s...” I said.

It was a single silhouette. It had the shape of a costume, and it was one I was very familiar with — an Adélie penguin costume.

“Ayy! Good evening, ladies and gents! What a great fight! Hella hype, wasn’t it?” Once everyone’s attention had focused on him, the penguin began speaking. As he gestured to everyone in the arena, the voice he spoke in was that of...

“...the announcer?” I asked.

It was the very same voice that had done the announcing for today’s battle. It was different than the voice he’d had yesterday.

He didn’t seem used to announcing, so can I assume he infiltrated and stole that role? I thought.

Though he clearly had no intention of answering my question, he touched something on his neck and changed his voice back to the familiar one.

“Aaall right! With the hype fight done, it’s probs time for the Count and Princess to bore you with some speeches and directions,” he said. “But let’s skip that crap and do something fun, instead!”

The penguin followed those words with a spin. Though he was in a suit, it was easy to tell that he was laughing.

And no, it wasn’t because I was used to my brother and his bear costume. Anyone who’d heard the penguin’s soft voice would tell you that it was thick with wickedness and malice.

“Name yourself, you cur!” said a voice from one of the boxes.

The box was significantly larger than most — clearly meant for the guests of honor. I knew the identity of the one who’d said that. It was the person I’d seen when the event began: Count Aschbarray Gideon.

“Why are you besmirching this event?!” the count yelled.

His rage was not without reason. After all, the penguin was making a mockery of a such masterful duel and the very successful event. Even I had a thing or two to say to him.

“HA HA HA! I just said it, didn’t I? I want to do something fun!” After some loud laughter, the penguin put his hands on the back of the suit’s head. “But yeah, I haven’t revealed who I am yet! Allow me to do so!”

Then he took off the penguin suit.

“Get a load of *this* handsome mug! Ain’t I charming?”

The one inside the suit was a thin man with an Embryo crest on his left hand. He was now wearing glasses and a lab coat, but nothing else really stood out — at least not as much as the penguin suit. Sure, his face was good, but with Masters being able to customize their appearances, it wasn’t anything special.

However, the only ones with such lukewarm thoughts about him were people like me and Rook. The rest of the audience seemed to be extremely shocked.

“You... YOU...!” Count Gideon knew the man, as well, and his presence seemed to rid him of words.

“Oh boy, oh boy! Look at all these people that know who I am!” Despite it being dark, the former penguin purposely put his right hand above his eyes to protect them from sunlight and looked around. He was clearly enjoying the reactions his face reveal had caused. They were a testament to just how well-known his identity was.

“Identity...” I murmured.

When I’d met him yesterday, he’d pronounced himself as “Dr. Flamingo.” It had been clear back then — and now more than ever — that he was just fooling around. That wasn’t his name. It was...

“Why are you here... Franklin?!” Count Gideon demanded.

“BIIINNNNGOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Franklin yelled.

Fireworks began exploding in the air not far from the arena.

Though they were a beautiful sight that made Gideon’s night sky more vibrant, few in the arena could enjoy them. It wasn’t just tians, either. I saw some Masters who looked like they couldn’t even stomach the man’s presence.

It was only obvious. No one here could feel good with Franklin nearby.

Despite being a newbie, even I knew what his name meant to this country’s people.

“Yeah, it’s ya boy! The same guy who fed your king and a bunch of other nobodies to monsters! The Dryfe Imperium’s Superior! The forefront of robotics and monster synthesis! Better check yourselves before you wreck yourselves. Because it’s me, Giga Professor Franklin!”

It was safe to call him the kingdom’s greatest enemy.

To Be Continued in the Next Episode…

Midword

Bear: “I bear good news: it’s time for the midword!”

Cat: “Yaay! Something neew!”

Bear: “In Volume 3, the main story stops with Figgy’s and Xunyu’s battle.”

Cat: “Now, it’s time for some side stories that take place during Volume 2!”

Bear: “They’re about Ray’s beary merry party members — Rook and the shaded journo.”

Cat: “These stories are told from perspectives other than Ray’s.”

Cat: “You might come to see things that you cannot see through Ray’s eyes.”

Bear: “They’re also strongly linked to the events in Volume 4.”

Bear: “Now, it pawsitively saddens me, but we must say goodbye! Until the afterword!”

Side Story: The Case of the Untamable Slime

Pimp, Rook Holmes

"Lucius, you've already learned the English patterns?"

"Yes! I'm also halfway done with Japanese and German, as well!"

"Amazing. Not even I could do that when I was your age."

"I'm doing my best, Father! After all, I'm your and Mother's..."

◇

"It's morning," I muttered as I woke up at my usual time at the break of dawn, on my first day after our arrival at Gideon.

A night of sleep here in *Infinite Dendrogram* made me feel as if I'd actually slept that much, which was quite curious, since the tripled flow of time here meant that I'd only slept a third of that time in reality.

"Good morning, Marilyn," I said. She was already awake in the jewel. "Let me do something, and then we'll have breakfast."

I got dressed and began going through my daily routine.

It was lip-reading practice. Something I'd been doing for nearly ten years now, ever since I was five years old. It consisted of checking the shape of the mouth when pronouncing various sounds from various languages.

However, in *Infinite Dendrogram*, things were a bit different.

"It's quite clear by now that any words with a meaning have the exact same shape no matter which language you use... It all gets translated into *Infinite Dendrogram's* common," I said. "I haven't fully learned it yet, so it might be a while until I'm able to lip-read here."

Whether I used English and said "hand" or Japanese and said "te," the shape of the mouth was exactly the same. It seemed to me that any words were translated into *Infinite Dendrogram's* common the moment they were given meaning. However, meaningless sounds — such as “h,” “a,” “n,” “d” — came out like they were supposed to.

In real life, I could freely lip-read conversations from several languages. Here, though, I was sent back to square one and now had to spend every day increasing the vocabulary I could read.

“Sorry for the wait, Marilyn,” I said after about an hour’s worth of practice. “Let’s eat.”

“Morning, Rook!” Babi said. “Yay! Food!”

“KIEEH...” Audrey added. (“Man, I’m hungry...”)

Babi and Audrey had awoken, as well, so we all went to eat breakfast.

Once that was done, I returned Marilyn and Audrey to the Jewel and walked through Gideon’s streets.

Marilyn and Audrey had been fighting ever since they woke up.

“MHOOO!” (“You uncouth red chicken!”)

“KIEE! KOOO!” (“You hard-headed turtle bitch! Fuck you!”)

This had been happening ever since Audrey had joined us. It might’ve had something to do with Marilyn being very diligent and Audrey being the delinquent kind of girl, but I’d also heard that land-dragons and avians just naturally didn’t get along too well.

We’re a team, so I’d really like it if they became friends, I thought.

“What do we do today?” asked Babi, causing me to ponder.

According to my friends list, both Ray and Marie were offline. From their vocabularies and the expressions they used, it was safe to assume that they were Japanese, and with it being nighttime over there, they were most likely asleep.

Due to that, it was best for me to take care of business that was entirely my own.

“We’ll first go to the Pimps’ Guild,” I said. “There’s someone I want to see there. After that, we’ll look around the tamed monster market.”

I had to meet a certain person in the Pimps’ Guild and then buy one or two new monsters, which was the reason why I’d come to Gideon in the first place. However, the latter priority had dropped a lot when I’d gotten Audrey to join us.

“MHOO.” (“Master, please do not get another bird.”)

“KIEEE.” (“Turtles either, Boss. We have one too many already.”)

Hearing Marilyn and Audrey say that from inside the Jewel on my right hand, I thought about what I really needed.

"Well," I said. "We have Marilyn for land and Audrey for air, so now we need someone for water. I don't think it'll be a bird, but it might actually be a turtle."

After giving appropriately differing reactions to my words, the two suddenly looked confused. From what I could tell, they had only just realized I could understand what they were saying.

"Who are you going to meet, Rook?" asked Babi.

"A person called Catherine," I answered. "She helped me a lot back at the capital when I became a Pimp. She's the one who told me that I should do some part-time work and get the Identification skill."

"We actually met someone like that?"

"It happened when you were sleeping."

After the Catalog Ray had lent me had told me that my suitable job was Pimp, I'd had trouble finding the capital's Pimps' Guild due to it being in a relatively secretive place and me being a newbie with little knowledge of the area. Catherine, an experienced Pimp, had helped me find it.

She was also the one that'd told me that the headquarters of the Pimps' Guild was here in Gideon. Catherine regularly visited the place, so I didn't see any reason not to drop by and say hi.

After following my map to a back alley in Gideon's eighth district, I arrived at an establishment that seemed to be a mix between a bar and an inn. The sign near the entrance said "Pimps' Guild's Headquarters," so there was little doubt that I had the right building. The Adventurers' Guild doubled as a bar, too, but the fact that this one was also an inn probably meant exactly what most would assume.

"I'll go eat over there!" said Babi before going to a table.

Though she wasn't as much of a big eater as Ray's Nemesis, Babi did eat quite a lot. Of course, the amount she consumed meant little when one noted that she ate solely sweet things turned spicy.

Anyway, likely due to me being a Pimp that was clearly too young, I attracted quite a lot of attention.

"Excuse me," I spoke to the high level-looking man working behind the counter.

"Welcome, boyo," he replied. "Well, aren't you a young'un! Oh no, that won't be a problem! We don't have age restrictions here! Anyone's free to enjoy themselves at any time!”

Though he talked with a fake-looking smile, it didn’t seem like he had any malice towards me. That was probably how he interacted with any average customer.

“Oh, I’m not a customer. I’m a member of the guild,” I said as I showed him my card.

“Well, whaddya know, you really are,” he spoke as he looked at it. “It’s rare for Masters to become Pimps. We have two or three others, but you’re easily the youngest among them.” The fake smile was all but gone as he changed his attitude towards me.

Just as he’d said, Pimp — despite being a useful job — wasn’t too popular among Masters. As far as I was aware, the most popular jobs here in the kingdom were from the knight grouping, and though watching Ray made me understand why, I still wondered why the pimp grouping was so niche in comparison.

“So, you’re lookin’ for someone you can offer your services to?” he asked. “Or do you need some workers?”

The first question referred to guild quests, like the model-searching one I’d taken back at the capital. The second question referred to buying tamed monsters and the like. In Gideon, just like this place, they could be bought in the fourth district.

“The latter, please,” I said. “May I ask something, though?”

“What is it?”

“Is the Master known as ‘Catherine’ here?”

The moment I spoke that name, the guild turned completely silent. Some people dropped their glasses, some went into a fetal position and cowered, while others just quickly paid their bills and hastily walked out.

What am I supposed to make of this reaction? I thought.

“Do you know her?” he asked.

“Yes,” I nodded. “She helped me a lot in the capital’s guild.”

“Well, she *is* good at taking care of pretty boys,” the bartender said. “Though most of them just avoid her... Anyway, she should be here soon.”

I decided to wait for her. I went and sat at the same table as Babi and let the time pass by while I drank the free tea they gave me.

During that time, I felt that Marilyn and Audrey — still in the Jewel — were fighting about something again. I heard sounds that seemed to refer to my tastes, Catherine, love rivalry, dragon anthropomorphization, and love between birds and people.

What are they talking about? I thought.

After nearly an hour of such waiting, the guild's door opened, and I heard a familiar, high-pitched voice.

"Heeyyy! Good morning to you allll!"

"Ah, she's here," I said.

The owner of the voice was the Catherine I was waiting for.

She came into the guild accompanied by four maids and, upon noticing my presence, walked up to our table.

"Oh my! It's really Rookie!" she said joyously. "I'd heard that the PK blockade had stopped, but I didn't think that you'd have arrived in Gideon already."

"I did, as you can see!" I responded. "I came here with Babi, my party members Ray and Marie, and these girls right here!" I introduced Babi and the two girls inside my Jewel to her.

"Rook, who is this?" asked Babi.

"She's the one I told you about — Catherine Kongou," I answered. "She's a highly skilled Pimp and a very reliable person."

"Oh come, now, Rookie, praise like that will make me blush!" Catherine cried.

A moment later, I noticed that Marilyn and Audrey seemed really shocked, for some reason. It seemed as though they were surprised by Catherine's appearance. Thinking that, I re-examined how she looked.

Long blonde hair bearing the slenderness and glamor of silk.

Eyes of a deep blue color reminiscent of a clear sea.

Custom-made clothing of a lavish design, clearly created from high-quality materials.

Nails covered in simply masterful art that she'd probably done by herself.

A voice as charming and enchanting as a mermaid's.

Over two meters in stature.

Huge biceps, about as thick as a horse's neck.

A slightly exposed chest which revealed pectoral muscles that seemed to rival steel.

A face with a boorish structure and features that clearly belonged on a dominating overlord.

Indeed, it was the exact same Catherine that I'd met back at the capital.

Her appearance was certainly unique, so it wasn't too hard to believe that she'd surprised Marilyn and Audrey.

It's actually pretty interesting that even monsters can be surprised by what we humans wear, I thought. *This has been on my mind for a while, but it really does seem that their thoughts are similar to those of humans.*

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Catherine Kongou was a veteran Pimp. However, rather than being from the pimp grouping, her current main job was Siren — a Superior Job from the harlot grouping bearing conditions such as "Charm a total of 100,000 people or monsters."

Apparently, she was also really high on the kingdom's kill rankings. I knew how effective Charm was in large-scale battles better than most, so I could fully understand why she was up there. Still, it was pretty obvious that her battle style had more to it than just that skill.

Also, Catherine's avatar was a man made to look like a woman, making the popular term "transvestite" to be the most apt description for her. However, I couldn't tell what her gender was in real life. That was something I could normally guess after a while of talking, but the way Catherine mixed masculinity and femininity made it really difficult for me.

Due to her being like that, however, you could safely say that she had both male reliability and female attentiveness, making her fully deserving of respect.

"Did you meet the PK terrorists on your way to Gideon?" I asked Catherine while we had a chat over some tea.

"I flew over here on one of my girls," she answered. "Seems like the meanies couldn't do anything about those in the air."

The words "my girls" made me glance behind her, where I saw the four maids that accompanied her.

"You've already met Rubiella, haven't you?" Catherine asked upon noticing where I was looking.

Indeed. One of the four, the maid with red hair, had been with Catherine back when she'd helped me out in the capital.

“Yes,” I nodded. “She was with you when we met.”

“Well, then let me introduce you to the other girls,” she said. “The blue-haired one is Sappheanne, the green-haired one is Emerada, while the one with the eyepatch is Crystella.”

The maids bowed to us respectfully.

“A pleasure meeting you,” I responded. “I am Rook, Catherine’s junior in this trade.”

“Could you be a dear and show me *your* girls, too?” Catherine asked.

“Certainly. Oh, but they might break the floor here,” I said. Marilyn was a heavyweight Demi-Dragon, so she could easily break through the wooden boarding beneath us.

“Let’s go somewhere else, then,” she said. “Guildmaster! We’re borrowing the back of the building!”

“Go ahead,” said the man behind the counter. “Also, there’s a job specifically for you, so do come back and take it when you’re done.”

I had a hunch that the bartender was high level, and now I know why — he’s the guildmaster here, I thought.

Behind the guild, I summoned my monsters from my Jewel. “Call — Marilyn, Audrey.”

“My, what a lovely pair,” commented Catherine. “They’d be a match for your usual high-rank Tamer’s monsters.” She then made a friendly smile.

...Why do Marilyn and Audrey look so afraid?

“A Demi-Dragon and a Roc Bird surely take lots of space, but your Jewel looks pretty fancy, so I assume it still has room for more?” she asked.

“It does,” I said. “I’d like to get one that could travel on water. Would I find any in the marketplace?”

“An aquatic monster? Finding one here might be difficult.” According to her, most of the city’s water came from the underground, and there weren’t any lakes or rivers nearby. Due to that, not many traders here dealt in aquatic monsters. The Pimps’ Guild actually didn’t sell a single one of those.

“Oh, but you might get lucky and find one in the market,” she added.

“I see! I’ll go there right now!” I said.

“But the roads there are complicated, and the place isn’t safe, even for us Masters. I’d come along, but I have a job to do... I know, let’s do this.”

Catherine turned to face the maids behind her and beckoned the red-haired one, Rubiella.

"Rubiella, be a dear and guide Rookie through the market."

"As you wish, milady." The maid bowed.

"Is that really okay?" I asked.

"Yes. Don't you worry," said Catherine. "Just tell her to come back to me once your business is done."

"Thank you very much, Catherine!"

Catherine gave me gentle smile and patted me on the head. That action reminded me of my dad — or mom, maybe — and made me feel somewhat happy.

Though, I still don't get why Marilyn and Audrey become so scared whenever Catherine smiles, I thought.

After parting ways with Catherine, Rubiella guided us to and around the market in the fourth district.

"In this market, there's a street-based bazaar and shops set up in buildings," she explained. "You might find bargains in the bazaar, but if you don't have a high enough Identification skill, you could end up purchasing counterfeit or inferior goods, so I cannot recommend it. The wares in shops are far more trustworthy when it comes to quality and authenticity, but that makes their price a bit higher."

"So, first-time shoppers like myself are better off using the shops, right?" I asked.

"Indeed," she confirmed. "Also, you can set up your own stall in the bazaar. The places you can use are managed by the fourth district's manager. For a daily payment, you can sell your products here even if you're not a merchant."

As she told me such things, we entered a small, secretive alleyway.

"Since you wish to purchase an aquatic monster, I will introduce you to a shop that Milady is well-acquainted with. If you don't find what you need there, we will look around the bazaar."

"That sounds good," I said.

As she guided us, Rubiella repeatedly did a strange hand-waving motion. I found it curious, but before I could ask what it meant, we arrived at a shop at the very end of the alleyway.

The secretive establishment had a sign saying "Monster King's Shop,

Central Continent Branch.”

That name was strange. After all, *Infinite Dendrogram* had only one continent, so “Central Continent Branch” didn’t really make sense, since it implied that their main shop was somewhere else. The only places that came to mind were the far-east island nation of Tenchi or the maritime country, Granvaloa.

Or perhaps... No, I still don’t have enough knowledge to theorize about this, I thought.

“Welcome!” the person behind the counter greeted us as we entered. “Oh? Well, if it isn’t Rubiella.”

The person was small in stature — about one head shorter than me. He was notable for the pitch-black robe and the hood hiding his face.

“It’s been a while,” said Rubiella. “Are you the one tending to the shop today, manager?”

“Yeah, I do it every once in a blue moon,” answered the person. “Where’s Catherine?”

“Milady is not here this time. She told me to help out young master Rook.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” I said. “I am Rook, Catherine’s junior in the trade.”

“Well, now that’s rare,” said the shopkeeper. “I assume you’re here to buy monsters, then? What do you have in mind?”

“An aquatic monster, please.”

“Aquatic, eh? There’s little demand for those here, so we don’t have anything particularly rare. We do have a corner for them, though.” He left the counter and began leading us to it.

This shop seemed to deal exclusively in pre-tamed monsters. The shelves had countless Jewels on them, and I could see the monsters they held by simply looking inside.

Oh, there are even Jewels with Tri-Horn Demi-Dragons like Marilyn inside. It’s kinda hard to tell whether this is more of a pet shop or a jewelry shop, I thought as we approached a booth lit by a bluish light.

“This is the aquatic monster corner,” said the shopkeeper. “Do look around.”

“...Wow,” I muttered. Though the keeper had said that they didn’t have anything particularly rare, I could see several jewels with aquatic Demi-

Dragons. It was clear that the selection was good.

"Our varied selection of land-dragons and sky-dragons extends to Pure-Dragons, too," he said. "Not sea-dragons, though."

Still, the wares here in the Monster King's Shop were far above the ones sold at the market we'd passed. They even had tamed Pure-Dragons, which were considered to be a rarity. Despite that, the prices here weren't particularly greater than the ones in the bazaar. One would expect them to have completely sold out by now.

That reminded me that Rubiella had made some strange action before entering the shop, so this might've been one of those establishments that only allowed a select few individuals to browse. I wasn't completely certain about that.

In any case, it was quite obvious that, in this shop, I'd have no trouble finding a new teammate that matched Marilyn and Audrey.

"Since you're a friend of Catherine's, I'll allow you to pay by installments," said the shopkeeper.

"How nostalgic," commented Rubiella. "When Milady and I met here, she also paid by installments."

"Oh, that was a bit over four years ago, wasn't it?" he said. "Time sure flies..."

While the two were conversing, I examined the aquatic monsters on display, but...

"I just don't know," I muttered.

"What's wrong, Rook?" asked Babi.

"Demi-Dragons not good enough?" inquired the keeper.

"No, I wouldn't say so. It's just that..."

I had nothing against Demi-Dragon class monsters. In fact, when taking cooperation with Marilyn and Audrey into consideration, they were actually better than Pure-Dragons. However...

"They just... don't click," I said. "When I met Marilyn and Audrey, the monsters with me right now, I had some strange feeling drawing me to them. Here, however, I'm not getting it at all."

When I'd chosen Marilyn as my reward from Grantzian and when I'd faced Audrey in that battle, I'd had a sensation drawing me to them. I didn't get it when looking at any of the monsters here in the shop, and that included the Pure-Dragons, which were supposedly stronger than both

Marilyn and Audrey. It was a really vague feeling that I found hard to describe.

"Oh, I see." The shopkeeper nodded as if he could understand me completely, and Rubiella seemed to share his sentiment, as well.

"'Rook,' was it?" he said. "I can see that Pimp is your vocation, but you seem to have the makings of a Tamer, as well. Not many people are equipped with intuition like yours."

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. And because of that, I don't think you should limit yourself to aquatic monsters. Take a look at every Jewel in my shop and search for the one that clicks."

"All right. I'll see if I find anything," I said before walking away from the aquatic monster corner and looking at other Jewels in the shop.

"A natural, non-sense skill Beast Judgment, eh?" said the shop owner as I walked away. "With Catherine and that other person, that's a total of three now." Those words stuck with me, for some reason.

After that, I spent about two hours looking at the Jewels here, but the results weren't great. No matter how many thousands of them I examined, I didn't find a single monster that "clicked."

"Well, that's a shame," said the shopkeeper.

"Sorry for wasting your time," I apologized.

"No need for that. A business wouldn't function if we didn't allow our customers to examine our wares as long as they liked. Though, now you'll have to look around the bazaar..."

"Indeed," agreed Rubiella. "However, using Beast Judgment in the bazaar is quite..."

"Oh, right. Even a Master would be in trouble if they found out."

They were talking about something, but I didn't know what "Beast Judgment" entailed, so I couldn't really follow the conversation.

"...Huh?" I asked.

Suddenly, I noticed something.

On one end of the shop, there was a metallic pot, large enough to fit a child. The lid was off and lying at the base of the pot. For some reason, it was surrounded by a chain bearing a warning coloration, as if to say that the pot was off-limits.

It stands out so much, so how didn't I notice it before? I asked myself before curiosity took over. I approached the pot and pointed my left hand at it.

"Shopkeeper, this pot is..."

"Pot? Ah...?! GET AWAY FROM IT!"

His shout startled me into quickly backing away. A moment later, *something silver* passed the space where my index finger was. I looked and noticed that the warning chain was severed. The cut was so clean and flat that it almost felt as though it could be fixed if you simply put the pieces back together. My finger was slightly damaged, as well, but a bit of rubbing was enough for the cut to close and leave only a small mark. It seemed like I was cut by an extremely sharp blade moving at an immense speed.

However, that was quite far from the truth.

What had cut me wasn't a blade, but a liquid. I saw some of it hang on the edge of the pot before returning inside. The liquid was silver and had a mysterious glossiness. The sight was bizarre, and I simply couldn't look away from this *monster*.

"Sorry about that," said the shopkeeper. "This one's dangerous, so I had an isolation barrier around it. Seems like it got broken."

"I'm quite fine," I replied. "What is this, though?"

"It's a Mithril Arms Slime," answered the shop owner as he cast some spell and fixed the chain. "A rarity among the already-rare metal slimes. They have bodies made of liquid mithril and attack by quickly turning themselves into weapons."

Mithril Arms Slime, I repeated the monster name in my head.

"I got it in an auction, but it wasn't tamed, you see," he continued. "I was planning to ask a Tamer I was acquainted with to tame it, but before I could do that, I accidentally unsealed it, and now it's in this state."

"'This state,' as in...?" I asked.

"Constantly on alert and prepared for battle. Thing's now completely volatile, cutting any living creature that comes close. It's also more difficult to tame it now, and moving it from there is really tricky, so I couldn't really do much besides creating a barrier around it. Slimes don't even get tired, so waiting it out isn't an option, either. Sure, killing it would take care of this mess, but I don't want to see the money I've spent go down the drain."

"How much did you spend on it?" I asked.

"10,250,000 lir. These slimes aren't the strongest things, but their rarity makes them cost a pretty penny.”

Hearing the price made me freeze for a moment. However...

“Shopkeeper,” I said.

“Yes?”

I gathered my resolve and told him what I wanted. “I’ll tame the slime, so could you sell it to me?”

My words made the shopkeeper, Rubiella, and the monsters inside my Jewel turn silent with surprise. Only Babi had her usual smile on her face.

“Though I’d like to pay by installments, if you don’t mind,” I added.

“I’ve already said that I would allow that,” he said. “Are you sure, though?”

“Yes. I mean... the slime clicked with me,” I responded with a smile, caused by an unwavering belief in my own intuition. “I *will* tame her.”

Simply because I wanted her, I chose to tame the Mithril Arms Slime — a creature yet to be tamed by anyone.

◇

Mithril Arms Slime.

According to the shop’s owner, they were a rarity even among the already-rare metal slimes.

Not carnivorous, herbivorous, or omnivorous, their diet consisted of water and metal ores, especially mithril.

All slimes had liquid bodies, and these were no exception. However, Mithril Arms Slimes had the special ability to instantly harden and turn parts of themselves into weapons. When attacked, they either turned their bodies into mithril shields or used their slime-like liquid state to maneuver out of harm’s way.

The number of these slimes that humanity had found was still in the double digits, while the amount that had been killed didn’t even break twenty. And so far, not a single one of them had ever been tamed.

Again — the Mithril Arms Slime, as a species, had yet to be tamed.

I was told that some Tamers had gotten them into a tamable state, but had gotten their right hands cut off when they’d tried to form a contract.

Normally, when monsters are in a tamable state, all the person has to do is touch them and form a contract to complete the taming. I’d already gone through that with Audrey, and she hadn't resisted at all.

However, Mithril Arms Slimes were different in that regard. As long as they were in an alert state, they didn't hesitate to attack the Tamers even after they became tamable.

Due to that, they were considered to be even more difficult to tame than Pure-Dragons.

"We've had some customers who wanted to try and tame it, but they've all failed," said the shopkeeper. "There were people with maxed out high-rank tamer grouping jobs, but even they weren't successful."

Basically, it was impossible even to the best of Tamers.

Some would probably laugh at the idea of a newbie such as myself having a go at such a challenging task, but that didn't mean that I couldn't try.

I knew people who wouldn't give up no matter how great was the challenge before them, so I wanted to follow their example.

And follow it I had been... for over four hours now.

Facing the pot with the Mithril Arms Slime inside, I silently extended the thing in my right hand towards it. It was a thin rod less than a meter in length — a mithril wire. Mithril was their staple food, and I figured that trying to feed it wouldn't hurt.

I'd gotten the wire by asking Rubiella to go to the bazaar and buy it.

Now, she was at the counter, talking about something with the shop's owner.

"I've heard that the grandchild of the Luor Company's president got kidnapped by the Gouz-Maise Gang," I heard her say.

"Those scumbags still at it?" responded the shopkeeper. "How many times has this happened now? It's above one hundred, isn't it?"

I'd heard the name "Gouz-Maise Gang" several times while in this city. From what I could tell, they were a vile group that troubled Gideon and its surroundings by kidnapping children.

What kind of person steals children, of all things? I thought, pure disgust welling up within me.

"Ah..."

A moment later, the tip of the wire I'd extended got cut off and fell to the floor. I instantly concluded that she'd attacked in response to either my disgust or the attempt at feeding. Despite both the wire and the slime being made of mithril, the cut was impressively clean, making the tip of the wire as flat and sharp as a mirror.

I slowly brought what remained of the wire closer to her, causing her to repeatedly sever more and more of it. The way it gradually got smaller reminded me of a certain stick-shaped sweet. It didn't take long for the wire to be reduced to nothing but pieces of mithril scattered on the floor.

"This thing cost me 2,000 lir," I sighed before finger-throwing the last bit of it towards the slime. It, too, got split in half the moment it entered her "personal space," so to speak.

"You seem to be having a hard time," said the shop's owner.

"I can't deny that," I replied. "Just as you told me, it becomes really difficult after you get her into a tamable state."

"Hm? You're there already?"

"All slimes are female, after all. Male Temptation works on them just fine, so I didn't have much trouble making her tamable."

Indeed, there had been no problems on that front. However...

"But when I reach for her to form a contract... she cuts me." I looked at the pieces of mithril on the floor and the countless shallow cuts on my hands.

"Among the Tamers who attempted to tame it was one who tried to do it while wearing mithril gauntlets," said the shopkeeper. "He still got his hands cut off." *So, not even properly processed armor-tier mithril can withstand these attacks, huh?* I thought.

"Armor made from Mythical metal... hihi'irokane... might protect against these cuts, though," he added. "Should we get some?"

"No, thank you," I shook my head. "I doubt my level's high enough to equip such things. Also, I don't think that's the right answer here." Relying on toughness and stats just didn't seem like the right way to go about it. If it had been, the Tamers that'd come before me would've already done it just because they had greater stats and equipment. The correct method of taming Mithril Arms Slimes had nothing to do with such things.

"You seem to be stuck, though," he said.

"So far, I've noticed two things," I responded while pointing at the pot. "First, her alertness. Rather than attacking automatically, she carefully considers each and every single one of her cuts. Over the four hours of doing this, I've noticed that the distance at which she starts attacking has a deviation of a few centimeters, meaning that she's not doing it with machine-like, automatic precision."

I pointed at the mithril pieces on the floor. Though they'd been cut by the same slime, their thickness wasn't consistent, which was proof of what I'd just said.

"I see. What's the second thing, then?" asked the shopkeeper.

"She *wants* to be tamed," I answered.

"Why do you think that?"

I showed him my open hands, which were covered in countless small cuts that the slime had given me. "All of these wounds are shallow."

"Well, I can see that much."

"Both the wire and my fingers entered her alertness zone. However, while the wire got cut apart, my fingers are still intact."

"Oh!"

She'd severed the mithril wire with ease, yet my hands — which were far weaker — were relatively unharmed.

"They're all little more than scratches, and the worst one among them is the one I got after carelessly pointing at her when I first saw the pot," I said. "As in, the one from before she was in a tamable state."

I raised the index finger of my left hand, and sure enough, the cut on it was the deepest one, if only by a few millimeters. Which was why I could infer that...

"She's holding back against humans. And she's been extra careful with those that have gotten her into a tamable state, reducing her attacks to nothing but warnings. It's clear that she treats us differently than inorganic objects."

"But the Tamers that came before you—"

"Yes, they had their hands completely cut off. I think the same would happen to me if I reached a little farther," I said as I extended my hand towards the slime's alertness radius.

Though her attacks put more small cuts on my fingers, I didn't retract my hand. Naturally, she continued attacking. After confirming that all the wounds were shallow, I took my hand out of her radius.

"See?" I said. "When you consider how differently she treats the mithril wire and my hand, it's clear that there's more to this than just distance. She's probably acting according to some simple rules."

"So you think you'll be able to tame her when you figure them out, eh?" asked the shop's owner.

"Yes, but figuring them out might be troublesome. I need a clue, and..." I stopped talking before I could finish what I was saying.

The shopkeeper looked at me with a puzzled expression, but I couldn't care about that. After all, something that I wanted to be oblivious of had entered the edge of my vision. Next to the pot, there was a small animal — a single *mouse*.

"Oh, a mouse," said the shopkeeper. "Guess the barrier keeping them out got broken."

The moment I saw it, the mind controlling my body went blank.

The mouse was so weak that it didn't even count as a monster. There was a hole in one of the walls, which was probably where it had come from.

It noticed our presence and ran away, passing by the pot in the process.

All of that entered my vision, and I properly processed it. However, at the same time, my body reflexively screamed. "Mouse mouse mouse mouse mouse MOUUUUUSE!"

I entered a state of absolute panic. As my brain tried to understand the situation, my mind was overwhelmed by memories of a certain event. Training, an old mansion, broken floor, falling into a room with countless mic—

"MOOOUUUUUUUUUSSE!" Losing control of my body, I became even more panicked.

However, before that reached its peak and made me lose consciousness...

"It's okay. Don't be afraid."

...I was embraced by Babi.

"There there, Rook. There's nothing to be afraid of," she said, comforting me and patting my back.

Strange as it was, that was enough for me to slowly regain control of my panicked mind and body. It was just like when my mother had done it to me.

After about five minutes, I had completely calmed down, and the panic was gone as if it was never there.

"Sorry you had to see that," I apologized to the shopkeeper and Rubiella.

I knew that my behavior had been unsightly. Panicked as I was, my mind was still somewhat functional. However, I could almost feel a wave of other thoughts overwhelm me.

Sober as I was now, I concluded that this was how most so-called "traumas" were.

"No need to apologize," said Rubiella.

"Everyone has things they can't handle, after all," added the shopkeeper. "But why do mice make you so... Oh, I won't ask."

He must have noticed how I reacted to the very mention of the creatures and — out of consideration — refrained from asking me for the reasons.

It was good that he did, for I wasn't too sure how I was supposed to answer that. I'd been wanting to get rid of my phobia of rodents ever since I was a child, but it still showed no signs of going away.

All right, that's enough about mice, I thought.

There was something far more important.

"I found out the slime's rules, so I'll tame her now," I said. The thing I'd seen while panicking had given me the final clue I needed. All that was left was to test my theory.

"Really? What's this, all of a sudden?" asked the shop's owner.

"This incident wasn't all bad," I said. "Thanks to it, I figured out why I couldn't tame her."

"...You could do that in *that* state?"

Well, I've been taught to analyze my surroundings no matter how confused I may be, I thought.

Anyway, testing my theory required some preparation.

"Excuse me, keeper, but can I borrow an empty Jewel?" I asked.

"I don't mind," he said as he took one of the Jewels from the counter. It was the same type as the one I had, only completely empty.

As long as the owner allowed it, it was possible to transfer monsters from one Jewel to another by simply making them touch.

"All right, then..." Taking the empty Jewel in my left hand, I closed it in to the one on my right. And just like that, I transferred Marilyn and Audrey into the empty Jewel.

"KIEEE?!" ("BOSS?! YOU'RE SELLING US?! WHAT THE FUCK!")

"MHOOO!" ("C-C-C-C-Calm down! I-I'm sure he has something in mind!")

Oh... they seem really startled, I thought. *Now I feel kinda bad. I should've warned them...*

"The Tri-Horn Demi-Dragon is 2,400,000 lir, while the Crimson Roc Bird is 3,200,000," said the shopkeeper.

"KIEEE!" ("Take that, bitch! I'm more expensive!")

"MHOO!" ("Now's not the time to be happy, you birdbrain! Also, the reason you're more expensive is because they already have my kind here!")

Does difference in price really mean all that much to them? Wait, that doesn't matter right now, I thought.

"No, I'm not selling them. I just needed to momentarily move them. Babi, hold on to this for a second," I said as I gave her the Jewel with Marilyn and Audrey inside.

"Okaaay."

"All right, then," I muttered as I began taking off my clothes.

I removed everything that counted as equipment.

"Hmm, that should be enough," I said, clad in only a tank top and underwear, inner clothing that gave no bonuses to stats or anything. "I think I'm ready now."

"Rook, what are you doing?" asked the shopkeeper, and I responded with only a smile, leaving the proper answer to the results of my theory.

While distancing my left hand — which had the Embryo crest on it — away from the slime, I extended my right — the one with the Jewel — towards her.

Unlike before, the way I reached for her had no hesitation. Soon enough, my right hand passed the edge of the danger zone without getting hit by a single warning attack.

I continued moving my hand further, into the area beyond which countless Tamers had theirs cut off. However, my hand went through without getting a single scratch on it, and I reached the edge of the pot.

As I heard the people behind me gasp, I placed the back of my hand on the top of the pot and waited for her.

"Come," I said, not sure if she would understand me.

A few moments later, the Mithril Arms Slime crawled out and touched my palm.

It was hard to tell how long it had taken, but eventually, magic began flowing between us and the taming was complete.

"Your name is Liz... Liz the Mithril Arms Slime," I smiled as I rubbed her shiny, silver body. "Let's get along, Liz."

In response, the Mithril Arms Slime, Liz, shook in a happy manner.

Thus, my theory was proven to be correct.

I turned around to face the store's owner.

"I've tamed her," I said.

"...How did you do that?"

"Exactly as you saw me do it. I momentarily moved Marilyn and Audrey to another Jewel and took off my equipment."

"How does that connect to you becoming able to tame the slime?" he asked.

My explanation was probably a bit lacking, sure, but the truth was actually really simple.

"Liz... or, rather, Mithril Arms Slimes in general... are very cowardly," I said while petting Liz, who was crawling all over my body. "Even if you get them into a tamable state, having them recognize you as worthy, they're still afraid of other things."

"Such as?"

"The other monsters in the right hand extended towards them."

"Ah!"

Anyone who tamed and used monsters kept them in the right hand's Jewel at all times, even while taming a new monster. Also, not a single Tamer wore a Jewel without any monsters inside. Those were the reasons why no Tamers before me had been able to tame Liz.

"Also, she first attacked my left hand," I continued. "That was probably because she was afraid of the crest — the thing that channels the powers of Embryos. And the fact that she attacked mithril gauntlets and wire made it safe to assume that equipment scared her, as well. That's why I tamed her after removing everything she was afraid of."

Those seemingly-simple reasons were why I had removed my equipment and distanced my left hand away from her.

"Isn't that just circumstantial evidence?" asked the shopkeeper.

"Yes. However, I became completely certain of it when I saw th-the mouse," I answered. Merely using the word made me feel unpleasant, but I still continued the explanation. "That mouse was *just* a mouse — not even a monster. And it didn't get attacked even when it was right next to the pot and passed by it while I lost myself."

Though I'd been panicking, I'd clearly seen how the mouse had acted. Despite being so close to Liz, it hadn't been attacked once. That was because the mouse wasn't even a monster.

"So it came to me that I might be successful if I had nothing on me and didn't scare her. After all, the wounds she gave me were small, making it seem like she was being considerate of me."

Her attacks had been warning shots. But they hadn't been directed at me; they'd been directed at the monsters in my right hand's Jewel and the Embryo crest on my left.

"Did you consider what would've happened if your deduction was wrong?" asked the shopkeeper. "You could've been sliced apart, you know?"

"I had confidence," I said before pausing for a moment. I added honestly, "Also... if I was wrong, it would've been fine for me to die."

My father often told me words that he'd gotten from his own father: "When making deductions that might change other people's lives, always bear responsibility for your words. Bet your life on them and do your best to never be mistaken."

When other people were involved in your deductions, you had to make sure you had the resolve to carry that burden.

Suddenly, I noticed that the shop's owner was looking at me with a shocked expression.

I guess that's to be expected, considering what I just said, I thought.

"Oh, but I'm a Master, so I can't really die here," I said with jest as I finished my explanation.

"..." ("Are you okay?") At that moment, Liz — who was still crawling all over me — worriedly asked me that while looking at the cuts on my hands.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Liz," I replied. "The wounds are shallow, and your cuts were so clean that they don't even hurt. I'm not mad at all."

By default, *Infinite Dendrogram* had no pain, but I was confident that it wouldn't have hurt even if there had been.

"Rook," the shopkeeper addressed me. "You can talk to slimes?"

"I can understand them by looking," I nodded. "Animals communicate more than just by words, after all." In fact, I found animals to be easier to understand than people.

"Is that a skill?" he asked.

"No," I shook my head and momentarily fell silent. "It's a technique that my parents taught me."

After saying that, I took a moment to run my mind through those memories.

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After that, I bought Liz for 5,130,000 lir, paid by installments.

According to the shop's owner, the Mithril Arms Slime taming method I'd discovered was worth more than 10,000,000 lir. Due to that, he'd wanted to give her to me for free, but that didn't sit right with me, so I'd chosen to pay at least half of her original price.

My mom had always told me that "Taking too much free stuff is best left for stealing," and it wasn't like I wanted to steal from the shopkeeper, so I was satisfied with the outcome.

Also, instead of having her join the other monsters in the Jewel, I had Liz use her Camouflage skill — common among slimes — to turn into clothing for me to wear. The clothing's appearance was still metallic, but there already was a piece of equipment known as "Mithril Coat," so I didn't really stand out too much. Also, when people with a low Identification skill level looked at her, they would see nothing but "Mithril Coat (Custom-Made)."

The only problem I had with this coat was the fact that Liz's fear of the crest caused the left arm's sleeve to be a bit shorter than the other, but that wasn't a big deal. She also moved in an unnatural manner every once in a while, but most would simply assume that it was just the wind.

Anyway, we were now gathered outside Gideon's north gate to see off Rubiella.

Apparently, while I had been busy taming Liz, Catherine had returned to the capital, and Rubiella was about to go after her.

"Thank you for your help, Rubiella," I said.

"I am humbled to have you thank me, Master Rook. I, too, am thankful for your giving me an interesting story to tell Milady."

"Speaking of Catherine, I really wish I could've thanked her before she left." After all, it was thanks to her that I'd met Liz.

She really helps me out a lot, I thought.

"I will make sure to pass over your gratitude," she said.

"Thank you."

"Now, then. Master Rook, Babylon, Marilyn, Audrey, and Liz," she said. "I hope we can meet again."

"How will you go the capital? Dragon Carriage?" Babi asked, making Rubiella silently chuckle.

"This body of mine will be more than enough," she said, and a second later, two large wings sprouted from her back.

As soon as I noticed that they were draconic, she flapped them and rose up to the clouds, where her appearance suddenly changed. She was now a large dragon emitting a crimson light that I could easily see from the surface.

Rubiella, the crimson dragon that could use Anthropomorphization, waved goodbye to us by spinning in the air and then flew off towards the capital, looking truly majestic in the process.

"KIEEE!" ("Hey, turtle. I'm gonna try and get Anthropomorphization, too.")

"VAHMOO!" ("What a coincidence. I was thinking the same thing.")

Audrey and Marilyn seemed to be quite impressed by what Rubiella had just shown us.

"Well, what do we do now?" I asked. "The meeting with Marie is the day after tomorrow, Ray doesn't seem to be online yet, and I don't really have any plans."

My only personal business for today had been to say hi to Catherine and get a new tamed monster. Needless to say, I'd already done both of those things, leaving me with nothing to do.

"Then why don't we go and level up?" asked Babi, to which I replied with a nod.

We had yet to fight with Audrey and Liz in the group, so that was a really good idea.

Also, I felt that our party would end up fighting some truly great foes in the future, so I wanted us to be useful when that time came.

"Good idea," I said. "I want to become stronger, so let's go get some levels."

Audrey cried, "KIEE!" ("Boss! I know where to find the prey around these parts!")

Audrey had originally been the mount of Gardranda, a creature that lived around the Nex Plains, so it was only obvious for her to be familiar with the surroundings.

"Can you show us, then, Audrey?" I asked.

"KIEEEE!" ("Sure thing, Boss! Hop on!")

"So, Marilyn, you'll have to go in the Jewel for now," I said. "We're hunting once we get there."

"MHOOO." ("Understood.")

"Will you protect me, Liz?" I asked.

"..." ("Of course. Don't you worry.")

"Babi, are you ready?" I asked.

"Always am!"

And, of course, I was fully prepared, as well.

"Let's go, then."

"Yes, Master!" they all replied in perfect unison as we took off.

[ROOK STORY, END.] To Be Continued in the Next Episode...

Side Story: A Day Off in Gideon — Noon

Journalist, Marie Adler

"Here are your luxury box tickets for tomorrow's event," the tian scalper told me. "100,000 lir each makes 300,000 lir. Instant payment."

"Okey dokey," I replied as I gave him the money. I'd already confirmed the legitimacy of the tickets by using my Truth Discernment and Identification skills.

I paid from the reward money pool the three of us had decided to split as a group yesterday.

"A pleasure doing business," said the scalper. "You're in luck, lady. Those are the last box seat tickets I had."

"Quite a popular event, isn't it?" I commented.

Not every show can get scalpers to sell out while pricing their tickets at three times the original cost, I thought.

"Well, obviously," he nodded. "After all, the thing going on at the central arena tomorrow has never happened before."

"True," I agreed. "It's only to be expected for a battle between Superiors to get this much attention."

The tickets in my hand had the words "The Clash of the Superiors" written on them. That was the name of the main event that was happening at the central arena tomorrow.

The participants were two Superiors.

One was a Superior of the Kingdom of Altar and the undisputed champion of the central arena: Over Gladiator, Figaro.

The other was a Superior from the hermit Empire of Huang He, summoned here to participate in this event: Master Jiangshi, Xunyu.

The idea of seeing a match between such distinguished personalities excited both players and tians alike.

Despite *Dendro* having hundreds of thousands active players, the total number of Superiors didn't even exceed a hundred. Due to that, opportunities to see two Superiors fight were few and far between. Since none of Altar's Superiors had participated, not even the war with Dryfe had had such a fight. Though Figaro's battles were a common sight at Gideon's arenas, all of his opponents so far had been either tians or non-Superior Masters.

As far as I was aware, Superior fights involving the kingdom's Masters had never gone beyond rumors that the furball (AKA The King of Destruction) had fought Caldina's "Magically Strongest" (The Earth), and one of the Great Seven Embryos of Granvaloa. Those fights were said to have happened in a secluded mountain area and in the middle of the ocean, meaning that there were few people who had seen them. Due to all that, this event was a golden opportunity for people to witness and find out just how intense Superior fights were. It was only natural for the tickets to get sold out. In fact, when they had officially gone up for purchase two weeks ago, they had been snapped up in less than ten minutes.

I silently looked at the ones in my hand and tried imagining what would happen if either of the participants boycotted the event. Count Gideon, the one managing the arena, would surely flip. Of course, considering that I'd spent most of the reward on these tickets, my situation wouldn't be too good, either.

I really hope the event happens without much trouble and that Ray and Rook enjoy it.

"Take care, now!" I said.

"You too," replied the scalper. "Come to me any time you need a ticket for something."

Silently praying that the event would start as intended, I left the scalper.

It was now past three in the afternoon, and I no longer had anything to do.

My job as a Journalist wouldn't start until tomorrow's event, while my *other job* didn't have any activity at all right now. I checked my friends list and found out that Rook was offline, while Ray was somewhere outside Gideon. I didn't have any other friends here in the kingdom.

Even if I wanted to do some observation and kill time while on a basic party quest, I couldn't get one because they normally rejected all Journalists. The job was of no use in battle, after all. It was a wonder why Ray had even accepted me.

Not having anything to do, I walked around the fourth district's bazaar while eyeing the wares with Identification. Every now and then, you could find some real bargains here, but nothing I saw today really caught my eye.

After a while of such walking, I saw the shop belonging to Alejandro, the man we'd met during yesterday's quest. I considered stopping by and saying hello, but the building seemed to be ridiculously crowded. From what I could hear the people say, the gacha machine there had just dropped an MVP special reward, causing many who were feeling lucky to try and hit another one.

Having only two special rewards in my possession, I could fully understand what drove them.

Yesterday, Ray had happened to become the MVP in a UBM fight when we'd run into Gardranda. But it rarely went as smoothly as that.

Encountering UBMs was rare even if you searched for them, and even the Epic-tier ones were really tough. Masters with high-rank Embryos and jobs would have to form a proper party just to stand a chance, and it was unthinkable to take them on solo without having a Superior Job. Even then, battles against Legendaries and Ancient Legendaries would be truly challenging.

Indeed, getting a special reward was no small task. Soloing UBMs while being like Ray — a high-rank job with a low-rank Embryo — was nearly unheard of, and it happened mostly because of luck and compatibility.

Nemesis's abilities were heavily focused on battle, countering, and giant-killing, making me quite excited to see how they'd grow.

Anyway, with the store being so crowded, going in just to say hi would probably make me nothing but a nuisance, so I decided to leave it for another day.

"I'VE WASTED A MILLION! AAAAHHH!" I heard someone scream as I slowly distanced myself from the shop.

As I aimlessly walked around and began thinking about killing time in some shop popular with cute boys and girls, a certain sound entered my ears.

A young girl was shouting something from behind the corner, in a secluded back alley between the buildings. With my curiosity piqued, I approached the source of the voice, stuck my head out to take a look and was presented with one of the most cliché scenes ever.

Four vulgar-looking men were surrounding a girl who didn't even seem to be ten years old. Though the blonde, coiled, drill-shaped hair made it obvious that she was Western, for one reason or another, her face was covered by a Japanese fox mask.

"Let's take this brat. She looks noble. Selling her off will get us some serious gold," said one of the men as he grabbed her wrist.

"Unhand me, you insolent cur!" the girl shouted as she did her utmost to struggle, but she simply wasn't strong enough to resist.

How cliché, I thought. *Truly the most of generic of incidents.*

It was even embarrassing to interfere, since that would make it even more cliché. However, that was exactly what I did.

"Now, wait just a moment, fellas," I said as I walked out from behind the corner. "Are you seriously trying to take this helpless loli away? Should I be concerned?"

"The fuck are you?!" one of them shouted.

"Just a passing Journalist," I answered while getting a better look at the men's faces. "Yep, those are the expressions of true criminals. Could you morbid-looking folks leave the loli alone and go home? Or would you like to go straight to jail?"

As I expected, my provocation made one of the men's foreheads twitch as he charged at me with a raised fist.

"A Journalist?! Who do ya think you're talking to?! C'mere and I'll...!"

"Aaand... there." I grabbed the man by the wrist and did a one-armed shoulder throw on him.

Hitting the stony path below instantly made him lose consciousness.

As always, this move is very useful against tians who don't know about judo, I thought. *They can never land safely.*

Of course, it would probably do little good against those who were aware of martial arts or simply had high stats. But these hoodlums weren't much better than the usual newbie.

"B-But she's a Journalist!" one of them exclaimed. "How can she fight?!"

"Oh come now," I said. "Journalist or not, everyone is capable of throwing people."

Not to mention that I'm... Oh, there's no need to say it, I thought. Then I repeated the same thing with the other three.

As a result, the four hoodlums who had been about to kidnap the girl were all spread out across the alley.

“Heh,” I chuckled. “Once again, I went and threw something worthless.”

“Amazing! You’re so strong!” said the blonde girl as she looked up at me. The blue eyes I could see under her mask seemed to be gleaming. How adorable.

“Y-You bitch! We’re not done yet!” Staggering, the hoodlums stood up and were about to charge at me, but...

“Hey! It’s time to get paid! Stop messing around!” another hoodlum from outside the alley called.

There were more of them? I asked myself. *Five hoodlums, huh? Why couldn’t it be five heroes, instead? That would’ve been far better in every possible way. Also, “paid”? Are they the underlings of some mafia or something?*

“Crap... We’ll let you off this time! I know your mug now! Remember that!” one of them shouted a particularly stale phrase as they all ran away.

“Do they have some debuff that forces them to keep saying overused phrases?” I said as I casually waved them goodbye. I really didn’t want to see them again. Not only were they awful as characters, but they were far too basic to be *useful* to me.

“Wow, that crest is the sign of a Master! I know why you’re strong now!” said the girl upon noticing the back of the hand I was waving.

Oh, the purity in her gaze is far too dazzling for a creature like me, I thought.

“Oh no,” I said. “That was just judo. Anyone can learn how to do it. Even you.”

I’d only taken a few real-life classes, for instance. For a while, I had dabbled in a lot of various martial arts for my work. I was now unemployed... and dropping such sports certainly wasn’t good for my weight.

“Truly?! I can learn that?! Could you teach me?!” asked the girl.

“Of course. First, we...” Suddenly, I realized that a stony pavement definitely wasn’t a suitable surface to teach judo.

We should find a patch of grass or get a soft mat and...

“We found her!”

“She’s over here! There’s a suspicious-looking woman with her!”

Before I could finish my thought, a few guards ran into the alley and shouted those things.

How rude! I'm not suspicious-looking! I wore a black men's suit, had a properly-tied necktie, covered my eyes with sunglasses, and always had a grin on my face.

All right, okay, I look suspicious.

"Oh no! We must escape!" said the girl as she grabbed my hand and started running away from the guards.

"And why am *I* being dragged into this?" I muttered as I realized that things could get really messy if we got caught. But I quickly decided play along with her.

I took the girl into my arms, faced the wall, and jumped upwards, instantly putting us on roof-level. Then I jumped from building to building to get as far away from that alley as was necessary before going down to street-level in a place where no one could see us.

"That was riveting!" said the girl, bright-eyed and looking like she'd just gotten off a roller coaster. "I felt like I became the wind!"

"Oh, it was nothing, really."

"Could you do it because you are a Master or because you are a Journalist?"

"The latter. Journalists are amazing. We can fly, carry buildings, and reverse time by making the Earth spin in the other direction."

"Wow!"

Okay, fine, that's limited to a certain man who is particularly "super," I thought. "By the way, about those guards..."

As I was about to continue, I heard an adorable sound coming from the girl's tummy.

"Shall we eat something?" I asked.

"We shall!"

And so, I decided to help her fill her empty stomach.

Coming out as we were and letting the guards see us wasn't the best idea, so I had to do a little messing around. Using two of my skills, Disguise and Illusion, I changed her appearance, making her look like a plain girl of a normal upbringing. People with Truth Discernment, Reveal, or Mind's Eye skills would be able to see through the disguise, but it wasn't like every guard here had one of those, so it didn't matter too much.

As for me... Saddening as it was, I had to remove my sunglasses. With that, I was no longer a “shady woman in shades.” Truly a shame.

We walked out of the empty alleyway and made our way towards the stalls on the main street. It was a popular place, so, naturally, there were food stalls, as well.

“Do you have anything in mind?” I asked.

“I want something I never get to eat!” she answered, and then noticed something. “There! I want those clouds!”

Clouds...? Oh, the cotton candy, I thought. *What an adorable choice.*

I went and bought some of the white cotton candy, which looked exactly the same as the ones we had on Earth. The only real difference was that they weren’t covered in wrapping displaying some character.

“Enjoy,” I said.

“Very well! Thank you very much!” she said as she took the cotton candy, took off the mask and began eating. “Such sweetness and fluffiness!”

“Heh heh. Glad you like... it...?” I paused.

Her exposed face was very cute, making it more than obvious that she would be a real beauty someday. But the fact of her adorability meant nothing next to the fact that her face was familiar to me.

I reached into my inventory and took out my Information Notebook, a must-have item for Journalists that allowed the filing and managing of info, and followed the index to a certain part of it. Specifically, the list of this country’s important people and the entry about the second princess, Elizabeth S. Altar.

It had all the information I’d collected about her and displayed her portrait photo, which showed a little lady bearing the exact same facial features as the girl right before my eyes, the one still eating cotton candy.

“Well, this sure smells like trouble,” I muttered as I became fully aware that I’d gotten myself into something both exciting and dangerous.

“Hm? But it smells sweet,” said Elizabeth as she smelled the cotton candy, making me momentarily discard the bad thoughts and merely enjoy the adorable presence of Her Majesty.

A journalist and a princess... Reminds me of a certain movie, I thought.

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Anyway, we’d distanced ourselves from the crowds, and it was time for me to take in the situation.

I had been strolling around.

A girl had been about to get kidnapped, so I'd helped her.

She'd gotten attached to me.

I had been about to be caught by the guards.

I'd taken the girl and ran.

The girl was actually the second princess of this country.

And that was the jist of it.

Conclusion: I was now officially a kidnapper of not only a child, but an extremely important person.

Oh, dear.

"In the worst case scenario, I might even get sent to the gaol," I muttered.

"Gaol?" the princess tilted her head to the side.

The gaol was a separate area where players were sent if they committed one too many grave *Dendro* crimes. Grave crimes in *Dendro* were primarily those against tians. Player killing and the like didn't count, and for me that was nothing but good news.

Going in and out of the gaol was completely impossible, and so far, not a single player had left it. According to what those who were sent there wrote on discussion boards, the gaol had equipment and dungeons, just like the rest of the game, allowing them to have a proper *Dendro* experience.

However, leaving simply wasn't an option.

No one knew its location, making many assume that it was the only separate *Dendro* server besides the worldwide one, but the truth behind it was still unknown.

Anyway, it took more than grave crimes to send a player to the gaol.

When criminals got on a country's wanted list, they could no longer use its save points. Save points were places such as the fountains here in the Kingdom of Altar, and they existed in all the cities, towns, and villages of all the seven countries. After getting a death penalty, players respawned at a save point they'd already "marked."

Getting a death penalty while not having any available save points would have the player respawn at the gaol.

I found that to be completely reasonable.

We Masters could get the death penalty, but besides that, we were completely immortal. The system needed a way to deter players from repeatedly committing crimes every time they respawned.

Mind you, for the wanted lists to work, the tians had to know the offenders' names, faces, and crimes. Also, even if they were put on a wanted list of one country and died there, players could always respawn in any other country, provided they had marked save points there. Such "escaping" was currently being used by Goblin Street — the clan responsible for besieging the west side of the capital, and the only group that had gotten on the wanted list because of it.

From what I'd heard, strong Masters who were criminals in some countries were sometimes kept as potential soldiers in case of a war by the other ones.

Now, some crimes were so grave that they got players on the wanted lists of all the seven countries at once, banning them from *all* the save points everywhere. Such cases were extremely rare, and few people had to worry about that happening. However, being someone who'd seemingly kidnapped royalty, I was now one of those "few."

Oh, what am I to do? I thought as I looked at the princess as she continued eating the cotton candy.

"Hm? What is it? Why are you staring at me so? Do I have something on my face?" she asked.

"Just a bit of cotton candy," I answered as I took it off her cheek and ate it myself. *It really is sweet.*

Anyway, for now, she was under the effects of my Disguise and Illusion combo. It wouldn't be easy for people to notice that she was the princess. I could've also used Presence Manipulation to make us stand out less, but that might've had the opposite effect due to stronger people realizing that something was off, so I refrained.

All right, now why did the princess wander about the city all by herself? I thought.

From the fact that the guards were searching for her, it was safe to assume that she had sneaked out for some sightseeing.

Well, that would be another way this situation is similar to the one in Roman Holiday*... I wonder if this city has a Mouth of Truth.* I'd do what they did in the movie, put my right hand inside and...

No. I'm a tremendous liar, so it'd instantly get bitten off.

"You haven't said anything for a while. What are you thinking about?" asked Elizabeth.

"Oh, nothing," I answered. "Just some things that might be slightly comedic to the audience."

"Comedic?"

All right, now back to why the princess is here, I thought. At this point, talking to her seemed like the best way to find out.

"Oh, we've yet to introduce ourselves," I spoke up, being careful not to make it obvious that I knew who she was. "I'm Marie Adler."

"I see! So your name is Marie! I am Elizabeth, the second princess of this country!"

...She actually had no intention of hiding it.

Why the mask, then? Did she just want to wear it?

"Umm, why were you in the streets, princess?"

"I was told that Gideon is an exciting place!" she declared. "However, my attendants did not let me go outside, so I escaped to have a pu-pleasure jaunt!"

And thus, it was confirmed that she really *was* just sightseeing. Not only that, but she'd done it without even trying to hide her identity, like any normal child just walking out to play.

How bold of her.

"That must've been quite the great escape," I said.

"Indeed! Timing it was hard."

Would the timing really have been enough for her — a princess — to successfully slip through? Should I be worried about this country? I thought. *Well, I obviously should, considering it's been on a decline ever since the war....*

"Today, I intend to spread my wings! However..."

"What is it?" I asked.

"When you found me, I was actually lost... Thus, I would appreciate it if you guided me around..."

It now made sense why she had been in that back alley.

As for her request...

If I stayed with the princess, they might assume that I'd kidnapped her and arrest me. However, the idea of leaving this adorable, socially-unaware girl all by herself was far more worrying to me than getting arrested. I also felt that there was more to this than it seemed.

“Why, certainly. I’ll guide you around,” I said.

“Really?!” asked the princess.

“Yes. I never lie.”

Apologies. That line itself was a lie.

When asked about what kind of places she wanted to go to, Elizabeth said simply, “Anywhere that’s riveting!”

As was natural for *duel city* Gideon, the most popular tourist spots here were the arenas, but I was quite apprehensive about bringing a little girl to a place so thick with the reek of blood.

Well, it wasn’t like the arena barriers let any smells reach the audience. Also, no matter how severely damaged the participants were, they would come out completely unharmed once the battle was over.

The barriers sure are useful and convenient, I thought.

According to the setting, the barrier-equipped arenas hadn’t been made by the kingdom’s tians. All thirteen of them had been there since ancient times, and a city had merely happened to be built around them.

A barrier that could make the most critical of wounds simply disappear was extreme tech for both magic and science, and being able to replicate it would cause far too many people to take advantage of it. That was surely the reason why the devs had made it into a lost technology that no one could copy.

The barriers weren’t the only pieces of such tech, either. There were the relics from the pre-ancient civilization and Granvaloa’s underwater ruins, among many other things.

Anyway, with the arena being out of the question, I decided to bring the princess to the nearby plaza.

Just like on the main road, stalls were placed all across the area, but that certainly wasn’t all. I could see street performers such as musicians, artists, and fortune tellers, as well.

“Wow! Is this a festival?!” the princess voiced her excitement.

“Many people with various impressive skills gather here,” I answered.

There were the staples such as jugglers and people balancing on balls, but I could also see Masters entertaining people by using their Embryos.

What I found particularly eye-catching — or, rather, ear-catching — was the musical ensemble. It consisted of four people — no, one person and three creatures. A man wearing a bird-like hat was swinging a conductor's stick, a centaur was playing a violin, a cat sìth was blowing into a flute, and a kobold was hitting a drum. Quite a peculiar band of performers, indeed.

What was even more peculiar, however, was the fact that, despite there being only three creatures playing, the resulting music was like that of a large-scale orchestra. Their act enchanted not only the passersby, but some of the other street performers, as well. Indeed, the music was downright beautiful, especially once you got over the fact that it was an orchestral arrangement of a classic super robot anime opening.

I felt like I was listening to an elementary-to-middle school orchestra contest or a Koshien cheering song.

"Such a powerful melody," said the princess.

"Indeed it is," I agreed. *It's* Mazinger Z, *after all.*

"Are those monsters and a horse-man?" she asked.

"No, I believe it's a Type Legion Embryo," I answered.

"'Legion'?" she asked.

Legion was an Embryo type that evolved from the base category of Guardian. Its main feature was the fact that it was basically multiple Guardians in one. That multiplicity was exactly what made the type interesting.

For example, you could have an Embryo that was basically a "We are the Something's Elite Four!"-kinda thing, where they were few, but strong. You could also have an Embryo that was hundred-strong swarm of weaker creatures. They both would be categorized as "Legion." Quality and quantity meant nothing for this type.

This band was definitely focused on quality.

My Embryo — Arc-en-Ciel — was Legion, but I wasn't quite sure what it was focused on. It could go both ways, honestly.

"So that is an Embryo," said the princess.

"Yes," I nodded.

"I always thought that Embryos were only meant for fighting."

"Embryos are based on their Master's minds, so they're not always created with battle in mind," I said. There were actually quite a few Embryos that didn't have a single fighting-related skill.

It wasn't particularly surprising, really. After all, they always reflected people's personalities and experiences. However, with that considered, I couldn't help but grin in self-derision at the fact that my Embryo was so battle-focused and what it implied about my mind.

The band was done performing, so after we gave them their due applause and money, we went to do other activities.

That included eating ice cream and scooping goldfish-like monsters, both of which were common things in the Japanese festivals I was familiar with and didn't seem the least bit special to any common citizen here. And yet, the princess looked like she was having tons of fun, as though these seemingly meaningless activities were a true treasure to her.

"Let's go to the painter next! I want to be drawn!" she squealed.

"Don't you get portraits regularly?" I asked in response.

"I do! But they look too serious! Also, they don't look like me! I'm not that scary!"

Apparently, the little princess had a little trauma going on.

I guess that's how most portraits appear to children, I thought. *That Beethoven in the music room is a good example, but let's not get lost in thought again.*

"I can draw you, princess," I said. In fact, I was the only one that could. She was under the effects of my Illusion skill, so if we let a random street artist draw her, the person on the result wouldn't even be her.

"Hm? You can draw?" she asked.

"Yes. Not only that, but I'm quite confident that I'm better than the average Painter." That was a non-battle job that had Drawing within its skill repertoire. Its effect was technical support that helped Painters draw lines to form pictures as they desired. However, people who already had the skill in real life didn't need any support from such skills. I was one of them.

Skills such as Drawing and Cooking, ones that players could replace with any technique and flair they had in reality, were called "sense skills."

Another example of this would be the Detective job's "Inferring" skill. It allowed the user to understand the tricks, clues, and evidence surrounding various incidents. But people who were skilled detectives in real life had no need for it.

Not like I was aware of any such players, but still.

"Anyway, you can trust my drawing ability," I said confidently. "I'll make you look very cute!"

"Very well! I shall believe you!" The princess sat down on a bench in the plaza and straightened her back. That bearing made her seem truly princess-like.

"And you are very right to do so," I said as I reached into my inventory to take out a sketchbook and my drawing equipment.

The sketchbook was opened on the page with a shirtless dog-eared Ray sketch.

...The princess must not see this, I thought as I skipped a few pages.

I put a lot of effort into drawing her, so it took me about ten minutes even without coloring, but I was quite satisfied with the result. It had to have her likeness, but since she didn't seem to like proper portraits, I avoided making it too realistic and just used my usual art style.

"Well, what do you think?" I asked as I sat down next to her and showed her the sketch.

"Wow! It's so cute! Is this really me?" she cried.

"Yes."

With the original being so adorable, making the drawing cute was easy, and the result had come out very naturally.

"Marie, you're amazing! You beat scoundrels! Run on walls! And can even draw!"

"Oh no, I'm really not that impressive."

"Are you able to do this because you're a Journalist?"

"Ah, no. My drawing ability has nothing to do with my job."

"Why can you draw, then?"

The reason for my artistic ability? Well...

"I used to be a manga artist on the other side."

◇◇◇

Nagisa Ichimiya

I began drawing manga — or, rather, simple illustrations — when I was in the later years of elementary school. It all started when a friend invited me to join an illustration club.

Naturally, the club had books that described the proper ways to draw manga illustrations, so I began reading them and put the knowledge I received to the test. As I repeated that, I eventually became able to draw manga in a proper format.

At first, I tried drawing a story that was far too grand for a newbie such as myself, and I ended up giving up after about three volumes' worth of pages. Two of those volumes were actually nothing but setting descriptions...

Despite my first work being so shoddy, I didn't give up on drawing manga, and after learning from my mistakes, I began drawing ones that were complete with just single chapters.

The only people who saw them were my friends in the illustration club, which became the manga association when we entered middle school. However, as I continued drawing those shorts, I eventually became good enough to have my friends suggest that I send my works to a contest.

Figuring I had no reason not to, I sent one out, and though it didn't make the cut, I didn't stop sending my contributions.

This continued for about five or six years, until the winter of my second year in high school, when a certain award chose the work I submitted.

It was the first shonen manga I'd ever drawn. My previous works had all been shojo manga heavily focused on love, and this shonen work had merely been something I'd drawn on a whim.

It had gotten put in a certain magazine as a non-serialized story, and, supposedly due to good ratings, the editorial department had approached and invited me to ask whether I'd like to serialize it. At first, considering that I'd drawn it on a whim, I didn't actually think that I could continue it. However, when I gave it a try, the drawing went so smoothly that I felt as though my pencil was moving on its own.

The story continued without a hitch, and by the time I graduated, instead of going into higher education, I decided to become a manga artist.

I was worried whether I'd made the right decision, but my parents were fully supportive of my choice. They told me to live the life I wanted and offered to help me whenever I needed it.

That moment made me cry a bit.

Thus, I became a manga artist with a series in a monthly magazine.

At first, there were a lot of things I wasn't used to, and adjusting to them was quite a challenge. I even had to do research for my work by getting into martial arts and buying airsoft guns. When my parents happened to visit me, they said that I was being very boyish, but that was one of my very dear memories now.

The serialization went smoothly for more than two years. My work was pretty popular, too. Not enough to be the magazine's flagship title, but definitely in the top five. I even had hopes that it could get adapted into an anime after a year or two.

And that was when the magazine's publisher went bankrupt.

The cause was a business failure in divisions besides the one responsible for manga. And yet, the magazine was canceled, forcing my first series to end with its first part.

I was absentminded for a long while after that. There were entire hours... *days*... when I was just lying around and whispering, "What do I do now?" to myself.

However, there was a silver lining, as I got approached by an editor from a different magazine, offering me to continue my manga there. With the publisher's bankruptcy, other magazines began competing for the newly-unemployed artists and their works, and my manga happened to be among those.

I asked the editor to give me time to think, but definitely not about the answer to the offer. The answer to whether I wished to continue my series was a resounding, "Yes! Of course!" But I had another major problem I had to consider.

It was the fact that I *could no longer draw it*.

I had simply become unable to continue my manga series.

Right after the forced end of its first part, my vision of the work's protagonist, Marie Adler, had gone completely still. No matter how hard I tried, drawing her just didn't feel the same as before. She seemed to have become completely inanimate. Forcing myself to draw her made me feel as if I was a puppeteer using strings to move a corpse.

I was going through a so-called slump. As though I'd forgotten something I could do as easily as breathing, I became completely unable to continue drawing my manga... Marie's story.

Eventually, this extended to any other stories I attempted, rendering me incapable of completing the simplest of one-shots.

I'd spent my entire life being absolutely serious about manga. I'd drawn my works with all I had. And yet, that had gone away in a flash.

I did everything I could to try and regain my touch. Thinking that it would help me gain a new perspective, I used my money to travel the world and made attempts to gain new skills, like cooking, handicrafts, and koryu. However, all of that failed me, making me more than aware that I could no longer draw stories as I was.

"Oh, God. Please give me a possibility that isn't my own. Let me draw her story... *Help me understand her*," I prayed.

Almost the moment I began asking for that, I became aware of a certain game.

"*Infinite Dendrogram* will provide you with a new world and your very own unique possibility!"

A VRMMO that bore the promotional line, and that didn't betray it, *Infinite Dendrogram*.

I believed... felt... *hoped...* that a game which provided countless different possibilities and lives would help me find the continuation to my story that I'd seemed to have completely lost.

With that hope in me, I began *Infinite Dendrogram*.

I made my avatar's name the same as hers — Marie Adler.

I gave my avatar a similar appearance: long black hair, tall, pretty, and always wearing sunglasses.

I even went as far as to talk the same way she did — unique in tone and superficially polite.

I finished it up by matching my behavioral patterns to hers, becoming a proper Marie Adler roleplayer.

I felt like and hoped that doing so might help me notice something that could breathe life into her again.

A year had passed since then, and I'd yet to draw her story's continuation.

However, I could feel her breathing every moment I spent in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

That alone was enough reason for me to stay here.

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Journalist, Marie Adler

"Nhh..." The princess stretched. "It's been so long since I had such an enjoyable time."

"That's good to know," I said.

After I'd drawn her, she'd continued to enjoy the many activities available in this plaza. Enjoying the food that she was likely unfamiliar with and the activities she never got to do, the girl had obviously had a very good time. Now, she was sitting on a bench while licking a candy that had the shape of a cute animal.

Why are the stalls here so much like the ones in Japanese fairs? I casually wondered.

"Gideon really *is* a lively city," she said. "Count Brittis was telling the truth."

"Count Brittis?" I asked.

"Yes. He often talks to me about how fun Gideon is."

"Oh?" *Shady.* "Well, he's not wrong," I said. "As you probably already know — or have heard from him — Gideon is quite a feature-plenty city."

It was a popular center for trade with the nearby nations of Legendaria and Caldina. The western port city was just a few days away on foot. Its arenas also gave it a powerful tourist industry, making a popular resort city for both rich tians and Masters.

Also, when it came to the kingdom's main cities, Gideon was the one that was farthest away from the northern country of Dryfe, so there was little fear of them endangering these parts.

"It's probably the most prosperous city in the kingdom," I concluded.

"Yes," said the princess. "Even the people's faces are more cheerful than in the capital."

Does she manage such escapes in Altea, too? I asked myself.

Seemingly remembering the state of the capital, the princess suddenly looked a bit down.

The people there had to live in constant fear of war, and the recent PK incident that had resulted in the complete immolation of Noz Forest surely hadn't helped at all...

"My heart hurts a bit," I muttered.

"Hm? What's wrong, Marie? Do you feel ill?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine. Also, you seem to be thinking about the capital's people, but I don't believe there's any need to worry. They should cheer up sooner than later. That's what the castle's people are working for, right?"

"...You're right! I'm sure my sister will take care of it all!"

"Indeed she will."

...Not like I believe that, I thought.

A good governing body was enough *only* when there were no international relationships to consider. When a country had a very clear enemy, not even the greatest ruler could do anything to take care of the people's fears.

I simply didn't have the heart to tell her that the capital's people's woes would continue for a long time. Thus, I told a comforting lie, and considering that it cheered her up, I was confident that I'd done the right thing.

"I will do all I can to help my sister in her work!" she declared.

"Excellent. Do your best, princess," I said.

"Mrrgh."

Oh? Why did she suddenly turn sulky? I thought. "Is anything wrong, princess?"

"That's what's wrong!"

"By 'that,' you mean...?"

"You've been calling me nothing but 'princess' for a while now! It makes you feel de...distant!"

"Distant," huh? I thought. *Well, I guess avoiding her name and calling her just by her position wasn't very friendly.* Also, the word "distant" was more fitting than she'd ever imagined. After all, I was full of lies.

"Very well. I'll call you 'Ellie.'"

She said nothing.

Oh? Why the silence? Did I close too much distance?

"Ellie," she muttered.

"Don't like it?" I asked.

"No! I love it! From now on, I am Ellie!"

So she likes it. "Good to know, Ellie."

"Heh heh."

My, what an adorable smile. I wanted to take her home, rub my cheeks on hers, and sleep with her.

All right, no no no no. Not only would that be cause for concern, it would also be a kidnapping of an important individual.

Remembering that she was important made me curious about something.

"By the way, Ellie, you said that you escaped the place you were staying at," I said. "Why are you in Gideon, in the first place?"

"To enjoy it, of course!" she answered proudly.

"Sorry. Poor wording on my part. I meant the official business." I was confident that I already knew the answer, but it didn't hurt to confirm.

"Oh, I came here to observe the arena event tomorrow."

Sure enough, it was The Clash of the Superiors. The event was an absolute first, after all. It was only natural for royalty to come in and make it even more prestigious.

"My elder sister should come tomorrow, too," she added.

"...Eh? Elder sister?"

"Indeed."

The elder sister of Ellie — second princess of the Kingdom of Altar. The only person that could be was the first princess and the current acting ruler of the country, Altimia A. Altar.

It didn't make sense. After all, a single member of royalty was more than enough to give an event prestige.

...Is there something more? I thought.

"So you and your sister entered Gideon separately, huh?" I asked.

"I acted as her representative yesterday. I met Count Gideon and we made preparations for tomorrow's banquet. It was very hard!"

I would prefer it if they didn't overwork such a little girl. However, that was probably part being royalty, so I couldn't really say much.

"That's why I'm very glad I got a chance to relax and enjoy myself today!"

"Well, and I'm glad that you enjoyed yourself, Ellie... Oh, I have something to take care of. May we go?"

"We may! I had enough fun here in the plaza."

I took Ellie's hand, helped her stand up, disposed of the stick from her candy, and began walking away. While doing so, I looked at one of the city lights — specifically, the image reflected on its metallic surface.

"We're being followed by... three people," I muttered.

"Did you say something?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, never mind, Ellie." After leaving the plaza, we entered Gideon's DIN office.

DIN, Dendrogram Information Network, was one of the news companies of the continent. Just like Knights got their job from the kingdom's knight orders and like Ninjas or Onmitsu got theirs from

Tenchi's shinobi villages, Journalists got their job by becoming associated with one of the many mass media companies all over the world.

The protagonist of my manga, Marie Adler, was a journalist, so it had already been decided that I would take this job.

The news company I decided to join was DIN. It wasn't the biggest in the industry, but it was notable for having offices in every important city of each country. Then there was the fact that it also acted as an information peddler without borders, which I liked because it was very "manga-like."

Naturally, DIN had a branch office here in Gideon, as well. In fact, I had found out about the scalper that sold tickets for tomorrow's event by asking my colleagues here.

By the way, every single Master working for DIN was treated as a special correspondent. After all, we could travel all over the place.

I had started in Tenchi, and I'd already been to Granvaloa, Huang He, and Caldina before ending up here in Altar.

We Masters made great special correspondents because we had the dynamism, fighting ability and — most importantly — the power to survive after getting the required information.

Of course, due to the skill "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword" preventing all combat action, pure Journalists had extremely high death rates.

However, just like Paladin's Aegis, it was the type of skill that only worked while having a main job from that grouping, making it perfectly possible to fight after nullifying it by switching to a job from another grouping.

That was why many Journalist Masters chose to travel after switching to another job, changing back to Journalist to do the relevant work and then switching to a fighting job when traveling again.

The problem with that was the fact that job switching could only be done at save points, which only existed at towns and cities.

Sure, there was also the option of using Job Crystals, which allowed the user to instantly change their main job no matter where they were, but they were both expensive and disappeared after one use.

There were pluses and minuses to both staying a Journalist and constantly switching jobs. That was why I'd chosen neither.

But enough about that.

Once we entered the office, Ellie looked like an elementary schooler that had just gone through an educational field trip. Well, not like anyone could tell, considering that I'd had her wear a mask. Many of my fellow Journalists had skills that allowed them to see through Illusion's visual trickery and Disguise's fake stats, so I did it to make sure no one realized who she was.

"I didn't know news companies were so active," she commented.

"They're really busy with the preparations for tomorrow's event," I said. "Even I got a job."

Once I thanked them for telling me about the scalper, they'd given me many various data devices. They'd wanted me to make the best of my special seat and get the best recordings I could.

Some might think it unnecessary, considering they'd reserved the media seats, but I could fully understand wanting to have shots from many different angles. It was especially important in fighting matches. I used many such photos as references when drawing my manga.

We didn't stay in the office for too long. I merely said hi, asked for two sets of information, and left.

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The information I got was everything concerning two noble families.

The first family was the rulers of Gideon: the Gideons. The current head of the family, Count Aschbarray Gideon, was a fifteen-year-old youth.

He'd inherited his position from his late father, who had lost his life to an illness about two months ago. However, his coming-of-age ceremony had been only a month ago, so there was a bit of a lag until he officially inherited the title and became acknowledged as the count.

Speaking of coming-of-age, the Kingdom of Altar had a custom where the ones to be sent to war weren't the current heads of noble families, but their heirs. Many would assume that it should've been the other way around, but apparently, they believed that the ones who lived through such pain and trials were the ones who were truly worthy of becoming the nobles of the next generation.

However, the war had happened half a year ago, when Aschbarray hadn't been of age, so he'd ended up avoiding having to participate in it.

The military officer the Gideon family had sent to represent him had died in the war, so it was safe to say that the Count was quite lucky.

Still, it wasn't a bed of roses for him.

The city of Gideon was still being terrorized by serial kidnappings at the hands of a group known as the "Gouz-Maise Gang." They had been happening since the rule of the previous count, and even after Aschbarray took over, it still didn't seem like it would be taken care of anytime soon.

The continuation of this terror made the people question the young count's ability to manage his lands and keep the peace. Apparently, the more critical nobles were talking about leaving the rule to someone else.

However, the first princess and the nobles who had a say in national politics trusted Gideon's name and had no intention of relieving him of his duties. That might change if the Gouz-Maise Gang continued its activities for longer than they could tolerate, but for all we knew, someone could just pop out of nowhere and simply take care of them.

In any case, the other family was the one bearing the name "Brittis." They ruled the area between Gideon and the port city facing the West Sea. The head of the family was Count Alzar Brittis. Though sixty years of age, he was still in good health.

Alzar had told Ellie about how fun Gideon was, but he had actually been on bad terms with the Gideon family ever since their previous generation.

They simply didn't get along. There were many reasons for that, one of which was the fact that, despite having similar amounts of land, the Gideons were far more influential simply because they had the duel city.

That was enough for me to find the situation suspicious.

It was odd that Count Brittis — who supposedly hated the Gideons — had told Ellie about how fun the city was. Most people wouldn't have anything good to say about those they hated, not to mention that a list of bad things about Gideon could have been pretty lengthy. And yet, Count Brittis had only told her the good things. That was enough reason to believe that he'd intended for her to become interested, walk out, and see for herself. I had my guesses, but I still wasn't confident about why he'd done that.

There was even more interesting info about him.

While getting up there in years, Count Brittis had had his first son. The man was an extremely doting parent and loved his son very dearly. Once his son came of age and became his official heir, he had naturally become excited about what the boy would become in the future.

Indeed, his son had gone through his coming of age ceremony. It had happened *before the war half a year ago.*

Following the custom, the son went to war to represent his father.

Good father that he was, Count Brittis spared no expense to give him the soldiers he needed to come back in good health. He also did some political maneuvering to have his son's army fight alongside the kingdom's strongest: the Knights of the Royal Guard. All so he would come back to him in good health.

And, after all he did for his son, all that Count Brittis got in return was a *right hand with the family's crest on it.*

Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

A Master sitting at the top of Dryfe Imperium's rankings, infamous for commanding numerous devils.

During the war, he had focused only on killing the Royal Guard's commander.

Naturally, the Brittis army, positioned near the Royal Guard, had been overwhelmed by the three thousand or so man-eating devils who had left barely any identifiable corpses. Thus, Count Brittis had lost his only heir — his beloved son.

The tragedy didn't end there, for not only had he spent great quantities of funds to gather the soldiers for the war, he also had to pay condolence money for those who'd lost their loved ones. To top it all off, the Brittis County got hit with a plague, causing the count to use the very last of his riches to prevent it from spreading all over the kingdom.

Though his efforts had been successful, they'd come at the cost of his county's bankruptcy. Count Brittis had bowed before the royal family and relinquished his territory to them. When managing a territory became difficult, it was rarely impossible to continue it, but I couldn't deny that the path to recovery would normally be harsh on the people.

Anyway, Count Brittis hadn't gone with that option. That could either have been because he wished to save his people by putting them under the royal family's wing or because — having lost his heir — he simply didn't have any attachment to his lands anymore.

Thus, Count Brittis became a noble without land, and he now worked at the royal palace as a common civil official.

I couldn't help but wonder what was going on in his mind these days.

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"I must say, I'm impressed by the detail of their info on these nobles," I muttered to myself.

As expected of a news company. They sure know their bigwigs, I thought.

Anyway, all this info gave me a better grasp of the full picture. Still, if things really were as I assumed them to be, the plan really lacked thoroughness. It required a great bit of luck to produce the results he seemed to want.

"Ellie, what kind of person is Count Brittis?" I asked.

"Count Brittis? He's very diligent," she answered.

Diligent, huh? I thought.

"However, he sometimes seems to be very lonely," she added.

"Lonely?"

"I'm lonely, too, so I can see it," said Ellie. Her face fell, and she looked into the distance... in the direction of the capital.

"I have an elder and a younger sister," she continued.

"Yes, I'm aware."

"They both have it very difficult."

I had heard that her elder sister — first princess Altimia — was overwhelmed by her work as acting ruler, while the younger sister — third princess Theresia — was very sickly and could only live in a certain sterilized environment they had.

"My elder sister is much older than me, while Theresia is always in bed. We've never had a chance to play as sisters, and this past six months... we haven't even spent time as a family." Ellie breathed a silent sigh before continuing. "I always felt so lonely. I was no longer sure if I was even loved."

"Ellie..."

Before meeting her today, I'd believed that the second princess was a selfish little girl. Elizabeth S. Altar was said to be whimsical, excessively vigorous, really insolent, and so full of curiosity that it was troubling.

That wasn’t really wrong. After all, she had escaped the place she was staying at just to go sightseeing around Gideon, completely neglecting to take any retinue with her. However, her actions could have been spurred by the loneliness caused by not having any family time with her sisters anymore.

“Today, however, I was very happy!” she burst out. “I had lots of fun playing with you, Marie! This was my first time partaking in such activities!” Ellie grabbed my hand in both of hers and gave me a smile reminiscent of a Sun peeking out from behind the darkest clouds.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” I said.

“I enjoyed it very much! It was a wonderful time! Like from my magic picture books! However...” She cast her eyes down and momentarily fell silent. “However... this magical time is ending.”

Ellie let go of my hand and turned her back to me.

“I think I will go back now.”

“Are you satisfied, Ellie?” I asked.

“Very! Thanks to you helping me cheer up, I will be able to do my duties better.” Still turning away from me, Ellie put her hands together. “Someday, when I become really good at my duties, I will take over for my elder sister and give her some time to rest!” she said before turning around and giving me a full smile. “Then, she and I will walk around Gideon, just like we did today!”

Albeit filled with determination, Ellie’s words displayed nothing but the dream of a little child. Considering her and her sister’s positions, it was really questionable that it could come true. However...

“Great. I’m sure you’ll be able to do that.”

That wasn’t a lie, but my very own desire.

From the very bottom of my heart, I wished for this pure girl’s dream to come true.

That was why I decided to help her.

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“The target and the accompanying person are on the move. Likely heading for Count Gideon’s residence in the first district... the place she is staying at.”

“Our Magic Cameras got them on record. We have enough ‘proof’ to frame that Master as the culprit. The time is right.”

“Inform the parties responsible for spreading false information all over the city. Once we gather, we will assassinate the second princess of the Kingdom of Altar — Elizabeth S. Altar.”

Side Story: A Day Off in Gideon — Night

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Come eventide, the two of us were walking through the dimly-lit streets.

The way we held hands might've made us look like sisters or mother and child, which was quite curious when I considered the fact that my avatar, Marie, was something akin to a daughter of my own.

As we walked, I chose to take us through a relatively empty alleyway. There were two reasons for that. The first was the fact that it would get us to our destination, Count Gideon's residence, about ten-odd minutes earlier, while the second was...

"Stop," I heard someone say, and I turned around.

A moment later, I felt something pass through my neck.

Then — after a momentary shiver — my head, separated from my body, fell to the ground.

◆◆◆

Leader of the professional assassin group "The Reaper's Pinky," Dead Hand, Roux Diene

"Target secured," I said. "The accompanying person is confirmed dead."

Within my vision, I could see the now-headless Master woman turn into particles of light and vanish.

The target, the second princess, had fainted due to the sight before her.

"Hmph," I scoffed. "She's a Master, you know? Not like she'll die."

They were always like that. When driven to death's door, they just vanished and came back three days later as if it was no big deal. If that wasn't bad enough, they also had ridiculous powers, Embryos, in their arsenal. It was really bothersome for us that they had their own networks.

To us, a group that murdered by the request of nobles and other rich people, hunting immortal targets wasn't worth the trouble, causing us to ignore most such requests. However, in this situation, the fact that a Master was accompanying our target was actually convenient.

"You have the 'proof,' right?" I asked.

"We've recorded her walking through the town alongside the target," answered one of my subordinates as he took out a crystal used for visual recording. "After we kill the princess, anonymously giving this 'proof' to the right people will get her accused of kidnapping and killing the princess. That will get her on every country's wanted list."

Truth Discernment could reveal any fabricated evidence as fake, but what we had was completely legitimate, so there was no need for us to worry on that front.

The woman had used Illusion to make the princess look different, but that was a skill that only worked on the minds of living things, having no effect on the inorganic. She had also changed her status display by using Disguise, but that was unrelated to our cameras. Not to mention that I — being a skilled Assassin — had high-level Mind's Eye and Reveal skills, allowing me to see right through such tricks. Mind you, the fact that my low-rank job subordinates hadn't been able to see through it meant that her skills were very high-level.

It was a mystery why a mere Journalist had Illusion and Disguise at her disposal, but since those skills weren't battle-related, it was entirely possible that she'd gotten them from a different job.

"Killing royalty instantly gets you on all the wanted lists," I said. "Even if she revives, she'll be out in the gaol."

She's as good as dead at that point, I thought.

"This is going well," said one of my subordinates.

"Yeah," I agreed. "We only have to deal with a powerless woman and a child, so this is far easier than anything we originally planned."

We'd expected having to fight the Royal Guard or infiltrating the residence to poison her. However, for some reason, she'd gone outside all on her own and even ended up finding us a nice scapegoat. This situation was a windfall if I ever saw one.

"Marquis Borozel will enjoy this news," I muttered.

"Hmmm...? So it wasn't Count Brittis," replied someone who *wasn't my subordinate*.

A moment later, the subordinate holding the princess screamed as blood burst out of his limbs.

First, I realized that his tendons had been severed.

Then, I saw that the princess was no longer unconscious and that her eyes were wide open.

Finally, I noticed that she was holding a dagger of a sinister design.

Thus, I concluded that she wasn't the princess, but *an enemy*.

"Kill her!" I commanded my subordinates, who instantly and simultaneously threw poisoned knives at her.

However, the enemy bearing the appearance of the princess jumped backwards, moved behind the subordinate who'd lost his tendons, and used him as a shield. All the knives sunk into him and didn't even give him a moment to scream before he died.

"What a terrible thing to do," she said, still holding the corpse. "However, I say that such deaths are a given for fiends trying to kill an innocent child."

She then threw the body away and revealed herself, looking completely unlike the princess.

No longer bright and blonde, her hair had become as black as midnight itself. She was now clad in one of the so-called "men's suits," sometimes used in places like Dryfe and Caldina. Despite it being sundown, she also wore a pair of sunglasses. Her stature was completely different, as well, for she was now an adult.

The only things that were the same about her were the dagger in her hand and the fox mask she wore on the side of her face.

"I must say, Art of Transformation sure takes a toll on SP when you take the shape of someone with a very different physique," she said.

She now had the visage of the Master that we'd beheaded mere moments ago, and the shining crest on the back of her left hand proved that she was the exact same person.

"You...!"

"Oh? What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Why is she alive? I thought stunned. *How did she transform? Isn't she a Journalist?*

As such questions went through my head, I used Reveal to take a look at her stats.

Marie Adler
Job: Journalist
Level: 32 (Total Level: 33)

Sure enough, I could see it. She was a mere Journalist who barely crossed level 30.

“What is it? It’s rude to stare at people, you know?” she said.

“Did you come back to life using an Embryo skill?” I demanded.

It will all make sense if she did, I thought.

“Why would I need to come back to life if I never died?”

“Where’s the real princess?” I demanded. “When did you replace her?”

“Replace her? But I’ve been here from the start, and—” Before she could finish her sentence, a subordinate positioned in one of the buildings to the side of the alley jumped out, got behind her and swung his blade at her neck. The moment it sunk into her body, she became particles of light and vanished.

At the same time, however, the subordinate who’d attacked her fainted and fell to the ground.

“And there was no one here but me,” her voice reached my ears.

It came from the roof of the building the subordinate had jumped out of.

Looking up, I saw that her appearance had changed yet again. Her body was now shrouded in a dark mist, giving her form a vagueness that made it hard for me to make her out. All I could be certain of was the fact that she wore the fox mask, held a dagger in her left hand, and held a strange pistol in her right.

“...!”

Shock filled me as my Reveal skill — still active — gave me completely different results than before.

■■■■■ ■■■■■
Job: ■■■■■ ■■■■■■
Level: ■■■ (Total Level: ■■■)

I could no longer see her name, her job, or even get a glimpse of her stats.

I’d experienced this when I was training to be an Assassin.

That was how the results looked when my Reveal had a lower skill level than the person’s Disguise.

However, I was an experienced Dead Hand — a high-rank job from the assassin grouping — and my Reveal skill level had already reached the maximum of 10.

Is her Disguise above that? I thought.

“It can’t be,” I muttered, yet I was hardly able to deny what I was seeing.

Another thing of note was the fact that my Reveal still got the right number of characters.

“It can’t be,” I repeated to myself, for it just didn’t seem right to me.

The *main job level* — not the total level — was in the triple digits.

At the very least, it was obvious that it wasn’t Journalist, for that was a low-rank job with a maximum level of 50.

The job and low stats I’d seen before were merely the result of Disguise or a similar skill, while this was her true form. The triple digits in her job could only mean two things — that she’d also reached the maximum on a high-rank job, or...

“What... What are you?!” I howled.

My question made her form a callous smile, making it seem as though she’d been waiting for it.

“‘I am a shade,’” she spoke, each word thick with emotion. “‘I am the reflection of all the wrongs you’ve committed — the mortal phantasm sent to pull you into the darkness...’”

Her tone didn’t have any of the ridicule from before. It was cold and theatrical in delivery.

“‘Into the Shadow,’” she went on with emphasis and grandeur, spreading her arms to the sides as if she stood before an audience.

“Credit for those words goes to Chapter 1 of Nagisa Ichimiya’s hit man superpower battle manga, *Into the Shadow,*” she added, making as little sense as before, as her tone did a complete turnaround and returned to normal.

The fact that her stats were still Disguised and that she’d just killed my subordinates didn’t change. Me and the rest of the subordinates still standing were intently observing her every single move.

“U-UWAAHHH!” screamed the new guy in our midst as he dashed towards her, unable to bear the pressure. It was a foolish thing to do, but if his sacrifice gave us an opening, then it would be worth it.

Not saying a word, the woman moved only her hand. With a snap of the wrist, she emptied the chambers on her revolver-like gun and loaded it with white and black bullets before pulling the trigger.

The muzzle was pointed in a completely irrelevant direction, but...

“GERGHGHGHGHGHGH!”

...what came out of it was a black and white, bullet-like creature that sounded a strange voice as it left the gun, changed its trajectory in an impossible manner. It sunk into the new guy’s body.

Without as much as a groan, he collapsed to the ground and became unable to move a finger.

It was as if he’d been completely paralyzed.

Though alive, there was nothing he could do.

The woman had done this with barely any effort — by merely moving her hand.

“What’s wrong?” she asked while looking down on us. “Getting cold feet? Cold sweat? Heartbeat too fast? About to break?” Her eyes were hidden behind both the mist and the sunglasses. “Is that how you become when facing something other than ‘powerless women and children’?”

I could tell that the light in her gaze was still cold.

“I’m probably not one to talk, though,” she said as she sighed. “When attacked by the land-warship, all I could do was run away. It was scary, and even though I was still in *Dendro,* I felt as though I could actually be killed... Yes, even I’m afraid of strong enemies.”

Even as she spoke of something that had scared her, her expression didn’t show a hint of fear. She was merely looking down on us, her gaze dense with coldness.

“That’s why...” she continued. “...I’m only good at cleaning up ‘powerless assassins’ like you.”

Following that proclamation, she made her move.

We tried to stop whatever she was doing, but the mist shrouding her concealed all her actions. A few of my subordinates threw knives at her again, but they all got deflected. Then, from behind the mist, she threw something in our direction.

It was an orb with a fuse on it — a bomb.

We tried distancing ourselves from it, but the fuse burned up far too quickly, blowing up and covering a part of the alley with an intense burst of... smoke.

It didn't take long for me to realize that it wasn't even a harmful kind.

"Don't panic! It's just a Smokebomb!"

Realizing that she might've used our reduced vision to kill us, we began to look around for her. I noticed her soon enough, but she instantly hid herself within the smoke. Thinking that she was using this smokescreen to get away from us, I got ready to do what I had to. However, a moment later, *five* silhouettes walked out of the smoke, all looking exactly like the woman.

Naturally, I was overcome with shock.

An Illusion...? No, this is above that! I thought.

"Get rid of the fakes! Throw!" I shouted my orders to my subordinates.

"Throw!" they said as they showered the five figures with throwing weapons.

It didn't matter if they aimed well. The knives would simply pass through the fakes, while the real one would block it. That would help us determine which one we had to focus on.

However, the result was completely unlike what I'd expected. Each and every one of the five figures moved in different ways to deflect all the throwing weapons heading in their direction.

"They... They're all real?!" I couldn't hold my surprise.

"Sadly for you, my Shadow Clone Technique creates corporeal bodies," she said.

Shadow Clone Technique?! I thought, shocked yet again. That was the name of a skill used by a Tenchi-exclusive job — Ninja.

So when she took the form of the princess, she... I see! So she's...!

"Ugaah...!" I heard my subordinates begin to panic, clearly because they couldn't tell which one was real.

The skill had created four clones that had the exact same presence as the original, making it difficult to tell which was the real one. Naturally, my subordinates were afraid of the person capable of this.

However, I was the only one who knew that her level was in the triple digits. If they were to find that out, their fear would become so great, it would hamper their ability to act. If that were to happen, I'd no longer have any chance of winning.

"Don't falter!" I shouted. "We have the numbers! Go two-on-one!"

"Understood!" they shouted as they charged at the clones.

A pair for each of them.

If logic applied, clones were weaker than the original. My subordinates should have a chance if they took advantage of their numbers.

Also, having them occupied like this gave me more options.

Or so I thought...

"Their levels sure are low," said one clone.

"Truly," agreed another.

"They don't require many of our tricks."

"Let's refrain from using Arc-en-Ciel, then, shall we?"

"Roger."

Even while fighting in pairs, they were still at a disadvantage against the clones. In fact, some had already lost their partner. Though supposedly weaker than the original, the clones were surpassing pairs of Assassins with a grasp of the trade's techniques.

Unlike me, they didn't have the high-rank job of Dead Hand, but they were capable Assassins nonetheless. And yet, they were getting disposed of so easily...

"Most people think that the biggest difference an Embryo makes are its unique skills," a clone spoke up. "I believe that to be both right and wrong. After all, even tians can have special skills if they get a UBM special reward."

Another clone picked up from there. "If you ask me, the biggest difference is their bonus to stats... and growth in general."

The third clone said, "The Embryo bonuses are what make Masters level up quickly and give us better stats. We're also immortal, so we can safely push limits tians can't. That creates a world of difference between the efficiencies of our growths."

A fourth one added, "That difference is great enough to have my three years here surpass your whole decades."

Three years? She acquired these monstrous abilities in a mere three years? I thought in disbelief.

"That's like a sick joke," I said. "If that's true, then to you Masters, all our training is nothing but fool's masonry!"

"Fool's masonry... that's an Altarian proverb, isn't it?" one of the clones responded. "It's based on the story of a man who tried to build a sky-reaching tower by hand, and it ends with it collapsing on him."

"But there *are* people who can build towers by hand, right?" another added. "Just like there are tians who have Superior Jobs."

"However, following that example, we Masters are building towers with heavy machinery," a third clone said.

They had basically said that there was a world of difference between us.

Many people equated Embryos with "talent" and "possibility," and the unfairness of it all made me grit my teeth in frustration. I just couldn't accept it. Ever since I was young, I'd been training with the organization to hone myself as an assassin, and it had taken me decades to become a Dead Hand. Due to that, I simply couldn't accept just how unreasonable Masters were.

A world where that woman was above me was a mistake.

I reached into my inventory and took out my secret weapon: a "Gem — Crimson Sphere." Just as it said in the name, it was a Gem which held the high-rank job of Pyromancer's ultimate spell, Crimson Sphere.

Its range wasn't particularly great, but its power was immense.

As things were, I would have no trouble having it hit that woman.

After all, my subordinates — the fools who had been able to do nothing against the clones even while in pairs — had been able to somehow able to keep them in place.

"Die," I said as I threw the Gem. It exploded right in the middle of the battle between the clones and my subordinates, covering it all in crimson.

There was no sound or explosion. There was only a crimson light and a heat that burned them all to nothing.

The woman, her clones, the subordinates fighting them, and the ones who were no longer capable of fighting all got engulfed in the light. A moment after I saw the shock in those guys' expressions, the skin on their faces became blackened ash, and their bones were soon to follow.

"Look at that... You useless shits were able to be useful, after all," I muttered. The crimson light also took out the woman and her four clones.

"Hmph," I scoffed. "So, just like Masters, clones become light when they die." With that, it was clear what had happened when we'd decapitated her the first time.

I stood around and watched them completely disappear. All that was left was to leave, find the second princess, and eliminate her.

"That woman sure was a pain," I muttered. "Covering the unexpected losses here will cost me a lot. I guess I shouldn't expect less from a Ninja — the eastern mystery high-rank job. Not like it matters now. She's the princess killer and she's going straight to the gaol. Hahahahah."

Entirely pleased with myself, I had my first laugh in a while as I played with the recording crystal containing the "proof."

A second later, I felt something cold sink into my back.

"Ah, wha—?" I voiced my confusion as the crystal fell out of my hands, shattered, and rang out with a high pitch. Looking down, I saw the blade of a dagger piercing out of my chest.

"Caught you off-guard, didn't I?"

I shifted my gaze forward, where I saw the very same five women that had vanished just a moment ago.

"You seem to have been misinformed about Ninjas. Allow me to correct you on two things," said one of them.

"One — Ninja is a low-rank job," a second one said. "The high-rank job would be Greater Ninja."

"First supplemental point: though 'shinobi' covers it all, there are different job groupings for different styles. Specifically, the ninja and onmitsu groupings."

"Second supplemental point: the ninja grouping's Ninja and Greater Ninja are for those who use the flashy ninja arts, like the ones that foreigners imagine them using."

"Third supplemental point: my job is one that grew from the onmitsu grouping, which gets the job done through hiding, sneaking, and confusion."

"And two — I'm not using a high-rank job."

Those last words were whispered to me by a sixth clone.

"Huh...? Gh...?" Bloody bubbles escaped my mouth as I turned around. There, I saw a mist-shrouded woman wearing sunglasses and a fox mask.

"Yes," she said. "I'm the real one. After making the smokescreen, I used Hidden Technique alongside Shadow Clone Technique to nullify my presence. Oh, and though you destroyed all my clones, I can easily make more by using the skill again, as you can clearly see.”

She removed the dagger, causing me to fall to the ground. As I was lying there, the five clones and the woman all looked down at me.

There was a very clear difference between the woman and her clones. I couldn’t feel her presence. Though she was right there before me, my five senses were denying her existence.

She had created several clones that had a physical presence while simultaneously nullifying her own presence.

How is that even possible...? I thought in disbelief.

“I hold the onmitsu grouping’s Superior Job, ‘Death Shadow,’” she said. “But you can call me the Superior Killer. I’m not revealing this as a parting gift, but that’s what I am.”

“A Superior Job... the Superior Killer...?!”

Superior Jobs were the ones above high-rank — the greatest of jobs. And “Superior Killer” was the nickname of the contract killer who, despite not having a Superior Embryo himself, had killed the Superior infamous for being “the greatest tian murderer of all time.” It was the alias of the person who could kill Superiors — the ultimate hitman.

“O-Ooaagh...” I groaned, and not because of the pain. This girl, while being far younger than me, had surpassed me and all my years of assassin training, going far ahead into a realm meant for only a select few.

In terms of jobs and as a professional killer, she stood at a summit I couldn’t hope to reach. That realization filled me with shock and emotion far greater than before.

“How... How can reality be so cruel...?” I muttered as the tears I’d thought had run dry began flowing out of my eyes.

“‘Cruel,’ you say?” she said with a hint of irritation in her voice. “You’re a Dead Hand, right? That’s a job you can only take after killing a certain number of people, isn’t it? You tried to murder Ellie, and even sacrificed your subordinates as if it was nothing. You’ve turned so many people into lifeless corpses, and yet you’re here crying after running into a little wall. That’s really low, if you ask me.” As she looked down at me, I looked up into her eyes. All I saw there was contempt. She wasn’t just looking down on me; she seemed to feel the same scorn she would when looking at the usual problematic city-dweller.

I found that both humiliating and hard to stomach.

But if she just kills me, those feelings will go away, and...

"Anyway, I have to go pick up Ellie," she said while turning around, showing no intention to finish me off. "I put her to sleep and hid her, after all. Can't keep her like that."

"Ki—"

"No, I won't kill you. It would be a silly waste of effort." She made the clones vanish and began walking away.

At first, I didn't understand what she said.

A few moments had to pass until I completely processed her words, and their meaning made me burn with more rage than at any other moment in this encounter.

I won't let her get away.

Carefully, to make sure she didn't notice, I reached into my inventory and took out an item. It was a Gem — Crimson Sphere, just like the one I'd used before.

I bet you weren't expecting me to have two of these, I thought.

I quickly activated the Gem and got ready to throw it, fully intent on reducing her to ash. Then I would search for the second princess and kill her, too, making sure to make her death was as gruesome as possible. That would take care of the request, but I could no longer care about that.

The woman, so far above me, had looked at me with those contemptuous eyes. That made me want to reduce whatever she so wanted to protect to scrap.

I can't wait to see her face when she revives and realizes that the princess is dead, I thought, picturing the most amusing future as I threw the gem, and...

I threw it, and...

"...!"

Shock overcame me as I realized that I couldn't move.

"...?! ..." I tried to talk, but not even my tongue functioned.

How? I wasn't shot like the new guy, I thought.

"Oh, I forgot to say," the woman said calmly without turning around. "Like you saw before, one of the bullet types for my Arc-en-Ciel are paralyzing bullets, but I can actually do a similar thing with this."

Still facing away, she pulled out a dagger and held it so I could see it. That was the very same item that'd pierced me.

“A skill on this dagger allows me to cover the blade with slow-acting paralysis poison,” she explained. “This thing is called ‘Palsy Stingblade, Belspan.’ That skill you’ve been hit with is actually from an Epic special reward, so — even though you’re a high-rank job — its effects might be hard for you to resist.”

Wh... What?

“I did say that killing you would be a waste of effort, but that didn’t mean that I could let you act as you pleased. If you hadn’t done anything stupid, you would’ve just stayed there for a day or two until the authorities found and took you away.” She suddenly changed her tone. “I repeat — *if you hadn’t done anything stupid.*”

In my hand, I held an already-activated Gem.

“H-hhhhh...!” I tried to scream, but only a whisper leaked from my mouth.

As I watched the woman casually wave goodbye to me — not even bothering to turn around — I was engulfed by my point-blank Crimson Sphere.

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Second princess of the Kingdom of Altar, Elizabeth S. Altar

When I came to, Marie was giving me a piggyback ride. A moment ago, it had been evening, but now, the sun had completely sunk.

“Oh, are you awake?” asked Marie.

“Yes,” I nodded. “Why am I being carried like this?”

“You got tired and fell asleep. It was a hectic day, after all.”

She was probably right. This was the first time I’d ever played this much.

“We’re almost at Count Gideon’s residence,” she said.

“Let me walk on my own feet, then,” I said. “Piggyback rides don’t befit a princess.”

“Very well.”

Though I’d enjoyed the ride, I didn’t hesitate to get off her back and stand by myself. Count Gideon’s residence was already in sight.

“This is far enough,” I told her. “I can walk the rest of the way by myself.”

“That’s good,” Marie smiled. “The guards would probably interrogate me if I got any closer.”

“Marie,” I said while gathering my resolve. “Thank you.”

My memory told me that this was the first time I’d ever used those words. During my life, I had never been given a chance to express such simple gratitude to anyone.

“You’re welcome.” Marie gave me a smile as she took off the fox mask — that she was wearing herself, for reasons unknown — and put it on me. “This day will be one of my good memories in this world. Let’s meet again someday, shall we?”

“Certainly! We... We shall meet again someday!”

And so, my day off in Gideon — a day I will never forget — finally reached its end.

Once I returned to the Count’s residence, I got yelled at by a very, very angry Liliana. However, when I saw the tears in her eyes, the person I was now could easily tell that she was very worried about me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, which made her look strangely surprised.

If today had made me different, that was surely thanks to Marie. I now had a very clear goal — to walk the streets of Gideon alongside my sisters Altimia and Theresia.

To achieve that, I first had to take care of the mountains of duties I'd neglected.

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Kingdom of Altar's Count, Alzar Brittis

In the dead of night, I was doing work in the royal palace's archives.

I've been doing nothing but putting documents and numbers in order ever since I'd relinquished my territory after the war half a year ago. That was my job these days.

Compared to running a territory, the tasks I'd been given were by no means difficult, so despite not having any experience, I had little trouble doing them. However, this day in particular, I seemed to have overworked myself.

The light helping me work so late was made by a magic item that didn't use any fuel, but even if it wasn't a waste to keep it on, it was a good time to end it for the day.

As that thought went through my mind...

"Count Alzar Brittis."

...someone addressed me.

I looked to where the voice came from and saw a woman. She was wearing a black suit and — despite us being indoors — had sunglasses on her face, making her look questionable. Most would've assumed her to be an assassin sent to kill me, but I didn't believe that to be the case.

"I want to talk about Ellie... Her Highness Elizabeth... and what happened in duel city Gideon," she said.

"I'm listening, dear guest," I replied.

Thus, she began telling me about the day's events.

The second princess had run away from where she was staying. She'd encountered street ruffians and then met the woman before me. Together, they'd walked around enjoying whatever Gideon had to offer. And finally, the woman had fought assassins that had been hired by another noble, one who'd probably wanted the rights to Gideon and the surrounding lands.

"So that's what happened..." I said.

What a curious turn of events, I thought.

"At first, I thought that *you* were the one behind it all," said the woman.

"Everything from her escape to the assassins."

"Why did you come to such a conclusion?" I asked.

"You were the ruler of the Brittis County, and it's well-known that you had a bad relationship with the previous Count Gideon — whose territory is right next to Brittis." she explained. "Also... in the war half a year ago, you lost your heir — your one and only son." Correct. All of that was nothing but the truth.

"Your son was fifteen years old at the time. Being of age, he was sent to the war as one of the kingdom's nobles," she went on.

Indeed. My son had participated in the war and lost his life.

"What went through your mind back then?" she asked. Though she was wearing sunglasses, I could feel her staring directly at me. "Unlike your son, the son of the current Count Gideon didn't participate in the war because he wasn't of age. As a result, the one that died was just the military officer that represented him. And thus, while Count Brittis lost both his heir and territory, Count Gideon continued into the next generation, ruling the most prosperous region in the kingdom. What did you make of this situation?"

She stopped for a moment, then took a breath before continuing.

"'Count Gideon is blessed with a prosperous territory and has a son he can bequeath its future to. I also gave my all for the sake of the kingdom. Why, then? Why am I the only one who lost everything?!'"

As if standing before a theater audience, she spoke those highly familiar words that I had said many times.

"Not many people could blame you for thinking that," she added.

"You talk as though you've seen me say that," I said. "We haven't even met before."

"That phrase is merely the result of the personality picture I've formed based on the information at my disposal."

I see. That's some impressive imagination, I thought.

The words she had spoken were more or less the same as mine. Indeed, there was a time when I'd thought those things and lamented in a similar manner while closed in my personal quarters.

It all made sense. That line of thought was more than enough to conclude that I had been the one behind the plot.

"That's correct," I admitted. "I was angry with everyone. The royal family, especially that foolish king, started the war that took away my dear son. The Royal Guard, despite being right next to him, failed to protect anything. And even though I went through such loss, Gideon still had everything... That made them all targets of my rage.”

That was why I had begun plotting revenge, which consisted of...

“However,” said the woman, “you were aware that those feelings of yours were unreasonable. A part of you thought that it was a mistake to direct your grudge at them.”

Oh, so you can see that much? I thought.

“Am I wrong?” she asked in confirmation.

Out of all the ways I could’ve responded, I chose to be direct about how I felt.

“I was considering revenge against the royal family, the Royal Guard, and Count Gideon,” I admitted. “However, just as you say, I knew that my grudge was misplaced.”

Still, I had felt that I had to do something. My chagrin was far too great to let me stop.

“Thus, I chose to leave it all to the hand of fate,” I continued.

“I can tell. That was why your plot had those intentional holes,” she said as she put up three fingers. “Three main points. First, there was the question if telling Ellie about the greatness of Gideon would really get her to escape and abandon her duties. Second, it was a test to see if the Royal Guard was really incapable of doing what they had to when faced with such incidents. And third, there was the question of whether Count Gideon’s city was safe enough for a girl like Ellie to walk around in all by herself. If they behaved in a way that cleared at least one of these three, they — just like you — would merely have been doing their duties to the best of their ability, which would mean that all the misfortunes you’ve faced were only your own fault. That’s what you were thinking, correct?”

Correct.

I had talked to Her Highness Elizabeth, the most brazen of the three princesses, and given her an idealized image of Gideon.

Then I had intentionally provided the Royal Guard with the wrong documents — ones that would get in the way of their protection duties.

Those two acts had increased the chances of the princess escaping the residence, and that was the extent of what I had done.

“The only problems would’ve occurred if there were failures on all three points,” said the woman. “If Ellie — a part of the royal family — got hurt, it would’ve been the responsibility of both the Royal Guard and Count Gideon, and your revenge would’ve been complete.”

I had let fate show me whether my grudge was misplaced or if there was anything more to it.

“It’s hard to call this a plan, and I don’t quite believe that it would’ve been their fault even if it went through... still, it was quite close,” she said.

“But it didn’t happen, yes?” I asked.

“Indeed. To the royal family, the Royal Guard, Count Gideon... and to Ellie herself, this is merely a case of ‘the whimsical princess ran away and enjoyed a day in Gideon.’ That’s it.”

“Thank you,” I said in gratitude before I even realized it.

“For what?” she asked.

I had said the words without even thinking, so even I didn’t know how to answer that. However, after a bit of consideration, I decided that words of thanks really were the most appropriate here.

“Thanks to you fortunately being there to save Her Highness’s life, I have finally reached a conclusion.” The things that had happened during this incident had given me the ultimate answer. “I... I was merely unlucky.”

The death of my son, the poor state of my lands... it all boiled down to that word.

No one in the kingdom was at fault. The cause of it all didn’t lie with anyone else. I had merely been unlucky.

“I can’t resent anyone for these results. My son went to war and was merely unlucky enough to die, while my lands unfortunately caught a plague. No one is at fault here... and yet, unable to see that, I went and did something truly unjust.”

“Indeed,” said the woman. “I also have a thing or two to say about you using Ellie’s life as a pair of dice.”

And she was right to feel that way, for — though indirectly — I had tried to hurt Her Highness Elizabeth. Brazen as she was, the second princess was a very gentle young lady.

I can’t believe I used her as a touchstone, I thought in self-disgust.

“However, again, this incident is nothing but ‘the princess ran away,’” said the woman.

Thus, no one would be blamed for this. Her Highness Elizabeth would get scolded, but that was the extent of it.

"But then..." I began.

"If you feel guilty," she cut my words short, "work hard enough to make it up to her. Starting with this."

Saying that, the woman gave me three bundles of documents.

"What is this?" I asked.

"I've gathered the proof and records of the injustices committed by Marquis Borozel — the one who sent assassins after Ellie," she answered. "Just say that you found it while organizing your documents or something and get him the punishment he deserves."

Naturally, I was surprised, for the files she'd given me were like the ones found in a noble's most secretive safe. Apparently, after protecting the princess, she had gone straight into Marquis Borozel's territory, taken these documents, and then returned here to the capital.

"Anyway, my job here is done, so I'll take my leave," she said.

"Wait," I called out. "Just who are you?"

My question made her form a smile.

"I'm just a passing Journalist," she answered as she disappeared like mist in the wind or shadow in sunlight.

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Journalist/Death Shadow, Marie Adler

The day after the one I'd spent with Ellie, I was sitting in a terrace seat at one of the more popular cafés here in Gideon.

"...I'm sooo tired," I muttered.

The reason for that was obvious — I was still drained from all that I'd done yesterday.

Ticket acquisition, the date with Ellie, taking care of the assassins sent after her, getting dirt on the main offender, Marquis Borozel, and then talking to Count Brittis... all of that had happened in a single day. The latter three had been after sundown, too.

Sure, I had a Superior Job, and yes, my total level was above 500. Though my stats didn't match those of Superior Jobs focused purely on fighting, they were extremely high nonetheless. My AGI was in the quintuple digits, and I could move at the speed of sound, making me a particularly super woman, if you'll pardon the joke.

However, HP and energy were different things, plus MP and SP had no connection to mental fatigue. I was so sleepy.

However, I couldn't let the Sandman take me, for it was the day of the long-awaited event known only as "The Clash of the Superiors." I had to wait for Ray and Rook, too, which was all the more reason why I couldn't sleep.

"Ray, huh...?" I murmured.

That was the name of the young man I'd met at Noz Forest, where I had been doing my work as a professional killer.

I was a roleplayer taking the role of Marie — the protagonist of my hitman superpower battle manga. To get properly immersed in her as a character, I simply couldn't do without the act of murdering people as a professional killer.

However, tians — just like living people — were intelligent beings. Due to that, I was wholly averse to the idea of killing them. Although ones like the assassins from yesterday were exceptions.

Anyway, that was why I'd chosen to become a professional killer focused solely on Masters — who didn't die even if they were killed. Unlike tians, they revived, and their lives would never be in any real danger. I had no problems killing them for my roleplaying purposes.

With that in mind, I'd spent my time in Tenchi taking and training in jobs from the onmitsu grouping, such as Onmitsu and Shadow. Eventually, I'd gotten the Superior Job of Death Shadow, and become a professional killer focused solely on PK.

I had chosen the onmitsu grouping's jobs because my manga's Marie had a similar fighting style to them, often using transformation and clones in her battles.

My success rate was very high, and the processes I went through to get my targets helped me learn to *draw* methods of assassination I had never thought of before. Being a professional killer was a valuable experience for both *Dendro* and my real life.

Once, my target had been the King of Plagues — a Superior who'd gotten on all wanted lists for indiscriminately killing tens of thousands of tians. The battle had been so grueling that I'd thought I was gonna die for real, but I had somehow been able to defeat him and send him to the gaol.

My most recent job had been the newbie PK hunt at Noz Forest.

I didn't know who'd requested it, but I'd been presented with a sizable sum of money for it. Though I'd been averse to the idea of indiscriminately killing almost nothing but newbies, the fact that I hadn't done such assassinations before had greatly intrigued me. Also, I had recalled that *Into the Shadow* had an event where apprentice assassins of a certain organization were one-sidedly massacred, which had made me think that this might help me revitalize the Marie that was lying dormant inside me.

Thus, I'd accepted the job, entered Noz Forest, and started killing all the Masters there, among which was Ray.

I found him to be quite interesting. Despite being a newbie, he'd been able to survive the first of my Embryo's attacks. Then he'd gone on to block the second one, and had still had the willpower to deflect the third.

In the end, I'd used bullet creatures made from a mix of Black Pursuit and Blue Dispersion to finally give him the death penalty, but what mattered weren't the results.

The important thing here was the expressions and emotions he'd displayed.

While struggling against the death penalty, he was *alive*.

Well, of course he was. That applied to me, as well, but that wasn't a big deal.

What I meant by that was the fact that he was giving his all to survive here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

I didn't know whether he was aware of it or not, but he was actually doing his best to stay alive in this *game*.

Some players who had played as long as me became like that due to spending lots of time here. There were also people — like the cultists — who didn't think it was a game from the moment they entered here.

However, he was neither. Despite being a beginner — a rookie — he was more serious about living here than most of the countless players I'd encountered.

That fact had greatly intrigued me, making me believe that watching him would help me discover what I was missing and perhaps even revitalize the Marie sleeping within me. Eventually, after I figured he'd most likely revived, I had started looking for him.

In the process, I had gone through a ridiculous encounter with a battleship-riding furball — the King of Destruction — which had resulted in the complete immolation of Noz Forest.

I had survived that predicament, and I'd soon found Ray and his Embryo, Nemesis, talking to another newbie, Rook. Not missing the opportunity, I had pretended to be a passerby and ended up becoming a member of their party.

By the way, my job back then had always been Death Shadow.

The onmitsu grouping had a passive skill known as "Onmitsu Conceal." While having an onmitsu grouping job as my main one, it made the job display remove all the onmitsu grouping jobs and replaced the main job with the non-onmitsu job that had the highest level.

That was why the only jobs that showed up for others were Journalist and one other, while the stats appeared lowered, as well. I could choose to turn it off for my party members, but since I was kinda infiltrating Ray's party, I didn't do it.

Due to that, the Journalist passive skill "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword" gave me a bit of a problem.

Normally, it wouldn't have been a big deal, for it would've activated the moment I switched to being a Journalist. However, switching my job to one outside the onmitsu grouping would've disabled the effect hiding my total level, which was something I definitely didn't want. Thus, I'd stayed a Death Shadow and opted to fake the skill's effect by secretly using items that increased EXP gain for a certain amount of time.

It was hard on my wallet, though — 100,000 lir for every 30 minutes. Still, I believed that I had to bite the bullet and just bear having to make these expenses.

...After all, I'd made quite a lot of money from the newbie hunt.

Looking back, though I felt quite guilty about it and thought that I shouldn't have done it, the fact that I wouldn't have found Ray if I hadn't made it a bit complicated.

As our party had gathered and traveled to Gideon, we'd gotten involved in the battle against the goblin horde and their leader — The Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda.

Gardranda had been a very strong UBM.

UBMs all had something talent-like to them. While Gardranda had a lower level than the two UBMs I'd defeated, I had felt that its latent abilities were not to be trifled with.

Its level might've been low, but it was still a far stronger creature than the newbies Ray and Rook.

Normally, even Epic-tier UBMs required Masters with high-rank Embryos at their disposal, and even then, their chances of victory would be only about 50%. When facing such creatures, incomplete parties of Masters with low-rank Embryos simply had no chance — *no possibility*.

Victory could've been ours if I'd taken off my disguises and gone all-out, but I'd chosen not to do that. Sure, doing so would've revealed who I was, but that definitely wasn't the primary reason for that. I had wanted to see... to observe how Ray acted in a situation similar to the one in the forest — when faced with a being far stronger than himself.

Thus, I had limited myself only to things that didn't go beyond the capabilities of a Journalist, making sure not to sully the purity of the actions he took.

He had ended up breaking all my predictions and expectations.

He hadn't run away.

He hadn't abandoned people — even if they were tians.

Even when beaten by a power far greater than himself and even when his plans had fallen apart, he had never given up.

Until the very end, he had searched for possibilities and seized the one leading to victory against Gardranda.

Sure, I'd helped him out at the very end, but that was a triviality. Having given his all and used everything at his disposal, Ray had won against Gardranda. The instant I'd seen him stand victorious had actually made my heart throb.

He was as alive in *Infinite Dendrogram* as he was in the real world.

At that moment, I'd concluded that I wanted to see more of him. As a Journalist, as a manga artist, as Marie, and as myself, I wanted to observe him.

"I'm using the word 'observe,' but it's more that I merely grew fond of him," I said to myself. In all honesty, I wanted to reveal what I was and apologize for killing him. I wished for us to become friends.

However...

"...Ray and Nemesis's current goal is to find and defeat me."

On the way to Gideon and during the party we'd held once we'd arrived, he'd told us of his first death penalty and his intention to win against the one responsible — me. Listening to him had made beads of cold sweat form on my back.

"Revealing myself would probably hamper their determination... and I really don't want their motivation to go down..." Nemesis's reaction when she'd believed that I'd been defeated by the King of Destruction made it obvious that they were quite fired up about the prospect of revenge against me. Also, more importantly, I found that Ray was coolest when he gave his all to break through whatever was happening right before his eyes.

Thus, I chose not to interfere with their immediate goal and decided to wait until they became stronger. Then I would appear before them as a mysterious PK, and — just as they desired — face them with all I had.

As such thoughts raced through my mind, I saw the two I was thinking of approaching.

I waved my hand at the now-familiar Master and his Embryo — the people that had me so enchanted.

[MARIE STORY, END.]

Afterword

Bear: “The part after the midword is done, so now it’s time for the afterword! I’m the beary merry Brother Bear!”

Cat: “And I’m Cheshire — the one who didn’t really have any scenes in volume 3 outside of this corneerr!”

Bear: “Man, time sure flies, doesn’t it? We’re already at volume 3!”

Cat: “Thanks to all the support from our dear readers, the novels are coming out smoothly!”

Bear: “I remember when a certain someone at the first meeting said ‘if it doesn’t do well, I hope we get at least 3 volumes before canceling. That should be enough to cover Part 1.’ How nostalgic.”

Cat: “How they expected to fit all that into just 3 volumes is beyond me. As our dear readers can see, even when we got a bigger page number than usual, we still ended right as the main event began! There's no way Part 1 could've fit into just 3 voluumes!"

Bear: "Not to mention the fact that Ray bearly had a role in this one."

Cat: "He chatted, ate, chatted, ate, and then just watched a fight!"

Bear: "And the one doing most of the eating was Nemesis."

Cat: "I wouldn't have been surprised if the fang on the cover was shiining."

Bear: "Anyway, if this had been canceled after 3 volumes, the readers would've been in fur a beary summary-like experience."

Cat: "They might've had to cut the entire Figaro vs Xunyu battle."

Bear: "Or maybe just end it with the labcoat's appearance and tie it all up with a 'Our battle begins...!'"

Cat: "That's not tying up anything!"

Xun: "Gotta thaNk the readers that it didN'T cOme to that, eh?"

Bear/Cat: "...Who's there?!"

Xun: "Master Jiangshi, Xunyu. Since it's apparently necEssary, I'm joining tHe afterwords from noW on."

Cat: "Oh, I see... So you're saying that I'm about to lose even more of my already-few roles?!"

Xun: "You even got yoUr role cut out oF the manga, diDn't ya?"

Cat: "Don't say that! Don't remind me that I only have a picture of me grinning on the cover!"

Xun: "The manga is beiNg distributed bY Comic Fire, by the wAY."

Cat: "You even took the advertisement I was supposed to do! First Figaro's organs, now people's turns... Just how much of a thief are you?!"

Xun: "Okay, no. The one in chaRge of thieverY in this work is someoNe else, you know?"

Bear: (...Man, Xunyu already seems comfortable here.)

Bear: "You were on stage and in the limelight on this volume's illustrations, and you feel the same way here, eh, Dhalsim?"

Xun: "What diD you just cAll me?"

Bear: "You fight by stretching your limbs, using fire and teleportation. You're beary much Dhalsim, from *Street Fi*—"

Xun: "I don't do yOga. Also, I'm a womAn."

Cat: "Well, a jiangshi woman brings up images of a certain other fighting game character!"

Bear: “By the way, the author noticed Xunyu’s similarity to Dhalsim a long while after introducing her.”

Cat: “Anyway, it’s time for the familiar serious comment from the author.”

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

My work has reached volume 3 and — thanks to your support — will go beyond that, allowing me to continue my writing without any worries. You have my sincere gratitude for that.

Anyway, this volume has two significant points the previous two didn’t have.

First is the fact that there are stories which have people other than the protagonist — Ray Starling — as their main characters. I hope you enjoyed the stories you couldn’t see with just a single perspective and that they gave you a broader look at my work’s world.

The second point is that the current central plot didn’t end with this volume. The Figaro vs Xunyu fight and the two side stories are concluded in this volume, but a certain incident is continuing from this one into the fourth. Though, some might be inclined to say that the hand of fate has been leading to this ever since volume 1.

Infinite Dendrogram part 1’s greatest event will continue in volume 4, so please look forward to it.

Sakon Kaidou

Cat: “All right, it’s time for us to end the afterwoorrd!”

Bear: “Ray’s been a bit dormant in this volume, but that sure won’t be the case in the next one.”

Xun: “...Huh? Wait, I know I mAde fun of Cheshire abOut this, but whAt will I be doiNg in the next voLume?”

Bear: “Looking at how you ended up in this volume... I really have no clue.”

Cat: “You just keep sleeping in the barrier! I won’t give you my turns!”

Bear: “Well, my place is beary much secure (perfect attendance in the original webnovel).”

Cat: “Anyway, the story from this volume continues in vol—”

Xun: “Volume 4, which is sEt to come out in a cOupLE monTHs! Look forWard to it!”

Cat: “She stole it again!”

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 3
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2017 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: November 2017

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
Infinite Dendrogram
4. Franklin's Game

Infinite Dendrogram

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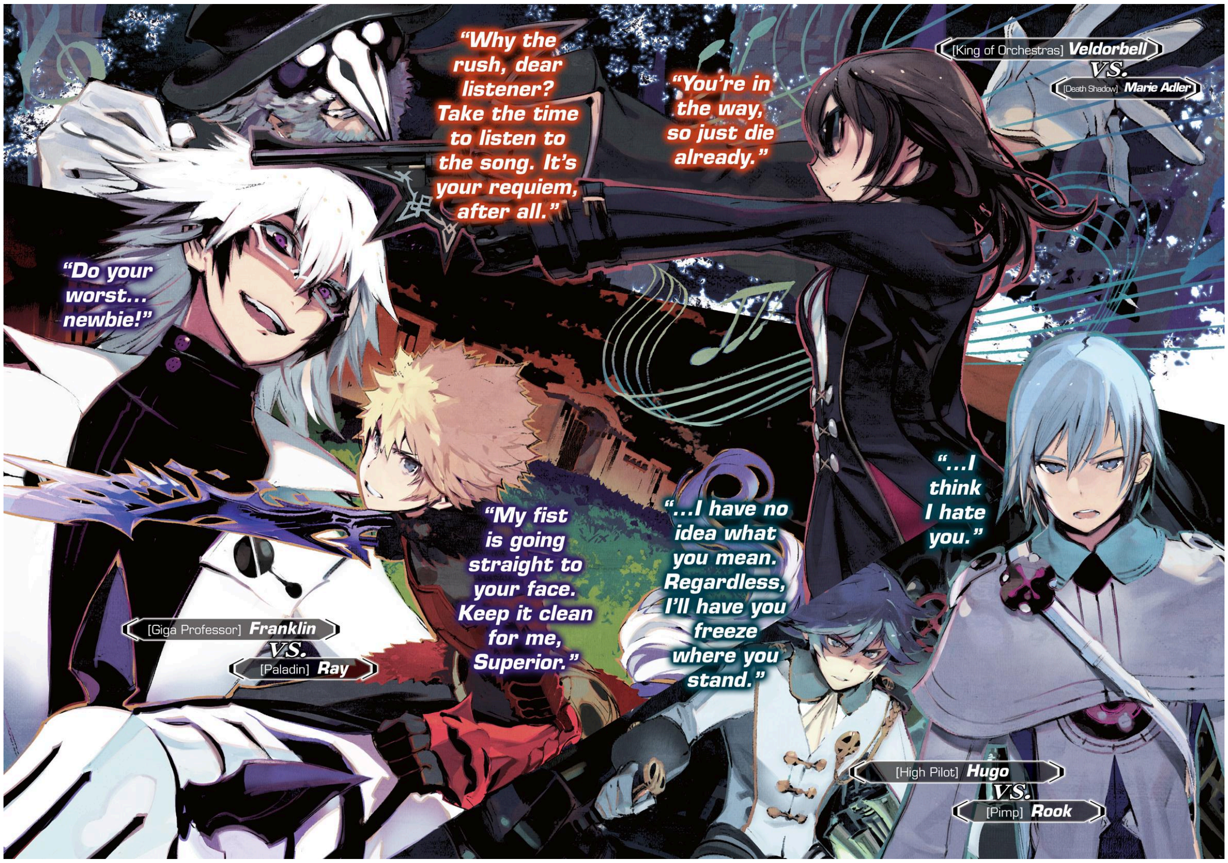
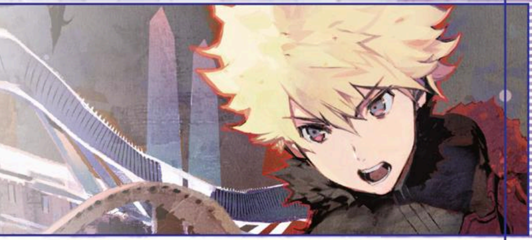

"Why the rush, dear listener? Take the time to listen to the song. It's your requiem, after all."
"You're in the way, so just die already."
[King of Orchestras] Veldorbell
VS.
[Death Shadow] Marie Adler
"Do your worst… newbie!"
"My fist is going straight to your face. Keep it clean for me, Superior."
[Giga Professor] Franklin
VS.
[Paladin] Ray
"…I have no idea what you mean. Regardless, I'll have you freeze where you stand."
"…I think I hate you."
[High Pilot] Hugo
VS.
[Pimp] Rook

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

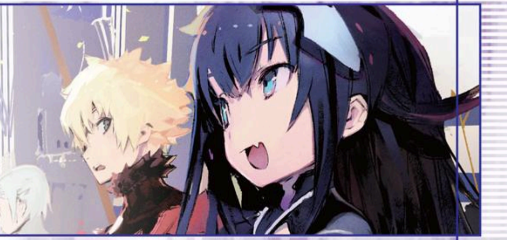
A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



Nemesis

Nemesis

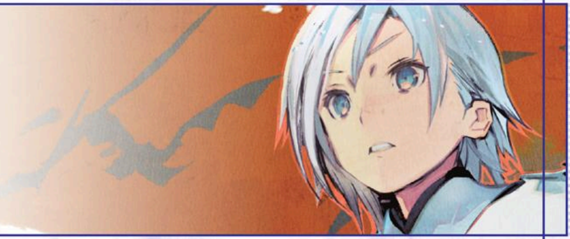
A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword or a halberd, and is equipped with skills such as Vengeance is Mine, which damages enemies for twice as much as they damage Ray.



Rook

Rook Holmes

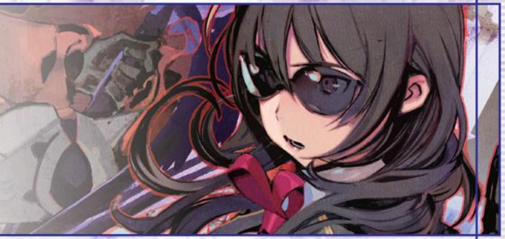
An astonishingly beautiful boy in Ray's party. His job is "Pimp" and he fights using his tamed monsters. His Embryo is the Type Guardian "Depraved Devil, Babylon."



Marie

Marie Adler

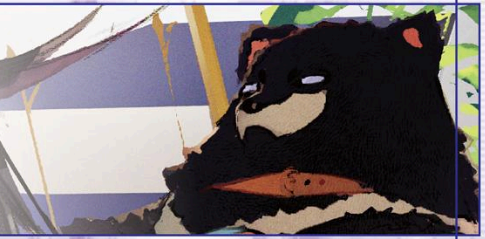
A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's brother and the one who invited him to the game. He wears a suit because, during character creation, he accidentally made himself look just like he does in real life.



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Continuation: Inside Their Minds

Three hours before The Clash of the Superiors, Count Gideon's residence

Gideon's first district was a gathering of official buildings and institutions. Among them were the knight offices, right next to which was the residence of the local ruler: Count Gideon.

Due to both buildings sharing a similar design focused on steadiness and modesty, most would've assumed that Count Gideon's mansion was nothing but an extension of the offices. This was because the first Count Gideon had believed that the spirit of Gideon lied within its arenas, and that gaudy castles wouldn't fit the city's character.

However, many matches since then had been attended by royalty and other guests of honor, making it necessary for the Gideons to build a luxurious guest house for them to stay in.

Thus, the residence of Count Gideon was a curious structure with a modest main building and a fancy annexe. The main office of said modest building was currently occupied by three people wearing serious facial expressions.

One was the young Count Gideon, Aschbarray Gideon.

One was the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard, the Paladin Liliana Grandria.

And the last one was the second princess of the Kingdom of Altar, Elizabeth S. Altar.

They were among the most important tians currently present in the city.

Elizabeth broke the silence. "So my older sister isn't coming?"

"Yes." Count Gideon nodded. "I've been informed that she is currently unwell and could not heal in time to depart for Gideon today. Apparently, there's an Epidemic happening in the capital." He was passing on to them what he'd been told via communication magic from the capital.

Elizabeth had arrived at this city to attend the great event happening this evening — The Clash of the Superiors. But it had originally been planned that her older sister, the current leader of the country, would attend it as well.

"An Epidemic..." sighed Liliana while covering her mouth and making a sour expression.

"Epidemic" was a term used to describe any sudden diseases that spread among the weak and strong alike. Masters saw it as an unpatterned, irregular, widespread *Infinite Dendrogram* event. There were various Epidemics that covered many large areas, creating sufferers among both Masters and tians. Though some went away with the passage of time, some required special healing methods such as vaccines or healing magic available only to Superior Jobs.

Fortunately, the Epidemic that had spread through the kingdom this time wasn't life-threatening, being more like a common cold than any other disease.

However, Epidemics completely ignored all stats and resistances. Even high-level Masters would become bedridden or simply log out until the disease went away. They were considered to be natural disasters above human knowledge. Indeed, it was quite fortuitous that the damage being done by the current Epidemic was so meager.

Still, Count Gideon, the host of today's event, could barely hide his chagrin about its inconvenient timing, and Liliana shared his sentiment.

There had been trouble caused by Elizabeth sneaking out of the building yesterday, but most of the official business and preparations relating to the event were already done.

Most of it had had to do with the arrival and welcoming of Elizabeth's older sister, first princess Altimia, and now it had all gone to waste. Being an older sister herself, Liliana tried to be considerate of Elizabeth's feelings about this.

"I see! Very well!" Elizabeth said with a voice that made it seem like Liliana's worries had been misplaced. "It's a shame, but we should not dwell on what we can do nothing about! Now, we should be thinking about how to make this event a success! Am I right, Count Gideon?!"

"Indeed you are!" he said heartily.

Elizabeth's words were full of resolve. Though her beloved sister couldn't come, she was determined to do her duty, in the hopes that it would help her sister.

“Your Highness...” muttered Liliana. Though Elizabeth’s current bearing wasn’t completely unlike her, the lady knight felt as if there was something different about her — as if she had become more of an adult.

Perhaps something happened when she sneaked out yesterday? Liliana wondered.

Suddenly, Elizabeth grabbed her hand in both of hers. “Liliana, I want you to protect me!” she declared.

“...Of course! I will keep you safe no matter what happens,” replied Liliana, fully ready to fulfill her duty.

She would protect the girl under any circumstances — no matter what awaited them.

Chapter One: “The Weakest, The Worst” Superior

Journalist/Death Shadow, Marie Adler

I knew about the top three of the Dryfe Imperium’s rankings before the war even happened. Being both a Journalist and a player killer, I had to be fully informed about the strongest Masters.

The tops of Dryfe’s duel, kill, and clan rankings were all cut from different cloths.

The commander of devilish armies was the Hell General, Logan Goddhart, the “Contradictory Equation.”

The one bearing the greatest stats was the King of Beasts, the “Physically Strongest.”

Finally, the leader of the imperium’s top clan was the Triangle of Wisdom, Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin.

The only one out of the three who hadn’t been a Superior at the time of the war was Franklin. Not only that, his only job was a non-battle job, and he had stats that put him below even the average low-rank battle job. Comparing him to King of Beasts the “Physically Strongest” or The Earth the “Magically Strongest” made him seem absolutely meaningless.

Of course, unlike the other rankings, clan rankings were focused on the scopes of the clans.

Though the leader of a top clan lacking power was curious, it had absolutely no impact on the clan’s position.

Most thought that, in war, the person at the top of the clan rankings was supposed to show their ability through the whole clan, rather than as an individual. But to everyone’s surprise, the result had been entirely different. What the war had shown was not the fearsomeness of the Triangle of Wisdom, but of Franklin himself.

Despite not being a Superior at that point in time, he definitely hadn’t been outdone by the other two.

The Superior Job of Giga Professor specialized in monster research, while Franklin's Embryo, Pandemonium, specialized in monster production.

Though focused on the same subject, research and production were completely different things, and Franklin combined them to create monsters with many various qualities.

Some were immune to physical attacks, some reflected magic, some exploded when nearing death, some latched on and assumed control, etcetera, etcetera...

The ones who had faced Franklin's wicked band had been the few kingdom's Masters who'd participated in the war and the kingdom's own army. When both sides clashed, the results had been simply tragic.

The fact that every monster was a wild card with unpredictable abilities had quickly brought disorder into the kingdom's ranks, which had left them open to the specially-made monsters that rivaled Superior Jobs in power. Naturally, they had made short work of the kingdom's Masters and gone on to feast on the king himself.

The price of making this monstrous army had no doubt been astronomical, for the necessary funds to acquire the materials required for monster creation were great. However, for Franklin, who was the top of Dryfe's largest clan and also had the backing of the imperium itself, money was no issue. That allowed him and his clan to participate in the war at full capacity and demonstrate just how fearsome an individual he was.

After the war, I, as a PKer... as the Superior Killer... had received many requests for Franklin's murder.

The ones making the requests had been Masters who'd been pushed into the death penalty by him, or friends and family of the tian soldiers who'd died. I had rejected each and every one of these requests.

Of course, I hadn't neglected to consider them. If he was a foe I could kill, I would just do it. But that simply wasn't the case.

With a single glance, I knew that I could kill him easily, but I couldn't do it because I knew that *something bad would happen if I did*.

Some time had passed since I'd refused those requests. The people who'd made them weren't the only ones with a grudge against Franklin. Many had tried attacking him themselves, and though most of them had been destroyed by his monsters, one person had actually defeated him.

Considering Franklin's poor stats, it hadn't been exactly unexpected. However, what had happened afterwards was simply off. After returning from his death penalty, Franklin had hunted down the one who'd killed him, fought him, and emerged victorious this time.

Then, he did it again.

And again, and again, and again.

And again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again...

Franklin had created monsters that the guy had the worst compatibility with and spent a whole month of real-world time relentlessly killing the one who'd defeated him. Eventually, the person had stopped logging in to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Though weak, he made the worst monsters.

Though weak, he had the worst disposition.

"The Weakest, The Worst" was my exact evaluation of him, and his most popular nickname.

In all honesty, I was aware of another good contestant for "The Worst," but that was irrelevant here.

Anyway, his sudden appearance meant far more than just that "one of the kingdom's irreconcilable enemies had appeared."

There was no doubt that he was about to do something bad.

◇◇◇

Paladin, Ray Starling

The moment Franklin named himself, countless people in the venue showered him in arrows, bullets, and offensive magic.

With him standing on the top of the barrier, many of the attacks got canceled by it. However, it was still a fearsome barrage of damage. I could even spot a number of high-rank attacks like the ones I'd seen during the matches, some of which might've actually been done by Superior Jobs. The barrier underneath Franklin's feet shook wildly as explosions hit it and covered the top with smoke.

Despite bearing the brunt of the barrage, Franklin came out alive.

"Get a load of you people. Duel City folk. Hot-blooded as they come and always quick to react," he sneered.

His lab coat being scorched here and there was proof that he'd been hit, but for some reason, it hadn't killed him.

"Why is he alive?" I asked.

"There's nothing special about what he's done so far," said Marie.

"Yeah." Shu nodded.

I had no idea what had happened, but they seemed to have full understanding of it.

"He survived the first few critical attacks with warding accessories and equipment skills," Marie continued.

"Then, he used Castling to shelter himself from the rest," added Shu.

"What's 'Castling'?" asked Rook.

"It's a skill that lets the user change places with one of his monsters, Rook," explained Marie. "It's a high-rank skill, but its effective range is so small that it's rare for it to be used as a teleport skill. Still, merely being among the few teleport skills is enough to make it noteworthy."

I see, I thought. So he'd survived the first attacks using the same things I'd used against the Demi-Dragon and the rest by simply disappearing away from here.

"Oh, but do be careful not to attack me anymore! Don't wanna end up in the gaol, now, do we?" Franklin mocked.

The gaol?

Confused by his words, I focused my gaze on him. As I watched, a single songbird appeared in his arms.

"Because that's exactly where you're going if you accidentally hit *this* little lady," said Franklin, and a moment later, the bird got replaced by something else — a girl, to be precise.

"Ellie!" Marie burst out, with a voice full of shock.

It was Elizabeth S. Altar — the person from the photo I'd seen yesterday and in the noble seats today. I hastily looked to the guest of honor seating and, sure enough, she wasn't there.

"So... this guy actually made a monster that can do Castling with third parties," said Shu.

What? Is it even possible to create something like that? I asked myself, but the answer was obvious with a single glance at the results — the second princess was out of her seat and in Franklin's hands.

Seemingly unconscious, the girl didn't even struggle.

"Have I made myself clear, you dumbasses?" Franklin smirked.

"Royalty killers go straight to the gaol, you know? Careful not to do that... Not like I'm one to talk! Ayyyyy... HAHAHAHAHAH!"

The man who'd killed the father of the girl in his hands laughed as though he'd just said the funniest joke in the world.

"Aaaaall righty, then," he continued. "With your hands all tied up now, allow me to make a sug—"

Before Franklin could finish, someone in the audience launched offensive magic that exploded right next to him.

"Huh?!" I exclaimed and looked to the spell's source, where I saw a Master doing a fist pump.

"Is he an idiot?!" Marie shouted my thoughts before I could.

The guy has the princess right next to him! You can't be so careless about this!

"Ooookaaaayyy," Franklin said as he appeared out of the smoke caused by the explosion. Both he and the princess were unharmed, meaning that he'd done something to prevent the effects of that attack.

"Do you fail to grasp the situation?" he asked the attacker. "I have taken the princess as a hostage. I am also talking... *trying* to talk... And then there's youuuu! Why did you attack me?! Why? I just can't understand it! Are you an idiot? Or a hothead? Or perhaps both?"

Franklin roughly scratched his head, clearly none too pleased with the situation.

"Hotheaded idiots like you should just cool off," he said, causing a blue liquid to gush out beneath the Master that had attacked him.

The blue liquid, the Slime, instantly surrounded the Master. "Hhh ————————"

It created a scene that was downright hellish.

A moment after he got consumed, both his skin and equipment melted, becoming indistinguishable from each other. He screamed, but the blue Slime's body reduced his voice to bubbles that didn't even make it outside. If that had been the extent of it, this Slime would've been much like the carnivorous slime from that one horror movie. However, it had other qualities.

Specifically, its surroundings were freezing.

Not only did it melt anything inside it — it also spread damaging frost to its surroundings.

“Say hello to my little Oxygen Slime, working title: Destroyer,” said Franklin. “Handmade by yours truly, he’s among the better ones I’ve created recently, if I say so myself.”

The tone he had while presenting the Oxygen Slime was much like that of someone submitting a cake to a cookery contest. Yet, naturally, it was nothing that hearty. The Oxygen Slime was consuming, melting, and freezing the spectators unfortunate enough to be around it. Soon enough, one of them released a surge of fire towards it.

“Good job, dum-dum,” muttered Franklin as the blaze hit the Slime and caused a large explosion.

First frost, now flame — a sizeable part of the audience seating was engulfed in a blue inferno.

“Come on now. I know that the go-to response to Slimes is fire, but I didn’t expect to see some brainlets here actually go with that. Were you even listening to me? I called it an ‘Oxygen Slime.’ Do you even know what ‘oxygen’ is? I hope for everyone’s safety that your stupid, liquid oxygen-lighting ass is forbidden from participating in experiments during science class.”

Liquid oxygen — a substance acquired by condensing oxygen gas in the extremely low temperature of minus 182.96 Celsius. It was a highly hazardous, volatile substance that had a great enough oxidation potential to see it used as rocket fuel.

“All of that blue is actually liquid oxygen...” I muttered.

“I remember having to mess with it in a chemistry class,” said Shu.

I had similar recollections. We had done experiments where we had to cool plastic bags full of oxygen using liquid nitrogen.

“By the way, there’s no point in lighting him even when you’re prepared for the explosion,” added Franklin. “Blow him up, and my boy Destroyer instantly regenerates using the oxygen in the air.” Sure enough, at the center of the explosion, there was the Oxygen Slime, quickly restoring itself until it regained its original size.

A creature that’s corrosive, indestructible, and explosive... Likely among the worst monsters you could face, I thought as I noticed something.

The Masters that had died because of it had become particles and vanished. There were no corpses to be seen within the reach of the explosion.

No tians got caught up in it, it seems. What a silver lining.

"Anyway, this brainlet interference derailed us a bit, but I think I'm free to speak my demands now, yeah? Unless anyone else wants to try and play hero," he said while standing on the barrier, looking fully confident that no one would get in his way.

"Let's play a game!" he shouted as he procured a strange switch and held it in his hand.

"BEEP," he said as he pressed it, making another Oxygen Slime pop out in another part of the audience.

Thankfully, unlike the first time, no one got caught up in it, but its appearance alone was enough to make the spectators there panic and start running away from it.

"That might've been enough for you to understand, but this switch is linked to the gadgets I set. As for what they do... they release the monsters I've prepared, like my Destroyers here. One press releases one monster at random," he said, making most of the audience hastily get up and try to leave, but his words didn't end there. "By the way, even if I don't press it, *all of them* will be released in about an hour, and I have these gadgets placed *all over Gideon*."

"What?!" I heard Count Gideon sound his shock from his noble seating. It was only natural, for the town he ruled had become a target for monster terrorism.

Not only that, given his willingness to terrify the audience to the point of madness and to do such terrorism, it was quite obvious that Franklin didn't care about any potential tian casualties.

"There are two ways to stop this," Franklin said with an extremely pleased smile on his face. "Either destroy this switch or give me the death penalty. That would stop the gadgets and make all the released monsters disappear. Simple, isn't it?"

Defeating him here and now would end it all, but...

"...Strange," I muttered. "Why is he...?"

Before I could voice my question...

"Oh yeah, this has nothing to do with the monsters, but I'm taking your little princess, okay? Thanks." Franklin took the unconscious princess into his hands. "Stop the monsters and save the princess!" he shouted. "Basic enough, is it not? Do your best, O Masters of the kingdom! That would be all, then! Adieu!”

Then Franklin once again used Castling to disappear somewhere, princess in hand.

A moment later, the venue was mired in chaos and enraged roars.

Some panicked, others screamed, others moved aimlessly in confusion. I could see some Masters dashing out of the arena in an attempt to hunt down Franklin, while some went to get rid of the two Oxygen Slimes here.

The ones who took to action shared a single sentiment — rage against Franklin, who’d started this incident and ruined tonight’s event. I was no different in that regard.

“This goddamn son of a...!” I sputtered.

In Franklin’s eyes, this was probably nothing but a game. Well, yes, *Infinite Dendrogram* was exactly that — a game.

However, even here, there were lines that shouldn’t be crossed, and he was getting really close to doing it.

“Yeah, I know exactly what you mean,” said Shu while nodding. “Riddle me this, though: why does he see it necessary to announce this little game of his?”

That was the same thing I was wondering about. He claimed to have set gadgets with Oxygen Slimes and other monsters all over the arena and the rest of the city.

That meant that his act of terrorism was 100% prepared and that he could start it any time he wanted, and yet...

“Terrorism and kidnappings are usually done without any prior notice,” said Shu. “Yet he went out of his way to announce it to this giant audience. Do you know what that means?”

“Well...” I said. From his mannerisms, it was obvious that Franklin was enjoying this. However, I felt that something was off... that there was more to it than it seemed.

His announcement seemed to be much like the one Xunyu had made before the start of The Clash of the Superiors. It appeared to have a hidden intention, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was.

“This is just my conjecture.” Rook joined our conversation. “But I think the goal behind his announcement is to make it seem like it’s possible to prevent it and *then have us fail*.”

“But why?” I asked.

“It’s likely that he—”

Before Rook could finish his words, we heard sounds of confusion coming not from the audience, but from outside our box — from the lobby. Listening carefully, I could make out some people saying something about a “barrier” and that they “couldn’t leave.”

“Let’s go to the lobby,” said Shu.

“...Yeah!” I nodded. Rook, Nemesis, Babi, and I all left our box. That was when I realized that Marie, who had been with us just a moment ago, had disappeared somewhere.

In the lobby, we saw nearly a hundred Masters trying to get outside the arena. They certainly weren’t the main issue here, for there was a barrier that separated the arena and the city, preventing any of them from leaving.

“Isn’t that just like the barrier used in the arena?” I asked. “Did he actually...?”

“It appears that he did,” nodded Nemesis.

So, besides the one that shrouded only the stage, there was also a barrier that covered the entire arena.

Franklin had taken control of it, and he had used it to prevent us, the Masters, from leaving the arena and getting in the way of his game.

“Damn it! What the hell?!” someone shouted.

“Why is a single player able to mess with the system?!” someone else yelled.

“Let us out!”

The Masters gathered here tried to leave, but alas, their efforts were in vain.

“I had a bad feeling when he shut out Figaro and Xunyu, but it looks like Franklin got total control over the barriers here,” said Shu.

Can a player really...? Oh, wait, I realized.

“The barrier system is run by nothing but some ancient technology, after all,” Shu continued. “It always has to be activated manually, too. That makes it possible for even us Masters to influence it and force it to do things like this, it seems.”

“It appears so,” said Rook. “And he started this game exactly because he’s capable of this. It makes his victory absolute and the defeat of the kingdom’s Masters unavoidable.”

If we didn’t stop the terrorism he had so loudly announced, it would mean that the Masters gathered here in Gideon had lost the game.

...All right, this is really bad, I thought.

"Let's use brute force!" shouted one of the Masters. "Lots of focused high-rank skills should be enough to break it!"

Many were quick to join him. He wasn't wrong. After all, both Xunyu and Figaro had been able to open holes in the ceiling of the barrier shrouding their fight. If enough power was applied, it shouldn't have been impossible to break it.

Soon enough, the attacks of several dozens of Masters hit the barrier.

Though it was clearly tougher than the ceiling part broken by Xunyu and Figaro, it became visibly thinner. If these attacks continued, the barrier could momentarily break and allow us to go outside.

As most in the lobby turned hopeful, the sound of an explosion somewhere in the arena reached our ears. Not only that, but there were some destructive sounds coming from certain parts of the city, as well.

When the Masters here became puzzled about what they were hearing, an unpleasant laugh rang out around us.

"AH HA HA! Looks like we have some silly gooses trying to break the barrier!"

Shortly after we looked around and tried to find the source of the voice, we found a permeable Franklin — his hologram.

"Greetings, ladies and gents. Sure hasn't been long, has it?" he said. "Oh, what you're seeing is our clan's latest product. Seems useful, no? It costs 8,000,000 lir. A bit heavy on the wallet, but we're selling these once the war is done. Drop by and get one if you feel like it."

He presented his product and its price in a manner that was both courteous and mocking.

"Anyway, about this barrier... Having you all just get fired up and break it would've annoyed me, so I put a bit of a limit on it. A single attack makes one random gadget release its monster, and if you manage to break it completely, *all of them* will be released before the time limit. Oh, the same applies for the barrier on the stage, by the way."

His words made the Masters in the lobby freeze in their tracks.

"Oh no, do carry on if you feel like it," he said. "Though I can't begin to care about any casualties that'd cause! Lol!"

"Damn it!" one Master shouted as he released an offensive skill towards the permeable Franklin.

Naturally, with that Franklin being just a hologram, he came out completely unhurt. However, the attack seemed to have broken the device projecting it, making his grinning mug disappear from sight. Still, whether the hologram was here or not, we could no longer rely on brute force, leaving us with nothing we could do.

“This is bad,” said Rook. “At this rate, the kingdom’s Masters will be completely defeated.”

“So what?” asked Babi. “If he wins, he will only brag about it and that’s it, right?”

“No, Babi.” Rook shook his head. “Well, it’s true that, to us Masters, it would be nothing but a meaningless defeat. However, *Infinite Dendrogram* has other sentient beings, too.”

The tians.

To them, the results of this incident might have a completely different meaning.

“I see how it is,” said Nemesis with a grave tone, clearly understanding exactly what Rook wanted to say. “At this rate, the kingdom will lose before the second war even begins.”

“Yes.” He nodded.

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The City of Duels, Gideon

There was something flying over Gideon, a mere hundred metels above ground. It was a single monster.

Strangely enough, its stomach and sides both seemed to melt into the night sky, making it extremely difficult to spot with the naked eye. However, its back was covered in fur with a texture reminiscent of Persian carpets, and two people were sitting on it.

One of them was Giga Professor Mr. Franklin, the one who’d created the monster and named it “Night Lounge.” The other was the person he’d kidnapped: Elizabeth, the second princess of the Kingdom of Altar.

Having regained her consciousness right after getting put on the Night Lounge, the girl was looking at Franklin. It wasn’t a hateful glare, but a puzzled stare.

“Why did you kidnap me?” she voiced her confusion.

“Oh? Does a person affiliated with the imperium, such as yours truly, really need a reason to kidnap this country’s royalty?” he asked in response.

“That is not what I meant.” Elizabeth shook her head and faced him before asking. “Why are you not killing me, like you did my father?”

“Hmm. For someone who’s so clearly aware of that fact, you certainly are composed.”

“May I have an answer?”

“Oh, right. That’s ’cause I was told not to kill ya. Not like I would’ve done it if I wasn’t. Anyway, I’ll be cordial with you, so do calm down. Want some candy?”

“No.”

“Psh, typical.” Clearly not bothered by her harsh response to his offer, Franklin began wiping his glasses and continued talking. “If our countries peacefully merge, you’ll be able to return to the royal capital, safe and sound. So, again, there’s no need for you to worry.”

“And what if peace doesn’t happen?” she asked.

“You’ll be returning to a flattened wasteland. After all, if peace isn’t an option, we’re having an all-out war,” he said as he put his glasses back on again. “Well, if things go according to that lunatic’s... His Majesty’s plans, you’ll be perfectly fine. I don’t think he wants to be hated by his potential sister-in-law or the one who’d be his empress.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“‘What,’ indeed? Well, let’s just say that your father was in the way, while you are *not*. Leave it at that.” He cut the subject short, showing absolutely no intention to emphasize.

“Then let me ask you something else,” said the princess. “Why are you attacking Gideon?”

Though the empty air around them was silent, screams and sounds of destruction could be heard coming from the ground beneath. Franklin’s pawns and the monsters that had already been released were already causing chaos in the city. She asked merely because she wished to know the reason behind such carnage and despair.

In response, Franklin formed an unpleasant grin.

“This is a side show to celebrate the end of the event we call ‘war’!” he shouted while spinning around the Night Lounge and making exaggerated arm movements. “It’s both a game and an initiation!”

“‘Initiation’?” she repeated.

“The strongest knight, the greatest sage, and the kindly, fatherly king have all died. The people are leaving. Despair is all around. There’s no future to be had here, for the kingdom is already in checkmate — everyone knows this.” Franklin brought his face so close to hers that it seemed as though he was about to touch her eyes with his tongue. “Tell me, then. Why do you think the kingdom hasn’t given up yet?”

Shocked, Elizabeth slightly backed away as Franklin made a pleased grin.

“That’s because you have your Masters.”

He lightly tapped Night Lounge’s back with the tip of his nail.

“Everyone thinks that the kingdom lost the war because most of the people on the rankings didn’t participate.”

Slowly, but surely, the joy in his tone faded until he was speaking with no emotion in his voice.

“That’s not exactly wrong. We won so easily because they weren’t there to stop us.”

He sighed, shook his head, and turned his back to Elizabeth.

“Still, you’ve gotta know when to give up. ‘We’ll win if the Masters participate in the next war,’ they say. ‘The kingdom is still undefeated,’ they proclaim. It’s a real pain in the ass. War isn’t free, you know?”

His voice was now thick with frustration.

“This Clash of the Superiors thing is the ultimate example of this. It’s just a huge ‘We can do it’ done by demonstrating the power of the kingdom’s Superiors! It’s a big old dick-measuring contest and it PISSES! ME! OFF!”

He spouted that while looking at the central arena, which became more distant by the second.

“If, by some freak accident, this country’s Superiors all participate in the next war, it’s entirely possible that the situation will do a complete 180. Hell, we might even end up completely defeated.”

That unpleasant fact turned his expression bitter, but that face was soon replaced by a maddened grin.

“That’s why, before anything troublesome happens, I came here to break this country’s spirit.”

Franklin’s expression was that of a hellish jester, and it seemed to take a toll on the sanity of anyone merely looking at it.

“Tell me, if the kingdom’s Masters just sit around and twiddle their thumbs while a city gets destroyed and a princess gets kidnapped,” he said as his grin became even wider, “would this country’s tians still have any hope left for their Masters? Would they still have the willpower to resist?”

His expression still the same, he covered his face with both of his hands.

“The kingdom’s liveliest city... The city with most of the kingdom’s fighting power... The kingdom’s strongest Over Gladiator...”

Then, as if praising something, he raised his hands to the sky and laughed out loud.

“This is the night of despair! This is when all the myths surrounding this city die!”

The laughter of the one putting Gideon in peril resounded throughout the city’s skies.

“Really?” said a certain little girl with a voice that was easily drowned out by the laughter. “I do not believe you’re right.”

Elizabeth, having solid memories of a Master she’d spent the whole previous day with, was still hopeful.

She said quietly, “I believe that the kingdom’s Masters... are people we can rely on.”

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Paladin, Ray Starling

“Brother Bear,” spoke Nemesis. “How strong, do you think, are the kingdom’s forces outside of the arena?”

“That would be the Royal Guard tasked with protecting the princess, Gideon’s own knight order, and the weirdo Masters that didn’t come to watch The Clash of the Superiors.”

It wasn’t like the Masters here in the arena were the only ones in the city. The people outside should’ve been able to do something about this, too, but...

“But any self-respecting battle-oriented Master came to see today’s match,” Shu continued. “The only such Masters who didn’t are the ones who couldn’t get tickets. However, that mostly happens due to monetary issues or lack of knowledge of the right people, both of which are solved naturally if you're strong. Meaning that the Masters outside the arena tonight aren't exactly the strongest."

That was likely one of the reasons why Franklin picked this night — the one with The Clash of the Superiors — to seal the kingdom's Masters inside the arena.

"There might be some tough guys who didn't come to see the fight just because, but I bet that Franklin thought of a counter to them, too," Shu added as he used his bear chin to point to the plaza outside the central arena.

I had no idea how long they'd been there, but there was a number of Masters and monsters in the plaza. They clearly had no intention of doing anything about the city's chaos, making it pretty obvious that they were preparing to attack anyone leaving the arena.

"Franklin's people, surely," said Shu. "With those guys there and the monsters messing the city up, getting to and defeating Franklin himself will be no small task."

"Gh..." I grumbled. There was absolutely nothing we could do about this situation. More importantly... with this barrier sealing us here, not even *I* could do anything. "If only..."

If only we... the Masters here in the arena... could get out and participate in the fight, our chances would go up.

"If this barrier wasn't here, I..."

I slowly extended my hand towards it, holding back the urge to punch it.

With any offense on it being a trigger that released monsters, attacking it wasn't an option. However, unable to contain my frustration, I reached to touch the barrier... and my fingers went right through it.

"...Eh?" I sounded my confusion as the nearly hundred Masters in the lobby started making noise about it.

"He... He went through!"

"What the hell?! I couldn't do it!"

"Did the barrier disappear...? OW! It's still here!"

"H-Hey! Does your Embryo have some barrier-related skills?!"

"N-None that I'm aware of..." I was more confused here than anyone else. There was no way I could answer that.

"Ray," my brother addressed me.

Strangely enough, him speaking made the entire lobby instantly turn completely silent.

I heard someone whisper things like “Oh, it’s that costume guy,” “So kid mountain also came to watch the fight,” and “The bear wasn’t an NPC?” My brother seemed to be strangely famous.

However, none of that mattered right now. What mattered was that, despite him wearing the suit, I could tell that he was looking directly at me.

“What’s your total level?” he asked.

“Total level?” Puzzled, I repeated those words before answering. “It’s 41.” My answer made the Masters in the lobby realize something and talk amongst themselves. Meanwhile, my brother...

“Khah... HAHAHAH!”

...laughed out loud.

“Of course!” he cried. “This is an arena’s barrier, after all! Of course you can pass it!”

“Bro, I’m completely lost here.”

“Oh, it’s really simple. Arena barriers prevent people going in and out of them. Otherwise, they’d be completely meaningless and make spectating duels into a life-threatening activity. However, that means absolutely nothing to people with a total level of 50 or below, who can’t participate in duels *because they pass through the barriers*.”

“...Oh!”

Yeah, well, I looked it up and found out that you can only participate when your total level is 51 or above.

Those were my own words from yesterday. People with a total level of 50 or below couldn’t participate in duels because they could freely pass through the barriers.

“I see. That means that...!” Rook, me, and the other few low-level Masters here could leave the arena and go help the people outside.

“Search the arena and get the help of all the Masters level 50 or below!” my brother called.

“Supporters with levels 51 and above, hit the newbies with buffs and autoheals! The rest of you, go take care of the monsters messing up the arena!”

“All right! We now have a way to indirectly slap that shitty lab coat!”

Once aware of this opportunity, the veteran Masters were quick to react, becoming battle-ready in but a moment.

"You are aware of what this means, yes?" Rook asked Shu.

"Yeah," Shu nodded. "As one who can control the barrier, Franklin is surely aware of this loophole. However, he didn't say anything along the lines of 'I'll release the monsters if you leave the arena,' meaning that he left this loophole on purpose."

It was pretty obvious that Franklin was a huge bastard and had a high degree of thoroughness in his plans, meaning that this loophole was here for a reason.

Even so...

"Ray."

"...Bro."

Before I'd realized it, he was standing right next to me. He was looking at me with seriousness that was obvious even though he wore a bear suit.

"We have a loophole. However, it's extremely likely that it's one of his traps, and even if it isn't, the things awaiting you are skilled players, an army of monsters, and he himself — a Superior."

"Mh..."

Franklin was a Superior — the same tier as Figaro and Xunyu, both of which had displayed immense power in their duel. That meant that I was about to get into a predicament that would surpass my deadly battles against UBMs, and even the time when the Superior Killer had given me the death penalty. I might be heading straight to my second death penalty. In fact, that would be the natural outcome.

But still, I...

"There's no doubt that you're gonna die... Will you still go?" my brother asked.

"Let me ask *you* something, instead, bro. Right before my eyes, a girl was kidnapped and a town is being destroyed. Letting it happen would give me the worst aftertaste in my mouth. Do you think I'm a sensible enough individual to give up and do nothing?"

I happened to be someone who didn't know when to quit. I'd keep reaching for the light for as long as I could.

"I knew you'd say that." Shu chuckled and gave me something. It was an item reminiscent of another time — a Dragonscale Ward. "I'm out of Brooches. This is all I can give you... Take it."

“Sure. Thanks.”

“I’ll join you when the barrier’s dealt with,” he said. “You can overdo stuff all you want, but make sure you’re alive by the time I come. And I *will* come — you can count on that.”

“Yeah. I’ll be relying on you... Shu.”

Not too long after that, the preparations were done. Rook and I were surrounded by other Masters who’d yet to hit level 51. They amounted to a total of twenty-two. Though relatively powerless and aware of it, all of them were Masters who’d volunteered to help end Franklin’s plans. That display of will alone made them seem reliable.

And to the right of me, I had the companion I relied on more than anyone else.

“Let’s go, Ray,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah,” I replied as I took her hand, after which she transformed into the familiar black greatsword.

“Time for a retaliation!”

Then the twenty-four of us newbies all charged towards the board of the game set up by that foul Superior.

Let the quest begin!

Chapter Two: Irregular Newbies

The central arena's lobby, ten minutes before the newbies went out to battle

In the central arena, the veteran Masters were gathering and preparing the newbies that would leave the barrier and go to battle. At the same time, they were using their Embryos and skills to gather information regarding the forces they'd face.

Rook, being one of those who would head to battle, made his own preparations.

"So we're about to fight other players..." he muttered.

"Yep," said Babi.

The battle he was about to partake in wasn't just a sparring match under the protection of the arena barriers.

Failure would mean getting the death penalty and being removed from the ranks of those struggling against the chaos in the city.

If that happened, Rook would be unable to help Ray, which was something he couldn't tolerate.

"At least we have *some* experience in this," he muttered.

Fighting the player killers outside the arena wouldn't be Rook's first PvP experience. He was fortunate enough to have a sparring match just before this incident began.

Closing his eyes, Rook ran his mind over how it had gone.

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It happened at noon, on the same day that Rook *realized Marie's true identity*.

"This 'Superior Killer' that Ray often talks about... It's you, isn't it?" he whispered into Marie's ear right after they and Ray went separate ways.

"H-How did you know...?! I-I mean, no no no no! I'm not!" she burst out, the bewilderment in her voice all too apparent. Normally, she would have been able to hide it relatively well, but the surprise factor had made her blurt out the equivalent of "Yes, that's true," making Rook turn absolutely certain of his conjecture.

"O-Oh, come now, I-I'm definitely not the man known as the Superior Killer." Marie still tried to salvage it.

"Then allow me to present you with the circumstantial evidence I've gathered," said Rook.

"Eh?"

Thus, he began listing the reasons why he had come to this conclusion.

First: despite the Superior Killer's age and gender being unknown, Marie often referred to him as a man. To Rook, it seemed like an attempt to give the entity a different image than her own.

Second: her behavior when talking to Ray about the Superior Killer's thoughts tended to be different from usual.

Third: during the battle against Gardranda, Rook had been high above the ground, but still hadn't been able to see a thing of what was happening within the dense miasma below. Yet Marie, who had also been outside it, had stated with absolute certainty that "The Superior Killer shot Gardranda's left shoulder."

Fourth: despite Marie having played for a year in real life, which was three years in here, she had a total level lower than newbies such as Rook and Ray, which led him to believe that she was concealing her true powers.

Fifth: there was a comic with a journalist/professional killer protagonist bearing a great deal of resemblance to Marie, and from what he'd read of it, even their mannerisms were highly alike.

That was when Marie raised her hands, looking absolutely defeated.

"Heh. Heh heh heh," she chuckled in self-derision. "I give up. This is the first time someone has realized it before I revealed it myself."

"You're not exactly the best at concealing your identity, so I'm quite sure I'm not the only one who connected the dots," said Rook.

"Ghh!" Marie's face contorted with pain. She'd had confidence that she was doing a decent job of hiding what she really was, so Rook's words did a good amount of emotional damage to her.

"Also, you use an avatar that has both the name and appearance of a character that's both a journalist and a professional killer, so it's completely obvious to anyone who has read the work," added Rook.

"I'm fully aware of that, but it's part of my identity," she replied. Marie was basing her *Infinite Dendrogram* character on Marie from her manga, so it was a given for her to be a "Marie Adler" that acted as both a Journalist and a professional killer.

"Anyway, we know your identity now," said Rook. "However, it doesn't look like Ray and Nemesis are aware of it."

"I'd probably feel like dying if they found out," Marie said.

"You're the one who gave them their only death penalty, right? Normally, I'd have a thing or two to say about that, but it doesn't seem like you have any malice towards them right now, so I'm content with being silent about that."

"Thank you."

"That aside, can I make a little request?"

Marie said nothing as she made a mental note of the fact that the flow of the conversation made his question seem much like blackmail.

Rook might actually have a sadistic side to him, she thought.

"A request, you say?" she muttered. "A-Are you about to have me do something inappropriate and—"

"Nothing about that would remotely interest me."

"Okay, kid... No need to cut me that deep... But what do you want of me, then?"

"I want you to have a mock battle against me."

"A mock battle?" she asked.

"As I said before, I want to learn more about battles against people. And I figured that facing a hardened player killer such as yourself would be a good initiation."

"Well, I don't really mind, but why the interest in such battles?" Marie asked.

"That's a secret," he answered with a smile on his face.

His expression was so beautiful it was angelic, but once she considered the conversation so far, Marie found it a bit scary.

And so, the two made their way towards the sixth arena, located in the duel city’s sixth district. Though such places were normally bustling due to various events and betting matches, all the standard arenas were nearly barren today.

During low activity times such as these, it was possible to rent the arenas for barrier-protected mock battles. Unlike in normal matches, it was also possible to make the barriers opaque, and Marie was truly thankful that she wouldn’t have to fight while minding any potential observers.

“You’re still below level 51, right, Rook?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m level 48,” he answered.

“Then don’t go near the barrier. You’ll slip right through.”

The barrier system allowed those of level 50 or below to pass through freely. Though those players benefited from the barrier’s restorative qualities, it didn’t wall them off inside. That was the reason why they couldn’t partake in official arena battles.

“The preparations are done,” said Marie as she set the block they’d rented into opaque mode.

With Babi at his side and Liz taking the form of his equipment, Rook summoned Marilyn and Audrey, making him fully ready for battle.

“We have plans for the evening, so let’s not go above ten matches,” she added. “Also, we might be sparring, but the gap in our power is still an issue, so I won’t be using my special rewards.”

To her mind, fighting while using special rewards like the Palsy Stingblade would cause Rook to lose the ten matches without giving him a chance to learn anything. Marie would use her Embryo, but she would avoid using its ultimate skill for exactly the same reason.

“Compared to many, my Embryo isn’t particularly tricky, so I’m confident it’s good for such practice,” she said. “Are you ready?”

“Yes!” Rook answered with vigor.

“Then let’s begin... Arc-en-Ciel.” Marie summoned a revolver-shaped Embryo into her left hand, and held a blackened dagger in her right. The Embryo was Arc-en-Ciel, Type Legion, while the dagger was named Night Pain.

In response to Marie readying her weapons, Rook sent Marilyn and Audrey after her while Babi vigilantly eyed her for an opportunity to use a skill. Rook himself stood at the rear, protected by Liz, and used the Charm skill.

This was the battle style they'd used many times during the hunting they'd done after Liz had joined.

He was clearly planning to avoid using trickery and go all out on the very first match.

"Very well, then I won't do any tricks, either," said Marie as she swung her right hand, causing the break-action revolver to unload its chambers.

That action made Rook look puzzled. And not without reason, for she had emptied a gun that had yet to shoot a single bullet. However, even though it had the shape of a revolver, Arc-en-Ciel was more Embryo than gun, and what it shot weren't bullets.

"Black Homing, Red Burst, Blue Spread." Marie's words made three types of bullets — no, transparent containers filled with *paint* — enter the revolving chambers of her Embryo. Once again, she swung her hand again to give it the shape of a gun...

"Fire."

...and pulled the trigger.

"GYAGYAGYAGYAGYAH!"

A moment later, several dozens of bullet creatures escaped Arc-en-Ciel's muzzle. Bending their expected trajectory, all of them rushed to overwhelm Audrey. She flew in an attempt to evade them, but all the creatures followed after her.

There was little difference between Audrey's and the creatures' speeds...

"KIEEEEE?!"

...so, when she soon reached the top of the barrier, they all caught up with her and exploded upon impact.

Reduced to smithereens, Audrey's corpse became particles of light and vanished.

"VRAAAAAGH!"

Right after that attack, Marilyn directed her horns at Marie and charged at her with all she had. In real life, this would be the equivalent of a 10 ton truck going at full speed...

"Too slow."

...but to Marie — whose high AGI allowed her to break the sound barrier — Marilyn was barely even moving.

She dodged the horns right before the impact and unloaded the chambers yet again before wordlessly filling them with two types: Red Burst and Green Piercing. Then — slowly from her own perspective and immensely quickly from Marilyn's — Marie put the muzzle against Marilyn's shell and fired.

The bullet creature imbued with great piercing ability penetrated the tough material with little effort before exploding within Marilyn's insides, quickly killing her and making her become particles of light.

Next up, Babi, Marie thought as she looked around, but she couldn't see the succubus anywhere. A moment later, without even turning around, Marie swung Night Pain behind her.

"...Ah."

That action caused the slashed space to release a gush of blood before becoming Babi, clearly on the verge of death.

Since she was able to use Drain Learning to absorb the skills of other monsters, Babi had received the Optic Camouflage skill from a Lesser Chameleon Basilisk, a creature inhabiting a forest area near Nex Plains. However, the hiding ability of that skill meant nothing to the Death Shadow — the apex of stealth.

Babi disappeared, leaving only Rook and Liz, who was still acting as his equipment.

With Arc-en-Ciel's bullet type still set to "penetrating and bursting," Marie fired at him.

Marie had intended to end the fight with that one shot, but unexpectedly, the bullet creature shifted its trajectory away from Rook and exploded after hitting the barrier.

Upon focusing on him, Marie realized that a part of his coat had become curved.

Rook had already noticed the bullets' penetrative abilities, and he'd chosen to turn them away instead of stopping them.

"I see," she said, astonished that the boy could notice that much from just one shot.

He also seems to know that I need to do the unloading motion to change modes, she realized. Rook's observational ability made chills go down Marie's spine.

"You won't protect against this, though," she said as she unloaded Arc-en-Ciel, loaded it with *only* Green Piercing, and fired once more.

The piercing bullet creatures that escaped the muzzle had far greater penetrative power than the ones mixed with bursting, allowing them to easily overcome the curved defense, pierce Rook, and kill him.

The primary feature of Marie Adler’s Arc-en-Ciel was the creation and firing of bullet creatures. The qualities of the bullet creatures fired depended on the paint used. There were six types of paint, and the ones she’d used in this battle were black for homing, red for bursts, blue for spread, and green for piercing. Besides these, there were also white for paralysis and silver for flash.

Loading the six chambers with multiple paints gave the bullet creatures more abilities, but lowered the potency of each separate one. That made Arc-en-Ciel an Embryo that had to be used differently depending on the situation.

“And that’s how it works.” Marie ended her explanation.

“And how, exactly, is that ‘not tricky’?” asked Rook. By the end of the first fight, he had been shot to death, Babi had vanished, and Marilyn and Audrey had exploded, but they were now just standing there — all alive and well, because even monsters were protected by the barriers.

“Hey now, I said ‘compared to many,’ and I stand by that,” replied Marie. “As far as sixth form Embryos go, Arc-en-Ciel’s very straightforward. By the time they start getting their ultimate skills, Embryos can become a bit... creative. For example, there’s an Embryo that ‘Turns people within a set boundary into toddlers.’ Then there’s one that ‘Forcibly removes people’s equipment and makes them naked’ and one that ‘Turns people into creatures that they hate.’ Mine’s quite modest in comparison, no? By the way, the ones I just named all belong to Legendaria’s Superiors.”

Masters often described Legendaria as the “Land of Perverts,” and their strongest certainly lived up to that reputation.

After that, Rook and Marie went on to have eight more matches, all of which were won by Marie.

The second and third battles were basically replays of the first. On the fourth, Rook’s movements and actions had gotten better, so Marie started using the Shadow Clone Technique. Come the fifth battle, he was moving in a way to compensate for that, so she took to using Art of Hiding as well.

After that, it was a one-sided show of Marie combining her Embryo and job skills to defeat Rook.

By the latter half, Marie was putting more effort into their fights than she had during yesterday's battle against Elizabeth's would-be assassins, The Reaper's Pinky.

With Marie being a Superior Job wielding an Embryo in its sixth form, the difference in power between her and Rook was great.

The onmitsu grouping's Death Shadow job had high base resistances to debuffs, not to mention that she was equipped with items that increased them further still, rendering Rook's Charm useless and giving him next to no chance of victory. However, there was one thing that greatly astonished her — specifically, Babi.

Optic Camouflage wasn't the only skill she'd gained through Drain Learning. She also had skills such as Monstrous Strength, Petrifying Breath, and even increased resistances to fire and poison.

That certainly gave Rook a wide array of tactics, but alas, it wasn't enough for him to land even a single hit on Marie.

This makes me question if he's actually learning anything, she thought.

Since she'd experienced many PvP battles, this sparring certainly wasn't the first time she'd encountered and prevailed against tactics meant to kill her. The time when she'd gotten attacked by what was most likely the King of Destruction was no exception, for she'd survived that onslaught. That made it quite obvious that lukewarm tactics were ineffective against Marie.

Battles against someone more or less equal to yourself always teach you something new, she thought. *However, when fighting opponents significantly stronger than you, it's all or nothing — either you leave without any new knowledge or mature a lot. I wonder which one applies to Rook...*

Such worries went through Marie's head as they prepared for their tenth and final match.

"This will be our last battle, right?" asked Rook.

"Yes." Marie nodded. "Are you ready?"

"...Just one more minute, please." Rook was breathing heavily, making it evident that he was drained. The barrier restored all the stats to what they were before the battles, but they had no effect on mental fatigue. It was only natural for someone to get tired after being killed nine times in a row.

“There, I’m okay now,” he said as he summoned his monsters.

Despite his fatigue, Rook was ready to spar for the tenth and last time.

“Very well. Let’s begin,” Marie spoke as she activated both her Shadow Clone and Hiding techniques.

As her five clones appeared and assaulted Rook and his monsters, Marie herself hid and loaded Arc-en-Ciel. Her plan was to use the distraction created by her clones to load her Embryo with the most effective qualities and fire the bullet creatures at her targets. If all went well, that should end the battle, but...

“KIEEEEE!” Audrey sounded a call as she released an intense stream of flame. The fiery tongues reached across the entire area, thoroughly scorching it all. The blazes were vast, immense, and bright enough to obstruct Marie’s vision of the arena.

However, she’d seen this skill used in the previous battles, so she did exactly what she’d done the previous times. Marie slipped through the flames and aimed at the spaces between them, ready to fire bullet creatures in homing mode.

“...?” That was when she felt something was off.

It came not from beyond the fire, but from the base of her feet, as she stood in the place she’d reached after passing the flames. It was as though something was lying and waiting to ambush her here... and that “something” was a *silver-colored, human-shaped creature.*

“...!” Overwhelmed with questions, Marie was at a loss for words. *How did this thing predict that I, the original, would move to this location? Why is it able to wait to ambush me while surrounded by blazing fire? What is “it,” anyway?*

In an attempt to find the answers, she ran her mind through those questions. That created a momentary opening in her movements...

“Mithril Strain!” Rook shouted.

...and he and the silver creature took advantage of it with a skill.

Assaulted by a silver slash, Marie was in no state of mind to evade it. Barely being able to bend in a way to avoid the damage, Marie lost her left arm to the slash.

“■■■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ — Arc-en-Ciel!” she shouted.

From point-blank range away from Rook, Marie hit him with her ultimate skill — the one she’d intended not to use.

In but an instant, Rook and his monsters alike were all evaporated.

With that, Marie won all ten of the battles. Besides the loss of her left arm in the last one, the result had been exactly what everyone would've expected. However, that single loss of limb made Marie feel like *she* was the one who'd lost.

At the start, Rook and his monsters had moved in a way not too different from before, but then he'd gone on to read her movements with terrifying precision and caught her off guard, giving him a chance to take her left arm. It was safe to say that, at that very moment, Rook had cornered Marie — a being far stronger than himself.

"Thank you for the practice matches!" Now that the fight was over, Rook lightly bowed his head, expressing sincere thanks.

"You're welcome," replied Marie. "You and your monsters aren't bad at all... In fact, considering your total playtime, you're nothing short of amazing. The way you use your skills and coordinate with your monsters is simply splendid. I was especially surprised by what you did last. Were you saving that tactic for the final battle, when you more or less understood the way I act?"

"Yes." Rook smiled. "I must say, you're very strong, Marie. Even nine battles weren't enough for me to become able to read your movements well enough. To be honest, I was going for your head with my last attack."

Oh, I see, she thought. *He used the first nine battles to get a grasp of my movement patterns and then predict what I'd do in the last one. That aside, that bright smile of his certainly doesn't fit what he's saying. This boy might have the makings of a nonchalant brute. I'm kinda scared of what he'll become.*

"Also, losing your arm didn't affect your movements at all," added Rook. "I expected that to create more openings."

"In high-level battles, losing limbs or organs is common, after all. It's something you get used to."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said. "Thank you very much for today."

"Did that help you much?"

"Yes! Very much!"

That makes losing an arm worth it, Marie thought. *Still, he pushed me — a Superior Job — this far despite being a non-battle-oriented low-rank job. I'd already established that Ray, a newbie who's already killed two UBMs,* *was amazing, but Rook certainly isn't far behind him.*

Having played for long, Marie knew enough Masters to be certain that these two were simply exceptional. And it wasn't because of their growth as players; they'd deviated from the norm right from the start. Marie was half-excited and half-scared trying to imagine what the two would become.

"I wonder which one of them is stronger," she muttered.

"Come again?" asked Rook.

"Oh, never mind. By the way, in the last battle, you used a skill you haven't used before, right? Oh, and I don't mean Mithril Strain." Discarding the question from her previous mutter, Marie brought up something that had been on her mind ever since the battle ended.

Rook had read her movements to ambush her, then used Liz to attack. Marie could understand that much, but she didn't see the process linking those two points.

She couldn't see why he'd been able to wait for the ambush while surrounded by searing flames. The silver-colored humanoid figure might've been the result of Liz covering his body, but that shouldn't have been enough to protect Rook from the heat. That feat required a considerable amount of fire resistance. Otherwise, he would've died from the flame before Marie even came close enough for the ambush. Due to that, Marie assumed that he'd used a skill that he didn't use before then.

"That was Union Jack!" Babi shouted with pride before Rook could give his answer.

"Union Jack...?" Marie raised an eyebrow.

"Yes." Rook nodded. "It's a unique skill Babi acquired when she reached her third form."

It seemed she'd gained that skill when she'd evolved during yesterday's hunting, and they'd kept it hidden until the tenth battle.

A skill they preserved for the very end... With all the preparation they did for it, it's obvious that it has a powerful effect, but... But Marie was unable to tell what kind of effect it had been. Most Embryo skills were based on the Embryo's ability characteristics. However, unlike that of Ray's Nemesis or Marie's Arc-en-Ciel, Babi's primary characteristic wasn't too clear. Due to that, Marie couldn't see the full picture behind Union Jack.

But, at the very least, she was able to tell that it was as terrifying as Rook's superhuman talents.

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“All right,” Rook said and opened his eyes, having ended the short recollection. At his side was Babi, looking right at him.

“Hey, Rook,” she said. “Were you remembering the practice battles from this afternoon?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Why’d you want to do them, anyway?”

“I guess you could say that I wanted to prepare.”

“For what?” she asked.

“This afternoon, Ray told us about his battle against a tian group called the ‘Gouz-Maise Gang,’ and, well, I think it must’ve been pretty hard for him. After all, Ray... he’s a gentle soul.”

“That’s true.” Babi nodded.

“However, he was faced with a situation where he absolutely had to overcome that mental hurdle and fight against *people*. That made me think that, sooner or later, I would have to do it, as well, so I figured that I needed to prepare a proper mindset for such battles. And, just as I expected, we’re about to fight *people*, meaning that the practice matches against Marie were absolutely worth it.”

“I don’t really get it, but if you’re gonna kill, then I will do it, too!” Babi declared.

While they were talking, the people around them were finishing up their preparations.

In the lobby, there was Ray, Rook, and a number of other newbies. However, the enemies outside were many, and they surpassed them in terms of both level and stats. Naturally, breaking through the enemies filling the plaza would be no small task.

“Okay,” muttered Rook as he remembered his battles against Marie. “The most important thing to keep in mind while fighting those stronger than you is to take advantage of their openings.”

Then he devised a certain plan and passed it over to his fellow newbies. With it, even they — no, *especially* they — would be able to take advantage of the enemies’ openings.

They all agreed to the plan and soon headed out of the arena.

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Duel city Gideon's central plaza

The central plaza expanding before the central arena was usually full of stalls, street performers, and hustle and bustle in general, making it one of the city's most popular attractions. Yet, despite it being the night of one of Gideon's greatest events, the stalls were all barren and the performers were absent.

Franklin's game had thrown the city into a state of absolute chaos. Naturally, the common folk had scattered from the plaza like flies, as far away from the core of the chaos, the central arena, as possible. But a certain group was there to replace them.

It was a gathering of about forty Masters and their tamed monsters or slaves. They were all prepared for battle, standing alert about anything that could leave through the entrance of the arena, ready to block the paths of anybody who tried.

The group certainly wasn't there to stop any of the monsters released in the arena from escaping to town. In fact, they were there to eliminate any Masters trying to curb the chaos enveloping Gideon.

The group were Franklin's pawns: the ones he'd referred to as "the betrayers" when having a phone talk with his sponsor, prime minister Vigoma. Just as their name said, they were the kingdom's Masters who wished to defect to the imperium.

Their reason was simple: profit. When wars happened and ended, there was a world of difference between the advantages gained by the victors and those gained by the losers.

Thus, due to the situation in the kingdom becoming worse, many Masters were switching to other countries. Among those were ones who wished to switch after doing something to improve their standing with Dryfe, both to avoid becoming a loser and to curry favor with the winning side.

The people in the plaza were exactly that — a group of Masters from the kingdom that Franklin had enticed with good conditions if they switched to Dryfe. He was having them participate in his plan as player killers.

"Heh heh. Looks like they realized that low level kiddies can get out," said a leather-clad traitor as he watched what was going on in the arena's lobby.

“Oh? And here I was beginning to think that we wouldn’t get to do anything,” replied a woman wearing priestly clothing.

“HYAHAAH! Time to shoot some fish in a barrel!” shouted a man with his hair in a pure-red mohawk and sunglasses over his eyes. Though the sunglasses and hair didn’t seem to fit it, the rest of his apparel made it clear that he was actually a mage of some sort.

The three with the highest levels among those that’d gathered in the central plaza.

Strong Swordsman, Ryzac.

Bishop, Myanna.

Pyromancer, Mohawk Red.

While most of the betrayers were somewhere around level 100, these three were over level 300. Also, perhaps due to them knowing each other for so long, they were acting like the leaders of the entire group.

However, they certainly weren’t the strongest betrayers in the kingdom.

There were two types of treacherous Masters. The first type had considerable power, while the second type wanted to switch because they were relatively weak. The former were tasked with handling the high-rank players that could potentially escape the arena, while the latter, weaker ones were positioned in the plaza to take care of the newbies.

The very fact that these three were here meant that Franklin didn’t consider them to be particularly strong.

“Well, time to do our job,” said Ryzac.

Though they certainly weren’t pleased with his assessment, they still considered themselves lucky. After all, the task they’ve been given was extremely easy. Logic itself dictated that low-rank jobs were weaker than high-rank jobs and that low-rank Embryos were weaker than high-rank ones. Everyone knew that a job where people had to face those weaker than themselves was simple.

“HYAHAAH! Here they come!” guffawed Mohawk Red.

The betrayers could see that the newbies in the lobby were done with their preparations.

There’s just over twenty of them... Yeah, we’ve won, Ryzac thought to himself and grinned.

They were above the newbies in both individual power and numbers, making failure absolutely unthinkable.

"Red, greet them with a little AOE spell," said Ryzac.

"HYAHAAH! Time to take out the trash!" replied Mohawk Red as he prepared an offensive spell, which was ready in just twenty seconds. It needn't be said that it had power no low-rank job could withstand.

They've probably got some buffs from the higher-rank players stuck in there, but that's never going to be enough to bring a low-rank to a high-rank's level, Ryzac thought confidently. Due to that, what was about to begin was going to be less of a battle and more of a one-sided extermination. Ryzac was absolutely certain of that.

And then he was proven wrong.

"What?" he raised an eyebrow. He'd expected the newbies to charge at them at full force. Instead, a mere one of those inside stuck his arm out through the barrier...

"Hellish Miasma, full power."

...and released an intense flow of dark purple smoke.

While the barrier prevented any of it from going into the arena, it spread throughout the entire central plaza, making about a fourth of the traitors lose their postures.

"Huh? Wh-What...?" Ryzac looked at his status summary and noticed that he had a debuff called "Intoxication."

He then looked at the status displays of his party and saw the same Intoxication debuff, along with two others: Poison and Weakness.

"G-Gas that gives *three* debuffs?!" Ryzac shouted in a panic. Luckily for him, he had accessories that protected him against Poison and Weakness, but that wasn't the main thing to consider in this situation. "Why is a low-rank newbie able to use an item like this?!"

His confusion was perfectly justified. After all, equipment had level limits. Skills that were able to apply three debuffs at once were the realm of high-rank jobs focusing on curses, so low-rank people should never be able to equip items that could do the equivalent. Even Ryzac and his buddies would have trouble getting and using such gear.

However, there was an exception.

When the equipment in question was an MVP special reward, it had properties that took after the UBM it was based on. Furthermore, MVPs could wear and use their special rewards regardless of level.

But of course, normally, low level players never became MVPs.

“Gheeh...”

“Hey! Drink your Elixirs!”

“Huh? B-But that’s such a waste...”

“You retard! If we fight in this state, even low-ranks could give us death penalties!”

The betrayers had lost their pace. With them being just a ragtag group of willing player killers, it wasn’t exactly reasonable to expect much coordination between them, but the unexpected turn of events made it even worse.

While most opted to drink Elixirs themselves, many of those with monsters and slaves under their command were too stingy to share and instead returned them back to the Jewel. Naturally, that reduced their numbers.

“Tch...!” Ryzac clicked his tongue in frustration.

Having more *Infinite Dendrogram* experience, the three with the highest levels didn’t hesitate to swig the Elixirs and remove the debuffs ailing them.

They sure got us with this one, he thought. *I’m guessing those newbies got Elixirs from the high-rank players in there. They’re planning to take advantage of the buffs they got and take care of us while we’re suffering from the debuffs!*

But Ryzac had no intention of letting that happen. Turning to Mohawk Red, he saw a giant sphere of fire that looked ready to be released hanging above the mage’s head.

All right! This will crush them the moment they leave! Ryzac thought as he felt something move within the smokescreen — from the direction of the arena’s entrance.

He was quick to realize that many people were leaving the barrier.

Ryzac instantly braced to face the newbies before realizing that something beyond his expectations was there, as well.

Wait... There’s something huge!

And so, breaking through the dark purple smokescreen came a dragon reminiscent of a heavy tank. A Tri-Horn Demi-Dragon, to be precise.

It was a Demi-Dragon class monster that had little in the way of unique skills, but came equipped with particularly high stats. Ryzac had defeated these before, but what mattered here wasn’t that, but the question of...

“Why does a low-rank have one of these?!”

Such a creature’s presence here was thoroughly unexpected.

As Ryzac considered that a high-rank might’ve lent it to some newbie...

“MHOOOOOO!”

...the Tri-Horn Demi-Dragon, buffed and strengthened by the Masters inside, charged with all the force it could muster. In its way were the betrayer Masters who’d yet to cure themselves of their debuffs.

“Red!” shouted Ryzac.

“Crimson Sph—” Following his buddy’s order, Mohawk Red prepared to launch the completed Crimson Sphere, the ultimate Pyromancer spell, towards the Demi-Dragon. However...

“Silence.” That clear voice came from *the top of the Demi-Dragon,* and was followed by the sound of someone snapping their fingers.

Once it resounded, Mohawk Red’s Crimson Sphere, which had been complete just a moment ago and had been meant to be the Demi-Dragon’s demise, vanished like mist in the wind. Then, with little resistance, the Demi-Dragon trampled the Masters who were too weak to retaliate due to the Intoxication and Weakness debuffs.

“Red! What the hell?!” roared Ryzac.

“That wasn’t me! Some guy canceled my magic just now...!”

After crushing the weakened Masters, the Demi-Dragon continued to ravage their ranks. That wasn’t all, either — a Demi-Dragon-class avian had appeared and joined the Tri-Horn in wreaking havoc. As the chaos and confusion among the betrayers grew, the newbies finally broke through the smokescreen and attacked them.

I misjudged their power and let them have the initiative, but we’re still stronger, and there are more of us! Ryzac thought, and he thought right.

Though they were equipped with unexpected items and had monsters common to relevant high-rank jobs, the difference in total power was far too obvious. When compared, the betrayers had far more than just double or triple the power. With a difference this great, there was little doubt that they would emerge victorious, and Ryzac was absolutely correct to think so.

“The low-rank Masters are here!”

“Gank ’em!”

A woman and a man among the betrayers brandished their weapons in preparation to attack the approaching newbies...

"Eh?"

"Ah?"

...but instead of attacking them, they attacked each other's vital spots.

The man's ax dug into the woman's shoulder, while her arrow pierced his throat.

And so, completely clueless as to what'd happened, they fell to their knees and were defeated by the newbies moments after.

"What the hell's... Huh?!" Ryzac found the answer to his question before he could even finish speaking.

His party's status display showed that they had the "Charm" debuff.

Charmed beings helped their enemies and killed their allies, making it one of the worst mental status effects in existence. And, due to it being mental, rather than disease-based, not even Elixirs could help protect against it.

The two who'd practically killed each other and Ryzac's party members weren't the only ones who were Charmed. Other Masters, their monsters, slaves... The Charm gradually continued to spread until more than half of the betrayers were fighting for the opposing side.

Indeed, it was hard to battle high-ranks while being low-rank. Emerging victorious while being weaker in both quality and quantity was truly difficult. So one simply had to borrow some forces.

From where? Why, from the opposing side, of course.

"Charm... CHARM?! There's no way that's possible!" Ryzac shouted.

His reaction was only natural. He and his people had high-rank jobs and were equipped with decent items. Among those, of course, were accessories that negated the effects of debuffs. For instance, despite not downing an Elixir, Ryzac was unaffected by Poison and Weakness.

However, the number of status effects in *Infinite Dendrogram* was vast, and it was nigh impossible to be prepared for all of them.

While making equipment selections in preparation for this battle, one of the status effects that had been disregarded first was Charm. After all, skills that applied Charm could only be learned by a handful of non-battle-oriented jobs, such as Pimp or Harlot.

High-ranks would sometimes take the Pimp job to get this skill or Female Monster Strengthening for its synergy with Tamer's Monster Strengthening. However, none of the betrayers had expected to encounter a player that had taken it before getting to total level 50 — as one of their first jobs.

"Huuhh?! The Charm's spreading too fast! There's more than one?!"

"Hell if I know!"

Another unexpected thing was the presence of an Embryo that could apply Charm, just like a Pimp.

In the natural world, monsters that used Charm were powerful, difficult to tame, and cost a lot, making it unlikely for low-rank jobs to have them. However, none of that applied to a Master with a succubus for an Embryo.

Making her way through the openings in the chaos of battle, she was Charming the men, one after another.

"MYANNAAA! Use a spell already! Remove the Charm, damn it!" Ryzac called out to Myanna, his high-level Bishop friend. He believed that her healing magic skills had the potential to remove all the Charm on their side.

However, no one answered to his call.

"Hey, what the hell?! You dead or something?! Myanna!" he called out once more and again got no response.

Since the three were acting as leaders of separate parties of lower-level Masters, Ryzac was unable to find out what became of Myanna. However, the fact that she hadn't responded was enough for him to conclude that she'd died in the chaos.

Why...? Why?! We were supposed to win this, damn it!

Their having gone from having an absolute advantage to being even — no, disadvantaged! — troubled Ryzac to no end. Still, his experience as a player allowed him to easily cut down one of the newbie Masters charging towards him.

Yeah. We're not done yet! he thought. *There's still me and Red!*

Regaining his composure, Ryzac continued swinging his blade.

Mohawk Red completed preparing another Crimson Sphere. "HYAHAAH! YOU'RE GONNA GET IT THIS TIME! Crimson Sphere!" he shouted, and there was no one to stop him this time.

Mohawk Red's most powerful spell went straight towards a single Master — the one wearing the bracers that covered the plaza in miasma. Red aimed to burn him down and relish the payback factor in the process.

The newbie was caught unawares, and the Crimson Sphere landed right on him.

“HYAHAAH! EAT IT!”

The Master with the bracers got engulfed in flames and became particles of light before he could even leave any ash...

...or so Red thought, but then the Master jumped out of the flames and charged towards him at full speed.

“Hyah?” Red released a weird sound, completely dumbfounded.

Then, right after a broken Dragonscale Ward fell out of the newbie Master’s pocket...

“Vengeance is Mine!”

...he hit Mohawk Red — a Master above level 250 — and instantly made him vanish.

“R-REEEEED!” shouted Ryzac, and not without reason, for what he’d seen was something that simply couldn’t happen. Like himself, Mohawk Red was a high-level Master, especially when compared to most in the plaza, and yet he’d gotten one-shotted by a far weaker newbie.

“Wh-Why is this happening?!” Ryzac shouted.

He could still hold and swing his sword, but his mind was in a state of panic, causing him to mutter his thoughts.

“We were all high-ranks here... Our stats and Embryo forms were higher than theirs... So why... Why are we being overwhelmed... It doesn’t make sense...”

By that point, the forces on his side had been cut down by more than half. About 40% of those still alive were Charmed. And with them having lost Mohawk Red and Myanna — the strongest among them — it was safe to say that the betrayers were defeated.

“...N-Not yet! *I* still haven’t lost!” Ryzac screamed.

After forcefully encouraging himself, the high-level Strong Swordsman cut down the enemies before him.

I tried to switch to Dryfe so that I could win, he thought. *Losing here is the opposite of what I want.*

Vehemently, desperately, he defeated any enemies he crossed paths with. He could no longer tell whether they were newbies or ex-allies that had gotten Charmed — he fought any and all people that came to him as enemies.

“Hh...!” That was when he came across someone particularly powerful.

The person wore full body armor of a silver color — no, the results of his Reveal skill said that it was a monster called “Mithril Arms Slime.”

He’s wearing a liquid metal-type slime as armor? Looks kinda tough... however...! Ryzac thought as he put his hand against his sword, a Type Arms Embryo.

“All-Slashing Blade — Durandal!” he roared, declaring that he was using his high-rank Embryo’s ultimate skill.

Durandal’s ultimate skill was different from Hræsvelgr and Poseidon, which were high-rank, as well. While those were the type of skills to unleash a single, powerful attack, Durandal’s ultimate skill was enhancement.

For a minute after activation, Durandal became able to cut *anything*. No matter how tough the Mithril Arms Slime was, when imbued with this power, Ryzac’s blade could easily cut through it and kill the Master within.

“Let’s do this!” he roared and charged, to which the Mithril Arms Slime responded with a swing from its blade-like tentacles.

Though its speed matched — or surpassed — that of a high-rank vanguard, it wasn’t difficult for Ryzac to see it, as he had become stronger and faster due to the side-effects of his ultimate skill. He swung Durandal twice and — with great ease — cut the tentacles off before charging close enough to cut his enemy. Then Ryzac unleashed a horizontal slash meant to split his opponent at the abdomen.

“You’re done.”

Due to Durandal’s immense sharpness, he didn’t feel any resistance. However, it was clear that it easily broke through the Mithril Arms Slime’s defense and split the person inside in half. The upper and lower half fell to the ground with half of the Slime accompanying them each. Despite that, the upper half of the Mithril Arms Slime moved to stop the blood flowing from the cut.

That’s useless. He’s as good as dea— Huh...? In order to stop the blood, the Slime focused most of its volume on the wound, causing other parts to become uncovered.

Those parts included the Master’s face.

Upon seeing it, Ryzac lost his words, for it was *his friend, the Bishop, Myanna.*

The Mithril Arms Slime had bound her in a way that prevented all movement and filled her mouth with enough of itself to gag her.

The realization that he'd split his own friend in half made Ryzac's mind go blank.

Taking advantage of his sorry state, the Mithril Arms Slime hastily turned half of itself into a spear and *pierced him from his nether region to the top of his head.*

"Gh?" Naturally, the damage was critical, making his HP drop to 0. Though his consciousness was still somewhat alive during the resurrection period, the destruction to his vitals was great, making it obvious that he wouldn't last much longer.

"Make them panic and they show their openings. Aim for a critical hit and they die instantly." Before getting the death penalty, Ryzac saw Myanna get freed from the Mithril Arms Slime's bindings and slowly turn into particles of light as the Slime, with its job done, crawled towards some boy.

As beautiful as a winter fairy, he talked to the Mithril Arms Slime in the same clear voice Ryzac had heard at the beginning of the battle.

"Don't miss an opening, and you can kill those stronger than you," he said. "It's just like we learned in the practice matches. Except this time, we were successful, Liz."

Though no doubt beautiful, Ryzac found the smile on the boy's face to be scary beyond words.

Aahh... Damn it... he thought as he vanished. *If I'd known we had newbies like this... I wouldn't have done this shit...*

Overwhelmed with regret, Ryzac got the death penalty.

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Soon after they'd lost their leaders and three strongest, the rest of the traitors gathered in the central plaza were quickly annihilated.

Then, having passed that hurdle, the newbies spread out to help fight the monsters ravaging the city or to search for Franklin.

Though this fight was merely the beginning for them, it should've been something they couldn't win. While the betrayers had been presented with many unexpected things, in the end, it could all be boiled down to the existence of a mere two extraordinary entities — Ray and Rook.

Chapter Three: The Movement on the Board

Paladin, Ray Starling

“That’s one barrier cleared,” I said.

“It appears so,” agreed Nemesis.

We’d escaped the central arena and fought the player killers that’d awaited us at the plaza.

Thanks to Rook’s plan, we’d been able to beat them with few casualties, despite them being far stronger and more numerous than us.

When I’d needed to use Hellish Miasma, I’d been worried about the prospect of involving innocents who still happened to be in the plaza, but a high-rank Master with a radar-like Embryo had shown me that it was all good in that regard.

After that, thanks to Rook using his Touch of the Silencer to cancel an enemy’s spell, and then him and Babi both using their Charm skills like they had in the battle against the goblin horde, we’d gotten an upper hand against the player killers.

I’d thought that the caster’s surprise attack was gonna kill me, but I’d survived thanks to the Dragonscale Ward Shu had given me before we left the arena. The fact that I hadn’t seen it coming had left me without a chance to use Counter Absorption, but that skill’s stock was extremely scarce right now, anyway. Only one use had been restored since my battle against Gouz-Maise yesterday, so having saved it could work out in my favor.

This battle and my encounter with Xunyu before The Clash of the Superiors had made me aware that the skill wasn’t without its flaws. It was ineffective in situations where I didn’t see the attack coming or just couldn’t use it fast enough. Sooner or later, I would have to find a way to make up for these flaws.

Skill problems aside, we’d defeated the player killers in the arena’s plaza.

After the battle, we newbies split up in all directions. I chose to go west, and Rook and a few others accompanied me.

Riding Silver, I led our little group forward. I'd avoided using my mount in the battle at the plaza because the brawl had been too melee-oriented, and I was satisfied with my decision, since the spell that had hit me might've actually melted him.

Following behind me, Rook and Babi were riding Marilyn, and furthest at the back, there were three girl Masters. All of them were staring at Rook, making it pretty certain that his being the ultra pretty-boy was the reason why they had come with us. Not that I could fault them for that, really.

"So, Ray," Rook spoke up. "Sorry for the belated question, but why are we heading west?"

"Well..." Indeed, I was the one who'd decided to go west, and he was right to assume that I'd had a reason. I'd chosen to go there because of the words gnawing at my mind.

It's west.

Hugo had told me this just before we'd separated. He was a Master from the Dryfe Imperium and a member of the clan known as "Triangle of Wisdom," which he'd described as the biggest clan in Dryfe, meaning that it was the one owned by the top of Dryfe's clan rankings: Franklin.

Back then, Hugo had tried to play it off like it was nothing, but I felt that...

"*Something's* up in the west," I said.

Unless he'd predicted that I would think like this and lied in order to mislead me, we should find something there. Since I didn't think that Hugo was the type to lie like that, I was going straight to the west.

Seemingly understanding, Rook nodded and began riding parallel to me.

Thus, we made our way towards the western gate.

If Hugo's words were truthful and there was indeed something to be found there, I was wholly confident that he himself would stand in our way.

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100 metels above the duel city, on the Night Lounge

Night Lounge — the flying, self-concealing monster — was melting into the dead of night as it flew straight towards the west. Sitting on its back, Franklin was doing something on a device highly reminiscent of tablets from the 2010s.

"The traitors at the central plaza are all dead," he muttered. "This isn't unexpected, but it certainly happened faster than I thought it would."

"What are you looking at?" asked Elizabeth.

"Here you go," Franklin said as he reached into his inventory and presented her with a device just like the one in his hands.

She looked down on it and saw a map of Gideon. It was covered in bright markers that clearly surpassed quadruple digits, and most of them were concentrated in the central arena.

"These lights... They're Masters, aren't they?" she asked.

Though the markers were many, they were nowhere near the total population of Gideon, making her assume that they represented the Masters in the area.

"Indeed they are." Franklin nodded. "Clearly, you're not a silly goose. I like people who aren't silly gooses. You're easy to talk to."

"I do not appreciate being liked by my father's murderer," Elizabeth replied.

"HA HA HA! Thought as much! That's the obvious sentiment, after all! GAH HA!" he laughed heartily, evidently finding it more funny than he had any right to.

Naturally, the princess found his reaction unpleasant, but more than that, she was curious about why it seemed so exaggerated.

"I happen to know someone who doesn't seem to understand that," Franklin continued. "Then again, we're talking about a person that took the imperator's throne by killing all the older royalty. Can't really expect such a character to be reasonable."

"I cannot make sense of anything you're saying," Elizabeth informed him.

"That's because there's a huge difference in the amount of information you and I have. Anyway, back to the subject at hand... Yes, you're holding a location map of all the Masters in Gideon. It's real-time, too."

Sure enough, the many markers on the map were moving.

The map was the result of a device created by The Triangle of Wisdom that was picking up the data signaled by a network of Franklin-made spycam monsters, which he'd scattered all across the city over several days before the plan.

Equipping the monsters with great hiding ability and Master differentiation had come at the cost of limiting the information they provided to show locations and nothing more — they didn't even give the names of the Masters. However, that was all that Franklin needed. He only wished to know where the Masters were, and to be able to tell friend from foe.

"May I ask something?" spoke up Elizabeth.

"You may," Franklin replied in a smug manner.

"These lights are either red or blue. Are they...?"

"Yes. We are red, while blue are the kingdom's Masters. I know that red is often the 'enemy' color, but I happen to like it, you see."

The markers were either blue or red, and the latter ones represented the Masters that Franklin had registered before this incident began. Though the blue markers vastly outnumbered the red, most of them were concentrated in the central arena. The blue and red in the rest of the city were about equal in number, but there was something to keep in mind...

"Not even half of the blue Masters outside the arena can fight properly," said Franklin. "Most of them are either non-battle jobs who weren't interested in the duel or third-rates who couldn't get a hold of a ticket for it."

Due to that, the blue markers tended to disappear soon after they encountered red ones.

The traitors besides the ones at the central plaza had been given the same devices as the ones held by Franklin and Elizabeth, which allowed them to seek out the blue markers, the kingdom's Masters, and kill them. The only real exception was when the outpouring of blue markers from the central arena had quickly made the red markers in the central plaza disappear.

Still, that wasn't unexpected, for the traitors positioned there had been among the weakest. The traitors tasked with doing a search-and-destroy in the city were significantly stronger, so they had little trouble taking care of non-battle jobs and third-rates.

"Though it's not like there *aren't* any tough cookies among those who didn't go see the event," Franklin commented.

A few red markers surrounding a certain blue one were disappearing.

He muttered, “I prepared this map to make it easier for me to find these ‘exceptions.’”

The device he was holding vibrated as a voice came out of it. “H-Help, Franklin! It’s the sixth in the duel rankings! The ‘Kamen Rider’ is...”

“RIIISEEEERRRRR KIIIICK!” That voice was followed by the sound of a fierce explosion, after which, there was nothing but noise.

Franklin pressed something, ending the connection. “The sixth, huh? Guess it’s safe to expect more like him. Well, at least ‘they’ will have something to do,” he grinned as he spoke to the device. “Club. Move to C3.”

Elizabeth didn’t know what he meant by that.

However, a short while later, she heard a loud impact coming from somewhere in the city. Looking back at the map, she noticed that the blue marker that’d seemingly defeated Franklin’s people had disappeared. In its place, there was red club-like marker.

“Club?” she asked. That was one of the playing card suits. Playing cards were a popular diversion even in *Infinite Dendrogram*, and casino games such as poker and blackjack were well-known pastimes. That was why Elizabeth instantly knew that she was looking at the symbol for the club suit.

“Oh, that’s a special marker,” Franklin explained. “The other reds were hired only recently, while these markers were my people from the start.”

She fell silent. Looking down, she noticed that there were a total of three such markers.

The first was a club. It moved around here and there, causing any nearby blue markers — including the “exceptions” that could kill red markers — to vanish.

The second was a heart. It was merely standing still near Gideon’s western gate. However, any blue markers that came close to it were vanishing without exception.

The third was a diamond. It was slowly making its way towards the west, and a short evaluation of the surroundings and its position on the map made it obvious that it was Franklin.

Elizabeth was now aware that Gideon had three entities far more dreadful than any monster or traitor.

Club, heart and diamond, she thought, making a certain question come to mind. *Where is the spade...?*

The spade suit carried the meaning of “sword” or “death,” making it the most ominous of the four, and for reasons unknown, it was nowhere on the map.

“Are you curious about the spade?” asked Franklin, as if he’d just read her mind. “It won’t show on this map. It’s for Plan D, anyway, so don’t expect it to be used.”

“Plan D?” she repeated.

“Yes. That’s what you’d call it if the current one is ‘Plan A.’ And I have no intention to fail with this one.” Franklin made Night Lounge change direction a bit.

Wondering why he’d done that, Elizabeth looked down on the map and saw two blue markers near the diamond, making it clear that it was to avoid them.

“So this map is also meant to prevent you from meeting Masters?” she asked.

“Why, yes,” he answered. “I happen to be a weakling, so I’d like to avoid having to fight by myself.”

Despite saying that, Franklin seemed quite confident that no one below could see through Night Lounge’s concealment ability.

“Though I avoid unnecessary battles, if I were to fight, those who could break through all the monsters at my disposal and land a finishing blow on me would only be my fellow Superiors,” he chuckled as he looked down on the map again.

Gideon was still in chaos as the diamond marker representing him casually moved over an empty area.

All was good.

At least, until a blue marker appeared right behind the diamond.

Surprised, Franklin tried to turn around, but before he could even move his neck, he felt his carotid artery get severed. That attack was followed by a barrage of bullet creatures, which sank into his body and exploded, causing great damage.

It didn’t end there, for the attack extended to the Night Lounge, causing its back to burst in places too many to count. Unable to bear it, the monster began losing altitude and descended to the city beneath.

Surrounded by bewildering chaos, Franklin looked around and saw an entity shrouded in a black mist scoop up Elizabeth — who'd fainted due to shock caused by the explosions — and jump down. The misty being wasn't unknown to him.

...Oh, yeah, he thought. *Can't believe I forgot about the Master who killed a Superior despite not being one.*

Upon remembering the player killer known as the "Superior Killer," Franklin held on for dear life as his Night Lounge crashed into the streets of Gideon.

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Duel city Gideon, ninth district

When Franklin kidnapped Elizabeth and disappeared from the arena, Marie instantly left her box seat. Her motive was simple — to chase after Franklin and rescue Elizabeth.

Being the Death Shadow, an AGI-focused Superior Job, allowed her to move at supersonic speeds, so she quickly made her way through the arena's hallways and got to the exit. However, when she tried to go outside, she got rejected by the barrier.

Marie didn't find its existence all that surprising. The fact that Franklin could trap Figaro and Xunyu in the barrier on the stage made it entirely possible that he could seal the arena, as well.

She was also quick to conclude that he'd done this in order to make the kingdom's Masters appear powerless. Elizabeth's kidnapping, too, had clearly been meant to increase the strength of that sentiment.

Marie couldn't let herself waste a moment's worth of time, so she *instantly escaped the barrier*.

She was capable of doing that because she was the Death Shadow — a Superior Job. She could do that for the same reason Xunyu's Zhenhuo Zhendeng Baolongba had broken the upper part of the barrier surrounding the Clash of the Superiors battle. That had been the ultimate skill of the Master Jiangshi — a Superior Job.

Due to that, Marie had assumed that Superior Job ultimate skills could surpass arena barriers. With that in mind, she'd used Death Shadow's ultimate skill.

Though it was a job from the stealth-oriented onmitsu grouping and thus didn’t have much in the ways of firepower, it was more or less suitable for the situation she was in. And so, at the cost of half of her SP, Marie escaped the barrier.

Once out in the streets, she used the Conceal and Conceal Perception skills to search for Franklin.

Eventually, Marie noticed the strange, stingray-like creature of the Night Lounge flying through the sky. She jumped up from the top of a building and used her own clones as stepping stones to reach and assault the creature.

Just as she’d expected, Franklin was riding it, so she hastily sliced his neck and put him in a critical state using explosive, piercing bullets from her Arc-en-Ciel. She followed it up with explosive attacks on the stingray-like creature before taking Elizabeth and jumping off.

And thus, Marie was now running through Gideon’s streets with the second princess on her back.

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A soft shaking caused Elizabeth to wake up.

She found the sensation to be familiar, for she’d felt it just yesterday. It was the feeling of being carried on someone’s back, and both the softness and the scent accompanying this sensation were the same as those from back then.

“Ma...rie...?” Elizabeth asked in slight a stupor.

“Yes,” said the one holding her. “It’s me, Ellie.”

“I’m happy to have met you again... But why are you...?”

“For now, let’s just get somewhere safe. We’ll talk later!” Marie said as she ran.

Though Elizabeth couldn’t tell due to the shaking being so mild, Marie’s speed was easily surpassing 100 kilometels per hour. Marie was the Death Shadow, an onmitsu grouping Superior Job, and she had a build focused on AGI and conceal skills. That made it easy for her to run with such speed even while being considerate of someone she was carrying.

The safe place Marie had in mind was the central arena. There were many high-rank Masters there. Not to mention that no one above level 50 could enter.

Sure, when Marie'd used the Death Shadow's ultimate skill to leave it, there had still been some monsters there, but considering all the players inside, it was safe to assume that they'd already been taken care of. Not to mention that one person in particular would be able to do it with ridiculous ease.

"Marie, if we're running, use this," Elizabeth said as she presented her with the device she still had in her hands.

"This is... Well, this will be useful," said Marie as she took the map and began moving while avoiding the red markers.

Just like when she'd attacked the Night Lounge, Marie was still using several conceal-type skills which prevented her from appearing on the map. Nevertheless, it was easy for her to see where she was by comparing the map and the streets around her.

"By the way, do you know the meaning of these card suit markers?" she asked.

"Yes. Diamond is Franklin, while heart and club are his confidants," answered the princess.

"I see..." said Marie while trying to contain the urge to click her tongue. "So he's still alive."

Based on what her Reveal skill told her, Franklin's max HP was almost ten times lower than all the damage she'd done to him, but despite the lack of warding accessories on him, the diamond marker was still there, meaning that he'd survived those fatal wounds.

Looks like he's also using Life Link, not just Castling, she thought. *That means that I won't be able to kill him until I take care of the monsters within his capacity.*

Life Link allowed the users to share HP with the monsters they had. Though it was certainly a useful skill that could potentially keep the users and their forces alive right until the very end, it also had many disadvantages.

The primary one was the fact that it could only work with monsters within the minion capacity and would have no effect if the monsters were placed in a party slot. However, the biggest one was the necessity of forming a strong bond with the monster in question, making it prioritize its owner over itself.

Creating a relationship in which the monster thought more of its master than itself was usually a process that took a lot of time and effort. Due to that, people who used Life Link were few.

The skill has some difficult conditions, but it seems like they mean nothing to Franklin, thought Marie.

Being a monster creator, Franklin could make monsters that had endless loyalty to him right from the very start, making it easy for him to have procured some Life Link-based HP tanks. That wasn't all. If he also discarded the monsters' combat ability and focused entirely on their HP, even minion capacity wouldn't be much of a problem.

Anyway, him being alive is really bad, thought Marie. Franklin was a Superior, meaning that it was unlikely he would fall for the same tricks again.

She'd also made herself into his target, making it safe to expect him to come at her with unpredictable means. As one who'd already fought and felled a Superior, Marie knew that better than most.

I have to bring Ellie to the central arena as soon as possible...! she thought. All the Masters trapped there made the arena the safest place in the entire city.

However, Marie had an even bigger reason for going there.

The barrier trapped most of the players there... including him. If he's who I think he is, then not even Franklin can win against him.

With that certain person in mind, Marie made her way towards the central arena.

She almost crashed into some monsters along the way, but she quickly blew them away with critical hits from homing, explosive bullets.

Soon enough, the central arena was in sight.

"All right!" said Marie. "We're at the home stretch, Ellie!"

"Yes, Ma—"

"I'll be taking the princess back, thank you very much."

Before Elizabeth could finish her sentence, a voice came from the device, and a moment later, Marie felt Elizabeth's weight and breathing completely vanish.

Marie turned around and saw a songbird-like monster just like the one she saw back at the arena. Elizabeth was nowhere in sight.

Upon realizing what'd happened, Marie clicked her tongue in frustration and cut down the songbird. "I was quite confident we were far outside of

Castling's effective range...” she said.

“You were,” replied Franklin. “But it just so happens that I have observational monsters all over the city. I caught up to you by Castling between them. You know, like a bucket brigade.”

Slightly disturbed that he was capable of that, Marie suppressed the urge to question him about the cooldowns and MP usage involved, since she was aware that Franklin was among the greatest monster creators, both Master and tian alike. Asking him about such things was meaningless.

“But man, you sure did me in back there, Superior Killer,” Franklin continued. “I actually thought I was gonna die.”

Though Marie'd sliced his neck not too long ago, the wound was already gone as if it had never been there, letting him speak with a clear tone. That fact greatly irritated Marie.

“Well, I was aiming for at least a death penalty,” she said.

“*At least* a death penalty? Whoa, that's scary,” Franklin replied.

“I'm coming to kill you again,” she growled. “And take Ellie back.”

“A ha ha ha, truly scary.” Though Franklin's tone had a hint of actual fear in it, his grin was still wide. “Hey, I'm actually scared here... Mind doing something about her, *club*?”

At that moment, Marie's Danger Perception skill flared up, warning her about a great threat. Using her immense agility, she moved at supersonic speeds to distance herself from where she was standing.

She glanced back and saw the space there begin to crumble.

The paving, buildings, and even plants — everything that had shape was shattering, falling apart and being reduced to dust.

“I'll leave you to my boy here,” said Franklin. “After all, I had him come so he could take care of ‘exceptions’ like yourself.”

Those words were his last before the device in her hands self-destructed. It was probably a function he'd installed in case it slipped into a third party's hands, but Marie wasn't in a position to care much about that.

What had once been a part of Gideon's streets had become akin to a desert, and beyond this scenery, there was a mysterious-looking group of four.

The first of them was a man in a bird-like hat, swinging a conductor's baton.

The second was a centaur playing a violin.

The third was a cat sìth blowing into a flute.

And the last one was a kobold hitting a drum.

Marie quickly realized that she'd seen such a group before, and after a quick jog through her memory, she remembered that they were the exact same band of street performers she'd seen yesterday.

However, the outside appearance of the centaur, cat sìth, and kobold had become entirely different. Back then, they had been surrounded by a large audience appreciating them for both their performance and lovable appearance. It seemed that had been nothing but sheep's clothing.

Now, their fur was gone, revealing surfaces of pure steel. It was a group of mechanical performers that not only played, but also *were* instruments. A lovable band of merry-makers no longer, they'd turned into machines of murder.

Needless to say, their audience was nowhere in sight.

Anything within their vicinity shattered and crumbled, leaving behind nothing but a desert-like expanse.

"And I truly believed that you were just a skilled band of performers," said Marie. "I guess your presence here means that I can take you for an enemy."

Her perception skills and experience as a Master told her that the opponent before her was not to be trifled with.

“You guess correctly,” the man replied, not with a voice, but with sound. The creatures’ music itself gained word-like meaning and reached her ears.

“May I have your name?” she asked.

“The club on the board,” he replied. “King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.”

“I see.”

“Club” was the title Franklin had given to one of his confidants here in Gideon. Unlike the traitors, whom Franklin had picked up here in the kingdom, the club was an actual member of the Triangle of Wisdom. And King of Orchestras was a Superior Job, just like Marie’s Death Shadow.

He must be quite strong, she thought, assuming that his Embryo was Legion, like hers. She realized that trying to avoid him and going after Franklin wasn’t an option.

Even if I do somehow get to Franklin, I’d just end up being flanked between him and this fellow, and that’s certainly not something I can handle... Man, he’s such a nuisance.

She heaved a long sigh and brandished her weapon, Arc-en-Ciel. “You’re in the way, so just die already.”

“Why the rush, sweet listener? Take the time to listen to the song. It’s *your requiem*, after all.”

After Veldorbell raised his baton, the surroundings became overwhelmed by a wild exchange of explosive and crashing sounds.

And so began *one* of that evening’s intense duels — Death Shadow, Marie Adler VS King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.

Chapter Four: Battle of the Artists

???

This is a story of a certain man.

He was a composer bearing musical talent that placed him among the greatest of his generation. Even those without an ear or mind for music would often see his name on movie credits.

The man dreamed of making an opera. It had been a dream for most of his life — ever since a particular opera had enchanted his young self.

He wished to depict the life of a true hero. The champion would not be based on any existing legend, and his opera would show the hero's life from start to finish, displaying people's joy, anger, grief, and raison d'etre in a seamless chain of song and story.

That was extent of his vision.

And yet it couldn't come true.

His outstanding track record had made it more than obvious that he could not only handle the opera's musical composition, but the script and production, as well.

And yet it couldn't come true.

If he had communicated his intention to make an opera, countless sponsors would've jumped in to support him.

And yet it couldn't come true.

A certain person was stopping him from giving shape to the vision he'd always dreamed of, and that person was *himself*.

Though the vision within him was very much alive, it was so vague and fragile that it always crumbled the moment he tried to make it more concrete.

He'd spent many a day in front of his desk, thoroughly troubled by his inability to create what he so desired. Though he'd composed countless musical masterpieces during his long life, facing his own dream caused him to stagnate.

It took a whole two years of such distress for him to come to know the reason.

I see... I can’t create it because there’s none of it within me.

The story he’d envisioned was failing to take shape because he knew nothing of the battles and struggles of heroes. No matter how hard he’d tried to give shape to his dream, it had always instantly felt fake and vanished. At least, that was the conclusion he’d arrived at.

But then, how do I come to know the battles of heroes?

He himself was far too old to set foot on the battlefield, and it needn’t be said that it would all be meaningless if he died there. Not to mention that the sagas he’d sought simply didn’t exist in the modern world.

Why wasn’t I there during the times when knights thrived? Why couldn’t I witness legends be born?

Upon realizing that such experiences were lost to the world he was part of, the man despaired, compromised his desire, and began to accept the fact that he might have to present his dream work in a half-baked state.

That was when...

“*Infinite Dendrogram* will provide you with a new world and your very own unique possibility.”

...those words reached his ears.

The words “new world” caught his attention, and he soon found out that it was the promotional line of a certain game.

Though he’d made game music in the past, he’d had next to no experience playing them. However, *Infinite Dendrogram* had a mysterious attraction to it that seemed to pull him inside. Thus, he’d entered the world where he could come to know experiences much like the ones he’d envisioned.

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Duel city Gideon, ninth district

Unlike the fourth district, where most of the wares being sold were relatively safe in terms of legality, the ninth district was home to many black markets. Due to that, it was usually about as chaotic as the eighth district — home to pimp and thief guilds — but tonight, it was strangely neat.

That was due to a lack of people and the great reduction in buildings caused by countless explosions and crashes.

At the center of all the destruction, there were two people.

One of them was the Death Shadow, Marie Adler — the PK often referred to as the "Superior Killer."

The other was the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell, and the three parts of his Embryo — a group that had given the death penalty to many formidable Masters of the kingdom.

Both he and Marie had Superior Jobs and high-rank Embryos in their sixth form. Excluding the overwhelmingly mighty Superiors, who didn't even break a hundred in total number, these two were among *Infinite Dendrogram's* most powerful.

As one would expect of a battle between such entities, the damage it caused to the surroundings was grave enough to liken it to a natural disaster.

However, anyone observant enough would see that only one of the two was responsible for all the destruction.

The crumbling buildings, plants, and paving were all Veldorbell's doing, but that certainly didn't mean that Marie was considerate of her surroundings.

"Tch..." she clicked her tongue as she filled every one of Arc-en-Ciel's chambers with Red Burst and fired bullet creatures made of pure explosive power at her opponent.

Their damage potential was great enough to instantly kill low-ranks and not be taken lightly by high-ranks. If they landed on Veldorbell, the buildings surrounding him would certainly be blown away.

However, not a single one of them hit. All the bullet creatures shattered and exploded midair a little over a hundred metels away from Veldorbell.

Damn it. No matter how much I shoot, none of my bullets get close, Marie thought in frustration.

The phenomenon was caused by one of Veldorbell's Embryo abilities. It was an area-of-effect attack that crushed everything within a range of several hundred metels and reduced it to dust — a property which let it double as defense, as well.

The battle so far and the information she'd gathered yesterday were enough for her to be certain of what had caused all this destruction.

It's sound... she thought. No doubt, Veldorbell's attacks were all caused by air vibrations.

Then again, the way they shattered physical objects made it painfully obvious that there was more to them than that.

Just like my onmitsu grouping is a branch of the ninja grouping, musician jobs also have branches for songs and instruments and the like, Marie thought. *With that in mind, this King of Orchestras fellow is probably in... the conductor grouping.*

The conductor grouping contained jobs focused on conducting orchestras, and those with jobs in it were generally equipped with abilities that increased the effects of the party members' musical skills.

No musician jobs were battle-oriented, and were they to participate in fights, they would either buff their allies or apply debuffs to the enemies. Thus, the conductor grouping could be considered a support job for support jobs.

Of course, that's something I've never encountered in battle before, Marie added silently.

And yet, the power demonstrated by Veldorbell put him among the most destructive forces Marie had ever faced. Even more when she discounted Superiors. Clearly, it wasn't anything she'd have expected from a "support job for support jobs."

Seems like his Embryo evolved to have some offensive music skills, she thought. *This destruction is the result of him using his skills as King of Orchestras to greatly magnify their power.*

She was also confident that he had skills that reduced MP consumption. After all, he'd been channeling this lethal, ultimate skill-like attack since the beginning of the battle, which would be impossible unless he had something that compensated for the cost.

My guess is that, rather than crumbling the objects by matching the resonance frequencies, the sound is causing destruction through a high output of air vibrations... shockwaves, basically. After all, even her bullet creatures were getting destroyed before they could reach Veldorbell.

"It pains me to admit it, but I'm at a compatibility disadvantage here," she muttered.

Marie was completely correct. Though the bullet creatures from her Arc-en-Ciel had high utility due to their many types, they were all living creatures, and as such received great damage upon entering the vibration field.

That applied to Marie, as well. It rendered her incapable of using her other forte — hiding her presence and performing a close-range sneak attack on her opponent. It was fair to assume that Veldorbell had no intention of disabling the vibration field until he consigned her to a death penalty.

Now, how do I go about this...?

Marie was a veteran player bearing the title of "Superior Killer." The Masters she'd defeated were far too many to count. Naturally, she wasn't unfamiliar with situations in which she was at a disadvantage in terms of either power or compatibility. She was the Superior Killer exactly *because* she'd won against such odds.

Marie pondered. *I have Ellie to worry about, so maybe I should just use Daisy or Shirahime?*

Just like any sufficiently experienced Master, Marie had an ace up her sleeve — her ultimate skill. Were she to use any of those available to Arc-en-Ciel, she could probably make it through this predicament.

But if I use them here, I'll have fewer options when fighting Franklin.

Though Arc-en-Ciel's ultimate skills were powerful, using them came at a great cost. If she used them here, there was no doubt that she wouldn't be in top form when facing Franklin.

Trying to defeat a Superior while not being at her best was nothing but a fool's errand. Not to mention that she assumed Franklin had yet to show even a tenth of his total battle potential.

Now that she'd failed to kill him with that surprise attack on the Night Lounge, it was safe to expect an all-out battle next. And when it came to not showing their full potential, she assumed her current opponent, Veldorbell, was the same.

It was obvious that there was more to his Embryo abilities than this vibration field. At the very least, it was mixed with two more attacks.

My passive skill that counters mental debuffs is flaring up... I guess he's also using some sound-based hypnosis.

The onmitsu grouping had high mental debuff resistance to begin with, and Marie was the grouping's Superior Job. Not only that, she'd spent some of the afternoon mock-fighting Rook, who'd somehow found out her true identity, and thus had equipped an accessory that increased her resistance to Charm and similar status effects. Due to that, she was able to negate the effects of Veldorbell's hypnosis, but it was obvious that it was very real and had a greater range than the vibration field.

Then, there's another... Marie thought as her Danger Perception skill flared up and she let her survival instincts make her jump to the right.

A moment later, something invisible passed through the space where she'd just stood.

The Danger Perception skill flared up yet again, and she quickly dodged while kicking up a piece of rubble, which instantly got split in half. The cross-section was abnormally smooth and sharp.

"Cutting" with sound... she thought. *Seems like an ultrasound scalpel to me.*

Though it had little to do with surgery, the surgical precision was definitely there. The cut reminded her of the ultrasound attacks used by a certain kaiju from an old movie.

Needless to say, it wasn't a feat that the laws of physics allowed. However, they weren't on Earth, but in *Infinite Dendrogram* — a world where magic was taken for granted.

It's a magic-leaning musical skill... I'm honestly quite impressed by his Embryo's rich variety, especially when considering that it's bound to nothing but sound.

Ultra vibration waves.

Hypnotic sounds.

An ultrasound scalpel.

Marie guessed that each of these skills was used by one of his Legion of three.

Type Legion is generally split into two categories: those that do nothing but grow in number or those that are few, but are each equipped with a different skill. It's quite clear that Veldorbell is a prime example of the latter.

Distributing abilities generally made them weaker, but Veldorbell used his skills as King of Orchestras to compensate for that and make them even stronger than before.

Experienced as she was, Marie felt pressure that was equivalent to or even greater than the one she'd felt when facing three sixth-form Guardians.

"What a troublesome enemy," she muttered.

Being a Superior Job and a Master of a sixth-form Embryo, she knew better than most that people like her already had one foot in the realm of Superiors. That went double for cases where Embryos and jobs had superb synergy.

"Troublesome, indeed... And yet..."

Due to that, she could easily tell that Veldorbell was a formidable foe. However...

"The music itself is just so... enchanting."

Though the vibration field was a true hell where everything shattered and crumbled, the music reaching the soundscape outside of it was simply magnificent and nothing short of moving.

While gathering data for her manga, Marie — or, rather, Nagisa Ichimiya — had once gone to listen to a famous orchestra's classical concert. It had been grand enough to leave her astonished, but not even that could hold a candle to Veldorbell's performance resounding throughout the battlefield.

Marie certainly wasn't the only one who felt that way. There had already been a few city inhabitants who, despite all the chaos in town, had wandered towards them, enchanted by the melody and searching for its source. Then they had run away when they'd realized that it was caused by a deadly battle.

"I wonder if it only sounds great because of your skills as King of Orchestras," muttered Marie.

"Who knows?" Veldorbell's music turned to words as he replied. "At the very least, I wrote the score myself."

Though the destruction and the heavenly performance had thrown the soundscape around him into chaos, Veldorbell could still hear her speak.

The hundreds of metels between them would have made conversation impossible even if the vibration field hadn't been there. However, Veldorbell was using some sound-transfer skills to allow a proper exchange between them.

"Yourself...? That's quite impressive," said Marie. "However, that makes it even harder for me to understand something... Why are you in a robot production clan? You seem like you'd be more comfortable in an art or battle clan."

"Don't assume I don't take part in their production activities," replied

Veldorbell. “Just a short while ago, I helped them with the composition of the Grand Marshall’s new opening song.”

“Gran...?”

While speaking truths which sounded like jests, Veldorbell continued *playing* his words.

“The reason why I joined is simple. Franklin won the previous war, and I’m certain that he’ll become a crucial part of many future battles, as well. Sooner or later, he might become a hero... or get defeated by a hero, instead. I honestly do not care.”

“Hero?” Marie repeated.

“Yes. I wish to see the birth of a true hero... to see a champion rise up before my very eyes.”

Though the voice reaching her ears through the music wasn’t natural, Marie felt immense amounts of passion in it.

“In that case, why didn’t you team up with King of Beasts or Hell General?” she asked.

“I couldn’t relate to either of them.”

Marie was about to say something along the lines of “Yet you could relate to *that*?” but she simply didn’t.

She wasn’t restraining herself from saying it, she just felt like it wasn’t the time for such talk.

Before she’d realized it, the music had turned silent and the effective range of the vibration field began to shrink.

Is he out of MP...? Wait, no!

Disregarding Marie’s perplexity, Veldorbell spun his baton and stopped. It was a motion signaling the end of a performance.

Seemingly obeying his command, the three mechanical beasts comprising Veldorbell’s Embryo stopped playing. With the end of the heavenly music, the destruction of the surroundings also ceased. Despite that, Marie couldn’t see this as a golden opportunity to attack him.

Her perception skills weren’t flaring up. However, her womanly intuition... or perhaps her instincts as an animal were warning her about some grave danger.

“Percussion’s solo. Strings and Wind, take to tuning,” said Veldorbell, using his own vocal chords for the first time since the battle had begun.

At his words, the kobold went forward and readied its drum. The cat sìth and the centaur stood behind it, pulled cables out of their mechanical bodies and connected to the kobold.

"Ah...!"

The feeling from before did a complete 180. Now, Marie felt an impetus to act and stop whatever they were doing as soon as possible.

But before she could move, Marie started coughing up blood.

"Guagh!"

And that wasn't the extent of it — she began bleeding from her eyes and ears, as well, and the dizziness accompanying it all left her unable to move her body properly.

Damage...? What's going o—?

That was when she realized that, despite the performance being over, the dust around her was still vibrating as though caught in a tidal wave of sound.

It's high-volume sound... in a frequency below the human audible range! Low-frequency soundwaves had a wavelength of less than 20hz — the lower limit of what humans could hear. However, sounds didn't stop existing just because people couldn't hear them. Just like audible sounds of great volume could force a person to cover their ears, megavolumes of low-frequency sound could shatter eardrums and damage the nerves despite not being heard.

But what's causing it... Wait... Up!

Using her Conceal Reveal skill, Marie looked up at the sky.

There, she saw a night sky and a celestial body much like the Earth's moon, before which there was a silhouette of a harpy with a keyed instrument hanging on it, which it skillfully played with its talons.

"A fourth!" Marie exclaimed as she came to understand Veldorbell's intentions.

The reason why he'd spent the past few days performing in the central plaza was to give the people the impression that his Legion consisted of just three creatures. That increased the effectiveness of the surprise attack from the hidden fourth and set his enemy up for his more powerful skills.

That was Veldorbell's score — his orchestra.

Marie looked at the harpy up in the sky.

Oh, I see, she thought, realizing that Veldorbell's bird-like hat was just another way for him ensure that no one expected the harpy.

Upon realizing what his Embryo's motif was, most would question the lack of a bird, and the mask was there to prevent that. Veldorbell had been writing the score for the flow of this battle long before it even began.

The harpy landed next to its Master, and connected to the kobold via cable, just like the other two. Seeing the Legion of four all in one place, Marie became all the more certain of what she was looking at.

The centaur was the donkey.

The cat sìth was the cat.

The kobold was the dog.

The harpy was the rooster.

It was a group of four animal musicians. Thus, Veldorbell's Embryo was...

"Beast Orchestra — Bremen, 'Percussion.'"

The name came in the form of the ultimate skill. The focused emission of ultra vibration waves that followed engulfed the surroundings, and Marie with them.

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Bremen was the four-in-one Type Legion Embryo belonging to the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.

Strings was the centaur playing a violin.

Wind was the cat sìth playing a flute.

Percussion was the kobold banging a bass drum.

Clavier was the harpy playing a piano.

Each of the four was set with their role and could even play sounds from other musical instruments of the same type, and the resulting melodies were great enough to surpass large-scale orchestras.

When in battle, they attacked and destroyed the enemies with Strings's ultrasound scalpel, Wind's hypnotic music, Percussion's vibration waves, and Clavier's low-frequency soundwaves.

Veldorbell, being a man who'd dedicated his life before *Infinite Dendrogram* to music and was now seeking battle, felt that the abilities of his Embryo were simply tailor-made for him. He wasn't unique in that regard, for most Masters were more or less pleased with their Embryo powers and could understand why they were as they were.

Many would claim that being unable to dislike a power born from oneself was only obvious. However, there were always exceptions, and Veldorbell was one of them.

Indeed, he was pleased with its abilities, but when his Embryo had hatched, he couldn't help but be disgusted by its *motif*.

Each and every Embryo was based on Earth's myths, legends, fairytales, champions, or natural phenomena, which set their name and appearance.

Velborbell's Bremen was based on "The Town Musicians of Bremen" — a children's tale that most people in civilized countries were familiar with. And that motif was exactly what Veldorbell disliked.

"The Town Musicians of Bremen" is about a group of animals that set out on a journey with the vision of becoming a musical band, he thought. *However, on the way, they get a warm house and food from a bunch of robbers and are so satisfied with it that they start living there... compromising on their vision.*

Being someone who had a dream and strove make it come alive, Veldorbell simply couldn't tolerate what they were.

Feeling as though they represented his foolishness from the time when he'd thought of compromising and presenting his vision in a half-baked form, Veldorbell continued hating the appearance of his Embryo.

But at the same time, he...

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The vibration waves faded away at the speed of sound, bringing about an uncomfortable silence.

The trajectory of the attack was covered in pulverized solid objects... the dust it had left behind. Nothing else was there — not even a trace of Marie.

All alone, Veldorbell was standing in the ruined ninth district.

Bremen's ultimate skill, "Beast Orchestra — Bremen," was the type that focused the entire Legion's power into just one of the four and allowed it to release a musical skill that greatly surpassed its usual output.

Due to that, it could have a total of four different effects. The one he'd used now, Percussion, released expanded vibration waves that went on for a few kilometels as they tore the pavement as far as Gideon's outer walls.

That abnormal power was due to the ultimate skill still being counted as “musical,” making it benefit from the King of Orchestras’ “Orchestral King’s Conducting” passive skill, which made all musical skill effects several times greater.

Naturally, it was incomparable to the vibration barrier from before.

There had been no bystanders in its way because they’d been afraid of getting caught in the battle’s crossfire, but if there had been, they would’ve surely been reduced to dust. And that was exactly what seemed to have happened to Marie.

“Sound Search,” said Veldorbell, causing everyone in his Legion besides Percussion to investigate the surroundings.

They started making sound and examining the area like a sonar. Even if something was hidden, he could find it as long as it had physical presence.

“No one’s there,” he said at last. There were no creatures in the area surrounding him. That could mean that Marie had gotten the death penalty and vanished or that she’d somehow escaped and gone to face Franklin. In either case, Veldorbell was the one who’d won.

“Heart Beat Palpitation, cancel,” he said, canceling the skill responsible for the vibration field.

It had been active even after he’d stopped swinging the baton before using his ultimate skill and even after he’d used it. The only moment it hadn’t been was when he’d used Beast Orchestra — Bremen.

If Marie had concluded that Veldorbell had ended the performance before using the ultimate skill and decided to close in on him, she’d have died without him having to use it.

“...Well, that certainly cost me a lot,” he muttered to himself.

The passive skills available to King of Orchestras not only increased the power of Bremen’s musical skills, but significantly reduced their MP and SP cost, as well. Even so, a skill as great as Heart Beat Palpitation wasn’t cheap. Keeping it up for a minute had cost Veldorbell, who had a Superior Job, about 4% of his total MP and SP. There was also the cost of the ultimate skill to consider, so he turned off the vibration area to use the relevant restoration items.

A second later, he felt a blade run through his back and split his spine in half.

“?!”

The fatal damage it had caused was negated by the Lifesaving Brooch he had equipped. However, the attack was followed by many more. Before Veldorbell or his Bremen could even do anything, his neck and back was cut several tens of times.

"Heart Beat Palpitation!"

And so, just as Wind created the familiar air vibration field, the attacker backed away at supersonic speed.

"You... You're...?!" he voiced his confusion, speaking through music yet again. The reason he did this was that his natural voice would always be drowned out by the vibration field. As confused as he sounded, however, he didn't even need to ask to know the identity of the attacker.

"That's sixteen with the right and twenty with the left," said the culprit. "I believe that should take care of the defensive items."

In her right hand, there was an Epic special reward, the paralyzing dagger known as "Palsy Stingblade, Belspan," while in her left, there was the attack trajectory-concealing blade, Night Pain. The one wielding them was none other than the Death Shadow, Marie Adler.

I was too careless, thought Veldorbell. Though his enemy had been nowhere in sight and hadn't appeared on his sonar, he shouldn't have canceled the vibration field. After all, it had been the only thing preventing Marie from attacking him. Without the field protecting him, Veldorbell was a sitting duck, just waiting to be killed.

Indeed, he was the King of Orchestras — a Superior Job. However, that was a job from a non-battle-oriented grouping. Though combining its abilities with those of his Bremen gave him battle potential rivaling that of battle-oriented jobs, he had little in the ways of defensive stats such as END.

Like Marie, with her AGI-focused battle-oriented Superior Job, had just demonstrated, those who got close to him could kill him ten times before he could even do anything.

Just as she'd explained to Ray, a difference in mid-battle speed could create a difference in the amount of actions the combatants could take during a specific amount of time, and it was often a far more important issue than strategy or skill.

Veldorbell had survived Marie's onslaught thanks to his equipment, but...

They're all gone now, he thought as he confirmed that not a single one of his defensive accessories remained.

“How did you survive my ultimate skill?” he asked.

“Well, who knows?” she said as she formed an indomitable smile.

Though she didn’t show it, she certainly wasn’t in a good state. The damage she’d received from Clavier was still there, and her SP was nearly depleted. Her SP was what she’d sacrificed in order to survive Veldorbell’s Bremen — that was the cost of the skill she’d used. Specifically, “Art of Vanishing” — the greatest skill available only to the onmitsu grouping’s Superior Job, Death Shadow.

Just as it said in the name, it allowed the user to *vanish* from the world for a limited amount of time. While it was active, nothing could see them, touch them, hear them, or perceive them in any other way. It was stealth perfected, and the only reason why she’d been able to remain unharmed in the face of an attack so devastating.

This skill was also what had made it possible for her to escape the barrier shrouding the central arena. Unlike the Master Jiangshi’s Zhenhuo Zhendeng Baolongba, it didn’t do any damage whatsoever, but it was still a skill that matched or perhaps even surpassed it.

Naturally, keeping it active came at a cost, and vanishing for a mere minute would completely drain her SP.

This time, she’d kept it up for half a minute, making her lose half of her total SP and leaving it at less than 20%.

However, she believed that it’d been worth it, for she had been able to make her opponent believe she was dead and surprise him with an attack that had deprived him of his accessories.

I should make sure to kill him, no matter what, Marie thought. The moment she’d used Art of Vanishing, she’d already given up on fighting Franklin.

Veldorbell had turned out to be far stronger and more dangerous than she’d expected, and she figured that if she didn’t defeat him here and now, the chances of someone else defeating Franklin would drop, too. Thus, Marie was now determined to defeat Veldorbell with all she had. She took out a single bullet from her left hand — specifically, from the Embryo crest on it.

The cartridge was about three times the size of the bullets she usually put in Arc-en-Ciel. Its sides were red and black and *it had the picture of a* *character on it.*

“It can’t end here. I cannot accept not witnessing what happens tonight.” Veldorbell was speaking through his music.

“I have a feeling that history will be made here — that tonight will be legendary.”

Despite being artificial, the voice in his music had more emotion than it would have if he’d spoken using his own chords.

“Thus, I cannot make my exit until I burn that moment into my retina and etch it onto my soul.”

The eyes below his bird-like hat became bloodshot as his music-voice turned louder.

“If I don’t... I’ll never be able to complete my work!”

He was a prime example of a person who truly desired something. Marie... Nagisa Ichimiya saw such a person in the mirror far too many times to count.

“...Oh, I see,” she whispered as a certain realization hit her. “You’re much like me.”

Both he and her had come to this world to gain something they didn’t have and to experience what they needed to continue their works. On that front, Marie and Veldorbell were the same.

And yet, Nagisa Ichimiya AKA Marie didn’t hesitate.

“But I’ll still have to ask you to leave, old man.”

Veldorbell was in the way of her goal, and if she didn’t take care of him, yesterday’s memories with the little girl might become shrouded in sadness. Thus, she had no qualms about destroying this man, even though he was much like herself.

“You can’t force me, you uncouth girl!” he said through his music before stopping it and using his real voice to shout a skill name. “Final Orchestra!”

That was the King of Orchestras’s ultimate job skill. It was a desperate measure that sacrificed 90% of his health in exchange for making musical skills ten times more powerful.

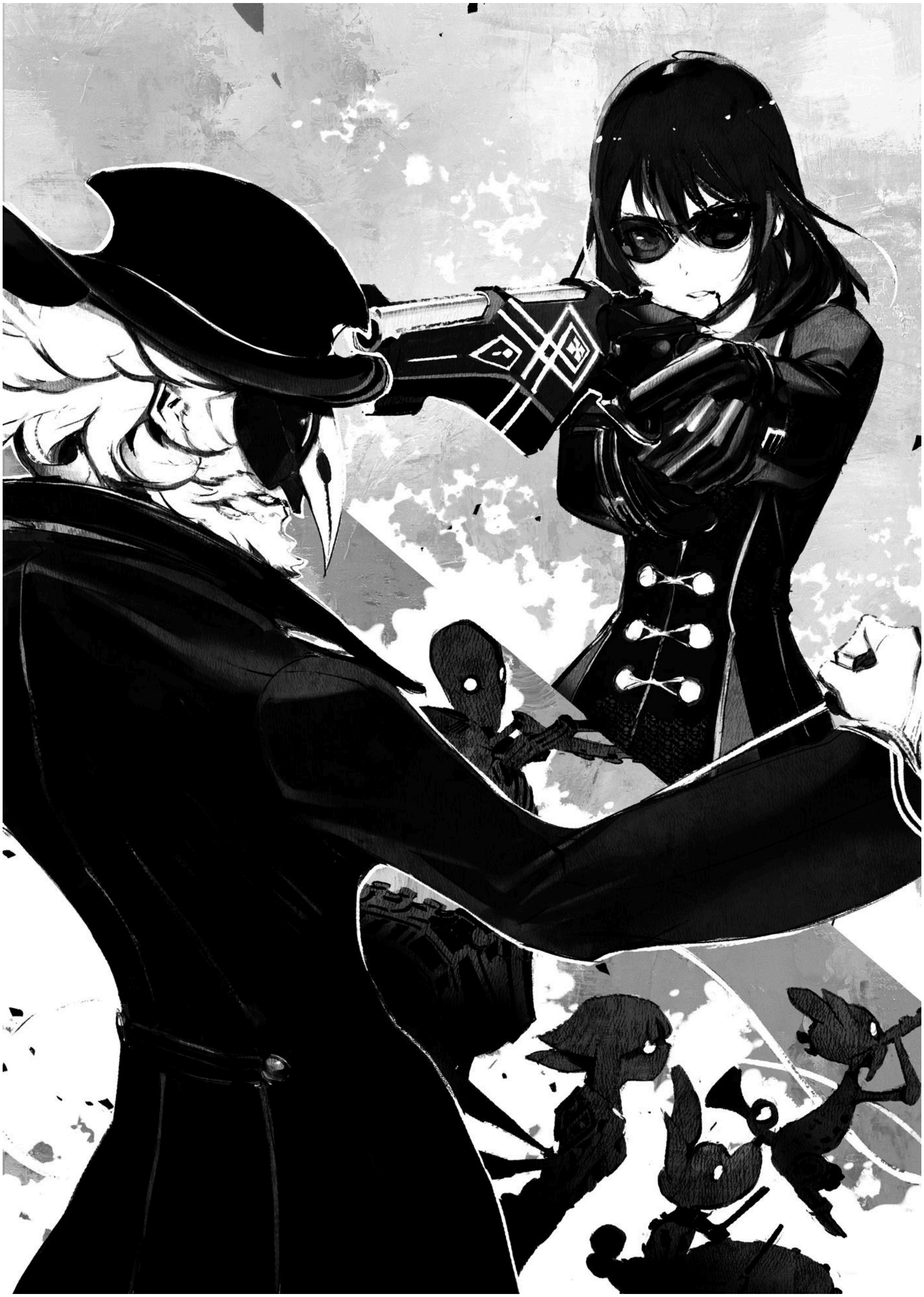
A moment later, the four members of Bremen connected yet again, ready to use the ultimate skill to take care of Marie once and for all.

“‘Uncouth’?” she asked indignantly. “Do excuse me, but superficial politeness is part of my character, you see.” She spun her Embryo, the gun in her hand.

Suddenly, the Embryo’s shape underwent a great change. No longer the six-shooter it had been before, Arc-en-Ciel had become a single-shot, high-caliber handgun. Marie loaded it with the large bullet she’d taken out of her crest and aimed it at Veldorbell.

She wasn’t making use of her supersonic movement abilities. It was difficult to tell whether she was just being careful about the possibility of having it used against her or if she just wanted to give this man — who was much like her — a fair fight.

The two combatants braced themselves. Though the distance between them was great, it didn’t matter at all, for the attacks they’d prepared were fatal regardless. The exchange that would soon follow would decide the victor and the loser.



After a moment of silence, the two made their moves.

"Phantasmal Raingun — Arc-en-Ciel, 'Daisy Scarlet the Explosion Death'!"

"Beast Orchestra — Bremen, 'Wind'!"

Two ultimate skills clashed, finally ending the battle.

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The ultimate skill of Beast Orchestra — Bremen came in four different forms.

Strings's magic slashes.

Percussion's wide-scale physical attack.

Clavier's stealth low-frequency wave attacks.

And Wind's hypnotic music.

Veldorbell chose the only one of the four that didn't do any damage. Most would question this choice, but he had a total of three perfectly valid reasons.

The first was the possibility of Marie avoiding Percussion's damage, just like she had before.

Veldorbell didn't know how Marie had survived the first Beast Orchestra, and thus believed that the same skill would be countered by the same skill.

The second was the existence of defensive accessories. Veldorbell had survived Marie's onslaught because of such items. If Marie also had some of these equipped, it was entirely possible that simple attack power wouldn't be enough to end her.

The same reasoning had applied to the first Beast Orchestra, but back then, he hadn't had a choice, as picking any other of his Legion would have made him deactivate Percussion's vibration field after using the ultimate skill.

Wind's hypnotic music, on the other hand, would cause the opponent to die regardless of any accessories.

The third reason — and the most important one — was the very melody resounding when Veldorbell combined the King of Orchestras's ultimate job skill with Bremen's ultimate skill.

The most perfect music he had at his disposal in such a state was the one played by Wind. Veldorbell was absolutely certain that it could move the listener's heart, mind, and soul. The music played by Wind when it was supported by Bremen and the King of Orchestras was nothing short of divine.

It was simply *to die for*.

Far beyond being just "hypnotic," the music played by Wind was of such excellence that listeners would actually *give their lives for it*. Some would call it the apotheosis of Charm.

The sound ignored all resistances and had already made many veterans kill themselves.

The power in the divine music had yet to fail him, so Veldorbell had limitless confidence in its effects.

He disliked the motif behind his Embryo. But at the same time, he adored their music more than anyone else in existence.

Veldorbell, a man who hated Bremen's form, but was thoroughly enchanted by its sound, believed in the power of Wind's Beast Orchestra more than anything else in the world. He was absolutely certain that no one could remain alive before this music.

And yet, Wind's melody, that had already defeated countless enemies, failed to fell the woman before him.

"W... Why...?" Veldorbell sputtered, as the life drained from his face. He was surrounded by Bremen — all shattered into little pieces.

The only reason why Veldorbell had survived Marie's ultimate skill even after having sacrificed 90% of his life was the fact that his Legion had jumped in to protect him. However, though he was still alive, his defeat was imminent.

His imminent defeat was the very reason why he'd asked that question.

"Looks like it's my win."

Veldorbell looked up to see *two* people before him.

One of them was, of course, the Death Shadow, Marie Adler. The other was a red girl — the same one that was drawn on the cartridge Marie had loaded into her gun.

A certain group of people would find her appearance and the fangy, ferocious smile to be familiar, for she was a character from Nagisa Ichimiya's manga, *Into the Shadow.* She was called "Daisy Scarlet the Explosion Death."

Arc-en-Ciel's ultimate skill, Phantasmal Raingun, used the same "paint" cartridges that Marie used to create the bullet creatures and focused them on bullets that Marie herself had drawn. The abilities of the creatures depended on the paint used when drawing, and Marie combined the characteristics of her paints to recreate the characters from her manga to the best of her ability.

Daisy Scarlet was the result of combining red and black paint. She was a vampire that could become explosions. Even as she was merely standing there, small bursts were happening in the area around her. Bremen's and Veldorbell's defeat was caused mainly by Daisy's first explosion, which covered everything in a 100 metel radius.

"Why... Why are you alive after hearing Wind's music? It's supposed to make you throw your life away."

Veldorbell didn't find it strange that he was on the verge of dying. Being in such a state after a clash of ultimate skills wasn't uncommon. However, he couldn't understand why Marie and Daisy were still alive.

Veldorbell already knew that Arc-en-Ciel created bullet creatures. Thus, no matter what kind of creatures Marie created, he would have expected any of them to kill themselves upon hearing Wind's melody. Be they monsters or mechanical dolls, the music was great enough to make them end themselves. Veldorbell couldn't believe that it seemed to have no effect.

"...Oh, sorry," said Marie. "Neither me nor this girl heard the melody."

"You... You didn't hear it?" he replied with pure shock in his voice.

"Yes. After all..." Marie replied as she pointed towards Daisy, "...her explosions blow away the surrounding atmosphere. Sound can't travel when that happens."

An extremely simple reason.

Sounds were vibrations. As such, they could only passed on through things that could vibrate, like air or water. That was why Marie had Daisy blow away the surrounding air to create a wall of vacuum that no sound could pass through.

Simple explosive bullets wouldn't have the power for such a feat, but Daisy, being the result of an ultimate skill, could do it with little trouble.

If Veldorbell had used Strings's magic attack or Percussion's wide-scale attack, this battle might've ended in a draw because they could've broken the vacuum barrier with sheer sonic force. Wind's melody, however, wasn't offensive in nature and was thus useless unless it could reach the opponent.

“A melody to die for...” muttered Marie. “That’s something I’d love to hear, but now is not the time for it.”

“...Ha,” chuckled Veldorbell. “Not lending an ear to good music... you really *are* uncouth.”

With his gaze full of disappointment, rather than frustration, he closed his eyes.

Marie aimed the muzzle towards him...

“Goodbye, King of Orchestras.”

...and shot his forehead.

Thus ended one of the night’s grand battles, and the board no longer had a club on it.

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“...Oh, am I tired,” Marie heaved a sigh as she fell to her knees. She then reached into her wristband-shaped inventory, took out a high-quality SP restoration item, and slowly began gulping it down.

Thanks to her using Art of Vanishing and Phantasmal Raingun, her SP was almost completely drained. Though she had items to restore it, the SP loss was too great to cover with those alone.

Also, though restorative items that had a weak effect acted quickly, the powerful ones used by Superior Jobs such as herself had a significantly weaker effect when used consecutively.

She’d need some time until she had enough SP to participate in battle again. Not to mention that she was still damaged from the low-frequency wave attacks.

And last, but definitely not least...

“With this, I can’t use red or black anymore,” she sighed.

Phantasmal Raingun had two major cons to it.

The first was the necessity to draw the characters on the bullet and the fact that she could only keep a maximum of six of them. The Daisy bullet she’d just used was the only one she had, so Marie was now rendered incapable of using Daisy until she drew her again.

The second con was the fact that the paints used to make bullets used by the ultimate skill were rendered inaccessible for the next 24 hours.

The ones used in Daisy were Red Burst and Black Homing. The former was for explosions, while the latter was for homing shots. Now that Marie had used her, she could no longer use her lethal explosive bullets or the ultra-accurate homing bullets for a whole day. This also extended to other Phantasmal Raingun characters that used Red Burst of Black Homing.

The skill was powerful and versatile, indeed, but its demerits were just as great. Marie's Embryo's ultimate skill drew upon her characters in exchange for draining her reserves.

"It doesn't seem like I'll be able to kill Franklin now," she sighed again. "But..."

Just like Veldorbell, Franklin had a weak, non-battle job that surpassed the average battle job due to synergy with his Embryo. Scary as that was, that could be interpreted another way, and...

"They might actually have a chance."

While running away with Elizabeth and during her battle with Veldorbell, Marie had caught glimpses of Ray and Rook heading towards the western gate.

Their opponent was a Superior. Marie had just barely won against Veldorbell, and Franklin was an entity above the musician. In any normal scenario, two newbies' chances of victory were lower than negligible.

Even so...

"*They* might just do it."

Ray already had a history of defeating creatures stronger than himself, while Rook had been able to cut Marie's arm off despite being a non-battle job. Considering those facts let Marie have hope that they could win and save Elizabeth.

"Heh heh... Still, I can't leave *everything* to them," she said as she threw away the empty restoration item and stood up. "I guess I'll just do what I do best."

With that, Marie Adler began running through Gideon's streets as she melted into their shadows.

Chapter Four-Point-Five: Setting

Paladin, Ray Starling

"Hh... What?!"

As Rook, I, and the three newbie girls accompanying us followed the road leading towards Gideon's western gate, we were overwhelmed by a destructive sound so great it made me want to shut my ears. It came from our left — the city's ninth district.

It was the same direction from which we'd heard a musical performance.

I'd found it strange that someone would play music at a time like this, but the blast of sound that'd just reached us was definitely something more than that.

What's happening? I thought.

"Is that where Franklin is?" I asked myself as I questioned whether we should continue going to the western gate or change directions to the ninth district.

"Apparently, he isn't among the ones fighting there," said Rook before I began to ponder.

It wouldn't have been unlike him to notice something I didn't, but I found it strange that he'd used the word "apparently."

"Oh, that isn't my assumption," he added. "I got this info from her." Saying that, Rook looked at one of the three girls accompanying us.

On a slightly unrelated note, while I was on Silver and Rook was riding Marilyn, the three girls were saddled on fluffy, ostrich-like birds called "Landwings" — the easiest-to-get ridable monsters, apparently.

Anyway, the girl Rook looked at was holding a tray-like disk in her hands as she presented it to us. It displayed a map of the area from Gideon's central arena to the western gate, with Roman numerals between I and VII littered all over it.

"What's this, uh...?"

Oh, yeah, I haven't asked for their names yet, I realized.

“M-My name is Kasumi...” she said meekly. “I-I’m a Summoner and th-this is my Embryo... Taijitu.”

Taijitu... I thought, digesting that. *A reference to the Investiture of the Gods, I guess.*

By the way, the other two girls were Io and Fujinon, a Barbarian Fighter and Mage, respectively.

“My Taijitu shows, uh... the location of the Masters within the area and their Embryo forms...” Kasumi said, explaining her Embryo. “According to this... th-there are two Masters in the ninth district, but they’re both on their sixth forms... s-so I don’t think that they’re Franklin.”

“...What a convenient Embryo,” I said.

Looking at the tray-like disk, I could see a “VII” marker heading towards the western gate, and it was safe to assume that it was Franklin. Thanks to her, I didn’t even have to think about changing directions.

“N-No, I-I just... umm... I-I couldn’t do anything in the p-plaza fight, so... I-I... I’m sorry...”

“Why are you apologizing?” I asked.

“‘Why,’ indeed.” Nemesis shared my sentiment. After all, Kasumi just helped us out a lot.

“Uohh...” She hid her face as she moved to hide behind the other two girls. She was strangely good at handling the reins.

“Sorry about that!” said Io. “Our girl Kasumi is the shy type, as you can see! Oh, but she’s the one who had the courage to tell us to come with you two! After all, we have some white-haired pretty boy and blond young man B-elRGHH!” Before Io could finish her sentence, Fujinon — the last of the three — cut it short with a backhand blow to her side.

Eh? What was she about to say?

“Sorry about this idiot,” said Fujinon. “Oh, we only accompanied you because we saw you fight in the plaza and became very interested.”

“O-Okay?” I replied.

I wasn’t too convinced, but the aura about Fujinon made me feel like pushing it further wouldn’t be the best idea.

“You three seem to get along very well,” said Rook. “Have you known each other for long?”

“Yes,” nodded Fujinon. “We’re all in the literary club in the same school.”

Friends in real life, huh? I thought. *No wonder they all act so familiar.*

"To my eye, the ones with the most familiarity are you and Brother Bear," commented Nemesis.

Well, we've been siblings for eighteen years now. ...Oh, but I guess that doesn't mean much when it comes to my sister. She... She's just so...

"Ray! What's wrong?!" Nemesis shouted into my head.

Ah! Damn, my consciousness almost lapsed out of reality.

"This has been bothering me for a while now... what is going on with your sister?" Nemesis asked. "Just like with the glasses, I can't see any of your memories about her."

Please, don't ask. Her very existence makes even less sense than Shu's. She's not even in the same genre as us.

"Anyway, we can now go to the western gate without any hesitation," I said.

At the rate we were going, we'd be there in five or so minutes. However, though I didn't say them out loud, I had two questions on my mind. Both of them were related to the map displayed by Taijitu.

One was about the central arena, the place currently keeping many Masters inside.

On the map, there were four "VII" markers, which pointed to Superiors. Two of them were most likely Figaro and Xunyu. Though Xunyu might not appear on the map because the barrier had been stopped right after she'd been defeated.

With that in mind, though, who are the other two — or three — Superiors?

The other question was about the surroundings of the western gate, the place we were heading to right now.

According to Taijitu, there were several dozens of Masters there. They had a wide range of Embryo forms, from II to VI. I assumed that a Master with a radar-type Embryo like Taijitu had found out where Franklin was heading and gathered a group with the intention of fighting him at the western gate.

That was very good for our confidence. After all, we needed to stop Franklin, but were severely lacking in numbers.

However, that sentiment of mine almost entirely vanished when I noticed that they *weren't moving at all*.

Taijitu was like an active radar, but the Masters at the western gate were still, as though it was just a picture.

There was only one exception, for the one closest to the gate, marked as “III.” It was making slight movements.

For reasons unknown, that marker was making me feel somewhat uneasy.

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Duel city Gideon, the surroundings of the western gate

It happened a few minutes before Ray got a look at Taijitu.

Approximately twenty of the kingdom’s Masters had just arrived at the western gate.

All of them were Masters who hadn’t been in the arena when it had gotten sealed, and who had happened to not encounter Veldorbell after it all began.

“This is the place, right?” one of them asked.

“Yeah. It’s pretty clear that Franklin’s planning to escape through here.”

Using their job or Embryo skills to predict where Franklin was heading, they gathered at the western gate with the intention of ambushing him here.

Their predictions and decisions were correct, for Franklin was about five minutes away.

They were about to prepare themselves for his arrival, but...

“...What’s that?” They encountered a strange sign. It was placed in the middle of the road in a really unnatural manner.

The words on it were in the continent’s common language, and to Masters — who were equipped with auto translation — it said this:

No Master shall pass beyond this point.

“Isn’t that a reference?” one of them asked, examining it. “What the hell is thi—”

“Wait! There’s something over there!” One of the Masters pointed beyond the sign.

There was a large silhouette, standing before the gate as if to prevent anyone passing. It belonged to a Marshall II — no, a Marshall II Revised. It was a humanoid mobile weapon created by the Triangle of Wisdom and fine-tuned for use by a specific individual.

“That’s a Magingear from Dryfe, all right, but it’s a bit different than their official ones or the ones leaked to Caldina,” the other Master agreed. “We might be looking at one of the Triangle’s bigger members. At the very least, he’s not like the player killers messing up the city.”

“He’s probably been put there to make sure that Franklin goes by safely.”

“The mech has higher stats than the average Marshall II, but it’s still just a bit over two times stronger than a Demi-Dragon, at best.”

“Then I guess he won’t be much of a problem for us.”

The Masters gauged the machine’s battle potential using Reveal and Identification. That method wasn’t without its faults. After all, these skills couldn’t see the stats or skills of the Marshall II R’s pilot. However, it was clear that the Masters surpassed him and his machine in terms of both numbers and experience.

“There are way more of us,” one of them said. “We won’t lose even if he uses his Embryo.”

“HA HA! Let’s get to the gate and wait for Franklin! Can’t wait to see his face when we ambush him!”

“‘No Master shall pass beyond this point...’ Heh. As if.”

Thus, the Masters passed the sign and charged towards the Marshall II R. As though he’d been waiting for it, the robot’s pilot spoke up.

“Cyco... ‘La Porte de l’Enfer.’”

“Roger.”

In but an instant, the Marshall II R donned frozen armor as the surroundings underwent a drastic change. Everything within a radius of 200 metels — from the sign to the gate — froze solid. Naturally, the Masters were no exception.

“La Porte de l’Enfer — the enemy dies,” spoke a feminine voice coming from the frost-clad machine.

Her words were mistaken, for no one there had died. They were simply *Frozen*.

“Eh? Huh? All of them? What?” a Master cried.

“...It’s an Embryo skill!” another one shouted.

Those two didn’t have a bit of ice on them.

“*Less than 100*, I see,” said the pilot. “They won’t be much trouble, though.”

Thirteen seconds later, the lower half of one of the remaining two Masters suddenly Froze.

"What the hell is this?!" he shouted.

"Hey, are you okay?!" The other remained unfrozen.

"His number is low," said the girl's voice. "He's probably a support job."

"A Priest or something, huh?" spoke the pilot. "Very well, then." Suddenly, the machine aimed the weapon in its left hand — LRW03 Huge Grenade Launcher — towards the two and fired several times.

With a strong impact, the grenades exploded and covered the surroundings in fire.

By the time the smoke faded, the two had already gotten the death penalty and were no longer in sight. Not only that, but the frozen statues that were caught up in the explosion had shattered and were turning into particles of light.

Some of the statues that hadn't been caught up in it also turned into particles. They had used the suicide feature to forcefully give themselves a death penalty. They'd probably wished to avoid becoming the enemy's XP or having him Steal something while they were Frozen.

The pilot had no intention of breaking them or taking their items, but they had no way of knowing that.

The pilot in the cockpit sighed. What had just happened was more of a massacre than a battle, but the pilot had been more or less certain that it would be like this. That was the very reason why he was positioned here.

The pilot and his Embryo were the natural enemies of anyone who had this city as their main haunt.

"This frost is strong," said someone standing at the sign. "But it won't work on me."

The person — who hadn't been in the previous group — was completely clad in flame, making his silhouette somewhat hard to discern. The man's ruffled hair and burning body were well known to anyone familiar with Gideon.

"An Embryo that grows in strength when you clear some complicated conditions, huh?" he said. "Well, my Surt is the strongest fire-based Embryo in the kingdom! No amount of cold can freeze it!" He was the seventh in the Kingdom of Altar's duel rankings. His name was...

"I am Bishmal the Raging Blaze! Just try and freeze *this* fire!"

Like an erupting volcano, Bishmal made flames burst from all over his body as he charged towards the Marshall II R. A single look was enough to tell that the fire was immensely hot.

Bishmal the Raging Blaze was said to have a punch that was more destructive than anything anyone else in the duel rankings could do. An attack empowered by his flame could easily melt the frozen armor, Marshall II R, and even the pilot.

But alas...

"You won't pass."

...the man clad in the kingdom's strongest fires was frozen solid. He was still aflame, despite this. The expression stuck on his face was an indomitable smile, showing no doubt that he was going to emerge victorious.

"My La Porte de l'Enfer ignores temperature," said the Marshall II R's frozen armor — the Embryo known as Cyco.

Surrounded by frozen statues, the pilot, Hugo Lesseps, shook his head. "Gideon's Masters are tough. They're all veterans far stronger than me and with far more experience in battle against people. And that's exactly why they can never win against me."

Indeed, the one sealing the western gate was none other than Hugo Lesseps — the very same Master that had helped Ray with the Gouz-Maise Gang.

He was now on the board of Franklin's game, acting under the codename "heart."

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As the battle between Marie Adler and Veldorbell came to an end, Franklin and his kidnappee, Elizabeth, were making their way towards the western gate.

Though Marie's attack had put Night Lounge on the verge of death, it was still capable of flight, if only barely. Elizabeth, having lost consciousness, was sleeping on top of it.

"...Looks like we've lost Veldorbell," said Franklin as he examined the map on the device, which no longer had the club marker on it.

The blue marker next to where it had disappeared was gone, as well, but Franklin couldn't tell whether it was due to her dying or simply using a stealth skill like the one she'd used before she'd attacked him.

"Hm..." Franklin clenched and opened his left hand. The action felt somewhat slow.

"Paralysis poison, huh?" he said. "Must be pretty damn strong to have such an effect even after I used an Elixir."

Franklin assumed that the dagger that'd torn his neck had been a special reward focused on paralysis poisoning. He was correct, for Marie's weapon had been Palsy Stingblade, Belspan: a dagger specializing in slow-acting paralysis.

"But it's not like it'd be much of a problem for me if I were unable to lift a finger," he said. To his mind, the only trouble the Superior Killer had caused him was the damage to Night Lounge and the loss of Veldorbell. And when it came to the latter, Franklin didn't believe that the King of Orchestras had gone down without a fight.

"The Superior Killer probably doesn't have the power to fight me anymore," he muttered. "And I don't think we'll have any other exceptions of her level, so... I guess I only have to be wary of a potential one or two Superiors, and..."

There were other exceptions, as well. Franklin already had the details regarding the battle at the central plaza, where the newbies had won against the traitors.

While approaching the western gate, Franklin examined how things were going, and noticed that two of the newbies performed some grand feats that made them stand out from the rest.

Naturally, by virtue of being newbies, they were weaker than the high-rank Masters around the city. However, Franklin was experienced enough to know that people like them should never be underestimated. Not to mention that he was already familiar with one of the two newbies.

"If I'd known this would happen, I wouldn't have messed around with the dog ears, and would've just given him a healthy dose of instadeath poison," Franklin muttered.

He was referring to what he'd done the day before. If Franklin had killed Ray back then, there was a chance that he would've posted about it on the internet, which could've put a dent in his plot. Due to that, the scientist had opted to merely mess around with him while getting some information in the process, but that had come back to bite him.

Things might've gone differently if I'd killed him then and there, he thought. *For all I know, the Superior Killer wouldn't have entered the fray if I had... but I guess I'm overthinking it.*

"First the Old Orchard, now this... The jackass just can't stop getting in my way!" Franklin grumbled. "Well, not that it matters anymore." He grinned. "I have the data, and RSK is complete. As things are, crushing him head-on should be quite satisfying, and a few cameras should make it even better."

Soon enough, the Night Lounge arrived at the western gate and crashed to the ground. Considering the wretched state it was in, this wasn't unexpected. Unable to return to the Jewel, Night Lounge breathed its last as it became particles of light and vanished.

"That thing cost me 70,000,000 lir... Oh well, I'll just make the next one a bit tougher."

Franklin scooped up Elizabeth with his right hand, the one that wasn't numb, and began walking towards the gate. In a moment, a sign saying "No Master shall pass beyond this point" entered his vision.

"I think I remember this," Franklin said. "It's from a Japanese folk tale. One of those witty ones, I think. How nostalgic."

Franklin casually passed the sign and looked at the area around the gate. He saw a mechanical warrior, standing there like the guardian of the gates of Hell.

That description couldn't be more appropriate. After all, the frost permeating the area and the many frozen Masters littered all over the surroundings made the scene highly reminiscent of the Ninth Circle of Hell.

"What a spectacle," Franklin said as he walked through it, clearly amused.

He showed no signs of getting frozen like the other Masters.

In fact, he didn't feel the least bit cold, and the same applied to the tian he was holding, Elizabeth.

"Ah, hey, this is Bishmal. Guy's seventh in the duel rankings," Franklin said upon noticing a man frozen while adorned in raging flames. "Ice to meet you!" he said in a playful tone as he kicked the statue away.

With no hint of resistance, Bishmal dropped to the ground, shattered, and turned into particles of light.

Onlookers would question whether an act like this should be so simple and done so casually.

“If you froze them, you might as well shatter them, you know?” Franklin said to the person inside Marshall II R, Hugo.

“I didn’t want to waste my ammo, and moving in to crush them costs MP,” Hugo answered. “I have to save it so I can keep La Porte de l’Enfer up for longer, right?”

Sounds like a waste of potential EXP to me, thought Franklin before speaking up again.

“What’s the setting right now, anyway?”

“We’re only targeting Masters that don’t belong to the Triangle of Wisdom,” Hugo answered. “Before these Masters came, the tians from the Royal Guard passed through. They’re waiting outside.”

“Oh? The Royal Guard? They didn’t attack you?”

“I’d already put the sign up at that point, so they knew that I had no intention of fighting non-Masters.”

“That might’ve been for the best,” Franklin said. “Attacking tians outside of war gets you on wanted lists, after all... Which is exactly why it’s obvious that I’m already on Altar’s.”

It was common knowledge that there were no crimes in disputes between Masters. Thus, a Master blocking the paths of or killing other Masters would not be considered a criminal.

“Anyway, if the RG is waiting for me outside, they’re probably planning to face me in an open field battle,” said Franklin. “That’s their specialty.”

“What will you do?” asked Hugo.

“Take them on, duh. This country’s tians ain’t shit.”

In the previous war, Dryfe had killed all the country’s tians with Superior Jobs. To his mind, mere high-ranks weren’t much of an obstacle.

“Oh, by the way, once I pass, change the setting a bit,” Franklin said.

“How?”

“Let Ray Starling pass.”

“...Ray Starling.”

“Yes, Ray Starling. He’s blond, has dog ears... well, not anymore. Anyway, you know him well, Yu. Let him pass.”

“...Why?”

Before answering his question, Franklin made a sinister, devil-like smile. “Because I’m gonna smash the twerp myself, duh. He and I seem to be bound by some weird cosmic mojo, so I’ll crush him and sever the tie once and for all. I even prepared a special monster for it.”

“W-Wait, y-you mean the MGD?!” Hugo spoke up with a voice thick with fear.

It wasn’t without reason. After all, MGD was the biological weapon Franklin had made for the purpose of fighting Superiors.

“Ha ha ha! Wouldn’t that be great? MGD could level the whole city... no — the whole country! Anyway, no, I’m using a different monster. MGD’s not finished yet!” Franklin laughed in an amused manner before continuing. “I’ll be bringing it out after we’re done with the kingdom, when we start warring with Caldina or Legendaria. Though, if this plan fails, we’ll be fighting the kingdom head-on, meaning that they’ll get a taste of MGD, too.”

Hugo was silent. Franklin passed by the Marshall II R’s arm and lightly tapped its frozen armor with the back of his hand. “So yeah, let him go by if he comes.”

“...Okay.”

With that, their exchange was over and Franklin made his way towards the gate.

However, Hugo turned back to look at him before speaking up. “S—”

“Yu...” Franklin cut his words short. “In here, you’re supposed to call me ‘leader.’ Your tone’s falling back to old times. Don’t let it fall back to old times.”

“...Yes, leader.”

“So, what did you want?”

“What do you intend to do to the Royal Guard?”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about that one, sweetheart.” With those words as his last, Franklin finally went through the gates.

Hugo could do nothing but watch as he left.

“Hoo boy,” said Franklin.

Beyond the gates, there was the western field known as the “Jeand Grasslands,” and a group of knights surpassing fifty in number.

“Another spectacle,” Franklin said.

All of them were from the Kingdom of Altar’s Royal Guard, Paladins tasked with Elizabeth's protection, and all of them showed immeasurable hostility towards Franklin. Standing in front of them was their Vice Commander, Liliana Grandria.

"Franklin, I presume?" she said.

"In the flesh, baby," he replied.

"We are taking Her Highness Elizabeth back."

"I'd rather you didn't. Well, losing her wouldn't actually be a big deal for me, but having her around certainly doesn't hurt." The grin Franklin made as he said that made the knights' hatred for him all the more palpable.

"Then we will take her by force."

"Hmm? You can attack me? I'm holding the princess, you know."

"Do not worry," Liliana informed him. "We Royal Guard are bound by magic that prevents us from hurting our royalty. We will not get a single scratch on her."

"Oh? You have friendly fire disabled? No fair..."

"However, the mere act of pointing my blade in Her Highness's direction pains me greatly, so I would be thankful if you let her go."

"Ah ha ha! Yeah, nah." Franklin stuck out his tongue.

"Grand Cross!"

A torrent of cross-shaped light burst out from the base of his feet.

Grand Cross — a Paladin's greatest skill — was an offensive ability that created a cross-like pillar of holy light, dealing some of the greatest damage available to high-rank jobs. It burst out of and burned Franklin's left side, the one opposite where he was holding Elizabeth.

The surprise attack almost caused him to fall, but he was able to balance himself.

"Well, aren't you rash," he complained as he looked at his chest and saw a Lifesaving Brooch, the accessory nullifying fatal attacks. The attack had left it completely broken, meaning that all the monsters he'd used for Life Link were already dead.

Though the power of the Grand Cross was nothing to sneer at, Franklin was made aware that the surprise attack from the Superior Killer had done more damage than he'd thought.

"Gee whiz... this day certainly isn't easy on my wallet," he muttered as the Royal Guard all charged towards him.

Even though he was a Superior, Franklin's stats were low, and his HP wouldn’t last long against more than fifty battle-focused high-rank jobs. However...

“Well, I’ve been given some good test subjects to prepare for when he comes, so I guess that makes up for it.”

...that only applied in scenarios where Franklin didn’t do anything.

“Call — RSK.”

Thus, Franklin called upon *that* creature.

Chapter Five: Yuri and Hugo

Yuri Gautier

My name is Yuri Gautier. This is the story of my past, and my present.

I was born in southern France, to a family most would call "upper class." My father was a self-made man of great wealth. My mother was an ex-theater actress, and even I, her child, could tell that she was very gentle and beautiful. I also had an elder sister, who was so smart, pretty, and nice to me that I could never stop boasting about her.

That was my family, and most onlookers would certainly suggest that I was blessed to have been born into such a household. However, as one who'd lived it, I had an entirely different opinion.

Though my father was a business genius, he was also greedy, arrogant, and often mistreated my mother, who bore it all while trying to hide the pain from us to the best of her ability. I could see something similar in my sister, too. Though she was always nice to me, I often felt that she was troubled about something.

I clearly remembered the days when my mother took me to the theater she used to act at before she got married. Her eyes as she looked at the plays weren't full of enjoyment or nostalgia — they were clouded with regret.

I could also recall seeing my sister in her room, clearly troubled by what the future would hold.

I lived my life without any inconveniences to speak of. My mother, sister, and even father were all nice to me. The world itself was a gentle place for me to be in. However, it seemed to be getting gradually worse for both my mother and sister.

That was my life for most of my childhood... until my parents got divorced.

And the reason why they did that was my sister's disappearance.

She'd disappeared without a trace after leaving a farewell letter, and though I didn't get to read it, it was obvious that she'd left of her own accord. I knew her reasons for doing that, and so, while I found it sad, I didn't think that it was the least bit strange.

Until a few years ago, my sister had been learning arts and crafts from our maternal grandfather. What had led her to this was the death of Dylan, our pet iguana.

It had made us both very sad, so our grandfather had tried to cheer us up with a handmade plaster figure that looked exactly like Dylan. Though our grandfather hadn't been good enough at this craft to be a recognized artist, my sister had liked the result very much — enough to try her hand at it herself while having our grandfather teach her. She continued making plaster figures even after he passed away.

The day before she disappeared, all the figures she'd made had been shattered, along with everything else our grandfather had left behind.

The one who did it was our father.

"How long can you keep doing this?! You're already arranged for marriage! He won't like the smell these things make!" he'd shouted as he shattered them one by one.

Standing before the pieces, my sister looked at him with the coldest eyes imaginable, left a letter, and simply walked out.

My father became furious, while my mother released the resentment she'd been holding in.

"This is all because she got involved with your old man and this stupid hobby!" yelled my father.

"No! It's all because you were never considerate of her feelings!" shouted my mother.

And so, this incident led to the obvious conclusion — divorce.

I was left in my mother's care, and the two of us moved to live away from him. From that time on, I was haunted by a certain thought:

I should've protected them.

Perhaps it was a childish idea, but I truly believed that things wouldn't have turned out this way if I'd been there for my mother and sister.

I sincerely wished that I could be someone able to protect them, like one of those noble princes or knights from the theater plays my mother often took me to. But at that point, I was already old enough to know that my wish would never come true, so I locked the desire away within me.

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However, a few years after the divorce, a certain thing actually made my wish come true.

It was a game called *Infinite Dendrogram*.

In its promotional line, it promised to “provide you with a new world and your very own unique possibility.”

I, Yuri Gautier, entered this world and became Hugo Lesseps — a High Pilot from the Dryfe Imperium.

Hugo was tall and always acted like a noble young man. I based his behavior on what I’d learned from the plays I saw, and I put a lot of effort into making it work. I also might’ve inherited some of my mother’s acting talent.

I wanted Hugo to be the realization of the wish I’d had since I was young: to be a knight that protected women and defeated any tragedies threatening them. I wished for my role as Hugo to be that of a beautiful flower’s thorn.

If there were no knights to protect women from tragedy, I’d become one myself.

That wish of mine might’ve been warped, but I’d continued playing this role for the entire month — or three months in game time — since I’d started *Infinite Dendrogram*.

But now, I’d become part of a plan which forced me to discard my role.

The plan was the result of cooperation between The Triangle of Wisdom and The Dryfe Imperium’s prime minister faction.

It was a wide-scale project that covered the entire city of Gideon, bringing tragedy to the innocent people living there. It even involved the kidnapping of a princess.

Normally, Hugo — the symbol of my ideal — would’ve avoided participating in the project even if it meant quitting the clan, but I had two reasons why I simply had to get involved.

The first was the fact that the success of this plan would greatly reduce the number of victims in the long term. If it caused the kingdom to give up, the war between it and the imperium would end without any more bloodshed. If this plan didn’t end the kingdom, the lives lost in the upcoming battles would be numerous. After all, about half of the imperium really wished for that to happen.

The country was split into two... or rather, three factions: The prime minister faction, the field marshall faction, and the imperator faction.

Prime Minister Vigoma was responsible for the country's internal affairs, and he was deeply troubled by the drop in national power due to the money they'd spent on the previous war. Back then, the imperium had gone crazy spending money to buy as many Masters as possible. That had resulted in Dryfe's victory, but it certainly hadn't been good for public finance. Not to mention that the kingdom had remained unconquered, meaning that the imperium had gotten far less than what they'd paid for.

And with the bar now being set, the reward couldn't be lowered. If Dryfe were to do that, the Masters would be as displeased as the kingdom's Masters had been when they hadn't been offered anything, which would result in a significant drop in participants. However, a reward like before could only be prepared one more time, and even if Dryfe ended up winning, the state of public finance would be horrid.

Therefore, the prime minister's faction had prepared this plan for the purpose of ending the war before it could restart. The Triangle of Wisdom had become a part of it because the imperium was their sponsor and they didn't want its economy to crash.

The faction led by the one in charge of the army, Field Marshall Barbaros, had a different opinion about what would be best.

It was nearly completely certain that war wouldn't end with just the kingdom and that Legendaria or Caldina would instantly become Dryfe's new enemies. Therefore, he believed that the best course of action was to demonstrate the imperium's might and military prowess while showing off the great rewards the country could give its Masters.

With that, Dryfe would attract new Masters and, in turn, increase its battle potential, deterring countries like Caldina from attacking them. The field marshall also believed that the money spent could be made up for with the kingdom's national treasury.

The one taking his side was the leader of the devil army: Hell General, Logan Goddhart. But he was merely a man who wanted battles where he could show off, so what interested him more was the method, rather than the goal.

Those two ideas had torn the country in half.

The third faction was the one led by the imperator himself. However, this faction didn't seem to have any solid ideas regarding the situation, nor did they comment on the two other factions, so that only served to polarize the country even further.

"The imperator doesn't care which faction wins this," said my clan leader. "To him, what matters isn't the process or the result, but the *goal*."

I didn't know what he'd meant by this, but eventually, the two factions had come to an agreement.

The prime minister's faction would go first, and if their plot worked and ended in the kingdom's annexation, the field marshall's faction would accept the results. However, if it failed and the war continued, the field marshall would get all the rights to restart the invasion.

If that happened, then the kingdom would surely suffer. Even if Dryfe won, they probably wouldn't stop at killing just the army or the Masters. It was entirely possible that the kingdom would lose far more than they would during the plan.

Therefore, I had to choose between a tragedy in the present or a calamity in the future.

I chose the former.

The plan would've happened even if I hadn't gotten involved, so I'd joined with the intention of increasing its success rate and ending it all right here and now. That was the first reason why I'd participated in the plan.

The second reason was extremely personal in comparison.

While the first reason was based in my role as Hugo, the second reason was completely my own.

It was because I greatly respected the main mind behind the plan, the one that most in *Infinite Dendrogram* knew as "Mr. Franklin."

"He" was the one who'd invited me to this world, who had instantly taken me to the clan, and who had helped me out with getting started. Not to mention that I myself wanted to be at Franklin's side and give him the help he needed.

My own feelings were half of the reason why I was standing here as one of the main parts of the plan.

That meant that, while half of my reason for getting involved in this tragedy was obligation, the other half was nothing but my own ego. This fact troubled me greatly.

Then he had come to me and promised that the player killers and the monsters would *only attack Masters*.

The monsters were designed in a way that limited their targets to Masters, while player killers wouldn't go for tians because they didn't want to get on wanted lists. With those facts, he promised that loss of tian life would be reduced greatly.

To him, harm done to tians didn't matter all that much, yet he promised this to me out of consideration for my feelings. Because of this, I'd decided to believe him and do my best to make the plan a success and to prevent the calamity from happening.

For the sake of being at his side and because of the trust between us, I — Hugo Lesseps the machine knight of ice and roses — had become a cog in this tragedy.

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And so came the day of the plan. It began the moment Figaro and Xunyu's duel in the central arena reached its conclusion.

The player killers in Gideon started hunting Masters as the few monsters released began destroying the city.

To take my mind off all the turmoil, I closed my eyes and silently sat in the seat of the Marshall II R that he'd given me.

About ten minutes after the plan began, I heard the sound of hooves galloping on the pavement. Then there were voices.

"That's a Magingear from Dryfe!"

"It's there to stop us from saving Her Highness!"

There was quite a bit of distance between us, but I could hear the contents of their conversation due to one of the Marshall II R's skills: Sound Collection.

I looked through the monitor showing the camera eye's output and saw that they were Paladins from the Royal Guard. Everyone in that group was a person of this world, not a Master. Therefore, they weren't my targets.

I moved the Marshall II R's arm and pointed at the sign I'd set up before the plan began.

"'No Master shall pass beyond this point...' That means we are allowed, yes?" asked a woman clad in flashy armor of pure white.

According to the information I'd been given, I was looking at the Vice Commander of the Royal Guard, Liliana Grandria. She was the exact same person to whom I'd explained the situation yesterday after bringing the children we'd saved from the Gouz-Maise Gang.

"Mh..." Not saying anything, I made my robot nod and moved aside, letting them pass through the gate.

"Very well," she said. "Then we shall pass and wait for Franklin in the Jeand Grasslands."

"Lady Grandria!" shouted one of her subordinates. "Can we really leave this Magingear here?!"

"Fighting in the city puts us at a disadvantage, not to mention that we would be caught between this Magingear and Franklin, once he arrives," Liliana told him. "Moreover, this Magingear is strong enough to be ordered to face Gideon's Masters all by its lonesome. Even if we emerged victorious against such a foe, we would most likely not have the strength to save Her Highness."

"...Understood."

After that exchange, the Royal Guard began going towards the gate while passing by my side. Some were wary of a potential surprise attack, some were tense, while others looked at me with nothing by hatred in their eyes.

This treatment wasn't unexpected. I knew and had already accepted the fact that I was doing something worthy of such reactions.

At the end of their unit was Liliana herself.

Before passing through the gate, she stopped next to my Marshall II R and began speaking. "You are the same person who helped Ray save the children from the Gouz-Maise Gang, yes?"

Though I hadn't said a word, she somehow knew who I was. I couldn't begin to understand what had given it away, but I was somehow able to hide my perplexity.

"You have my sincere thanks for that," she continued. "Also, as myself, rather than the head of the Royal Guard, I have another thing to say..."

She momentarily fell silent and looked at my Magingear's camera eye, staring at me through my monitor before continuing.

"Please don't upset Ray."

Unable to say anything back, I merely bowed lightly.

The Royal Guard passed the western gate and began preparing their formation for “his” arrival at the Jeand Grasslands.

Though I couldn’t help imagining what would happen to them in the fight, I could do nothing but turn away.

Franklin came right after I took care of the Masters that followed the Royal Guard. He told me to let Ray Starling pass, saying that he wanted to take care of him himself.

I’d imagined that I would be the one to fight Ray. I’d already told him that “It’s west.” If, by the time the plan began, he remembered the name of the clan I was part of, he would certainly realize that there was more to me saying that.

The reason I’d said that to him was my own hesitation. A single day with him as my comrade had been enough for me to know that he was like me — a person who couldn’t tolerate tragedies and considered the lives in this world to be worth as much as those on Earth.

In this plan, I’d chosen to be the one bringing about the tragedy, and I’d revealed the part of the plot to him exactly because I’d known he would try to stop it. Though I was part of the tragedy, I felt guilty enough to try and help stop it.

I had entrusted my hesitation — my wish to stop the tragedy — to him.

I'd made him the representation of these feelings, to see which side would win.

I was fully aware that it was much like using him as a coin toss. What I'd done was warped, selfish, and ugly, but it was something I just couldn't avoid doing.

After talking to me, Franklin passed the western gate and went outside. It wouldn't be long until he began fighting the Royal Guard.

Looking away from it, I tried my best to ignore the inevitable result of their battle.

A short while later, *he* finally arrived.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

The best word to describe the scene before me was "hellish."

The many ice sculptures littered all over the pavement made it somewhat reminiscent of a snow festival I'd gone to when I was little, but the fact that they were actually people frozen solid made my reaction a far cry from the joy I'd felt back then.

All of them had crests on the backs of their left hands, meaning that they were Masters, just like me. Normally, the sight would've left me feeling nothing but fear. However, I'd seen a humanoid frozen in this manner just yesterday, so I had the capacity for other sentiments.

Wordlessly, I looked at a nearby sign.

"'No Master shall pass beyond this point'?" Nemesis read, her voice resounding in my mind. "I reckon this is a warning."

Most likely. And I suppose the ice statues are what became of the Masters who ignored it, I thought.

Still, a part of me believed that it wasn't a warning. I felt as if it carried the meaning of "I can't and won't let you pass, so please, stay away." However, I might only be seeing it that way because I knew the one who'd created the hell before me.

The meaning of this sign contradicted his inviting me here, but I had a feeling that he was completely aware of that.

"Did you want me to come or not... Hugo?" I called.

"...I'm not sure about that myself, Ray." In the middle of the hell stood a mechanical frame, almost five meters in height and clad in bluish-white armor of frost. Each of its hands held ice blades reminiscent of crosses.

The entity bearing the overall appearance of an icy church was none other than the Type Maiden/Chariot Embryo known as Cocytus, while its Master was the man with whom I'd defeated the Gouz-Maise Gang, Hugo Lesseps. He and I had met again on this very day's afternoon and separated on good terms.

His tone now was very different compared to back then or yesterday. It seemed as though he was feeling very cornered.

"Where's Franklin... your clan leader?" I asked.

"Beyond the gate," he answered. "Right now, he's... fighting the Royal Guard."

"Hh...!"

Liliana's people are fighting him? I thought.

That certainly wasn't unexpected. Franklin had kidnapped the princess, so it was only obvious for them to face him. If it meant protecting what was dear to her, Liliana would ignore any dangers, no matter how great they were. I had known that part of her character ever since my very first day in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"If that's how it is, we'll be passing through," I said.

"You can pass, but I can't say the same for your friends," he said as he made his Magingear point at Rook and the three girls behind me. "That is my role in this."

Wait... "You can pass?" What? I thought. "Why am I allowed?"

"I wasn't the one to decide that. 'He...' the boss... wants to fight you himself."

I was astonished. *Franklin wants to fight... me? But the only link between us is the dog ear drug he gave me yesterday. Not to mention that I'm a newbie and there are many people stronger than me, so... why is he singling me out?*

"Why?" I asked.

Hugo said nothing. Perhaps not even he knew the reason.

"...What matters here is that you can pass," he spoke up. "If you wish to stop him and save the princess... then go."

Hugo then moved to the side, clearing a path for me.

If I went on ahead, it would mean leaving Rook and the others behind, not to mention that...

"Go on ahead, Ray," said Rook, as if he knew what I was thinking. Of course, he probably *did*, and that was exactly why he'd said it.

"You're troubled by two things at once... by what's going on here and beyond the gates, yes?" he continued. "Then you should hurry up and go. I will fight this person in your stead."

"Rook..."

He clearly knew the questions that concerned me right now: "Should I really go on and leave Rook and the girls here?" and "Can I ignore Hugo while he's in such an unsteady state?"

"It's quite obvious that this is the friend who fought at your side yesterday," he continued. He looked directly at me. "I understand that you're wondering why he's taking part in this, and I can tell that you want to talk to him. And it's exactly *because* I can see all that that I'm saying that you should go on ahead. If you don't make it in time, you would surely regret it forever. That's why I'm suggesting that you go after Franklin."

"...Thanks, Rook... I leave him to you," I said.

"You can count on me!" he replied as I grabbed hold of Silver's reins and turned to the gate.

While facing the frozen hell before me, I was a bit concerned that I'd get frozen like the rest, but upon entering it, I realized that my worries were needless, for it didn't even make me feel the least bit cold.

And so, I rode Silver towards the gate, but then...

...Hugo's robot moved to block my path.

"Hugo," I said.

"...Ray," he spoke through the speakers with a voice bearing no certainty, as though he was wringing it out after having hesitated a lot.

Following a short silence, during which he was likely thinking about whether he should say it or not, Hugo continued his words.

"I'm sorry to fall back on my word... but could you fight me? Just one exchange of all-out attacks will do."

I didn't know what was going on in his mind, and I couldn't tell why he'd decided to say that, but it didn't take long for me to give my answer.

"All right." I nodded as I brandished Nemesis in her black greatsword form. "I have many questions to ask and lots of things to say to you, but for now, I'll leave it at just one attack each."

“...Merci,” he said as I and his robot stood to face each other.

There was about 15 meters between us. With me being saddled on Silver and Hugo riding his Magingear, that distance might as well have not been there.

I instantly began charging towards him, trying to get past his Magingear’s right side.

“Motor Slash!” shouted the voice from the speakers as the robot swung its right cross-blade towards me with all the speed it could muster.

Magingear were said to be Demi-Dragon-tier, and that was an attack bearing the mecha’s whole weight and power. It menaced me more than the Demi-Dragon Worm’s charge, and I could tell that it would easily split me in half if it landed.

“Counter Absorption!” Nemesis exclaimed, preventing that from happening with her barrier of light.

“Vengeance is Mine!” I added, following it up with a counterattack from my blade. That shattered the Magingear’s frozen armor and bent its inner frame.

And with that single exchange of blows, the battle was over and we had switched positions.

With my back turned to him, I charged towards the outside of the gate, entrusting my friend... to another friend.

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Triangle of Wisdom member, High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

After our momentary battle, I watched as Ray headed out through the gate.

The battle had ended with Ray remaining unharmed and my Marshall II R’s right arm being significantly damaged. If that was all that had to be considered, it would’ve been my loss. However, I’d just taken something important from him...

“So he used it...” I muttered.

Counter Absorption.

It was a defensive skill unique to Nemesis. Though immensely powerful, Ray had told me that it had a stock of uses. If it had run out during his battle against Gouz-Maise, the amount he’d restocked by now was one. And I’d made him use it on me.

To Ray, who was about to fight "him," it was a shackle he couldn't ignore. I'd asked Ray to go all-out because I'd believed he would do exactly that.

What I'd done just now was nothing but betrayal of a friend who — if only for a day — had fought at my side. I'd sent him to certain death and even cut his sole lifeline.

Though it was a bitter choice for me to make, I had done it regardless.

After all, I didn't want to simply let "his" enemy through.

I hadn't been able to stay out of it with Ray heading there with a do-or-die spirit and endless resolve. It was something I'd done because I'd tried to shoulder everything — my emotions, my sins, and my role as an accomplice.

Oh... seriously... why am I so...?

"For you, that was... Nh?!" Cyco spoke up, but before she could finish, a sudden impact cut her words short.

It was caused by a charge attack from the Tri-Horn Demi-Dragon and additional attacks from the Master riding it — Ray's friend.

"Do excuse me," he said. "You happened to be full of openings."

As I tried to fix my frame's posture, the Master, his Tri-Horn, and the succubus — presumably his Embryo — continued the barrage. There was no hesitation or mercy in his attacks, making it evident that he would've ended it with this sole surprise attack if I'd allowed it.

"You're so unfaaair," said Cyco.

"Now *that* is uncalled for," he replied. "I already said that I'd be the one fighting you. It's not my fault that you got lost in thought."

"Heh heh," I chuckled. "For someone who appears to be Ray's friend, you're certainly different from him."

While Ray was somewhat irrational, tactless, and single-faced, this guy here was logical and calculating to the core.

The expression he was giving me was nothing like the one he'd given Ray. It was cold, and the lack of even a hint of a smile, combined with his well-structured face, made it somewhat frightening.

I felt like he was fine-tuning the impression he gave to other people, much like I did when playing the role of a knight. However, his mask seemed to be far thicker than mine.

"Perhaps," he said. "That might be why I respect Ray so much. Ah, that aside..."

Still sitting on the back of the Demi-Dragon, the Master, Rook, looked at me with some of the coldest eyes I'd ever seen... much like the ones my sister had had on that fateful day.

"...I think I hate you," he continued, his words puzzling me to no end.

Sound Collection then picked up the succubus — likely his Embryo — muttering, "That's the first time Rook's ever said that to someone."

"...Heh," I chuckled. "Hated on the first encounter. Now that's something."

"Perhaps it is," he replied. "But you're simply loathsome. You're so indecisive and uppity that you remind me of *a certain someone*."

"Incomprehensible nonsense..."

"Is it really?" His gaze had enough power to make me know that he was absolutely sure about something. It felt as though he was aware that I'd averted my eyes to many things and couldn't be definite about anything.

"...I have no idea what you mean," I said. "Regardless, I'll have you freeze where you stand."

I fixed my mech's posture, bashed the Tri-Horn away with my armor, and made some distance between us.

"I cannot allow any Masters besides 'him' and Ray to pass here," I continued. "As a member of the Triangle of Wisdom and as a thorn protecting him... I shall give my all to this battle."

"Very well," he replied. "Then I will use everything I have to defeat you and pass through. I'll do this as Ray's friend... and as myself."

Standing on the Demi-Dragon with the succubus at his side, he faced me.

After a momentary silence and an exchange of glares, I finally spoke up. "High Pilot: Hugo Lesseps, and Embryo: Cocytus."

This was a ritual. I would defeat Ray's friend and prevent him from attaining his goal. This was a ritual for that purpose... and a "duel."

"Pimp: Rook Holmes, Embryo: Babylon, and minions: Marilyn and Audrey." He responded in the same way.

"May the fight..." I said before taking a breath.

"...begin!" we both declared.

The duel had begun.

Chapter Six: The Duel in the Frozen Hell

Past, Lucius Holmes

I was born in the United Kingdom. London, to be precise. I was born into a household that was neither wealthy nor noble nor poor. It wasn't all that special in terms of social status. But it certainly wasn't normal, either.

My father was a detective running an agency focused on solving unresolved cases, while my mother was a thief who specialized in stealing works of art.

Indeed — I was the son of a thief and a detective. Though it sounded like the premise to a joke, it was nothing but the truth.

My father was much like a protagonist of a mystery novel, solving many cases no one else could, while my mother was a movie-like secretive robber who traveled the world and stole things of great value. Both of their families had been doing those things for several generations.

I'd even been told that my father's side had taken the surname "Holmes" because his great-grandfather had changed it when starting his detective work, basing it on the most famous detective in the world. It didn't seem to have mattered to him that it was a work of fiction.

How my parents had met, gotten married, and made a son was a mystery for the ages.

I'd once asked my father why he wasn't arresting my mother. He had replied, "A detective's job is to uncover the truth, not to catch criminals." I'd found that questionable, to say the least.

The curiosities didn't end there, either, for my mother was a thief who always returned the works she'd stolen after a couple of weeks of enjoying them. In fact, most of the time, she stole objects that the owners had acquired by illegal means, and handed them over to the police.

Apparently, her goal wasn't money, but the very process of thievery. "A thief's job is to steal, not to sell," she once told me.

To be honest, I wasn’t quite sure if “thief” counted as a “job.”

Anyway, both of them loved their trades and always gave their all to them, leaving little time for us to spend as a family. Still, exactly *because* they were so focused on using their talents to do what they so loved, they had been quick to notice a certain thing about me when I was young.

Lucius is extremely gifted.

Insight, observational ability, imagination, dexterity, reflexes, appearance... I’d inherited the talents from both my parents and had even more potential on those fronts than either of them, giving me the makings of both a detective and a master thief. Naturally, my parents had been extremely pleased with that.

With both of them being so passionate about their family business, the two of them thought the same thing:

This talent must not be wasted. I want to nurture him into a great detective/thief, but I can’t ignore my beloved’s wishes, either.

Thus, they came to a certain agreement.

They would take turns giving me their special education.

My father would train my observational abilities, teach me lip-reading, world languages, and the workings of the human mind, while my mother would instruct me in trap disarmament, finding people’s blind spots, and the means of charming and manipulating people.

When I was young, it was set in stone that they would be training my mind and body based on this plan. But neither of them ever ordered me to become a detective or a master thief. Instead, they continually emphasized that they would nurture my talents, and leave me to decide what life I would lead.

A part of me thought that acquiring such a specific set of skills would limit my choices to either detective or thief, but I wasn’t unsatisfied with that.

As I got older and began to reflect upon my life so far, I started to realize that limitations like that were only natural when a person had trained in such things for as long as they could remember, because experiences like that were what became the basis of self.

My education had included common sense and sociology, through which I’d discovered that my standards and values were wildly different from those society considered “universal.”

Knowing that my situation wasn't the least bit normal, I finally concluded that "It's normal in *my* family, and when talking to those with different standards, I should simply adjust accordingly," which I felt was a thought that truly highlighted the fact that I was my parents' son.

Anyway, after ten years of their special education, by the time I was fifteen years of age, I had acquired almost all of the skills my parents had. I hadn't neglected self-study, either, so I was confident that my total abilities had already exceeded theirs.

Then, when I was just a few years away from becoming an adult and starting to think about what kind of future I'd choose, something happened.

My parents died in a plane accident.

While they were out on a trip together — which was rare for them — their plane crashed. I was contacted about it shortly afterward.

Though I grieved their deaths, a part of me wondered if that would've truly been enough to kill them. It wasn't a denial of reality — I just reasonably assumed that their skills and experience would have allowed them to survive a normal plane crash.

The day afterward, the news showed that several children wearing parachutes and life jackets had been found in the middle of the sea. They had all come from the same plane that had killed my parents. When the media asked them about their experience, the children said, "A tall man and a pretty lady put parachutes on us."

With that, everything made sense. Apparently, rather than focusing on their own survival, my parents had chosen to bet on the possibility of saving the children.

As a fresh orphan, I wished they had considered me and prioritized their own survival, but at the same time, a great sense of pride filled my chest. I felt nothing but respect for what they'd done. Though, for reasons unknown, tears were running down my face.

Following their death, I got everything in order and took a break from life's stresses.

My parents had already taught me how to go through such formalities, so I was able to inherit their land, house, and money without much trouble. With all I had, I could easily live out the rest of my life with no inconveniences to speak of.

However, I couldn't just do nothing, so I... I...

“...Ah.”

That was when I realized that *I didn’t have a vision of my own future*.

Silly as it was, despite the fact that I was a genius who’d learned everything my parents could teach me, I didn’t notice that until that very moment.

With all the love they’d given me, I’d been comfortable in a life comprised of nothing but honing the skills my parents had bestowed upon me, and thus I’d ended up a person who hadn’t made a single decision in his entire life. I’d followed the road my parents had prepared for me and lived doing very little besides clearing the challenges they’d presented me with, and so I had next to no experience in choosing how I wished to live. That was something that I’d left for “someday,” rather than “today.”

I could vaguely picture the future me making such a choice, but the present me simply didn’t have the guidelines for it. Surrounded by my parents’ love, I’d led a passive life where I couldn’t even shape an image of the person I wished to be.

“Just how should I live?” I asked myself, feeling as though I’d been thrown into an empty wasteland.

It was as if I had water, food, a compass, the knowledge and the ability to survive, but I didn’t have the slightest clue as to my destination. Regardless of whether I went north, east, south, or west, I had no idea what awaited me, and even if I found something, I wouldn’t know what to do with it. I was completely lost, but no amount of thinking brought me closer to a choice.

Well, this is bad, I thought. If I didn’t mend that, I might end up a person who did *nothing* but live.

Wholly puzzled, I began considering what I should do.

First, I decided check whether or not my parents had left me a message or something in their rooms. A little voice in my head scolded me for searching for my own destination by going through my late parents’ things, but I chose to ignore it.

I started by searching my mother’s room.

It held a trap that, once activated, would burn down the whole room and any potential evidence it could’ve had. I was able to disarm it, but I couldn’t help giving a passing thought to the fact that things could’ve ended badly if this house had been given to someone else.

The only notable thing in my mother's room was her work equipment. There were no stolen works of art. With it being a room that could burn down, I hadn't really been expecting any, and a glance at her diary made it obvious that she hadn't had anything she hadn't yet returned. I was thankful for that, since I would've had to be the one to bring back whatever she'd stolen. Still, a part of me would've liked to have a new goal, however meager.

Aside from her work equipment, the only thing of note was an incomplete hand-knit sweater.

I moved on to my father's room.

Unlike with mother's room, there were no traps to speak of, and I could easily get in with just a key.

Of course, it's probably not normal to expect traps in situations like this, I thought to myself.

Upon entering, I instantly noticed something. On father's work desk, there was an unfamiliar object — a headgear-type piece of electronic equipment.

"Isn't this for *Infinite Dendrogram*?" I muttered.

The game was part of general knowledge at this point, so I was aware of its existence. It was well-known as a dive-type VRMMO that had gained popularity all across the world. I'd always been busy with my training and studies, so I hadn't had time for games, nor was I particularly interested in them. At most, my father and I had played the occasional match of chess.

"Was Father playing it?" I murmured.

He'd been extremely busy with his detective work and my training, so I found it strange that he'd had any time for it.

After leaving the device where it was, I began looking around and found a single letter in one of his drawers.

At first, I thought that it was his will or something, but I quickly realized that it was a letter he'd received from someone. I considered not reading it at first, but a glimpse at the content had me notice the words *Infinite Dendrogram*, so I let my curiosity get the better of me.

Apparently, my father had accepted an anonymous request related to the game.

The sender had asked him to uncover its secrets. They believed that *Infinite Dendrogram* was part of some conspiracy, and had offered my father great amounts of money for a thorough investigation.

Much later, when I looked through the mail, I came across another letter which seemed to be from the same sender. It was condolences regarding his death and a withdrawal of the request, but not of the advance payment. Apparently, the sender was a person of integrity.

Anyway, I was standing before the *Infinite Dendrogram* game machine left behind by my father. It was a game that someone had asked him, a famous detective, to investigate. Naturally, I was interested, but more than that, I felt a strong desire to "choose."

Having lost sight of where to go, I felt as though it could open up a new path for me.

"If I recall correctly, this game's promotional line is..."

Infinite Dendrogram will provide you with a new world and your very own unique possibility.

I felt as if it was directed at me.

No other words could intrigue a person who'd lost sight of where to go as much as those. And right now, at this moment, that person was me.

"Very well, provide me with that, then."

Present me your new world.

"I hope you can point me to it."

To my possibility.

"Let's go," I said as I put on the headgear in my father's study and entered the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

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Duel city Gideon, western gate, Pimp, Rook Holmes

"Motor Slash!"

"MHOOOOOOOOOOO!"

The frozen Magingear's pilot used its left arm to launch the same skill as before, to which Marilyn responded with the physical attack called "Tri-Horn Upper."

Next, he will quickly draw out and fire that large gun, so... Babi, Little Flare, I thought.

"Okaaay!" she replied.

"Ah!" the pilot exclaimed in surprise as the low-rank fire spell that Babi had gotten through Drain Learning hit the projectile right before it escaped the gun. The resulting explosion destroyed the muzzle, rendering it impossible for him to use the weapon again.

Next, he will stomp with his right leg and slash upwards with the left blade, so...

"(Liz, move,)" I said, not with audible words, but with slight vibrations in my throat. Since she was in direct contact with my whole body, Liz could feel them going through my skeletal frame, allowing us to communicate without me even having to speak.

Of course, Babi had her beaten on this front, since I could coordinate with her just by thinking.

"...!"

I heard the pilot express his surprise again as I dodged his blade with a backwards jump.

I was able to do that thanks to Liz smoothly extending herself to my heels while making sure that he couldn't see it, and then hitting the ground in a way that made the impact take me backwards. With that, I was now at a distance at which he couldn't hit me again.

An opening at the back right. Two seconds long.

"Marilyn, attack," I ordered.

"MHOOOOOOOO!"

"Mrrgh... So annoying," his Embryo complained as the Magingear turned around and used both blades to stop Marilyn's charge right before she hit. She didn't build up all that much speed to begin with, so the damage wasn't significant.

"This sure is difficult to deal with," said the pilot. "It's as though you're foreseeing our every move... No, you *are*, aren't you?"

Indeed I am, I thought.

Magingear were humanoid and mechanical, so their operative range was easier to grasp than that of humans or other living creatures. I could predict the Magingear's movements even better than I'd been able to predict Audrey's during our aerial battle.

This technique was called "movement observation," and I'd learned it from either my mother or father. I wasn't certain which.

"Yes," I said. "After all, unlike speed-focused Superior Jobs, you don't fight at supersonic speeds or outright disappear from vision."

“Heh,” he chuckled. “You talk as though you’ve fought a Superior Job before.”

I did, I thought. *I lost ten times in a row, though.*

Still, fighting her, a person moving at speeds impossible in our world’s framework, had increased the precision of my movement observation.

“So if things go on like this, we will be at a disadvantage...” the pilot said.

“Yes.” I nodded. “It’s true that your Magingear has great stats, and the enhance skill that you High Pilots surely have makes them even greater. However, in the end, it’s still merely a slightly improved Demi-Dragon-class entity.”

In other words, Marilyn, who was a Demi-Dragon, could provide a decent challenge to it. The openings her crash attacks created could then be targeted by Babi, who could use the many skills she’d acquired through Drain Learning during the recent hunt.

Though the skills she’d gained were only those of the low-level monsters we could handle, the number she’d amassed easily surpassed fifty. On that front, she was above even Superior Jobs like Marie.

As for me... Since my opponent was inside the Magingear, Charm was rendered useless, so I could only be a target for him to focus on. Still, evading his attacks left him open to ours, and no matter how many of them I avoided, he would still go for me. After all, Babi was my Embryo and Marilyn was my minion, so it would all end if I fell.

My whole body was like a weak spot for us, which was why I had Liz focusing on assisting my evasive maneuvers rather than attacking.

We also did it in a manner that didn’t give it away, since I had a certain play in mind.

“So, at this rate, we will use up all our energy...” the pilot muttered.

Though the Magingear had higher stats than any of us, my movement observation and our powers combined made it entirely possible for us to come out on top. However...

“But I do wonder how long you can stay unfrozen while La Porte de l’Enfer is active,” he added, pointing out the greatest problem on my end. My left hand was already Frozen from the elbow down.

I had no doubt that it was the same attack he’d used on the more experienced Masters around us, turning them into the ice statues they now were. Then there was the fact that I'd had to return Audrey into the Jewel right after taking her out because she'd had half of her body completely Frozen.

The amount of ice on me was slowly increasing, making it obvious that I would eventually become like the other Masters here. Rather than increasing continually, it seemed to increase at regular intervals, somewhere between a few ten to a hundred or so seconds.

First, it had covered my hand and a bit of my wrist; then it had covered most of my forearm; now it extended to my elbow. Though the amount I Froze each time was about the same, the intervals were all over the place. The second time had come 39 seconds after the initial freeze, while the third had happened 130 seconds after the second.

The greatest common divisor for those numbers was 13, so it might have been related to the Embryo's name and the skill's name: "Cocytus" and "the gate of hell."

"What does it mean?" asked Babi telepathically.

Well, Babi, I thought in response, *In Dante's* Divine Comedy, *Cocytus is the name of the Ninth Circle of Hell, which is the frozen hell where the treacherous go. It's where Christ's thirteenth apostle and the greatest traitor in Christianity, Judas, gets his punishment. Some suggest that during the Last Supper, before betraying Christ, he sat in the thirteenth chair. And there's also the fact that thirteen is considered to be an ominous number in Christianity.*

"Ohh, so she is an ominous Embryo, right?" said Babi.

For me, at the very least.

If things continued as they had been, I had a high chance of winning, but if I Froze before that happened, I would become unable to arrive at that result. Therefore, I had to use one of the aces up my sleeve, but I couldn't ignore his La Porte de l'Enfer. After all, there was no guarantee that using it wouldn't cause me to become a Frozen statue, just like the rest of the Masters here.

Thus, I began by solving the mystery behind it.

"(Liz, I need a moment to focus on thinking, so you prioritize evasion and defense. As long as you make sure that he doesn't see you, I can leave it all to you.)"

A moment later, my body began being swayed around as Liz, my coat, started moving on her own will. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it didn't hinder my thought processes.

And so, I began thinking.

I looked around with my erratic vision, and the thing that stood out the most was the pallid ice trapping each of the Masters.

The one thing about the ice statues that really caught my eye were their still faces. Based on their expressions, I could tell that they'd gotten Frozen before they'd even realized it. As in, their whole bodies had been Frozen right from the start. From that, I could conclude that there were four... no, three ways this skill affected its targets.

First, there was the way experienced by me and Audrey: those who got Frozen partially and had it grow over time.

Then there were the ice statues around us: those who got completely Frozen in an instant.

And finally, there were Babi and Marilyn: those who didn't get Frozen at all.

The targets and the skill's effects on them were based on some criteria, and until I knew what it was, I couldn't use my trump card due to the risk of it causing me to turn into an ice statue.

Does it Freeze everyone except for the ones chosen by him? I wondered.

Negative. If that were the case, then Babi, Marilyn, and Liz would've gotten frozen, as well.

Does it Freeze only humans?

Negative. Audrey had been affected, as well.

Perhaps the amount Frozen is proportional to level and stats?

Negative. That wouldn't explain the difference in effect between Marilyn and Audrey, who were just about equal in that regard.

Maybe it's just random?

Negative. That simply wasn't the case, since a luck-based skill wasn't reliable enough to be used in holding important locations or fighting many strong individuals.

There was definitely a certain degree of rule and regularity to it.

"Oaaaaghh!" the pilot roared and made his Magingear slip by Marilyn and Babi, charging at me with its right blade held high, ready for a downwards swing.

"Oh?" I said.

Well, he's closing in on me, I thought. *I won't really be able to read his movements completely until I uncover the secret behind his skill, so...*

Liz seemed to have decided to try and bear the attack by enhancing the part of the coat it would hit, and according to my calculations based on the estimated damage, Liz's defenses, my own HP and END, I had a 70% chance of dying. There was nothing I could really do during the two seconds before the blade would hit me.

So I'll spend those two seconds thinking and getting the answers I need to know so that I can attain victory when I survive.

"M..." he began shouting his skill as I changed my approach to the mystery I was solving.

Embryo names and their skills weren't unrelated.

For example, Ray's Nemesis was based on a goddess of retribution and was focused on counterattacks, while Marie's Arc-en-Ciel — rainbow — launched bullets of several different colors.

"...o..."

So, I focused on the name of his Embryo — Cocytus.

In Greek myth, it was the river of lament, while in Dante's *Divine Comedy,* it was the lowest Circle of Hell, the frozen lake.

"...t..."

From the current situation and the name of the skill — "gate of hell" — I could infer that it was based on the latter.

Cocytus was the hell meant for those who had committed treachery, considered to be the greatest sin of all. There, Satan, frozen up to his waist, was continuously gnawing at Judas and other traitors.

It was obvious by now that the name was related to the 13 second counter and the frost, but I felt like there was more to it.

"...o..."

For example, it was possible that the skill had a greater effect on traitors. It would explain why Audrey, who had originally been Gardranda's mount, had been affected the most, and... No, that couldn't be it. After all, it was highly unlikely that the Frozen Masters here were all traitors that could make Judas proud.

"...r..."

Then perhaps, like most hells, it is based on some sort of karma system?

I didn't see it in any of the informational windows, but there could be some sort of hidden stat which recorded the vile deeds done and... no, that couldn't be it, either. The difference in damage just wouldn't make sense if that were the case. Just like with treachery, it was hard to believe that each and every Master here had had enough negative karma to Freeze in only an instant.

"...S..."

I can't quite put my finger on it, I thought. *What makes it a hell and what does it count as "betrayal"?*

It would be far easier if there were some sort of record that displayed treachery as a concrete number, and...

...Hm? A concrete number?

"...l..."

I was actually aware of something that fit the criteria. It could easily be interpreted as treachery *and* could be linked to the difference in effect between the entities here.

"...a..."

I had found my answer. *This number* was the secret behind his skill, and its greatness was what determined its power.

For Babi and Marilyn, the number was 0. I'd gotten some just a short while ago. Audrey had gotten several dozens during yesterday's hunt. And the experienced Masters who had Gideon as their main haunt had it far above 100.

"...sh...!"

Indeed, the number that La Porte de l'Enfer was based on was—

Two seconds had passed. Just as I'd expected, the Motor Slash he'd launched landed directly on me.

As some of my silver hair got scattered into the wind, I was blasted away straight into Gideon's outer wall.

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These were the memories of a not-so-distant past.

Upon logging in to *Infinite Dendrogram* using the headgear in my father's study, strangely enough, I found myself in another study, this one significantly more old-fashioned.

"Hellooo and welcommme!" In the study, there was a talking cat.

“I am the control AI called ‘Cheshiire,’” it said. “What’s wrooong?”

As I stared at the feline creature, I felt something really odd.

Due to the special education I’d gotten, I saw the world in a manner different than any normal person or even my parents, the ones who’d taught me. By simply observing people, I could uncover the truths about their personalities or see what they were hiding behind their spoken words, allowing me to more or less guess what they were thinking.

With those I was familiar with, my mind-reading success rates were as high as 99%. That number wasn’t nearly as great with people and animals I’d just met, but I could still make a decent guess as to what they were thinking or feeling.

However, the creature before me — Cheshire — was completely unreadable to me. I’d felt as if it didn’t even fit the categories of “feline,” “human” or even “living being.” It felt like I was looking at something beyond human comprehension merely pretending to be a cat.

“Well... perhaps this is normal for control AIs...?” I muttered.

“Umm... Is anything the matter?” asked Cheshire.

“Oh, it’s nothing. My name is Lucius Holmes. A pleasure to meet you.”

Thus began my tutorial.

Soon enough, we got to the character creation stage.

“Will you keep your name as ‘Lucius Holmes’?” asked the cat.

“Can’t I?” I replied with a question.

“You can, but it’s not recommennnded.”

As I began thinking of another name, I noticed something that was in the study.

It was a chessboard. The pieces on it were placed in a way that made it seem as though the players had disappeared in the middle of the game, and one piece — a rook — had the enemy king placed in check.

“I will be ‘Rook Holmes,’” I said. I had good memories of playing chess with my father, so it felt somewhat... right to base my name on something from the game.

“Very welll. Now, for the appearaaance,” said the cat.

I didn’t make any notable changes in that regard. I’d spent many years training to move and act with my own body, so I kept it the same to prevent any potential feelings of malaise. The only thing I changed was the hair color. Instead of keeping the blond I’d inherited from my father, I made it a silver just like my mother's.

Thus, I began the game.

At the end of the tutorial, Cheshire told me that I was free to do whatever I chose to in this world. I could uncover the truths about it, steal its secrets, simply play it, or perhaps even live in it. To my mind, it seemed like good practice at choosing what kind of life I wished to lead.

On my first day in *Infinite Dendrogram*, the Embryo implanted in my left arm hatched, creating Babi.

"Hellooo! Let's get along, Rook!" She had been exactly the same back then as she was now.

I couldn't help but wonder why *she* had been the one born as my Embryo. Cheshire had told me that it would be created and evolve based on my own personality and experiences. I was curious as to why those things had resulted in Babi, and that was a question which I had yet to answer.

On my second day in *Infinite Dendrogram*, I'd realized that, despite not having any relevant skills, I could use the techniques I'd acquired in reality without any problem whatsoever. This world had sense skills such as "Mental Analysis," but I felt that they were weaker than the same abilities of those who'd brought them over from reality.

Anyway, unlike in on-screen games, *Infinite Dendrogram* had avatars to which I could apply my techniques and analyze the people controlling them.

In real life, I'd used this ability to examine the true faces of those I was talking to and determine whether they were worthy of trust. People's minds were different from the expressions they showed. It was especially common to find those who seemed to be cheerful, but were actually gloomy at heart. This was something I'd taken for granted, as it was only a natural part of the human condition.

And that was exactly why my first meeting with Ray greatly surprised me.

After all, *there was no difference between what he appeared to be and what he really was*.

Not even his Nemesis surprised me as much as he himself did.

What made his existence a true enigma was the fact that his *Infinite Dendrogram* avatar seemed to be no different from him as a player.

This world was presented as a game, so differences between the players and the roles they took in their avatars was a given. But Ray showed no signs of showing off, playing some character, or hiding some complex he had in reality.

At first, I thought that *Infinite Dendrogram* had reduced the effectiveness of my people-observation abilities, so I'd made it my first goal to uncover the mysteries behind him, and I'd reached my conclusion far quicker than expected.

I'd talked to him, met with him again, fought at his side as we'd faced the likes of the Goblin horde and Gardranda, and that had been more than enough for me to know that Ray was simply *himself* — an honest person with no fronts to speak of. In his heart of hearts, he saw no difference between the two worlds.

The determination he'd displayed during the battle against the Goblins or Gardranda, the grief in his eyes when he'd talked about the children lost during his battle against the Gouz-Maise Gang, and the anger he was currently feeling towards Franklin were all very real.

Ray wasn't roleplaying a character called "Ray Starling" — he stood in this world as none other than himself, and put his very being into his existence here.

He could instantly choose what he had to do in any particular place and time, and he always gave his utmost to achieve his goals, regardless of what hardships awaited him and no matter how low the possibility of success was.

Ray *lived* genuinely and earnestly.

Unlike me, who was always indecisive, he always had his heart provide an answer for which he would give his all.

"I mean, it would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

Ray was a person who constantly chose actions he wouldn't regret and always acted in earnest to achieve them, and that was exactly why I wished to support him. I was a person who couldn't even choose his own path in life, but seeing Ray and the honesty he displayed when giving his all to face the challenges before him made me want to help him.

For his sake and by his side, I wished to fight in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Therefore...

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“...I will defeat you, here and now,” I declared as my momentary flashback ended and I stood up from the outer wall’s rubble, facing the Magingear piloted by Hugo Lesseps and his Embryo, Cocytus.

“For a Pimp, you sure are tough,” he said. “I didn’t expect you to be able to stand after that attack.”

I couldn’t agree more. I’d calculated my probability of survival at about 30%, but even I was surprised at how little damage the attack had done to me.

The most likely cause of this was the Magingear’s right arm. Just by looking at it, I could tell that the frame under its icy armor was bent.

It had been caused by Ray’s Vengeance is Mine, and its effect on the arm had greatly lowered the damage I’d received in this attack.

“I can’t lose here,” I said.

“Heh,” he chuckled. “Don’t expect to be so lucky with my next attack. Also...”

I knew exactly what he was going to say. The ice on me had already reached the top of my shoulder.

The fact the attack hadn’t shattered my arm was quite a stroke of luck.

“...La Porte de l’Enfer continues to consume you,” he continued.

“True,” I replied. “You might say that your skill has me in *check*.”

I momentarily fell silent, regained my breath and spoke up again.

“After all... I defeated several humans in the plaza battle against the player killers.”

That was part of the conclusion I’d reached.

“...What is that supposed to mean?” he asked, and the momentary pause before his reply was all the confirmation I needed.

“That’s what this skill is based on, right?” I asked.

Even more confirmation couldn’t hurt, so I opened my menu — making sure that Hugo could see it — and looked at the window where the core of the skill known as “La Porte de l’Enfer” lay.

“Battle history window, extras section, creature type kill counters,” I continued. “La Porte de l’Enfer’s effects are based on ‘the kill count for the same type of creatures as yourself,’ correct?”

Creature type kill counters kept a record of the total number of kills of separate creature types, such as undead, beast, avian, dragon, devil, elemental, demon... or human.

"The 'betrayal' that Cocytus looks at is the kill count for creatures of your own type, and it's what dictates the extent of your La Porte de l'Enfer's powers," I went on.

He said nothing.

"The number of 'humans' I've killed is 7. What a coincidence... my body seems to be Freezing about 7% at a time."

I also had access to Audrey's kill counts. Her type was "avian," and she'd killed a significant number of such creatures during yesterday's hunt. The exact number was 58, so it made perfect sense that the skill had Frozen over half of her body.

We'd had yet to fight any devils or dragons, so Babi and Marilyn's counters were at 0, which explained why they hadn't Frozen at all.

And, of course...

...it includes the kills made within the barriers of duel cities such as this one, I thought. *Those who frequent this city have probably killed hundreds of people.*

Experienced Masters gathering in duel city Gideon had likely spent a lot of time in the arenas, and even if it had happened within barriers, they'd probably killed a number of humans that surpassed 100.

"To add to this, the number is also applied to the chance of it happening every 13 seconds, yes?" I asked.

Sometimes, I got away without Freezing, while the other Masters had all completely Frozen right at the start.

"The description for La Porte de l'Enfer is 'Gives an X% chance to Freeze X% of the selected target's body every 13 seconds. X is the number on the target's kill counter for the same creature type as the target.' Am I correct?"

That meant I had a 7% chance to Freeze 7% of my body every 13 seconds, while those with 100 on the counter had a 100% chance to Freeze completely. The skill also ignored resistances to some extent, seeing as it was unlikely that every single Master here didn't have anything that lowered the effects of the Frozen debuff.

"This skill is the reason why you're standing guard here," I continued. "Most of the kingdom's Masters in duel city Gideon are here for the arenas, so your skill is nothing but their bane. It makes sense to have you block the escape route."

Those who'd fought against many of their kind and become powerful in the process would have that experience work against them. Any and all traitors, killers of their own kin, would be encased in the ice of the frozen hell.

"An interesting guess, but it's based on nothing but circumstantial evidence," he said. "To me, it looks like your conditions merely happened to meet the result."

"Ha ha ha," I laughed. "Your tone just now confirmed that I'm right. You're bad at lying and fooling people, aren't you?"

I could tell without even seeing his face.

"And that's why I hate you," I added.

"That's not the first time you've said that," he replied. "If I may ask, what do you mean by 'and that's why'? Do you like people who are good at lying?"

His words made me heave a long sigh.

He still doesn't get it, I thought. *...No, he probably does.*

"I certainly don't like people who can lie well... but I hate those who make their inner doubts and dishonesties so obvious," I answered.

"...What?"

Well, now, should I say it? If I provoke him too much, the time might... You know, I'll just make it a bit harsh and relatively long. He's probably the type to get mad after hearing people out.

"You're like Ray, aren't you?" I asked. "As in, one of those who sees this world as a world, rather than as a game, yes?" I said. "Despite that, your actions are just so... so irritating."

"'Irritating'?" he repeated.

I gathered the slight bit of depression he made me feel and put it into words.

"It irritates me how you've taken up a role in Franklin's game and become complicit in this tragedy, yet you talk and behave in a way that reeks of excuses like 'I must' or 'There's no other way.' It irritates me how you spin your reasoning to try and justify your actions, yet you give it a preface of 'Oh I'm so terrible,' basically making excuses for your excuses. Then there's your exchange with Ray. It irritates me how you, with all your indecisiveness, have the gall to stand in his way. It irritates me how even *you* felt guilt after doing it, yet you just took to thinking something like

‘Another sin for my scroll,’ basically wallowing in your own guilt. Speaking of wallowing, it irritates me how you’re so full of yourself that you talk with that theatrical elocution. Truly, you’re irritating beyond words.”

As I went on, I realized that I was even more vexed than I’d thought. Still, my volubility took over, and I simply couldn’t stop.

“Oh, and I’m irritated by the church-like design!” added Babi. “We’re just so *done* with you!”

“Y-You...!” he said with anger.

“K-Kill...” his Embryo joined.

I see... “done,” eh? I thought. *I guess that’s about enough, then. Now, for the finishing touches.*

“Good grief... You’re full of doubts about where to turn, you can’t be honest with yourself, you wallow in the tragedy you willingly participate in... You’re so much like an even worse version of *a certain someone* that I can’t help but find you irritating and loathsome.”

As a conclusion to this, I only had one more thing to say to him... no — “her.”

“Stop wallowing in so much doubt and angst... *young lady*.”

“Kh...!” My words provoked an outburst from the pallid Magingear.

It charged towards me with all its speed, eager to get me into the range of its blades, and the one in the left hand would probably be used to end me, once and for all.

I had an estimated three seconds before it sunk into my head and split me in half. The power behind it wasn’t something Liz’s defenses could bear, and it was unlikely that I could evade it. However, there was no need for that.

After all, we were already done *charging*.

“Union Jack,” I said, long before my three seconds were up.

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Duel city Gideon, not far from the western gate

This took place a short time prior.

Duel city Gideon’s western gate connected it to the field known as “Jeand Grasslands” and was one of the only four exits out of the anti-air barrier shielding the entire city.

Near it, there were dozens of Masters Frozen solid, and they surrounded the battle between the Pimp known as Rook Holmes and the High Pilot calling himself Hugo Lesseps.

However, that wasn't the only battle going on there.

"Kasumi! Your tank summon is gone!"

"I-I need 55 more seconds until I c-can re-cast it."

The ones fighting were the three girls that had accompanied Ray and Rook — the newbie Masters known as Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon.

Their opponent was a monster looking much like a carnivorous dinosaur with the name "PBS — Preparative Brute Saurus" hanging above it.

"BGHAAAAAARGHH!" it roared as it charged towards Io with its fangs at the ready.

"Tyranno...saurus?" hesitated Kasumi.

"Looks more like an allosaurus to me," commented Fujinon.

"Not the right time to say that!" shouted Io. "This thing's obviously stronger than a Demi-Dragon-class thing! Do something about it!"

"All right. I'll stop it... Almagest."

Standing behind Io, Fujinon readied her Embryo, a staff with a spinning orb on its end.

"Mud Clap, then Star Printer, thrice," she said, using a pair of skills. They caused a magic circle to form at the base of her feet. Then three more magic circles appeared and orbited the center one like satellites.

"Click," she said, causing one of the orbiting magic circles to vanish.

A moment later, the pavement and ground beneath PBS began moving like mud and grabbed its foot. Due to the might of its charge, it instantly broke the bond, but its momentum caused it to violently crash into the ground.

"Click, Click, Click," she continued, making the remaining three magic circles vanish.

Three patches of ground around PBS became mud-like and bound it completely.

Fujinon's Embryo, Almagest, was a Type Arms taking the shape of a staff with a star-like sphere at one of its ends. Its unique trait was the copying-and-pasting of the spells she used, allowing her to create up to three copies, represented by orbiting magic circles, and release them at her command.

Its drawback was the fact that Fujinon couldn't move when a satellite magic circle was present, which was a fitting negative for an Embryo bearing the name of the main text behind Ptolemaic theory.

Mud Clap was a low-rank, earth-based binding spell, and though a single one gave little trouble to an enhanced and modified Demi-Dragon-class monster like PBS, a few of them could hold it in place for several seconds.

It was an opening — an opportunity not to be missed.

"Io!" she shouted.

"Okay! I'll tear it apart! Five-Ring, Splitting Mode!"

Following her words, Io charged, holding a huge, one-sided battleax that probably weighed several tons, with a handle over 5 metels in length.

"Here I gooo!" she called, gathering all her strength as she swung her weapon down on the immobilized PBS's medulia.

Like a beast of legend or an executioner from the middle ages, she tore into its neck, broke its cervical vertebrae, sliced through its throat, and even reached the pavement below, shattering a large portion of it.

Though greatly modified, the monster wasn't able to survive without its head. Thus, it simply became particles of light, leaving behind nothing but its drops.

"Io, there's one in the sky behind you!" Kasumi warned her.

"I know! Crushing Mode!" she said as she turned around to look at the pteranodon-like monster trying to surprise attack her using the night's veil as cover.

At the same time, her Embryo, Five-Ring, changed shape. Its handle reduced to about a fifth of its previous size, and the ax head got replaced by a chain at least 20 metels in length, which ended with a spiked ball that surely had more weight than she did.

Io's Embryo, Five-Ring, was a Type Arms that could transform into several ultra-heavy weapons, such as the one-sided battleax from its Splitting Mode or the giant flail from its Crushing Mode.

Like with Ray's Nemesis, the user didn't feel any of the weapons' weight, making the Embryo excel at dealing damage. On the other hand, the weapons still had huge mass, which made them move very slowly and thus have low accuracy.

Io swung the giant flail towards the pteranodon-like monster. It tried to evade it, but it suddenly got caught by something.

“BOBOBOBOBO...”

It was a marshmallow-like balloon giant — a creature many in *Infinite Dendrogram* would recognize as the summoned monster called “Balloon Golem.”

“Hold it in place... Balulun.”

Kasumi was a Summoner — a job focused on using magic to create monsters which help them in their fights.

Balulun was one of the monsters she could summon, and she did so often, as its Physical Resistance and Floating Ability made it a capable tank. Therefore, there was nothing strange about the summoning itself.

What *was* strange was the fact that Balulun had appeared right behind the pteranodon.

That was done by Kasumi’s Embryo, the Taijitu.

It was a radar-like Type Arms that showed the location of all the Masters in a certain area around it. Its drawback was the fact that it neither had nor provided any abilities that were meant exclusively for battle. However, the Taijitu *did* have something besides its radar function.

It was an ability to teleport any tamed or summoned monsters within Kasumi’s minion capacity to any location on the map. Though greater distances cost her more MP, locations within a 50 metel radius of her weren’t all that draining.

Balulun pushed itself on the pteranodon, rendering it unable to move.

“HIIIIIT!”

Not missing the opportunity, Io threw her flail towards it, pulverizing its bones and tenderizing its flesh.

That single hit was enough to kill the pteranodon. Just like the PBS, it began to turn into particles of light, leaving behind nothing but its drops.

“That’s five!”

“W-We did it...”

Kasumi and Fujinon gave their all into binding and holding the enemies, while Io used her high-rank-tier damage to kill them with a critical hit. This tactic of theirs led them to defeating a total of five Demi-Dragon-class monsters that had gathered near the western gate.

Demi-Dragon-class creatures were said to be equivalent to a party of six low-rank jobs. Of course, Masters had Embryo abilities at their disposal, so it wasn't always necessary for a party to be full in order to defeat a Demi-Dragon, but no one could deny that their success was an impressive feat. Each of them knew about the extent of each others' abilities and fought while making up for each others' flaws in order to achieve victory.

Aside from exceptions like Ray and Rook, among the newbies that had escaped the central arena, these girls had the greatest combined amount of battle potential. If that hadn't been the case, they would never have stood a chance against the modified monsters attacking them.

"Phew," Io sighed. "We can finally catch our breath!"

"N-No, we can't... Rook is still fighting... We have to help..." said Kasumi.

The three had been intending to help Rook fight Hugo right when the battle began, but they'd had to make a change of plans when they'd gotten attacked by the monsters.

"Oh, yeah! How's he holding up?!" cried Kasumi.

"They've stopped and are now talking about something," answered Fujinon. "I can't hear them from here."

"All right! I'll use my Bursting Mode and...!" said Io as she was about to make Five-Ring transform into its third form, but Kasumi and Fujinon quickly stopped her.

"D-Don't..."

"Attacking right now doesn't seem like a good idea. Let's watch and see where this goes... Kasumi, are there any other Masters nearby?"

"N-No..." Kasumi slowly shook her head. "Ray's mark is outside the gates... so he's still alive... Franklin is there, too, though..."

"I see."

"Okay! Then let's go and pick up the drops! Demi-Dragons give lots of stuff!" cried Io before running to take the items around them.

"I-Io... there might be more... so we should be on-guard," Kasumi warned.

"Let's sell it all and split the money equally!" Io cried. "Oh, but I might take the armor the boss boxes give! There isn't much we Barbarian Fighters can equip, you know?"

"Sh-She's not listening..."

Io got absorbed in her looting, while Kasumi looked at her with teary eyes.

Fujinon, on the other hand, noticed something strange. “Drops...? Wait... why are they dropping items? Tamed monsters *aren’t supposed to drop anything*, aren’t they?”

Her question wasn’t without reason, for what was happening right here was simply impossible.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, the system itself made it so that tamed monsters under someone’s command wouldn’t drop items.

“Not only that, but the default setting makes it so that tamed monsters return to the jewel before they get fatal damage,” she continued. “But even if he changed it, there’s still no reason for them to be dropping items...”

It was evident that the monsters had been made by Franklin and were under his command, which was exactly why they were targeting the kingdom’s Masters.

“But what if they’re not actual tamed monsters and aren’t acting by his orders?” Fujinon said slowly. “What if that directive was imprinted during the creation stages? If that’s the case... If Franklin can do this, then...”

As a conclusion began to form in Fujinon’s mind...

—■■■!!

An air-rending clash resounded around them, causing the three to turn to its source.

It came from the frozen hell — the area of effect of La Porte de l’Enfer.

Its cause was the impact made by the enraged Magingear using all its power to bring one of its blades down on Rook.

Following the sound, the silver-haired young man, Rook, disappeared from the frozen hell. It wasn’t just him, either, for Babylon and Marilyn, his Embryo and minion, were nowhere in sight.

The three girls thought Rook had been defeated and that his creatures had disappeared with him. But they soon noticed something strange.

“Who is that?” asked Kasumi, momentarily breaking the silence enveloping the surroundings.

Indeed, Rook’s team was nowhere in sight.

Instead, there was just someone *none of them recognized*.

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“Wh-What’s going on?” Hugo asked, perplexed more than anyone else witnessing this event.

Enraged by Rook’s words, he’d swung his blade down on him. Then his attack had been stopped.

The unknown person before him used the long weapon in his right hand to stop the superhuman robot’s blade, and that person definitely didn’t look like Rook. He had devilish wings on his back, devilish horns on his head, and draconic scales on his body. In his right hand he held a silver lance, seemingly made out of three bundled dragon horns.

He was a fine figure of a man, looking much the way one would expect the silver-haired pretty boy to look if he aged a bit.

“Who... Who are you?!” asked Hugo.

In response, the creature flashed a grin before answering.

“Union Jack — Dragon-Devil-Man.”

The man closed in on the Magingear and kicked it away. Though its weight surpassed ten tons, the attack made the machine get blasted a few metels back.

“Kh...!” Hugo quickly recovered from the mental shock and the physical impact before regaining his posture.

A moment later, he noticed the man standing right beside his Magingear with his left hand on the robot’s chest armor piece.

“Little Flare.”

The point-blank fire spell melted the frozen armor as it delivered an impact to the inside of the Magingear.

“That’s the magic skill used by the Embryo!” cried Hugo, and he was completely right. But the draconic, devilish man’s Little Flare was several times more powerful than that of Babi’s.

“Tri-Horn Upper!” the man said as he closed the distance between them and swung the dragon horn lance.

That was another skill Hugo was already familiar with. Though the horns had been replaced by a lance, it was definitely the same move that Marilyn had used during the battle before she vanished.

Hugo tried to deflect it with the right blade, but it wasn’t able to bear the attack and broke off at about the halfway point.

“Th-This is too...!”

A moment later, he activated the Smoke Discharger attached to the Magingear’s thigh part. The area instantly got covered in a sight-obscuring smokescreen, causing the man’s movements to become duller.

“Motor Slash!” said Hugo as he brought his remaining blade down on the man, who evaded it by jumping backwards, clearly aware that it was coming. The manner of movement was one he’d already seen many times during this battle.

“I see,” he said. “So that’s how it is.”

Hugo was now absolutely certain about the nature of his “new” enemy.

“So you’re ‘him,’ aren’t you?” he continued. “Right now, you’re merged with your Embryo and monster. That’s the effect of the skill you used before, isn’t it?”

In response, the man... Rook... merely smiled.

His opponent solved the details of his skill, but there was no need for him to confirm it. Hugo himself had reacted in a similar manner, after all. However, it was undeniable that he was absolutely correct.

Master, Embryo, and monster merging. That was indeed the effect of Union Jack, the skill Babylon had gained upon reaching her third form.

It had been born out of Rook’s admiration for Ray and the way his fighting style focused on combining his powers with those of Nemesis. Though Union Jack wasn’t quite the same as what they did, it wasn’t completely unlike it, either.

The skill combined the stats and skills of three creatures to create a single entity.

In this case, it bore the great stats of the dragon known as “Marilyn,” the many skills of the devil called “Babylon,” and the intelligence of the genius man leading them. Thus, it was labeled “Dragon-Devil-Man,” and it was the strongest ace up Rook’s sleeve.

“Can you really perform such a skill without any preparation?” added Hugo, and with good reason, too.

Union Jack wasn’t the only skill that merged or combined certain entities. However, all of them either needed some time to be charged up before they were ready to use or had the combining process itself take a while. That was the ultimate negative of such skills.

“Skill preparation? But I did do it. And for a while, too,” the man purposely answered with words, rather than just a smile.

Noticing that what he’d said had made Hugo subconsciously began rummaging through his memory, the man used the opening to attack him yet again.

“Gh!” Hugo came back to his senses and swung his blade down.

“I can see your movements even better than before,” Rook said as he evaded the sword and lunged the lance into one of the robot’s leg joints.

The Magingear had high defense in its basic state, and it was increased even further by the frost armor. Due to that, the attack didn’t break it completely, but the stats Rook had gained as a result of Union Jack had made him surpass even Marilyn, and the damage done to the armor wasn’t something Hugo could just brush off.

“Now, when do you think I started preparing this skill? Take a moment to think on it,” Rook said in a gentle voice that contrasted with his vicious attacks.

The correct answer was that Babi had begun charging Union Jack the moment Rook had said “check,” and that it was over by the time Babi said “done.” It was a code they’d decided on beforehand.

The reason Rook had dedicated time to explaining his theory about Hugo’s skill, seemingly neglecting the fact that his body had a higher chance to Freeze the more time had passed, had been both to confirm that he was right and to buy time for Union Jack.

In his mock battle against Marie, he’d prepared this skill during the break between the ninth and tenth battles.

Rook wondered how he’d go about buying the time during an actual battle, but in this one, he had been able to do it thanks to his conversational skills and a bit of planning.

"As you may have noticed already, La Porte de l'Enfer has no effect on me anymore," he added.

Indeed, upon becoming the Dragon-Devil-Man, Rook had been freed from the ice damning his left arm. Not only that, but he didn't show any signs of freezing again.

"Right now, I don't count as human, and I don't believe there's even a kill counter for what I am," he said. "So, La Porte de l'Enfer can't do anything to me."

By merging with a dragon and a devil, Rook had become a chimera, and since he hadn't killed a single one of those, the frozen hell was nothing more than scenery to him. Rook had escaped La Porte de l'Enfer's judgment by changing his own creature type.

"From here on out... our battle is merely a contest of strength, Hugo Lesseps," he said.

"La Porte de l'Enfer is meaningless, and you have enough power to match me all by your lonesome," said Hugo. "I can see why you call it that. Very well, I'll face you, Rook Holmes."

Rook jumped backwards, creating some distance between them.

It wasn't to escape. Far from it. He needed the distance to get the speed necessary for the activation of the most damaging skill at his disposal: Marilyn's charge attack.

In response, Hugo, Cocytus, and the Magingear got into posture. Unlike before, they weren't going to use a Motor Slash or some firearm attack.

Among her unique skills, Cocytus had only one that did damage directly. It was severely taxing in terms of MP, so Hugo had avoided using it in order to keep La Porte de l'Enfer active. However, as things were, he decided to prioritize preventing the person before him from getting to Franklin alive. He had become absolutely certain that his opponent was too dangerous to be allowed to go and support Ray.

He's too much of a threat, Hugo thought. *It's not about his power... He merely sees through people too well to be allowed to see "him." I have to end him, here and now.*

What followed next was a deafening silence.

It felt as though the very air that transmitted sound vibrations became Frozen.

The Dragon-Devil-Man and the Magingear faced one another, not moving a muscle or a mechanical joint.

Surrounded by the many ice sculptures, they stood so still that they, too, seemed like pieces of art.

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion from *outside the gate* resounded around them, breaking the silence and the tense air.

The two had no means of knowing what had caused it, nor did they care enough to find out. They merely used the sound as a trigger to begin dashing.

Rook brandished the silver-coated dragon horn lance and sprinted with a posture so low that it seemed like he could scrape the pavement. He used Marilyn's charge attack, which was empowered by both the stats he'd gotten due to the merge and the many passive skills Babi had at her disposal.

The lance's attack was now beyond the realm of Demi-Dragons, and it wouldn't have been far-fetched to say that it could bore a hole in a Pure-Dragon.

Tri-Horn Grand Dash.

The Magingear re-created the left blade it had lost. But unlike before, it wasn't an ice weapon. On the contrary — the distorted air around it made it quite obvious that it was a blade of pure heat.

It was Cocytus's trump card — a skill that took all the heat absorbed by La Porte de l'Enfer and transformed it into offensive energy.

Purgatorial Slash!

And so, the two clashed, finally deciding the victor.

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The end of the battle was witnessed by only three people — Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon.

"Ah..."

What they saw after the clash was Rook, lying down on the pavement.

The two's most lethal attacks met, and the Dragon-Devil-Man reached his limit before his lance could completely pierce the Magingear's cockpit. The deadly damage he'd received had caused the transformation to be undone, so Babi and Marilyn were lying nearby.

Rook was wounded all over.

“Looks like... I didn’t have the power to win,” he said.

Though many would argue that he’d simply been unlucky. If the Masters defeated by La Porte de l’Enfer hadn’t included Bishmal, the kingdom’s strongest fire user, the heat absorbed wouldn’t have been nearly as great, and the power of the Purgatorial Slash would’ve been significantly lower.

If that had been the case, Babi’s resistances and the Demi-Dragon-surpassing stats would’ve made it possible for him to bear the attack.

“Mh...” Hugo silently examined the damage on his Magingear, as it certainly hadn’t come out unscathed, either. The frozen armor on the front of the machine had shattered, and the armor of the Marshall II R itself was crooked and pierced deep enough to reach the cockpit.

Hugo had seen the tip of the silver lance that had entered his vision. If he’d been just a little bit slower in defeating his opponent, he would’ve surely gotten the death penalty. However, the Marshall II R was still up and running. If the Magingear Cocytus used as a base was still there, and he could still use La Porte de l’Enfer.

As proof of that, Rook — having returned to being human — was beginning to Freeze again.

“Next... it’s those three,” muttered Hugo as he shifted his gaze towards Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon.

That slight action was *the greatest mistake Hugo had made tonight*.

He should’ve crushed Rook’s head before taking time to analyze the situation.

After all, Rook...

“If I don’t have the energy to beat him directly, I’d like you to open the hatch... *Liz*.”

...was a boy who always had multiple plans running through his mind.

Following his words, the Marshall II R’s hatch quickly opened up.

“Wha... AH?!” Hugo exclaimed in shock as he saw a gathering of silver-colored liquid metal on the button opening the hatch.

It was Liz the Mithril Arms Slime.

Rook had hid her existence from the moment they’d introduced themselves and used her while making sure that Hugo wouldn’t notice. Liz had been the very thing coating the surface of the dragon horn lance in a brilliant silver. She’d snuck into the cockpit the moment the weapon had pierced inside.

Originally, the plan had been that she would just cut Hugo apart, but the heat of the Purgatorial Slash had made a lot of her volume evaporate, making her lack the strength to do it. Thus, all Liz could do was press the button to the Marshall II R's hatch.

However, that was more than enough. After all, with the hatch open, nothing was separating Hugo and Rook's group...

"Male Temptation."

"Lilim Temptation."

...letting the Pimp and the succubus do what they did best.

"Checkmate," Rook proclaimed. With those words, the battle of the western gate was ended.

Chapter Seven: The Right Arm of the Victor

???

The Kingdom of Altar's Knights of the Royal Guard.

That was the name of the order closest to the royal family — the knights who served and protected them with their very lives.

The minimum requirement to join them was to become a Paladin, a high-rank job of the knight grouping, while their leader the commander had the Superior Job known as "Celestial Knight." This had been the case for the entirety of the order's history.

Being the strongest knight of his generation, the commander had been entrusted with one of the kingdom's national treasures, a Prism Steed, and he had ridden it as he led the country's forces into battle.

As the strongest of knights leading the proudest order, the Kingdom of Altar's Royal Guard had been the very symbol of their country, which was often called "the land of knights."

Again, "*had been*."

As things were now, the Royal Guard was generally referred to as a thing of the past. The most glorious Altarian knight order had been all but annihilated about half a year ago, *Dendrogram* time.

During the so-called "First Knight-Machine War," a certain portion of the Dryfe Imperium's forces had killed about 60% of the Royal Guard's members. That was bad by itself, but it was even worse when you considered the fact that, in a sense, it had been done by just a single person: Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

He was one of Dryfe's three — two at the time — Superiors.

Hell General was a Superior Job that mixed frontline battle qualities with army commanding. However, its most notable trait was its focus on summoning devils at the cost of sacrifices.

"Here and now, I consign these many lives I have at my disposal.

Remove the lid of hell and gather, my forces," he had intoned. "Call Devil Regiment."

During the war, the Hell General had summoned more than three thousand devils. The man-eating army had been as tough as it was ravenous, and they'd had little trouble dealing with thousands of the kingdom's soldiers. Even the Paladin-filled Royal Guard had lost over a hundred members upon intercepting them.

As the victims had continued to pile up, the commander of the Royal Guard — Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria — had broken through the devilish ranks all by himself and made it through to their leader and source, the Hell General.

True, many might have argued that Langley hadn't been alone in his charge. He was simply the only one who had *survived while trying to get to Logan*.

Neither the vice commander at that time, nor the many other skilled, max-level members of the Royal Guard, had been able to survive the devilish onslaught, which had left the Celestial Knight to face the Hell General all by his lonesome.

Their fight had been overwhelming in its intensity.

The Celestial Knight had been considered to be one of the strongest tian vanguard fighters, and he'd proven how worthy he was of that title by fighting toe-to-toe with the Hell General, a Master bearing bonuses given by his Embryo.

The devils at Logan's command had tried to swarm him, but even they had been able to do little to protect their summoner.

"I won't let you stain the kingdom's lands with the blood of my brethren any longer!" Langley had called. "Logan Goddhart, I shall defeat you and banish your devils!"

"Gh! Shit...!"

In a one-on-one battle, the Celestial Knight had been above the Hell General. Langley had seemed to have a chance to emerge victorious and make the devilish army disappear. However...

"Umm, hello hello? Your Excellency the General? You okay? The King of Beasts already took care of the Archsage, y'know? Wait, what? You're not done yet? Are you actually about to lose? Well, ain't that just troubling, your excellency. (lol)" ...a voice of provocation ringing in the Hell

General's ear had changed the situation by messing with his mind.

"DON'T MOCK ME, *FRANKLIN*!" Suddenly, the Hell General had yanked off one of the items he had equipped. It was a special reward he'd earned by defeating an Epic-tier UBM. "'Here and now, I consign this unique treasure! In exchange for its limitless value, grant me a moment of power! Come from the ancient times, O endless devil!' Call Devil Zero Exceed!"

Thus, the Hell General had sacrificed a special reward to summon a devil with power matching a Mythical UBM.

The addition of such a being had instantly turned the tides of battle, making it end with the death of the Celestial Knight. There had also been the destruction of his beloved Prism Steed, the kingdom's national treasure. So the country had lost both its human *and* material symbols.

Following that conclusion, the Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, had gone for the finishing blow and used his modified monsters to attack the forces led by King Eldor Zeo Altar himself.

In the end, the king and all his men had become sustenance for the creatures.

Thus, the Royal Guard had lost their brethren and leader to the Hell General, and their lord to the Giga Professor.

After the war was halted, the order had reorganized, giving their late leader's daughter and the fifth among their ranks, Liliana Grandria, the position of vice commander. With that, she had risen to the top of the Knights of the Royal Guard.

She had been made the vice commander rather than commander because she was the strongest among the order's survivors, but she had yet to inherit the title of Celestial Knight. Every one of the order's commanders for the entirety of its history had had that Superior Job, so the country believed that a Paladin who had yet to gain Celestial Knight wasn't worthy of that title.

Though Liliana wasn't weak, she certainly wasn't at the level of Superior Jobs. The combined level of everyone else in the order was significantly lower than it had been, as well. And the number of those who could use the ultimate job skill, Grand Cross, or the hidden skill, Purifying Silverlight, could be counted on one hand. Thus, the position of commander and the throne of the Celestial Knight had been rendered empty.

The order's failure to protect their lord had severely damaged their status in the kingdom. Countless people had looked down on them, and the surviving knights themselves had been extremely ashamed of their dishonor. Many had quit being knights, run away, or switched to other orders, reducing the size of the Royal Guard yet again. What had once been an elite army amounting to three hundred had become a group of a mere fifty.

Still, all of those remaining had a strong will and a goal to go with it.

Was it a craving for revenge against the Hell General and the Giga Professor? Did they wish to avenge their lord and many brethren?

Wrong.

That sentiment was certainly there, but it was nothing compared to what lay at the core of their beings. What they truly desired was simply "to protect them."

They wished to succeed where they'd once failed, to ensure the safety of the three princesses left behind by their lord and protect the people of the Kingdom of Altar.

Bearing the many hardships, the members of the order still gave their all to their role as knights.

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And so, they dashed.

Reaching and breaking the limits of their power, the order struggled against the abomination before them, the RSK. They gave their all to defeat their foe and rescue their princess, and their efforts made them shine like the protagonists of a knight epic.

"Oh, they're shining, all right," I said with a grin. "*Like candles in the wind*."

Looking around, I — Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin — saw members of the Royal Guard lying on the ground beneath us. Their total number had fallen below the already-small fifty, and those of them still able to move were few and far between. Most of them had been defeated by my RSK.

He was a custom-made modified monster, a cracked sphere of flesh supported by ten tentacles. The creature was based on Evil Offspring and Ropers, and had potential to be classified among the more powerful members of them.

Besides the tentacles, he didn't have any other... interesting features. It wasn't like I couldn't have added any, but considering his main target, doing so would've been pointless.

His skillset and biological tissue were so complicated that he couldn't have been made by the standard Monster Creation skill. I had only been able to do it because of my Superior Embryo's ultimate skill, "Playing God — Pandemonium."

Though custom-made and quite complex, the RSK was a monster I'd hurriedly created during the span of last night. I hadn't had time to test whether he could live and function properly, so the Royal Guard's presence here was very convenient in that regard. The many dead knights lying around him made it clear that the RSK was a success.

"All seems to be A-okay," I said, pleased. "The attacks are on the weaker side, but that's not unexpected."

The lack of damage made it entirely possible that the poor RG folk around it were simply "dying," rather than "dead."

Of course, I intend to finish them off, I thought.

The only still-moving knights were Vice Commander Liliana and Lin-whatshisface — the third among them.

"Sir Lindos! Let's use the stack!" she called.

"Understood!"

Having some sort of plan, they split up and positioned themselves at twelve o'clock and three o'clock around the RSK, clearly readying themselves for a focused attack from both of those directions.

"Grand Cross!" they shouted, causing a sky-reaching pillar of light to burst out from below the RSK.

Grand Cross was a Paladin's ultimate job skill. It created a cross-shaped stream of holy light energy which seared anything in its way, making it an ability not to be underestimated. And the two knights had cast it at the exact same time, increasing its damage to a factor of two.

Naturally, it was a formidable technique, and if the elements matched up, it could perhaps even fell a Pure-Dragon in a single hit. The RSK was actually Pure-Dragon-tier when it came to stats, so the attack *could've* been extremely dangerous to him.

"Alas, it isn't," I said as I looked at the RSK, completely unhurt by the stacked Grand Cross.

He didn't have a single burn. The immense attack had been about as effective as a mosquito bite, if not less.

Seemingly irritated, the RSK fought back against the two attackers by either swinging his tentacles or opening many of its cracks and firing light projectiles from them.

"It can't be...! How could the stack do nothing to it?!" Sir Lin-whatsisface cried.

"Sir Lindos, not yet! It's too early to give up!"

"Mh...! Understood!"

And so, the two began attacking the RSK again.

Looks like they still intend to struggle, I thought. *Don't see why. It's useless, after all.*

"Heh... You might've stood a chance if you weren't Paladins," I grinned. Though, if that had been the case, I would've had them face a different product.

Anyway, there was no reasonable way for a Paladin — a job focused on the holy element and sword attacks — to win against the RSK. That's how I'd designed him, after all.

He was equipped with the physical damage-reducing Material Barrier and Holy Negation.

In addition to those skills, he also had Fire Negation, Poison Negation, Weakness Negation, and Intoxication Negation, which were mostly just extras to the "main feature" — the one I'd prepared specifically for that guy.

"Khehehehehehehe," I chuckled. "Man, I hope he doesn't take too long."

I didn't know or care whether it was the hand of fate instantly making my hope a reality, but the RSK was suddenly assaulted by a grand flow of flame. The intense flamethrower was brought about by none other than Purgatorial Flames — an equipment skill from Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Of course, the RSK's Fire Negation made it come out completely unscathed.

But what mattered right now was the very usage of the Purgatorial Flames, for that meant that *he* had finally come.

"He's here... He's here he's here HE'S HERE!" I screamed. Though a bit later than I'd anticipated, the star of the show was finally on the scene.

"Are you all right?!" Ray Starling asked the other two, upon joining the RG in their fight. With his silver Prism Steed, he appeared extremely prince-like, making his arrival seem reminiscent of another chapter in some knight tale.

And holy shit, is that hilarious.

"Ray?! Why are you here?" Liliana cried.

What a retarded question, I thought. Through my observations, I'd noticed that he was a man acting on the most hero-like impulses. If anyone before his eyes was in peril, he'd rush to help them while completely ignoring all related limitations and risks.

"I'm not exactly a fan of a scenario where a child gets kidnapped. It'd leave a bad taste in my mouth," he said, proving my point. He simply hadn't been able to stop himself from getting involved in tonight's event.

"...I'm also here to beat the crap out of that guy," he added, looking at me.

"Oh? You thought that far?" I said. "Man, that sure is something."

Again, I was fully aware that he disregarded his limitations and risks. But I hadn't actually expected him to come here intending to win against me — a Superior.

He was looking straight at me. Were his eyes full of antagonism? Hatred? Frustration? No... he was simply *mad*.

"KheHAH!" Unable to hold it in, I laughed in a weird manner.

He was completely serious. I knew very few people who were as earnest about *Infinite Dendrogram* as him. I could only name her — well, "him" in this world — and then there was the King of Tartarus, and of course me. As expected of a Maiden's Master.

...Or perhaps he was a Maiden's Master *because* he was this kind of person?

Regardless, I liked him a lot and was very pleased with his presence here. After all... *Breaking him will feel so good,* I thought with satisfaction.

"Flamingo, you're going to be getting your due for what you did today *and* yesterday," Ray snarled.

"Ahahah! Then I'm giving you yours for what you did a week ago, dog ears," I grinned.

Welcome, Ray Starling, I thought, smirking. *The RSK, your nemesis, awaits.*

◇◇◇

West of the duel city, Jeand Grasslands, Paladin, Ray Starling

"The stage is set and the cast is here. Heheh!" For reasons unknown to me, Franklin cackled, clearly unable to contain his amusement.

Right now, he was standing on a floating, platform-like monster surrounded by a visible barrier. Princess Elizabeth was on the ground at his feet.

"All right, then, Ray my boy!" he said as he pointed to the night sky. "Feast your eyes on *this*!"

Looking up, I saw a monster that looked like a giant eye with bat wings.

"That's a Broadcast Eye," Franklin continued. "Everything it sees and hears is sent to a receiver monster that projects the data as a 3D movie."

So it's basically a living camera, I thought.

"Right as we speak, everything it sees and hears is being turned into a hologram and projected over Gideon. If everything is working as intended, whatever's happening here should be visible to everyone in the central arena, every one of Gideon's districts, and even the royal capital."

"Why is this necessary?" I asked.

In response, Franklin grinned and raised one of the fingers on his right hand. "The first reason is to have the kingdom's people witness the course of events here. Without a live broadcast, they wouldn't know the process, and would just make their own assumptions about the result, which is no good to me." He paused, and then continued. "After all, I want to break this country's spirit."

The amused sneer on his face was nothing but nauseating.

"It would all be pointless if the Altarians don't see the people they so rely on display pathetic impotency as they fall before my creation, and don't witness the powerlessness of the duel city. Surely you understand, right? Dying during your sleep isn't scary, so I'm gonna open their eyes and show them the fingers digging into their necks."

"...Makes sense, but man, that's a pretty messed-up mentality."

"Khah!" he laughed. "Well, it's not like *I'm* the one who needs this... Anyway, on to the second reason." Franklin then raised a finger on his left hand. "I want to publicly humiliate the ones who chased after me."

"...You what?"

“Hahahah! Man, if things had gone according to plan, no one would’ve come here in the first place. But now we have the RG and you, and boy oh boy, are you all a nuisance! You’re delaying my darling Plan A! And since you got in my way, I decided to get rid of you all while also making you the laughingstock of the kingdom.”

“I had a hunch, but you’re actually an asshole, aren’t you?” I said. “And what’s with the assumption that no one was gonna get in your way if you went out the western gate? Seems pretty naïve, if you ask me.”

Not to mention that there were many who would get in his way even if his plan was a success.

“If that signboard was anything to go by, he lets tians pass, right?” I continued. “That means that Liliana and her people would’ve been here even if I wasn’t.”

“...Wrong,” said Franklin as his smile disappeared. “If *you* weren’t here, she wouldn’t have come here, either.”

Following those words, for reasons unknown, he glared at me with some of the sharpest eyes imaginable.

However, that expression didn’t last more than a moment, and he was soon back to his maniacal grin. “Anyway, let’s begin,” he said. “RSK... the test is over.”

Suddenly, the monster Liliana and her knights were fighting turned to face me.

The more I looked at the creature, the more eerie it seemed. Though its size was about the same as Gardranda’s, its appearance was completely unlike that of any monster I’d faced so far. It was a flesh-colored sphere with many cracks on it and ten thick tentacles protruding out of its body. The appendages were highly reminiscent of skin turned a dark blue due to blood loss.

“We fought something straight out of a horror movie just yesterday,” I muttered. “And now this thing here is like a nightmare.”

The monster was the type to make people feel uneasy and scared simply due to how hard-to-define it was.

“Indeed,” said Nemesis. “Though I find this one far easier to handle than any undead. But Ray, you *do* understand, right?”

Yeah, I thought. *I know I acted all brave and all, but the situation here is pretty bad.*

"If it hadn't been for the battle at the gate, we could've tried for a Counter Absorption and Vengeance is Mine combo, but now that we don't have that luxury, we can only hope that this creature doesn't hit as hard as Gardranda or Gouz-Maise."

True, I thought. *After all, my preemptive Purgatorial Flames didn't seem to work, either.*

With all the Royal Guards lying around the area, Hellish Miasma wasn't an option. Then there was the fact that Liliana and her knights — who were surely above me in terms of pure Paladin ability — had been completely overwhelmed, meaning that my normal attacks would do little... if anything. The unfavorable situation also prevented me from using *that*, leaving me with nothing except for Vengeance is Mine, but...

"Mh..."

Can I really use it? I thought.

"Ray?" Nemesis asked.

Just like in my previous battles against foes far stronger than me, my intuition was trying to tell me something.

The visual nausea the RSK made me feel was accompanied by chills that were hard to describe, similar to — but quite unlike — the ones I'd felt when fighting my worst enemy so far, Gouz-Maise.

If that amalgam of the undead loathed all the living, then it was almost like this abomination hated only one thing...

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Franklin raised his voice, cutting my thoughts short. He was looking directly at the Broadcast Eye and acting like he was live on TV. "This is a stream for the people of Gideon and the rest of the kingdom! Hello again or for the first time! I am Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, and I'm here to show you the climax of my game!"

Upon saying that, he took out a device looking much like a mobile terminal from about three decades back: a smartphone.

"This right here is the switch that releases the monsters I've set up in the duel city!"

"...Gh!" I voiced my frustration.

"This switch has a timer function, and it's set to launch a signal to release all the monsters after 652 seconds!" he continued. "Though, we do have some early birds thanks to a bunch of hot-blooded idiots who tried to escape the arena by attacking the barrier."

"Release all the monsters?! But wait, that's...!" said Liliana with a tense expression, which made Franklin's grin widen.

"Oh, yeees, 500 monsters stronger than your average Demi-Dragon will be released to the city all at once. Well, they happen to be set to attack only Masters, but they're relentless and don't hesitate to destroy buildings, either."

His words and our situation here were being broadcast to everyone in Gideon. Franklin used this to heighten their fear by showing them the remaining number of seconds before the time bomb finally went off.

"Well, as for what I'll do with this switch... Whoooosh!" he said, throwing it towards the RSK.

The monster responded to the action by opening its fleshy sphere and taking the switch inside before closing again, which was a scene highly reminiscent of a clione feeding.

"So yeah, there are about 600 seconds left until the signal goes out, and the only way to stop it is to kill my boy the RSK here." Franklin fell silent for a moment before pointing to Liliana in an exaggerated manner and speaking up again. "The ones braving this fight are these noble Paladins, the vice commander and third knight of the Royal Guard — Lady Grandria and Sir Lindos!"

After pointing to them...

"And let's not forget the only Master here! Another Paladin, Ray Starling!"

...his finger was redirected at me.

"Can the three Paladins protect the city of duels?! It all rests in their hands!"

With excessively grandiose presentation, he was setting up the stage for the "public humiliation" he was talking about.

"So, uh..."

Thus came his final words.

"Blame *them* when the city's gone, okaaay?"

Which he said with nothing but malice and glee.

"What an incorrigible bastard!" exclaimed Nemesis.

He sure is, but comments about him will have to wait, I thought.

The flesh-colored orb was already making a move. The many cracks on its surface all opened up like wounds and released dazzling streams of eye-piercing light.

Feeling as though I was barraged by countless camera flashes, I could barely keep on looking at it.

“A blinding move?!” I exclaimed.

“Ray! This light is followed by an attack!” Liliana warned us, but my Silver was already dashing away.

“Kh!” Suddenly, something hit the place I was at and exploded.

They were light projectiles the RSK fired during the blinding flashes, and their power was about three times greater than the White Lance Gems I’d used.

However, *that was the extent of it*.

I’d failed to evade one of them. The impact had been nothing impressive, while the damage had only cost me about a tenth of my HP.

“This isn’t beyond us!” cried Nemesis.

Indeed. We could do this, no problem. I simply had to bear its attacks, heal myself, and land a Vengeance is Mine after getting enough damage.

From what I’d seen of the Royal Guard’s fight against it, the RSK had a constantly-active barrier against physical damage and extremely high resistances against holy attacks and fire. However, the damage from Vengeance was fixed and doubled, making it perfectly capable of taking out large portions of the thing’s HP.

At least, that’s how it should go, I thought. *But... why am I feeling so uneasy?*

“Your intuition rarely fails when we’re in a predicament,” said Nemesis. “There might be more to this abomination than meets the eye. However...”

...Vengeance is our only option against it, so that’s what we have to go with, I agreed.

“Oh, by the way,” said Franklin. “The barrier of this darling I’m riding right now is directly linked to the RSK, so you have to beat my boy even if you prioritize saving the princess.”

...Even more reason to use it, then.

“Looks like it’s do-or-die,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “...Let’s go!”

“Certainly!” With that settled, I made Silver gallop towards the RSK.

Making sure not to stop for a second, I evaded — or purposely took — the light attacks while occasionally going on the offensive myself.

All of my sword slashes were negated by the barrier on its surface, and the same went for my Purgatorial Flames. However, due to the beast being so abnormal, I didn't stop my fruitless attacks, hoping that I could perhaps find a source of its power or something.

Of course, I also didn't neglect to use my healing magic or items to keep my HP up. Thanks to my 5,000+ HP, Paladin's Aegis, my general endurance, and the RSK's lacking offensive abilities, I was able to stack up a considerable amount of damage. It all seemed to be going very well... but my unease showed no signs of abating.

"Wait, the accumulated damage is... what?" said Nemesis. "No, it's pretty clear it came from the abomination, but..."

"Nemesis?"

"O-Oh, sorry. It's just that... I just felt something off."

About the accumulated damage, right? I thought. Nemesis seemed to have an ability to "feel" the enemies that have damaged us. She'd used it during the Gouz-Maise battle, too.

"'Off'? In what way?" I asked.

"The damage is clearly coming from this RSK monster, but it feels like it's... scattered all over."

Scattered?

"If I were to liken it to something from your world, I'd say that it feels as though I'm looking at an X-ray displaying the spread of cancer cells within the body."

"...Wait." *Doesn't that mean that the RSK is still the thing that's accumulating damage?*

"Yes, that's correct..." she replied, and even though it was telepathic, I could easily tell that she felt uneasy about this unfamiliar sensation.

"...Let's try using it once," I said.

"I don't believe we have enough damage to kill it, though."

"And that's exactly why we have to try. My gut and your feeling are telling us that something's wrong. Rather than having to deal with something unexpected when we go for the finisher, we should confirm our suspicions right now."

"...Very well!"

"Silver!" I shouted as I kicked my steed's sides and pulled his reins, making him speed towards the RSK.

Passing the barrage of light attacks, we closed the distance between us and the abomination. Once it was within range, I swung Nemesis at one of its tentacles, fully intending to cut it off. Then we used the ace up our sleeve, our only means of fighting it.

"Vengeance is Mine!" we shouted in unison, activating the skill that had felled many of our opponents.

Our first foe — the Demi-Dragon Worm.

The tri-faced beast of flame and poison — Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda.

The amalgam of people's death and malice — Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

With all the powerful enemies it had helped us defeat, it was small wonder why it was our most trusted skill.

Now, we had used it on the mysterious creature called "the RSK."

"How...?" Nemesis said in bewilderment, and not without reason, for Vengeance *hadn't hurt it in the least*. My greatsword had simply slipped on the RSK's surface, not destroying a single inch of it.

The attack had rendered us defenseless, and a light projectile that came from one of the monster's cracks landed directly on me. It took away about a third of my total HP, but I couldn't manage to care about that.

"Why...?" I murmured. The only thing on my mind was my skill — Vengeance is Mine. It doubled the damage I'd received from my enemies and brought it back to them, completely ignoring any defenses.

It had worked every time I'd used it on anything that had accumulated damage on me.

However, it'd had absolutely no effect on the RSK.

"Ohhh maaan, what a great expression." I heard a voice thick with intoxication.

"Franklin!" I shouted.

His face was still in a smile, but unlike the basic grin from before, it had become a thoroughly amused sneer. "Ahahah! You look so dumbfounded. Have no idea what's going on, huh? 'Why? How? Wasn't our Vengeance absolute and unmatched, Nemmy-wemmy?!' Lol. Must've been hard to be cast as Nobuta just because of your glasses, eh, Ray-boy?"

"Wh...!"

"Oh, now you look even more surprised. Man, I'm loving this to bits."

The thing he'd just referred to was something I'd only told Nemesis... and that had been *after* Flamingo had left us. The fact that he knew it could only mean one thing...

"That drug you gave me had more than just the dog ear thing in it, huh?" I snapped.

"Ohhh, yeah it did," he answered as he reached into his pocket and took out a drug bottle filled with the exact same mixture he'd given me yesterday. "The drug I gave you was a Lesser Elixir and Animal Ear Drug cocktail..." He then opened the bottle and poured the contents into his hand.

"...but there was more than just the drug in there," he said as liquid flowed out of the palm, leaving behind a marble-sized object. "This little beauty is a PSS — a Peeping Spy Slime. They're always in a liquid state, have no means of fighting, and get digested by humans in about 24 hours... But in exchange for being so powerless, for as long as they're alive, they send me the stats, skill info, and the words of those they've been ingested by." His grin widened. "Getting the person to not find it suspicious or stay online can be a bit hard, I'll tell you that."

Couldn't you have gone with something else? I thought as I put my hand on my mouth in disgust. *I can't believe I drank a damn slime!*

"I know everything at your disposal," he continued. "Your Nemesis's three Embryo skills, Miasmaflame Bracers, Greaves of Grudge, your real Prism Steed, your own skills — including Purifying Silverlight — and even the various tactics you used in your battle against the Lich Maise and Gouz-Maise."

That was everything I had. Everything I could attempt to do had been leaked to him.

"And my boy the RSK here was made to counter everything you've got," he finished proudly.

"...As in?"

"Vengeance is Mine doesn't work on him, he doesn't give any debuffs, he negates Purgatorial Flames, Hellish Miasma, Purifying Silverlight, and even Grand Cross, if you had it. Standard attacks of your level don't hurt him, either. Against you, the RSK is completely unbeatable. After all..."

Franklin momentarily stopped talking and flashed an almost dazzling smile before continuing.

"He's the *Ray Starling Killer*. Custom-made just to defeat you."

“...Made to... what?”

It’s actually called “Ray Starling Killer”? I thought. *Franklin seriously made a monster for the sole purpose of defeating me?*

“So yeah, you’re losing no matter what. My boy the RSK cost me a whole 100,000,000 lir, but hey, money spent on victory ain’t money wasted, right?”

“Why...?” I burst out.

Why is Franklin — a Superior — doing so much against me? Didn’t we meet just yesterday? Does it have something to do with Hugo?

“‘Why,’ you ask? Yeah, I guess it must be strange to you. Why would a Superior like me throw such serious money to deal with such a nobody?” he said as his smile vanished. “That’s because I’ve *lost* against you once.” His eyes had turned scarily serious, making me feel as though they could pierce me.

“You lost to me?” I asked. “When did that happen?”

As my confusion reached its peak, Franklin pointed below... at Liliana, who was fighting the RSK.

“I had a plan to assassinate Liliana Grandria, you see,” he said. “You completely destroyed it, so I decided to single you out.”

A plan to assassinate Liliana...? Does he mean the time I...?

“If you hadn’t gotten involved, that bear man wouldn’t have been there either, and the fifty Demi-Dragon Worms would’ve surely taken care of Liliana. *You* ruined my plan and made me lose, Ray Starling.”

Bear man — my brother.

Fifty Demi-Dragon Worms — Old Reve Orchard.

“And then, a guy with glasses told me, ‘If you have this incense, you can go get some from the orchard outside.’” I remembered Milianne’s words from back then, and it all made sense now.

“I *can’t stomach* anyone who makes me lose or yield,” Franklin continued. “Whenever someone like that appears, I set up a rematch and make sure they lose so thoroughly it’s pathetic. Then they never feel like standing in my way ever again, and you won’t be any different. Now just lose and become the laughingstock of the kingdom, will ya?” His expression and voice as he said that were thick with madness.

Though it wasn’t like he didn’t make sense. I could understand why he resented me so much. Really well, in fact.

“All right, I understand why you went and built an anti-me thing,” I said.

So he was the one responsible for that situation, huh? I thought.

“Hahahah! Good to see you get it.”

“Oh, I do,” I assured him. “And I also get... that now I have to punch you.”

“...What?” Franklin asked, looking visibly puzzled.

What? Did I stutter? ’Cause I sure as hell didn’t say anything weird.

“You know, you got a child... Milianne... involved in that incident, and when she told me about the man in glasses, a specific thought went through my mind.” I recalled exactly what I’d thought back then and put it into words. “‘I’d like to punch that idiot for sending a kid to a place this dangerous.’”

I hadn’t known the culprit, and both Milianne and Liliana had been okay. Due to that, I’d shelved the sentiment, but I sure as hell hadn’t forgiven the bastard.

“So yeah, now that I know that *you’re* the one responsible, I’m gonna settle this.”

“Kh...”

“I’ll say it again...” I raised my bracer-covered hand and pointed my index finger directly at him before making my proclamation. “My fist is going straight into your face. Keep it clean for me, Superior.”

“Do your worst... newbie!”

Following that exchange, the RSK moved to stand between me and Franklin.

This thing was a monster a Superior had made for the sole purpose of defeating me. Thus, it made perfect sense that Liliana and her knights had had such a hard time with it.

“It’s because they’re Paladins...” I murmured. The countermeasures made against my job were fully functional against them, as well.

Damn shame, I thought.

Still, if they hadn’t been Paladins, Franklin would’ve probably released some other monsters.

He could actually do so now, if he so desired, but he didn’t, because he wanted to break my spirit by making me lose completely and create a show where those protecting the city got defeated by a single monster without anyone leaving as much as a scratch on it.

Franklin probably *would* summon more monsters if we defeated the RSK.

However, with the RSK gone, we would stop the monster release in Gideon, and the disappearance of the barrier would give us a chance to save the princess.

“There’s no change to what we have to do, then,” I said. “We kill the Ray Starling Killer... Man, what a damn stupid name.”

“For that, we must find out why Vengeance doesn’t work on it,” added Nemesis.

“I think I know why.”

“Eh?”

“Let me just see if I’m right,” I said as pulled on Silver’s reins, making him stop.

“Ray?!”

I closed my right eye and made my left one open wide before placing my left hand on my face and looking at the RSK through the gap.

The thing was still releasing flashes and light attacks through its many cracks. Naturally, looking directly at it would burn my eyes as effectively as looking at the sun through a telescope. However, I ignored the searing sensation on my left retina and strained to see into the sources of the light — the cracks.

The brightness was literally blinding, and making anything out was a real challenge, but I kept my eye open with the intention to see what I was certain was there.

And so...

“Thought as much.”

...a light projectile hit me the very moment I saw *it*.

Combined with the damage from the previous attack, my HP was now below half.

“Ray! Force Heal!” Liliana cast a healing spell on me from a short distance away. It was more powerful than the spell I had at my disposal, and it instantly got my HP up to 90%.

“Ray... You fool! That was nothing if not suicidal!” Nemesis screamed.

“Ray! What you did just now was far too careless!” Liliana chastised.

Nemesis and Liliana telling me off at the same time produced a stereolike effect.

"Yeah, sorry about that," I said. "It was worth it, though, 'cause I *saw it*."

Even after the effects of Liliana's healing magic, my left eye was still somewhat damaged. However, I'd gotten something really good in exchange.

"*I saw a name in the light*," I said.

"A name?" asked Nemesis.

"In one of those shining cracks, I was able to make out the name display of a different monster than the RSK."

"Does that mean that...?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "The RSK isn't alone. We're being attacked by other monsters."

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In *Infinite Dendrogram*, there was a monster type called "Children of the Wicked God," which was often simplified to just "Evil Offspring."

Their main characteristic was that they *had no designated shape*.

The same could be said for slimes, but rather than being completely amorphous, Evil Offspring grew body parts and organs as they saw fit.

They all began life as spheres of flesh, but as they matured, they grew organs and other body parts, which differed depending on the environment they were in. For example, those that were surrounded by predators would grow many ears and eyes to help them sense danger, while those living in cliffy areas would grow many arms to help them climb.

Even if they were driven by necessity and their methods were appropriate for human standards of practicality, their manner of being definitely wasn't comfortable to observe.

Combined with the fact that they had a tendency to go for easy targets and thus often took to consuming young creatures — be they animal, human, or other Evil Offspring — they had become feared to the point of acquiring that name.

When making the RSK, Franklin had thought about basing it around the use of an Evil Offspring's organ specialization ability. After all, the creatures weren't limited to just ears, eyes, or limbs — they could even create organs which released damaging light projectiles. However, Franklin had decided to take it a step further by modifying it to *create other monsters that could attack in its stead*.

He'd empowered the specialization function to the point where the attacking parts would count as monsters separate from the RSK, while also making sure that they would always be under the RSK's control, rather than autonomous.

Such ludicrous modifications were impossible for standard Monster Creation, the researcher grouping skill that allowed the person to use lots of materials to create many monsters of the same type. Though additional ingredients could give slight changes to stats or give an extra skill or two, there was little room for any big modifications. However, to Franklin, it was entirely possible thanks to his Superior Embryo's ultimate skill, Playing God — Pandemonium.

The result of his efforts, the RSK, was a monster that had many negation skills and generated other monsters using its Kin Creation skill while doing *absolutely nothing* by itself.

Leaving the attacking to other monsters would normally have been meaningless, while its many negation skills could normally have been avoided by simply using an element that wasn't covered by them.

Due to that, despite being so detailed, the RSK was nothing but a standard Pure-Dragon-class monster.

But that certainly wasn't the case for a certain Master.

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"Other monsters?" Liliana spoke, clearly confused. "But when he called it, he only named the RSK."

"Then they were probably created inside the eyes after it was summoned," I said. "I mean, plant-like monsters sometimes create allies, so who's to say this one can't?"

On our journey to Gideon, we'd encountered several monsters that could multiply by dividing or throwing seeds.

"What is the point of that...?" she asked.

"Well, normally, there'd be none. The result would be the same regardless of whether the attacks came from the RSK itself or other monsters."

However, this method of attack made a world of difference for me and Nemesis.

"As it says in the name, 'Ray Starling Killer' was made to kill me, and my and Nemesis's trump card is Vengeance is Mine — a counterattack that returns double the damage I receive from the enemy."

Therefore...

"This skill has no effect if the target doesn't attack me. The most effective move against us is *to not do anything*."

That was the crux of it all. What damaged us were the monsters the RSK created, rather than the RSK itself, which rendered Vengeance unusable... or "useless," rather.

After all, no amount of multiplication could make 0 be more than 0.

It was also fair to assume that the light show the RSK created was there to visually conceal the fact that it was a gathering of monsters.

Anyway, I now knew the truth behind it. Vengeance could do nothing against the RSK itself, and even if I killed the attacking monsters, they would just be re-created.

"So, are you done clarifying how screwed you are?" mocked a malicious voice.

"Franklin..."

"Man, you're fast. I expected to see you panic as you tried to figure it out. Well, not that anything changes now that you know!" He formed another sneer.

Franklin wasn't wrong about that. My knowing how the RSK worked didn't change anything.

However...

"I'm *relieved* that there's a reason why my Vengeance doesn't work," I said.

"...'Relieved'?" Franklin repeated the word as his smile vanished and his brow furrowed.

"It means that not even a Superior like you was able to create a monster that was invincible *just because*."

"Kh..."

Superiors were the pinnacle of players. They were the strongest elite of Masters and Embryos that didn't even amount to a hundred. And yet, not even one of them had been able to make an undefeatable being.

"That means that there's something I can do," I continued. "Even if it's nearly zero... as long as the possibility is there, I'll never give up trying to seize it." The words I spoke were the same ones my brother had told me... the ones I'd recalled during the Gouz-Maise battle.

"Khah!" Franklin laughed. "Not giving up is fine and all, but you only have 270 seconds left. What can you do in just over four minutes?"

In response, I brandished Nemesis and pointed her at the RSK before speaking up. "Kill that thing."

"...Hmph."

All right, I have four minutes, I thought. So far, neither I nor Liliana nor Sir Lindos had done anything that had an effect.

My Vengeance and Purgatorial Flames were both useless, and since the RSK didn't give any debuffs, using Like a Flag Flying the Reversal would be meaningless. Hellish Miasma wasn't an option, either, since there were people lying around it. Then again, if Franklin was telling the truth, it wouldn't have had any effect, either.

"Mm...?" I murmured.

"Vengeance is Mine doesn't work on him, he doesn't give any debuffs, he negates Purgatorial Flames, Hellish Miasma, Purifying Silverlight, and even Grand Cross, if you had it."

Upon recalling Franklin's words, I realized that there were two strange things about them. First, there was the fact that he had gone out of his way to tell me what the RSK negated.

If he'd stayed quiet, I would've wasted a bunch of the little time we had left just attempting those skills, and he would have derived enjoyment from watching me try and fail.

Why did he say it and throw that scenario to the wind? I thought. *Did it just slip out because he was feeling uppity... or is there some other reason?*

The second strange thing was the fact that the measures he'd named didn't cover everything I had.

"...Oh, yeah," I muttered. "He did say that it was 24 hours."

That PSS had been alive and feeding my info to Franklin for a whole day since yesterday morning. Due to that, it wasn't strange for him not to know it.

Still, it's unlikely that I can win against it with just this and... Wait, I thought. *If I combine these two things... I might have a chance.*

"Ray?" asked Nemesis.

"We have a way to turn this thing around," I said. "And I don't think that Franklin knows about it."

"...You mean *that*?"

"Yeah, *that*," I replied. "If we mix it with another gamble, we might be able to win against that thing. The risk is pretty great, though. If I'm wrong, what we'll do here will be pretty suicidal."

"I don't believe that any risks we take can be worse than us losing this fight."

"Good point. Still, there's a problem."

I looked at the RSK... or, rather, at the ground around it. There were a number of incapacitated Royal Guard knights there, and I couldn't make my move until I helped them. I was about to go and try getting them away from there...

"You have a plan, yes?" Sir Lindos stopped fighting the RSK and asked.

"It's a huge gamble," I replied. "But if it goes well, I might be able to take care of the monster release time limit."

"Can I help in any way?"

His words made my eyes open wide. I'd only met him yesterday and seen him once again today, but from that alone, I figured that he didn't have the best opinion of us Masters.

"...I know what you want to say," he continued. "However, my opinion means little here. What's important right now..."

"...are the people of Gideon and the princess?" I completed his sentence.

"Exactly." Sir Lindos put on a smile, to which I responded with my own.

"Now, is there anything Lady Grandria and I can do?" he asked.

"I would like you to move the Royal Guard near the RSK away from it," I answered. "Do it within the next two minutes and take them at least 100 meter... I mean, 'metels' away."

The *buildup* would probably take two minutes.

"Also, you need to keep the RSK in place and make sure you're nowhere near it when I get close."

"That sure is a lot of orders... But very well. Did you hear him, Lady Grandria?!"

"Yes! Leave the rescue to me!" Liliana called.

“Then I shall keep it from moving!”

The two split the roles and charged towards the RSK. Liliana evaded the light projectiles and saved the Royal Guard members while Sir Lindos kept the RSK in place.

Their skill as Paladins was clearly greater than mine, and I would’ve been lying if I’d said it didn’t move me.

“Let’s not fall behind... SILVER!” I called.

My mount neighed.

“Wind Hoof... activate!”

Thus, I used one of the skills on my Prism Steed, Zephyrus Silver.

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West of duel city Gideon, Jeand Grasslands

Ray’s words made Silver use a skill which distorted their appearance.

It was caused by Wind Hoof’s compressed air barrier bending the light around them.

“...Why now?” Franklin asked, slightly surprised and confused. It wasn’t because he was witnessing something unknown. Quite the opposite — he knew the skill well, but he didn’t see any reason to use it. “I mean, that’s a skill for mobility and defense, right?”

Since PSS had been inside Ray when he’d acquired the Prism Steed, Franklin had received its info and knew the details of Wind Hoof. It was a compressed air barrier skill with a flying — or rather, “air-walking” — ability as a bonus.

Wind Hoof certainly wasn’t special, either, as mount-type special equipment or monsters with similar skills weren’t all that uncommon.

Franklin’s countermeasure to this barrier was already in place, too. After all, the many light projectiles fired by the monsters inside the RSK would have little trouble breaking through it. He would’ve added some defensive function if Wind Hoof had been an attack skill, but that just wasn’t the case.

“There’s nothing special in the skill’s description, so nothing should happen if he uses it... right?” Franklin muttered his thoughts as he looked at Silver using Identification. However, the confirmation did little to abate his inexpressible unease.

Franklin wasn’t actually wrong in the least. Wind Hoof was most definitely a skill for a compressed air barrier and aerial movement, and normally, it wouldn't be anything to worry about.

At least, *as long as Ray didn't combine it with another item*.

"*Gouz-Maise!*" Ray shouted, his words resounding throughout the surroundings.

As if they *heard him*, his dark purple greaves groaned in a manner reminiscent of the living dead. They began to flicker.

"Release... your MP!"

Suddenly, the Grudge-soaked Graves emitted immense amounts of magic into the surrounding air.

Normally, magic was colorless and permeable, but Gouz-Maise's energy had a blood-curdling, purple hue. That was due to it being the magic stored in Greaves of Grudge through its Grudge Conversion — a skill that changed the surrounding grudge and negative emotions into the wearer's SP or MP.

The magic released just now was so great it could make a magic-focused high-rank job turn green with envy. In fact, it could even match the maximum magic stores of such Superior Jobs.

"Whoa, whoa..." Franklin muttered as he backed away a bit.

The magic was equivalent to hundreds of thousands of MP — a number most maxed-out spellcasters could only dream of.

"So this is that skill..."

Of course, Franklin knew of Grudge Conversion, as well. However, he didn't see what had caused the magic stored to become that great.

"Where did he get all this gru...? Damn it!" Realizing the cause, Franklin cut his words short and cursed. "*It's me*!"

The grudge... the negative emotions came from *the game that Franklin had started*.

He'd let his player killers and modified monsters run rampant throughout the city, and livestreamed himself laughing that he would release even more. Naturally, that had caused the tens of thousands of Gideoners to feel *fear*, which had then been absorbed by Gouz-Maise during Ray's ride through the city.

Though Gouz-Maise's nature made it so that its greatest source of energy was the grudge of the dead, the fear of the living was viable as well. Naturally, it was far weaker, but when it came from tens of thousands of people, the gathered MP could reach immense numbers.

Did I mess up? thought Franklin. *No, this phenomenon was unavoidable. Wait, the problem here is...*

During the RSK's creation, he'd pictured scenarios in which Ray used the MP from Gouz-Maise on Purgatorial Flames, Hellish Miasma, or Reversal, but those were already taken care of.

With those things out of the way, Franklin wanted to know the purpose behind Ray releasing all that magic power.

The answer to his question came quickly, since the purple magic in the air was suddenly absorbed by Silver. What followed was a mighty wind, coming from every direction imaginable.

No, "wind" wasn't appropriate, as Silver was simply *absorbing all the surrounding air*, all for the purpose of unleashing the full potential of Wind Hoof — the skill using the rider's MP to create a barrier of compressed air.

The hundreds of thousands of MP allowed Silver to gather so much air that both he and Ray disappeared from sight. The barrier had become so dense that it no longer allowed any light to pass, leaving behind nothing but a pitch-black sphere.

"Khah...!"

Upon seeing it, Franklin instantly realized that, in this situation, *the barrier wasn't actually a barrier*.

"RSK! Move! Get away from there!" Franklin shouted.

Since no light could pass through the sphere, anyone inside wouldn't be able to see what was outside. If the RSK moved, Ray would be rendered unable to hit it.

"I won't allow that!"

But the RSK's movements were stopped by a certain Paladin — Sir Lindos.

"Grand Cross!" he shouted, unleashing his most powerful attack.

Just like before, the holy light did nothing to hurt the RSK, but that didn't matter, for even if it didn't take any damage, the pressure of the mighty skill dulled its movements. With that, the stage was set for Ray to unleash his attack.

"Tch! Ca—!" Franklin tried to Call for new monsters that could take care of the threat. However, before he could, the pitch-black wind began speeding towards the RSK.

Sir Lindos instantly went out of the sphere's way and distanced himself from it.

Upon being set free, the RSK tried to escape, but it was simply far too slow to avoid the black object heading towards it.

The spheres clashed, but didn't touch directly, as the RSK's Material Barrier was protecting it. No matter how densely it compressed the air, Wind Hoof was merely a barrier and thus didn't have much in the ways of damage.

Upon arriving at that realization using its limited thinking capabilities, the RSK became relieved. Its creator, on the other hand, clicked his tongue in frustration.

"Wind Hoof, *cancel*."

The voice came from inside the compressed air barrier and wasn't heard by anyone outside, but everyone saw its effects.

The black sphere vanished, creating a mighty *explosion* which tore through the Material Barrier as though it was paper and hit the RSK.

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Ray Starling had discovered this phenomenon by complete accident.

It had happened on the morning of the same day, when he was testing Wind Hoof and trying to find a way to make its compressed air barrier useful.

Even when Ray gave it all of his maximum MP, the resulting barrier couldn't shield him from attacks by the most basic monsters in the Nex Plains, and he concluded that it was due to his MP being too low to unleash its full potential.

Then Ray got the idea to combine the skill with his Grudge-soaked Greaves.

Ever since he'd gotten the item, Grudge Conversion had been stocking up on a decent amount of MP — certainly greater than Ray's own maximum, at least — and he figured that it could be used to create a powerful barrier.

He turned out to be correct, and the resulting compressed air shield was strong enough to hold even when he got swarmed by monsters. It had the negative of rendering him incapable of seeing anything around him, but

Ray figured that he could find a use for it regardless.

With his experiment done, he decided to fight the monsters swarming him. However, when he disabled Wind Hoof, Silver's surroundings *exploded*.

Or perhaps *burst* was the better word for it.

Surrounded by clouds of dust and a rain of monster guts, both Ray and Nemesis tilted their heads in confusion.

However, there was nothing curious about this.

Wind Hoof's barriers were made of gathered and compressed air, which *didn't disappear after the skill was canceled*. So, upon losing its "container," the air got scattered into the surroundings, creating an explosion in the process.

It was much like a bursting balloon, only hundreds... or thousands... of times greater. The only thing separating it from a bomb was the fact that there were no life-threatening shrapnel, but the explosive pressure was more than enough to tear a living being apart.

Upon further thought, Ray realized that the result was nothing if not obvious.

Fortunately, Silver himself was designed to not get caught up in the explosion, so Ray and Nemesis were completely fine. Otherwise, he'd have gotten the death penalty.

Though impressive overall, being surrounded by falling ground and flesh was enough to make Ray and Nemesis hesitate about using this skill combo. After a bit of talk, they concluded that it was too indiscriminate and dangerous and chose to never use it again.

Funnily enough, they ended up having to do it a second time on the same day, and with far greater MP than during the experiment.

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Ray himself had had no idea just how powerful Wind Hoof would become when he gave it all the hundreds of thousands of MP from his greaves... however...

"Looks like it was enough to break through its barrier," Ray said as he looked at the RSK, lying on the ground, its insides exposed due to having lost its upper half.

The abomination wasn't the only thing that had been caught up in the explosion. The surrounding ground looked as though it had been turned upside down, making the area seem more like a "wasteland" than a "grassland."

The damage caused was far greater than Ray had expected, and if there had been any other people nearby, the results would've been nothing but tragic.

"...Yeah, this definitely wasn't a skill I could use when the Royal Guard were lying here." Ray worriedly looked around and saw Liliana and her knights, safe and sound.

"Right, then..." he said as he turned to the RSK again.

It wasn't over yet, as the monster still hadn't become particles of light. Ray didn't find that surprising, since he hadn't expected Wind Hoof's explosion to be enough.

"...Yeah, I figured as much," he muttered as he noticed that the RSK began gradually *regenerating*.

Just like with Gouz-Maise, his enemy from yesterday, the flesh expanded and rebuilt the parts of the body it had lost.

With the RSK being a creature that could spawn monsters, the presence of a regenerative ability was par for the course.

Thus, Ray made the move he had in mind.

"...Let's go," he said as he made Silver dash towards the abomination.

The RSK's regeneration speed increased exponentially in relation to the volume it regained, and soon enough, its offensive function was back up.

The cracks opened up again and began firing light projectiles towards Ray.

Their amount was significantly lower than before, but the reason for that was obvious. Not only had the explosion from Wind Hoof exterminated all the attacker minions it had had in its upper part, but the RSK was too preoccupied with regeneration to dedicate any energy to their creation.

"Break through... Silver!"

The Prism Steed ran on the air and gracefully avoided the light projectiles as he closed in on the RSK.

"You can make it!" Ray shouted.

The moment he was in range, Ray jumped off Silver's back and forced his left arm into the RSK's last wound. Though the meaty pressure wasn't pleasant, it wasn't strong enough to crush his limb.

"Gardranda!" he shouted, preparing his left bracer — the flame thrower — to fire.

"...Ha, now that's just pointless," said Franklin in a mocking voice that Ray was already familiar with, much to Ray's dismay. "Didn't I tell you that Purgatorial Flames and Hellish Miasma don't work?"

The jerk was nowhere in sight, but his voice resounded throughout the surroundings.

"That attack sure as hell surprised me, but it's not like you can do it again, right?"

"Yeah," Ray replied. "It drained all the MP I had in Gouz-Maise, so it's not an option anymore."

"Then you're out of moves, huh?" Franklin sneered.

"Nope," Ray grinned in response. "I can still burn this thing down."

"...Why, though?" Franklin said. "You should know by now that Purgatorial Flames don't work on him. I mean, you tried it yourself."

Franklin spoke nothing but the truth.

"But does it negate *regardless of where I fire*?" Ray asked.

"Ah..." The words made Franklin fall silent.

"Wouldn't the fire work if it came *from inside*?" Ray added.

Ray believed it was entirely possible that the negation effect was only present on the surface.

"Honestly, if it could really negate the fire no matter what, I don't think you'd have told me that," he went on. "I mean... you're a huge asshole."

That was Ray's primary reasoning. He had a feeling that Franklin wouldn't have said that if the RSK hadn't had some sort of weakness.

"That's pointle—" Franklin began.

"Is it? I'll see it for myself." With those words, Ray poured all his remaining MP into his Miasmaflame Bracers.

"Wai—!"

"Purgatorial Flames — full power!" Thus, demonic fire began rampaging within the RSK.

They filled its corpus, burst out of its many cracks, and even roared through the hole Ray forced his arm into. The RSK's body, attacker minions, central nerves, Ray's left arm — all of it got caught in the crimson blaze.

“Well, my ‘natural enemy...’ let’s test our endurance!” Ray shouted.

“■■■■■...!” The RSK’s mouthless body released a silent scream as it shook its large frame and swung its tentacles to try and throw Ray off of it.

The abnormality of the situation caused the RSK to break the rule of not attacking Ray by itself.

But Ray was able to stay on anyway by forcing Nemesis in her sword form into one of the RSK’s eyes and holding on to her. His back got hit by the tentacles, but he had enough endurance to bear it.

Ray’s arm burned and his torso got damaged, causing his HP to drop by the second. But he didn’t stop his flames, for he had already decided that he would continue firing until either he or the RSK died.

Right as his limited HP and MP was about to be depleted, for reasons not even he knew...

“GOUZ-MAISE!” Ray shouted the name of the grudge abomination that had turned into his boots, and despite him not intending it, Gouz-Maise *answered.*

Ray’s flames had turned the RSK into a gathering of pain and rage — negative emotions fit for Grudge Conversion.

Placed directly on this potent source, the boots were able to absorb the grudge with great efficiency, delivering great amounts of MP to Ray. He instantly used it to empower the flow of the fire and even heal himself.

The greater flames increased the RSK’s pain, which, in turn, got converted into MP. It was much like a perpetual motion engine.

However, nothing was perpetual, and something would eventually yield.

And, sure enough, after an amount of time that would have seemed long for some and short for others, something broke.

Surrounded by the crimson blaze, a silhouette crumbled and vanished.

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That night, the tians living in Gideon were overcome by fear.

Fiendish-looking monsters were unleashed upon the city, and its streets were ravaged by the battles between Masters.

Some shut themselves in their homes, some took shelter in designated emergency facilities, some just curled up and shook in back alleys, and some were trapped in the arena and shared their worries with others in that situation.

Likely for the purpose of fueling their fear, a live recording was being broadcast to them through several projections in the night sky. They displayed a madman in a lab coat, a large monster, and a mere three Paladins fighting those enemies. The madman claimed that if they didn't defeat the monster within the time limit, countless more beasts would be unleashed upon Gideon and reduce it to rubble.

Naturally, the people's fear escalated, and they began feeling much like criminals waiting to answer the gallows' call. However, despite the overwhelming despair, they still held on to a bit of hope.

After all, the three Paladins were still fighting the enormous abomination, and their struggle against the odds was more than enough for the people to not give in to despair.

Eventually, the monster and the young man — the sole Master among the three — were both engulfed in flames.

The fire he'd released burned not just the abomination, but himself, as well, and to add to that, the monstrosity's large tentacles were repeatedly attacking him. Despite it all, he didn't give up or show any signs of stopping.

For both those involved and those watching, time seemed to be distorted, feeling long for some and short for others.

However, such differences were inconsequential to the result — the crumbling of a *large silhouette*.

Its ten tentacles fell apart as the sphere-like gathering of flesh exposed its scorched insides and slowly began turning into particles of light. As they scattered and vanished into the wind, the shape of a young man stood up in the midst of it.

His own flames had carbonized his left hand, while the thrashing he'd received from the tentacles had taken its toll, and his equipment no longer held its original shape. And yet, his eyes were still shining with power.

In his right hand, he held a black greatsword which he used to support his body.

Then, he wrung out his remaining energy to raise his right arm up into the air.

As if to tell the scared citizens of Gideon that the fear was no more, or perhaps just to assert his victory, he raised his arm, making him look much like the many arena champions the inhabitants of the duel city were so familiar with.

A moment later, the city of Gideon was drowned in roaring cheers.

To be continued...

Afterword

Cat: “We won! Franklin’s part is over! Hello, this is the control AI you already know well, Cheshiiire!”

Xun: “Whoa noW, it ain’t over yEt. And hey, I’m the Master Jiangshi, XunYu.”

Cat: “Brother Bear cannot participate due to certain circumstancees.”

Xun: (Certain circumstances...?)

Cat: “We will start this afterword by informing you about something. The manga version of *Infinite Dendrogram,* drawn by the skillful Kami Imai, recently had its first volume released!”

Xun: “I bet thAt tons of novel rEaders are already readiNg it.”

Cat: “The first volume ends with chapter 5, the one that got lots of ironic ‘Is this the final chapter?’ comments on *Niconico Seiga.* Our battle had only just begun!”

Xun: “Stop adding uNtimely endings to sTuff.”

Cat: “If all went smoothly, then chapter 6, the continuation of the first manga volume, should already be up on Comic Fire! We will be very glad if you enjoy this story in both novel and manga form.”

Xun: “Well, with the adVertising done, let’s go bAck to talking about tHis volume.”

Cat: “Yes. Despite what I said at the beginning of the afterword, this incident isn’t over yet.”

Xun: “The latter haLf of the Franklin paRt will be in vOlume 5.”

Cat: “Yep. However, while the latter half was too large to fit into volume 4, it’s also too small to fit into a separate volume, so volume 5 will have new scenes that don’t exist in the webnovel.”

Xun: “We’ll leavE the explanation to the aUthor and his serious commEnt.”

Dear readers, thank you for the purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Instead of ending the ongoing incident with volume 4, I decided to make it continue into volume 5.

I figured that making the split and adding additional scenes was a better choice than cutting good scenes just so that I could cram it all into a single volume.

After all, Franklin’s part has numerous scenes and includes lots of characters, so I wanted the novels to use Taiki’s superb drawing ability to portray as many of those characters in as many scenes as possible.

However, this choice wouldn’t have been possible if the novel series had gotten canceled on volume 4.

Thanks to your support, dear readers, we have plans to continue the series further. *You* are the ones that allowed me to make this choice, and I simply can’t thank you enough for it.

That aside, I have something to say about this volume.

It portrays the battles between people who are “similar, but unlike.”

There are those who began playing *Dendro* for the sake of their creations: the manga artist, Marie, and the composer, Veldorbell.

There are those who are friends with Ray and are both indecisive in their own ways: Hugo and Rook.

Ray, who uses all he has to seize the possibilities, and Franklin, who has used everything he has to win.

It’s safe to say that this volume was all about such similar people fighting for what they couldn’t give up on.

Rather than the amount of powers or the knowledge needed to win, the results of their fights could have actually been decided by their mental strength.

After all, it was Ray’s unbreakable will that allowed him to defeat his natural enemy and pull victory from the fiery maw.

The only reason why Taiki's wonderful illustration displaying the final scene of the battle could go at the end of the volume was thanks to the split which, again, could only happen because of you — the readers.

I will continue to do my best to answer to your expectations.

Just as you've already been informed, the next volume will contain scenes that weren't in the original webnovel. Up until now, I've been doing primarily sorting and editing of parts too personal or verbose, so this would be my first major addition to the novel.

Little would make me happier than your excitement for the conclusion to this incident in volume 5.

Sakon Kaidou

Cat: "So there, please wait for volume 5."

Xun: "It's alrEady decided when it reLeases, though."

Cat: "...Ah! *Infinite Dendrogram* volume 5 is—!"

Xun: "Volume 5 is sEt to come out sOon! Look forwaRd to it!"

Cat: "I thought I'd get to say it this time! You thieving cat!"

Xun: "*You're* the caT here. By the waY, Cheshire."

Cat: "Mrrgh, I didn't get to announce it even once... Well, what is it?"

Xun: "Why didn't thE bear partiCipate in this afterWord?"

Cat: "He said he's on standby for volume 5."

Xun: "...AlreaDy?!"

Bonus Short Stories

A certain day of a certain month, a certain place in Tenchi

"Hmm... What should I do about this?"

That day, Marie was sitting at her table in her private quarters, very concerned about something.

She had yet to acquire Death Shadow, the Superior Job of the onmitsu grouping. She was still just a high-rank job, Shadow.

Marie currently lived in a ninja village and spent her days going through "training" quests. To get fully immersed into her role as Marie Adler, the protagonist of her work, she needed to acquire the necessary ninja-like skills.

The thing that had her concerned was a particular skill.

It wasn't any of the onmitsu grouping's job skills. What bothered her was the new skill she'd acquired on her Embryo, Arc-en-Ciel.

She murmured, "'Phantasmal Raingun — Arc-en-Ciel...' what it does is very clear, but..."

Arc-en-Ciel's ultimate skill was an enhancement of its basic ability — the creation and firing of bullet creatures. With it, her shots could become significantly more powerful.

That wasn't all. Marie could also draw the bullets using any of her paints to control the abilities of the output bullet creatures, which made it a highly versatile skill, albeit a bit costly.

"But... Hmm..."

The skill itself wasn't bad at all, but Marie was concerned that *it didn't suit Marie Adler*.

The Marie Adler that she'd portrayed in *Into the Shadow* was a so-called finesse-based professional killer who could match the abnormal killers with superpowers thanks to her wisdom and technique.

However, having a skill like Phantasmal Raingun in her arsenal brought her into the same realm as the abnormal killers. She'd already thought that the gun firing standard bullet creatures was a bit iffy, but she'd been able to convince herself that it was a replacement for the gun Marie used in *Into the Shadow.* But alas, she couldn't find any such excuses for the ultimate skill.

"I can see that it's strong, but I feel like using it will make the Marie within me less... clear."

Instead of using her role-playing tone, Marie spoke her worries as herself, Nagisa Ichimiya.

"I'd never have to worry about something like this if I roleplayed Daisy."

Daisy, AKA "Daisy Scarlet the Explosion Murder," was one of the characters in *Into the Shadow.* She was an abnormal killer that appeared early in the story and was basically a vampire that could transform into explosions instead of mist.

Though Marie Adler had defeated her, Daisy had come back to life due to her vampiric nature, only to die again. This had repeated a few times until, eventually, she'd become Marie's ally. After that, she had turned into somewhat of a joke character who almost always died to the new enemy they faced.

Despite that treatment, Daisy still had a lot of popularity, and even Nagisa herself was quite fond of her.

"If Daisy... Ah."

Upon remembering the character, Nagisa was hit with an idea and instantly began drawing using red and black paint.

A few minutes later, her work was done, and she had a picture of the same "Daisy Scarlet the Explosion Murder" she'd just been thinking about.

"...This is it!"

Upon looking at the result, Nagisa... Marie put up a bright smile, as though her worries had all but vanished.

And so, Marie had figured how to use her ultimate skill, Phantasmal Raingun. It would be a power that "fired the abnormal killers Marie had become allied with in *Into the Shadow,*" which covered both its function as a skill and her roleplaying needs.

A certain day of a certain month, Hugo Lesseps

“So this is the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*...”

That day marked Hugo Lesseps’s AKA Yuri Gautier’s first login to *Infinite Dendrogram*. She’d chosen the Dryfe Imperium as her starting point and appeared in the imperial capital, Vandelheim.

“Wow... The smells and atmosphere is just like in real life... Hm?”

Like many players, she started out overwhelmed by the game’s degree of reality, but then she noticed something off.

The point of view is a bit high... Oh.

Suddenly, it all came back to her.

She was no longer the junior high school girl known as “Yuri Gautier.” She’d become Hugo Lesseps, the man representing her ideal.

He was about 30cm taller than her, and the leg length that came with this height made it somewhat uncomfortable for her to walk.

Not only that, but...

“...They’re gone.”

She touched her chest, which held, quite obviously, a masculine set of pectoral muscles.

Yuri didn’t care about that all that much. She wasn’t exactly well-endowed, so the only real difference here was the softness or lack of it.

However, she didn’t know what to make of the area *below*.

“...It’s there.”

Though she didn’t touch it by hand, she could feel something between her legs whenever she tried to walk, and it certainly wasn’t a sensation she had in real life.

I’m not sure if this is how it actually is for men... but I feel it.

She could hardly believe that the game could actually make her — a girl — get to know the feeling of having male genitals. *Infinite Dendrogram’s* technology impressed her to the point of making chills go down her spine.

Yuri then remembered the words of the control AI that had guided her through the tutorial process.

“Keep in mind that picking the gender opposite of yours in reality can make you feel really uncomfortable.”

Yes, that’s what that “Duchess” control AI told me.

And Yuri had already come to know this discomfort very well.

“But I can’t let this stop me.”

She had something she wanted to do in this world, and for that, she could easily overcome this slight problem.

"Okay. I'll start with tone. I have to sound more like a chivalric knight."

After saying that, she took a moment to practice. In real life, she often pretended to be a theater actress, so she had a far easier time getting used to a change of tone than the change of body.

"This should be good enough. Anyway, I should go and meet up with her. If I recall correctly, I'm supposed to go to the capital's adventurers' guild," she spoke with a tone she considered knightly and chuckled a little bit. "Heh. I reckon my appearance will really surprise her."

Anticipating the other person's reaction, Yuri... Hugo made "his" way towards the place they were supposed to meet.

Those were her first steps as Hugo Lesseps.

Due to the other person also looking completely unlike herself in real life, they needed several hours to finally meet up, but that was a story for another time.

A certain day of a certain month, Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin

I felt like I was spending a lot of my recent time making plots to help the imperium annex the kingdom.

It was all because the previous war hadn't been enough to end it all.

We'd defeated most of their main forces, but Caldina's intervention had prevented us from finishing the job. Therefore, I was now making plots that would allow us to get it all done before Caldina could make their move.

"To do that... I should kill someone," I said.

The target I had in mind was Liliana Grandria.

She was a Paladin and the current vice commander — the de facto leader — of the Knights of the Royal Guard.

In terms of battle ability, she was nothing for us to fear. Sure, her father had been the previous Celestial Knight, and she probably had much in the ways of talent, but it was highly unlikely that she could become a threat by the time the next war began.

However, she was wildly popular.

Liliana's family had been close to the princesses since their parents' generation, and the kingdom's knights had unwavering trust in her. In addition to that, her bloodline had a little bit of something that could prove troublesome.

The biggest problem of all, though, was the fact that she was popular not just among tians, but Masters, as well.

In fact, the current no. 2 in the kingdom's clan rankings was the merger of both her and the princesses's fan clubs: the Altimia, Elizabeth, Theresia, and Liliana Union, AKA the "AETL Union."

As stupid as it sounded, without the kingdom's Superiors or Tsukuyo Fuso's Lunar Society taking part, these maniacs were the most powerful force on their side.

...Well, they'd also had duel rankers like Masked Riser the "Kamen Rider" and Bishmal the "Raging Blaze," but they were too few to be relevant.

"I should get rid of as many of their forces as I can," I decided.

The AETL Union had caused us to use more of our armies than necessary and slowed down our invasion. So, I'd chosen to get rid of their reason to fight.

Though some would turn vengeful and attack us with more ferocity, there would be just as many who'd just quit. After all, to about half of those there, Liliana was just "an NPC they liked."

"The most effective way to get rid of their battle potential would be killing the first princess, but that's not exactly something the imperator would allow..." I murmured.

And when the first princess's future was considered, the other two princesses were off-limits, too. Even in our plans for Gideon, we'd only keep it at kidnapping.

"Well, that plan is all the more reason to kill Liliana," I decided. "Make sure she doesn't get in the way and all."

I chose to start with the orthodox approach — poisoning. And if that didn't work, I'd have her get overwhelmed by the Demi-Dragon Worms hiding in the kingdom.

"I'm going to Gideon, anyway. Might as well pay a visit to the capital and set a trap for her."

After saying that, I put my plans in order, sealed Liliana's fate, and went to log out.

I had no means of knowing that this decision of mine would begin my unpleasant connection to a certain newbie.

To be continued in Episode One.

Chapter Semis: Brother Bear's Welcoming Party Preparations

2045, March 16th, 9:00 A.M.

That day, Shuichi Mukudori was sitting in his living room and talking with his little brother while watching the morning news on his wall-sized monitor.

"Oh, you're finally starting *Dendro*?" he asked.

"Yeah. I've finished moving, so no better time than now, I thought," his brother answered.

"Ha ha. That's great and all, but make sure not to get too addicted. You don't want to neglect the college you worked so hard to get into, right?"

"Well, yeah. I know that much."

"Let's meet up, all right? I'll prepare a welcome party."

"All right."

"It's decided, then. I'll wait in the Kingdom of Altar's capital."

"Kingd...? What?"

"Find me at the fountain in the central plaza."

Shuichi might or might not have realized that the country name he wasn't familiar with had confused his brother, but he just hung up on him regardless.

"So, now he'll buy the gear, then return home and go through the tutorial... That'll be about two hours here and six hours there... All right, then."

Shuichi stood up from his sofa and stretched his body.

He then looked towards the large monitor, which was now showing the entertainment news. The news anchor was talking about something over a video of a live performance of the worldwide rock star, Rachel Raymuse.

"...As busy as ever, I see."

Shuichi swung his hand and turned off the monitor using its sensor function.

"Well, guess I'll go and prepare," he said.

He left his living room and went to his bedroom, where he kept the hardware for *Infinite Dendrogram*.

◇◇◇

On an unrelated note, Shuichi Mukudori had an extremely well-featured body.

His height exceeded 180cm, and he'd kept an admirable balance even as he'd built up his muscles, making him look like a first-class martial artist. He was also paying daily visits to the gym in his apartment to keep himself in shape.

He was quite handsome, as well. So much that his face wouldn't be out of place in the acting industry.

Despite being such a fine figure of a man, however...

"HYAHAAH! The bear hungers! Time to forage for the party!"

...he was now speaking borderline nonsense while clad in a bear suit.

Not a single inch of his splendid body was in sight — even his visage was hidden by the face of the animal.

Shuichi had his reasons for looking like that.

He had to hide his avatar because it looked exactly the same as his real body.

It had turned out that way because of some trouble during his tutorial, and he'd been playing the game in such suits ever since he'd started.

Of course, even if it meant he had to hide his appearance, there was no need for him to talk in such a nonsensical manner. Thus, he used the weird tone and spoke with puns simply *because he wanted to*.

Indeed — in the game, Shuichi Mukudori was the bear-suit-clad Shu Starling.

"All right, so the time here is..."

In real life, it was a bit past nine in the morning, while here, it was a little before dawn. The marketplace was about to open, so he was just in time to do his so-called "foraging."

"Hell yeah! Gonna get these paws full of the stuff!"

◇

First, Shu went to the wholesale produce market.

"Let's start with the capital's favorite remberries. Gotta buy a load of those."

The remberries cultivated in the royal capital were popular in and out of the city. Their rich sweetness and pleasant sourness made them a highly sought-after product.

Shu became worried about a highly unlikely event.

"Hmm, I think I'd feel beary bad if he liked them a lot and wanted more of them, so... all right."

He let this worry guide him to a wholesaler...

"Excuse me, sir. I'd like to buy all the remberries you have today."

"ALL?!"

The seller seemed to be taken aback.

Thus, Shu ended up with an obscene amount of remberries.

Though they'd told him they couldn't sell all of them because they had to give them out to the shops, Shu was able to buy every single remberry that was meant to be sold that day.

After buying a number of other fruits and vegetables, Shu left the produce market with a satisfied smile on his face.

On an unrelated note, a certain bespectacled man that arrived there an hour later was heard panicking and saying, "Sold out?! What the hell do you mean?!"

◇

Then Shu went to a meat shop he was highly familiar with.

"Hey, my guy," he said. "I'm here to get these paws on some meats."

"Well, ain't that a voice I know. So today you're a bear, eh?"

"More or less every day now."

The meat shop dealt primarily in food items dropped from stock-farmed, edible monsters.

Strangely enough, the taste of these drops could differ by specimen, rather than just by monster. The ones looked after by diligent cattle farmers actually produced tastier, better-quality meat. And as always, quality had a direct link to price. Gourmet meat was a luxury, and it wasn't uncommon for a mere 100g to cost 10,000 lir.

Also, monster drops could increase in quantity if the one handling them had high Dismantling. Due to that, the owners of meat shops often raised the level of this skill, raising their own level and getting respectable muscles in the process.

The shopkeeper Shu was acquainted with was no exception. Even though he was fully-clothed, it was easy to tell he had a muscular build.

"Today, I'd like you to give me all the beary high-quality beast, avian, and dragon meat," Shu said. Just like with the remberries, Shu was requesting all the gourmet ingredients the man had for sale. However, the price was significantly greater than before.

"Whoa there, sonny," the man said in a worried manner. "I don't mind selling it all, but that'll cost ya 30,000,000 lir."

"The hungry bear cares not. Today, money is of no matter to me."

Shu didn't hesitate to do away with an amount of money equivalent to 300,000,000 yen.

Though he thought he was merely being considerate of his brother's welcome party, most would agree that he was buying far too much.

And so, after putting the various meats into his inventory, Shu left the meat shop.

◇

"Hm, hm-hmm. Where to next... Nh?"

Whilst whimsically walking to get the other ingredients, Shu noticed something strange.

A single ruined building was facing the street. It was surrounded by a fence, and a sign nearby warned against trespassing and said that the building would soon be demolished. Despite that, however, Shu could hear the laughter of children coming from inside.

Since a part of the fence was missing and because they seemed to be having lots of fun, he assumed that they'd sneaked in to play. However, the building was very aged, and even while standing outside, he could very clearly hear the building creak under their steps.

For now, he chose to merely warn them.

"That's beary dangerous! Play outside, you cubs!"

“Okaaay!”

“Kyaahhh!”

“Hiiide!”

“Meow!”

The children responded in various ways, but it was very clear they’d heard him.

Shu scratched his face, muttered, “I’ll check on them later,” and went shopping again.

◇

The third shop he went to dealt in fresh fish.

Though it was questionable whether it was really “fresh.” After all, the royal capital was a fair distance away from seas, lakes, or rivers, making it impossible for its inhabitants to fish locally. Most of the city’s water resources came from its plentiful underground water veins.

Despite what most would expect, however, the fish in the capital was edible. This was because it was brought here from the port city in the west using time-stopping inventories. The fish and other seafood was still as fresh as they come, so the distance from water sources was of no issue.

This applied to many other products, as well, which made such inventories a crucial part of the economy.

Anyway, Shu was now staring at a fish tank before the shop.

It was only there to showcase the goods, and the actual products sold would come from the shop’s inventories. This method helped chefs and the like get a good look at the fish they would get here.

“Hmmm...”

As serious as one could be about such things, Shu was thinking about what fish to get for the welcoming party. However, all the onlookers only saw a bear, poised to strike at a fish at any given moment.

Feeling great suspense, they actually expected him to throw his paw into the tank and grab one.

In the end, Shu bought lots of ten or so types of fish and several types of crustaceans. Goods imported from the seaside were costly, but again, he spared no expense.

"Will Mr. Bear chew on the salmon?" a young tian asked while pointing at Shu, all stocked up and ready to go.

"Shh! Don't look at it!" the mother scolded the child, concluding the bear man's peculiar shopping trip.

◇

"Vegetables, fruits, meat, seafood... Now, for wheat."

With that in mind, he arrived at the wholesale wheat store.

When it came to grain-based foods, he already had rice, since it was sold as a vegetable. However, the Kingdom of Altar's cuisine was primarily Western, so wheat was a necessity.

"Heyoo, give me your best wheat fur bread and pas...ta?"

Right upon entering, Shu realized that the situation in the store was abnormal.

He saw a masked man point his sword towards an old tian — most likely the owner of the place. There were three other masked men, and they, too, were using their weapons to threaten the employees, customers... and Shu.

"Don't you dare move, or I'll shove this right through your suit!" one of them shouted.

"Come on, you old fart! Bring inventories full of money and food *or else*!"

The situation and their words made it obvious that they were burglars.

"...Fur real? An incident? Now, of all times?" Beneath his suit, Shu made a troubled... no, an annoyed expression.

By wasting his time here, he could end up being late to meet up with his brother, and might not be able to gather enough ingredients.

With that in mind, he acted fast.

"Hey, you suit freak! I told you not to m—"

First, he made one burglar faint with a backhanded blow to the chin, making sure to not blow away half of his face.

Next, instead of going for the one closest to him, Shu went to the side of the one who turned towards him first. Lowering his power so that he wouldn't make the burglar's insides blow up, he launched a straight thrust into his abdomen.

Then, he faced the closest guy next to him and made him trip with a kick. It broke his legs, but — thanks to Shu holding back again — didn't tear them off.

Finally, he went for the one threatening the old man. Before he could turn around, Shu grabbed him into a sleeper hold, making sure not to snap his neck.

"And so, you won't have to bear these losers now," he told the old man.

All four of the burglars were on the ground in a span of only 30 seconds. Only the one with broken legs was conscious, and, naturally, he was screaming.

Anyway, with the little problem gone...

"Your best wheat fur bread and pasta, please."

...Shu returned to his original goal and asked the old man to sell him wheat.

The old man and the employees thanked him by selling the wheat for cheap.

After leaving the burglar handling to them, Shu, satisfied with his deal, went on his way in an exuberant mood.

◇

"I still have some alcohol among the drops I've gathered, and it's not like he'll drink anyway, so we don't really need it. What we *do* need, though, is..."

After getting the wheat, Shu thought he more or less had everything, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something.

He took a moment to think, humming in a strangely bear-like manner, until it finally came to him.

"We need some good ol' H2O."

He still hadn't gotten the water. With the capital's supply being primarily underground, it could vary heavily in terms of quality. The best water in the city was the one in the noble area — specifically, the royal palace.

"...Guess I'll pay a visit," he said.

And thus, for the sake of his brother's welcome party, Shu decided to sneak into the most important building in the country.

And so, in less than 20 minutes, he was in the deepest reaches of the royal palace.

This didn't mean that the security here was weak.

It was all due to an extremely powerful sneak effect on one of Shu's items.

However, the security around the water source was particularly strong. There were many magical items in place to prevent anyone from poisoning it, and not even Shu's equipment could let him pass by unnoticed.

That's why Shu didn't go to the source.

"Now, bear can I find...?"

He started walking around, looking for a person who could share some of the palace's water with him. After all, he was here to "get" some water, not "steal" it.

Of course, no one reasonable would give something to some bear suit that'd sneaked in here.

That was why he was looking for one of his acquaintances, when suddenly...

"Mister suit?"

...someone saw through his sneak ability and called out to him.

He turned around and saw a strange girl.

She wore fancy nightclothes, had fluffy hair, and looked about the age of an early student in elementary school. None of that was particularly strange. It was her posture that made her curious.

She was riding a strange animal — a hamster the size of a large dog. Though its closed eyes made it look asleep, it had no trouble walking over to Shu.

"Oh, hello, Theresia," Shu said.

He wasn't surprised by their appearance. Though the girl and the hamster weren't the people he was looking for, Shu still knew them well enough.

"Why are you here today?" asked Theresia.

"I came to get some water, but I'm having a beary hard time finding the grand chamberlain."

"Oh, he's talking about something with my sister... but if it's just water you want... very well, I'll try asking for some. Will one barrel be enough?"

"It should be."

"Very well. Leave it to me. They won't find it strange if I tell them it's for Dor," said Theresia as she petted the hamster's head.

The furry creature, its eyes still closed, replied by shaking its whiskers, as if to say, "I do not mind."

"Well thanks," said Shu. "I owe you one fur this."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Suddenly, he heard footsteps at another part of the hallway and instantly hid himself.

"...Hm?" he murmured.

For reasons unknown, Theresia and the hamster were hiding with him, too.

Soon enough, a maid passed by them, and when she was gone, he turned to the girl.

"Why did you hide with me?" he asked.

"We're taking a walk while I'm supposed to be in bed," she replied with a guilty expression.

"...You're not the healthiest girl, so just bear in mind not to leave the palace."

"I know. I'm about to go back, anyway. Oh, and I'll have Dor throw the barrel through the window, so make sure you catch it."

"Got it," Shu replied and turned away from her.

He knew where to find her room, so he made his way outside to wait under her window.

"Make sure they do not see you," said someone behind him in a refined, manly voice. "If you kick up a fuss, they will up the security and make it harder for us to go on walks."

Shu showed little care for who had said it. He responded by simply raising his right hand and continued walking.

Thus, he parted ways with the girl living at the palace and the mysterious creature at her side.

A short while later, Shu safely got his water barrel and left the royal palace without being discovered once.

◇

“Phew. Now I’m pawsitively ready.”

Fruit, vegetables, meat, seafood, grain, and water. Though it had taken him nearly four hours, Shu had collected all the foods he deemed necessary. They were all fit for a royal banquet, and their total cost exceeded 50,000,000 lir.

That amount of money was certainly heavy on the wallet, even for a veteran player and ranker like Shu. However, he found it a price worth paying. After all, the little brother he’d been impatiently waiting for would finally start *Infinite Dendrogram*, and if that wasn’t a reason to party hard — nothing was.

“...Ah, I almost forgot to reserve a restaurant. I hope Darshan’s place is open today.”

Due to him being a Master, the place run by the Star Chef — the cook grouping Superior Job for Western food — had irregular opening times. Nevertheless, it was immensely popular due to his food being significantly better than any of his competitors, and because he was open to using the ingredients brought by the customers.

“Ah, looks like he’s online,” Shu said after he opened his friends list. “Time fur a visit, then.”

And thus, he went straight to the Star Chef’s place.

On a related note, *Infinite Dendrogram* had no built-in long-distance chat function between friends. Such communication requires relevant spells or magic items meant for this purpose.

Many players complained that it was inconvenient and had asked the developers to implement it, but it doesn’t seem like they intended to do so anytime soon.

Due to this and many other cases where the developers didn’t seem to consider game-like convenience and logic, some players called them neglectful.

The restaurant Shu was aiming for was open, so he quickly made a reservation.

Upon accepting the many ingredients Shu prepared, the owner laughed and expressed his excitement over working on them.

And with that, the preparations were done.

◇

Now, to wait for Reiji to finally log in, Shu thought as he made his way towards the fountain they'd agreed to meet at.

"...Wait, I gave him the place and all, but how will we confirm that we're each other?"

Reiji and Shuichi didn't know each other's avatars, which would make it impossible for them to meet.

"Should I sing? He could tell it's me by my voice," he said.

Shu's idea was sub-optimal, since the sight of a singing bear might make his brother ignore him even if he did realize it was him.

"All right, let's start the vocal exercise... hm?"

Suddenly, Shu noticed something at the side of the street — the ruined building from before.

He'd purposely taken the path going through it just to see if something was wrong, and apparently, there was. Several children were looking at the building from outside the fence, and they all looked very worried.

"A grizzly situation, I assume?" Shu asked, surprising the children.

Some looked scared of him, while others seemed relieved.

"U-Umm..."

"Th-The house is gonna fall, and Thomas is stuck there."

Those words and the state of the building gave Shu all the information he needed.

The structure was even more tilted than before, and the creaking had turned even louder.

The building reached its limit while the children were playing inside, and while most of them escaped, one was still there.

"All right, then."

Shu acted fast.

He pulverized the fence, jumped inside the grounds and charged towards the building, ready to save the child. However, the boy he was going to save came out at about the same time, wailing loudly and holding a cat in his hands. He sped towards the exit, but before he could make it to safety, the building began to collapse.

Losing all that remained of its structural integrity, the roof fell towards the boy and was about to crush him when...

"*First form*."

"Ready."

...an artillery shell made of light completely blew it away.

The destruction was instant and absolute.

The roof was a roof no longer. It didn't even leave any fragments. It was reduced to such a state that its molecules could never bond again.

Indeed, it was *destroyed* so thoroughly that it was no longer able to have any integrity as physical material.

The shell that had made it happen had been fired by the cannon that'd suddenly appeared on Shu's left arm.

Much like some device made by the cat robot from that world-famous anime, the cannon replaced his left hand.

"...Safe," he said in satisfaction. "But man, nothing beats this one. At least *when it comes to pure firepower*, anyway."

It was the first form of Baldr, Shu's Embryo.

He'd realized that the boy wouldn't make it in time, so he saved him by destroying the roof. Of course, a normal artillery shell would've made the damage even worse. But Shu had known he'd save the boy if he'd combined his Baldr with a particular job skill.

"Good thing I didn't switch it off. My heart's beating so fast I can hardly bear it..."

At least, he'd *assumed* he'd be able to save the boy, and it had simply happened that he'd been successful.

"Eh? Huh...?"

"Meow...?

The boy and the cat in his hands looked like they had no idea what had just happened.

Covered in dust raised by the building's collapse, they both had expressions thick with astonishment.

The same applied to the worried children outside.

"Did you learn your lesson, cubs?" said Shu. "No more playing in places you're not allowed to."

After Shu scolded the boys and girls, they finally took in the situation and started crying out loud, either due to relief, fear, or both.

◇

After that predicament, Shu comforted the children while making his way towards the fountain where he was supposed to wait for his brother.

As he carried or let them climb on him, the children quickly stopped crying and began laughing cheerfully. They were on him even when he sat down at the edge of the fountain. The sight soon attracted even more children, and he was soon treated as a bear-shaped playground.

Shu let them do as they pleased and began making something.

In his hand, he held some wooden remains he'd took from the ruined building.

After linking a rod with a board, he wrote something on the latter.

"Welcome little brother"

Shu believed this would be more than enough for his brother to recognize him. He got the idea when he was looking at the sign telling people to keep away from the ruined building.

And thus Shu, swarmed by children, held the sign and waited for his little brother for about an hour.

End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 4
by Sakon Kaidou

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Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2017 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2018

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
Infinite Dendrogram
5. Those Who Bind the Possibilities

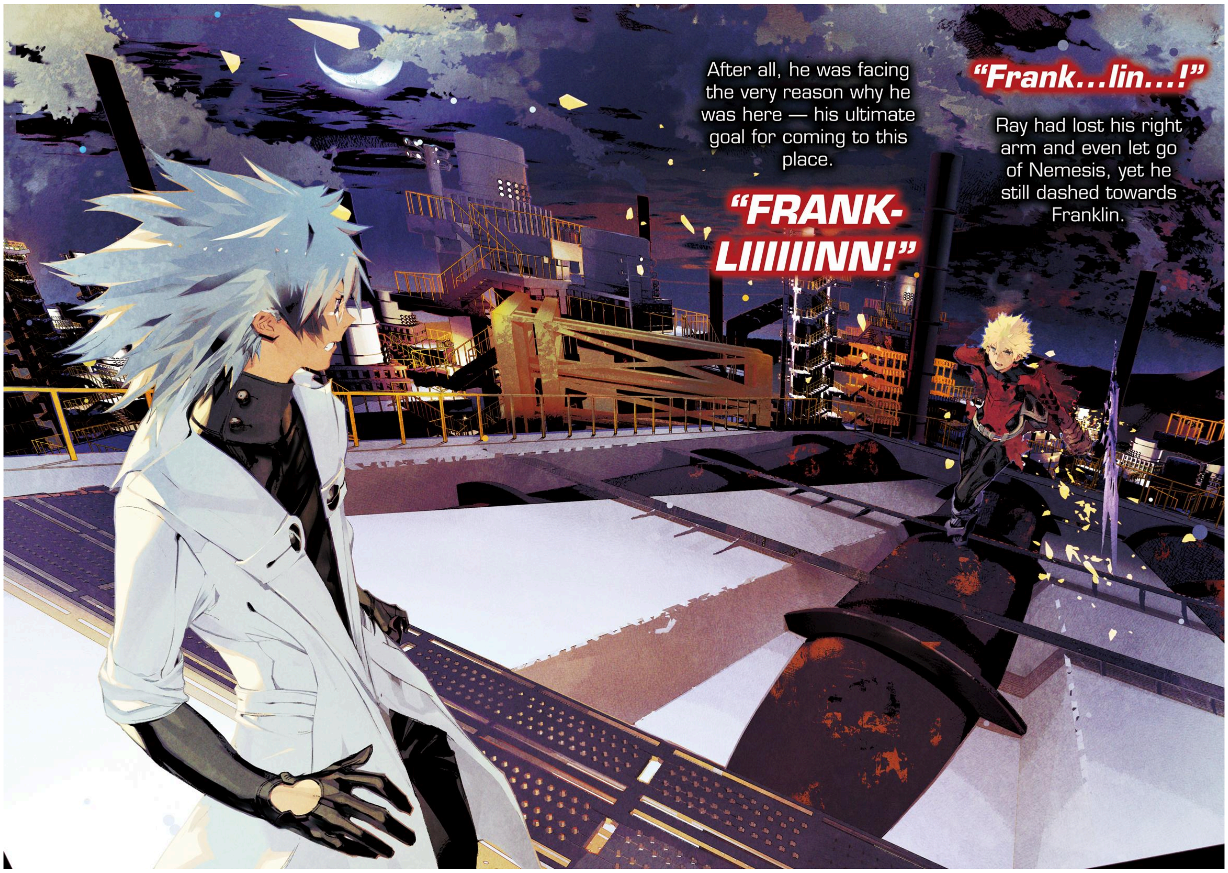
“Save your desperate counters fur a cooler sceeene, goofus!”
No one saw the moment that man appeared before Ray.

Infinite Dendrogram

5. Those Who Bind the Possibilities

Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: **Taiki**



"Frank...lin...!"

Ray had lost his right arm and even let go of Nemesis, yet he still dashed towards Franklin.

After all, he was facing the very reason why he was here — his ultimate goal for coming to this place.

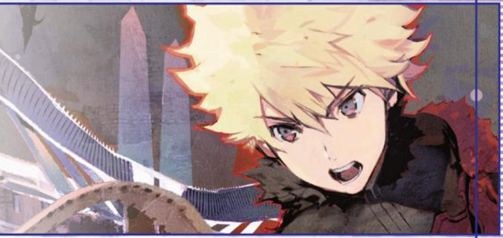
"FRANK-LIIIIIINN!"

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

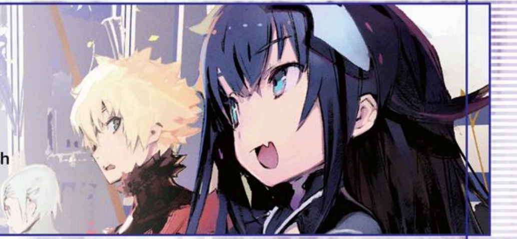
A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



Nemesis

Nemesis

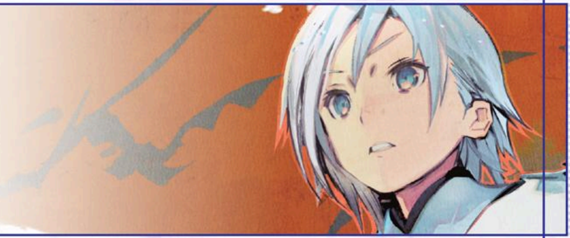
A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword or a halberd, and is equipped with skills such as Vengeance is Mine, which damages enemies for twice as much as they damage Ray.



Rook

Rook Holmes/Lucius Holmes

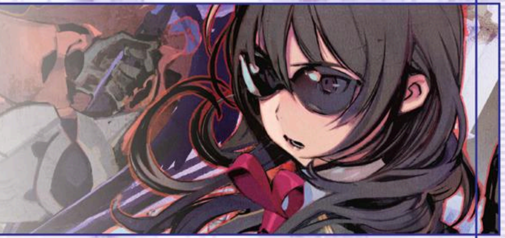
An astonishingly beautiful boy in Ray's party. His job is "Pimp" and he fights using his tamed monsters. His Embryo is the Type Guardian "Depraved Devil, Babylon."



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

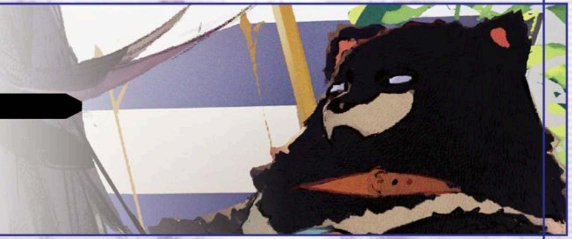
A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's brother and the one who invited him to the game. He wears a suit because, during character creaton, he accidentally made himself look just like he does in real life.



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Examination Chapter: ■■■ ■■■■■’s Analysis

Central arena, audience seating, **■■■ ■■■■■, ■■■■■■**

“Lad, did you see that?! That kid’s amazing!” the middle-aged tian man seated next to me cried.

“Yes, he truly is!” I enthused.

As I gave the appropriate response, I analyzed the broadcast. The moment it had appeared, I’d changed my thought process from personal to tactical. The Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, had started the broadcast in order to make the kingdom’s tians despair. However, the newbie young man called “Ray Starling” — a surname I knew very well, by the way — had turned it around and emerged victorious, bringing about the opposite of Franklin’s intended result.

If he’d committed this act of terrorism just to make the kingdom lose faith in its Masters, it was safe to say that he’d failed, but Franklin still had some pawns on the board. Needless to say, he wasn’t out of plans just yet.

I began forming an image of the overall situation, starting with the numbers of pawns on both sides of Franklin’s Game.

First, I went through Gideon’s forces.

No. 1 in the duel rankings, “Endless Chain,” was sealed. No. 4, “Black Raven,” and no. 8, “Vagrant Golden Sea,” were both bound by the barrier around the central arena.

No. 6, “Kamen Rider,” and no. 7, “Raging Blaze,” had been defeated in battle.

No. 2, “Monster Cat Mansion,” no. 3, “Guillotine,” and no. 5, “Bone-Eater” were not present. No. 9 and below weren’t all that relevant to the situation at hand.

The barrier’s disappearance would release nos. 1, 4, and 8, which could greatly influence the flow of the battle. In fact, no. 1 was capable of killing Franklin all by his lonesome.

The non-ranking Masters outside the arena were gradually decreasing in number, but many of those incapacitated at the western gate were only bound by the Frozen debuff, meaning that they could re-join if it was removed.

There was also the person who I assumed to be the Superior Killer. I'd lost all trace of them, but I was absolutely certain that it was due to stealth abilities rather than death.

The newbies that had left the arena had lost half of their number, with only about twelve still alive. However, Ray Starling — the newbie who'd achieved the most — was badly injured, making it questionable whether he could continue fighting.

Then there was Franklin's battle potential. The Masters he'd hired were gradually being purged, and the same applied to the monsters released unto the city. However, it was glaringly obvious that he had more in store, making it entirely possible that the numbers on his side could increase.

The three characters thought to be his heavy-hitters had been taken care of.

Veldorbell, the one who'd killed "Kamen Rider," had in turn been killed by the Superior Killer. Hugo Lesseps, the one who'd sealed "Raging Blaze" and many other Masters, had been captured by the newbie called "Rook." And the Ray Starling Killer, the monster that had greatly damaged the Royal Guard, had, ironically, been killed by Ray Starling.

Though the number of pawns on the board clearly wasn't all that great, all the ones sealed within the barrier and the unknown monsters Franklin still had in store made it hard to predict which side would win. And I wasn't even including the pawns that could destroy the board itself.

By that, I meant the joker Franklin had placed beneath this arena and the three abnormally powerful individuals sealed in here — myself included.

I looked over the stage, eyeing the opposite side of the arena. By straining my eyes a bit, I could see a woman with a porcupine on her knees. Her eyes were directed at the broadcast, and I couldn't tell whether she was amused or bored.

Suddenly she shifted her gaze towards me, causing our eyes to meet. Though her expression was devoid of any killing intent, I felt as if it came with the question, "You wanna go?"

If I responded to the challenge and fought her, we would bring about far more death and destruction than all the battles so far *combined.*

Right now, I had no intention of becoming the cause of such a calamity, so I simply shook my head. With that, she seemed to lose all interest in me and returned her gaze back to the broadcast.

This is the first time we've met, but so far, she gives me the impression of a wild beast, I thought.

Anyway, with that curious exchange, it became obvious that she wouldn't make a move unless provoked.

Besides the two of us, there was one other abnormally powerful individual here. He would make his move as soon as whatever was holding him back was gone, meaning that the climax of this event was near.

I can't wait until he enters the scene, I thought. *He's probably even stronger than he was the last time we fought.*

What was about to happen would be far more intense than tonight's Clash of the Superiors or Franklin's Game.

"It's your turn now... Shu," I murmured.

Those words escaped my mouth, confusing the tian man next to me. I lied my way out and began waiting for the time to come.

Chapter One: Plan C

Duel city Gideon

Gideon was roaring with cries of joy — cheers over Ray and the Royal Guard's victory.

With the defeat of the RSK, the remote controlling the monster-releasing devices had been destroyed as well. Even after the time limit had passed, there was no sign of any monsters being released in Gideon. Thus, the city's people became overwhelmed with joy and praised the victors.

The traitors working for Franklin, on the other hand, either became upset by the failure or scorned Franklin for his mess-up.

Though the reactions were mostly split between those two, there were a few exceptions. One of them was Hugo. Being one of Franklin's people, he was aware of Franklin's plans and knew what the man would do next. That perspective also applied to a few of the veterans fighting or merely observing the situation.

They knew that *it wasn't over yet*.

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Jeand Grasslands

Using optical means to hide himself, Franklin observed what was happening in the Jeand Grasslands.

"Well... damn. Seriously," he muttered while looking down at the place where the RSK had vanished. His tone contained suppressed rage, irritation, and a hint of self-derision.

Tonight, he'd started the plan he'd formed as a member of Dryfe Imperium's prime minister faction. At the same time, though, he'd challenged Ray Starling to a revenge match.

Franklin loathed defeat more than anything else, and he wouldn't find peace until he made anyone who won against him experience an even greater loss. That was how he'd broken the spirit of the Master who'd killed him, and that was exactly how he'd planned to get back at Ray for ruining his plan and indirectly defeating him.

He'd intended to have the fine-tuned monster defeat this newbie and make him aware of his powerlessness when all the monsters ravaged Gideon. However, the actual result of the revenge match had been nothing like that.

The RSK, the 100,000,000 lir Pure-Dragon-class monster he'd designed specifically to kill Ray Starling, was turning into particles of light.

Franklin had *lost to him again*.

It was an unexpected result, but he could've predicted it if he'd considered several factors.

Franklin began thinking what he had to do in order to win against Ray Starling with the handicap he'd set for himself. That was about the only thing on his mind while looking at the place where the RSK had vanished.

Though he ruined my plan and defeated me, he's still a newbie, he had thought yesterday. *Going all-out on him would be immature. Not to mention that it's a waste of resources. Then there's the fact that he helped out one of my people, so... All right, I'll handle him with a single Pure-Dragon-class monster.*

Franklin slowly shook his head and sighed. "I was such an idiot for thinking that yesterday," he said in a voice thick with anger and self-derision. He regretted his ever choosing to set a handicap, and tried to think of what he should've done instead, but in the end, he believed the result would've been the same regardless of what he did. That was because his opponent was Ray Starling.

This was the person who'd defeated a Demi-Dragon Worm — a match for a high-rank job — while being level 0.

Then, a few days later, he'd faced and defeated the UBM known as "Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda."

On the day that followed, he'd defeated the head of the infamous Gouz-Maise Gang and felled the UBM born out of the group's grudge: Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

And just now, he'd emerged victorious against his natural enemy, the RSK.

The newbie had already brought about a number of miracles, and Franklin had a hunch that he could do it again. The memory of that hunch mixed with the reality of his defeat made his thoughts go into disarray.

I don't want to lose a single time, yet I've lost twice now. It happened even with my countermeasures in place. I can't stomach this. I won't allow it.

Gradually, his verbal thoughts became emotions. A staggering lack of words overwhelmed his head before gathering and forming a single sentence.

"I'll go all out... and *kill him*."

At that moment, Franklin, the Superior from Dryfe Imperium, reached a certain conclusion. His greatest enemy wasn't the imperator faction's King of Beasts, the field marshall faction's Hell General, any of the four Superiors from the kingdom or any of the nine Superiors from Caldina's pride and joy that was Sefirot.

It was *him*.

The newbie known as Ray Starling was Franklin's smallest, yet greatest, nemesis. Thus, he decided to defeat him using all he had.

Next time, I'll grind him into dust using my anti-Superior monster: Mechanic God Dylan, he thought furiously.

However, that was something to do another time. MGD still wasn't complete, and Franklin had other priorities. His revenge match against Ray Starling was purely a personal thing. He still had a role to fulfill as a Superior sponsored by the prime minister.

With that in mind, he regained his composure and sprung into action, starting with...

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By the skin of his teeth, Ray had defeated the RSK and announced his victory to the people of Gideon.

Following that moment, he reached his limit, lost consciousness, and fell flat on his back.

"Ray!" Nemesis shouted his name as she returned to her human form and supported his body. Liliana, Sir Lindos, and several other Paladins of the Royal Guard gathered in Ray's vicinity.

"Ray, are you all right?! Force Heal!" shouted Liliana as she cast a healing spell.

“Those with spare MP, you take turns healing him and the incapacitated knights!” Lindos gave his orders. “Franklin is hiding right now, so the rest of you, search for him and Her Highness Elizabeth! Don’t let that man escape!”

“Understood!” the knights replied in unison before scattering.

A small number of them stayed with Ray. One was Liliana, who healed him with a pained expression on her face.

“We can restore his health, but...” she said while looking at Ray’s left arm. It was Burned so badly that the debuff merely upgraded to Charred. Even high-rank healing magic would have a hard time with such grave injury-based debuffs. Defeating the natural enemy of all Paladins had caused him to pay a heavy price.

Thankfully, Ray was a Master and thus could be completely restored by simply getting the death penalty and respawning once the time had passed. Whether he’d be willing to take this course of action, however, was a different matter entirely.

“For now, just keep him alive, please,” said Nemesis. “Ray doesn’t want to make his exit just yet.”

“I understand,” replied Liliana as she and the other knights healed Ray.

A moment later, the sound of clapping reached their ears. Surprised, they looked for the source and found it in the hologram projected into the sky.

Though they were unaware of this, it was displaying the exact same thing as the ones projected all across town. Right now it showed Franklin, smiling so widely it seemed unnatural.

“Did you see that, dear audience?” he asked. “The monster I’ve created has been destroyed. How sad. Truly a pity. Even so, I believe the Paladins who pulled it off deserve a round of applause. So here, clapclapclapclap.”

Clapping was exactly what he did. However, not a single soul joined him in that. In fact, the viewers who had been cheering just a few moments ago had turned silent upon seeing him.

“So yeah,” he continued. “Congratulations. 251 seconds have passed since the time limit and uh, it’s pretty clear that the remote is destroyed. The monsters don’t seem to have been released, after all.”

Franklin placed his hand on his forehead and shook his head in a disappointed manner. Then he reached into his pocket with a blank expression...

“Lo, this right here is a spare!”

He pulled out a remote, just like the one consumed by the RSK.

“You wretch!” shouted Nemesis, the anger in her tone all too palpable.

“Hahahahahah! The folk on the scene all look like, ‘What was the point of the last battle?’ I’m guessing the rest of the audience feels the exact same way.” Ignoring Nemesis’s words, Franklin continued speaking in a smug manner. “The battle up until now was just a sideshow — a revenge match. Come on, now. Stuff breaks, you know? Making spares is the obvious thing to do, don’t you think?”

A grin formed on his face yet again.

“By the way, this one works without a timer, so... I’ll just press it. Beepbeepbeepbeep.” With that, he nonchalantly activated the devices, releasing the 500 monsters in Gideon.

“Franklin!” Nemesis roared in anger, but again, he paid no heed.

“Hahahahahah! You were a pretty great sideshow. Sure, I didn’t like the result all too much, but seeing you now makes it kinda worth it. If only Ray was awake, too. I’d love to see his reaction.” Franklin laughed mockingly.

Liliana glared at him, told her subordinates to continue healing Ray, and stood up.

“Well, hi there, your excellency miss vice commander,” Franklin said cheerfully. “You’re gonna go help the citizens? Or are planning to defeat me? You think you can do that when you’re hurt all over? That’s some impressive perseverance... Anyway, I’m not having that. Call — DGP, KOS.” Franklin raised the Jewel on his right hand and summoned two monsters, both of which appeared right next to Nemesis.

One of them was Dino-Earth Giga Phalanx: a pachycephalosaurus-like dinosaur emitting a red aura.

The other was a King-Size Oxygen Slime: a blue Slime just like the ones he’d released in the arena, only several times bigger.

“Th-They’re...” Nemesis muttered as her intuition told her something. The two monsters before her were far stronger than the RSK, the creature they’d just worked so hard to defeat. In fact, they were actually more menacing than Gouz-Maise, their foe from yesterday.

“What? You find it strange?” asked Franklin. “I have the Superior Job of Giga Professor, and I am the owner of a Superior Embryo. You didn’t actually believe that the RSK was the only monster I had *or* that it was the strongest, right? In fact, out of all my special creations, he was among the weaker ones. While he was Pure-Dragon-tier, these are a match for Masters with battle-oriented Superior Jobs and Legendary-tier UBMs."

Nemesis and the Royal Guard were at a loss for words. Franklin continued.

"Surely you saw this coming, right? The only reason I used the RSK was because Ray had been able to kill a Demi-Dragon Worm, and going a step up in terms of tier seemed like the reasonable thing to do. I spent the appropriate amount of money to make sure everything was accounted for and intended to thoroughly break his spirit. But the result... well, I lost again." He heaved a long sigh as his smile faded. "Ray won against me two times out of two. I swear that I'll get back at him for this humiliation."

Nemesis stayed mute. She realized that, with the RSK, Franklin had been partially playing around. Though everyone had believed him to be immature for singling out a newbie, he'd still been somewhat considerate. However, now that he'd lost two times, Franklin had no such sentiments left.

A Superior — one of the few strongest players — now saw Ray as an enemy.

"Still, I have no intention to fail tonight's plan," he said. "Anyway, let's see how the city's doing. The monsters there are weaker than these babies, but I did throw in a few troublesome ones and... Hm...?"

After looking in the city's direction, Franklin tilted his head in a puzzled manner.

Nemesis could easily tell what had him so confused.

Gideon is too quiet.

For a city being ravaged by 500 monsters, it was far too silent.

By straining their ears, they could hear some sounds of battle, but they were strangely infrequent.

"...Did it only release a part of them?" Franklin pressed the button again, but Gideon still remained the same. "The remote is functioning properly. That means the problem is on the other en..."

Suddenly, he remembered something.

Tonight, he'd encountered a certain person who could easily take care of the many devices hidden in the city. It was a person clad in a black mist which made it hard to tell whether it was a he or a she.

The person's name was...

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A certain place in duel city Gideon

"Oh, I'm so glad I made it," a certain person muttered while looking up at the projection above.

Her name was Marie Adler. She was sitting at the edge of an alley to take a breather.

Right next to her, there was a bag filled to the brim with devices with Jewels fixed inside of them.

Each and every one of them were broken.

They were the monster-releasing devices Franklin had placed all over the city.

After fighting the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell, Marie had run around the city collecting them. Being the crux of the plan, these devices had had to be hidden until it was time. Because of that, in addition to their long-distance monster-releasing function, Franklin had also equipped them with a high-quality Conceal ability. That was the reason why they had been able to remain in the city for a few days without anyone noticing. However...

"Sadly for him, I happen to be as good at finding as I am at hiding," she said.

Being a Death Shadow — a Superior Job from the onmitsu grouping — Marie excelled at Conceal. She could not only masterfully hide herself, but discover those in hiding as well.

Marie's Conceal Perception skill was maxed out. It was what had allowed her to see through the Conceal on Night Lounge, the monster Franklin had used to escape.

During her search, however, she'd noticed the many Concealed monster-releasing devices littered across the city. Thus, after her fight, she'd taken it upon herself to gather and break as many of them as possible.

In the end, she'd taken care of 403 devices — more than 80% of the total.

Considering that a number had already released themselves ahead of time, it was hard to imagine that there were many left.

This result certainly wasn't *all* thanks to her. The Paladins' battle against the RSK had bought her time to minimize the harm.

This also marked a turning point in the situation: the Masters high-rank or above were now capable of leaving the arena. The only thing that had been holding them back was the potential of releasing monsters upon attacking the barrier. With that gone, they were now free to break it and retaliate against Franklin.

His plan had completely collapsed.

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However, some veterans were more than aware of just how abnormal Superiors could get.

They knew just how tenacious and meticulous Franklin was.

Thus, they were absolutely certain of one thing:

It's not over yet.

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Duel city Gideon, not far from the western gate

"...Oh, so *that's* what's happening here. Hahah. Now ain't that funny. You all just keep ruining my plans. How... disheartening."

As he listened to Franklin, Hugo became painfully aware that the plan had failed.

"...So it's over," he muttered to himself.

Hugo was currently sitting on the ground, virtually unable to move. Rook and the others had bound him when he'd become Charmed. The debuff had canceled Cyco's merging with the Magingear, and she was now at his side, Charmed and unable to do anything. As long as she was in that state, Hugo had no hope of breaking out of this situation.

Looking away from the broadcast, he examined the situation around him.

He was no longer in the area right before the western gate.

Rook and the three girls with him had all moved to a place where they could see Franklin's broadcast, and they'd taken Hugo with them. By Rook's decision, he hadn't been given the death penalty yet.

"Ray defeated that monster," said Rook. "The devices, too, were taken care of by... someone.”

Though he didn’t say so, Rook was completely certain that the culprit was Marie. Hugo, on the other hand, was completely unaware of her existence, so all he took from this was the reality of the plot’s failure.

“It appears so,” Hugo said. “Heh, Plans A and B have both failed... The plot is as good as over.”

I guess this will mean an all-out war between the kingdom and the imperium, he thought sadly.

“So I failed to prevent the calamity and ended up simply supporting the tragedy,” he muttered in self-derision. “If I’d known it would go down like this, I would’ve had ‘him’ reconsider, and... What?”

Hugo noticed that Rook was looking between him and Franklin’s projection with a puzzled expression on his face.

“You just mentioned ‘Plans A and B,’” Rook said. “Can I have their details? They’ve already failed, right?”

“...Very well.” After a moment of hesitation, Hugo began his explanation, which sounded somewhat like a sinner’s confession. “For Plan A, we sealed the Masters that came to see The Clash of the Superiors in the central arena and kidnapped the princess. Then we threatened to release the monsters to force them to stay put inside. The low-level Masters that could leave the barrier and those that weren’t inside from the start were then handled by player killers, meaning me and Veldorbell... he’s a master with a Superior Job in our clan. Our leader was then meant to escape from Gideon with the princess, which would make the kingdom’s tians lose faith in the kingdom’s Masters. And that was pretty much the whole plan.”

“...Not exactly thorough, if you ask me,” said Rook.

“Indeed.”

“The part about keeping the Masters in by making it so that damage to the barrier releases monsters is a huge flaw. After all, as proven by us, low-levels can pass freely.”

“That was part of the plan,” Hugo said. “Apparently, it was necessary that we fight the kingdom’s Masters and defeat them in a one-sided battle. Low-levels are the most suitable for this purpose.”

It wouldn’t be enough for everything to end when the Masters were sealed and rendered incapable of doing anything. To break the kingdom’s spirit, it would have been necessary for the imperium’s forces to gain a flawless victory against the kingdom's Masters. Thus, it had been optimal for them to be as weak as possible, and that limitation on the barrier had been perfect for this. In the end, however, Plan A had completely failed because of anomalies such as Ray and Rook.

"The way you handled the Masters that weren't inside the barrier was very sloppy, too," said Rook. "The plan would've completely failed if a Superior with no interest in the fight had just hung around town, right?"

"The possibility was there, yes," replied Hugo. "But as you're aware, that didn't actually happen. Not to mention that we had Cyco — the bane of many Masters here — and the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell."

Franklin had displayed a lot of cunning by positioning Veldorbell in Gideon days before the plan had begun. He'd had him act as nothing but a Master street performing in the central plaza, and soon enough, most of the people in town had become familiar with him and his band. Even the fact that he had his Legion Embryo out all the time had been taken for granted.

When the plan began tonight, many of the kingdom's Masters hadn't recognized him as an enemy, giving him a perfect opportunity for surprise attacks.

Though his stats were significantly lower than those of battle jobs, the bonuses from his Superior Job skills greatly empowered the attacks of his Bremen. And since they all moved at sonic speed, only AGI-focused Superior Jobs could ever hope to evade them.

The Masters he'd defeated had been far more numerous than those Frozen by Hugo, and most of them had been reduced to dust before even getting the chance to realize what had happened to them.

If the Superior Killer hadn't been an AGI-based Superior Job with the Danger Perception skill, there was a high chance that she would've died from his first attack.

"So," said Rook, "I assume Plan B was what you had in store in case the Masters in the barrier turned impatient and just broke out, or if someone made it through the obstacles and got to Franklin — which is what's happened now."

"Yes." Hugo nodded. "Plan B was basically the release of all the monsters regardless of the remaining time. The ensuing chaos have would allowed our leader to escape with the princess. This was also what would've happened if 'he' had been caught off guard and been given the death penalty."

Franklin's claim that it all would've ended if he died was nothing but a lie. It would've actually acted as the trigger to release the monsters, which was a testament to his meticulousness and troublesome nature.

"Regardless of what transpired..." Hugo said before cutting his words short. He couldn't bring himself to add that "...the leader had no scenario in which he didn't release the monsters."

However, Rook was practically able to read minds, so he could infer Hugo's words even if he stayed silent.

"If he wanted to break the country's spirit, he could've done something far more effective than merely kidnapping the princess," Rook commented.

"You're probably right," said Hugo. "However, 'he' promised me that he designed the monsters to only attack Masters. He wanted to limit tian casualties, too."

"...Oh, I see how it is," Rook responded with a short sigh.

"What do you mean?" Hugo asked, thoroughly puzzled.

"I've been wondering about this, but you saying 'he wanted to limit tian casualties' makes it all clear."

"Makes *what* clear?" Hugo couldn't understand what Rook was wondering about and what kind of answer he'd found.

In fact, Hugo was actually the *only one* who couldn't make sense of this. Basically...

"I now understand why you're so blind when it comes to Franklin. You actually believe that he'd never massacre tians, don't you?"

...it was a question regarding Hugo's perception.

Before, during, and even after the plan, Hugo had continued to believe in Franklin, and that was exactly what Rook was curious about.

"You... y-you think I'm blind?" asked Hugo.

"Yes," answered Rook. "You probably don't think that, but to my eyes, that man's a person who can easily start a massacre."

"He'd never. He's like me! He also understands that tians aren't just NPCs, but entities close to living beings... no, actual living beings! He'd never do something that vile!"

"So what if he *does* understand that? Does that get in the way of him starting a massacre?" Rook demanded.

Being told that Franklin was the type of person to commit such atrocities wasn’t something Hugo could stomach. “He’d never do that! I... I’ve known him for a long time! Don’t act like you understand him better than me!”

His anger made apparent, Hugo shouted at Rook, who replied with a cold gaze and his own words.

“That’s true. I only know Franklin through word of mouth and this incident. I’ve never even talked to him directly. Even so, I can assert that my assumption is correct.”

“Why?!”

“It’s *because* I don’t know him. By simply lining up what he’s done so far, it’s pretty easy to predict that he’s prepared something even more sinister. Anyone would assume that much. You’re probably the only one who doesn’t.”

“Gh...!” Hugo gasped in response.

Rook’s conclusion was based in nothing but reality.

Franklin had participated in the war. He had killed many soldiers by feeding them to his monsters, and had even killed the king of this country that way. And tonight, he’d kidnapped the princess and tried to destroy the city in order to make the kingdom’s Masters look bad. It was only natural to assume that a person like that would do something even more atrocious, and Hugo was alone in not thinking so.

“You say you’ve ‘known him for a long time,’ huh?” Rook continued. “I’m sure you have. It’s why you don’t see him as he is right now. You’re observing him through a filter, much like the mother of a criminal. ‘My boy would never do such a thing,’ and all that.”

“Gh...!” If he wasn’t bound, Hugo would’ve most likely tried to punch him. Unable to do so, however, he simply continued sitting as Rook stared at him with the coldest eyes.

That was when Babi talked to Rook through telepathy. “You’re very harsh on him, Rook.”

That was a very natural comment to make. After all, the boy known as Rook was generally very courteous and could get along with just about everyone, so it was the first time Babi had ever seen him be so cold and judgmental towards someone.

“I’m only this candid with those I can’t bear to watch,” he thought in response.

To Rook, Hugo was the opposite of Ray, the person he wanted to observe as thoroughly as possible. His standards regarding this were extremely vague. However, the fact remained that watching Hugo filled him with a strong desire to make sure he didn't continue as he was, so he pointed out his mistakes in a really harsh manner.

"You know what, since you believe in Franklin so much... let me give you a simple prediction," Rook said.

"A prediction?"

"Franklin is about to say something vile," Rook said with certainty in his voice as he looked at the broadcast.

A moment later, Franklin — who'd seemingly been despairing over Plan B's failure — suddenly raised his head. On his face, there was a full smile.

"Oh man, this is annoying. I can't believe both Plan A and B have failed... The big and scary meatheads are probably gonna leave the arena soon, so... I guess I'll have to start on Plan C."

"...Huh?" Hugo voiced his puzzlement. That was about the only thing he could do upon hearing Franklin's words.

All the Masters who'd participated in Franklin's plot were just as confused as him. After all, none of them had been told about the existence of a "Plan C."

The only one who had known its contents was Franklin.

"Plan C for 'Crisis...' Total annihilation of Gideon by *56,826 monsters*."

And its contents were, as Rook had predicted, absolutely vile.

Chapter Two: Those Who Bind the Possibilities

Jeand Grasslands

Franklin's words made the surrounding air freeze.

Nemesis, Liliana, Sir Lindos, and the other Royal Guard members failed to fully understand what Franklin had just said.

"F-Five... eh?"

"Wasn't it 500...?"

"56,826 monsters? Hmph. Isn't that a bit too large a number to work as a bluff?" Nemesis asked, the worry in her voice all too apparent. She knew exactly what he was saying, but it was clear that she simply couldn't believe that he was capable of that. "You planned to release just 500 into the city. Do you really expect us to believe you can increase that number a hundredfold?"

Nemesis wanted to think he was lying, and most of those in and outside the city likely shared her sentiment.

In response, Franklin simply nodded and widened his smile. "It's just that I couldn't make more than 500 monsters with the *useless* 'attacks only Masters and buildings' trait. They cost me quite a lot, though."

In other words, he had been able to prepare far more monsters that targeted all creatures, and that number was above 50,000. The 500 monsters in the devices in Gideon had only been made out of consideration for one of his own: Hugo.

"But now that plan A and B are bust, I can't allow myself to care about appearances," he continued.

That word made Nemesis realize something. "Plan...!"

It was clear what she meant.

Plans A, B, and C — the more Franklin failed, the longer the kingdom held against his schemes, the more intense and destructive the plans became.

Franklin had intended to end it with plans A and B. As he always said, he'd had no intention of losing. However, he had devised plans just in case he was defeated, and he'd done it all for a single purpose.

"Oh man, what a shaaame," Franklin mocked. "*It never would've come to this if you'd all just given up.*"

All to break the country's spirit.

All to make its people painfully aware that their fruitless struggle would only increase the casualties.

That was why he'd gone out of his way to create other plans in case his earlier ones failed.

"Find Franklin! Put the wretch to death before he can summon the monsters from his Jewel!" Sir Lindos roared, causing the Royal Guard to begin desperately searching.

Defeating Franklin before he summoned his monsters would mark the end of the crisis. The fact that the two monsters from before had appeared right next to them must have made Liliana assume that Franklin was nearby.

However...

"Heh heh heh. 'From his Jewel'? Come on now, if I got them on the board by Calling each one separately, morning would come before I could even get to 10,000." Franklin formed an indomitable smile and snapped his fingers. "Optic Camouflage — cancel."

A moment later, the world was shaved off, much like the scales on a fish. An area of the nightly darkness crumbled, revealing whatever was hiding there.

It was an object so large that it could make people forget the fact that it was ever hidden. Its silhouette was reminiscent of a mix of a box, a dragon, and a spider. Countless smokestacks were extending out of a cube that had sides reaching a length of a kilometel.

The inorganic cube was fixed with a large, elaborate head of a dragon. It also had eight arachnid legs extending to its sides. It was abnormal in terms of both size and design.

Everyone besides Franklin was immediately puzzled as to why they'd failed to notice an existence *this* unnatural. Franklin stood at the top of the abnormal structure and introduced it.

"First time seeing this? Well, you'd better remember it, since this is my Superior Embryo. Type Plant Fortress — Magic Beast Factory,

Pandemonium.”

“Superior Embryo” was a term used in reference to the Embryos that had evolved to the seventh form, the apex of Embryos.

Gideon’s inhabitants were highly familiar with the term thanks to their champion Figaro, the Over Gladiator. However, before the overwhelming abnormality of Franklin’s Pandemonium, that familiarity did little to help their state of mind. It was simply far too unlike the Superior Embryos Figaro and Xunyu had used in their match.

“This bad boy wasn’t evolved during the war, but yeah, this is my Superior Embryo,” Franklin said gleefully. “His unique abilities are monster production, as I’m sure you’re all aware, and monster transportation.”

With that, the large, mystical fortress opened its mouth. Within it, there were countless dim lights. They were eyes — the sinister gazes of the numerous monsters about to be unleashed.

“All right, let’s start with 5,000 of my Suicide Series,” Franklin said in a casual tone, causing a slope to go down from the dragon’s mouth.

5,000 monsters grouped up and began marching, all for the purpose of annihilating Gideon.

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Superior Embryos were the apotheosis of Embryos.

Though that was true for all of them, the path they took to get to that point and what they became upon reaching it differed on a person-to-person basis.

For example, there was the one belonging to Over Gladiator, Figaro: the heart-shaped Superior Embryo with a name still unknown to me. It and its Master were literally one, and its unique ability was a very simple thing — the enhancement of the items he had equipped.

Basic as it was, however, thanks to the enhancement proportional to battle time, the enhancement inversely proportional to the number of equipped items, and a *third type of enhancement* — the ace up his sleeve — he was theoretically able to improve his equipment without limit. And that was enough for this Superior Embryo to be considered an apex among Embryos.

Then there was Tenaga Ashinaga — the prosthetic limbs Superior Embryo belonging to Xunyu, the Master Jiangshi. They could stretch at the speed of sound and had durability matching that of Ancient Legendary-tier special rewards. Though Xunyu had an END-focused caster job, this Embryo gave her the potential to match AGI-focused Superior Jobs in terms of close-quarter fighting ability.

Then there was her Embryo's ultimate skill — the space-bending attack capable of destroying the organs of and killing targets far in the distant horizon, even if they weren't in battle.

Thus this Superior Embryo was, without a doubt, another apex among Embryos.

Then there was the Superior Embryo belonging to the Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin.

It was a Plant Fortress: a Type derived from the basic category of Type Castle, and the only one of its kind so far. It had two main unique abilities: monster production and storage.

Monster production was again split into two types: mass production and the creation of specially-made monsters using the ultimate skill.

The former was the one relevant to this situation, and the skill it used was simply called "Monster Mass Production."

As far as I was aware, it was a skill that empowered the researcher grouping's Monster Creation skill and allowed the production of multiple monsters at the same time. Of course, Franklin needed materials for this, but I'd been informed that it was entirely possible for it to produce 1,000 monsters per day.

The skill also came with the effect of lowering the costs the more monsters he produced at once, making it more than deserving of the name "Monster Mass Production."

Instead of being instantly moved to the Jewel, the monsters created by this could then be stored inside Pandemonium using its "Storage" skill. Even though taking them out just once would make it impossible for them to be Stored again, until then, they could be kept inside semi-permanently.

Pandemonium was a gigantic fortress factory capable of producing as many monsters as resources allowed, then storing and unleashing them, making it more than worthy of being considered another apex among Embryos, a Superior Embryo.

Now, what if these three were to fight in a defensive battle?

Specifically, what if Franklin had attacked Gideon and the other two had protected it?

The expected result was obvious — Franklin would win a hundred times out of a hundred.

It wasn't a matter of who was better than the other. It all boiled down to the difference in the vectors of their abilities.

As made obvious by its equipment enhancement ability, Figaro's Superior Embryo was an "individual battle type," focused on the power of one, and the same applied to Xunyu, as well.

Franklin, on the other hand, could summon countless monsters. He commanded armies that could overwhelm the earth, skies, and seas. In player terms, that made Franklin a "wide-scale suppression type."

When that type was on the offensive side of a defensive battle, it was considered to have an absolute advantage. Those focused on individual power were staggeringly incompatible with those who had numbers on their side.

Sure, they would never actually be defeated. In fact, they could probably break through the overwhelming ranks and take down their leader. However, when defending an area, they would lack the numbers to keep the enemies at bay, and the place would be destroyed by those that leaked through.

Perhaps they could have been able to defeat the head of the enemy — Franklin, in this case — before his monsters reached the city. However, due to a trick by Franklin, it was evident that the monsters would continue attacking even if he was defeated. The battles — or, rather, their aftermaths — here in the city made that all too obvious.

Due to that, Figaro and Xunyu would have been able to do little against him.

Even my individual battle type comrades would have a hard time in these situations.

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"Hell yeah, baby. Man, it feels good to just... let it all out." As Franklin expressed his pleasure, Pandemonium continued unleashing the numerous monsters. The way they swarmed out of the dragon's mouth was highly reminiscent of a scene from an old anime.

Due to that, the sight might've been somewhat comical. But the fact that they were all heading to destroy Gideon, which was only a few kilometels ahead, made it no laughing matter.

"Get the Embryo!" shouted Sir Lindos. "Kill Franklin! We can still make it!"

A number of knights followed his order.

His decision was sound. Though they couldn't stop the numerous monsters, they could prevent any harm to the city by defeating Franklin and making them all disappear. The knights would give their all to that possibility.

"'Make it'? Sorry, not happening," said Franklin, making the knights halt. "With respect to the fact that you ruined two of my plans, let me reveal something to you, dear people of the kingdom."

He was talking not only to the knights before him, but also to all the Masters trying to stop the tragedy.

"These monsters won't stop if I die, and *I can't make them stop even if I try.*"

His words confused just about everyone listening. It just didn't sound like the words of the one who'd unleashed all these monsters unto Gideon.

"What are you saying?" asked Liliana. "These monsters are *your* doing, aren't they?"

With that question, she was speaking for just about everyone on the scene.

Franklin simply widened his grin. "Yep. I made them all with my Pandemonium. However, they're no longer mine." He paused briefly. "I mean... *I let them go.*"

Once again, the ones listening had trouble processing what he was saying. And even after they were done, they still had trouble understanding.

"What... What are you saying?" asked Liliana, representing everyone yet again.

"Well, you know minion capacity, right?" said Franklin in response. "Giga Professor might be a Superior Job, but I still don't have enough of it to take in *that many* monsters. And a party only has five slots, too."

Tamed monsters worked using the minion capacity, which allowed the monsters to act as the owner's own battle potential.

Though it could be increased by taking jobs from the tamer, knight, researcher, pimp or other groupings, the limits were still there. Using monsters too numerous or too strong for the capacity would either cause them to be unusable or greatly lower their power. Thus, Franklin had chosen to not be bound by it.

"If you want to make that many monsters fight to their full potential, letting them go is about the only option," he explained.

Monsters that were let go were no longer being used by the ex-owner, so they also weren't bound by the capacity. He'd completely discarded the restrictions.

"Oh, and don't worry," Franklin continued. "They're properly programmed, so they won't attack me. They've been set to 'move forward until death' and 'kill everyone besides my clan members and my other monsters.' That's why I call them the 'Suicide Series!'"

Though Franklin proudly puffed his chest, what he had done was nothing short of nauseating. He'd created an army of lives, set to move forward from birth to death while doing nothing but killing everything except a select few.

It was abhorrent enough even to those who saw *Infinite Dendrogram* as a game, and to those for whom it was another world, this deed was a work of pure madness.

"Why do you think I ran to the west?" he said. "If I'd used this in the north or the south, I could have damaged our dear Dryfe or Legendaria — the third party in this war. This is a deathly army made up of tens of thousands of monsters that are constantly on the move and can easily go through borders as long as they're alive... And yeah, there's Caldina in the east, but I don't care. They're our enemies too, after all."

Not to mention that the likes of The Earth and the King of Termination will make short work of them when they get there, he was probably adding silently.

"Anyway, there's nothing I can do about the monsters I let go, and they'll keep going even if you somehow kill me. *Tu as compris?*" Franklin willfully used his real-life mother tongue to taunt his enemies.

Nemesis, Liliana, and the other Royal Guard knights were stunned into silence. They had to defeat every single monster and then their source — Pandemonium and Franklin.

In the best case scenario, they would take care of Pandemonium before it could release the remaining 50,000 monsters. However, they simply didn't have the required battle potential to do it.

It would be difficult for Liliana, Sir Lindos, and the other knights to defeat Pandemonium by themselves. They would be able to do little to buy time against such an overwhelming number of monsters.

The barrier around the central arena had already been rendered useless, meaning that the Masters there could finally destroy it, and Cocytus's La Porte de l'Enfer had been canceled, as well. In a few minutes or so, the Masters from both places would come to their aid.

Before that, however, the Suicide Series would ravage the city of Gideon, and Pandemonium would release even more of the wretched creatures. Those "few minutes" were far too long.

Franklin spoke what everyone was thinking. "Heh heh heh, you won't make it—"

"I'll buy the time." A completely unexpected person spoke up, wiping the sneer from Franklin's face.

No one had thought he'd be in the spotlight again. After all — his battle was over. He'd been sleeping after having sacrificed his left arm and exerted every inch of his being to defeat his natural enemy.

And yet, he still stood up.

Ray Starling still had the power to stand.

His consciousness was in an uncertain state. The battle had completely drained him, and even the mind of the player controlling the avatar was in a sorry state. It was likely that he didn't even have a proper grasp of the situation.

And yet, he would still face the 5,000-strong monster army charging towards Gideon.

"Ray!"

"Ray?!"

Nemesis and Liliana's worried shouts weren't without reason. Ray still had a number of injury-based debuffs, couldn't move his left arm, and didn't even have half of his maximum HP.

And despite all this, he still stood up.

“Nemesis, Silver... let’s go,” he said as he called his trusty steed and extended his right arm towards his Embryo.

“...Certainly!” Nemesis said after a moment of hesitation. Then she took his hand and turned herself into the black greatsword.

“Ha ha... ha ha ha ha... Oh man, I think I’m gonna cry,” laughed Franklin. “You’re pretty maimed, my dude. It’s pretty greedy of you to try and struggle in that state. Your battle is over, so why not just, you know, go to sleep?”

“It’s not over.”

“Hm...?”

“It’s not over yet,” Ray said firmly. “It’s too early to stop. I’ll keep going as long as I can stand and swing my blade.”

It was possible he was speaking those words only due to the uncertain state of his mind.

“As long as you... as long as I’m faced with tragedy.”

However, it might’ve been a glimpse into the very deepest reaches of his heart.

“...Oh, I see.” Franklin nodded, seemingly having realized something. “Though you’re both Maidens’ Masters, you’re completely unlike *him.* If anything, you’re just like the King of Tartarus.”

Ignoring Franklin’s words, Ray rode Silver towards the front of the 5,000 vile creatures.

“Hellish Miasma!” he shouted, causing his right arm to release the familiar triple debuff of poison gas.

Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness caused the monsters to slow down, but that was about it. The monsters unaffected by the gas either pushed the affected monsters to the side or simply trampled them, continuing their charge towards Gideon. However, a number of them recognized Ray as an enemy and moved to fight him.

There was no hint of cooperation between them. They randomly attacked Ray using their weapons, claws, fangs, organic projectiles, and offensive magic. Ray and Silver failed to evade them, causing him to end up on the ground.

It was uncertain whether it was because he was injured, because the enemies were many, or simply because Ray was a weakling whose level didn’t even break 50. Whatever the case, he was unable to move, and a number of monsters were approaching to finish him off.

Liliana, Sir Lindos, and the other knights tried to help him, but the other monsters were holding them back.

“Ray!” shouted Nemesis as several monstrous claws reached to take his life.

He didn’t have the time to heed her warning and get up.

And so, when Ray was on the verge of experiencing his second death in *Infinite Dendrogram*...

“GYAGHGHGHGHGHGHGHGH!”

...it was prevented by his *first death*.

The monsters that had been about to kill him were pulverized by bullet-like creatures — the very same ones that had once pulverized Ray himself. They came from the Embryo known as “Arc-en-Ciel,” and its Master was...

“AllOw Me to aSsisT.”

...the Superior Killer — a player killer shrouded in mystery... and a black mist preventing people from telling their age or gender.

“TheY haVe tHe nUmbeRs,” the figure said in an unnatural voice, most likely passed through a voice changer. “We shOulD coOperAte foR noW.”

“Gh...”

It was the same Master that had killed Ray back in Noz Forest and later gone on to help him in his battle against Gardranda.

Faced with this person, Ray said:

“Yeah. I’m counting on you... Marie.”

He *called her by name*, as if it were no big deal.

“WhA?! EeeeEeeeEehHhhH?!” the Superior Killer cried.

“Eeeeehhhhhh?!” Nemesis shrieked.

At that moment, a monster closed in from behind Marie. Ray quickly transformed Nemesis into the flag halberd and thrust her into it. Though Nemesis was still in a state of shock, Ray could still will her to change, and the monster was now thoroughly skewered.

“WhY?! HoW diD You KnoW?!” the Superior Killer cried.

“That’s Marie?!” Nemesis yelled. “What is the meaning of this, Ray?!”

“I couldn’t tell when we first met, but now, I can more or less make her out through the mist.” After saying that, Ray heaved a sigh.

A monster saw that as an opening and tried attacking him, but Marie made short work of it using her spread-piercing bullets.

As she watched the monster disappear, Marie canceled the Voice Change skill and began speaking in her own voice. “Oh man, do I feel stupid for trying to hide it with Voice Change.”

“Eh? Marie is actually the Superior Killer? You’re not joking?” asked Nemesis, still flabbergasted.

“This is a bit of an emergency, so I would be thankful if you ignored that for now,” said Marie.

“Sure,” Ray replied as he launched a Vengeance on a monster that had previously attacked him. “But only if you duel me once we’re done here.”

He then brandished Nemesis in his only usable hand.

“Very well. I’ll fight you with all I’ve got,” said Marie as she brandished Arc-en-Ciel and the Palsy Stingblade before standing back-to-back with Ray.

And so, the two faced the monsters charging towards them.

The two had never before fought on the same side.

Marie had helped Ray once during his battle against Gardranda and had killed him back during their fight in Noz Forest, but that was the full of extent of their common battle history. But despite that, they cooperated without any flaws to speak of and killed the encroaching monsters with great efficiency. That was possible because Marie had observed Ray to try and find what she lacked, and because Ray had often thought about the actions taken by the one that’d killed him.

They moved as one, forming a wall that slightly slowed down the 5,000 monsters charging towards Gideon.

“HA!” Franklin shouted. “There’s still just two of you, you know? Do you really think you’re enough to hold against 5,000 monsters? Like hell!”

Franklin’s words were nothing but the truth. Even if one was a newbie with a history of miraculous victories and the other was a player killer that had felled a Superior, two people simply weren’t enough to stop the 5,000 monsters from the first wave, much less the 50,000 Franklin still had in store. Their defeat was all but inevitable.

“Then we will stop them with twenty.”

Thus, they needed someone to link them to the possibility of victory.

The voice had come from behind the western gate, followed by countless attacks that left the monsters overwhelmed.

There were flames from an avian, offensive magic, a giant ball of steel, fire arrows, and the overpowering allure of Charm, among many other skills.

The 50 monsters standing at the forefront of the 5,000 were destroyed in but an instant.

“Ray! M— McBlackJack! I brought reinforcements!”

“Rook!” shouted Ray.

“...Is ‘McBlackJack’ supposed to be me?” asked Marie.

“He probably couldn’t call you by name with all these people here,” commented Nemesis.

At the western gate, there were twenty Masters, along with their summoned and tamed monsters. Standing at the front of the group were Rook, Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon, along with four other newbies that had gone different ways after the battle at the plaza and been able to survive long enough to make it here. The other twelve were the high-rank Masters that had been Frozen by La Porte de l’Enfer at the western gate.

Those Masters were very enthusiastic.

“Hell yeah! Let’s go, boys!”

“We can’t let the newbie kiddos get all the spotlight!”

“...I wonder if this will get on tomorrow’s MMO Journal Planter.”

“It’s simple. We kill the Franklin!”

Evidently, their reasons for joining the battle were varied, but they were all Masters bearing the powers of high-rank jobs and Embryos.

Though they’d lost to Hugo due to compatibility issues, they were experienced players that had this duel city as their main haunt.

Naturally, the group was far stronger than Ray, and them joining the battle had a great effect upon it.

“No way,” Franklin muttered, more surprised than anyone else there.

After all, this turn of events was impossible. Franklin knew better than most that the Frozen debuff caused by Cocytus’s La Porte de l’Enfer wasn’t easy to undo. It nullified items that removed status effects and could last *at least* an hour, even if Hugo himself was killed.

The only way to get around these rules... was to have Hugo — the user of the skill — willingly undo its effects.

“You canceled it, Yu...”

It couldn’t be done by simply Charming him, either — he *had* to do it by himself. That could only mean that Hugo willingly betrayed Franklin and canceled the skill.

Oh wait, I was the one who betrayed her first, Franklin thought in self-derision.

"Well, whatever," he said in a murderous tone. "There are still only twenty-two of you. If you think you can stop this surge of magic beasts, go ahead and try."

This was followed by the Suicide Series roaring and baring their fangs.

They had already been set into the wild, so it wasn't like they actually followed Franklin's will. The core of their beings... every cell in their bodies... was screaming for them to attack the newly-appeared enemy creatures before them.

"We've gotta buy time!" one of the high-level Masters cried. "Don't let a single one of these into the city until the guys from the arena get here!"

"Try to keep the newbies alive! They've worked too hard to get the death penalty here!"

"...Will we be famous if we pull through?"

"KILL THE FRANKLIN!"

The high-rank Masters charged towards the monsters, marking the start of a 22 vs 5,000 battle. In terms of scale, this was the largest battle that happened tonight so far.

However, it certainly wasn't the largest that *would happen*.

Gideon's central arena, the stage

No one saw the scene.

Most of the audience in the central arena were watching the broadcast, either with despair or slight hope.

Thus, no one saw a certain man approach the barrier sealing the stage. He was tall and wore the pelt of a black bear.

With casual steps, he closed in on the barrier.

There were some other Masters nearby. Upon realizing that there was no danger of monsters being released inside the city, they'd moved to try and free the two Superiors stuck inside the stage — Figaro and Xunyu. However, that barrier was even tougher than the one surrounding the arena as a whole, and when they'd realized they couldn't break it, they'd also started staring at the broadcast.

This man passed by them and stood right next to the barrier.

Suddenly, something attacked him.

It was a blue Slime — the remains of an Oxygen Slime that Franklin had released into this arena. Though most of them had been destroyed by the Masters here, one had been able to survive thanks to being hidden by some rubble.

Because it relied on things other than sight to perceive its surroundings, the Oxygen Slime was the only creature there that had noticed the man. And, since he'd happened to be right next to it, it had attacked him right after crawling out of the rubble.

The moment it came close to him, the man *reduced it to dust* with a casual backhand blow.

The hyper low temperature, ultra poisonous immortal Slime was *destroyed* by a mere fist.

"Eh?"

"Huh? Since when...?"

The sound of the battle — if you could call it that — caused by the Slime being pulverized made the Masters around the barrier notice the man. Right when they did, however, he swung his fist again and — just like the Slime — *destroyed* the barrier in one hit.

With it broken, the two Superiors inside were rendered free.

As the barrier's destruction made everyone in the arena panic in confusion, the man spoke to one of the Superiors: Over Gladiator, Figaro.

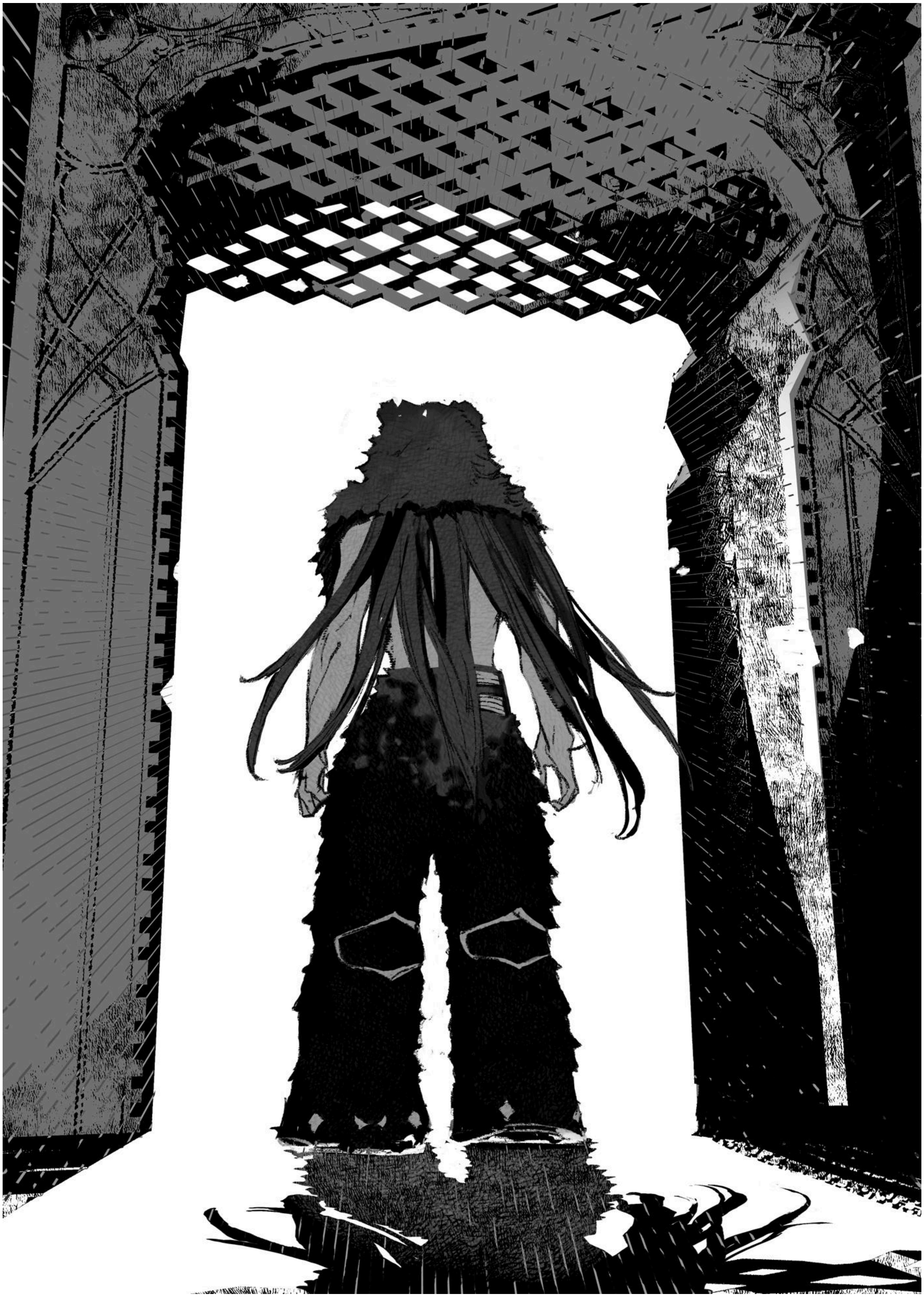
"I'm leaving this place to you. If the *thing below or the two in the audience* look like they're about to do something, you stop them, all right?"

After saying those words, the man made his way towards the exit.

"What will *you* do?" asked Figaro.

The man momentarily looked up at the broadcast and — with his back still turned — responded.

"I'll bind the possibility he seized."



Chapter Three: And His Name is...

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In this game of his, Franklin had made a total of three grave mistakes.

Of course, those were just the mistakes from *my* perspective. A third party might see more or fewer than me.

These were the mistakes, one by one.

His first mistake was separating his plot to destroy Gideon and kidnap the princess into Plan A, B, etc. and going through them one after the other.

Considering the fact that he wanted to break the country's spirit by starting worse and worse plans the more the kingdom struggled, that might've been the right course of action, but in terms of the force he released, this design was highly ineffective. When unleashing your battle potential, you should always release everything all at once.

He should've released the monsters in the city and unleashed the 50,000 from Pandemonium right after using the barrier and starting the PK massacre. That way, the kingdom would have had next to no way of fighting back. The princess would have been kidnapped, and Gideon would have been severely damaged.

Since he'd chosen to do them all one by one, the plans had all been taken care of in that order, bringing us to our current situation.

What? "The result will be the same if his 50,000 monsters succeed," you say? Well, true, the results would be the same *if* they succeeded. I'm fully aware of that.

His second mistake was mixing revenge against *him* into his plan.

You're wondering why that was a mistake? Surely you've noticed that adding the whole thing with the RSK into the plan extended the time until monster release, right? So that must be what I mean.

Ohh, no no, you've got it all wrong. The revenge itself wasn't a mistake.

The mistake was doing the revenge along with the plan, effectively *putting something on the line* into his battle.

You look like you don't understand.

Normally, that RSK thing would've beaten Ray. But by creating a condition where he would lose something if he lost, Franklin had made Ray significantly more powerful. And if that wasn't a mistake, I don't know what is.

In fact, even Ray's air bomb had only been possible to use because the city was thick with grudge that he could transform into MP.

If Franklin had aimed for Ray alone, he could've crushed him like a bug, don't you think? That was how the Superior Killer got him, after all. But Ray was really strong in cases like this, and that was why the RSK had lost.

It's not like we get many cases when people's lives are at stake on the other side, after all.

As for the third mistake... Ah, screw it.

Saying it is embarrassing.

Hey, even I can feel shame.

What? "A person who can feel shame would never walk around like that?" Oh, shut up. The reason why I have to walk around like that is because you messed with my character creation and...

Hm? "Just say the third mistake already?" All right, all right.

Franklin's third and greatest mistake was...

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In *Infinite Dendrogram*, people had a tendency to use the terms "Demi-Dragon-tier" or "Pure-Dragon-tier" to denote a creature's fighting ability.

A Demi-Dragon-tier creature was equivalent to a party of six low-rank battle jobs or a single high-rank job, while a Pure-Dragon-tier creature was equivalent to a party of six high-rank jobs. That meant that a Pure-Dragon was about six times stronger than a Demi-Dragon.

One had to keep in mind that the power of the owner of a high-rank job greatly varied depending on how well-leveled their six low-rank jobs and two high-rank jobs were. Thanks to their Embryo bonuses and unique abilities, many high-rank Masters were able to defeat Pure-Dragons all by themselves. Still, it was a decent way to indicate a creature's strength.

Every single one of the 5,000 Suicide Series monsters released by Franklin were Demi-Dragon-tier, which made them equal to 5,000 high-rank jobs.

The ones fighting them were merely twenty-one Masters with low or high-rank jobs.

Even considering the sole Superior Job among them, their number was still only twenty-two.

By trying to add their Embryos into the equation, you could assume that they were all Pure-Dragon-tier, but even then, the difference in battle potential would be about 5,000 vs 132.

Naturally, those odds were ridiculous.

Despite that, however, even after three minutes had passed, not a single Master had died.

"...Well, they're sure holding out well," Franklin muttered, clearly unamused. Even the one who'd unleashed the monsters hadn't expected this.

This result was due to all the Embryos there.

The Masters alone numbered twenty-two, and even if Franklin disregarded the Embryos he'd known about, there were still twenty Embryos. Some greatly enhanced their allies, some created walls, while some were just really good at keeping armies at bay.

Embryos were extremely vibrant in terms of variation, and by using their powers wisely, they were able to hold their own against the 5,000-strong monster army.

Of course, Franklin's monsters had great variety, as well. However, the Suicide Series had been programmed to do nothing but charge forward and kill until they themselves died. Though varied, they didn't have the mental capacity to be able to cooperate and make the best of their variety.

Due to that, despite having an overwhelming numerical advantage, they didn't seem to be able to break through the twenty-two Masters.

"...Well, then," Franklin muttered.

In all honesty, having his monsters held back like this wasn't a problem for him. Pandemonium was already releasing the next batch of monsters. According to his calculations, even if these Masters bought enough time for the Masters from the central arena to gather, the city would still end up severely damaged.

The twenty-two Masters holding back the monsters were already doing it with lots of desperation. Though none of them had died yet, they had only taken care of a small percentage of the 5,000 monsters. And the Masters had used up lots of their MP and SP, making it more than obvious that they would soon be rendered unable to struggle and get overwhelmed.

Then there was the fact that Franklin had ten times that number of monsters, not to mention that he was protected by the likes of DGP and KOS, both monsters matching Superior Jobs in power.

Franklin recalled that the Masters in the central arena amounted to around 1,000, which was a number that he could certainly handle.

When it came to battle ability, Franklin was among the weakest Superiors. In a fair, 1v1 battle, he could even be defeated by a low-rank job.

However, he excelled at strategy.

After the war with the kingdom half a year ago by *Infinite Dendrogram*'s time standards, he'd spent enough time and resources to gather enough monsters to handle 1,000 Masters with little trouble.

"...Well well, then," Franklin murmured.

The only real problem left was those two Superiors: Over Gladiator, Figaro and Master Jiangshi, Xunyu. By intervening in their Clash and sealing them using the barrier's stopping function, Franklin had most likely made enemies out of them. If they intervened, Franklin would almost certainly be given the death penalty.

Figaro was exclusively a solo player, so there was a chance he wouldn't get involved. Xunyu, on the other hand, could very possibly use her ultimate skill to claw his heart out at any given moment.

However, Franklin didn't care about that.

Even if he were to die, the 10,000-strong monsters released so far would still attack Gideon, not to mention the fact that he had another ace up his sleeve.

While Franklin was the diamond, King of Orchestras was the club, and Hugo was the heart, the spade was a certain something placed underneath the arena that was patiently waiting to be activated.

That was exactly what would happen if Franklin were to get the death penalty. It was part of Plan D — the final plan he'd hinted at when talking to Elizabeth.

Still, Franklin assumed that it would all end before he would have to go through with it. Franklin's monsters would soon overwhelm Gideon and completely ravage it. This group of people was nothing but a speed bump against his army.

If Gideon fell while being actively protected by Masters, the kingdom would finally break, and his goal would be achieved.

“...Well well well well, then,” Franklin murmured.

Franklin was going to win regardless of whether he chose to do anything more or not.

“All right, they piss me off. Let’s kill them.”

And that was exactly why he made his move.

Franklin looked at DGP, the dinosaur that was scattering the Royal Guard around Pandemonium. He’d used a Legendary UBM’s special reward in its creation. That gave it enough power to match such UBMs, and due to that, it was his strongest monster currently on the scene, not counting the spade.

When Ray had charged towards the Suicide Series, Franklin had assumed that it wouldn’t need to be used. But now, he ordered it to massacre all the Masters that’d gathered.

“DGP, be a darling and trample those eyesores.”

“VRGHAAAAAAHHHH!” It released an earth-shaking roar as it charged with ground-shattering power in its steps. It was heading straight towards the front lines of the battle between the 5,000 monsters and twenty-two Masters, and it got there in only a few moments.

First, the twenty-two Masters became twenty.

DGP, clad in a red aura, went straight for the two high-rank jobs right at the front, quickly crushing and turning them into dust. In addition, an Embryo that took damage in their stead reached its limit and shattered.

Then the twenty became nineteen.

The red aura canceled a spell from a high-rank magic job.

DGP responded by swinging its tail and splitting the person in half, instantly making them vanish.

Then the nineteen became sixteen.

Three Masters simultaneously attacked it using their ultimate skills, but before they could have an effect, DGP chomped them all with a speed so great it left afterimages.

In but a moment, the twenty-two that had held against 5,000 had become sixteen because of a single creature.

“Tch!” Marie — the only Superior Job on the scene — clicked her tongue as she shot piercing bullets into DGP's head.

Upon entering the red aura, the bullets lost their power and speed before being deflected by the monster's shell.

"This is the defensive *and* offensive 'Dragon King Aura!'" she realized. "This one must've been made using material from a Dragon King!"

Marie was completely right.

"Dragon Kings" were a type of UBM. They were basically Pure-Dragons with great enough power to be titled kings of their sub-species. Their Dragon King Aura could weaken all attacks coming their way, and since they were unique for every generation, all of them were recognized as UBMs.

Franklin had defeated a number of Dragon Kings, and DGP had been made using the special reward from one called "Fangdragon King, Drag-Phalanx." Due to that, its power easily surpassed that of Pure-Dragons. It could easily have fought on par with the UBM used as its base, and it even had the Dragon King Aura symbolic of their kind.

"VGHAAAAAHHHHH!"

"Khh...!" Marie cried.

When in top shape, Superior Jobs such as Marie had only about a 50% chance of winning against Legendaries. However, using her ultimate skill against Veldorbell had rendered her incapable of using bursting and homing bullets, lowering her chances even further.

I could try to send "Ulbetia the Piercing Murder" at a vital spot where the aura is thin, but even then, it's questionable if that would be enough, she thought.

Even though doing that would cost her the Green Piercing and Silver Flash bullets, Marie believed that it wouldn't do the job on this creature.

Entities above Pure-Dragon-tier had great HP, and it was rare for them to die due to just a single ultimate skill from a Superior Job. Combined with the fact that DGP had powers matching that of the Fangdragon King that had been used in its creation, it was highly unlikely that Arc-en-Ciel would be enough to defeat it.

But then again, they were in no position to battle it for long. The more DGP ravaged the front lines and the longer Marie stalled, the more monsters would enter the city.

Marie readied herself and loaded Arc-en-Ciel with a special bullet meant for ultimate skills.

"Phantasmal Raing—"

Before she could go through with it, the DGP made its move.

Just like before, it moved at a speed great enough to leave afterimages and charged towards a Master a short distance away — in this case, Ray.

"Ray!" both Marie and Rook shouted as DGP quickly closed in on him.

In a sense, this turn of events was only obvious. Franklin wanted to crush Ray more than anyone else on the scene, so there was nothing surprising about DGP following its owner's will.

"Wait— kh!" Marie tried to go after it, but she was then surrounded by a number of AGI-focused Suicide Series.

"Mh..."

Ray silently watched as DGP stormed towards him, and it was hard to tell whether it was because his mind was still hazy or because he knew exactly what he had to do.

He sighed.

"Ray...?" Nemesis spoke as he brandished her.

Ray was already aware that he had no means of escape. He wasn't riding Silver, and even if he was, he still wouldn't have the speed to avoid the upcoming attack.

Thus, he knew that he was about to experience his second death in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

However, he intended to do something before leaving the scene. Specifically, he wanted to *land a counterattack at the same moment he was damaged.*

Even if the attack instantly killed him, he thought he could hit it with a single Vengeance before dying, which could maybe help turn the situation around.

As such thoughts went through his mind, Nemesis read them and prepared for what was to come.

"Very well," she said.

She would do all in her power to activate the skill at the right moment.

As the two readied themselves, DGP arrived at just a few metels away from him. It opened its maw, determined to erase the enemy of its creator.

"Bring it!" Ray shouted.

Everyone was watching that moment.

Marie watched it.

Rook watched it.

Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon watched it.

The ten surviving Masters watched it.

Liliana watched it.

Sir Lindos watched it.

The Royal Guard watched it.

The people of Gideon watched it.

The people of the capital watched it.

Figaro and Xunyu, now free from the barrier, watched it.

Franklin watched it.

Ray faced the deathly jaws opening before him, fully prepared to do what he needed to do before he died.

Nemesis, too, faced the enemy, ready to fulfill her Master's wish, even if it would cost him his life.

Everyone watched it... and yet *no one saw it*.

No one saw the moment that man appeared before Ray.

"Save your desperate counters fur a cooler sceeene, goofus!" the man called.

"Eh?" Ray muttered a voice of confusion, and he certainly wasn't alone in that regard.

As if some frames were skipped, the man appeared as though he had always been there.

He was clad in furs, which definitely made him look odd. The upper part of his head was covered by the pelt of a bear, which extended to his back and flowed like a cape. He was tall, and though he had no upper clothing, his exposed muscles looked much like pure steel. Black pants reminiscent of a hakama covered his legs, and their texture seemed to be the same as that of the fur on his head.

For reasons unknown, his right leg was raised towards the sky.

From the fact that he had no trouble keeping the pose up, it was safe to assume that he'd had his share of physical training.

"Bro, this is the kind of stuff you pull when you know you'll survive *and* kill the enemy," he said with his leg still raised to the sky. "Doing this only to damage them and die regardless of whether you succeed is just... beary lacking. All right, all right, I'll drop the puns for now."

The man's appearance and words were strange enough, but there was something even more weird about the sight.

The dinosaur was gone.

DGP, the monster that had been about to consume Ray, had completely disappeared the moment the man in the furs had shown up.

"...Nooo wayyy," muttered Marie.

She, along with a few other Masters, had noticed what was happening here. They were all looking towards the sky — towards DGP, hurtling off *several hundred metels in the air*. Those with good eyesight could see that its head was completely shattered and that it was slowly turning into particles of light.

From the dinosaur's sorry state and the man's right leg — still raised in a kicking position — the onlookers assumed two things.

The man had just kicked a monster weighing at least ten tons up into the sky, and he had *destroyed* the beast in just a single kick, ignoring the Dragon King Aura and its immense HP.

"Hmm, that lizard had some decent weight," the man said.

"...Ah."

Upon seeing the manner in which the man lowered his leg and looking at the lower, unhidden part of his face, Ray realized that it was someone he knew very well.

"Well, you went and overdid it, as usual, but you're still alive, so it's all good." Upon saying that, the man gently patted Ray on the head. "Kept you waiting, huh?"

"...So you came," Ray said.

"Hey, I told you I would, didn't I?" After taking his hand away, the man in the furs reached into the bag at his side, his inventory, and took something out. It was a ring called "Voice Amplification Ring" — a name that said it all. "Uhh... Test, test. You hearing this, Franklin?"

"...Uh, Yeah, I am..." Franklin said.

"All right, that's good. I'll just make a little proclamation, then."

"...A proclamation?"

"You made a really big mistake in this game of yours," said the pelt-clad man before pausing for a second. "*You messed with my little brother.*"

Though only a few could understand what he was talking about, everyone on the scene and even those just watching the broadcast could feel the intensity of the fighting spirit in those words.

“So yeah... Franklin. Here’s how it’s gonna go,” the man said. “I — The King of Destruction — am gonna *obliterate* every single one of your precious monsters.”

Shu Starling made his will known.

Thus began the night’s final battle.

The wielder of the imperium’s most numerous force — Mr. Franklin.

The wielder of the kingdom’s most powerful force — Shu Starling.

Quantity vs quality.

Giga Professor vs. King of Destruction.

Superior vs. Superior.

In a great act of irony, that evening’s main event had been replaced by something fundamentally identical.

The Clash of the Superiors.

Chapter Four: King of Destruction, Shu Starling

???

Shu Starling, the King of Destruction, was one of the kingdom’s four Superiors, and he’d reigned at the top of the country’s kill rankings for over two years of *Infinite Dendrogram* time.

His name was known to few, but his many deeds were spoken of far and wide.

These were such things as the defeat of the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria; the Corpse Stronghold incident in the Southern Sea; the Kim-un-kamuy incident in Tenchi; the disappearance of an entire mountain range in Caldina, attributed to his battle against The Earth; and the crashing of the Unidentified Flying Stronghold, Laputa, which was one of Huang He’s Superior Embryos.

Though he’d gained a reputation as the central figure in those and countless other such events, there was next to no information about him.

His appearance was as much of a mystery as his name, and many argued that his avatar wasn’t actually human. Witnesses described him as “white,” “black,” “always looking different,” or “soft and fluffy,” and though it turned out those rumors weren’t wrong, there was no denying the vagueness of them.

However, there were two specific pieces of info most thought to be highly accurate.

One was the idea that he held a Superior Job from the crasher grouping. Its stat growth focused entirely on STR, and its specialty was the breaking of material defenses in events such as castle sieges. Alas, that job grouping’s AGI and END was very low, making it unsuitable for vanguard roles.

But the King of Destruction, Shu Starling, was...

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Jeand Grasslands

The sight was much like a scene from a decade-old action manga.

The man kicked a monster. The sad creature was pulverized and sent flying towards other monsters, all of which shattered upon impact.

Another monster came from behind the man.

Before the monster realized it, the man had placed his fist right below its neck and thrown it upwards for an uppercut, launching the unfortunate creature to the stars.

In less than a minute, more than 300 monsters had been completely shattered — no, *destroyed*.

And it was all done by one man: the King of Destruction.

"You've gotta be shittin' me..." Franklin muttered in disbelief, and he was fully justified in doing so.

After all, the hundreds of monsters the man was sweeping up definitely weren't just cannon fodder. They were all Demi-Dragon-tier, and therefore monsters strong enough to match battle-focused high-rank jobs. In fact, their relentless nature and lack of concern for their own lives made them even stronger than a usual Demi-Dragon.

And yet, they could do nothing to stop this man.

The man began to run, pulverizing a monster.

He casually swung an arm, making another monster explode.

Another monster dropped dead by simply grazing one of his fingers.

Countless monsters were *destroyed* as though they were more frail than papier-mâché.

Now, Franklin would have been fully willing to accept and understand the scene if the man had been using a skill that did something along the lines of "Destroys what you touch."

But there was simply no such thing.

The man wasn't using a single skill.

The King of Destruction was able to create the scene simply because *he was strong*.

"Hhhhh..." Franklin sighed, impressed to the point of speechless shock. After all, he was the one who knew the reasons behind the ridiculous feats better than anyone else on the scene. Franklin's right eye was shining blue, emitting an aura of knowledge and understanding.

All high-rank and Superior Jobs had ultimate and unique skills, and Franklin's Giga Professor was no exception. One such skill was "The Analyzing Eye of Wisdom."

It allowed him to find out the target's stats, skills, growth, status effects, and materials dropped by simply looking at them long enough. Even skills such as Conceal or Disguise meant little against that skill.

Skill explanations would be shrouded in a mist that slowly faded, while stat points would start at 0 and gradually rise at a pace of about 2,000 per second until they arrived at the correct number.

For example, he had seen all the stats of Marie — the stealth-focused Death Shadow — in only about 10 seconds of looking.

Franklin was now using it on that man, and he just didn't know what to make of what he saw.

The King of Destruction *job level* was 1,080, while his STR had already exceeded 100,000 and still continued to rise.

"Man, what the actual fuck?" he burst out.

The stats seen by The Analyzing Eye of Wisdom stopped rising upon reaching the right number, meaning that the man's STR easily surpassed 100,000. Considering that some stat-focused Superior Jobs had a hard time breaking 10,000, that number was nothing if not ludicrous. Sure, the number included Embryo and equipment bonuses, but that did little to soften his astonishment.

The Analyzing Eye of Wisdom also displayed any skills the target used.

They appeared as momentary, flashing pop-ups, and Franklin *had yet to see any of them* since the King of Destruction had entered the scene, effectively proving that the man was merely destroying the monsters with nothing but pure power.

All the destruction here was caused by simple *standard attacks.*

"When it comes to STR alone, he might be a match for the King of Beasts," Franklin muttered, comparing the man to the strongest Master he knew.

The King of Destruction might actually be the Master with the greatest STR.

But that was with STR alone. The rest of the stats weren't high. And it wasn't like they merely seemed low because of the towering, six-digit STR.

All of the other stats besides it and the five-digit HP were in the four-digit range.

In fact, his AGI was just barely over 1,000. There was simply no balance in these stats.

The go-to path for vanguard roles was to focus on either AGI, so that they could move at supersonic speeds, or END, in order to bear many attacks. A standard Superior Job like that would have at least 5,000 of one or the other, but the King of Destruction was different.

He had a pure STR build, focusing entirely on STR while discarding all the other stats.

Sure, that gave him a lot of attack power. With all the Embryo and equipment bonuses, he was now doing damage that made him seem more monstrous than the actual monsters.

However, he shouldn't have been able to survive this fight.

Though the monsters were merely Demi-Dragon-tier, the ones focused on speed had five times more AGI than the King of Destruction did. A STR build like him should've been showered by attacks from the AGI monsters, and he should've lost his HP until it was all gone.

One such monster attempted to bite into the man's neck from one of his blind spots, only to be shattered by a fist that was *placed* right before its eyes.

"This makes no sense," muttered Franklin. The scene seemed to both match the stats and completely betray them.

Most of the onlookers likely thought that the King of Destruction was *just strong*. Franklin, however, could see the stats, notice the inconsistency, and realize that it wasn't caused by some skill.

Thus, he came across the answer... but he couldn't comprehend it at all.

There was no other possible explanation for the scene, but it seemed like a part of some joke.

After all...

"Am I seriously supposed to believe *he's using fighting skills he brought from reality*?"

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Central arena, the stage

"'If the enemy is ten times faster, you just read ten moves ahead,'" Figaro quoted.

"What thE hell?"

"Apparently, he reads their movements and places his attacks at points where they can't change their trajectory."

"Huhhh...? What tHe hELl?"

It was the central arena, the location of what was supposed to have been the night's main event, the Clash of the Superiors. Two Masters were standing on its stage and watching the broadcast above.

One was the Over Gladiator, Figaro, while the other was the Master Jiangshi, Xunyu.

They were the stars of the Clash of the Superiors and the ones who Franklin had locked up in the time-stopping barrier. Now, after being released, the two were just standing and watching the second Clash.

Of course, the other Masters in the arena — especially those who'd tried to save them — wanted the two to join the battle outside. However, Figaro showed no interest in participating in an ongoing battle, while Xunyu seemed to have entered spectator mode. Getting them to fight was hopeless at this point.

Being the greatest players of all, Superiors were often the most troublesome and stubborn of eccentrics. Upon realizing that, the rest of the Masters reluctantly gave up on getting their help and headed out to battle themselves.

They assumed the Superiors would move the moment the arena or the tians inside it were endangered, and they weren't wrong on that front. Still, there was no denying that the two Superiors' casual chat didn't seem to fit the situation.

"How did yoU even get to knOW that?" asked Xunyu.

"We had a fight after he became King of Destruction," said Figaro. "That was when I asked him how he could guard against my attacks when I have so much more AGI than him, and that was his answer."

"Oh yeah, thE bear deflected my attAcks, too..." Xunyu remembered. "But is it even pOssible to read ten movES ahead?"

"It's possible for him, it seems. He said he's 'dabbled' in martial arts in the past."

"Whoa, that's prEtty cool. Maybe I should pick martiAL arts when I'm in juniOR high... Though, wAit, I think thAt was an oPTion for bOYs only.”

“Even if you can’t take classes, you can find gyms or dojos in most sufficiently civilized towns,” Figaro said.

“Or maybe I cAN find some crazy mArtial arts in some seclUded place or soMEthing. That’s hOw it goes here, anYway.”

“Oh, you mean that one Superior Job discovered in Huang He? ‘The Arts,’ was it? I always thought that the ‘The One’ series of jobs was limited to weapon types and magic elements, so I was pretty surprised to find out that there was one for bare fists.”

“Man, how did thAT guy even clear those cONditions?!” Xunyu added. “He’s not okAy in the head! The bEar gives him a run fOR his money, thOugh! They’re both MAdmen!”

“Shu’s a friend of mine, but I can’t deny that.”

Despite fighting each other in an intense, deadly battle just a mere hour ago, Figaro and Xunyu were now watching the show at Jeand Grasslands and talking like good friends.

Many delinquents of the past had believed that anyone who went all out against each other would become pals, and though that wasn’t quite true, duel rankers seemed to have something similar. After all, their current interaction made them look like the best of buddies.

“Anyway, wasn’t he in a beAR costume?” asked Xunyu. “What’s with that appEarance? He’s still a bear, bUT still.”

“It’s a convertible piece of equipment,” answered Figaro. “It’s presented as an Ancient Legendary ‘Suit,’ but it’s actually a Mythical ‘Godcloth.’ You know how there are bosses that basically go, ‘This isn’t even my final form’ and transform? They drop these convertibles every now and then.”

“...I’ve nevEr met any of these retrO RPG demon loRds.”

“Really? You have about a 1% chance to meet them at the boss rush in the later stages of the Tomb Labyrinth.”

“...Eh? You’ve beEN there more than 100 tiMEs?” Xunyu asked.

“Isn’t that normal? And it’s 214 times. It hasn’t been long since I started reaching that point.”

“That’s a lot, mAn. But now it makEs sense why you hAve all those items.”

“All that stuff can be troublesome, though,” Figaro said. “Even when it comes to inventories, I have so much that I don't know what to do with it all. Anyway, convertible equipment is interesting, but their abilities can be really weird. Shu's is a UBM special reward, so it seems to be adjusted for him."

"Oh?"

"As a Suit, it was focused on stealth, so I think that applies to the true form, too," Figaro said. "From the way he entered the battle, I assume it has some skill that 'Hides your appearance and presence until you enter the battle.' It might have some other conditions, though."

"...He cAN pull off a surprise attAck with *that* kind of damage? That's just unfAir."

"Your ultimate skill isn't too different, though."

"GheaHahAhahaH! You gOt me therE!" Xunyu guffawed.

Their exchange was friendly, and they talked like true gamers. However, to the audience in the arena, it looked like the two Superiors were consulting about how to handle the chaos threatening Gideon. Due to this, the overall sentiment in the audience was tenseness and excitement at what was happening on the broadcast mixed with hope for the two champions on the stage.

But alas, the two they so believed in were just having a simple chat.

"By the wAY," Xunyu said.

"What?"

...Or so it seemed.

"When will thAt shitty labcOat dude use the thing undER us?"

"It's probably a tactical self-destruction monster, so he'll probably do it after his Plan C falls apart," Figaro said. "It shouldn't be long now."

Not all of it was just idle chatter after all.

"Then I'll get riD of the thing wiTH my ultimate sKill. You shoUld—"

"I'll stop the two 'strongests' if they go on the offensive. I'm interested in the thing below, but sadly, I'm a pure solo player."

"GhehAh! But those two arE way more tROublesome!" cried Xunyu.

"Dealing with them sounds like fun, though, doesn't it?"

"AgreEd."

Watching the fight of their fellow Superior, the two readied their fangs.

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Central arena, audience seats

At the eastern side of the arena, there was a woman with a porcupine on her knees. Just like everyone else, she was watching the broadcast.

While doing so, she noticed something. Not about the scene displayed, but about Behemot — her porcupine partner.

She could easily tell that the sight of the King of Destruction filled the creature with much excitement and joy.

They'd been in *Infinite Dendrogram* for over four years now, so it was easy for her to notice such changes in the porcupine's mood.

"That's clearly the same bear that you were so fond of," she said. Upon remembering how Behemot had climbed on the bear suit's head, she formed a faint smile.

At the same time, a thought came to her mind. It was a sentiment shared by many of the audience members watching the broadcast.

He's strong.

Just like most, she saw Shu Starling as powerful. However, what that strength made her feel was quite unlike what the rest of the audience felt.

To most, his struggle was their last hope, while what she felt was very different.

He's using tricks, too, but most of it is just pure power, the woman thought. *I like that. It makes my heart flutter. I want him to hit me, and I would love to crush him, too. He'd be a much better opponent than the two on the stage.*

She was the only one watching him who wanted to face him as an enemy.

Her gaze was that of a bloodthirsty beast, and the meager amount of bloodlust she exuded was enough to make the surrounding tians shake in fear, unaware as to why. But she was quick to hide that lust for battle, for Behemot sent her a certain thought.

"He's like a hero."

In the broadcast, Shu scattered a number of monsters with but a single kick. Despite facing countless of the disgusting creatures, he stood strong and continued felling them, hit by hit.

The sight made her nod. "Yes, he truly is a hero. Especially when you consider he's fighting the Giga Professor, who's quite the villain."

Shu was a true hero facing a horde of disgusting monsters all by himself, while Franklin, the leader of the horde, looked like nothing but a vile madman.

"Well, I certainly won't call it pathetic," she added, giving her opinions on the situation while telepathically talking to Behemot.

"Hey," said the porcupine.

"Yes, what is it?" asked the woman.

"Which is stronger — *the queen of beasts or the hero*?"

"Well..."

She knew the hidden meaning behind the question and put her response into spoken word.

"We should see for ourselves."

It was a promise for a not-so-distant future.

"Anyway, it's good that we came here," she added telepathically. "I'm happy we found someone who meets our desires."

With that, she focused entirely on the broadcast.

Thus, she and Behemot — the two representing the joker card that wouldn't help Franklin in his game — decided to just silently watch the battle.

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Jeand Grasslands

The King of Destruction's bare fists had already destroyed more than 1,000 monsters. Not only that, but his feats allowed the ten-odd Masters nearby to regroup and take on any monsters that slipped through the Superior's devastation.

The Masters that had been closed in the central arena were now pouring through the western gate and aiding the war effort, too.

The Masters outside had been able to buy enough time, and the situation was shifting in favor of the Masters guarding the city of Gideon.

Despite all that, Franklin still had a wide grin on his face.

"Well, I have his skills and stats now, and it sure is something..." he murmured.

The King of Destruction's stats and battle prowess were astonishing, indeed. Each of his punches was on par with a high-rank Embryo ultimate skill, and the fact that they were paired with excellent combat ability made them nothing short of frightening.

It didn’t end there. The Analyzing Eye of Wisdom allowed Franklin to see the King of Destruction’s unique skill, and it was definitely something to be feared.

Its name was “Right of Destruction,” and its description was, “Allows you to destroy indestructible targets with endurance lower than your attack power.”

Franklin believed the skill let the King of Destruction destroy creatures that nullified physical attacks, such as Slimes and Spirits. After all, the skill had flashed up on his Eye of Wisdom when the King of Destruction had destroyed a King-Size Oxygen Slime in just one hit.

Considering the attack power his ridiculous STR gave him, Right of Destruction likely allowed him to negate any and all Destruction Negation skills.

“Well, he sure surprised me,” said Franklin. “But he won’t be a problem.”

No matter how strong and combat proficient, the King of Destruction’s strength was still merely the strength of one. He was the same as the other two Superiors Franklin had deemed to be of little concern; he wasn’t anything Franklin couldn’t deal with.

The many other masters gathered here weren’t a big problem, either. Pandemonium would soon finish unleashing the remaining monsters.

Though they were also part of the Suicide Series, they were of a different version than the 5,000 that had been released first.

About a third of them were on par with Pure-Dragons, but that certainly wasn’t all. When Pandemonium released Franklin’s monsters into the wild, he could make slight modifications to them, which included the addition of simple orders.

The reason he’d released the 5,000 first was to make the kingdom believe that all Suicide Series monsters only charged forward. The new order he added to the 50,000 monsters was simple: “After all the Suicide Series monsters are released, surround Gideon and invade it.”

That meant the city was about to be attacked by 50,000 monsters coming from every direction.

The kingdom’s Masters would be able to handle it if Franklin released them gradually. If they banded together and focused all their powers into sweeping up the monsters, they could likely protect the city with little trouble.

However, if the 50,000 monsters all split up and attacked simultaneously from every direction, the side with the smaller numbers wasn't going to stand a chance.

Even if they had the King of Destruction and his exceptional STR, and even with the 1,000 Masters from the arena, a significant portion of the monsters would surely break into the city. And with that, Franklin would be victorious.

As Pandemonium released the last of the monsters, Franklin spoke up.

"All right, now they'll advance to the city and—"

But before he could finish his sentence, the world before his eyes underwent a drastic change.

Parts of the ground were ejected upwards, and its pieces and dust began covering the sky.

Violent ear and flesh-rending explosive sounds overwhelmed his surroundings.

The stench of gunpowder and blood assaulted his nose.

And between the explosions, he could hear the dying wails of countless monsters.

He realized that the monsters he was releasing were quickly being exterminated by countless cannon shots from places unknown.

"Artillery?! What the...?!"

At that moment, he remembered the two most reliable rumors concerning King of Destruction, the mysterious Superior.

One was the idea that he was a Superior Job from the crasher grouping. The other was...

"A battleship!" Franklin shouted.

The surrounding explosions abated, and the battlefield was caressed by a speedy gale. It blew away the cloud of dirt shrouding the ground beneath, revealing that not a single one of the Suicide Series had survived the onslaught unscathed. And beyond the wretched creatures, there was something that hadn't been there before.

Just like Franklin's Pandemonium, it had once been hidden by Optic Camouflage, but now it was concealed no longer.

It was larger than Gideon's walls.

It was a weapon.

It was a vehicle.

It was a *Superior Embryo*.

It was a land battleship, crushing the ground beneath with its gigantic caterpillar tracks.

It very much confirmed the second most reliable piece of information about the King of Destruction: “His Embryo is a battleship.”

This was the War God Ship, Baldr.

“Twin Quintuple Cannons, firebombs loaded... Barrage.” The Superior Embryo spoke in a robotic voice as it fired the quintuple cannons on both its sides towards the surviving monsters.

The incendiary shots leaked fuel as they rent the air and slammed into the monsters, either turning them into burning effigies or simply reducing them to ash.

“Stardust Genocider,” the Embryo said.

It wasn’t just artillery that it had. The extremely masculine, tank-like, ship-like Embryo suddenly exposed countless aircraft catapults on one of part of its deck.

They all momentarily lit up and released strange projectiles that left trails of smoke behind them.

Like ravenous hawks, the flying objects relentlessly went after the monsters, exploding upon impact and reducing them to dust.

“Bloody Laser Storm.”

Certain parts of the ship’s hull slid open, revealing a number of sentry guns. They all started autonomously releasing crimson lasers towards the monsters within range, neatly slicing them up.

If this wasn’t an overwhelming annihilation, nothing was. Each and every piece of Baldr’s weaponry was focused on wide-area extermination.

In a short while, it had already taken care of more than 10,000 of Franklin’s monsters. The menacing creatures he’d wanted to use to make the kingdom succumb were nothing but lowly insects before the battleship.

“He... What... He kills stuff in a large radius, too?!” For the first time that day, Franklin raised his voice in anger.

He had every reason to do so.

After all, he was looking at his natural enemy.

Franklin’s Pandemonium was a wide-scale suppression type — one that felled a target location through sheer numbers.

The King of Destruction's Baldr was a wide-scale extermination type — one that killed great numbers through sheer force.

Like skills, items, and jobs, Embryos also had compatibility.

Just like Franklin was certain he could win against Figaro and Xunyu, who both focused on individual power, he was now certain that he couldn't win against the King of Destruction.

The barrage of attacks had already felled 10,000, and it wouldn't be too long until there was nothing left. The surviving monsters followed their imprinting and tried to split up, but it was obvious they wouldn't last against *that* firepower.

The King of Destruction, true to his name, would destroy them all.

He was the kingdom's most powerful. He was the country's strongest Master, bearing the Embryo with the greatest firepower. He could never be stopped by mere numbers with half-baked abilities.

"...I guess this is it," Franklin muttered as he realized that his Plan C had failed completely.

It would take some time for the Suicide Series to be completely exterminated, but they could never harm Gideon now.

Even if, by some freak miracle, some monsters survived the onslaught, the other Masters on the scene would have no trouble mopping them up.

"I lost Plan A to Ray Starling, Plan B to the Superior Killer, and Plan C — the one that took the longest to prepare — to the King of Destruction..." The fact that he was being cornered made Franklin laugh in self-derision. "Ha ha ha ha... Funny how they just keep getting stronger every time I use a nastier plan..."

At this point, there was simply no way for Franklin to win. The King of Orchestras, Veldorbell was down, Hugo Lesseps had abandoned him, and the traitorous Masters on his side were thoroughly unreliable.

We'd probably be able to turn it all around if those two decide to participate, Franklin thought. But he knew that it wouldn't happen. The two girls he'd counted as his joker had dropped out of the scene the moment they'd found out that the first princess hadn't come to Gideon.

Hell, if she *were here, we could... No, that's stupid. What am I even thinking?* Franklin even went as far as to remember a certain person who was no longer at his side, and ridiculed himself for it.

“...Enough.”

He looked down at Pandemonium, the battlefield, and Gideon with the coldest of looks on his face.

“All right, I get it. I can’t win this, no matter what.” As though convincing himself, he spoke those words and reached into his lab coat’s pocket. “So I’ll just delete both your victory and my defeat.”

He pressed the button to activate his final pawn.

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Central arena, underground

As the many people in the arena's audience watched the broadcast with either joy or worry, a certain something 4,000 metels underground was digging through the bedrock and making its way towards the surface.

It was a monster highly reminiscent of a centipede.

Using the spinning, drill-like appendage on its head, it broke through the tough bedrock and charged towards its destination.

The monster's name was the NDW, short for the Nuclear Dragon Worm, and it was the final piece that Franklin had prepared for his plan.

The NDW was a creature that had been developed using a Demi-Dragon Worm as its base, and that gave it a great tunneling ability. However, that certainly wasn't its main feature.

The NDW was equipped with a single, extremely powerful weapon.

Since it was underground, no one could see the creature, but if they did, they'd notice that its chest was shining red.

It was basically a nuclear bomb.

Franklin had defeated an Ancient Legendary UBM called "Nuke Dragon, Untergang" and used its special reward to create the NDW.

Once activated, it would burn everything in a two kilometel radius in a storm of fire and radiation. Naturally, the NDW would die as well, but it wouldn't mind that. Right from the start, the monster had been designed to be a self-destruction superweapon.

The NDW was the main component of Plan D for "destroy," the plan that Franklin had decided to start if the many Suicide Series monsters from Plan C somehow failed.

It was his spade — the final ace up his sleeve — and using it would be the equivalent of flipping the entire game board upside down.

If the NDW reached the surface and blew up, everyone in the arena would die. That would include the tian spectators, Count Gideon himself, and the Masters still there.

Of course, the arena — the symbol of the city — would blow up, as well.

The severe losses would bring great chaos and despair upon the kingdom, and the country would be unable to claim they'd been victorious against Franklin.

He'd prepared the NDW to prevent the kingdom and its people from rebuilding, on the off chance that they might attain victory against him.

Franklin would've liked to have kept the central arena and its precious functions for when the imperium gained control over the kingdom, but even that was nothing compared to the possibility of losing.

"DRRRRRRR..."

The NDW drilled through the hard bedrock, making short work of it. At the rate it was going, it would reach the surface within the next few minutes or so. It would fulfill Franklin's desire and burn his defeat along with Gideon.

When it came close to the surface, its high-quality biological audio sensors began picking up the voices of the people above.

"Go, KoD!"

"Masters! Please do your best!"

"Please help us..."

Most of the voices were supporting the King of Destruction and the other Masters fighting the monsters, while the rest were worried about whether they would see tomorrow. But none of them were overcome by despair.

Clearly, none of them had any idea that they would be wiped from this world the moment the NDW reached the surface in just a few minutes.

The creature didn't think much of it, mostly because it wasn't equipped with the ability to think. The NDW's only role was to "stand by below the arena, wait for the signal, rise, and blow up," so it didn't need to have any sort of thoughts.

Even its biological audio sensors were nothing but a means of knowing where it had to rise. Thus, the NDW didn't pay any heed to the people's voices...

"Magic Range Extension, Magic Power Magnification, Magic Area Designation Magnification, Magic Conceal."

...even when someone was speaking a curious set of words.

"Now, for the MP I'll give to the magnification skills... All right, I'll go with 500,000 each."

It sounded like delirious gibberish to those who didn't understand, and delusional nonsense to those who did.

Naturally, the NDW, not having any mind to speak of, ignored the words. But then...

“Mud Clap.”

...the very next moment, it was rendered completely immobile. It was unable to move even a single one of its many legs.

“DDRRRRRR?!”

Though the NDW couldn’t think, the thoroughly unexpected event caused errors in its programming which made it release a sound much like a shriek.

It tried moving the drill on its head, but it couldn’t spin at all. In fact, the burden of even trying to move it made the drill break.

Of course, the NDW couldn’t understand what was happening to it. But anyone looking at the situation from the side would surely realize that the NDW was *surrounded by ground compressed to the point of becoming ultra hard*.

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The central arena’s audience was astir.

It was caused by the ground below them slightly shaking.

Though earthquakes in the kingdom hadn’t been all that uncommon recently, the suddenness of this shaking made the people panic slightly.

Still, since there was no aftershock, most peopled believed that it had been nothing but a side effect of the raging battle outside, and they quickly shifted their attention back to the broadcast.

Among the people, there was a man that muttered something inaudible while looking downwards. The turban and the skin-concealing, loose clothing he wore made him look highly Arabic.

“I used about as much as that other time... but it seems it was too much,” he said and sighed. “Should’ve used a third of that.”

His pensive face made the middle-aged spectator at his side call out to him.

“Hey, what’s up, lad? Why the muttering?”

The Arabian-looking man looked back at him with a troubled expression.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said. “There was a *bug* below, and it caught my attention.”

The words made the middle-aged man look at him in shock before bursting into laughter. “Ha ha ha! You care about bugs in this situation?! I can’t tell if that’s tough or weak! Oh well, it’s not like we can do much from here! Let’s just leave it to the King of Destruction and the other Masters!”

“Ahaha, yes. Let’s leave it to them.” The Arabian-looking man laughed and chose to watch the broadcast along with the fellow spectator.

3,000 metels under them, Franklin’s final pawn, the NDW, was completely bound and unable to move.

That had been done by the basic earth spell of Mud Clap, but the insane amounts of magic used had brought its effects far beyond “basic.”

The worm was equipped with a powerful tunneling ability, yet it couldn’t even shake one of its legs. It was as though it was lodged into a casket designed specifically for it.

The NDW had been rendered incapable of doing anything.

To prevent it from accidentally exploding while underground, Franklin had made sure to set it so that it would only blow up when it reached its target.

And now that it was stuck below ground, his last pawn was rendered completely useless, and a few minutes later, Xunyu used her ultimate skill to rip out its core and kill it.

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Jeand Grasslands

“Just a few more minutes...” Franklin sighed and muttered after pressing the button to activate the NDW.

In Franklin’s final act of terror, his game became nothing but an event where he simply waited for the result. Regardless of whether it ended with the NDW’s explosion or his own death penalty, it was all over for him.

“There were just too many unexpected factors,” he muttered.

The Superior Killer, the RSK’s defeat, Hugo’s disaffection, and then the appearance of the King of Destruction. Though Franklin had taken measures to assure his success, the unforeseen factors had just been too many for him.

“Especially that King of Destruction. Guy’s just unfair.”

The King of Destruction’s Embryo’s artillery had destroyed both Franklin’s Suicide Series and the ground beneath. The Jeand Grasslands were grassy no longer.

“Well, at least all the shots he’s firing cost materials, just like my monsters, so it probably hurts him as much as it does me,” Franklin muttered.

He assumed that this barrage had cost the King of Destruction about 3,000,000,000 lir, which made him grin in a satisfied manner.

But at the same time, a question came to his mind.

“So... why isn’t he attacking Pandemonium, again?”

That firepower and range would’ve made short work of Franklin’s Embryo.

He considered why the man wasn’t doing it, and quickly noticed the reason at the edge of his vision.

The second princess was not far from him, sleeping at the top of Pandemonium.

That’s right, Franklin realized. He wasn’t the only one riding his Embryo — he was accompanied by one of the most important figures in the country.

The King of Destruction couldn’t use that infernal artillery when Franklin had such a hostage.

Franklin now knew the reason why he’d avoided attacking Pandemonium, but that brought him to his second question.

“Why didn’t he use the Embryo from the start?”

That battleship could’ve easily taken care of the 5,000 monsters released first. And yet, the King of Destruction had taunted Franklin with his proclamation and gone out of his way to show off and waste time fighting the monsters without his Embryo. He’d only started using the battleship when the 50,000 monsters had been about to make their move.

It was just illogical.

Almost as if...

“He has something planned!” The moment he shouted that, a silver silhouette passed the edge of his vision.

Before he could confirm what it was, he heard hooves hit the top of Pandemonium and felt the silver silhouette land behind him.

“Mh...”

Franklin felt the ominous presence, but he was above doing anything as pathetic as hastily turning around in shock. That was mostly due to the fact that he had Life Link — the skill that transferred damage done to him over to his monsters.

DGP, KOS, and all his other minion monsters were already destroyed, but he still had Pandemonium. The Embryo was basically a giant monster, and Franklin believed that, even though King of Destruction could made short work of it, the person standing behind him couldn’t damage it all that much.

Thus, with a certain degree of calmness, he slowly turned around.

“Yo. You sure have an annoying habit of charging in on the front lines, don’t you... Ray?”

“Well, I still have some unfinished business,” the man replied.

The man standing there was exactly who Franklin thought it would be:

Ray Starling.

Chapter Five: Game, Set, Match

Jeand Grasslands

The battle in the Jeand Grasslands was approaching its end.

The army of over 55,000 monsters was already down to half of that number, and the many Masters on the scene, especially the King of Destruction, were quickly taking care of those still standing.

Franklin also didn't have any more of his unique monsters. The RSK had been felled by Ray Starling, while DGP and KOS had been destroyed by the man's brother.

The fights in the streets of Gideon were abating, as well.

The freed monsters and the traitors had been more or less exterminated, while the King of Orchestras, the second strongest imperium Master on the scene, had been given the death penalty.

The direction of the battle was fixed, and Franklin's defeat was now inevitable.

Normally, the surviving Dryfean forces would have ended the battle by retreating, but they displayed no intention of stopping. After all, the overwhelming majority of those remaining were monsters of the Suicide Series, an army of biological weapons whose cells practically screamed for them to charge and kill until death. They were the reason why the kingdom's Masters were still fighting and why the King of Destruction's Baldr continued its infernal artillery.

Even now, the Suicide Series — and chunks of the ground, along with them — were being scattered into the wind by the battleship's bombardment.

It was happening a short distance away from the kingdom's Masters, and one of them was keenly observing the sight.

"Ray's brother's Embryo sure is something," muttered Rook to himself, feeling much like someone watching a firework show.

He wasn't alone in that. Just about every one of the low-rank Masters present on the battlefield was doing the exact same thing.

When the many high-rank Masters had escaped the barrier surrounding the central arena, the newbies had been told to stand back.

It wasn't because they would get in the way, but because the high-ranks had a consensus that the newbies had worked too hard to get the death penalty here.

Rook himself was unable to keep up with their speed without using Union Jack or Liz's protection, so he could only agree that he had no place on the front lines.

"High firepower artillery..." he muttered. "Honestly, I'm not sure if that *fits* him all that well..."

That sentiment aside, Rook was in absolute awe at Baldr's power, proficiency, and precision. It fired countless shots, yet none of them hit Ray as he made his way towards Pandemonium.

Despite being a newbie just like Rook, Ray was still out there fighting. He'd broken through the enemy lines and gone after the leader, Franklin.

Rook had seen Ray and Shu talk to each other. The two hadn't spoken aloud, and instead had used the Telepathy Cuffs Shu'd given Ray before he'd left the arena. Nevertheless, Rook had been able to correctly assume what they'd talked about.

Ray had said that he wanted to get to Franklin atop of Pandemonium. Shu had decided to help him.

By their own will, with no hesitation to speak of, they instantly set out to do what they had to do.

Rook found it nothing short of dazzling, and observed Baldr's artillery while basking in the aftertaste of the sentiment.

Suddenly, something caught his attention.

"Hm...?"

It was somewhere in the area ravaged by Baldr's attacks.

"That's..."

Surrounded by explosions and dust, there was a familiar silhouette.

It quickly disappeared beyond the veil. Rook could easily tell that it went towards Pandemonium and fully understood the reason why.

Rook heaved a sigh, understanding that this had happened because of his carelessness. Absentminded as *she* was, he'd left her all alone without any supervision. But at the same time...

"That's much better than merely hesitating..." he murmured to himself.

...he was a bit satisfied.

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“Ray Starling has arrived at the upper part of Pandemonium,” Baldr reported to its Master.

"Right," Shu said as he swung his fist. It landed directly on a Suicide Series monster, instantly obliterating and making it vanish.

The unfortunate creatures stood no chance against fists that could instantly kill legendary monsters.

To add to that, his Right of Destruction negated most defensive skills and fatal damage negation effects, such as those provided by the Lifesaving Brooch. Some of the Suicides he’d pulverized had impressive resistances, but those meant nothing before his punches. Yet the Suicides continued attacking him, showing no fear whatsoever.

Their minds weren’t even equipped to consider their own lives, so they kept on charging towards Shu — towards certain death.

“Mh...” he muttered.

It was easy to describe it as disgusting and call it a day, but Shu felt like their way of existence was a brief glimpse into the mind of their creator, Franklin.

He clearly defines what he has to gain, what to discard, what to win, and what to spend for that purpose, Shu thought, feeling that Franklin was much like himself and a bit like Ray in that regard.

Shu looked up at Pandemonium, where Ray should be facing Franklin, and recalled what his brother had told him over the Telepathy Cuffs.

I have something I have to do and a question I have to ask him. Can you help me get to him?

Remembering Ray’s request made Shu form a faint smile.

“You just do whatever you think you have to,” he muttered as he looked up at the top of Pandemonium, towards Ray. “Whatever happens, I’ll set things straight. That’s my role as your big bro.”

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Franklin, the mastermind behind the evening’s terrorist plot, was grinning.

The tables had completely turned, and the numerous monsters he had made were being exterminated by overwhelming destruction and a unified will to protect Gideon. Despite it all, Franklin stood atop his Pandemonium and faced Ray Starling with a smile on his face.

“KoD over there is doing all the needed work,” he said. “You’re damaged all over, Ray-boy. Why didn’t you just stay back and sleep?”

Ray’s appearance more or less confirmed Franklin’s suspicions that the King of Destruction’s strange actions were nothing but a distraction. His flashy performance had attracted Franklin’s attention, allowing Ray to arrive at the top of Pandemonium.

The fact that Ray had been able to ride Silver all the way here without being caught up in the bombardment was all the proof that Franklin needed. Also, the explosions had killed all the monsters he’d positioned in the Jeand Grasslands to act as sensors. The broadcast monsters around Pandemonium were dead, as well, meaning that no one else could see Franklin face Ray.

“Still... the King of Destruction himself...” Franklin mused.

Franklin had a good reason to believe that the Superior had a reason to help Ray. It was the name.

Along with the stats, Franklin’s Analyzing Eye of Wisdom allowed him to see the name of the King of Destruction — “Shu Starling.”

“Here’s a question, Ray Starling,” he said. “Do you know a Master called ‘Shu Starling’?”

“He’s my big brother,” Ray answered with no hesitation.

Upon hearing that, Franklin nodded in understanding and formed a wry grin. “Two brothers and two sisters,” he said. “The older ones are Superiors and the younger ones are Maiden’s Masters... Helluva funny little coincidence.”

“Huh...?” Ray raised an eyebrow.

“So, what’s so important that you had your brother help you get to me?” Franklin asked.

“I’m here for three reasons.”

“Well, that’s a number. I already know one of them, though.” Franklin pointed at a part of the floor they were standing on, towards a young, unconscious girl. It was Elizabeth, the second princess of the Kingdom of Altar. “You’re here to save her, aren’t you? Your brother can’t attack

Pandemonium while she's here, right?"

Elizabeth was his enemy's Embryo's Achilles' heel. Without her, the King of Destruction would barrage Pandemonium with focused hellfire. Franklin was fully aware of that, so he was being careful not to let Ray take her.

"So what's the second thing?" he asked.

"I have a question," Ray replied.

"A question, eh?"

This was within Franklin's expectations. If Ray had only been here to save the girl, he could've done it while atop Silver, not giving Franklin a chance to react. And if Ray had only come here to defeat him, he could've hit him with a surprise attack. The fact that he'd gone out of his way to get off his horse and stand there talking meant that he was obviously here for an exchange.

"What do you want to hear about?" asked Franklin. "My recommended hunting spots? The UBM habitats I know? Or perhaps my country's internal affairs?"

Franklin had a hunch that it wasn't any of those... but...

"Why did you do this?"

But the question that actually came wasn't within his expectations.

"Why... What? Didn't I talk about my goal? Did you forget it?" Franklin shot back.

"You wanted to give the kingdom's Masters an embarrassing defeat and break the Altarian fighting spirit by showing them a devastated Gideon, right?"

"Hey, so you do remember."

"That's not what I'm asking, though."

"What's the question, then?" Franklin asked with a ridiculing look in his eyes and a jeering tone.

Ray looked directly back at him.

"What do you think of the tians?" he asked.

The question momentarily confused Franklin, but he quickly processed it and understood what it meant. "Oh, you want to know whether I think that *Infinite Dendrogram* is a world or a game?"

Ray nodded.

"I see, I see... AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!" Franklin roared with laughter.

As though broken in more ways than one, Franklin laughed out loud until he had to catch a breath.

"Anyone who thinks this is *just a game* is either a retard or a child who believes everything he's told," he said with the most serious expression imaginable. "A game? Like hell. The realism, the models, the *life*. Everything besides the system-related stuff is way beyond game level. Honestly, if the system weren't there to try and convince us that we're just playing something, none of this would look like a game."

"Tsk..." Ray said.

"I have no idea what all of this actually is. I'd assume it's the human experimentation phase for the creation of a national... no, worldwide virtual reality, but that's way above our current cutting-edge tech, so I don't think it's likely. For all I know, those guys who say this is an actual other world or that aliens are messing with us could be right."

"...Then what do you think of the people living here?" Ray asked slowly.

"AI with minds so sophisticated, they might as well be human. Or perhaps actual people from another world. Or maybe *life* that conforms to those boundaries. At the very least, I don't think they're just 1s and 0s."

He paused.

"So I want to make this perfectly clear, bucko. If this were our Earth, if my situation, conditions, and powers were the same in real life, I'd still go through with this plan. I would act exactly the same way as I act in here. *No matter how many thousands it would kill.*" He proclaimed that with absolute certainty. "That's what you wanted to know, isn't it, Ray-baby? A Maiden's Master like you just couldn't help but wonder why I would design such an evil plot, right?"

"How could you do this?!" Ray asked with a voice wrung out from the very depths of his heart. Those were the words of someone who recognized this world's lives as real and couldn't tolerate the tragedy that had nearly befallen them. The words didn't have a hint of theatrics or falsehood in them; they were all Ray's mind made vocal.

"Hm..." Franklin silently looked at him, finding the young man somewhat dazzling. He realized that they were alike, but completely different at the same time. With respect to that fact, Franklin chose to respond with the same honesty. "Because I never want to lose again. I've had enough of being controlled. I'll live free, create what I want, and enjoy the world as I please. No one will ever bind me. I've decided to crush anyone trying to obstruct my way of life."

He then fell silent. He didn't have anything more to say.

Franklin's words were vague, and he was probably the only one who could ever understand them. Nevertheless, the mad scientist felt that he said all he had to.

"I see how it is." Ray nodded in understanding.

To avoid defeat, Franklin wouldn't hesitate to cause tragedies, and that was exactly why he had to be defeated.

His pursuit for his way of life would bring about the most devastating of calamities, which was all the reason needed to stop him at all costs.

"Anyway, that's the second thing settled," said Franklin, his tone back to normal. "So what's the third?"

"It's th— hgh!" Ray tried to answer, but his words were cut short by Pandemonium starting to shake wildly — not because it had started to move, but it because it was being barraged by an artillery storm.

"What the... KoD is attacking?" asked Franklin, thoroughly confused. "But I still have the princess. Did he finally snap or someth...?" He stopped mid-sentence and became even more puzzled.

He'd shifted his gaze to the princess's position, and realized that she'd disappeared.

Ray wasn't the one responsible for this.

Franklin had been observing him this whole time, so he was absolutely certain that Ray hadn't been the one to take the princess. Someone else had sneaked up here, taken Elizabeth, and saved her. Franklin knew exactly which person would be capable of that.

"The Superior Killer..." he said. "So you were a decoy, too."

While Franklin had been focusing on Ray's moves and words, the Superior Killer had come up and saved the princess. He couldn't tell whether they'd planned this out, or whether the Superior Killer had merely taken advantage of Ray's actions.

Regardless of that, Pandemonium had lost the one thing protecting it from Baldr's artillery. Countless shots pierced into the factory and exploded, distorting the already-strange creature even further and gradually bringing it to the ground.

“This sure is intense,” Franklin said as he kept himself standing by holding onto the railings installed atop of Pandemonium.

Because Ray was here, none of the attacks were hitting the top, but Franklin was more than aware that the factory would soon collapse.

Even the stat summary said that it had less than a tenth of its total HP left.

“Mh...”

Franklin’s death and Pandemonium’s destruction weren’t outside of the expected outcomes. His defeat would simply trigger Plan D. Or so it should have, but...

“They’ve taken care of it...” Franklin sighed.

A glance at the device he was holding told him that the NDW had lost its life. And Gideon remained the same. That could only mean that the central piece of the final plan, the spade, had been killed before self-destructing. It had vanished without doing any damage to speak of.

“I had a feeling this might happen,” he muttered.

The King of Destruction had been the one to show up here in the grasslands, rather than either of the Superiors from the Clash. That situation had made them into a wild card, which meant that this turn of events was entirely possible.

Normally, the spade’s underground tunneling ability would be impossible to counter, but the ultimate skill Xunyu displayed in the Clash of the Superiors would make it really easy. If Franklin had known about that ability before the Clash, he’d have prepared something else, but thinking of what-ifs was meaningless at this point.

With DGP and NDW, Franklin had now wasted two monsters made with special rewards — ones he could never make again. And with Plan D falling apart, Franklin had lost not only his chance of winning, but his chance of “not losing,” as well. If he was given the death penalty here, he’d officially suffer a crushing defeat.

Perhaps he could make it a bit less overwhelming by escaping, but...

“...It’s too late,” he muttered.

Large as it was, Pandemonium had nearly no means of fighting, and it was on the verge of being completely destroyed.

The Castling monsters he’d positioned all over the Jeand Grasslands had been thoroughly exterminated, too. Franklin’s death penalty was imminent.

After all... Ray was charging straight towards him.

Not even wasting his time getting on Silver, he dashed on his own two feet, showing no hesitation whatsoever about Baldr's barrage.

I guess he expected these attacks, Franklin thought. *Well, they're brothers, after all. They probably agreed on this or just knew what the other would do without even having to talk it through... I'm kinda jealous.* Feeling a little bit sentimental, Franklin breathed a light sigh.

"So the third reason you're here is to kill me," he muttered.

Ray gradually closed the distance between them, but Franklin had no means of doing anything about it. He'd already used up all the custom monsters in his arsenal, so there was no one to protect him now.

Very well. I'll accept this defeat. He gave up and prepared himself for his death penalty. *But someday, I'll...*

At that moment, a silhouette arrived at the top of Pandemonium.

"Hgh!" Ray exclaimed in surprise.

"Eh?" Franklin voiced his confusion. The silhouette was a half-broken Magingear. Much of its metallic armor was lost, and it was only complete because of the frozen coating. It was the unit piloted by Hugo and armed with Cocytus.

"Kh..."

If the Magingear had been a person, the damage would surely have killed it.

Some of the damage had been caused by his battle against Rook's group, but he'd gained most of it after undoing La Porte de l'Enfer and letting the Masters fight the monsters. There was no way he could have remained unscathed while breaking through the veil of fiery destruction created by Baldr's artillery.

Despite being more damaged than the Magingear he'd used against Gouz the day prior, this Magingear was still able to move.

"AAARRGHHHH!" the pilot roared. It was a voice that the roleplayer acting as a chivalrous knight would never use.

With that, the Magingear stood right before Ray, as though to protect Franklin.

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Hugo had spent much of the time until and during the plan doing nothing but doubting himself. He'd wondered whether he should participate in the plan, whether he was right in doing what he'd chosen to, and whether he should face Ray, who was a friend from the day before.

While he was doubting himself, he'd been defeated by Rook, heard his words, and seen Franklin begin Plan C, filling him with even more doubts.

While hesitating, he had undone La Porte de l'Enfer's Frozen debuff that was trapping the Masters near the western gate. He'd done that instantly, without thinking it through.

Hugo had thought that he couldn't let things continue as they were, but even then, he hadn't been sure if it had been the right thing to do. That action had helped stop the tragedy before his eyes, but it had been a move against Franklin — the person Hugo so greatly admired.

Then, in the midst of those doubts, Hugo had remembered that Franklin had lied and planned to destroy Gideon, which filled him with even more doubt.

Once Rook and the other Masters had gone out to the Jeand Grasslands and left him alone, the Charm effect had disappeared, and he had hesitated further still.

But then, all of a sudden, Hugo had stopped thinking and doubting himself.

He'd realized that he couldn't do anything if he'd spent all his time hesitating.

Once all the doubts and self-questioning went away, he'd arrived at a single, ultimate answer for what he had to do.

It was the answer that was always inside Hugo and the girl controlling him, Yuri.

It was...

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"*I'll protect my sister!*"

With those words, the Magingear began moving.

"Even if I have to defeat you!" The frame was on the verge of shattering, and it only held together because of Cocytus. Nevertheless, the icy machine soldier charged towards Ray. Though he had been a friend the day prior, Hugo brought everything he had to his attack.

"Bring it, Hugo," Ray said, ready to face him.

He didn't know Hugo and Franklin's relationship. But as an opponent and as a friend, he wanted to face him properly.

With that, the Paladin and the High Pilot... the two Maiden's Masters... clashed.

It was their second battle since the one at the western gate, and surely the last one they'd have today. The clash seemed to last no more than a blink of an eye.

"Motor... Slash!" Hugo roared. His Magingear raised its right arm and tried to attack with a swing of the icy cross-sword. "...Hgh! Kh!"

That single motion was the straw that broke the camel's back. The frost armor in the area broke apart, the whole right arm was dislodged from the torso, and the power of the swing made it fly off into the distance.

It was the same arm that had suffered from Ray's Vengeance and the Devil-Dragon-Man's Tri-Horn Grand Dash. The many powerful attacks it'd gone through had brought it to its limit, and the skill just now had gone past it.

"Not yet! Motor Slash!" Hugo roared again as he instantly used the skill with his other arm. The icy blade went right towards Ray, ready to split him.

"I can't break through the armor like this," said Ray. "Then I'll just...!"

He loosened his grip on his black longsword, Nemesis, and threw her up into the air. Then he bent his body to avoid the sharp cross-blade and *extended his right arm into its path*.

"Gh...!"

The frozen blade cleanly cut it off, dealing great damage to Ray and making him bleed. However, the sharpness of the weapon made it so that the impact didn't blow him away.

"Hgh...!" Ray exclaimed as he, still bent, moved to the Magingear's side.

As he did that, Nemesis fell back towards him.

However, with his left arm being charred and his right arm being completely lost, he had no means of holding her hilt.

Or so they thought.

"Hh...!" Ray exclaimed.

“What?!” Hugo shouted.

His surprise wasn’t without reason, for Ray had *bitten into Nemesis’ hilt with his teeth*.

“Mfh...!” Ray couldn’t say a word, but...

“Very well!” said Nemesis, having read his mind.

Ray moved his head in a way that made the greatsword in his teeth reach into the frozen armor coating the Magingear’s cockpit. It wasn’t enough to break through, but that didn’t matter at all.

“Vengeance... Is Mine!” said Nemesis, activating the skill.

The counterattack doubled the damage Ray had suffered and delivered it into the frozen armor, instantly making it vanish. Without anything to protect him, the black blade dug into Hugo’s chest and pierced his heart.

“Ah...” he breathed his last before becoming particles of light and vanishing out of this world. His Embryo, Cocytus, disappeared soon after, leaving nothing but the remains of the badly damaged Magingear.

“Argh!” Ray roared.

He was done with Hugo, but he still had some unfinished business. Nemesis fell out of his mouth as he charged towards his target — Franklin.

The mad scientist didn’t even run... or perhaps he even forgot to do it upon seeing Hugo vanish.

“Frank...lin...!”

Ray had lost his right arm and even let go of Nemesis, yet he still dashed towards Franklin. After all, he was facing the very reason why he was here, his ultimate goal for coming to this place.

Ray wasn’t here just to save the princess or to present Franklin with his question. In fact, even defeating him was a secondary goal. He was here for something he’d decided he’d do long ago.

I’d like to punch that idiot for sending a kid to a place this dangerous. My fist is going straight into your face. Keep it clean for me, Superior.

Indeed — Ray only wanted to punch him.

“FRANKLIIIIIINN!” Ray forced his charred right fist into Franklin’s left cheek, finally settling the score.

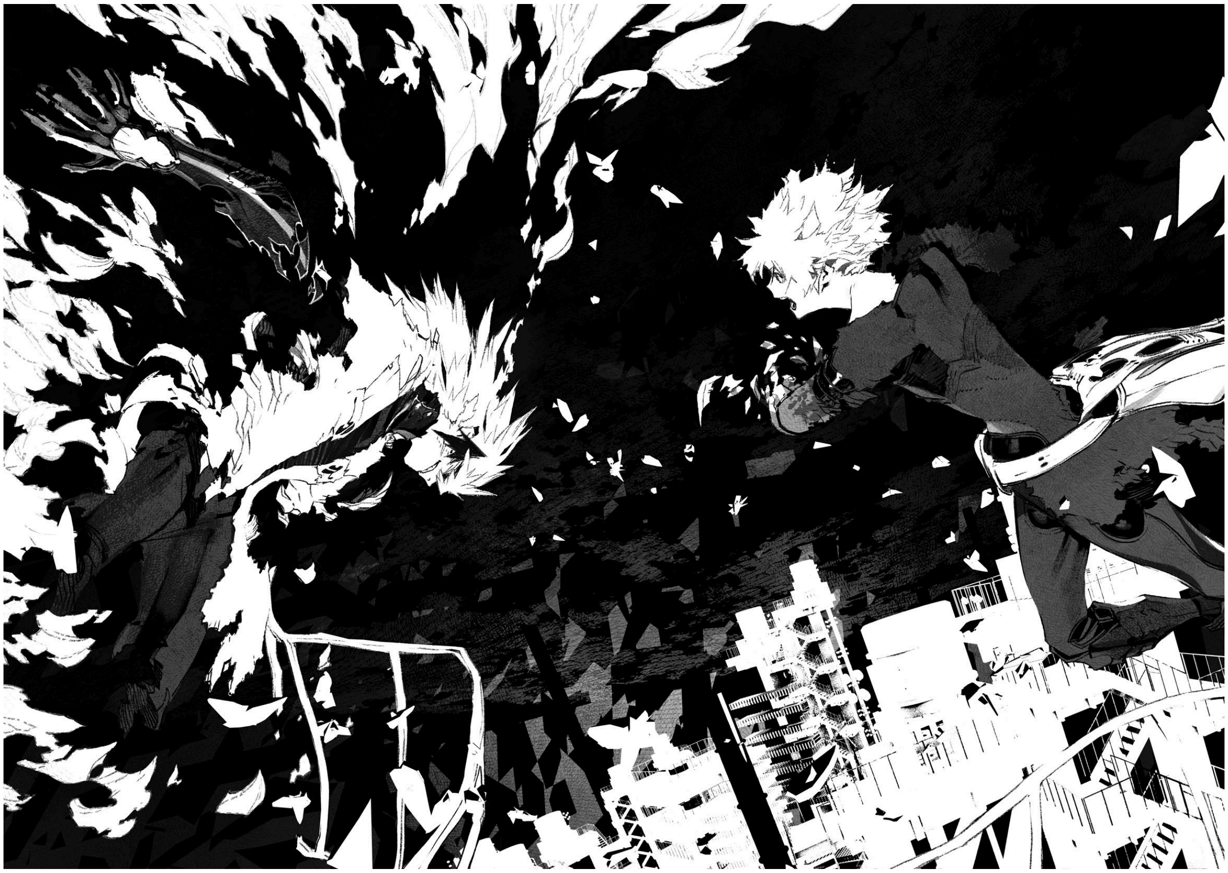
“GHAH?!” Franklin exclaimed.

The power of the impact caused Ray’s fragile arm to begin crumbling. But the moment it hit Franklin’s face, the Miasmaflame Gauntlets released a burst of flame that spread across the mad scientist’s body, quickly turning him into a human torch.

Franklin no longer had a Lifesaving Brooch or any monsters he could use for Life Link. The purgatorial fires made short work of his mediocre HP, and he soon began to vanish.

“Kgh...” Just as he was about to be taken by this world’s rules and disappear, Franklin opened his mouth and spoke. “We’ll win next time.”

And with those words as his last, he became particles of light.



Thus, the Dryfean Superior that had designed and executed this nightmarish plan upon the people of the kingdom vanished at the hands of a single newbie.

With that, the incident was settled.

Or perhaps this outcome had been set in stone long ago, when a certain Superior had tried to use a certain little girl, and a certain newbie had tried to help her.

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Twenty minutes after Franklin’s disappearance, the last of the Suicide Series were downed, ending the battle at Gideon.

Traitors working under Franklin were dead or deserted.

The Suicide Series was thoroughly exterminated.

The club, King of Orchestras, Veldorbell, was dead.

The spade, NDW, was dead.

The heart, High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps, was dead.

The diamond, Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, was dead.

Thus marked the end of the terrorism at the city of duels.

Franklin’s Game was over.

Epilogue A: The Superiors

Journalist/Death Shadow, Marie Adler

A few hours had passed since Franklin's annoying little game, and dawn was only a few moments away.

Tonight, I'd fought the King of Orchestras, gathered and broken the devices all over Gideon, protected the city against the Suicide Series, broken through the King of Destruction's bombing to get on Pandemonium, saved Ellie, and handed her unconscious body to what remained of the Royal Guard.

Naturally, I was thoroughly drained, especially since it was the second night in a row I'd been running around doing stuff. Sure, my Superior Job gave me some great stats, but even so, I had my limits.

I definitely wasn't the only one who had found this night to be highly taxing. Ray and Rook had gone through a number of harsh battles, as well. In fact, Ray had even lost both of his arms.

Franklin's death penalty made Pandemonium vanish, making Ray fall towards the ground below. Thankfully, he was saved by Nemesis and their Prism Steed, which was named "Silver," apparently.

The girl picked up Ray's right arm, and the Masters on the scene were able to put it back on him using high-rank healing magic. It would take a few days until he would be able to move it as smoothly as before, but it wasn't that big of a problem. However, I couldn't say the same for his left arm.

It had been completely Charred and crumbled to pieces because of it, so retrieving it was impossible at this point. And loss of body parts couldn't be fixed by mere high-rank healing magic.

Now, high-rank Embryo ultimate skills would probably do the trick, but as far as I was aware, the kingdom didn't have any high-ranks whose ultimates were focused on healing others.

There was *one* person who'd be able to heal Ray's wound. The High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso, a Superior Job from the priest grouping and an owner of a Superior Embryo, could give Ray his arm back in the blink of an eye.

But I couldn't recommend relying on her.

She was the head of a cult, and the prospect of being indebted to her was nothing short of frightening. Worst case scenario, it could even go beyond *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Considering these circumstances, I'd recommended that he just take the death penalty, since that would have him return completely healed.

However, Ray had shown no intention of doing so, giving me the wild response that, "I still have my right arm, and I found out I can even use my mouth if I have to. I can make this work."

Upon hearing him mention using his mouth, Nemesis had put on a distant look and muttered "Does that count as a kiss...?"

Personally, I thought that biting into the hilt of her greatsword form had been quite unlike kissing.

Anyway, following that exchange, Ray had basically collapsed and logged off, making it obvious just how drained he was, both physically and mentally. No one could fault him for it.

Rook was quite tired, as well, so he'd logged off right after feeding Liz some mithril to restore her volume.

And so, I'd ended up being the only one of our party still online to greet the dawn.

I was extremely sleepy myself, but as both a Journalist and a manga artist, I just couldn't miss this beautiful opportunity to collect quality material.

I mean, it's not every day you get to be on the scene of a settled terrorist incident, I thought.

Anyway, time for a rundown of all that had happened.

Approximately one hour after the last of the Suicide Series was exterminated, Count Gideon declared that the trouble was officially over.

With Ellie saved and Franklin's forces destroyed, he had no reason not to.

Well, there were some player killers that had escaped, but none of them would be stupid enough to do anything at this point, likely because they were afraid of being erased by the King of Destruction or the Super Gladiator.

Speaking of the King of Destruction, Count Gideon had stated that he planned to reward him, Ray, and all the other Masters that had helped take care of the incident. I'd found that surprising, considering he also had to pay for city repairs. It was hard to tell whether he was just *that* rich or simply a good guy.

Thinking about city repairs made me wonder how much it would cost to fix the area destroyed by me and King of Orchestras and...

Yeah, I probably don't want to know, I thought.

As far as I was aware, the damage there had likely been greater than anywhere else, and I couldn't be more thankful for the fact that they didn't know who was responsible.

Anyway, after Gideon's declaration, the people reacted in two ways.

The knights, guards, and other public officials became busy with damage reports and other post-incident business, while the civilians and Masters took to revelry.

It was only to be expected. Franklin had ruined their big event and replaced it with a night of dread, so merrymaking was the natural response to seeing the man responsible for that defeated so thoroughly.

Masters aside, I was quite impressed by the quick recovery from the civilians.

I guess duel city folk are befittingly hardy, I thought.

Still, once the sky turned bright, a significant number of carts and dragon carriages were seen leaving Gideon, and I couldn't really fault them for that. After all, even the so-called strongest city in the kingdom, the one farthest away from the imperium, hadn't been safe from such an incident. It was only natural to expect some merchants to be scared into taking their riches and leaving for another country.

They were most likely heading to Caldina, so this incident had actually ended up being beneficial to them. Not exactly an unexpected effect, but still.

Hm? Now that I think about it, this war was really profitable to them, I thought.

Not only was Caldina the primary destination for wealthy refugees, they'd also experienced a boost in trade with Altar. Naturally, the kingdom wasn't exporting any of its food to Dryfe, so Caldina was there to buy it all up.

Altar hadn't been left without its share of goods, either. Caldina had sold them lots of war-like wares, such as magic items from Huang He or weapons from Tenchi.

But enough about them. Really, it was only natural for the "land of merchants" to take advantage of such a situation.

Back to the aftermath of Franklin's game.

He'd intended to display the powerlessness of the kingdom's Masters, to break the country's fighting spirit and to have it merge with Dryfe through "diplomacy" before the war had a chance to restart.

However, thanks to the hard work from the newbies and the Masters that hadn't been caught by the barrier, Plans A and B had completely failed.

The most significant event during this interval had been the broadcasted battle between Ray and Franklin's unique monster, as it had had the exact opposite of the intended effect. Though Franklin had planned to completely crush him and break his spirit, Ray had achieved a miraculous victory which had uplifted the masses.

That battle had been quite popular among us Masters, too, gaining lots of replies and comments on related discussion boards and video sites.

It was the third biggest *Infinite Dendrogram*-related news story, with the first obviously being the King of Destruction's appearance in the spotlight and his fight against Franklin, and the second being Figaro and Xunyu's Clash of the Superiors.

This incident was sure to get Ray a nickname or two. In fact, people were already exchanging ideas both here and in real-life discussion boards. There was even a meeting going on in the central plaza regarding that.

Normally, such meetings were only held for people who made their debut in the arenas, but this time, they were gathering nickname suggestions for Ray, Rook, and King of Destruction, who was no longer "Unknown."

The proposed nicknames for Ray included, but weren't limited to: "Dark Paladin," because he was a Paladin that certainly didn't look like one; "Prince on the Silver Steed," obviously because he'd been riding Silver; and "The Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson," which made me wonder about the mind behind such a... polarizing name.

Any of those would probably make Ray want to crawl into a hole.

Still, there were some simple, fitting ones that I personally really liked.

Anyway, back to the results of Franklin's plot.

Following the failure of Plan B, Franklin had started Plan C, which had been significantly worse than the other two, clearly designed to show that "resistance will only make it worse." I and a few other Masters had been there to buy some time, but it was clear that we wouldn't have been able to hold for long, and the damage would've been great.

Enter the King of Destruction, who had instantly turned it all around.

The thousands of monsters that had been meant to overrun Gideon had become nothing but punching bags for the King of Destruction to show off his power.

Franklin had intended to show just how powerless the kingdom's Masters were, but had ended up doing the exact opposite. At the very least, it was now clear that the kingdom wouldn't go down without a fight.

But it was hard to say that it'd been a good thing for the country.

This incident had not only displayed the power of the kingdom's Masters, but also confirmed a certain truth that was on the minds of the country's people... and just about everyone else in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Basically, a war force with Superiors was on a completely different level than one without.

A Superior was capable of razing an entire city, or perhaps even a whole country.

Franklin had created monsters that surpassed 50,000 in number, while the King of Destruction had completely annihilated them all. Evidently, they had only been able to have a proper fight because they were both Superiors, while the rest of us were only waiting to be massacred.

It was more obvious than ever that a Superior could only be countered by another Superior.

Of course, there were exceptions, among which was my avatar, Marie Adler.

Marie had a Superior Job, but she wasn't a Superior because she didn't have a Superior Embryo, and the reason why she'd received the nickname "Superior Killer" was because she'd defeated a Superior and sent the criminal to the gaol.

Mind you, that victory had been the result of many factors, such as my abilities, the Superior's abilities, various conditions, and a lot of tactics. All of them had come together, letting me emerge victorious against the King of Plagues, Candy Carnage — a wide-scale suppression type, wide-scale extermination type Master bearing the title of "the greatest tian murderer" and the nickname of "Legions Lost."

...Honestly, I still find it hard to believe I won, I thought.

Back to war matters. The kingdom had been thoroughly devastated in the previous war because there had been no one to counter the imperium's Superiors. In this incident, the kingdom had won because it had the King of Destruction, effectively proving that the outcome of a war was decided by the presence of Superiors or the lack of it. Because of this, the main thing to consider in the next war was the number of Superiors that would participate.

The imperium would obviously have the three that already had accolades from the previous war: the very familiar Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, "The Weakest, The Worst"; Hell General, Logan Goddhart, the "Contradictory Equation"; and King of Beasts, the "Physically Strongest."

If nothing changed, they would be the only ones, but we also had to consider that the imperium had won the previous war event and had given great rewards to those who performed well, so it was reasonable to expect more Superiors to switch to Dryfe.

The kingdom, on the other hand, would only have two, at best: Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts, who came online at highly irregular times, and the King of Destruction, whose appearance in the spotlight had made it safe to expect him to participate. Those two could easily drop to one if Lei-Lei wasn't online on the day of the war.

Of course, they weren't the only Superiors in the kingdom.

The kingdom also had the Over Gladiator, Figaro. He was symbol of the duel city and the one who'd just won against Xunyu, a foreign Superior.

Then there was the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso — the leader of the largest clan in the kingdom and the user of the Lunar Divider Field, said to be the most wicked skill one could face in a large-scale battle.

If they were to participate, they would be an invaluable force against the imperium.

However, Figaro was widely known as a pure solo player, so it was clear he had no intention to take part in a battle involving great numbers. Tsukuyo Fuso, too, had refused to participate because the kingdom hadn't accepted her downright unreasonable condition — to make her cult's teachings into the state religion.

The former was tough on his policy, while the latter was a highly demanding Princess Kaguya, making their participation extremely unlikely.

In fact, Tsukuyo might even switch to the imperium if they accepted her condition that the kingdom wouldn’t.

Not to mention that Dryfe also had more non-Superior forces, both Masters and tians.

The kingdom wouldn’t go down without a fight, but a defeat still seemed completely inevitable.

I wonder what the Superiors themselves think about this, I pondered.

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Duel city Gideon, twelfth district, King of Destruction, Shu Starling

“Man, am I tired,” I grumbled. “I need some booze to bear it.”

“Good job back there,” said Figgy. “Drink all you want. It’s on me. You too, Xunyu.”

“ThanKs,” she replied. “I’m underAge, though, so I’ll just haVE some juice.”

I and two fellow Superiors were sitting around the table, enjoying some drinks. We were in a private room of a high-quality club in Gideon’s twelfth district.

Figgy had reserved this place ahead of time. He’d planned to use it right after the Clash, but thanks to a certain shithead in a lab coat, we’d ended up coming here long after his reserved time was up. Thankfully, the store had been kind enough to allow him to use this room after the incident was over.

I was kinda impressed by the management’s professionalism. Not everyone had the guts to continue working in this situation.

“Honestly, I’m pretty glad we have this place,” I voiced my thoughts. “If we were outside, the number of people around us would be unbearable.”

Mind you, I had run riot in a completely different get-up than I was in now, so maybe they wouldn’t realize it was me. The Scandinavian berserker-like clothing was easy to move around in, but the costumes I wore always made me feel calm.

“Yeah, that’s exactly why I reserved it,” said Figgy. “Sure, we could just log out, but a good battle always makes me want to cool off like this.”

“I get whAT you mean,” Xunyu joined in. “But man, this place has sOme good juice." She emptied her glass and ordered some more.

Well, if that ain't an action befitting her age, I thought. *I really don't know how to feel about her being twice as tall as me.*

"The face under the talisman and the Voice Changing Fu made me suspicious, but you really *are* a kid, aren't you?" I asked.

"I'm turning ten this yEAr," she answered. "That's doubLE digits, so I'm now a prOper lady."

"Really, now?" I said.

Her excessively long limbs might've been the result of a desire to travel far and a wish to grow up. Humpty, the control AI for Embryos, could probably give a more detailed analysis, but all she ever did was lead me to trouble or watch me struggle to take care of it.

"What are your plans now, Xunyu?" asked Figgy.

"I still have a jOb to protect the prince, so I'll be stAYing in the capital," she answered. "Guess I'll also rAid the kingdom's dUNgeons." The items you could get from doing so differed depending on the country you were in, so that was a good idea.

...Speaking of items, I still had to stock up on materials for Baldr's ammo. It'd cost me roughly 3,300,000,000 lir.

"Oh, but rAiding alone can be prEtty hard, especially whEN going deep into a creAted dungeon," Xunyu added.

You'd have to be Figgy to effectively raid dungeons by yourself. Not to mention that you'd also have to have an Embryo you could chat with just to make it more bearable.

"Coming wiTH?" she asked.

"I'm exclusively solo," Figgy replied.

"And I'm not leaving Gideon fur a while," I said.

"Man, you guYs are cold."

I can't just leave while that walking bomb is still here, I thought.

"If you want, I can introduce you to some duel rankers here," Figgy said, proposing an alternative. "They'll probably want to spar with you, too."

"Then should I set you up with the kill rankers I know?" I joined in. "Oh, but I don't know bear they are."

I wonder what Catherine Kongou's up to, I thought.

"Yeah, thAt'll help a lot." Xunyu nodded. "Wait, uhh... Figaro is the kingdOM’s no. 1 duelist, while the beAr is no. 1 in the kill rankings, rigHt?”

“Yes,” Figgy nodded.

“Bearily so,” I said and did the same.

Oh boy, I know where this is going...

“Then how aboUT the no. 1 in clan raNKin—”

“Avoid her,” Figgy and I simultaneously cut her words short.

“...Is she trOUble?” she asked.

In response, we both simply nodded.

We were unfortunate enough to already be acquainted with that shady cultist fox, and I honestly believed that a person was better off not meeting her. Ever.

“I see hOW it is,” Xunyu continued. “Looks like every country’s top clan owner is bad news.”

“Come on, that’s a bit of an exaggeration...” I began. “Wait, is it?”

The kingdom’s fox... Nope.

The imperium’s lab coat shithead... Nope.

Granvaloa’s military nerd... Nope.

Legendaria’s masked lover of little boys and girls... That one deserved a red card.

I didn’t know much about Tenchi’s, and Xunyu’s words implied that Huang He’s was no good, either.

Well, damn, there actually wasn’t a single decent clan top anywhere.

The owner of Caldina’s Sefirot seemed okay, but he was somewhat scary. Like a rabbit living with a pride of lions.

Oh, speaking of Caldina...

“Hey, this is unrelated, but... did anyone in the arena make a move?” I asked.

My question would’ve been unclear to most, but it was more than enough for the two I was talking to.

“I crushed the cOre of the thing below bEfore it could do anYthing, and it was all ovER,” said Xunyu.

“The Physically Strongest didn’t do anything,” added Figgy. “But Caldina’s Magically Strongest got involved, apparently.”

Did he just say “apparently”? “Why the uncertainty?”

“The mONster I killed wasn’t moVing at all,” Xunyu answered. “I later used the skill tO dig through the dirt arOUnd it and... herE."

She put something on the table. It was about the size of a pebble and looked very much like one, too.

I took it in hand and grasped it with about a tenth of my strength, but that wasn't enough to break it.

"Hnrgh!" I grunted as I used a third of my STR, approximately 60,000, which finally made it break. "It's dirt made by binding magic he enhanced several times over. Makes sense why the thing couldn't move."

It's like being in a skintight coffin, I thought. *I know it well. The guy did it to me once...*

"I'm not too smart, so I don't really get it," said Figgy. "Why did they come here, anyway?"

"To watCH our battle, obviousLY," Xunyu answered. "I don't kNOw why the Physically Strongest didn't heLP the lab coat. They're bOth from Dryfe, aftER all."

"Mh..." I fell silent and pondered.

I'd known about the other Superiors in the audience before Figaro's and Xunyu's match even began. I'd even told Figgy about them.

Their presence here hadn't been strange at all. It was only natural for Superiors to investigate the abilities of other Superiors, since they were their primary opponents in this world. UBM hunting, special events, war — there were many situations in which Superiors could compete against other Superiors, so knowing their abilities ahead of time was never a bad thing.

So it was only natural for them to come and observe a duel between two Superiors, and honestly, it was strange that we hadn't had anyone from Legendaria here. The country was as much of a neighbor as Dryfe and Caldina.

Figaro and Xunyu had both been fully aware that they were being put under the magnifying glass, and they most likely hadn't used the aces up their sleeves. Figgy hadn't shown his ultimate skill — which not even I knew about — and though Xunyu had used hers, it was clear that she was still hiding something.

That aside...

"This is just a guess," I spoke up. "But I think the Physically Strongest, the King of Beasts, came here with a goal unrelated to Franklin's plot, while the Magically Strongest, The Earth, came here because he knew that

Franklin was about to terrorize Gideon."

"...Isn't thAt the other way arouND?" asked Xunyu, and it was a reasonable question.

But...

"The King of Beasts is widely considered to be the strongest being in all the three western countries. If Franklin's terror plot involved her, then it would've also been designed around her," I said.

The fact that Franklin's Game had been so layered and focused so much on using as few of his forces as possible made it obvious that the King of Beasts hadn't been working for him.

"The Earth, on the other hand, intervened with one of Franklin's plans, making it safe to believe that he came here for this reason. Mind you, this is less about him and more about Caldina. They wouldn't like it if Dryfe merged with Altar, since separated countries are easier to manipulate."

Caldina was surrounded by four land countries and Granvaloa. Having two of them become one would be a huge problem for them, so they'd obviously do something to prevent that.

Though, in the end, they were probably planning to take advantage of the all-out war and take off with all the spoils. It wasn't hard to imagine Caldina invading and conquering weakened countries.

Anyway, the fact that they'd sent The Earth made it clear just how serious they were about this. Honestly, it was entirely possible that he would've done something if I hadn't been on the scene. If that had happened, Jeand Grasslands probably would've had to be renamed "Jeand Desert," "Jeand Wastelands," or "Jeand Swamplands."

Well... not like it was much of a grassland now that I was done with it. My Baldr had blown it sky-high.

"But mAn... The Physically StrONgest and the Magically StronGest, eh?" Xunyu muttered. "Are they reAlly such a big deal? I've never foUght either."

"I've heard that Shu here fought The Earth," said Figgy.

"Oh yeAh, I've heard of those rumORs, too. Which of you wOn?"

That had happened some time before the war... about a year ago in *Dendro* time.

"We tied, I guess?"

"You 'guEss'? What do yOU mean?"

"Exactly what I said. A tie. No clear winner. Match invalid. We pawsitively had to stop because of a third party."

"...What kind of thiRD party could intervene in thAT battle?"

Right when we'd been about to finish it, Humpty and the environment control AI had come over and told us off.

Honestly, we'd probably deserved it, since our battle had completely destroyed a created dungeon.

Anyway, The Earth, eh...? I thought.

I said, "If he came all the way here, he could've at least said hi."

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East of duel city Gideon, Cruella Mountain Belt

The Cruella Mountain Belt was one of the border zones between the Kingdom of Altar and the great desert country of Caldina, and it was one of the trade routes connecting Gideon and the city-states of the commercial union.

Dawn was about to break as several dragon carriages traced the mountainous paths of the belt. Each and every one of them belonged to Caldinian merchants. Since their country was a land of deserts, they had decided to make some distance by leaving early, when the sun wasn't high up and the heat was easier to bear.

A certain man was riding one of the dragon carriages. He looked much like any of the merchants he shared the vehicle with. The only difference was the crest on the back of his left hand — the sign of a Master.

Snacking on a smoked chicken sandwich, he gazed at the mountains and forests that would soon be bathed in the light of dawn.

"This sure is tasty," he muttered.

The smoked food he was eating had been given to him by the spectator sitting next to him during last night's Clash. Once the act of terror had ended, the middle-aged man, who'd been as high spirited as anyone else, had taken some of the smoked goods from the shop he owned and presented them to him.

The man in the carriage had put the smoked goods between some of his leftover bread and made his way to Caldina while relishing the curious mix of midnight snack and breakfast.

"A smoked chicken sandwich," he said to himself. "I should get our leader to make this sometime."

Remembering the leader of the clan he belonged to, the man realized something and reached into his inventory.

"Umm, the souvenirs are... all here," he said. "I have something for everyone except Moneygold. I don't intend to spend a single lir on him... but he should be satisfied with the video of last night's battle."

He nodded to himself while mumbling things not uncommon for travelers... and mixing it with things no common traveler would understand.

"Magic Activation Acceleration — instant; Magic Multi-Activation — 28... no, 143; Magic Conceal; Magic Range Extension — 8,000 metels... Bottomless Pit."

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In the Cruella Mountain Belt, a certain group was watching the Caldinian merchant carriages. All of them were crest-bearing Masters and members of the PK clan known as "Goblin Street."

"Those look like merchants from Caldina, boss," one of them said. "What do we do?"

No response. The one he talked to, the King of Burglary, Eldridge, closed his eyes in silent thought.

Most of the clan's members had left Caldina and come to do their business as indiscriminate bandits here in the kingdom. The group's crimes during the blockade incident had been limited to the Masters and tians of the kingdom, so although they were wanted by Altar, they had yet to get on Caldina's list. However, that would surely happen if they attacked these Caldinian merchant carriages and left survivors who could tell the tale.

On the other hand...

It might be time to leave the kingdom for good, he thought.

Before switching to this area, they'd worked near the capital, where every member besides Eldridge, who hadn't been online, had been completely annihilated by Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts.

After coming here, things hadn't gotten any better, as they all — Eldridge included — had been killed by Xunyu the Yinglong. That incident had made some members lose faith in Eldridge, and the clan's numbers had dropped by half.

Given the members lost at the capital and the ones who'd left on their own, the clan's situation wasn't too good. Still, it all might just be a sign that it was time to drop this place and try finding prey somewhere different.

"We'll attack those carriages," he said.

"Really?" his clan member asked.

"Yeah." Eldridge nodded. "And once we're done with them, we're moving to Granvaloa... to the sea. Enough banditry. It's time to try the pirate life."

He turned towards his clan and formed an indominable smile.

"Let's go! Say goodbye to Caldina! We'll make some bank with these and ditch that sandbox for good!"

His words made the members still with him all fired up.

"Yeah!"

"Hell yeah!"

"When this attack is over, I'm becoming a pirate!"

Right after they said those things, *a large hole appeared right under their feet.*

"Ah?!" Eldridge gasped as he jumped away, avoiding the hole.

His clan members weren't as lucky. They all fell in, were buried alive, and left the world due to death penalty.

"What happened?!" he shouted.

No one could hear him in these empty mountains, but even so, he couldn't hold himself back from voicing his shock.

◆

"One of them avoided it," muttered the man in the carriage. "Let's make it a bit bigger, then... Earth Eater."

◆

Eldridge ran through the mountains.

Something strange was happening.

He was obviously under attack, but he couldn't see his enemies or any signs that they were attacking.

He was even more confused than he had been during his battle — if you could call it that — with Xunyu. Still, he was able to run away using his high stats and powerful intuition.

But he soon noticed something strange.

"It's... far?" he murmured.

The sky seemed distant, as though it had become higher.

The nearby mountains seemed taller, as well.

Eldridge found it strange, as he had yet to go down the belt.

Soon enough, he was *surrounded by dirt walls from every direction.*

No — that wasn't the case...

"Th-This mountain is sinking into the ground...!" he cried.

Indeed it was. The mountain was going down much like an elevator.

Puzzled and perplexed, Eldridge tried to think of what could be responsible for this.

"I-Is this Caldina's The Ear—?!"

Before he could finish his sentence, the sunken mountain he was on was *crunched* by the surrounding ground and sand, instantly giving him the death penalty.

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"...Oh, I leveled up," muttered the man in the carriage. "Was there someone strong among them?"

An earthy smell rode the wind and reached the carriages, but none of the merchants noticed. Oblivious to the sudden and silent disappearance of a nearby mountain, they simply continued chatting.

"Oh, I'm so glad this trade route is safe to use now," said one of them.

"Truly," another agreed. "I hear some Masters took care of the bandits in the area just the day before yesterday. What a helpful bunch."

They didn't know. While the Gouz-Maise Gang, the most infamous bandit group in the area, had been thoroughly destroyed, there were many more bandits lurking in the mountain belt.

They didn't know. A group of PK bandits had been aiming to attack them for their goods and wealth.

They didn't know. The group and all the other bandits in the surrounding mountains — a number of people surpassing the triple digits — had been buried alive, in the blink of an eye, by just a single person.

They didn't know. They were sharing a carriage with the one they called the "Magically Strongest."

Confirmed the elimination of all threats in the surrounding area, he thought. *Setting a two kilometel auto-interception zone.*

Fatoum. He was the bearer of that nickname and the owner of the Superior Job "The Earth." He ran his mind through those mechanical-sounding words and activated an automatic interception barrier.

Even so, no one in the carriage noticed.

The immense amount of MP he'd put into Magic Conceal made it impossible to detect. Even the experienced tian guards were thoroughly clueless.

I must admit, my visit to the kingdom lasted far longer than I expected, he thought.

Done with his job, he'd switched his thoughts from battle mode back to normal.

At first, it was just a trip to investigate the UBMs and Ruins in the country while also setting some slow-acting magic, but then the King of Toys suggested I arrange the blockade terror around the royal capital.

Fatoum ran his mind through the incident which involved a culprit still unknown to the people of the kingdom.

To top it off, I then received information about Dryfe's terror plot in Gideon and had to go there to stop it. Dear me, what a long trip this ended up being... I hope she's not too mad.

His visit to the kingdom had taken almost a month longer than expected. That fact made him picture his wife, who was waiting for him back in Caldina.

Well, I have the souvenirs, and I guess I can make it up to her by taking her out on a nice date.

The Magically Strongest, Caldina's most powerful force, was thinking things you'd expect of a busy salaryman.

I must admit, the Clash of the Superiors was truly an excellent battle, well worth watching. And thanks to Franklin, I even got to see Shu fight again. It's been far too long since last time. Which made Fatoum remember a certain detail.

"Oh, I completely forgot to greet him," he said. "But that might've been a good thing."

Regardless of the circumstances, he simply couldn't greet his old acquaintance. After all...

"Meeting him would just make me want to fight him. And, well..."

...it's far too early to destroy that city.

No city would stand after a battle between him and Shu.

With that thought on his mind, the Strongest that had sneaked into Altar returned back to Caldina, leaving the kingdom with a few of his tricks.

Epilogue B: The Sisters

Imperial capital outskirts, headquarters of the Triangle of Wisdom, High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

The Dryfe Imperium's capital, Vandelheim, had two faces.

One was that of a city from 19th century Europe. These days, you could only see such townscapes in the simple, black and white photos from that era. Though it was at the technological forefront here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, it was nothing but retro to Earthlings living in 2045.

That was one of Vandelheim's two faces, while the other could be demonstrated by the sight before me.

"GHAAH!" one person panicked. "The new amphibious model has sunk into the pool! It ain't going up!"

"Oh, out of MP, eh?" said another. "It uses magic engines for both oxygen generation and the anti-pressure barrier, so that's kinda to be expected."

"Looks like we'll have to use conventional chemistry for the oxygen supply and fight the pressure with better design and materials," a third one joined in. "We can't just try to solve everything with magic. We're dealing with robots here."

"Be serious, people! Help me get Zerbahl Type M out of there!"

"Glubglubglub..." the one in the sunken robot mumbled unintelligibly.

"Oh, it's not exactly airtight, either."

"Looks like there's water inside. A problem with the gaskets or the frame, I assume?"

"YOU GUYS!"

"GLUBGLUB, I'M DYING!"

The one panicking at the side of the ten-meter-deep experiment pool was Zerbahl, an Engineer. The two observing the results as they gathered data and worked on something were Flosch and Roboroman, both Mechanics. I wasn't too sure about the one drowning in the water, but it was probably one of our Pilots, Kuromiki.

“Excuse me,” a girl spoke to two of our members. “The custom Marshal II requested by the military seems to be constructed, but how was it supposed to be painted, again?”

“Well, they said something about red, so I think that’s the color we should use on the whole thing,” said one of them. “Let’s give it a horn, too.”

“We don’t need no horn,” said the other. “Our communication devices don’t require any antennas. Also, we’re only painting the shoulders.”

“...Hey now, a base dark green Marshal II with red shoulders is way too basic.”

“Well, I could say the same about a purely red Marshal II with a goddamn novelty horn.”

“It doesn’t matter, you two, just—”

“IT DOES MATTER!” they both shouted simultaneously.

“Eek!”

The girl with the report in her hands was Luphia, a tian working in our general affairs section. The two people pushing their own policies — tastes, more like — in response to the presented demands were the Painters, MS Geomad and Assault Tripper.

“Oh, yeah. Apparently, our leader went out to do something, lost, and came back,” said one person in another group of three.

“Got sauce for that?” asked another.

“MMO Journal Planter.”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve been so busy with my designs and tests that I forgot to check it.”

“Same here, aheheheh,” the third person laughed in a strange manner.

“How many days behind are you?”

“Five.”

“I win. I’m at seven.”

“...Is that really a victory, though?”

The three were pulling consistent all-nighters both here and in reality, and yet — though they were doing it with mad-looking grins on their faces — they still had the capacity to construct Magingears. They were High Engineers: Boolantan, Draragun, and Black Company.

They all created what they liked, faced various problems doing so, asserted their ideas, and sometimes went overboard with their work.

“Well... this place is the same as always,” I said to myself.

After my death penalty had expired, I'd logged in and found my clan completely unchanged.

I was standing in the large, 200,000 square meter facility located in Vandelheim's outskirts. It was the headquarters of the Triangle of Wisdom and the center of the imperium's cutting-edge technology.

This scene here... this mix of eccentrics, weirdos, and normal people playing with robots was the other face of the imperial capital.

Such sights weren't uncommon in this city, but nothing could match the Triangle of Wisdom in terms of scale.

This was the clan *he* had created — a place where people could gather, combine their intellects and *create what they wished, as they pleased*.

"Mh..." I silently looked at the scene and pondered.

Just like the city, people also had multiple faces. If the plot in Gideon was the dark side of his dream, then this was surely the bright side.

"All right, then..." I murmured.

I turned away from the everyday scene and walked towards a certain place in the headquarters: the structure's central part.

It was the clan leader's... Mr. Franklin's... my sister's room.

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"I'm having you leave the clan," she said right as I entered, without as much as a greeting, enjoying the comfort of her chair.

"So you're firing me," I said, not surprised in the least.

I was already prepared for this. After all, when she'd activated Plan C — the one she'd hidden from me — I'd gone and betrayed her. If I hadn't deactivated La Porte de l'Enfer's Freezing, her plan would've gone a bit better.

"Veldorbell said that he's leaving the clan, too," she added. "Well, he was a guest, so this isn't unexpected."

Her tone as she fired me and talked about Veldorbell was exactly the same as always — the one she used while roleplaying the mad scientist known as "Mr. Franklin."

"He also left us with a nice parting gift of three soundtracks. A highly methodical guy, that one. It's a shame to lose him, but... well... I can't really argue with it."

“You can’t?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “He only joined this clan to find ‘a true hero’ or whatever, but taking part in my plan made him miss out on quite a lot. I also think that he wasn’t too amused by what I did.”

She then closed her eyes, as though remembering something.

“I’m not the most popular person. He wasn’t the first to distance himself from me. Right before the war, AR-I-CA, the Ace, left me and went on to become one of Caldina’s Superiors. People are turning away from me left and right...”

She formed a wry grin and looked directly at me.

“Yu,” she said, changing her tone. She was talking to me as herself now. “Why did you come to help me? You were disgusted with me, weren’t you?”

“That’s not...”

“You felt betrayed, didn’t you?” she cut my words short, not letting me deny it.

“That’s...”

If I tried to answer that question with “That’s not true,” I would definitely be lying. She’d made a promise that she wouldn’t hurt tians, but had gone on to design a plot where that promise was broken.

“That’s why, before you leave, I want to know,” she continued. “Why did you did you come to help me on the Pandemonium?”

She wanted an answer. But...

“I... I don’t know that, either,” I muttered.

I looked inside me, but couldn’t find the answer, no matter what. After all, I’d acted before thinking it through, so no amount of thought could help me know that.

“I just don’t know...”

Before I’d realized it, tears were flowing down my face.

They were a belated reaction to the fact that I will now be separated from my sister in this world, too. The words “before you leave” reminded me of this.

I finally understood.

Even if she’d lied to me, betrayed me, and did things I thought were horrible... I still really loved my sister.

Since I couldn’t give my own answer and just continued crying, she went and formed her own conclusion. “You couldn’t think of what to do, so you acted without thinking and ended up doing what you did.”

She stood up from her chair and walked up to me.

“Next time, take the time to form a conclusion that you can hold with you to the bitter end,” she said as she took out a handkerchief and wiped my tears away.

“Ah,” I silently gasped as I realized that she was doing it with the exact same precision and care as she used to.

“Yu.” She looked into my eyes. “Travel and broaden your horizons. That’s what I did back on Earth.”

“Eh...?”

“Thankfully, the experiences in this world — especially those related to your disposition — don’t ever go to waste. There’s a lot for you to gain if you leave my side and travel around, so don’t bind yourself to me or the clan. Experience *Infinite Dendrogram* as you please. And if you wish to return once you’re done, I’ll always be ready to accept you.”

“Sis...”

“Oh, also.” She reached into her inventory and took something out. It was a Garage storing a Magingear. “This is both a parting gift... and a birthday present. You’re turning fifteen on Tuesday of next week, right?”

“You remember...?” I asked, making her form a wry grin.

“Don’t be silly. I could never forget your birthday.” Then that grin became a smile.

It was unlike any expressions she’d displayed during the incident in Gideon. If anything, it was like one of the gentle smiles she’d given me long ago... when we still lived together.

“Francesca...” I spoke her real name as the tears she’d just wiped began flowing again.

I finally understood.

That devilish man was right — I’d always avoided looking at her bad side. It surely existed, and it made lots of people suffer, but it wasn’t all that she was. Just like now, she could still be very gentle to me, and that was no delusion.

“Thank you, Francesca,” I said. “Let’s meet again someday.”

“Of course, Yu.” She nodded. “Until next time.”

With that, I left the Triangle of Wisdom.

Once I walked out of the room, Cyco appeared out of my left hand.

"That's a nice expression, Hugo," she said.

"Mhm..."

"Good thing you got to be honest with your sister, right?"

"Cyco..."

Apparently, this sharp-tongued partner of mine had been watching me and my sister's conversation.

"Thanks, Cyc—"

"Still, I know you're girls on the inside and all, but you both look like adult men. And a scene where two adult men talk like women and have a teary farewell is a bit... you know..."

...Cyco, those words completely ruin it, I thought sourly.

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Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin

Still in my own room, I looked at the monitors and watched Yu leave.

She was surrounded by a large number of my clan members. I'd just announced that she was going on a journey, so they were there to see her off.

Though sad about her leaving, they all encouraged her and wished her the best.

Yu had only been in the clan for about a month of real life time, but she was already quite popular among our members. She was gentle to a fault, and as far as I knew, she'd spent a lot of her time helping people out. She even remembered the names of a few hundred clan members, which might've been part of why she was liked.

And speaking of being liked... a group of girls was bawling. They were the clan's Yu fan club.

Which was fine and all, but... she was a girl on the inside. I was a woman, too, but strangely enough, people rarely noticed.

Were they anything like fans of the Takarazuka Revue?

It wasn't something I could relate to, to be honest.

"It's gonna get pretty lonely here," said one of the clan members surrounding her.

"Yeah... We're losing a skilled test pilot."

"I really wanted him to test the Supersonic Death Revolver Catapult."

Okay, what is that wonderfully-named device, and why don't I know about it?

"Oh no! We're losing a Master who's handsome both inside and out."

"They're much rarer than those who are only handsome on the outside."

"Only the beautiful die young..."

Yu's not dying, though.

"There goes the pilot with a Maiden..."

"They were so picturesque, too... especially for lewds..."

"Oh, speaking of which, I'll send you the new leader x Hugo thing when we're done."

All right, the fanfiction department is next in line to be eaten by my new monsters.

"The leader should've come and seen him off, too."

"Dude, do you even know who you're talking about? Guy's probably watching this through those cameras over there."

"Should we hack and kill the camera network?"

"...We're the ones who'll have to fix it, you know?"

I would very much prefer it if they didn't damage their own surveillance system. Still, they were completely right about me watching.

The goodbyes continued for a long while. During her month — three months in *Dendro* time — in the Triangle of Wisdom, Yu had become a true clan member.

"Hm..." I quietly pondered.

I was the one who'd invited her to the clan, or rather, *Infinite Dendrogram* as a whole. Honestly, I could've invited her much earlier, and it was somewhat strange that I hadn't.

After the imperium had gained superiority over the kingdom, after I'd killed the one who'd given me the death penalty, and after my Triangle of Wisdom had become more prosperous than ever, I'd suddenly had the idea to invite her over.

I didn't know whether I'd just had an urge to show her what I'd created, or whether I just hadn't had anything better to do, but that was when I'd become determined to meet her again, after several years of separation.

And soon enough, she and I had met in this world.

In all honesty, I truly hadn't expected her to be like me and use an avatar of the opposite gender. That had made our rendezvous far more troublesome than expected.

Anyway, though a few years had passed since we'd seen each other, she was still a very good girl. Though she was roleplaying a pompous, theatrical knight/prince-like character, she was still as gentle as ever.

Her Embryo being a Maiden made it clear that she was also considerate of the tians calling this world their home, which was very much like her.

Yu was gentle, indeed.

However, it seemed like she'd misunderstood something.

"Well, it's more like that I made her misunderstand," I said.

She probably believed that I'd made her leave the clan and go on a journey purely for her sake. That was part of the reason, yes, but I'd also done it for myself.

Why? It was very simple.

"With her at my side... I'd be unable to do anything truly gruesome."

Plans C and D had failed. That meant that the next time I designed a plot or worked to extinguish those who'd defeated me, I'd have to do something far more fiendish.

If Yu was at my side, she'd put a mental brake on me.

In hindsight, I could've been far more relentless with my plot in Gideon. Though her presence had given me peace of mind, she'd been in the way of my march to victory.

And now, she was going away.

My dear sister — the person I wanted to appear gentle to, and the embodiment of my conscience — was no longer at my side.

I was now free to act without restraint.

I wouldn't have to cherry-pick my methods, and I'd be able to fight the ones who'd defeated me with all I had.

"Keep your head clean for me... Ray Starling," I said, as pure vitriol bubbled up my throat.

Epilogue C: Ray the Unbreakable

Duel city Gideon, first district, Paladin, Liliana Grandria

Bells were tolling.

Three mornings had dawned upon Gideon since that nightmarish night. Clear, yet sorrowful bells were echoing throughout the city, as all the churches in Gideon were sounding out a requiem.

It was a sound for the second day of the three day-long combined funeral happening here in the knight offices in the first district, mourning the knights and guards that had laid down their lives during the incident.

Our Royal Guard had lost 18, Gideon's knights had lost 15, and the guards had lost 28, making for a total of 61.

"...Sixty-one," I silently voiced the number.

The only saving grace was that the lives lost here had been relatively few compared to the crushing defeat and loss of life we'd suffered during the war. And most of all, by some miracle, the incident hadn't killed a single civilian. Though, sad as it was, I couldn't say that it was the result of the sacrifice of the deceased.

Not saying a word, I looked at the mourners.

A young boy standing before a coffin was calling out for his father.

A woman was on her knees, sobbing uncontrollably.

An old man looked at the flower altar, completely still, as though in shock.

Clearly, they were family of the knights and guards who'd never made it back.

I could tell because they were exactly the same as Milia and I had been when we'd attended the combined funeral for those lost in the war... including our father.

"...Hhaah," I breathed a sad sigh. As ones with a duty to protect the kingdom, knights and soldiers were all ready for death.

However, I doubted that any of them thought they'd die on that night.

Death could come suddenly and without warning.

Gideon’s knights and guards had been killed by either the monsters that had attacked the streets, or by the lawless Masters the other Masters referred to as “player killers,” while my subordinates had died in the battle against Franklin. Some had been crushed by that tentacle monster, while others had been consumed by the overwhelmingly powerful dragon clad in the red aura.

All of us had been powerless against them.

But Ray and his brother — the King of Destruction, Shu Starling — and many other Masters had avenged those that were lost. They’d saved my subordinates and the kingdom’s second princess, too, while also sending the tian-killing “player killers” to the gaol.

Thanks to their efforts, many of the deceased had been recompensed, and those that had died that night hadn’t died in vain.

I was silent.

Both the one who’d started the incident and the ones who’d ended it were Masters.

They had only been able to stop Franklin because they were like him.

“Even so, Masters... those chosen by Embryos... aren’t special,” I whispered.

They were as human as the rest of us.

They simply had a means of escaping death and were blessed with immense powers.

Though they were quick to gain power, their powers weren’t their identities.

That was why we had Masters who crushed others, such as the Hell General or Franklin, as well as those who stopped them, such as Ray and the King of Destruction. That was how it was among us tians, as well.

There was a vast difference in power between tians and Masters, but they were just as human as us.

That power difference was exactly why only Masters were capable of stopping a rampaging Master. That was what had happened that night... and what hadn’t happened in the war half a year ago.

“Protecting the kingdom requires their aid... Lady Altimia,” I muttered and pictured the person I served, the first princess and the acting ruler of the country, Altimia A. Altar.

Sadly, it was doubtful that Her Highness Altimia intended to borrow the powers of the Masters.

She didn’t consider them to be as human as us.

“Still...”

I watched the flower altar and noticed that the left hands of those placing flowers there were varied.

Those with and without crests alike were mourning the deceased and adding bouquets to the altar.

One was gently patting a crying child’s head, while another comforted a different child with a light embrace.

Another one supported a woman who was about to fall due to the staggering despair.

Another took the hand of an old man who stood still in shock, and helped him place his flowers on the altar.

“They really are just like us... Lady Altimia,” I whispered.

Speaking of Masters, I wonder what he’s doing, I thought.

Yesterday, he’d come here to present his flowers the moment the combined funeral was opened.

He’d just lost his left arm, so I could only hope that he wasn’t doing anything reckless. With what he’d done during the trouble with Milia, the Gouz-Maise Gang, and Franklin’s Game, it was clear that he wouldn’t hesitate to do absurd things for the sake of others.

“But that quality might just be a part of his kindly nature,” I said to myself and pondered about similar nothings when suddenly, Lord Lindos ran up to me with a panicked expression.

“Lady Grandria! We have trouble!” he exclaimed.

“Oh? What’s the matter?”

“Her Highness Elizabeth, she...”

“She has no official business today, yes? Today is a free day for her.”

She’d spent all of yesterday attending the combined funeral, and had spent all her days prior to the Clash dedicated to the relevant preparations. Because of that and due to her kidnapping by Franklin, she’d been given a day off today so that she could have a proper rest.

“Did Her Highness say anything?” I asked. “If she wishes to leave, simply have a number of Royal Guard accompany her, and—”

“She left a note and escaped the Count’s residence! Again!”

“...Augh.” I voiced a strange sound as I turned dizzy.

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Duel city Gideon, sixth district's arena, Paladin, Ray Starling

When using Nemesis in her greatsword or halberd forms, I never felt a hint of her weight. Both of those forms could be classified as ultra-heavy weaponry, but I could swing them with ease thanks to that trait.

I was always thankful for it, but never was my gratitude as great as it was now that I'd lost my left arm.

I tried swinging the greatsword, then had her switch to the halberd and did the same.

Though I couldn't spin the flag halberd due to risk of dropping her, I could still thrust, slash, and cleave without much trouble.

"Looks like I can get by without my left arm," I said.

"Indeed," Nemesis agreed. "The lack of an arm is nothing to us."

Well, I wouldn't go that far. Losing an arm was a pretty big deal. However, she was right that it wasn't much of a problem when fighting with her as my weapon.

A very clear problem, however, was Gardranda.

Without my left arm, I couldn't equip the left bracer, meaning that I couldn't use Purgatorial Flames, which was one of my main skills. When punching Franklin, I seemed to have discovered a new way to use it, too, but now it looked like that would have to wait.

I'd thought that losing my left arm would render me incapable of storing Nemesis, but there was no problem at that front. The crest had simply moved to the upper left arm — the part that was still there.

Clearly, losing an arm wasn't enough to lose the sign that I was a Master.

"Still, holding you with one arm will make it pretty hard to fight while riding Silver," I said.

I mean, I can't really hold Silver's reins with my teeth.

"Mhm," Nemesis agreed. "But I believe it's a good thing here."

"Because... why?"

"We're about to battle her again, and I want us to face her like last time — with just the two of us."

"Oh my, aren't you enthusiastic," the "her" she was referring to, Marie, said jokingly.

Just like during our encounter in Noz Forest, she was shrouded in the same black mist and held her gun-like Embryo, Arc-en-Ciel, in her right hand. She and I were in this arena to have the rematch duel we'd promised to have when fighting Franklin's monster army.

We were facing one another in a block shielded by an impermeable barrier.

Besides us, the barrier contained a few spectators — Rook, Babi, Shu, Figaro, and one more person.

On an unrelated note, Rook had already known that Marie was the Superior Killer. Hell, Shu had known it, as well.

In hindsight, Shu... the King of Destruction... had tried to kill the Superior Killer even if it took burning down the entire Noz Forest, so him knowing her identity wasn't all that surprising.

Speaking of that incident, apparently he'd done it to avenge me.

I had lots of things to say about that, including but not limited to, "Dude, what the hell," "No one asked for this," and "You scorched a goddamn forest," but I chose to tell him off later.

After all, we were accompanied by someone far more troublesome than Shu.

"Marie, do your very best!"

For reasons unknown, the princess that we'd all worked so hard to save was among the spectators.

"...Might I finally know why you're here, princess?" I asked.

"Hm? Very well," she said.

Apparently, she had awoken right before my battle at the top of Pandemonium. Because of this, she clearly recalled how I'd faced Franklin and how Marie had rescued her.

Wanting to thank us, she'd snuck out of the count's residence *again* and walked around searching for us.

During her search, she'd found Shu and Figaro, both of whom were in suits that really stood out from the crowd. Thinking that she could find me by following my brother, she'd done exactly that and eventually came here.

Apparently, she had the whole day off, but that wasn't the problem here...

"Liliana!" I shouted, unable to hold it in. "You really need to do something about your security!"

"That's more or less how I feel. 'What? Again?' and all that," said Marie. "Still, rather than poor security, I'm starting to think that it's Ellie who's just really good at sneaking out. It's the second time she'd done this, after all."

"The princess might have a talent for it," added Rook. "She might make a good thief."

A princess who's a thief...? What?

"Anyway," said Marie. "Ellie's watching, so victory's as good as mine! Don't expect any consideration or mercy!"

"Well, I wouldn't have it any other way, but..."

This is nothing like the revenge match I'd imagined, I thought.

After Marie had given me my first death penalty, I'd pictured a desperate rematch between two enemies. But now, right as we were about to fight, we were surrounded by a peaceful air of friendship.

"...And that's fine, really," I said.

"Indeed," Nemesis agreed.

Though Marie had once killed us, she was now nothing but a friend, and that was in no way a bad thing.

"Still, I want my rematch," I continued.

"Heh heh," Marie chuckled. "Such vigor and drive... But do you really think you can win?"

Well, that's the question...

"Let's see... you're way above me in both level and stats," I said.

Her total level was over the cap for low and high-rank jobs, while her AGI was at least several dozens of times greater than mine.

"My technique is just incomparable to yours."

She'd been fighting in *Infinite Dendrogram* for far longer than me. Her experience was on a whole different plane.

"And I'm here without my left arm — quite a handicap. It's pretty clear that I have nearly no chance of winning."

This battle would've been hard even if I was in top shape, so this definitely didn't help my chances.

"Still... I won't say that I can't win."

No matter how severe the situation, I would never quit without even trying.

"If there's a possibility I want, I'll never give up reaching for it."

That was what my brother had taught me.

"That's what seizing the possibility is all about."

My words made Shu laugh out loud and give me a thumbs-up.

"And that's why I'm in it to win it," I concluded my speech.

"And also why you're Ray the 'Unbreakable.'"

"Unbre... Huh?" *What?*

"Oh? You're unaware?" she said. "That's your nickname."

"I have a nickname?"

"Indeed you do. 'The King of Destruction's little brother, the one who didn't break before a Superior.'"

"Well, that sure is something..."

What an awkward nickname to have, I thought.

"There's also 'Dark Paladin,' 'Prince on the Silver Steed,' and 'The Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson.' Any preferences?"

"Unbreakable, please."

It's not even a damn choice with those other options.

"I'm quite fond 'Prince,' though," Nemesis commented.

"...No, thank you."

Anyway, "Unbreakable," eh...? I actually kinda like it.

"Okay then," said Marie. "Here I go, Unbreakable!"

"Yeah! Bring it on, Superior Killer!"

We prepared for battle.

Marie instantly pulled Arc-en-Ciel's trigger, making it fire bullets as numerous as they were during the first time she'd killed me. It was a repeat of that day.

Time for a quest, then, I thought.

My target was the strongest PK, the Superior Killer.

My destination was beyond the familiar veil of bullets.

And my goal... was victory.

"Let the quest..."

"...begin!" Nemesis finished for me.

I kicked the ground beneath me and dashed forward.

To be continued in the next episode...

Midword

Cat: “Greetings, dear readers, I’m the Cat you all know well by now, Cheshiiire.”

Xun: “I’m Xun, for XunYu.”

Bear: “And I’m the one and only Bear... the King of Destruction, Shu Starling!”

Cat: “We knew, and so did the sharper readers. Maybe even since volume 1.”

Bear: “You’re cold! I’ve been prebearing for this for five volumes!”

Cat: “That aside, this concludes the Franklin arc and ends the first part of *Infinite Dendrogram* as a whole.”

Bear: “What a good finale.”

Cat: “Hey! The part is done, but the product is still going on! Don’t jinx it!”

Xun: “But the lAst scene was somEwhat like the last chApter of a manga. Honestly, it woUld work pretty well if it just endED here.”

Cat: “Stop! Nothing’s ending! We’re still going on!”

Bear: “Anyway, jokes aside, the beary presence of a midword means that there’s something more, right?”

Cat: “Yes. There will now be two everyday life stories set after the Franklin arc.”

Bear/Xun: “...”

Cat: “You two look like you want to say something.”

Bear: “Who puts everyday life stories after final scenes like the one we just had?”

Xun: “...Wouldn’t tHE volume leave a bettEr impression if it ended hEre?”

Cat: “Silence. Anyway, the latter of the two stories is completely new.”

Bear: “...Did the author need to fill some pages?”

Cat: “He tried to write something new into the main story, but he couldn’t think of anything besides expanding on The Earth and the DOA worm.”

Xun: “Hey, don’t cAll it DOA. I had to be realLY careful with the bomb whEN killing that thiNg.”

Bear: “He could’ve expanded on me and my ursine greatness.”

Cat: “You’re saying you want *more* scenes?! I want some, too, you know?! I didn’t show up in volumes 4, 5, and won’t show up in the story that comes next, either! When’s my turn?!”

Xun: *This has been bOthering me for a while... Why is Cheshire so nAive when it comes to appEArance in the story?*

Bear: “Anyway, enough of the sad cat without any scenes. Please enjoy the stories that come next. Thank you beary much.”

Cat: “Give me a turn!”

Extra: A Change of Clothing

Paladin, Ray Starling

Ten days had passed in *Dendro* since the incident started by a certain bastard in a lab coat.

Rook, Marie, and I were still staying here in Gideon, busy either sparring or fulfilling guild quests.

The need for repairs in the city had created a demand for building materials, and Shu's obliterating Jeand Grasslands had turned it into a habitat for strong monsters which needed to be culled. Such quests were so MMO-like that they reminded me that *Dendro* was, indeed, a VRMMO.

As for the sparring... though I rarely came out as the victor, I'd learned quite a lot.

My opponents had included Marie, Shu, Xunyu, Figaro, and even the other local duel rankers. Though they'd allowed me to use consumable warding accessories, my victories had still been few and far between, which was a clear testament to just how strong they were.

Thankfully, all our duels had taken place within the arena barriers, so all the items used and accessories lost had come back to us once the battle was done. With the Lifesaving Brooch and the other stuff I'd used having a combined cost of about 10,000,000 lir, I'd never appreciated the restorative functions of the arenas as much as I did now.

10,000,000 lir — in other words, ten times more than we'd received for killing Gardranda. It was a great fortune no matter how you looked at it, and it was in no way an amount I could have used when I'd started out. But the current state of my finances allowed me this luxury. After all, I'd recently had two great bursts of income.

First, there was the money I'd won by betting the reward for the Gouz-Maise Gang on Figaro. The 60,000,000 I'd put in had been multiplied by 1.2, giving me 72,000,000. Cleaning up after the mess made by a certain bastard in a lab coat had made the reward come a few days late, but it had come nonetheless.

Then there was the reward from Count Gideon.

He'd presented great amounts of money to all the Masters that'd fought in Franklin's game. The newbies who'd escaped the central arena and those who'd already been outside had received especially large portions.

Sadly, Marie hadn't been among the recipients, since only our inner circle knew that she was the Superior Killer, but she'd made her share of the Count's money by doing other work for him.

Naturally, Shu was rewarded with the greatest sum of us all.

"With this and the drops from the Suicide Series, I made back enough fur a tenth of the ammo I used," he told me.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the total cost.

That aside, the subject of our rewards wouldn't be complete without the story of how Rook used his, and my involvement in it.

It had happened two days ago...

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As I sat around, thinking of what to do with the copious amount of money I'd received from Count Gideon and through betting, Rook walked up to me.

"Ray, can I ask for your help with something?" Rook asked.

"Hm?" I said. "Well, this is unusual. It's rare for you to ask for something."

"Perhaps," he admitted. "But this is something I just can't do by myself. It's related to my job change..."

For a while now, Rook had wanted to switch to being a Lost Heart — the pimp grouping's high-rank job. It had three conditions: having reached level 50 as a Pimp, the sum total stats of all underlings being above a certain point, and at least 1,000,000 lir earned through Pimp work.

Rook had already cleared the first two, but the third one was proving to be an issue. He probably could've gotten the money when he'd done the modeling quest, but he'd chosen Marilyn and her carriage instead of a monetary reward, so it didn't count for the condition.

Because of his inability to move on to Lost Heart, after he'd maxed out Pimp during Franklin's Game, he'd switched to Tamer and leveled up his Monster Strengthening skill.

And I guess he's now found a way to solve the problem, I thought.

"You have an idea for how to switch to Lost Heart?" I asked.

"Yes." He nodded as he reached into his inventory and took out a coin pouch. "Could you give me a job and use this money as my reward?"

"...Ohh, I get it," I said.

Earning 1,000,000 lir through honest Pimp work would likely take lots of time and effort. But if you prepared the necessary money and had a third party give you the job, you'd clear the condition as if it were no big deal.

I'm guessing this option became available thanks to Gideon's reward, I thought.

"This bag has 1,000,000 lir for my reward and 1,000,000 lir for the Pimp guild's charges — a total of 2,000,000 lir. Use it to give me a job," Rook said.

"Yeah, sur— Wait, the Pimp guild takes half the money?!"

Holy shit, what a kickback!

"I can't really fault them," said Rook. "The Pimp guild must pay lots of taxes to continue being an official guild. There are some Pimps who don't like that and do pimping on their own... but that's a crime here in the kingdom."

...So the Pimp job is a gray zone in and of itself, I thought.

Apparently, the merchant grouping's Slave Dealers were handled in a similar manner — work through a highly-taxed guild was legal, while freelance slave dealing wasn't. The kingdom was somewhat... no, *very* strict about this.

Anyway, I took the money, went to the Pimp guild, and gave Rook a job.

It didn't matter what I requested, but I'd remembered seeing an elephant stand on a ball while watching the morning news, so I'd nonchalantly written down that I wanted to see Marilyn do the same.

It went without saying that I'd come to deeply regret not giving them an easier task.

They had taken quite some time just finding a ball large enough for a triceratops-sized creature to stand on, and then they had to spend an entire day and night training her to be able to do it. Naturally, I was really sorry about all this.

Still, her success had made her fulfill the request, and Rook had cleared the condition, letting him become a Lost Heart.

Also, a short while after my request, a rumor had spread throughout the city that “some rich weirdo paid 1,000,000 lir to a guy just to see a monster step on a ball,” creating a sort-of “ball-stepping boom” among Gideon’s Pimps and Tamers.

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Now, back to my circumstances.

The money I’d won in the bet and the Count’s reward had given me some leeway in spending, allowing me to buy lots of various equipment. I’d started by giving Shu the accessories I’d broken during my first quest, and then bought myself a Lifesaving Brooch and other items, among which was a simple prosthetic arm.

It could be best described as a hook that a generic pirate would wear. It didn’t connect to my nerves or anything, and it was much like a long glove that I wore on what remained of my lost arm. I could use MP to make the hook tighten, but I couldn’t fine-tune it, and the lack of fingers made it impossible to use as a normal hand.

Some would question the tightening function’s usefulness, but the answer to that was simple: holding a horse’s reins. According to Alejandro, the man who’d sold it to me, these prosthetic arms had been developed for knights and nobles who’d lost their arms, but who still wanted to ride their horses. As the proud owner of Silver, I greatly appreciated that function’s existence.

There was the problem in that it limited my left side to only being able to hold the reins, making it a blind spot in horseback battles. And its shape didn’t allow me to equip the left Miasmaflame Bracer, either. But there was no use in minding that right now.

Apparently, Legendaria and Huang He had high-quality magic prosthetics, while Dryfe was highly advanced in the mechanical side of the spectrum. However, all such prosthetics were custom-made specifically for the customers, so you couldn’t find them anywhere on the market, which went doubly so here in the kingdom. I couldn’t waste time trying to get what wasn’t available here, so this prosthetic arm was more than enough, especially since I’d likely find a way to heal my arm sooner or later.

Still, I couldn’t help but note that those surrounding me — mainly

Nemesis — looked at me as if they had something to say.

Well, the hook's pretty pirate-like. It probably stands out, I thought.

Anyway, with the leeway in my finances, I could allow myself to roll the gacha in Alejandro's shop. Specifically, one 100,000 lir roll per day. Honestly, I had the money for it and was up for more rolls, but Nemesis just wouldn't have it.

"That's all I will allow. Roll any more, and I'll eat food that costs as much money as you spend," she'd said, making me back down immediately. With how spacious her stomach was now, that threat sounded all too real.

That aside, the gacha had yet to give me any capsules above C rank. Unsurprisingly, Bs and above were considerably rarer than the ones below, meaning that Rook and I had been very lucky to land an X and an S on the same day. Still, I felt that it was high time the gacha blessed me with a B or an A.

With that thought in mind, I came to Alejandro's place, did my shopping, and stood before the gacha to make my daily roll.

"...Let me ask you something, Ray," said Nemesis. "The fortune in your hands allows you to buy most of the things you require, no? What compels you to roll the gacha?"

"*It's the unknown,*" I replied.

"...I'd prefer it if you didn't try to make it sound so cool."

Was it wrong to find something attractive simply because you didn't know what it will give you?

Anyway, it was my turn, so I threw in today's 100,000 lir and made my roll, which gave me...

"...An 'A'?"

The capsule was marked with a letter denoting the second highest level of rarity — not quite a jackpot, but close enough. However, my excitement was drowned out by my confusion at the capsule.

The S one that Rook had received had looked like a rainbow-colored mineral, while, aside from the obvious rarity, the X capsule I'd gotten Silver from had looked perfectly normal. But I definitely couldn't say the same for the capsule now in my hands.

It was black in color, the "A" on it was blood-red, and, for reasons unknown, the letter was written in a "melted" font. Not only that, but the capsule's surface was covered in lines much like blood vessels. To top it all off, it had letters on it saying, "WARNING: Please don't open when children are nearby."

...*What the hell?* was just about all I could think about it.

"What you hold in hand is a wealth coffer of hex and malediction," said a voice coming from my side.

I looked away from the capsule and towards the source, where I saw a girl wearing gothic-looking dress armor.

"Oh, Juliet," I said. She was an acquaintance of mine.

Juliet the Black Raven was one of Figaro's fellow duelists, and the fourth in the kingdom's duel rankings. She was one of the two Masters who had fought in the semi event before the Clash of the Superiors. I had come to know her through Figaro and sparred with her several times now.

Despite appearances, she was very easy to get along with, and since she was younger than me IRL, I could talk to her with no reservations to speak of.

"Heh heh heh," she chuckled in a curious manner. "We haven't been in one another's presence since our last immortal battle two nights ago, Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson."

Sure, she talks a bit strangely and uses one of my weird nicknames, but she's an okay person, anyway.

"Oh, yeah, I haven't seen you since our sparring match two days ago," I said. "So, do you know something about this capsule?"

"Verily. The coffer seals a maledicted artifact soaked in blood and tainted by grudge. The mark of rarity speaks volumes about the treasure's power, but alas, that power might prove to be a double-edged blade that gnaws at the wielder's heart."

Mhm...

Basically, she was saying that "There's a cursed item inside. The A means that it's something good, but it also means that the curse is powerful, as well."

"Mh..." Nemesis looked at me in silence.

"When balance thrives, the one to suffer the malediction will be the wielder alone," Juliet added. "But when the stars of ill omen shine bright in the heavens, the calamity will fall upon those environing them, as well. Never banish this memory to oblivion, lest you bring about a new tragedy."

I see.

She was saying that “Normally, the curse only affects the one equipping the item, but it might sometimes extend to the people around you, so be careful.”

“Mhh...” Nemesis continued quietly looking at me.

“All right,” I said. “Then I guess I’ll go open this somewhere with no people around. Thanks for the warning.”

“Heh heh heh,” Juliet chuckled. “My advice needs no gratitude. But if you so desire, O Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson, we may partake in yet another immortal battle.”

“Sure, let’s spar again sometime.”

With that, Juliet and I parted ways.

All right, so I’ll go open this where there aren’t people around, and...

“...Might I ask you something?” Nemesis said with an indefinable expression on her face, finally breaking her silence.

“What is it?” I asked.

“How can you talk to her so smoothly?”

“What? Juliet? Sure, her gear is a bit scary, but she’s a good, approachable girl.”

“That’s not what I... Oh, never mind. If you don’t get it, I won’t push it.”

...What’s with her? I wondered.

Anyway, we moved to the usual place: Nex Plains. Ever since I’d gotten Gardranda, this seemed to have become my go-to testing area for new items.

Upon confirming that there were no people within 100 meters of me, I opened the cursed capsule.

Inside, I found upper body armor called “CBR Armor,” where “CBR” stood for “Cursed Bloody Regeneration.”

It was a piece of light armor that was blood-red in color and generally looked *very* sinister.

It gave +200 to defense, making it even tougher than Gardranda — the hardest piece of equipment in my arsenal.

Additionally, it came with a level 3 skill called “Bloody Regeneration,” which restored three HP per second. That didn’t seem like much, but it was completely passive and didn’t use a bit of my MP or SP.

Though not as unbalanced and broken as a special reward, CBR Armor was definitely a decent piece of equipment. However, it was called "Cursed" for a reason.

The item said:

CBR Armor

Armor mass-produced by a wicked alchemist.

Provides the user with regenerative abilities born of the grudge seeped into the steel through the blood of the victims.

This unstable source of power afflicts the wearer with various curses.

Curses: Bleeding, Doom, Weakness.

I was all too familiar with the effects of the debuffs named.

"Well, this thing sure doesn't have a pleasant background," I said. "And wearing it makes you bleed out, renders you immobile, and cuts your stats by half... Basically, this is just a damn blood bag generator."

I can't use this at all, I thought. *The decent positives don't make up for the insane negatives. What the hell was the guy thinking when mass-producing these?*

Not only that, but it had a total level requirement of only 50, most likely to make it equipable so that it could curse as many people as possible, and if that wasn't kindness nobody wanted, I didn't know what was.

What do I even do with this...? Can I sell it...? I don't think I'm getting my 100,000 lir back, though.

"A Dark Knight could probably wear it without a problem," I said.

Jobs from the dark knight grouping, like Juliet's Fallen Knight, had a skill that weakened the negative effects of cursed items.

Because of that, this armor would've been good for a Dark Knight, but I happen to be a Paladin.

"Eh?" Nemesis released a confused-sounding voice.

"Eh?" I responded the same way, confused by her confusion.

"...Oh, right," she said. "You *are* a Paladin."

"You shouldn't forget your partner's job," I said.

"Well, your battle style and clothing are a far cry from 'Paladin-like...' And to think you used to shine so bright." She put her hand over her mouth, so I couldn't make out much of what she was muttering.

But man, whoever thought that an armor that gives you Bleeding and Weakness was a good idea... Hm?

"Isn't that one fewer curse than before?" I asked.

I still had the armor's description window open, and it felt like the text there had changed a bit.

The three debuffs became two, didn't th—? Oh, it dropped again.

Now it was just Bleeding, but soon enough, that one disappeared, as well. Not only that, but the skill level on Bloody Regeneration had dropped from 3 to 1.

It now said:

BR Armor

Armor mass-produced by a wicked alchemist.

Provides the user with regenerative abilities born of the grudge seeped into the steel through the blood of the victims.

It used to afflict the wearer with various curses, but they vanished when the grudge was dispersed. This weakened the armor's regenerative abilities.

Even its name and background were different.

"...Why?" I asked.

"How curious," said Nemesis.

Why had the grudge just gone and "dispersed"? Had it gotten *sucked out* or something?

"Ah," Nemesis and I simultaneously exclaimed and looked at my feet... towards my Grudge-soaked Greaves — an item that could *absorb and store the surrounding grudge.*

Unlike Gardranda, who I'd talked to while out cold, it didn't appear to have any remnants of consciousness, but I couldn't help but feel that it *felt* satisfied and well-fed.

Apparently, it had absorbed the grudge from the CBR Armor.

"...I had no idea you could be used like this," I said.

The curses had been caused by the grudge, and with it gone, they'd vanished, as well. As a result, the unusable CBR Armor had become the usable — if slightly weakened — BR Armor. It was definitely better than the armor I was wearing just to fill the slot, so I didn't hesitate to put it on.

"Hey, it looks spiky, but it's actually pretty easy to move in," I said.

I quickly took a liking to it. With the good defense value and Bloody Regeneration, I had no reason not to use it.

"Mh..." Nemesis looked directly at me, clearly wanting to say something.

"What?"

“...Nothing. You’ve made your choice, and I won’t say anything against it.”

“Hm?”

Nemesis wasn’t as articulate as usual today.

“Is something troubling you?” I asked.

“I’d be lying if I said ‘no,’ but it’s not something I can tell you,” she replied.

I could only assume that it was some girl thing, so I had no business pushing her any further.

“Fine by me,” I said. “Let’s get something to eat.”

“...Very well.”

And so, elated thanks to my new gear, Nemesis and I returned back to Gideon.

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Dryfe Imperium, Triangle of Wisdom headquarters

That day, a certain man in a lab coat — namely, the Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin — was checking the footage filmed by the spy monsters he’d sent to Gideon’s surroundings.

He’d been gathering information this way for a while now, but things had changed recently.

Following Franklin’s Game, Gideon had become filled with skilled counterespionage personnel, making it impossible for Franklin’s spy monsters to enter the city. Because of this, nowadays, he was only sending monsters to the city’s surroundings.

Of course, Franklin had no intention of executing any more plots in Gideon, but the city was the main haunt of the one he considered to be his archenemy, and he wanted to observe him to the best of his ability. This loathsome person happened to appear on one of his monster’s footages as Franklin was casually eyeing them.

In the Nex Plains, he opened a capsule he’d gotten from a gacha machine, received a cursed piece of armor, spent some time thinking about something, then equipped it and returned to Gideon.

Upon seeing that, Franklin began to ponder.

“That appearance...”

A demonic bracer on his right hand.

A gnarled hook instead of his left.

A pair of boots fashioned from the dead.

Clad in armor rife with curses.

“...He honestly looks more like a Hell General than our actual Hell General.”

Ray’s fashion sense was staggeringly heinous, but the boy was completely oblivious to it.

Franklin was aware that someone who constantly wore a lab coat wasn’t all that much better, but even he felt like there was a thing or two to say about Ray’s appearance.

“Did no one tell him about this?” Franklin mumbled as he looked at the archenemy in his monitor with a hint of pity in his eyes.

Franklin’s question was nothing but reasonable, and the answer to it was, “No. No one told him.”

Ray was surrounded by people such as Shu, who was always in an animal costume; Rook, a guy in a Slime coat; Marie, who wore a suit despite being in a fantasy world; Figaro, who only cared about stats and wore a mishmash of gear because of it; Xunyu, who had prosthetic arms and legs far too long for anyone; and Juliet, who wore a highly-adolescent set of gothic dress armor.

Other Masters weren’t all that different, so tians tended to simply ignore it, thinking something like, “Well, he’s a Master, so...”

There was no one who could tell Ray about the state of his fashion, as anyone wanting to do so would be rendered incapable of doing so when they simply looked at themselves.

And so, spurred by their silence, Ray’s fashion took a turn toward the dark side.

Extra: Reiji’s Everyday Life / Ray and Nemesis’s Everyday Life

March 29th, 2045, Reiji Mukudori

About two weeks had passed since I’d started playing *Infinite Dendrogram*.

I’d spent a lot of this time in the game, and thanks to its tripled time feature, those two weeks had felt way longer than usual. Then again, all the stuff I’d experienced so far would make even a whole six weeks seem short.

I’d rescued Milianne during Liliana’s quest, encountered Marie in Noz Forest, met Figaro in Tomb Labyrinth, fought against Gardranda, met Hugo, rescued the children with him, struggled against Gouz-Maise, and defeated Franklin, ending his plot to break the kingdom’s spirit.

All those events had happened during a span of just four real-life days, and I couldn’t help but wonder how I’d ended up with such an event-heavy start in that world.

The days that came after were relatively peaceful. I did quests with my party, sparred against Figaro and his fellow duel rankers, tested Shu’s cooking, and raided the Tomb Labyrinth with the three girls we’d met during Franklin’s Game — all of which made for a pretty standard MMO experience.

According to Nemesis, “This is merely the calm before the storm. I’m certain that you will soon be involved in even greater trouble,” and I could only hope that she was wrong.

Still, I couldn’t deny that I had a tendency to get caught up in all sorts of incidents.

There was the car accident Shu had saved me from. Then there was the trip abroad that my sister had dragged me into, during which I’d gone through things that’d made me question whether it was actually real or I’d just dreamed it all.

Oh... just remembering that made my body tremble, so yeah, it had been very real.

That aside, there was something I had to do regardless of whether my new adventures in *Dendro* would be normal or not.

I had to go through college enrollment preparations.

Starting next month, I would be a college student. I'd spent half of the month remaining before college diving into *Dendro* so much that I'd rarely had time to go outside. In fact, I'd been online longer than I'd been off, and it wouldn't have been surprising for me to forget the important things in my life.

Still, I wasn't negligent enough to miss the days during which I had the necessary college-related procedures, and I'd already gone for the briefing, the cooperative, the textbook selling, the physical examination, and so on.

Today was the final such day — the one in which I'd settle everything related to the humanities course I was going to take.

Being fresh out of high school, I couldn't help but wonder whether this process really had to be so complex and split into so many parts, but this might've been normal here in college.

Well, it wasn't like my apartment was all that far from the place. I could get there in less than half an hour on bike, so I had no trouble being on time and going through whatever I had to do.

I'll be back by evening and log in to Dendro *then,* I thought as I walked towards the apartment building's elevator.

On my way, I passed a fellow resident.

"Hello," I greeted her.

"Ah, hello," she reciprocated with her slightly awkward Japanese. She was a foreigner living on the same floor as me.

This apartment building was luxurious and secure, even by the city's standards, so it had no shortage of female tenants.

However, the high rent was a huge barrier preventing the common college student from living here, meaning that most of the collegians in this place were the children of particularly wealthy people. I was an exception to that, since I lived here thanks to Shu.

"Wait, that woman..." I muttered to myself.

The one I'd just passed was probably only a few years older than me.

Her lack of mastery over Japanese made it safe to guess she was a transfer student in some college. Even Shu had told me that there were lots of rich foreigners in this building. Since she was able to live here, she was probably a member of an upper class family.

No use thinking about a stranger's private life, I thought.

"But... what was her name, again?" I murmured.

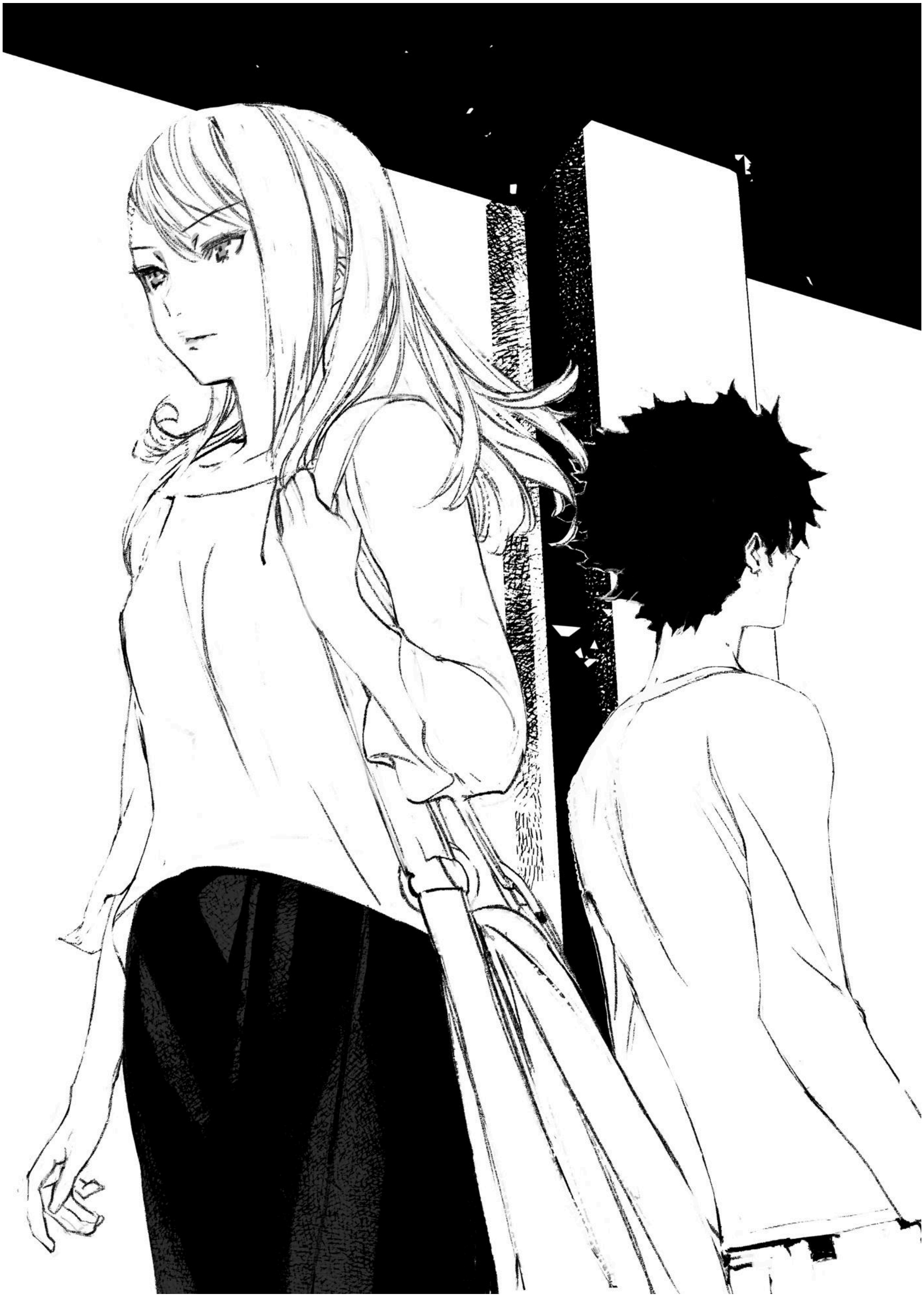
When I'd moved in, I'd followed the cultural practice and greeted the neighbors on my floor with some soba. We'd introduced ourselves back then, and the fact that I couldn't remember her name bothered me so much, I stopped to think about it.

"It went something like Fra... Fra... Franklin? No, no, no, no."

Hearing "Fra" instantly made me picture that mad scientist lab coat bastard, but that was just wrong in all possible ways. Confusing that guy with that pretty blonde lady would be nothing if not rude. Her actual name was...

"Oh, right," I said as it came back to me. "It's Francesca."

Refreshed from having this weight on my mind lifted, I left the apartment building and went to college.



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During my high school years, I'd always thought that all educational facilities were nearly empty during spring break, but a few visits to campus had quickly changed that.

There were lots of people here, even though it was late March. Some went to seminars, some paid visits to labs, while others were busy with club activities. The most passionate people were the ones ready and waiting to invite new members into their clubs.

"Clubs, eh...?" I mumbled to myself.

I was about to become a proper college student, so it might be a good idea for me to join one, too.

To my eye, the people promoting the sports-oriented clubs were the most enthusiastic of all. The mixed martial arts club, for one, was full of men with physiques larger than Shu's, showing off their muscles as they gave warm, or perhaps heated, invitations to the freshmen.

They also had a banner saying "Aim High! Leave a Mark in the Unlimited Pankration College Tournament!" — their goal, most certainly.

The Un-kra mention intrigued me, mostly due to the memories of Shu from when he'd still been in school.

However, unlike my superhuman brother or my downright inhuman sister, I was completely ordinary. Hell, I hadn't even been all that much into sports during my high school years, so I really had no business in that club.

"Ah, my high school years..." I muttered and went on a trip down memory lane.

Though I hadn't been in any clubs during my second and third years, I had been an active member of a club when I was a freshman. It'd been called the "Electronic Game Research Society" or just "EGRS," and its activities had begun and ended with only one thing: playing video games.

The school must've been pretty lenient to allow something like that, but then again, we had also been active in various e-sports, going as far as to participate in several national tournaments.

The club president had won first place in a *Verseair* (card game) event, while the vice president had been the last survivor in a major *War Grounds* (FPS) battle royale. I, too, had left my mark in a *Stream Fighter* (fighting game) tournament, so we'd ended up with three trophies in our club room.

The president and vice president had graduated soon afterward, but I recalled them having been pretty satisfied with the good memories they'd made.

I wonder what they're doing right now, I thought as I pictured them — the ones who had become college students two years before me. *They send me New Year's cards, but those didn't say much about what they're doing. Knowing them, they're probably still gaming.*

"I could try joining a game-related club like I did in high school, but... Oh, whatever, I'll think this through once I actually start college," I decided.

I'm too busy with Dendro *right now, anyway.*

Suddenly, I imagined a college life spent doing nothing but playing online games. I quickly shelved the picture to the depths of my mind and resolved to do my best with both my higher education and my job hunting two or three years later.

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I was done with my student card creation and all the other college-related business before the clock hit noon. In fact, all I really had to do was present my fingerprint.

The simplicity had me bewildered, but apparently, this was normal these days.

According to an aged worker, "Things have gotten increasingly more computerized over the thirty years I've been working here. Even this procedure has become *this* simple."

The schools in the area I'd lived in were pretty advanced, too, but nothing there was this speedy, which went to show that metropolitan higher education facilities were always ahead.

Honestly, if it was this easy, I couldn't help but wonder why it wasn't done along with the briefing.

Anyway, though that was over with unexpectedly quickly, it was now past 11 o'clock — a bit early, but still a good time to have lunch. With that in mind, I made my way towards the cafeteria, hoping that the food I'd be eating here over the next four years would actually be good.

“Wow... There are multiple cafeterias here,” I said as I entered one of them, surprised by how different it was from high school.

I looked at the menu and noticed that it had multiple daily special meals and a great variety of noodles. While eyeing the intriguing, yet highly unappetizing, “Miso-Cooked Lobster Special,” I ordered spaghetti with meat sauce — a favorite of mine.

“Hm...” I tasted some of it and concluded that it was normal. No, as far as school food went, it was definitely delicious. Still, I couldn’t help but compare it with something else.

“The taste is... kinda dull.”

It lacked a certain something I’d grown accustomed to.

Now that I think about it, I haven’t cooked much recently, I realized.

I used to help around the house a lot, so I was familiar with basic chores and cooking. Enough for my mom to be certain I wouldn’t have any trouble living by myself. As things were, however, I was barely doing any cooking for myself, and was instead opting to eat basic onigiri or sandwiches from convenience stores, or cup-a-soups sent to me by my parents. It didn’t take me long to figure out what had caused this change in my eating habits.

“It’s all because of *Dendro*,” I said.

All the food there was better than here in real life, as it had the strange powers unique to fantasy worlds.

To people familiar with RPGs, food was a thing that, for example, healed or raised stats — but in *Dendro*, a game which had taste, it didn’t end there. There were foods and skills focused entirely on flavor, and restaurants built with certain construction skills gave a taste bonus to all food made inside. By stacking such effects, the popular establishments, according to Shu, could “easily surpass the fanciest places in real life.”

Mind you, I didn’t know how to feel about hearing *him* say that, considering he could easily surpass the enhanced *Dendro* restaurants by sense skill alone.

Recently, he’d called me to try his handmade candy, and it had been so good that I’d experienced some indefinable phenomenon called “taste inflation.”

Back to the matter at hand... Basically, the food in *Dendro* was so good that it made real food feel lacking. I wasn’t doing any cooking because I just hadn’t felt that anything I could make would be worth the effort.

Lavish eating in Dendro*, basic nutrition intake in real life... I've read about this online,* I thought as I realized I was unintentionally following the so-called "*Dendro* Diet," popular among women and avid players.

"Mh..." I silently continued eating my spaghetti.

By all reasonable standards, it was good food, but it seemed to lack the power to overwhelm my taste buds.

...Let's try adding this Tabasco sauce and grated cheese, I decided.

"Ahh, I'm finally done with everything I had to do," said a woman sitting at a table behind me. "What a pain that was."

"Well done," said a man accompanying her.

There weren't many people in the cafeteria at this time of the day, so I could hear their conversation quite clearly.

"It must be nice to have all your stuff done long before the deadline, eh, Kage?" she continued. "You coulda shown me what you'd done, you know?"

"I consider schoolwork to be something you do by yourself," replied the man.

The woman had a Kansai accent, slightly Kyoto-like, while the man talked in a very polite manner.

Looks like college really is a place for people from all across the country, I thought.

Once done with my lunch, I went towards the cafeteria's exit and noticed the papers hung on a nearby bulletin board. Surprised that such an advanced college was still using something so archaic, I took a moment to look through it.

While most of the papers were about in-campus contacts and clubs, there were also some leaflets for part-time jobs. There seemed to be demand for cafeteria, shop workers, and even private tutors.

I was living fine on just my allowance right now, but I probably had to consider eventually getting a part-time job for extra income.

Well, perhaps I'll do it when I'm not as busy with Dendro *as I am now,* I thought as I walked out.

◇

Once done with my college business, I went to buy some necessities and returned home a little past noon.

As I was handling what I'd bought, my mobile phone began to vibrate as someone called me. The display said that it was Mom, so I didn't hesitate to answer and bring the mobile phone to my ear.

"Hello? Reiji?" Sure enough, it was my mother, speaking to me with the same voice I'd heard yesterday.

"Hi, Mom. What's wrong?" I asked.

"The schedule says that it's the day of the last part of the enrollment process, and I was just wondering if you'd actually gone..."

Yeah, I expected as much, I thought.

My mom was highly prone to worrying, and didn't hesitate to call me on days when I had something going on. She'd also called me yesterday morning, saying "Today's the physical examination, isn't it? Are you ready for it?"

According to Shu, she had always been this much of a worrywart. I supposed I couldn't really blame her, considering she'd had my sister as her first child.

Ever since my sister was young, even her most basic antics had been outside the realm of reason. Just like in the various misadventures I'd recalled this morning, my sister had a tendency to get caught up in the most absurd of situations and make it through them using nothing but brute force, and because of this, our parents had had a really hard time with her.

To make things worse, Shu had been born soon after her, and though he wasn't as absurd a creature as our sister, he certainly wasn't normal, either.

In his younger years, he'd entered showbiz and became both a child singer and actor. Later down the line, during his middle and high school years, he'd dabbled in martial arts and gone on to win Un-kra. And when he'd started going to college, he'd casually picked up cooking and made food so good that it made people pass out.

Basically, he could do just about anything he tried.

As far as I was aware, the only exception to this was art. I recalled having looked at his "works" and thinking that I would probably have to be an alien creature for them to make even a bit of sense.

Anyway, having those two abnormals as their children must've been pretty taxing on my parents, and I could totally understand why they would worry about me, as well.

Still, compared to them... no, without any comparisons, I was as normal as people come, so they really didn't have to mind me all that much.

...Weird. An auditory hallucination bearing Nemesis's voice had just asked, "Does a normal person fight by eating undead flesh? What about punching people's faces with a charred arm? Is that normal?"

...Hey, I'm still more normal than my siblings, I replied silently.

"Reiji?" Mom spoke up in a worried tone, returning me to reality. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Uh, no, it's nothing," I said to calm her down. "I did all I had to before noon. It's all good. Now, I just have to wait for the opening the day after tomorrow."

Which was true. This year's April 1st, the day when the term would usually start, was a Saturday, so the event had been moved to Friday, March 31st. Still, it would be nothing but a guidance event, and the schedule said that the actual entrance ceremony would be held some time after college began.

I remembered finding it weird that the entrance ceremony would be separate from the actual entrance.

"Well, that's good to know," said Mom. "Your dad and I will come see you at the entrance ceremony. If you need anything, you can ask Shu for help. He's not far from you."

"Yeah, I know."

Shu said the same thing, I thought.

"But wow... my little Reiji is a college student. Time sure flies..." Though we were talking by phone, I could easily tell that she was turning sentimental. "You were such an easy child to raise... Well, I could say the same for Shu, but he was just *too* little trouble. Your sister, though..."

I could almost see her place her hand on her head as she recalled something. She was either remembering the same sister-related events I was, or deeds that had happened before I was even born.

Unless...

"Did something happen to her again?" I asked.

"She called me from overseas yesterday and said, 'I got caught up in a bomb terror plot in Val Verde. You might see my name on the news, but know that I'm perfectly fine. I even caught the one who set it up.'"

"Yikes..."

The fact that she'd caught the terrorist made it obvious that she hasn't changed at all.

Wait, Val Verde...? She's in South America again? I thought.

"Sometimes I wonder if she isn't some sort of Superman or Terminator," my mom added.

Considering my sister's love for Western movies, that comparison was very much like her, but...

I told Mom, "Last I asked, she said, 'Hospital examinations say that I'm an Earthling. Oh, and DNA tests support that, too, of course.'"

"That girl is just so..." my mom said and sighed. "I can understand Shu, since he's a man without a steady job, but I'd really like to see your sister settle down soon. At this rate, she'll enter her thirties without anything changing."

"Well, you'd first need to find someone brave enough to bond with her," I commented.

I certainly know I wouldn't do it, even if we weren't family, I thought.

"What about you, Reiji? Got any sweet stories to share?" Mom asked suddenly.

"...Eh?" I exclaimed, confused as to why the subject had switched to me.

"Have you gotten a girlfriend in college yet?"

"I've only been to the briefing and gone through the enrollment process," I protested. "There's no way I could have gotten one at this stage."

In *Dendro*, I'd become acquainted with Liliana, Marie, and the duel ranker girls such as Juliet or Chelsea, but those were all just friends — far from the "girlfriend" Mom had in mind.

"What about food? Have you had a girl make lunch for you yet?"

"...Nope."

Sure, Marie had made us a midnight snack while we were heading to Gideon. However, considering *the thing she'd made* to be food was an insult to all cooking everywhere, it didn't count... surely.

"Have you at least gone for a drive with a girl?"

"I don't even have a license to drive cars," I retorted. "I have one for motorbikes, but I don't have one of those here."

Nemesis and I occasionally rode Silver, but riding a horse was different from "driving," so, again, it didn't count.

"I see," said Mom. "I just thought that you were the one best suited for love out of you three."

"What? Wouldn't that be Shu?"

As far as I knew, he was extremely popular among girls. I could clearly remember the loads of chocolates he'd brought home on Valentine's Days when he was in high school.

"Well, he's unemployed right now..."

"Ohh..."

True enough. These days, he was in *Dendro* around the clock, so he probably wasn't as popular as he used to be. Or maybe he was and I just didn't know about it? To my knowledge, he was only popular among children, and even then, only as nothing more than a bear-shaped jungle gym mascot thing.

"Oh, but Mom," I argued, "Shu doesn't have a job, but he has an income, right? I'm sure he'll be popular with women who marry for money. It's fine."

"That seems like a problem in and of itself..."

...Yeah, I realized that right after saying it, I thought.

"Would I be asking for too much if I wanted to see a grandchild within the next ten years?" she asked.

"Well, Shu will be married before he closes in on his forties," I answered. "Probably."

"And your sister?"

"..." Deafening silence.

I'm sorry, Mom, I thought. *I just can't picture her ever getting married. That might be a possibility that would have to be seized from far, far beyond the radix point.*

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Duel city Gideon, Paladin, Ray Starling

After wrapping up my exchange with Mom, I logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram.*

First things first: I checked the time and found out that it was right about three in the afternoon here.

As I did that, Nemesis left the crest.

“Are you done with your college business and whatnot?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I went through the last part of the procedure.”

Which means that, today and tomorrow, I can focus on Dendro *entirely,* I thought.

Then again, I’d start going to college soon after that... but that was something I could think about later.

“So, what shall we do today?” Nemesis asked. “The meeting with Rook and Marie was tomorrow in this world’s time, no?”

Being a party, we regularly went on various quests.

The particularly popular ones were those related to the Jeand Grasslands. The drastic change to the area had affected the local ecosystem, creating conditions that made new monsters come dangerously close to the city. Quests to cull the more threatening ones were becoming more common by the day.

We’d intended to go on such a quest today, but my business with college had ended unexpectedly quickly, giving me lots of free time.

I looked at my friends list and, sure enough, Rook and Marie weren’t online.

“Well... I guess I’ll pay a visit to the knight offices,” I said.

“The usual business, I assume?” asked Nemesis.

“Yeah.”

When I came there, a worker greeted me and led me to the usual place, clearly used to doing this by now. We stood before a heavily sealed door as the worker used some spells to undo the seals.

Once beyond it, I was surrounded by a load of container-shaped inventories, all of which contained nothing but cursed items.

There were many ways weapons and armor could become cursed. Some got cursed due to the grudge of the dead; some were designed to be cursed by the Dark Knights using them; some were merely left behind by Hexers, a job focused entirely on cursing people and objects; some became cursed due to monster skills; et cetera, et cetera.

Though some curses could be lifted by the common clergyman from the priest job grouping, many were too strong for that, demanding the powers of skilled, max level tians — a rarity in the kingdom, and doubly so in Gideon, since most hardened clergymen were in the capital.

Another problem with cursed items was that they could neither be disposed of — since someone might find them and be subjected to the curse — or destroyed — since the cursed item might react to that by unleashing the curse. There was also the fact that these had once been good items, so people were somewhat reluctant to get rid of them.

Because of these reasons, the long years of "purify or store" handling had created this massive hoard of cursed items. Since the game had started and Masters had entered this world, resulting in an increase in high-level clergymen, the situation here had slowly gotten better, but the cursed items were still great in number.

Many of the items being held here had once been powerful pieces of equipment. Returning them to a usable state would give the people greater power while dealing with events like Franklin's Game or the wars to come, and because of this, Count Gideon had been pushing to get them uncursed.

But it had been going too slowly, and while they'd been wondering what to do, I'd received and uncursed the CBR Armor using my special reward.

The Count had somehow heard of this — likely from Elizabeth, who'd heard it from Marie — and sent me a request to undo the curses on the items here. I'd accepted, provided I wasn't bound to any schedule and could do it whenever I had free time.

Thus, I paid occasional visits to the offices and worked to undo the curses on the items here.

It took me about two hours to uncurse a single inventory. That might seem like a long time, but clergymen had it even worse. Due to MP and cooldown limitations on their skills, they had to gradually purify items over the course of an entire day, while my Grudge-soaked Greaves did it much faster with me doing nothing but being close to the inventory. Still, it would be a pretty long time until I was done uncursing everything here.

"The equipment purification will take quite a while, I assume?" asked Nemesis.

"Well, they've spent many years hoarding these," I answered. "Just look around."

"So it's a great mess, even for Gouz-Maise the grudge vacuum."

"...Grudge vacuum? Well, that's pretty on-point."

Whatever the case, I was allowed to do this whenever I pleased, so could purify it all at my own leisure.

Hell, doing this was advantageous for me, too. After all, the MP and SP stored in the Grudge-soaked Greaves grew the more grudge it absorbed, and considering the chances of my wanting to use it in future battles, having more of it certainly wouldn't hurt.

The reward for this activity, by the way, wasn't monetary. For every ten inventories I purified, they let me pick any one of the purified weapons. These inventories contained sacred swords, mystic blades, and gem brands, and I was allowed to take any one of the ones I'd uncursed.

Considering that there might situations in the future in which I'd have to fight without Nemesis at my side, or with her helping me in human form, I figured that having a spare weapon was a good idea, and I hadn't hesitated to accept those conditions.

But alas...

"No good," said Nemesis. "This one is lacking, as well."

"Tsk..."

When I'd told her about the spare weaponry, Nemesis said that she wouldn't allow it unless the weapon passed her examination.

She was so strict that none of the ten weapons I'd purified so far had made the cut.

There were some really strong-looking blades, too, I thought.

"I still don't see a single sword that passes!" she declared.

I knew she'd said, "I'll have to make sure that it's fully worthy!" but I'd certainly had no idea she would be so strict.

Does a weapon that passes her examination even exist? I thought to myself.

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After purifying one inventory, I left the room, looked outside, and saw that it was evening. Once done reporting today's results to the person in charge, I went out to the hallway...

"Oh?"

...and saw someone familiar — Liliana.

Her face was red, and she was talking to several people while looking somewhat anxious.

"So she's no longer in Gideon," she said before coughing loudly. "I do not think we couldn't find her if she was anywhere in the city, so we can only assume she went outside...”

The people she was talking to were clad in navy blue shinobi clothing, and wore masks and plated headbands on their heads, making them look like the most standard of ninjas. These days, they weren’t an uncommon sight here in Gideon — you could see them jumping from rooftop to rooftop at noon and midnight alike.

The primary cause of these sightings was one of our party members: Marie.

Count Gideon was really bitter about his city being subjected to the horrors of the Gouz-Maise Gang and the terror of Franklin’s Game. Because of that, he’d decided that he had to be strong on policing and intelligence, leading him to ready his pocket money to set up an intelligence agency.

Since such a group would handle sensitive information, Count Gideon had wanted it to be made up of tians, rather than Masters, but there had been a significant lack of qualified people.

During the attack by a SUBM called the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, and the war that had come later, the kingdom had lost many of its battle-focused tians, leaving the country’s forces underleveled and underskilled. Most of the few capable tians were in the knight orders and other groups rooted in the capital. Thus, to form an intelligence agency that could double as police, the Count had first had to acquire the right people, and he’d chosen Marie to help him with this purpose.

After Franklin’s Game, Elizabeth had introduced her to the Count, and Marie had taken the opportunity to sell him the Jewels storing the monsters that only attacked Masters, which had gone on to be used to train and powerlevel tian knights.

She’d also revealed to him that she was the Superior Killer and the Death Shadow — the Superior Job of Tenchi’s onmitsu grouping. Upon hearing that, the Count had wondered if he could use Marie’s connections to hire some Tenchi ninjas for his intelligence agency, since they were known to be highly capable operatives.

Marie had accepted his request and contacted the Tenchi ninja group she was still connected to, which was the shinobi village where she got her onmitsu jobs, apparently.

As luck would have it, a civil war in Tenchi had destroyed their employer’s household and left them wandering, searching for a new boss.

Count Gideon’s wants and the ninja group’s wants had matched perfectly, and soon enough, the entire village had moved to the city.

“Soon enough” was a bit of an understatement, actually, considering they’d come all the way here from Tenchi — the other side of the continent — in less than a week’s time. It was a speed impossible for most Masters, let alone tians, and naturally, the Count had been absolutely dumbfounded.

When he’d asked about it, however, they’d merely said, “It’s a trade secret. Nin-nin,” in a manner as questionable as it was ninja-like. Apparently, not even Marie knew how they’d pulled it off.

Whatever the case, true to their reputation, the ninjas were highly skilled.

Tenchi, the land where the Gideon Shinobi Force had originated, was known as the country with the strongest tians. For Tenchi’s battle-focused tians, reaching level 500 was more like a starting point than anything else, since they would then begin to hone their techniques until they became true martial artists worthy of the name. Because of this and other reasons, Tenchi was often referred to as the “land of strife.”

Luckily or unluckily, depending on your perspective, the country’s current state was much like that of Japan during the Sengoku Era, so almost none of their great power was directed toward other countries.

It’s not like a constant civil war is all that better, but still, I thought.

Anyway, the highly stereotypical ninjas were all max level stalwarts, making them simply perfect for the job. Count Gideon had quickly hired them and set up the Gideon Shinobi Force, an information agency answering directly to him. And thus, we now had a Rome-like city in which ninjas were a common sight.

Also, Marie had made big bank for her role as mediator, and she’d gone on to treat us to some food.

So yeah, the ninjas were a normal part of Gideon by now, but Liliana’s panicked expression as she talked to them certainly wasn’t.

“We will split up and search Gideon’s surroundings,” said one of the ninjas.

“Please do so,” replied Liliana and coughed yet again. “I’ll join you soon.”

“Do not overdo it.”

The ninjas kicked the floor beneath, dashed away, and vanished like shades in sunlight.

"Ah, Ray!" Liliana cried as she saw us nearby, again looking somewhat anxious.

"Are you okay, Liliana?" I asked.

Her pallid expression made it evident that she wasn't in good health.

"Oh, don't mind me," she said and coughed again. "Her Highness escaped today. Have you seen her, perchance?"

She showed little intention to answer my question, instead revealing that she was caught up in more Elizabeth-related trouble.

"...No," I said, shaking my head in response.

The kingdom's second princess was a very free and brazen character, as well as a genius escape artist. Though she refrained from doing it on days with official business, her leaving the Gideon residence she was staying at had become a nearly daily occurrence by this point.

The fact that she was able to escape while being observed by the Royal Guard and several max level ninjas spoke volumes about the extent of her skill. It was hard to believe she was just a child who didn't even have a single job.

...Well, the primary reason why Elizabeth had become so good at escaping was the coaching from Rook, who, for reasons unknown, had been trained in such things in real life.

Our party is full of eccentrics, I thought.

"And you're no exception," Nemesis commented telepathically.

...I can't really deny that.

"Well... I know I probably shouldn't say this, but isn't that a common thing at this point?" I asked Liliana.

"Indeed it is." She nodded. "But things are slightly different this time."

"In what way?"

Elizabeth had sneaked out, and the officials had gone out to find her. What could be different there?

"A short time ago, as a countermeasure against her antics, we gave Her Highness a Jewel."

Jewels were items that allowed the storage of tamed monsters that obeyed their owners. Even if they couldn't fit the monsters into their minion capacity, children and low-level humans could use them by putting them in party slots.

"I see," I said. "Since you can't prevent her from escaping, you decided to give her a means to protect herself." As far as safety was concerned, that was perfectly reasonable.

"Yes," Liliana said and coughed again. "Count Gideon used his connections to procure a Pure-Dragon and presented it to her."

"Well, that's something..."

Their rarity on the market made Pure-Dragons quite a luxury. While Demi-Dragons went for about 1,000,000 lir, Pure-Dragons were often over ten times more expensive.

I figured the Count hadn't hesitated to fork up the money for something so costly because he'd felt responsible about Elizabeth getting kidnapped during Franklin's Game.

But man, Count Gideon sure is rich, I thought.

He'd rewarded the Masters, given money to the families of those that'd died, paid for city repairs, created the Gideon Shinobi Force, and he'd still had more funds to spend. His wealth might've been another reason why Franklin had picked Gideon as his target city.

"And, well... the Pure-Dragon's name is 'Stealth Dragon,'" Liliana added.

"Oh, 'Stealth Dragon,' eh?" I said. "Wait... *Stealth*?"

I have a bad feeling about this.

"Stealth Dragons have the ability to hide themselves and the people riding them," she explained.

...I more or less see how it is.

She went on, "Count Gideon assumed that this quality would make it an optimal bodyguard, since it could hide Her Highness and take her away from trouble, but..."

"...it was also an optimal escape partner," I finished her sentence.

The escape artist princess had been given the perfect ally: a monster that was basically a huge, flying Marie. Sure, it didn't have Arc-en-Ciel, but that wouldn't stop it from being stupidly troublesome.

"Yes." Liliana nodded. "We've been searching for Her Highness and the Stealth Dragon ever since they disappeared in the morning, but we can't find them anywhere in Gideon, so we assume that they might've left the city."

"That's... plausible," I said.

Among the ninjas, there were many people from the onmitsu grouping, just like Marie. That grouping excelled at both hiding and finding hidden things, so if they'd had no luck finding Elizabeth in Gideon, it was likely that she'd gone outside the city.

Thanks to the Gideon Shinobi Force, the city was now considerably more peaceful and safer. However, the same couldn't be said for the city's monster-ridden outskirts. Even if you had a Pure-Dragon bodyguard, this was a world where you could easily be ambushed by something even more powerful.

"I had the Gideon Shinobi Force extend their search to the outside of the city," said Liliana as she walked towards the exit. "I'm about to join them and—"

She cut her words short and coughed so heavily that she staggered.

It had been bothering me ever since I'd seen her today. The red face, the coughs — it was clear that she was ill.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Do you have a Cold?"

"...Yes, but it's just a normal Cold, rather than the Epidemic they had in the capital."

In *Dendro*, illnesses were classified as disease-based debuffs. However, unlike the basic poisons and the like, they could be significantly more troublesome, as many of them couldn't be removed by your standard Elixirs or Antidotes.

The Food Poisoning I'd once gotten had disappeared after I'd taken just one drug, but there were Epidemics that could only be cleared by healing skills from Superior Jobs. Alas, not everyone had access to people with such skills, so most had to settle for slowly healing themselves with medicine made by people in the doctor grouping, simply waiting for the illness to go away, or...

"Liliana," I said slowly. "Have you met with Her Majesty before she ran away today?"

"Yes." She nodded. "But she disappeared soon afterwards..."

I'm starting to see what's going on here, I thought.

"All right, I'll search for her, too. But you have to stay in Gideon and rest."

"But I...!"

“Leave it to me,” I said while looking her in the eyes. She momentarily hesitated before giving me a light nod.

“Very well,” she said. “I leave Her Majesty to you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find her no matter what.” I nodded confidently and left the knight offices.

[Quest Received: Search — Elizabeth S. Altar, Difficulty 5]
[Confirm the quest details in the quest window]

The message I received was highly reminiscent of an event I’d experienced a month ago.

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After leaving the offices, I took Silver out of my inventory and jumped on him, and as I made my prosthetic left arm hold the reins, Nemesis climbed up behind me. Then I activated Silver’s Wind Hoof skill and dashed through the air towards my destination.

“You know where to find Elizabeth, Ray?” asked Nemesis.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m almost completely certain that she went out to look for a food that works on Colds.”

Dendro had loads of foods that made people healthy, and some of them were effective against Colds. One such food were Clearberries — a type of berry often found in the areas surrounding Gideon. However, Clearberries also weakened the symptoms of the Epidemic that had attacked the capital recently, so most of Gideon’s Clearberries had been sent there. Alejandro had told me that the storage was completely empty.

This morning, when she’d seen Liliana suffering from a Cold, Elizabeth had clearly wanted to do something about it and decided to get her some Clearberries. And if she hadn’t found any of them in Gideon’s shops, it was entirely possible that she’d used her mount-bodyguard to go forage for them directly.

“Well, she’s a proactive girl, after all,” said Nemesis.

Thanks to a quest I’d done not long ago, I knew where I could find Clearberries. They grew in the area southwest of Gideon, the Saudade Woods.

“The monsters there aren’t particularly high level, so it’s not too dangerous,” said Nemesis. “A little girl with a Pure-Dragon at her side should fare just fine, no?”

“The monsters there *were* below Demi-Dragon-tier, so it *wasn’t* too dangerous,” I replied, emphasizing certain words.

“...Past tense, eh?”

“Yeah. Things are different now.”

Following Franklin’s Game, the ecosystem in Gideon’s surroundings had slowly begun to change. The most noticeable difference was that the more powerful monsters that had once lived farther away had started coming closer to the city.

When I’d been searching for quests to take with my party, I’d learned that the southwestern woods was now a habitat for Pure-Dragon-tier monsters and above.

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Southwest of Gideon, Saudade Woods

In the middle of Saudade Woods, there was a girl and a Pure-Dragon.

“Phew, this should be more than enough!” The second princess of the Kingdom of Altar, Elizabeth S. Altar, nodded in a satisfied manner while looking at a basket full of Clearberries.

“KYULULU.” The white Pure-Dragon with rabbit-like fur released a voice, as if agreeing with its owner. It was a Stealth Dragon called “Kyululu” — named so by Elizabeth because of the sound it made.

“Let’s go back, then,” said Elizabeth. “It’s already evening. If we don’t come back now, they might start to worry.”

Little did she know that they were already worried. The girl’s standards regarding this were quite unlike those of the people responsible for her.

Elizabeth climbed up on Kyululu’s back and, just like when they’d arrived here, had it use Optic Camouflage and Presence Block to hide them both and leave the Saudade Woods.

Kyululu spread its wings, ready to take flight...

“Kyu?!”

It jumped to the side in surprise. A moment later, something large broke through the surface and burst out of the ground.

“SHAAAAAAH...”

It was a large monster bearing the head of a cobra-like snake and many centipede-like legs.

It bent its head and looked directly at Kyululu and Elizabeth as though Optic Camouflage had no effect at all.

“Wh-What?!” Elizabeth cried.

“KYULULULU!”

As Elizabeth got frightened, Kyululu began jumping away from the monster, careful to not throw the girl off.

The snake-head creature went after Kyululu with a precision so great, it was scary.

“Kyululu! Can’t you fly?!” shouted Elizabeth in desperation.

“KYULULU...!”

Despite having wings capable of flight, Kyululu was running on land. Its instincts were telling it that flying would instantly kill them both.

The monster chasing them was a Viperhead Dragon Worm. It was a Pure-Dragon-tier monster bearing Poison, the worm-like ability to dig underground, and the snake-like skill called “Heat Perception.”

It was much like thermography, and it allowed the creature to see Kyululu despite its Optic Camouflage.

“SHAAAAAAH!”

Though Kyululu was a Pure-Dragon, too, its focus on camouflage and surprise attacks made it have relatively low stats.

The Viperhead Dragon Worm not only had greater stats, but it also nullified Kyululu’s prime merit, Optic Camouflage, by using its Heat Perception.

The creature was basically the Stealth Dragon’s natural predator.

Its only way out of this predicament was to fly, but it would all be over if the Viperhead spat its Poison over Kyululu when it stopped to take flight. It had to increase the distance between them, but the creature was gaining on it with frightening precision.

Soon enough, the Viperhead’s poisonous fangs reached for Elizabeth, but then...

“Counter Absorption!”

...a barrier of light appeared in the creature’s way.

“Eh?” the girl exclaimed in confusion.

“KYULU...?” the Stealth Dragon cried as it and its owner both tried to turn around and see what caused the crashing sound behind them.

“Don’t turn around! Just run! Get some distance, fly, and get out of here!”

Urged by the loud order, they both looked forward and continued running.

Kyululu quickly created the necessary distance and flew up into the sky.

That was when Elizabeth turned around for the first time.

There, she saw a dark-red knight on a silver horse fighting the snake-headed insectoid.

◇◇◇

Paladin, Ray Starling

Upon hearing dragon wings flutter behind me, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“That was uncomfortably close,” said Nemesis.

“Seriously.” I couldn’t help but agree. I dreaded to imagine what would’ve happened if I’d been just a second late, and I was really glad I’d made it.

“Now, we just have to do something about this snake-head,” Nemesis added.

“True.”

The snake-head before me — a “Viperhead Dragon Worm,” apparently — seemed to be quite irritated. I could only assume it was upset about me getting in the way and letting its Pure-Dragon feast escape.

It threatened me with snake-like movements and sounds.

“Well? Should we escape it?” asked Nemesis.

“We saved the princess, but if a monster like this lives near Gideon, it might eventually kill someone else,” I answered.

And that would leave a bad taste in my mouth, so...

“...we’ll kill it,” I finished aloud. “Here and now.”

“Understood!”

Thus began the battle.

“SHAAAAAAH!” Treating us as enemies to be killed, rather than prey to be eaten, the snake-head opened its mouth, not for a bite, but to release a Poison breath. The green smoke buried my vision and afflicted me with

Poison, which quickly drained my HP.

"Form Shift — The Flag Halberd!" I shouted.

And so, the damage was reversed.

Right as Nemesis became a halberd, I activated Like a Flag Flying the Reversal, the skill that reversed the effects of debuffs. With that, the Poison began healing me.

The snake-head, surprised by me still standing strong upon taking its Poison, slightly backed away from me.

Not missing the opening, I held my right hand in front and made my Miasmaflame Bracer release its Hellish Miasma while also activating Silver's Wind Hoof barrier to protect me from the three debuffs.

The monster was staggered. It had a resistance to Poison, but Weakness and Intoxication worked on it just fine.

"The stage is set," I said. "Let's go, Nemesis!"

"Certainly!"

My strategy was the same as with Gardranda. I repeatedly let it damage me and healed myself with the reversed Poison, accumulating the damage needed to end it with a well-placed Vengeance is Mine.

It was safe to assume that, unlike the demon, this one wouldn't turn more powerful once I took its head.

"Still, even though it's Weakened, its stats are far higher than yours," said Nemesis. "Mess up one time too many, and you might die."

"True," I said, acknowledging that my own stats were equal to or less than Demi-Dragon-tier. "Our chances of winning are about... forty percent?"

"Ha ha ha! Forty percent, you say?" she laughed. "That's much higher than any of our previous encounters!"

"Damn right!"

Recalling the battles we'd gone through, we charged towards the enemy.

With Silver as my steed and Nemesis in hand, I clashed with a creature far stronger than myself.

Just like we'd done before, and just like we would be doing from this point onward, we struggled against adversity while reaching for the possibility we wanted to seize.

As the enemy's fangs ripped into me, as my blade sunk into the enemy, as I narrowly avoided death from its lethal attacks, and as its unexpected actions caught me off guard, we continued fighting until the end.

And so, after an hour-long battle...

"Vengeance is Mine!"

...we launched an attack that obliterated its head.

◇

After the battle, we returned to Gideon.

"...Man, am I tired," I sighed.

"That's only natural," said Nemesis. "You've been fighting for so long."

The Poison I'd received had gone away with just a healing item, but sadly, the exhaustion wasn't so easy to get rid of. I hauled my somewhat-heavy body through the city's streets.

"Still, I'm glad Elizabeth's okay," I said.

After killing the monster, I'd gone to the knight offices to see whether she'd made it back safely, and found her being scolded by Liliana.

They'd decided that the Pure-Dragon she'd used to escape — "Kyululu," apparently — would have its ownership switched to another person. Elizabeth would still be allowed to keep it as a pet, but that was it. The knights looking after her would take turns owning Kyululu until it was clear that she wouldn't escape anymore.

The scene reminded me of the times my mom had confiscated a toy when I was a child.

Though Elizabeth was sad about being scolded, she seemed to understand that she'd deserved it for making Liliana and the others so worried, so she definitely wasn't a bad girl.

Also, the moment when Elizabeth fearfully presented Liliana with a basket full of Clearberries, bringing Liliana to the verge of tears, left a pretty big impression on me.

"This is very much a happy ending," said Nemesis.

"Yep. Glad it all worked out."

But man, a quest from Liliana where I look for a girl and fight a worm...

It was just like the first quest I'd done upon starting *Dendro*.

In the first battle, the one in which Nemesis and I had first met, I'd faced a Demi-Dragon Worm and narrowly seized the possibility with Nemesis at my side. And today, Nemesis and I had fought a monster far stronger and still ended up seizing the possibility.

It felt somewhat easier than the first time, though, I thought.

“That’s because you’ve grown since then,” said Nemesis.

I’d changed quite a bit during my month in this world, but I didn’t think that me becoming stronger was the biggest difference. The biggest difference was that I’d had Nemesis with me right from the start this time.

On my first day, I’d protected Milia until I was beaten to a pulp, had to beg for a possibility, and had Nemesis answer. Today, Nemesis had supported me right from the start, and if that wasn’t the biggest difference, I didn’t know what was.

Hm... I silently pondered.

It was likely that, just like everything before now and just like today, I’d be at the center of many various incidents. Some might be far worse, more intense, or scarier than any of the ones before. But...

“Hm? Why are you looking at me like that?” Nemesis asked.

“No reason...”

No matter what came my way, I felt that I could overcome it as long as I was with my partner. Thus, my everyday life would go on with Nemesis and me clearing all the trouble we get caught up in.

“Anyway, it’s late,” I said. “Should we go get something to eat?”

“Certainly,” said Nemesis. “The snake-head’s Coffer contained nothing but items you convert into money, so let’s use that new wealth to have a feast!”

“...Don’t overdo it, though.”

And so, Nemesis and I walked through the late evening streets.

The End

Afterword

Bear: “Time fur the afterword! It’s me again! Brother Bear, AKA Shu Starling!”

Cat: “I’m Cheshiiire! The one who seeks to get a turn in these wastelands of the afterworrd!”

Xun: “What the hell Are ‘wastelands of thE afterword’...? I’m XunyU.”

Cat: “Anyway, like I said in the midword, this is the end of the first part of *Dendro*.”

Bear: “We only clawed our way this far thanks to our dear readers.”

Cat: “Indeed. The work’s popularity allowed us to complete the first part without having to force it into fewer than the necessary five volumes.”

Xun: “You mentioNEd in the midword that the authOr had a few spare pages he could use to add morE story, right?”

Cat: “Yes. The short story even portrays some of Ray’s real life.”

Xun: “Now that I think abOUt it, he’s been online throUghout pretty much the whole of the story sO far.”

Bear: “He was only offline before logging in for the first time and after he got his first death penalty.”

Cat: “Yes, and since the work *is* in the VRMMO genre, the author figured that having some real life scenes was important, as well, so he went and wrote that short story. VRMMOs wouldn’t be VRMMOs if actual reality didn’t exist and the differences weren’t there for all to see!”

Xun: “...Still, a cErtain someone is a bit too differeNt.”

Bear: “Who do you mean?”

Xun: “The one who got an illustration in the short story.”

Bear: “Ohh...”

Cat: “The author was really surprised when Editor K told him that she would get an illustration.”

Bear: “Abearently, this was done at the request of Taiki.”

Xun: “Well, she sure is pOpular...”

Cat: “Please continue supporting Mr. Franklin — the one bearing the face of a mad scientist (*Dendro*) and of a cool beauty (real life).”

Xun: (...I’m not sUre if many people want to suppoRt her.)

Bear: “Now, it’s time for the usual serious comment from the author.”

Thank you very much for reading *Infinite Dendrogram*’s fifth volume and completing the first arc of the series. We’ve only made it this far thanks to you — our readers.

At the time I’m writing this, it was recently announced that *Infinite Dendrogram* got first place in BookWalker’s New Light Novel Awards 2017. According to Editor K, this was mostly due to votes from readers and bookstore employees. You have my sincere thanks for the result and for letting me complete the first part with little trouble.

The upcoming sixth volume would mark the start of the second arc, but we are also considering releasing a short story collection, as well.

New characters, new happenings, new battles — it would bring me great joy if you continued to enjoy and look out for the ever-heating story of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Cat: “Anyway, with the author’s comment done, it’s time to announce the next volume...”

Bear: “You do it, Cheshire.”

Cat: “Eh?”

Xun: “You’ve wanted tO do this for a while, so go foR it. Wrap up the first aRc.”

Cat: “...Thanks, you guys. All right, here I go! Volume si—”

?: “Volume six is set to come out at the end of 2017! (In Japan)!”

Cat: “Eh? Ehh?!”

Bear: “Some beary jaunty individual just stole your announcement...”

Xun: “...Oh, it’s thE person who made a brief appearance in the secOnd short story.”

Cat: “Hngh... AAAAHH! YOU THIEVING CAT!”

Bear, Xun: (You’re the cat here, dude...)

?: “So yeah, look forward to volume six and my proper first appearance!”

Bonus Short Stories

The Royal Capital, Altea

The day after Mr. Franklin's terrorist incident in duel city Gideon, the Superior from Huang He, Xunyu, returned to the kingdom's capital at a speed unimaginable to the common person.

Unlike when she had gone *to* Gideon, she didn't have Meihai with her. The Huang He ambassador had more business in the duel city, and she was also thoroughly averse to Xunyu's method of travel, going as far as to tearily beg the Superior not to take her.

No one could fault her. Xunyu traveled by extending her Superior Embryo, Tenaga Ashinaga, into the distant horizon at supersonic speeds, then grabbing the surface and pulling herself towards it just as fast. To her, it was as natural as walking normally, but anyone forced to accompany her would turn groggy from the repeating decreases and increases in speed.

Upon arriving to the capital's gates, Xunyu took off her Superior Embryo. By design, Tenaga Ashinaga was like a set of complex claw grabbers and circus stiltwalker stilts, so it wasn't hard to remove.

With that done, she walked, on her own two feet, towards the state guest house in the noble district. She proved her identity to the guardsmen at the entrance, headed for her destination room, knocked on the door, and was welcomed inside.

"I'm bAck, Cang," she said upon entering.

"Welcome back, Master Xunyu!" a boy greeted her with a smile. He was Canglong, the current owner of the room and the third prince of the Huang He Empire.

"How'rE you holdin' up?" she asked.

"I still have a bit of a fever, but it's nothing major. What about you, Master Xunyu? There was some trouble in Gideon after the Clash, wasn't there? It was projected in the capital's sky."

"So it seEms."

Franklin had made sure that the incident at Gideon would be broadcasted to both Gideon and the capital. It was still the talk of the town here in Altea, and many tians were worried that something similar could happen here.

That was the reason why Xunyu had removed her Tenaga Ashinaga from sight upon entering the city. While wearing her Embryo, she had the appearance of a fiend with limbs far too long for any humanoid creature, and the sight of such a being hopping around was sure to make the tians uneasy.

Fiendish and odd as she sometimes seemed, Xunyu was a girl (ten years old, by the way) who was capable of such consideration.

"Well, I'm finE," she said. "All I hAd to do was take care of a single mOnster."

"I see. That's good to know," Cang sighed with relief. "Oh, right, Master Xunyu, how was the Clash of the Superiors? Was the kingdom's duel champion... was Figaro strong?"

"YeAh. Figaro was toUgh and I had tons of fun. I'd love tO fight him many more times while I'm here in thE kingdom," she said with a smile that was plain to see even with the talisman covering her face.

Oh, it must have been a really great duel, thought Canglong upon seeing her expression.

"Master Xunyu, could you tell me more about the fight?" he requested. "The incident made it all chaotic, and I have yet to hear many details of the duel."

"Of coursE," said Xunyu. "That's whY I returned here, aftER all."

Indeed, she had come back to the capital specifically to show this boy that she was all right and tell him of the duel that he was certainly curious about.

"Before the stArt of the fight, to get fired up, stir up the sCEne, and set up a trap, I built myself up as the heEl. Then, I..."

And so she spoke, telling Canglong the details of the exciting new memory.

A certain day after Franklin's Game, Nemesis

Ray arrived at the knight offices in Gideon and began uncursing the items there. This was quickly becoming a part of his daily routine.

Naturally, I was at his side, examining the weapons he had freed from their spells.

As I silently eyed the items, I became painfully aware that, as weaponry, they were far stronger than I was. Not only were their bonuses to attack power far greater than mine, but some also increased other stats, gave new skills, or even dealt elemental damage.

Comparing myself to them might've been foolish, considering that they were all things like named blades, demonbrands, and sacred swords, even though they'd been cursed, while I was merely a second form Embryo. Even so, the very idea of having to choose any of them to be Ray's weapon gave me a heartache. It made me picture a world in which he saw me as weak and became more distant.

I'd rejected the idea of him taking new weapons and acted as though they had to be "examined," and now I couldn't help but admit that it was nothing but an act of jealousy.

Still, I couldn't keep rejecting them for such a superficial reason. For Ray's sake, I had to pick him a suitable weapon.

With that in mind...

"Ray, if I may ask, what are your preferences when it comes to weapons?" I asked.

"My preferences?" he raised an eyebrow.

"I believe I should consider more than just its attributes when picking your reward. Your tastes are important, as well."

No matter how powerful the weapon, it would mean little if he didn't like it.

"Well..." he said and took a moment to think before continuing. "I'd like it to be black, considerably long... and I prefer blades over blunt weapons."

"Hm?" I was highly familiar with a weapon that fit those conditions perfectly.

It was none other than myself. Both the Black Blade of my first form and the Flag Halberd of my second form were right up his alley.

"Is that all?" I asked. "Some people like weapons that release fire, lightning, and such. Don't you have any preferences like that?"

"Can't say I do."

"But the conditions you gave make it seem like you're satisfied with me.”

“Oh, right. Guess that means you’re just my type.”

...

“...UEH?!”

Eh? I... Huh!? W-W-W-W-Wait...! What?!

“What’s wrong?” Ray asked. “You look pretty red. Are you sick...? Does the Epidemic affect Embryos, too?”

“N-No! I’m fine! I’m perfectly fine!”

Calm down! Compose yourself, Nemesis! I told myself. *He’s only saying that I’m his preferred type of weapon... definitely not that he likes me as a woman!*

A-All right, I pulled myself together.

“Still... so I’m your ideal weapon, am I?”

“Marie told me that Embryos naturally take shapes and abilities befitting their Master’s wavelength. You’re born from my personal traits, after all. It’s no surprise we’re compatible.”

“I see... That means I’m the best partner you could ask for!”

“Damn right. We’re companions. Keep looking out for me, will you?”

“...Of course!”

This was a real weight off my mind. I actually had nothing to be afraid of. No matter what weapons Ray would use from now on, I would be his only partner.

So now, as the proud bearer of this title, I had to choose a weapon that would make Ray more powerful than ever!

Thus, free of the gloom from before, I faced numerous weapons and began examining them with an eye keener and stricter than ever.

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 5
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2018 J-Novel Club LLC

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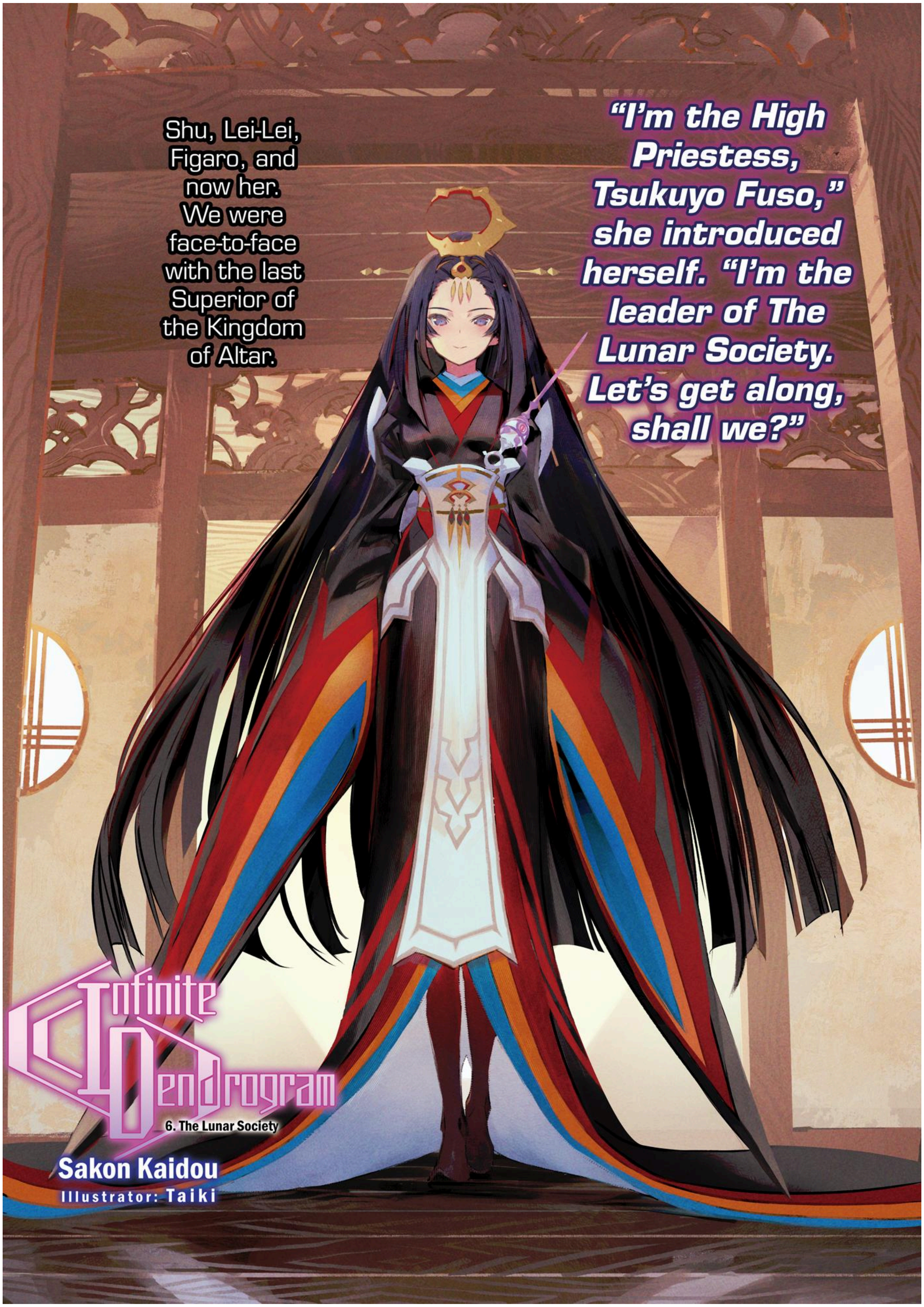
Ebook edition 1.0: March 2018

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
Infinite Dendrogram
6. The Lunar Society



Shu, Lei-Lei, Figaro, and now her. We were face-to-face with the last Superior of the Kingdom of Altar.

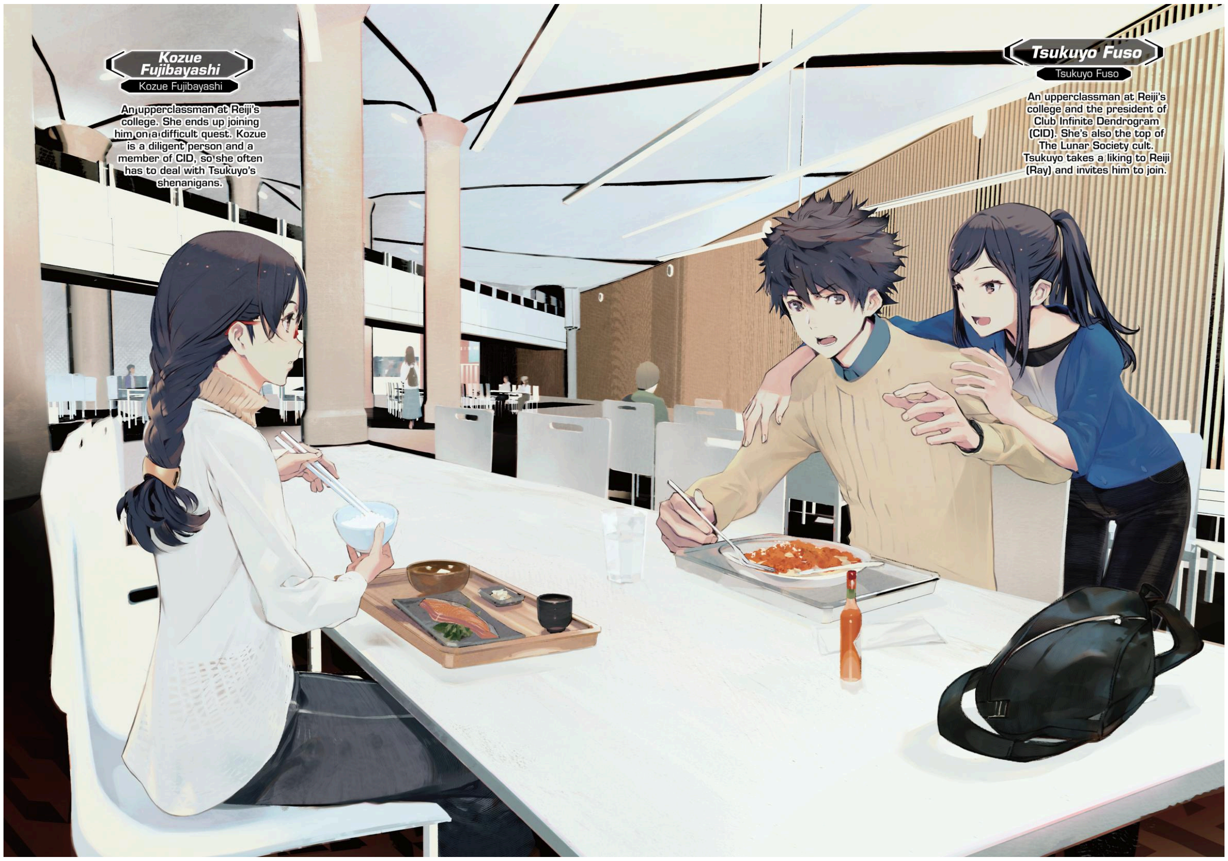
"I'm the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso," she introduced herself. "I'm the leader of The Lunar Society. Let's get along, shall we?"

Infinite Dendrogram

6. The Lunar Society

Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: Taiki


Kozue Fujibayashi
Kozue Fujibayashi

An upperclassman at Reiji's college. She ends up joining him on a difficult quest. Kozue is a diligent person and a member of CID, so she often has to deal with Tsukuyo's shenanigans.

Tsukuyo Fuso
Tsukuyo Fuso

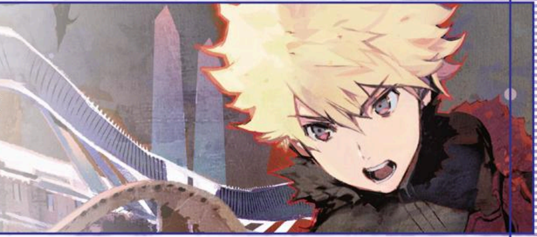
An upperclassman at Reiji's college and the president of Club Infinite Dendrogram (CID). She's also the top of The Lunar Society cult. Tsukuyo takes a liking to Reiji (Ray) and invites him to join.

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

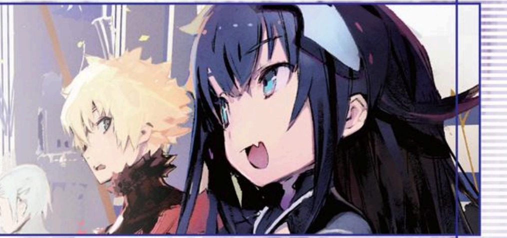
A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



Nemesis

Nemesis

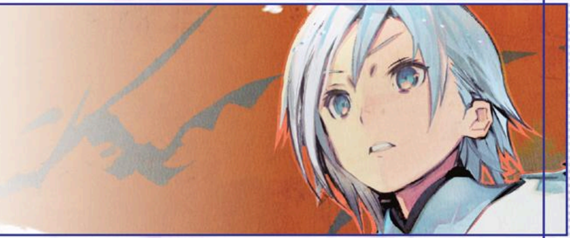
A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword or a halberd, and is equipped with skills such as Vengeance is Mine, which damages enemies for twice as much as they damage Ray.



Rook

Rook Holmes/Lucius Holmes

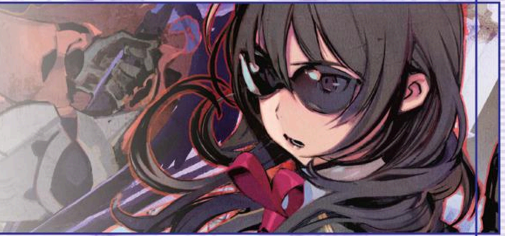
An astonishingly beautiful boy in Ray's party. His job is "Pimp" and he fights using his tamed monsters. His Embryo is the Type Guardian "Depraved Devil, Babylon."



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

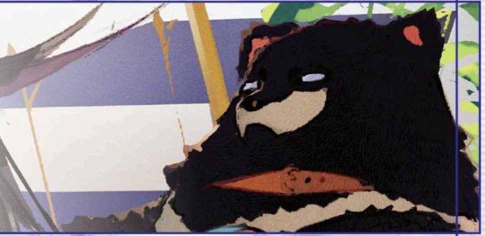
A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's brother and the one who invited him to the game. He wears a suit because, during character creaton, he accidentally made himself look just like he does in real life.



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Prologue: The Kingdom of Altar’s Big Three

The story of a few Masters

A little over a year ago in *Infinite Dendrogram* time, a certain monstrosity was ravaging the lands of the kingdom. Its name was the “Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.”

It was a three-headed, enormous draconic creature, as mystifying as it was terrorizing, and also the third SUBM ever witnessed.

Gloria appeared in one of the kingdom’s mountain ranges and made its way towards the capital, leaving death and destruction unmatched by most natural disasters in its wake.

As things were, the kingdom would’ve certainly fallen to the monster.

Thus, the kingdom tried to stop Gloria... but alas, its armies were powerless against it, with many of the forces being unable to even stand on the battlefield.

The only tians in the kingdom who could fight it were Superior Job owners such as the Arch Sage and the Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria, or high levels such as the Royal Guard’s vice commander.

However, even if they were to combine their powers, victory against a force as immense as Gloria would still be unlikely, if not downright impossible.

Thus, tians all across the world thought that the kingdom would soon be no more.

But as despair at their encroaching doom overwhelmed Altarian hearts, a certain group of people stood up to the monster.

They were the kingdom’s most experienced Masters... the ones many would refer to as the “no-lifer players.”

A lot of them had been playing since *Infinite Dendrogram*’s release, and all of them had either reached level 500 or acquired a Superior Job.

To the tians, Gloria’s charge was a matter of the country’s survival or desolation, but to the Masters, it was an mega event typical of MMOs. They scrambled into battle without hesitation, challenged the great dragon... and tasted a crushing defeat.

Gloria's immense power was one reason for this outcome, but there was an even bigger problem: the Masters didn't cooperate with each other.

Though they could work together with their party or clan members, they hadn't been willing to coordinate with Masters outside their circles. And with Gloria being the equivalent of an ultra-powerful world raid boss from classic MMOs, it simply couldn't have been defeated by a number of small groups haphazardly fighting for and by themselves.

The Masters, however, considered wide-scale cooperation to be nothing but plain stupid. After all, Gloria was an SUBM — the apex of all UBMs — meaning that the MVPs of such a fight would receive a Superior MVP special reward, an item of the highest tier.

Thus, coordinating with many people was out of the question for them, as greater numbers would reduce the chances of them becoming MVPs.

Max-level no-lifers that they were, they simply couldn't make this compromise, and that led to their defeat.

So the tians lacked power, while the Masters couldn't work together and failed.

As the kingdom's end once again became all but certain, another set of individuals came to face the dragon.

They were the three Superiors of the kingdom.

The King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

The Over Gladiator, Figaro.

The High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso.

Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts had yet to evolve into a Superior, so these three were the only ones the kingdom had.

Due to their status as the tops of the country's three rankings, they were considered to be Altar's strongest, which led many to believe they could succeed. However, the three were Masters as well, and many thought that they, too, would be unable to cooperate.

Such cynics were proven right when one of the Superiors said something outrageous.

"I'll go first. By myself."

And thus, without even a party at his side, Figaro went solo against

Gloria.

Despite his status as a Superior, the power difference between him and the monstrosity was so immense that it seemed hopeless.

Even so, Figaro didn’t break. He continued fighting for as long as he was alive, and when he inevitably began to vanish, he took one of the dragon’s three heads — the one that breathed a devastating light — with him.

“We’re up next, darlings,” said Tsukuyo Fuso. “My ultimate skill won’t work on this one, so let’s take it with our numbers.”

And thus, the head of the Lunar Society and her followers began a raid against Gloria.

The religion’s 34 strongest Masters at that time overwhelmed the dragon while cooperating and coordinating without flaw.

Despite that, they were all wiped out, but they took another head — the one that upheld a deathly barrier — with them.

With that, only one head remained.

“...Going down to just one head made its stats go up,” Shu observed.

By losing two heads... two ways to use its immense power... Gloria had gained stats *even greater* than before.

Not even the firepower of a Superior Embryo like Baldr could defeat it as it was now, which was exactly why Shu didn’t take that route.

“Then I guess we’ll settle this with fisticuffs,” he said.

Standing in a canyon with no one around to see the showdown, he and the monster glared at each other...

“■■■■■■■■■ ■■■ ■■ ■■■ — Baldr.”

...and began the final battle.

The intensity of their vicious clash shook the earth and changed the surrounding landscape beyond recognition, and at the end of it all, as it was with most fights, there was a victor.

With the death of its last head, Gloria met its end and vanished.

Three Superiors had felled the three heads of the awful, terrorizing great dragon. Thus, after those harsh battles, to show respect for the victories they’d achieved, the people gave them a name.

The ones who’d slain the three heads of Gloria...

The ones who’d surpassed the three-headed dragon...

The three absolute strongest of the Kingdom of Altar...

They were now “The Kingdom of Altar’s Big Three.”

◇◆

Approximately half a year after Gloria’s defeat in *Infinite Dendrogram* time, the glory of the Big Three had started to fade.

This was because, for reasons unique to each, they had all failed to participate in the war against Dryfe. Many looked down upon them for this, seeing them as failures who had been defeated by the imperium’s Superiors before even fighting.

Recently, however, things had drastically changed.

It had all begun with the incident in Gideon one month ago *Dendro* time.

First, the Over Gladiator, Figaro, had fought in the Clash of the Superiors and defeated Huang He Empire’s Master Jiangshi, Xunyu, proving that his power was not below that of foreign Superiors.

Second, the King of Destruction, Shu Starling, the one bearing the nickname of “Unknown,” had entered the spotlight and purged the tens of thousands of monsters produced by the Dryfean Superior known as Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, making his power and presence obvious and known.

With the names of the two resounding throughout the world, Altarians and foreigners alike became aware that the Kingdom of Altar once again had its Big Three.

Indeed, the incident at Gideon had resurrected the name, and since the term “the Big Three” wasn’t complete without a third, naturally, the people’s attention shifted to the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso.

Many wondered what the bearer of this venerable title was doing right now, and to answer that...

“I’m sooo booored. There’s nooothing to dooo.”

...she was rolling around on the floor of the inner parlor of her Lunar Society’s headquarters.

Though she looked about twenty, the way she rolled on the tatami mats made her seem like a child, but for some reason, it seemed to suit her. Of course, this action made a mess out of her expensive-looking — priceless, in fact, considering it was a Mythical special reward — junihitoe, but she didn’t seem to care.

“Hey, hey, Kage. Heard of any other PKs around the capital?” she asked hopefully. “You know, some people we can blame for something, gang up on, and wipe out like we did the last time.”

A month ago in *Infinite Dendrogram* time, the Lunar Society had annihilated the PK clan known as “K&R” for, *allegedly*, giving the death penalty to one of their members.

Wanting something similar, Tsukuyo turned to her clan’s sub-leader and her secretary in real life, the King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.

Despite looking about as old as her, he had the air of an aged butler about him.

“Currently, there are no such PK incidents in the capital’s surroundings,” he said. “The most notable matter here is the spread of the Epidemic, but as you’re surely aware, it’s not fatal. Also, the lack of malignant mutations leads us to believe that it’s the type to last a while, but have weak symptoms.”

“Is that so?” asked Tsukuyo. “I healed it right away, though. It’s important to weed out diseases before they take root.”

“We also have some more adherents that have caught this Epidemic, so you should remember to heal the ones who pay,” Eishiro added. “I hear that the first princess and the visitor... the third prince of Huang He... have healed naturally, but there are some new infected among the senior statesmen.”

“Really? But I wasn’t called to the castle this time, either.”

The Epidemic had spread, and it had even gone as far as to afflict the royal family, and yet Tsukuyo — a Superior Job of the healing-adept priest grouping — hadn’t been called to the castle even once.

“I believe the first princess is apprehensive about asking for your help,” Eishiro commented.

“I wonder why,” said Tsukuyo. “My High Priestess skills can easily cure the Epidemic. And just about anything else.”

“The illness is not fatal, so she probably thinks that simply waiting for it to abate is better than owing something to you, Lady Tsukuyo.”

“Oh dear me, I wouldn’t ask for *too* much. That princess is such a worrywart,” she said with a bell-like giggle before forming a wide smile. “I’d only have her change about ten state churches into Lunar Society establishments.”

Depending on one's outlook, that would be a very heavy condition. A while ago, Tsukuyo had proposed to heal the kingdom's royalty and VIPs in exchange for an increase in the Lunar Society's religious institutions, and this offer was still active to this day. This was her modus operandi.

Even if the current Epidemic was fatal, she would still force the country to accept her conditions before she would help.

Tsukuyo always presented outrageous deals and waited until the other parties had no choice but to swallow them. And with her being the High Priestess, she knew there would be no one in this country who could match her in healing ability.

As things were, the Lunar Society was gradually gaining more and more tian adherents.

This was because, just like the standard state churches, the Lunar Society's establishments healed illnesses and wounds. Not only that, Tsukuyo herself could also rid people of afflictions and injuries too heavy for the state clergy, and she could do it with little effort on her part, provided that the payment was right. However, unlike the state church, the Lunar Society limited their healing services only to their adherents.

Thus, through the pain suffered by the ill and the blood spilled by the injured, the clan and religion continued to grow, eroding the current Altarian faith in the process.

Those familiar with the history of Earth would expect the country to crack down on the Lunar Society and begin to suppress it, but that was impossible in this situation. There were a number of reasons for this, but the most prominent one was the fact that the clan's upper echelon was dominated by Masters, Tsukuyo included, and suppressing a gathering of resurrecting, undying individuals was nothing but a fool's errand.

Additionally, the Lunar Society had had enough no-lifers to challenge Gloria — the greatest foe the kingdom had ever faced — and had grown in power even more since that time.

As no-lifers, they naturally had save points in other countries, so even putting them on Altar's wanted list wouldn't cause a problem for them.

Thus, though the kingdom saw the growth of the Lunar Society as troublesome, it was unable to make an enemy out of them, since doing so would mean waging a religious war against a cult full of battle-focused Masters led by a Superior. Worst case scenario, that could result in the end of the kingdom.

"Anything else?" asked Tsukuyo.

"Well, there's one thing you might find intriguing," said Eishiro.

"I'm allll ears."

"It's related to the incident in Gideon."

"Oh. Maaan, that was sooo unfair. Those two got to show off sooo much. I wanted to go wild, too."

"Lady Tsukuyo, if you went wild, there wouldn't be many survivors, so I would prefer it if you didn't."

Eishiro spoke his warning while looking at the wand fixed at Tsukuyo's side. It was the Superior special reward she'd received for taking one of Gloria's heads, Gloria β.

The effect of the deathly barrier it could create was weaker than that of the Tri-Zenith Dragon's, but it was still enough to instantly kill low-level commoners, and it hardly needed to be said what would happen if she used it in a battle to protect a city.

"Oh, come onnn," groaned Tsukuyo. "I'm borrrred, you knowww?"

"I know quite well," said Eishiro as he reached into his inventory, took out a photo, and handed it over to her. "Which is why I'll show you this."

The photo portrayed a particular scene from the incident at Gideon. Specifically, the instant a blond young man, beaten and burned, raised his right arm up into the air.

It was a photo of the moment when Ray had defeated Franklin's RSK — the Ray Starling Killer.

"Oh, this boy," said Tsukuyo. "I was watching Fran's broadcast, too. He was pretty good."

"Have you heard that he's a Maiden's Master?" asked Eishiro.

"Oh, really?"

"Also, the battle cost him his left arm, and he keeps it like that instead of fixing it with a death penalty."

"...Oohh?" Tsukuyo's smile turned even wider.

To some, it might've seemed like she was merely having a good time, but to others, her expression was that of a carnivorous beast with prey in sight.

"Now *that's* interesting," she said.

"I'm glad you found a way to kill time, Lady Tsukuyo," said Eishiro, feeling nothing but pleased that the one he served seemed satisfied.

“Kage, bring him over to me, will you?” she asked.

“As you command.” A moment later, Eishiro sank into his own shadow. From toe to head, he was consumed by his shade and vanished, quite literally, without a trace.

“Well, I guess I should prepare to welcome him,” said Tsukuyo. “I wonder what he’s like when you talk to him.”

She got up from the ground, stretched, and looked towards a certain part of the room.

“Hear that? His Embryo is a Maiden. You’re a bit excited, aren’t you... Kaguya?”

“Indeed I am. In fact, I am about as excited as you, Tsukuyo.”

The one to answer was a kneeling woman clad in curious clothing. She was wearing a raiment characteristic of tennyo from Japanese myth, and had long, silky hair reminiscent of moonlight.

Though she appeared as fantastical as Tsukuyo, the aura about her was quite different. True to the name “Kaguya,” she seemed to have come from another world.

“Eheheh. Oh, I am excited indeed. Very much so. It appears they even used ■■■ once. Ehehehehehehehe.”

Her eyes closed shut, Kaguya — the Type Maiden Superior Embryo — giggled with anticipation for her meeting with a certain Master and a certain Embryo.

“Come hither, new goddess... Nemesis. I will treat you kindly... Ehehehehehehehehe.”

Kaguya smiled, and so did her Master, Tsukuyo.

Those expressions were a sure sign that the most wicked of the Superiors in the Big Three would soon bring Ray and Nemesis into the fox’s den.

Open Episode: “The Third Power.”

Chapter One: In the Jaws of the Fox

Journalist, Marie Adler

"Just so you guys know, I'm starting college tomorrow," Ray revealed out of the blue.

A month of *Dendro* time had passed since Franklin's annoying little game. We were currently at a diner annexed to Gideon's sixth arena, celebrating the success of a recent quest.

"Oh, really?" I asked. "Well, it's that time of the year, after all."

In real life in Japan, tomorrow was March 31st. As far as I was aware, colleges and the like would normally start on April 1st, but I guessed it had been moved a day back due to it being a Saturday.

I hadn't gone to any college or university, so I wasn't too knowledgeable about this. The manga I was drawing was set in a societal underworld dominated by inhuman assassins, so I hadn't really needed any higher education.

...Honestly, I was probably more knowledgeable about guns and poisons than anything relating to college life.

"I must say, I had no idea you were a college student," I said, realizing that he was actually younger than me. I'd always assumed that we were as old as each other, or that he was a little bit older. I mean, that bear man was 27.

Then again, it was entirely possible that he'd repeated years or entered college following a gap after high school, which could easily make him older than me.

Digging too much into the real lives of other players was bad manners, but even if it was BM, I couldn't help but be curious.

How old was he? What college was he going to? *Maybe I should just ask him?* I wondered.

"Will that lower your online time?" Rook spoke up before me.

Oh, yeah, that would be a problem.

These past few days, Ray the one-armed wonder and Rook — no longer

Pimp, but a Lost Heart — had gone on many various kill quests, and I'd accompanied them to help them level up. We'd even returned to the capital and raided the Tomb Labyrinth. Our party had consisted of us three and Kasumi's trio, and we'd been able to defeat the boss on the tenth floor.

Just so you know, I'd done little to help them in the actual fighting. I'd changed my main job from Death Shadow to Journalist and only used the "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword" skill, increasing their EXP gain. After all, if I'd just powerleveled them while doing all the work, they wouldn't learn anything.

Ray had defeated tons of monsters during the past month, and he was getting close to reaching max level on Paladin. Not only that, but the stat growth bonuses from his job and Nemesis had made his HP enter the quintuple digits.

...In contrast, my HP growth was so bad that, despite being a level 500+ with a Superior Job, I was still in the quadruple digits, meaning that he'd already surpassed me in this regard.

Additionally, Ray had had lots of mock battles against me and the duel rankers such as Figaro, which had greatly improved his fighting technique.

It only went to show that there was much to learn by fighting those stronger than yourself. My feints were working on him less and less frequently.

Ray would often dedicate entire *Dendro* days to quests and mock battles, but that would certainly happen more rarely when he started college.

"On my days off, I'll be online as much as before, but on weekdays, I'll only log in for one day," Ray explained.

One real-life day was equal to three days here, and he was saying that he'd only be able to stay around for one of them. No surprise there; college students seemed like busy creatures. As far as I knew, they spent their after-school hours living out their youth through club activities or part-time jobs.

...Despite that, Ray had implied that he'd be online for eight real-life hours each day. Which, if you asked me, made him into quite a no-lifer.

Looks like the Dendro *virus has really corrupted him over the past month,* I thought.

Speaking of corruption... his gear made it look like he'd given in to the dark side. To think that he'd looked so decent back when I'd PK'd him a month ago.

...Wait, his dark fashion sense isn't my fault, is it?

"The turns and twists following the PK are directly linked to the present, so I wouldn't say the incidents are unrelated," muttered Rook. "After all, the reason Ray was in Gideon in the first place and got involved in all the incidents here was because the newbie hunt made him go to the Tomb Labyrinth, where he met Figaro, who suggested coming here."

Rook, I would prefer it if you didn't try to hold casual conversations with my thoughts. Also, you're implying that I'm the one who caused Ray's fashion sense to take a turn for the worse, and I won't accept such slander!

It had all started with the one who'd given me the PK request! I didn't know who had done that, but I was willing to bet it was all Franklin's fault!

...Strange. I could almost hear him shout, "No, it's not!" Was I having auditory hallucinations?

"But wait, if your college starts tomorrow, shouldn't you be preparing for it today?" I asked Ray.

"No, I'm actually pretty free today," he answered. "I've already taken care of the necessary paperwork and gone through the physical examination. Right now, it's about 2PM in real life, so I'll be online for the whole of tomorrow here in *Dendro*, log out, and then go to bed. When it's tomorrow IRL, I'll have to go to another college briefing and the orientation."

Well, he certainly seemed to be more busy than he'd let on.

"No entrance ceremony?" I asked.

"Yeah. That's gonna happen in about two weeks. I was told it's gonna be held in the Budokan, too."

"Wow, I had no idea colleges handled things so strangely." Having never gone into higher education, I was quite surprised by this.

...Huh? I thought as a certain word caught my attention. "...The Budokan?"

Wait a second...

He was going to a college that was holding its entrance ceremony two weeks from now, at the Budokan?

"By the way, uh, don't answer this if you don't want to, but... what's the college?" I asked.

"UTokyo," he answered with no hesitation.

...Th-That's the best place in the country, I thought in shock. *The*

University of Tokyo!

Oh no. Ray was actually a winner at life. I reluctantly compared him to myself, an unemployed high school graduate manga artist, and it made me feel...

“...Bitter,” I muttered under my breath.

“My parents refused to let me live in Tokyo by myself unless I passed the entrance exams for UTokyo during my last year of high school,” he continued. “Also, a year and a half before the exams... on the summer of my second year... I rejected all entertainment and focused solely on studying.”

“Ohh, well... I see... Hm?” I murmured.

Entering UTokyo after a year and a half of intensive studying was certainly quite impressive, but he’d started it at about the same time as *Infinite Dendrogram* had come out, which made me feel kinda bad for him.

Also, if he’d passed the entrance exams in his last year of high school, then he really *was* younger than me.

“Wait, so you’re living alone now?” I continued my questions.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I’m from the northern parts of the country, but last month, I moved to a high-rise apartment building in Tokyo.”

“...Hmm?” I said.

A college student, living all by himself, not in a dorm or some cheap condo, but in a high-rise apartment building?

“First mind... now wealth... Curse you!” I grabbed Ray’s collar and rocked him back and forth, not caring about his protests a single bit.

“Whoa?! What the hell?! Stop shaking me!” he cried.

Feel the resentment of a have-not! I thought.

“...I think lots of people would get mad if you called yourself a have-not, Marie,” said Rook under his breath.

Rook, could you please stop reading my mind and replying? Thank you very much. Also, I didn’t actually say it out loud, so don’t judge me.

“Anyway.” Rook looked at Ray. “You can actually afford an apartment in a high-rise and don’t have to live in a dorm or a cheap flat... Are your parents rich, perchance?”

With his collar still in my hands, Ray shook his head.

“No,” he said. “The allowance I get from my parents doesn’t even cover rent. I can live in a high-rise apartment only because it belongs to Shu.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is.” I let go of him and nodded.

So he lives with that reckless furball bear man King of Destruction... Well, his brother.

...Wait.

"Eh? Didn't you say that you live alone?" I asked.

"Yes, and...? Oh, sorry, the way I put it is confusing. Let me rephrase," he said, correcting himself. "I'm borrowing an apartment in a *building* owned by Shu, so I don't have to pay any rent."

That semi-naked fur man actually has an apartment building — a no-effort source of income — in an urban area?

"Really?" I asked incredulously.

"Yeah, Shu said, 'Just use any of the free rooms in my three apartment buildings, you can pay the rent after you get a job and start making bank,' so I just chose the one closest to college, and—"

"Wait, 'three'?!" I cut his words short and howled.

Three apartment buildings in an urban area?! How?!

"Where did he get the money for them?" I exclaimed.

Ray put on a distant look. "When he was still in college, he often used to accompany his professors to their presentations in other countries, and he casually bought lottery tickets every time."

...You're joking.

"He actually won?" I asked.

Ray slowly nodded. "He called us and said, 'I hit the jackpot with a lottery ticket I bought for no real reason and got some serious money,' and even with all the international taxes and handling charges, he still had an insanely huge fortune. I'm kinda scared of finding out the exact amount, so I never actually asked." There was that distant look again.

Honestly, Ray's brother's IRL luck was so broken, it left me speechless. That arsonist hairball was an enigma both here and on the other side.

"So yeah," Ray continued, "Shu used the money to buy land and apartment buildings. I still remember how hard our dad snapped when he shouted, 'Woohoo! No-effort income! Now I don't need a job!'"

Well, it was only natural to be upset when your college graduate son proudly proclaimed that he would live a life of leisure because he'd won the lottery. *My sympathies to you, Papa Starling.*

"Anyway, that explains why your working-age brother is online around the clock," I said.

"Indeed it does." Nemesis nodded. "Hm? Wait a second."

"What?" Ray raised an eyebrow.

"You said that Brother Bear was a popular child actor when he was young, and the world champion martial artist during his school years, no?"

"Yeah."

What? That's just... disturbing, I thought. *Then again, I think I've actually heard of someone with such a track record.*

"So, basically," Nemesis continued, "Brother Bear is an insanely talented individual with a brilliant track record who now spends his days as a video game no-lifer NEET surviving on money he won in a lottery?"

"...Yep."

I might not have been in a position to say this, considering I was a manga artist who had shut herself into *Infinite Dendrogram* instead of doing my job, but... he was definitely wasting his talent.

"We went off on a tangent there," commented Ray.

"Indeed we did," I agreed.

What we'd just talked about was so astonishing that it could easily have become the main subject of the conversation.

"Anyway, starting tomorrow in real-life time, I'm a college student," Ray said.

"Real life is important. Don't neglect it, and do your best," I said.

It was a shame that he'd only be able to take quests spanning multiple days on weekends and the like. Then again, right now, in real life, it wasn't even 3PM. Just as Ray had said, even if he planned to go to sleep early, he could easily spend a whole day's worth of time here in *Dendro*.

"Then let's go on a big quest tomorrow!" Rook proposed. "We have Audrey, so we can even pick one that takes us far away!"

Ray and I both nodded in response.

Flying monsters were always useful in these situations. With Rook's Audrey and Ray's Silver, I had come to know this pretty well.

Maybe I should buy a flying monster myself? I wondered.

Though I was taking a break from it right now, I'd pooled quite a lot of wealth from my professional PKing, so I definitely had the money for one. These days, I even had some nice extra income from the jobs I was doing for Count Gideon.

Wait... "pooled"... "pool"... That gives me an idea, I thought and spoke my mind.

"Then how about we go to the seaside tomorrow?"

As far as I was aware, these two hadn't seen *Dendro*'s seas yet.

"The seaside? Good idea. We could go fishing," said Ray.

"And I might be able to tame an aquatic monster," Rook put in.

The two were clearly in favor of it.

Personally, I was looking forward to sketching them in their swimwear. It was for research purposes, of course. Couldn't neglect to gather material, after all.

"The sea, you say?" Nemesis asked with interest. "Fresh seafood... Kamameshi... Seconds, please."

"The sea... Maybe I'll get to cover some sashimi in habanero topping..." Babi murmured.

Those two were the same as they always were. Also, in my humble opinion, sashimi covered in habanero topping would be sashimi no longer.

"Then let's meet up tomorrow at the western gate. How does eight o'clock sound?" I asked.

"No objections there," said Ray.

"Same here." Rook nodded.

And so, with the meeting time and place properly set, we went our own ways.

◇

The following day, Ray, for reasons unknown, hadn't showed up at the meeting spot. The friends list said that he was online, so we checked up on him at the inn he was staying at.

When we asked, the proprietress of the establishment said, "He didn't come down when it was time for breakfast, and when I went to call him, I found this in the gap in the door," and gave us a piece of paper.

Its contents said:

"Due to certain circumstances, I had to summon Mr. Ray Starling to our headquarters.
I greatly apologize for this abrupt interruption of your plans.
Please bring your complaints to the nearest Lunar Society branch.

Yours sincerely,
The Lunar Society’s spiritual leader’s secretary, King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.”

"..."

"..."

"Hey, is this a kidnapping?" said Babi, breaking the silence.

Oh, uh... Yes, I realized.

I had many things to say about this situation, but the jist of it was this: Ray had yet again found himself in some sort of trouble.

Barely a month had passed since Franklin's Game, and it looked like he was now at the epicenter of a new major event.

"...The swimsuits will have to wait," I said as I went to contact the furball.

◇◇◇

Paladin, Ray Starling

I woke up to see a ceiling completely unlike the one I had seen as I was drifting off into dreamland.

"I'm quite sure I was sleeping on a bed at an inn," I said through my drowsiness.

Now, however, I was in a futon in a predominantly wooden, Japanese-looking room.

I momentarily thought that I was back at my parents' house in real life, but though the room was similar in style, it certainly wasn't the same.

It had the aesthetic characteristic of Japanese construction, but it looked far more expensive than any place I'd ever lived at.

"This is... *not* real life," I said as I noticed my avatar's blond hair drop over my eyes and confirmed that I could open the game's menus.

Indeed, I was still in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"You're awake," said Nemesis as she popped out of the crest on my left hand and sat on her knees next to my futon. Her posture was surprisingly proper.

"Nemesis... where are we?" I asked.

"I don't know." She shrugged. "We seem to have arrived here while I was still sleeping within you."

I was silent.

From her words, I could deduce one thing.

The one who'd taken me out of my bed at the inn and brought me here had done it so silently that neither I nor Nemesis had woken up. As far as I was aware, not even Marie, with all her Death Shadow skills, was capable of such a feat.

Overcome with worry, I looked into my inventory, but thankfully, it didn't seem like anything was stolen.

"But Ray, can't you check where we are by simply looking at the map?" asked Nemesis.

"You have a... point?" I said as I opened the map, and what I saw made me tilt my head in confusion.

The words written there were:

[Royal Capital, Altea, The Lunar Society Headquarters]

"...Calm down, me," I muttered.

Players were automatically given the maps of the capitals of the countries we belonged to, so the map window showed my exact location. I was in an area outside the walls encircling the capital. That was fine and all, but I couldn't say the same for the name of the place.

"'The Lunar Society Headquarters'..."

I was at the heart of operations of the one and only Lunar Society — the largest clan in the kingdom and an actual real-life cult.

The fact that I'd been taken from my inn and was moved to the headquarters of such a shady bunch could only mean one thing...

"I'M KIDNAPPED!"

Why did they kidnap me?! For what purpose?! I thought frantically.

"Don't men only come to establishments like this when trying to save girls they're acquainted with?" asked Nemesis.

"Well, I gue... HEY, NOW'S NOT THE TIME!"

"Calm yourself. A predicament like this is nothing compared to the lab coat lunatic's shenanigans."

"This isn't like anything Franklin did, but being kidnapped by a cult is still freaky as hell!"

"Hm..." she said.

Okay, Ray, think. Work your brain... Oh, yeah!

"Nemesis, I actually have no reason to panic!" I declared.

"Oh?"

"I can just log out and return to the save point in Gideon."

"That's a great idea!"

All right, I'll just open the menu, start the log out process, and...

[Cannot log out: In contact with another entity]

...Pardon?

"I... I can't log out," I muttered as I fell to my knees.

"You sound like the protagonist of a death game VRMMO story," Nemesis commented.

"No, really, I can't. It says that I'm in contact with someone..."

To log out, a player had to go 30 seconds without touching anyone. We were the only ones in the room, and there was no one who could touch me, so why...?

"Oh, so that's why I've been feeling a presence here," said Nemesis.

A presence? I asked telepathically.

"Ever since I woke up, I've felt as though there was another Embryo here," she answered. "We are probably within the effective range of a Type Territory or Castle. Naturally, that prevents you logging out, as that counts as you being 'in contact' with someone."

"Ah...!" Shock overcame me. They'd actually anticipated me trying to go offline, and had prepared a countermeasure. That meant that...

"It appears the ones who brought you here have no intention of letting you go," said Nemesis.

"Seems like it..."

Suddenly, the room's sliding door opened up.

"Hm?!" Completely on edge, I turned towards it.

"Ray!" Nemesis shouted as she transformed into the Black Blade. I hastily grabbed her hilt and brandished her.

The one who came through the sliding door...

"Good morning, Mr. Ray, Miss Nemesis."

...was a servant.

Specifically, a nakai — a waitress-like girl working at traditional Japanese inns. The lack of crest on her left hand meant that she was a tian.

Besides those two points, the only notable thing about her was the mark on her kimono, which displayed a crescent moon and a closed eye.

“Your breakfast is ready,” she continued. “I will lead you to it once you’ve changed.”

Seemingly having said all she had to, she politely bowed and closed the sliding door.

“Hm...” Nemesis and I were at a loss for words.

Well, that sure softened the tense air in here, I thought.

“What now?” Nemesis asked.

“Guess I’ll change,” I said.

I was still in my pajamas, after all. I had no idea what I was in store for, but considering where I was, I had to at least be battle-ready.

“Very well,” nodded Nemesis. “And then we’ll have breakfast.”

I’m not too sure about that, I thought. *What if it’s spiked?*

“Wouldn’t that be a good thing?” Nemesis asked.

“What?”

“If the food is poisoned in some way, we can simply use Reversal.”

...Good point. I guess spiking isn’t much of a problem for us.

“With that in mind, let’s go have breakfast. We’re kidnapped, after all. Might as well have a feast at their expense.”

“Nemesis...” I muttered.

I couldn’t help but feel that recently, this partner of mine had become even more gluttonous. Was she about to go into hibernation or something?

But we did go to breakfast together.

“This is really good,” I said after taking a bite.

“It’s... amazing,” Nemesis agreed.

I mean, sure, it had looked good from first glance, but the circumstances certainly hadn’t made me think it would be. Basically, the breakfast we were given was stupidly delicious.

“It just... really emphasizes the taste of each ingredient,” I commented between bites.

“The seasoning is light, but so satisfying at the same time,” Nemesis added.

I’d never even considered that *Infinite Dendrogram* had Japanese food of this kind. Not having both hands made it a bit hard to eat, though. I couldn’t hold the rice bowl.

“I haven’t been this satisfied with my meal’s taste since our first day here," said Nemesis.

"Same here, actually," I nodded.

"I'm glad you two like it, darlings," said someone behind me.

The food the Star Chef had made for my welcome party had been the greatest cooking I'd ever eaten in *Infinite Dendrogram*, and these dishes here actually rivaled it.

"It has such detailed flavors," said Nemesis as we were finishing up. "Looks like the kingdom's largest clan has no shortage of skilled people. Do they have high-rank and Superior Jobs from the cook grouping or something?"

"Actually, this is my secretary's natural cooking," said the voice behind me. "Even in real life, Kage's food is sooo good that it could be in a manga."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Cooking is a type of sense skill, so—"

Suddenly, all the cells in my entire body began to shake. It was a reaction to multiple powerful stimuli attacking me all at once.

I belatedly felt surprise at the voice that had been joining our exchanges as though it belonged, then became overcome with shock at the woman embracing me from behind, then felt intoxication from her own scent and the fragrant wood incense smell coming from her clothes, and lastly... *I was overwhelmed by fear as a living creature*.

I felt as though my neck was in the jaws of a tiger, as though my head could fall off with the most casual of bites.

"Hh?!" I gasped as I realized that the woman holding me could easily end me.

I was familiar with this sensation. I had felt it on my first meeting with Figaro in the Tomb Labyrinth, and in my encounter with Xunyu before the Clash of the Superiors. However, this time, I was feeling such danger directly on my skin, which made it countless times more scary.

"Hmm? What's wrong, sweetie? You're shaking," the woman said, as though whispering to me. "Oh, and don't glare at me like that, li'l Maiden. This is just some light skinship." She then slowly let me go, running her pale, slender fingers along my neck in the process.

"Rgh!" I grunted as I instantly got up, ran to Nemesis, had her turn into a greatsword, and grabbed her by the hilt.

I had three Counter Absorption uses — my current maximum. And yet, for some reason, it did little to help me feel safe.

This wasn't like the time when I'd ran out of uses while facing overwhelming odds, not like the time when I hadn't been able to activate it fast enough against Xunyu, not like the time when Marie had taken advantage of my flaws in our rematch, and not like the time when it had been broken in a mock battle.

Though she would probably handle it in an entirely different way, I had a feeling that this woman would render Counter Absorption meaningless.

"Oh no, sorryyy." She put her hands together and giggled while apologizing. "I overdid it with the teasing." In all honesty, that gesture was quite adorable, and an overwhelming majority of men would find it charming. Had I the emotional capacity right now, even I might've been captivated.

However, the fear I'd felt when she'd touched me seemed far more reliable than any cutesy gesture.

"So you're Ray Starling and his Maiden, Nemesis," said the woman — or, rather, the woman-shaped aberration.

"You're sooo earnest," she continued. "I like that. I like that *a lot*."

She cracked a smile just like the one I saw on her in the recording on the crystal, and began introducing herself.

"I'm the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso. I'm the leader of The Lunar Society. Let's get along, shall we?"

Shu, Lei-Lei, Figaro, and now her. We were face-to-face with the last Superior of the Kingdom of Altar.

After her introduction, Tsukuyo Fuso called some people to clean up the table.

For the whole time they were doing their job, I was just grasping Nemesis and barely moving a muscle.

Nemesis and I were both silent, unsure of how to react to the prime suspect behind our kidnapping.

However, the one to break the tense silence that had overcome us was none other than the person who'd caused it.

"That left arm of yours..." she said while pointing at the limb I'd lost in my fight against Franklin, which was now replaced by a hook prosthetic. "So you really haven't fixed it yet."

"Sadly, I don't know anyone who can do that for me," I said.

Speaking of which, Marie had said that the High Priestess was capable of it. She held a Superior Job from the priest grouping, after all. Despite that, I had absolutely no intention of asking this aberration to fix me up. I could now understand full well why Marie had recommended against it.

Seriously, who in their right mind would request anything of... *that*? Might as well try the devil. He'd probably give you a better deal.

"For someone who's barely even talked to her, you sure seem to consider her a danger," Nemesis commented telepathically.

Being kidnapped by her is more than enough reason, if you ask me, I replied.

Besides that, merely being touched by her and exchanging several words with her had been enough for me to come to a conclusion.

She's as bad as, if not worse than, Franklin.

"Heh, agreed," Nemesis said. "I also feel the same way about the presence behind her."

I could feel her shift her attention towards somewhere behind Tsukuyo Fuso — an area we couldn't see from our position.

"Hmm..." The aberration showed little concern about Nemesis and me being on high alert. Ignoring that completely, she continued her questions. "You can fix it, but you're not doing it... Why aren't you getting the death penalty? Hm?"

"What?" I raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, if you get the death penalty, you'll be completely healed after just a 24 hour break, no? I don't see the reason to spend more than ten days... a whole month of this world's time... with such a disability."

Oh yeah, Marie said the same thing, I recalled. *Still, I don't think that's an option.*

"What kind of idiot dies just to fix his arm?" I asked.

Even if I had to die in the near future, I didn't want it to be for the sake of just an arm. That would be unreasonable.

"Ha ha!" Tsukuyo Fuso laughed, her eyes open wide. It wasn't a loud, roaring laughter — the sounds escaping her covered mouth were a bell-like giggle.

I didn't know if anything I said was funny or if she was laughing for some other reason, but I felt like taking advantage of this moment was a bad idea, so I just stood stock still.

"This... is so good." Tsukuyo Fuso muttered as she stopped laughing and looked at us again.

Her gaze was completely different from before.

I felt as if there was some sort of fire in her eyes, and it made me freeze in fear.

"You know, sweetie," she said, "I actually had you come here to invite you to join my clan. You're pretty famous, after all."

"Not happening."

If I ever entered a clan, this certainly wouldn't be it.

Cults were freaky in and of themselves, but more than that, I was just really scared of the... *thing* before me, and that feeling only grew stronger the more we talked.

"I'll fix your arm if you join us, though," she offered. "I'm the only one in this country who can do that, you know?"

"Still... not happening."

"Hmmm..." She turned away from me.

The fact that she wasn't facing me anymore soothed me, if only a little bit.

I didn't know whether she was aware of my current emotional state, but Tsukuyo Fuso continued talking.

"I don't want anyone who chooses a 'logical' death penalty."

Wait... What the hell is this ominous feeling? I thought.

"I don't want anyone whose reasons for not choosing a death penalty are boring."

She's looking away from me, and yet...

"And I don't want anyone who's not cute in some way."

Yet the fear binding me just continues to grow.

"So, honestly..." she said before quickly turning around, making her long hair sway. "*I really want you.*"

Those words, combined with her gaze, filled me with fear far greater than before.

"...Gh! HELLISH MIASMA!" I shouted.

Still holding Nemesis in my right hand, I directed Gardranda's right bracer towards Tsukuyo Fuso and launched the triple debuff mist. I didn't care that we were inside or that she was close to me. That aberration was far scarier than any debuff.

“Oh, so this is the Legendary they were talking about,” she said. “Holy Zone Horizon.”

In an instant, the miasma was gone. The dark purple mist vanished as if it had never been there.

“What?!” I gaped.

The space around us was bathed in light and filled with a purified air. It felt as if the world itself had been remade anew.

“This is one of my High Priestess skills,” she explained. “It nullifies all disease and curse-based debuffs within the area!”

“Nullifies them... all?!” I yelped.

The High Priestess was a Superior Job from the priest grouping, which was focused on healing and purification. I should have expected her to be able to do this!

“It’s quite a shame. That might’ve worked if you’d been up against anyone else.” She covered her mouth and giggled again.

Ohh no, I’m not giving up yet! I thought.

She was a support-type Superior Job, so she ought to have lower stats than vanguard roles. Of course, I didn’t expect her to be as frail as Franklin, but in 1v1 melee combat, I should have a chance...

“Okay, me neeext!” she said as I kicked the tatami below and sprinted to her side. “Lunar Divider Field.” The world was engulfed in night.

We were inside, and yet above us, I saw a dark sky with a large blue moon. An unnatural space — a world abnormal.

“It’s just like in the crys...tal... Gh?!” I said. Or at least tried to, but something strange began happening.

“Ray?!” Nemesis exclaimed.

As the night I’d once seen in Marie’s crystal overtook the world, my body started malfunctioning. I wasn’t taking in any air... No, I was breathing normally, but my lungs and heart weren’t delivering oxygen like they were supposed to. Not only that, but my body was quickly turning colder!

“This is my Kaguya’s... my Superior Embryo’s unique skill,” she said as she looked down on me, squirming on the floor and grasping at my chest. “Its name is ‘Lunar Reduction Field.’ It’s pretty famous. You didn’t know about it?”

No, I goddamn didn’t!

“Basically... this skill creates an area where all the numbers I find inconvenient are reduced to a sixth of their original value.”

Inconvenient... numbers?

“It divides enemy stats by six, the damage they deal by six, their heart rate by six, their body temperature by six... among many other things. Oh, and it’s probably six because it’s ‘Lunar.’ The gravity on the Moon is six times weaker, you know?”

“Wh...?!”

What the hell?! No one could stand a chance against that!

The damage she would receive would be divided by 36 — the combination of the stat and damage division. Not to mention that her opponents’ bodily functions would drop way below tolerable levels.

“Well, high-level people can resist it. A bit,” she added.

That basically meant that a sub-level 100 newbie like myself would be feeling its full effect.

“But... I...!” I said through ragged breaths as I remembered one of my skills.

...I have a way to fight this!

“Neme...sis!”

“Very well!” cried Nemesis as she switched from her Black Blade form into the Flag Halberd.

At the same time, I activated Like a Flag Flying the Reversal. It was one of Nemesis’s unique skills, and it reversed the effects of debuffs I was subjected to.

Now, I’ll turn this Superior Embryo’s debuff against its Master, and...

“Khh...” I groaned and realized that something was off.

Reversal was up and active, yet it was still hard to breathe. It had become a bit easier, sure, but that was the extent of it.

“What... is this...?” Nemesis said, her voice thick with shock. “I... I can’t reverse it? Can’t push it back? The output is just too...”

“What’s wrong, Nemesis?!” I shouted, but all I got in response was silence, as if she was completely dumbfounded by something.

“You have the right idea here,” said the aberration. “My Kaguya is focused on debuffs, so this skill Nemesis has is her, well, nemesis.”

I didn’t know whether she’d learned about my Reversal beforehand or if she’d figured it out just now, but she clearly knew what it did.

"But..." She tut-tutted me. "That only applies when you and I... and our Kaguya and Nemesis... are on a similar tier."

"Wh-What...?" I stammered.

What does that mean?

"Your Nemesis is still just low-rank, while my Kaguya is a Superior Embryo."

Smirking in the most terrifying manner, she slightly opened her eyes and looked at me with a spine-chilling gleam in her gaze.

"Their base powers are on entirely different digits, sweetie," she continued with a giggle. "You can't carry 100 tons just because you can lift 100 kilos, you know? Same thing. Though, from how it feels here, she can probably reverse debuffs from high-rank jobs just fine. Heh heh."

"Gh!" I shouted.

The description for Reversal *did* say that its effects could be affected by the enemy's level and skill level. But... the skill had reversed so many debuffs I'd been subjected to. It had even turned around all the nightmarish status effects piled on me by the Lich, so how could it have no effect here?

"Up until now, you've won against stronger enemies because you were compatible, no?" she said with an eerily gentle voice as she walked up to me. "Well, here's something for you to keep in mind, darling. Compatibility... isn't enough to win against someone with *absolute power*."

Then she extended her bare foot from out of her junihitoe and kicked me directly in the chin.

"...Hh," I gasped as my consciousness was forced to shut down.

Chapter Two: The Maidens’ Tea Party

Death Shadow, Marie Adler

Ray had been kidnapped by The Lunar Society, the clan led by the infamous High Priestess.

“Why does he attract the attention of such troublesome individuals?” I mumbled.

First Franklin, now Tsukuyo Fuso... Just what did the guy do to deserve this? I added silently.

“Excuse me, but weren’t *you* the first ‘troublesome individual’ he encountered?” asked Rook.

“Oh hush, Rook. You might have a point, but now’s not the time for that.”

This was a serious event that might even go beyond the confines of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

The two of us were clearly not enough to handle this. We needed more manpower, and there was no better opponent for Tsukuyo than another one of the kingdom’s Big Three, Ray’s very own brother bear... the King of Destruction, Shu Starling. I wasn’t sure about in real life, but surely he could counter most of her nonsense here in *Dendro*.

“What about you, Marie?” asked Babi, the curiosity in her tone all too evident. “Can’t you do it?”

“...Well, if we’re talking about *just* killing Tsukuyo Fuso, then I probably can,” I said.

I wasn’t called “The Superior Killer” for no reason. If I delivered a good surprise attack while she was off-guard, I might be able to quickly dig through the High Priestess’s HP and PK her. However, as things were...

“It’s impossible,” I sighed.

“But whyyy?” Babi asked.

“Because... she has the King of Assassins with her.”

King of Assassins was the Superior Job of the assassin grouping, and it currently belonged to Eishiro Tsukikage — the functional second-in-command at The Lunar Society.

It was much like my Death Shadow in nature. The only real differences were that mine was eastern, while his was western, and that Death Shadow was focused primarily on hiding the user's presence, while the King of Assassins specialized in, as the name might suggest, assassination.

And because of that, just like I was as good at seeing through Conceal as I was at Concealing myself, he was as good at preventing assassinations as he was at assassinating.

As long as she had him at her side, the High Priestess would be an impossible target for me. Any and all of my surprise attacks would be countered.

"In fact, we can't even be sure if giving her the death penalty would be enough," I added. After all, we were faced with a cult that had a solid presence both here and in reality. And if that wasn't troublesome — nothing was.

Still, that furball could, at the very least, save Ray from his predicament here in *Dendro*, and...

"Ah," Rook exclaimed, pointing. "Look, Marie! Ray's brother is right over there!"

I turned to where he was pointing, and saw...

"*The bear's popcorn! Gosh, oh boy!*
Eating them is so much joy!
Your taste buds these will destroy!"

The bear was standing at a popcorn cart and attracting customers with a song sung in the most needlessly beautiful voice.

What is this manbear-thing even doing? I thought, exasperated.

"Mister Shu!" Rook called as we approached him.

"Oh, hey there, Rook, Babi, Superior Killer," the bear greeted us. "Something wrong? You look beary out of it. Oh yeah, Superior Killer, I—"

"Don't call me 'Supe... whatever and so forth' in public!" I shouted. "And just what are you doing here?"

Why was the top of the kingdom's kill rankings selling popcorn? Had he gotten a part-time job as some business's mascot or something?

"A furmer I know retired and went off to Caldina, so I went and bought all the corn he had left," the furball answered.

Well, Altar *was* politically unstable and kept bleeding people daily...

No, wait, but *why* had he bought them?

"I'm selling popcorn to get money fur Baldr's ammo," he continued. "The KoD's seal of approval actually makes it beary popular."

"You could go hunting instead," I commented. "Thought about that, Mr. Kill Ranking Number One?" He'd definitely earn more money that way.

"Well," he scratched his cheek as he responded. "I have reasons that keep me from going too far from here. Anyway, what's your deal? You were looking for me, weren't you?"

"Well, Ray was kidnapped by The Lunar Society, and..."

Once Rook explained the situation, the surrounding air instantly shifted.

"Reeaaally, now?" said the bear who was the King of Destruction. He was spitting words so laced with bloodlust that one needed no skills to sense it. Though it wasn't directed at us, it still made a chill go down my spine.

The people around us were shaking, as well, thoroughly unaware as to why.

"That damn cultist fox bitch..." he continued with not a hint of the usual humor in his tone, even swearing in the process. Clearly, he was most displeased about the kidnapping.

...Wait, had he been like this back when I'd given Ray the death penalty?

...Th-That's just terrifying, I thought as another chill went down my spine.

"The guy has college tomorrow, damn it..." the angry bear sighed. "Man, how am I supposed to go about this?"

"You're actually thinking this through?" I raised an eyebrow.

That was thoroughly unexpected. Knowing this bear, I'd expected him to go straight to the capital and raid The Lunar Society's headquarters the moment he'd heard that Ray was in a pinch.

"Strange," I said, speaking my thoughts. "I expected you to rush to them and punch her lights out the moment we told you."

I mean, you scorched the entire Noz Forest when I PK'd Ray, I thought.

"Believe me, I'd love to do that, but I can't really move from here right now," the bear said, once again telling us that he couldn't leave the city.

Was something happening here in Gideon? Surely he didn't mean that he was too busy with his popcorn business to leave, right?

...Then again, I couldn't really put it past this ursine barrel of laughs.

“I see,” I sighed, giving up on his help. “But if *you* can’t act... saving Ray will become much harder. Well, if worst comes to worst, he can escape by just using suicide.” As a precaution against harassment and cyber bullying, *Dendro* had the “suicide” feature. It allowed players to give themselves the death penalty by simply willing it, letting them escape situations where they, for some reason, couldn’t log out the normal way.

It came with the risk of dropping precious items, but the most valuable gear in Ray’s possession — the two special rewards — couldn’t be transferred in any way, including via dropping upon death.

Also, most of the money he’d acquired from Gouz-Maise, Clash of the Superiors, and Franklin’s Game had been entrusted to the relevant public institutions.

The only thing to fear was the possibility of his dropping Silver, but considering the number of items he had on him, that was highly unlikely. Ray’s daily gacha rolls had given him quite a stuffed inventory.

All in all, a death penalty wouldn’t be *too* bad for him. In fact, once he came back from it, he would get his arm back and be fully healed — a huge plus, no doubt.

However...

“Well, sure he can use suicide,” said the bear man. “But knowing him, he won’t want to.”

Yeah, that, I thought.

I mean, the guy had chosen to spend a month of *Dendro* time without an arm instead of fixing it with a death penalty.

“Still, if we don’t do anything about this, his college life could be in danger...” I said.

We were dealing with The Lunar Society here. That bunch of literal lunatics would have no qualms about keeping him from logging out for 24 hours and beyond.

...Oh dear, that might even cause Ray’s real body to be in danger.

“The timing just couldn’t be worse,” growled the bear. “Leaving Gideon and letting the nuclear duo do what they want isn’t an option, so... damn.”

Nuclear duo...?

“Who do you mea—?”

“Should *I* go, then?” asked someone at my side, cutting my question short.

I turned and saw none other than the most famous person in Gideon.

"Over Gladiator, Figaro..." I muttered his job and name.

It was another one of the Big Three and, without a doubt, one of the strongest Masters in the kingdom.

...For some reason, he was actually eating the popcorn sold by the bear.

"I'm about to... raid the Tomb Labyrinth again, anyway," he said while munching down the popcorn. "I can also pay a visit... to The Lunar Society."

He then cracked a smile while looking at us with those slit-like eyes of his.

It was no doubt a pretty expression, but alas, his popcorn-eating completely ruined it.

"You'll help him?" asked the bear man.

"Of course." Figaro nodded. "Ray worked really hard while I was unable to move back during Franklin's Game. I'd like to return the favor."

"Thanks," said the bear.

So we now had the one and only Figaro on our side.

...This will work, I thought in relief. In fact, the Over Gladiator would be even better than KoD in this situation. With the High Priestess being holed up in her HQ at the capital, the bear would have had to hold back so that he wouldn't destroy the city, but Figaro had no such limitations. Not to mention that his limitless buffing was a good counter to her debuffs. No matter how heated things got, he could save Ray without much trouble.

"You probably know this, but..." the bear began.

"Yeah," Figaro cut his words short. "If she and I fight, I'll make sure to end it before she uses her ultimate skill. Otherwise, *I'll lose*."

...Eh? I thought in surprise.

"Thankfully, it's still daytime," he added. "If I hurry, I should be able to settle it before sundown."

"...Take care, my dude."

"Yeah. All right, I'm off," he said before running away from us at supersonic speeds. Even I found it hard to follow his shape. He'd probably switched to AGI-focused gear.

With how fast he's going, it won't be long until he's at the capital, I reflected.

"Marie," Rook spoke up. "What do we do now?"

"Well..." I muttered, and began to ponder. At our top speed, it would take us several hours to arrive at Altea. But if all went well, we might be able to meet up with Ray right after he was rescued by Figaro.

"Maybe we should go right now...?" I said.

"I don't think there's a need fur that," the bear commented.

"Why?"

"No matter how quickly Figaro does his thing and saves Ray from the lunatic cultists, Ray would need to log out immediately. Going there now would beary much be a waste of time."

Well, he wasn't wrong, but I didn't feel too good about entrusting it all to Figaro alone.

"Also, Superior K... Marie," he continued as he reached into his inventory and took out a letter. "I have this for you."

The "To Marie" written on the envelope in cutesy handwriting made it easy to tell who was the sender.

"Is this from Ellie?" I asked to confirm.

"Fur sure," the bear nodded. "She and Liliana came to me while I was selling popcorn yesterday and handed this over to me."

Well, our party had been out on a quest for the whole of yesterday, so they'd probably figured that giving the letter to the bear, our party member's brother, was a good way to get it to me.

They'd actually entrusted a letter to this furball... Well, as far as Superiors went, he was definitely a good person, so it wasn't the worst idea. He certainly wasn't *reasonable* by any stretch of the imagination, though.

"They told me it was fur a quest," the bear added.

"A quest for me? From Ellie?"

Now, what could it be? I pondered.

"Yeah, so I'd say you should focus on that. Also, Rook."

"Yes?" Rook replied.

"Lend me your ear fur a sec."

"Hm...? All right."

The bear walked up to Rook, brought his mouth to his ear, and whispered something. In all honesty, it felt kinda like I was watching a bear about to eat a person.

"I see," nodded Rook. "Very well, then."

"All right. Come to me within the next few *Dendro* days. Whenever

Ray’s offline and you have nothing going on will do just fine.”

The two seemed to have made some sort of arrangement.

“Just what are you two planning?” I asked.

“Well, in a word... ‘training,’” the bear answered.

Training? The furball is gonna train Rook? I raised an eyebrow.

“That’s the simplest way to put it, anyway,” the bear added. “I mean, Ray’s been in lots of mock battles, but you can’t really say the same for Rook, can you?”

True enough. Rook had been primarily an observer, rather than a participant.

Wait, no, that wasn’t the crux here. What I had to ask was...

“...What does this ‘training’ involve?”

“Death...ly difficulty, but it’s beary much worth doing, yes.”

H-He just straight up said “death” and then added some words that don’t make it the least bit better.

“...Isn’t a Superior like you a bit too much for a newbie like him?” I asked.

“The world is an unbearably harsh place,” the furball sighed. “It even has veteran players who stalk forests and go around massacring newbies on their first day of *Dendro*.”

...Sincerest apologies, I thought and looked away. *I have no say in this matter.*

“I don’t mind it,” Rook spoke up. “Also, if he went out of his way to bring it up, then this training is probably very important.”

“It is.” The bear nodded. “I guarantee it.”

Rook seemed to be very accepting of the idea.

Are you sure? You’re training with the bear, you know?

“Anyway, with that pawsitively settled, again, come find me whenever you have free time.”

“Yes, of course,” Rook said.

The bear then left us, dragging his popcorn cart behind him. It kinda felt like he was avoiding us, but instead of investigating it, we just went our own way.

I then opened and read Ellie’s letter, parted ways with Rook, and went to her place.

Sure, I was still concerned about Ray, but I decided to entrust him to

Figaro.

I could only hope that the situation would be resolved without Ray having to choose the death penalty.

◇◇◇

Duel city Gideon, alley

Once Shu pulled his popcorn cart into an empty alleyway, someone behind him began talking to him.

“Do you plan to train the newbie and make him capable of doing something against us... or him?”

It was a lone woman. She had the appearance of an average adventurer, but the porcupine-like animal in her arms made her more than notable.

As for her expression... it was clearly mocking.

“We heard your exchange back there,” she continued. “So neither Figaro, the prime primate around these parts, nor your lucky, puny Superior-killing little brother is here, eh? Such a shame we don’t have any orders from the imperator. As things are, we wouldn’t have to kick away any annoying trash gathering around us.”

Those words clearly mocked the weak and frail, but they weren’t enough to arouse Shu’s anger.

“‘Kicking away trash’?” he said. “What are you, some sort of slovenly OL?”

“‘OL’? What does that mean?”

“...Oh, I see. That expression isn’t beary popular in your cultural sphere. Well, can’t say I blame you. I mean, it’s a neologism that was created in a Japanese magazine.”

“But what does it mea—? Well, no matter. I must say, though, you certainly like making assumptions. That little encounter made it clearer than all the days since the incident have.”

“Mh...” the bear muttered.

“You’re here to *keep an eye on us*, aren’t you? That’s why you’re staying in the city instead of going out and hunting. Am I right?”

“Well, if worst comes to worst, I’m just about the only one who can stop you.” Shu’s reply was very casual, definitely not meant to bring out any sort of emotion, but it was enough to make the woman knit her brow.

“You’re *gravely* wrong about one thing,” she said in a menacing tone, and looked at him with a beast-like glint in her eye. “You are not enough to stop the Queen of Beasts... and the King of Beasts.”

The murderous aura about her was enough to instantly kill the faint of heart. Even hardened warriors would shiver when facing it.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

But the King of Destruction remained firm. Like a boulder standing solid in the wildest storm — or perhaps like a willow letting the mighty winds pass it by — Shu was unfazed by her threats.

“Care to try?” she said, pushing the tension further and creating an air much like the one that formed between Figaro and Xunyu during the Clash of the Superiors.

This one was very different in nature, though. While Figaro and Xunyu’s battle had been one of precision and technique, this one would be a face-off of sheer power.

Indeed, while the Clash had been a duel between two of the greatest warriors, this would be the *collision of two natural disasters* — a sign of a volcanic eruption and a tornado coming at the same time, devastating everything in its wake.

The situation was critical. It felt as though Gideon could be wiped off the face of the world the very next moment.

“I’m beary much against that!”

But all such feelings scattered like mist when Shu spoke in his usual, comical tone, not even neglecting to throw in a pun.

“Going at it now would be bad fur all of us. Your infiltration would become meaningless, while I’m short on money fur ammo. Man, that unbearable lab coat lunatic’s mess was such a hit to my wallet that I can’t make up fur it, no matter how much popcorn I sell.”

“You little...”

Shu’s seemingly-mocking — yet completely true — words made the woman scowl even more. Anger overwhelmed her. She began reforming the menacing aura Shu’d scattered and prepared to charge him.

“lol” The porcupine-like animal in the woman’s arms released a sound that seemed somewhat joyous.

Because of that alone, the woman’s rage vanished like it had never been there, and her expression softened up.

"If you're having fun, Behemot... then I won't mind it," she said.

"Well, fun things are beary good things," Shu commented.

There were no traces of the tense air from just a moment ago. The alley was now tranquil.

With their exchange seemingly done, Shu grabbed his popcorn cart and started walking away.

As he did so, the woman spoke to him again, as though she just remembered something she was curious about.

"By the way, may I ask you something?"

"Bearily, yes."

"What about your life on the other side? You're always online whenever we're here, aren't you?"

"You're in no position to talk."

"XD"

With those words as their last, the no-lifers that had clocked over 200 hours of play time over the last ten days turned their backs to each other and walked away.

Hidden under the everyday scenery of Gideon, the two's clash had been postponed to a later date.

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The Lunar Society headquarters

"...How pathetic," Nemesis muttered.

She was at The Lunar Society's headquarters, in the same room that Ray had awoken in. Having passed out after the staggering loss against Tsukuyo Fuso, he had once again been brought to lie here.

The room had no grates, no guards — nothing in the way of security. And that only served to make Nemesis more conscious of just how powerless the enemy thought them to be.

"Truly... I'm beyond pitiful," she muttered again as she gently stroked Ray's hair.

Her evaluation of herself came from her very heart. After all, the defeat at the hands of Tsukuyo had been hers alone. She was simply too weak of an Embryo for Ray to stand a chance. No amount of strategy, willpower, or compatibility could ever make up for the great gap between Nemesis and

Tsukuyo's Embryo, and this truth weighed heavily upon her.

"Ray... You've become so strong over the last month..."

Through victories against UBMs or by luck alone, he'd acquired a formidable set of equipment.

Through numerous battles, he'd raised his Paladin level and gained stats befitting the high-rank job.

But most of all, through all the sparring against many veteran players, he'd gained battle experience that would make most newbies like him pale in comparison.

All in all, he was staggeringly more powerful than he had been a month ago.

"And then there's me... Painfully stagnant," Nemesis murmured.

Ever since undergoing her first evolution in the battle against Gardranda, Nemesis hadn't experienced any power progression as an Embryo, and that was the very reason why she was admonishing herself.

The Embryos of the many Masters they'd faced in the mock battles were no doubt strong, and even Babi — who had once been on the same tier as Nemesis — was now two forms ahead of her. Nemesis felt as if she alone wasn't making any progress whatsoever.

She knew that, were she to reveal these worries to Ray, he would instantly deny it and say, without a hint of falsehood, that Nemesis *was* growing.

However, as she was now, Nemesis sought power that was more tangible... more direct. Power that she could use to never again let Ray suffer the pain of defeat.

"I want to evolve..." she said through the most sincere sobs as tears formed in her eyes.

She cried, wishing for new powers she could use to uplift Ray... the Master she'd dedicated her heart to.

"Evolution is not something you become impatient over," someone suddenly said as they opened the sliding door and let themselves in.

"Ah?!" Nemesis gasped as she transformed both her arms into swords and stood to protect Ray. "Who are you?!"

The person who'd entered the room looked strange, to say the least. She was wearing a raiment characteristic of tennyo from Japanese myth, and had long hair that radiated moonlight. However, Nemesis found the very presence of her being far more curious than any visual details.

"'Who are you,' you ask?" the entity replied. "Should we present you with the name 'Kaguya'? Or maybe we should introduce ourselves as Tsukuyo's Embryo? Or perhaps we should simply say that we are your senior?"

That made it all too clear.

This Maiden is...! Nemesis thought in shock. This was the very same Superior Embryo that she had been so utterly defeated by.

Remembering her loss made her tense. Nemesis mustered her willpower and stood before Kaguya to protect Ray.

"Eheheheh. You look like a mother cat protecting her kitten," the Superior Maiden giggled with a gentle smile on her face. "Don't worry, neither we nor Tsukuyo have any intention of touching your Master while he sleeps."

"As if I can believe that!" Nemesis shouted, thoroughly mad at Kaguya for having the gall to say that. The Lunar Society had kidnapped Ray while he was asleep, after all. "You're that freakish woman's Embryo! What do you want?!"

"Eheheh. No need to be so antagonistic. We merely wanted to have a talk with a fellow Maiden."

"I have nothing to say to you!"

"Now, now, calm down," Kaguya said as she reached into her inventory, took out two floor cushions, placed them on the floor, and sat down on one of them. "Care to use it?" she said, referring to the other.

Nemesis felt as if she was mocking her and was about to refuse on reflex, but then she thought of Ray, reconsidered, and hesitantly sat down on the cushion.

Kaguya then took out a teapot, some tea leaves, a magic flask full of hot water, and prepared some tea.

"...Again, why are you even here?" Nemesis asked.

"We just said that we want to talk," Kaguya replied. "Oh, by the way, these are high-quality tea leaves donated to us by an adherent. They're from Tenchi. Do try it," she offered the tea to Nemesis.

"It's not poison, is it?" she asked cautiously.

"Heavens, no. Unlike a certain fake chinagirl and the snake, we don't poison drinks."

Fake chinagirl and the snake? Nemesis raised an eyebrow, but instead of inquiring about it, she chose to believe her words and hesitantly sipped the tea.

"...It's good," she said after one taste. Nemesis had no cause to lie about this, so she didn't. To her mind, the tea had a gentle flavor that warmed and relaxed the whole body to the core.

"It truly is." Kaguya nodded as she sipped on her own tea, clearly satisfied. "Oh, would you like some tea cakes with that?"

"...Yes."

What followed was a short silence. The only sounds in the room were those of Nemesis eating the tea cakes and Kaguya sipping her tea.

Eventually, the Superior Embryo spoke up again.

"It has been so long since we enjoyed tea with another Maiden."

"Mh..." Nemesis silently thought of how to respond to that, but Kaguya spoke up before she did.

"Due to its nature, The Lunar Society has more Maidens than other clans. However, not every Master who thinks this is not merely a game gets a Maiden Embryo, so the numbers are still quite low."

"Mhm..." Nemesis nodded as she realized that, indeed, she didn't sense many of her kind in the surroundings.

Masters who hatched Maiden Embryos had a tendency to consider *Infinite Dendrogram* to be more than just a game, but things didn't correlate when it was the other way around. Such a mental state only made it *possible* for Maiden Embryos to be born, rather than making it 100% certain.

"Also, strangely enough, Maidens' Masters oftentimes leave us," Kaguya added.

"They do?"

"We even had some such Masters among those whose Maidens were born at about the same time as yours truly. Officially, they're still part of the clan, but they live their lives away from here. Do you know why?"

"...I haven't the slightest idea."

Neither Nemesis nor Ray could understand the mind of someone who had become a part of a cult and distanced themselves from it, despite not quitting.

However, Kaguya's answer made it somewhat easy to imagine.

"Because they made families with tians," she said. "If a Master truly sees this world and the other side as equal, it’s not unlikely for them to fall in love with tians.”

“...True,” Nemesis said, nodding.

Entities one didn’t consider to be mere game characters were, indeed, valid targets for romance. In fact, there could also be Masters who saw tians as romanceable despite still seeing them as NPCs.

“The number of such people is growing, both in and out of this clan, and among both Masters with and without Maiden Embryos. Almost five years have passed since *Infinite Dendrogram* began, after all.”

“Hm?” Nemesis raised an eyebrow, feeling as though the subject of the conversation was changing, or that everything up until now had been nothing but an introduction.

“Our name is ‘Kaguya,’” the Superior Embryo continued. “It’s the name of a heroine from a tale from Tsukuyo’s country.”

“I know *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* from Ray’s memories. It’s common knowledge where he comes from.”

“Oh, so your Master is from the same country as Tsukuyo.” Kaguya formed a smile, which quickly turned faint. “The Kaguya from that story was an entity not of their Earth. She quickly grew to be stunningly beautiful, and eventually returned to the Moon. While she was on Earth, many men fell in love with her and sought reciprocation, but she responded by giving them nigh impossible tasks, and in the end, she went far away from everything she’d ever known there.”

She’s presenting Kaguya as some sort of foreign contamination, Nemesis thought.

“You’re not making your name sound very favorable,” she commented.

“Indeed.” Kaguya smiled for a moment before looking at Nemesis with her most serious expression yet. “‘Kaguya’ might be our name, but we feel that, to Masters, all Maidens, Embryos, and tians alike are akin to Kaguya... or perhaps it’s the Masters who are the Kaguya in this situation?”

Depending on one’s perspective, that was either a vague comparison or a solid truth without a hint of dramatization.

“...What are you implying?” asked Nemesis.

“You love your Master, don’t you?”

“NHUH?!” Nemesis exclaimed. The question caught her completely off-guard and was shocking enough to make her rise up from her cushion.

"A budding affection. A feeling of attraction. Isn't that the innocent emotion we call 'love'?"

"D-D-Don't be absurd! That's not... I'm not... W-Well, I won't deny I find him likeable, but that's only..." Nemesis tried to deny it, but her inability to do so made her all flustered.

"But no matter how much we love them, we and our Masters will eventually have to part ways," Kaguya said.

Those words made Nemesis's expression completely freeze solid. "What kind of—"

She tried to say "What kind of nonsense is that?" but Kaguya cut her off and continued enforcing her point.

"Surely you have considered this. Their reality is on the other side. They are nothing but guests here. They don't die in this world because their very lives here are evanescent."

That was nothing but the truth. Masters were called "players" for a reason. To them, the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* was a game. Even if they recognized it as a world inhabited by intelligent beings, they were still merely visitors. And though Maidens' Masters didn't see this world as a game and could make it a part of their lives, they could never make it the core of their beings.

"And so, when the end comes, they will return to the other side, while we will stay here," Kaguya said, emphasizing that the Masters' actual ending was different from the ending of them coming here. "The end might come in the form of their death on the other side. Or perhaps they will merely lose their will to be here. Or maybe the thing that binds them to this world will disappear."

Indeed, there were many ways in which it could end. It could happen at any time, too. And that was exactly why...

"When that happens, as you are now, you will be left with nothing but despair."

This was true. With her love for him still in her heart, Nemesis would be rendered incapable of meeting him ever again. And being an Embryo, she wouldn't be able to interact with the world or anyone else unless her Master was here, meaning that she would be left with nothing but the memories of the days she'd spent with him... and an ending with no continuation.

Nemesis had tried to avoid thinking about this harsh truth, but Kaguya had made her all too painfully aware of it.

"*Why* did you tell this to me?" Nemesis wrung out those words and looked at the Superior Embryo with a hint of grudge in her gaze.

Nemesis knew full well that her anger was misplaced. This harsh truth was something she should've faced by herself a long time ago.

Upon seeing the sorry state the young Embryo was in, Kaguya gently caressed her head. "Eheheheh."

"Nh?! What are you doing?!" Nemesis exclaimed, taken aback by the abrupt move.

Paying no heed to her reaction, Kaguya softened her expression and gave Nemesis a smile. "Forgive us for that. We came here to talk about something more Maiden-like, but your teary plea for power to help your Master made us want to warn you."

"Well... much obliged."

"Oh, but leaving you with just a warning is quite sad, so let us give you some advice to help you fight the despair when the end comes," Kaguya said as she extended her finger and lightly poked Nemesis's chest. "If possible... you should confess your feelings as soon as you get the chance. The earlier they bloom, the more memories you will make for you to treasure."

Thus the experienced Maiden bestowed the young Maiden with the most straightforward and sincere love advice.

"...I will keep that in mind," said Nemesis. "But whether or not I will act on it is another matter."

Still, Kaguya's words made her cheeks slightly rosy, and her expression was now soft, housing little of the gloom from just a moment ago.

Upon seeing that, the Superior Embryo formed a satisfied, gentle smile.

"Then we will take our leave now," she said. "When your Master awakes, Tsukuyo will likely approach him again."

"I really wish she wouldn't," Nemesis sighed.

While Nemesis had absolutely no love for Tsukuyo Fuso, she no longer felt the same about the woman's Embryo. Kaguya's eyes as she looked at her were much like those of a worried senior or an elder sister, which made her feel slightly peaceful.

"Oh, another thing," Kaguya spoke up again. "Here is some Maiden-like advice for you... If you get another chance to use ■■■, you should cancel it until you’re at least a high-rank. Otherwise, your evolution to high-rank might be postponed by a whole year or so.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, too... but what *is* that, anyway?”

Nemesis could tell what Kaguya was referring to, but she couldn’t even hear it as spoken word.

It — ■■■ — was the thing that had activated in the middle of the battle against Gardranda, forced Nemesis to evolve, and provided her with Like a Flag Flying the Reversal — the most optimal skill for the situation.

She still didn’t know what it actually was, but she could tell that it was the reason why she was evolving so slowly.

“It’s what causes Maidens... no... what causes *Embryos* to be what they are,” Kaguya said. “It’s a meaningless function that has already been lost... but it still exists in Maidens and Apostles.”

“Apostles?” Nemesis raised an eyebrow. She had never heard of such a category before.

Kaguya ran her mind through her memories and spoke. “While we are the products of a sense of danger, Apostles are the products of a sense of duty. The function remains solely in Embryos that can only be owned by those whose will isn’t vague.”

“...I don’t understand.”

Kaguya had spoken nothing but the simple truth, but Nemesis had been unable to comprehend it. Or, more like, she just didn’t have the right foundation to be able to understand it.

“You will come to understand it eventually,” said Kaguya. “Perhaps when you are on the same stage as we are... Oh, my.” Her gentle, considerate smile vanished. She put on a stern expression and looked at an uncertain direction.

“What is it?” asked Nemesis.

“We have a guest.”

A moment later, the roof of the room they were in was torn off by *chains*.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

When you fell asleep in *Infinite Dendrogram*, your consciousness fell asleep with your body, just like it did in reality.

However, when you were forcefully made unconscious, things were a bit different. The body would be under the effects of the Fainting debuff, while the consciousness would still be awake in a space away from the body, where only the mind existed.

"*Here again*, huh?" I sighed. The first time I'd entered this state had been during the battle against Gouz-Maise. Back then, I'd been flung into a world that replayed my memories, and I'd encountered its creator — the dark red silhouette.

A month of *Dendro* time had passed since then. During this interval, I'd Fainted a few times while exploring the Tomb Labyrinth or doing other things, and I'd found myself standing in a pitch black space, just like now.

Unlike the first time, there was neither the memory world, nor the dark red silhouette.

All there was was a sign saying "Coming Soon..."

"...Seriously, just *what* is 'coming soon'?" I demanded.

The sign had probably been placed there by the dark red silhouette, the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Just like how it was with any other mental status effects, Fainting was fully applied to the body, but the player protection function prevented it from actually affecting the Master's mind. Because of that, when we Fainted, instead of actually losing consciousness, we were just forced to wait in this empty space until the effect wore off.

Apparently, Gardranda had learned to take advantage of this. Just like she'd recreated my memories here, she had now placed this sign.

"Well, if I can't meet her this time, either... I guess all I can really do is wait..."

I'd wanted to confirm a few things with her, but alas. Still, at the very least, I could spend this waiting time thinking things through.

I closed my eyes and remembered the battle — if you could call it that — I'd just been in.

Compatibility... isn't enough to win against someone with absolute power.

Those were the last words Tsukuyo Fuso had told me before I Fainted.

This hadn't been my first time facing a Superior. I'd had a few accidental encounters with them, sparred against them, and, of course, fought Franklin.

I compared those experiences with my “fight” against Tsukuyo Fuso.

It was completely unlike the time I’d faced Franklin, who’d prepared a weapon specifically against me.

This time, I’d won in terms of compatibility, but I’d been completely overwhelmed by the immense difference in our powers, and totally crushed because of it.

Not only did Tsukuyo Fuso have ill will towards me... she was also insanely strong. And for some reason, she wanted to drag me into her clan.

It was clear that she’d still keep me here when I awoke. To log out, I either had to use the suicide function or fight them while trying to find a way to escape the headquarters.

With that in mind...

“Looks like I have no choice.”

...I readied myself to fight that freakish creature.

Even if my chance of victory was minuscule — far below 1% — I would still struggle to seize the possibility. That was how I rolled.

“Still... there are some problems,” I muttered. “That aberration... is scary as hell.”

Even now, I was still afraid of Tsukuyo Fuso. I was losing to her not just in terms of actual power, but on the mental front, as well. I’d actually found her far more scary than anything else I’d encountered in this world so far.

That might’ve been strange, considering I’d faced a Demi-Dragon Worm while being a level 0 without an Embryo, and later fought two awe-inspiring monstrosities, Gardranda and Gouz-Maise.

As scary as I found her, though, I couldn’t really tell why I felt that way. This fear should’ve been completely new to me, but for some reason, it felt somewhat familiar.

Whatever the case, acknowledging that something was scary ought to make it a bit less scary than before.

“All right, I have the mindset... Now I just need to find a way to win this.”

Tsukuyo Fuso could cast an AOE debuff that would make short work of my basic bodily functions, and neither Hellish Miasma nor Reversal had any effect on her. Thus, I had to use something else. However...

I didn’t have enough MP stored to use the Wind Hoof bomb... not to mention that I couldn’t really use it in town, either.

I didn’t have my left hand, so I couldn’t use Purgatorial Flames.

I probably couldn’t build up enough damage for a good Vengeance, either.

Besides that, all I really had was Purifying Silverlight... but no matter how much of an aberration she was on the inside, her job was completely sacred, so it wouldn’t help at all. I’d heard that the priest grouping had passive skills that lowered all holy damage coming their way.

I could ignore all that and try to take her head-on... but either because of her level, or because of some other jobs she had in her build, she had higher stats than me.

From the kick that’d reaped my consciousness, I could also tell that she was a skilled fighter. In fact, she could probably rival the contestants in the Un-kra tournament that Shu had taken part in. She was probably doing some sort of martial arts in real life.

“But man, the direness of my condition makes me wonder... How the hell did she actually corner me more than Franklin did when he was actually aiming to do it?”

I could almost picture Franklin retorting with “Don’t get the wrong idea, noob! I’d have won if I’d set all my forces on you!”

That aside, this encounter made me painfully aware that, even if I was able to surpass Superiors on some highly specific fronts, they were still so much more powerful than me, it was stupid.

With opponents like Tsukuyo Fuso and all the powerful foes waiting for me in the upcoming war, I definitely had to become stronger. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to seize the possibilities.

“The best way to become stronger would be... an evolution.”

Evolutions were the primary feature of all Embryos everywhere, and also their greatest power-ups.

What separated Superiors and standard Masters was that their Embryos were in their seventh forms, so if I wanted to catch up to them, an evolution was my best bet.

However, ever since evolving to her second form in our fight against Gardranda, Nemesis hasn’t evolved once during the entire past month here.

To compare, despite him having started at the same time as me, Rook’s Babi had already reached the fourth form, making her a high-rank Embryo.

According to Marie, a month should be more than enough time for an Embryo to reach the third form.

...Well, I was fully aware why Nemesis was evolving so slowly.

It had been there in the system window that had popped up when she was evolving to her second form.

I recalled the window saying that it would provide us with the optimal evolution for the situation in exchange for slowing down the next evolution.

I was completely fine with that.

If we hadn't gotten The Flag Halberd and its Reversal back then, we wouldn't have won against Gardranda and Gouz-Maise... and if I hadn't gotten the Grudge-Soaked Greaves, I couldn't have won Franklin's Game, either. Without that evolution, I couldn't have made it against those odds, so I found it perfectly fair that it had come at the cost of slowing the next evolution.

The only problem here was... just how long would this lag continue? Surely we wouldn't be stuck in the second form forever, right?

"I'd say it's high time we see a sign that it's about to happen," I muttered.

It wasn't like I was expecting to get a convenient evolution here and now and completely turn the situation around, but still.

"I want it to happen... for her sake, too."

I was fully aware that Nemesis was troubled by the fact that she wasn't evolving. She was clearly trying to hide it, so I never actually said anything, but for her own sake, I really wanted to help her evolve.

As I considered Nemesis' evolution problem, I began hearing a voice from what felt like far beyond.

"...! ...!"

"Hm?"

"...y! ...e up!"

"Nemesis?"

The voice belonged to my Embryo. It was faint, as if it was coming from beyond a thick glass.

"Ray! Wake up!"

The moment her voice became loud and clear, the space within my mind vanished, and my consciousness returned to my avatar.

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“Nngh...” I murmured.

“You’re awake!” Nemesis cried.

Upon waking up, I found myself on the tatami of the same room I’d woken up in last time. Nemesis was right next to me.

That was all perfectly normal, but she seemed really tense, and the room was in a... rough state, to say the least.

Two of the room’s walls were completely gone, as if they’d been blown away by an explosion.

Through the missing walls, I could see other areas of this facility, and honestly, it didn’t look pretty.

Most of the tiles had slipped off the roof, and I could see the evening sky beyond it. The walls and pillars alike were broken, letting me see even more of the devastation, including the countless furnishings scattered all over.

It looked as though this place had suffered an immense earthquake or a powerful tornado, but that wasn’t the case here. This devastation was man-made, and I couldn’t be more certain of that.

Why? Because I could see the two responsible in the midst of all the chaos.

“Now, now, don’t overdo it, you sickly prince,” Tsukuyo Fuso said mockingly.

“How about you just take the death penalty and give Ray back?” Figaro snapped.

The two Superiors were killing one another.

Chapter Three: Lion and Fox, Light and Dark

The Lunar Society headquarters

Figaro had arrived at The Lunar Society's headquarters approximately ten minutes before Ray was woken up by Nemesis.

It hadn't been long since he'd left Gideon. The Superior knew the quickest way to the capital by heart, and he'd traversed it while wearing his best AGI-enhancing equipment, so while his speed had been impressive, it definitely wasn't surprising.

Standing at the gates of The Lunar Society, Figaro spent a moment to equip the best gear for the situation, such as anti-debuff armor to counter his prime opponent, a stone ax so large it could split mansions in half, and a monocle-like accessory.

That last item wasn't particularly rare or remarkable. It only had a weak Clairvoyance effect, which was often used to search for traps and the like. However, Figaro planned to use it for a completely different purpose — to merely *look at the backs of people's left hands*.

The presence of a crest there would indicate that the person was a Master.

"If I get rid of all the Masters, they'll have no choice but to let Ray go," he murmured.

And the monocle was there to help him differentiate who to kill and who to let live.

Indeed, the very same man that had dismantled the blockade at the south of the capital by annihilating Mad Castle was about to rescue Ray by massacring The Lunar Society. And alas, no one was there to tell him just how absurd and rash he was being.

This Superior's modus operandi was quite unlike what his noble-like features would have you expect.

"Let's go," the fair-faced meathead said as he started it all off by throwing his gigantic ax towards the main gate.

Needless to say, it collapsed in one hit, and Figaro didn't hesitate to bound over the rubble and enter the premises.

Thus began the lion's wild dance of destruction.

Walls crumbled, structures fell, Masters vanished, and tians scrambled for safety.

It didn't take much of this chaotic pandemonium for Tsukuyo herself to stand before Figaro. Kaguya, too, was forced to end her chat with Nemesis and join her Master in battle.

It was at that moment that Ray woke up and saw the two Superiors face one another, murderous as could be.

With The Lunar Society's HQ as their stage, two of the Big Three were now fighting each other to the death — a situation that could certainly be called a Clash of the Superiors.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

Nemesis and I stood in the shattered room and observed the battle.

Figaro's arms were entwined in his trademark Crimson Dead Keeper chains, and he held a bow in his hands — a weapon I had rarely seen him use.

From his words, I could assume that he'd come here to help me, but his murderous intention seemed unfittingly immense.

Did something happen between him and the aberration? I pondered.

Speaking of Tsukuyo Fuso, she was holding a wand as menacing as Figaro's Gloria α or Xunyu's Yinglong's Fang, and she, too, looked thoroughly murderous, likely because of the tragic state of her base. Even a third party like me could feel the hostility between them.

Maybe because of the intensity alone, or perhaps because of their immense skill, the battle between the Over Gladiator and the High Priestess was simply sublime.

Figaro wasn't clad in his AGI-focused gear, so even I could follow his movements, and they were nothing short of spectacular. The four chains on his arms attacked automatically, and he coupled it with shots from his bow.

Not only that, but he was doing it while moving all across the space by kicking off of walls or pillars, and the arrows he'd launched all seemed to break the laws of physics, leaving log-sized perfect circles wherever they hit.

Tsukuyo Fuso, on the other hand, was entirely different from the way she had been when she'd faced me.

She was wrapped in a dark blue cloth highly reminiscent of the night she'd subjected me to, only *denser*, and she was launching black waves, much like swallows or crescent moons, with every swing of her wand. In all honesty, she looked like a final boss straight out of an RPG.

"Is that dark blue cloth just another form of the Lunar Reduction Field?" I asked.

"Yes." Nemesis nodded. "Kaguya... Tsukuyo's Maiden... transformed into it a short while ago."

"Maiden...? Oh, so we share a category."

The impression they gave me was completely different than the one I'd gotten from Hugo and Cyco, though. Also, that cloth of hers seemed like a solidified version of the night she'd used to defeat me.

This was supported by the fact that Figaro, despite excelling at melee combat, wasn't fighting her from up close, meaning that the cloth-Embryo might be a more effective — or harder to resist — Lunar Reduction Field.

The swallow/crescent moon-like waves were likely similar in nature.

Another thing to note was that the wide-scale night she'd used to suppress me wasn't active. Tsukuyo Fuso herself had said that the night wasn't effective on high level opponents, so when faced with someone like Figaro, she probably had no choice but to "compress" it.

Also, Figaro's endless buffing was a good counter to her debuffing. He was growing stronger with every passing second. His movements were gradually becoming too quick for me to follow, and his arrows were causing more and more destruction.

The two were more or less on equal footing right now, but that meant that Figaro would eventually gain the upper hand.

"As things are, it seems like the meathead will win," commented Nemesis.

"Yeah." I nodded, but then noticed something. "Hm?"

The flow of the battle itself was shifting in his favor, but there were two things I found odd and concerning.

First was the fact that Figaro wasn't looking at me at all. I was aware of a plausible reason for that, though. He himself had told me about it.

One day, after we'd had a little spar, we'd chatted a bit. I'd taken the opportunity to ask him why he was so adamant about playing solo, both in the Tomb Labyrinth and out.

Figaro definitely wasn't socially impaired. While sparring, dueling, or just having lunch, he had absolutely no trouble making pleasant exchanges with me, Shu, or the kingdom's duel rankers, so that had made me all the more curious about his solo fixation.

A part of me had thought that it might be a sensitive subject, but Figaro hadn't hesitated to answer, "Because I can't cooperate with anyone."

I didn't know the details, but apparently, when he participated in battles involving someone he recognized as an ally, his fighting would become abnormally worse, and that was why he was never a part of any party, and always acted alone.

It wasn't an effect of a *Dendro* skill or debuff or anything the like. It was related to his real life, so I'd chosen not to ask about it any further.

That being the case, right now, Figaro was purposely ignoring me because if I entered his vision, his movements would become more dull.

Even so, his fighting was lacking some of his usual brilliance, making it evident that he was telling the truth and that my very presence here was burdening him.

The other strange thing I'd noticed was that Figaro seemed to be rushing so much that it made it look like he was panicking. Occasionally, he looked away from Tsukuyo Fuso and, for some reason, glanced at the sky.

Since she wasn't using the wide-scale night effect, it was nothing more than a sky you'd see on a typical evening.

Another thing I'd found strange was not something with Figaro, but with Tsukuyo.

"She still looks confident," I muttered.

Though she was clad in the nightly veil, I could occasionally catch a glimpse of her expression — a composed smile.

It didn't seem to suit her current situation at all. Figaro was growing stronger by the moment, and his attacks were beginning to pierce the night shrouding Tsukuyo Fuso.

"Ah..." she gasped as one of Figaro's arrows grazed her and *completely* *blew her left arm away*. In but a moment, she became as limbless as I.

"Mercy of the Holy," she said, speaking the name of a skill. Light gathered where her arm had once been, and reformed it as if it had never been gone.

An injury so grave, treated in mere seconds.

"So that's the healing magic of the High Priestess..." I muttered. Though she could probably fix me up just as easily, I still had absolutely no intention of asking for her help. "Even so, it doesn't look like he can lose this."

Figaro's attack, the damage it had done, and the way Tsukuyo Fuso had reacted to it made me more confident than ever.

She'd used her immense healing ability and damage reduction from the Lunar Reduction Field to effectively become an endurance build meant to survive prolonged battles, meaning that Figaro — a fighter that turned stronger with the passage of time — had no way of losing this fight.

However...

"Oh dearrr, a dummy like you is just too much for little old me alone," she muttered as she wiped her brow with her freshly-healed left arm.

She was absolutely right about that. Figaro was at the top of the kingdom's duel rankings and was nearly unmatched in solo battles. In contrast, Tsukuyo Fuso was a support job focused on helping her clan as they did the dirty work.

One was the apex of single battle, while the other was the zenith of leadership. The outcome of a one-on-one battle between them was obvious from the start.

"I could reallllly use an ally or two..." she murmured.

We were at her clan's headquarters, so there should've been many of her followers here. However, I didn't see any of them in my immediate vicinity. There was only Figaro, Tsukuyo Fuso, and us.

"She herself made all the adherents, Master and tian alike, distance themselves from the battle," said Nemesis.

The aberration had probably realized that an opponent like Figaro was just too much for them, and that they wouldn't be much help in a battle against him.

Still, she must have known full well that a pure support build such as her would stand little chance in a solo battle against a pure battle build such as

Figaro, and... wait.

"Is she really alone?" I thought out loud. We'd only talked for a brief moment, but that was enough for me to be able to tell that she wasn't exactly a nice enough person to make all her underlings stand down and to face a threat all by herself to lower the casualties.

And so, as if to prove me right...

"You can join us now, Kage."

"As you wish."

Indeed. She spoke to something, and the "something" answered.

It seemed to have a man's voice, but I couldn't be certain about that. After all, it came from all the lengthy evening shadows, and it reached my ears like an echo.

"The Shades and Death, They Beckon — Erlkönig." The voices from the shadows spoke what were unmistakably grand words of power — a skill.

Suddenly, all the shades turned from black to crimson and rose up as arms with the most menacing of claws. I felt like I was looking at the nightmare of a child still afraid of the dark. Shades small and large... the darkness of every corner became monsters full of pure malice.

"King of Assassins," Figaro muttered in surprise as he began evading.

The shadows of the trees in the garden, the shades of the ruined building, the blackness beneath the broken lanterns, and even the darkness following Figaro became crimson, gained an extra dimension, and clawed towards him. However, though the claws were menacing, the shadows themselves were far more scary, for everything they touched simply *crumbled*.

The trees in the garden, the ruined building, the broken lanterns — all were consumed by the shadows they made, crumbled to pieces, and scattered.

It was like watching the deceased invite the living to the afterlife — beckoning straight out of hell.

The shades were encroaching towards Figaro like a raging wave.

"These shadows are an Embryo's ultimate skill!" I shouted, more certain than ever.

Before they'd appeared, I'd heard the word "Erlkönig." That was the name of a certain poem by Goethe and a song by Schubert based on it.

It was about the Erlking beckoning a child to his death from the shadows of the night forest, and it was a perfect fit for what I was seeing.

Another thing to note was their menacing presence, as it matched those of the skilled rankers I'd faced in many mock battles over the past month.

Figaro had said they were made by the King of Assassins — a job Marie had once told me about. It was the Western equivalent of her Death Shadow, meaning that he could very well be on the same tier as the Superior Killer. This ultimate skill alone was enough to tell that the King of Assassins was among The Lunar Society's best.

However...

"Something's off," I murmured.

The shadows were attacking Figaro, but not as intensely as you'd expect. It almost seemed like they were focusing on keeping him in check and preventing him from acting, rather than actually killing him. A portion of them were positioned around Tsukuyo Fuso, too.

I momentarily assumed that they intended to limit Figaro's movements and make it easier for her crescent moons to hit, but for some reason, she created some sort of barrier around herself.

That was probably another one of her High Priestess skills. After she'd put it up, it didn't seem like she had any intention to attack anymore.

The shadows alone weren't enough to defeat Figaro, and Tsukuyo Fuso was focusing entirely on defense, making it seem as though they were stalling.

"What good can come of that?" I thought out loud.

The first thing that came to mind was that they were waiting for reinforcements. However, no matter how great of a clan The Lunar Society was, I couldn't help but doubt that they had that many Masters that could turn the tides of this battle, especially since Figaro only grew stronger with every passing second.

Would something change if they bought enough time?

"Ah...?" I silently gasped as I realized that the shadow beneath my feet had become quite long.

For a moment, I thought that the shadows were about to attack me, too, but then I realized that it was natural — an effect caused by the sun slowly sinking below the horizon.

Well, it's gonna be night soon, I thought. *Wait... night?*

"Is that what it's about...?" I murmured.

A while ago, Figaro had been looking at the sky with obvious panic in his expression. Had he, perhaps, not been looking at the sky itself, but at the way it was darkening? The night was Tsukuyo Fuso's Superior Embryo, after all.

Given that, I could assume that...

"...It gets stronger when it's night?"

In the PK clan massacre clip Marie had shown me, in Tsukuyo Fuso's battle against me, and even now, she'd only ever used her night when it wasn't actually night.

So, would something change if she used it at nighttime? Would it allow her to use something she couldn't during the day? Like, say, her *Superior ultimate skill*?

"That's most likely correct," said Nemesis telepathically. "With the growing darkness, I can feel that Kaguya... her Embryo... is growing stronger, as well."

Her words supported my conjecture.

If that was really true and they were actually stalling until nighttime, it meant that Tsukuyo Fuso was fully confident that she could defeat Figaro if she got to use her ultimate skill, and this was backed up by Figaro's panicking.

Because of this, Figaro had to defeat her within the little time we had left until night, but the shadows were preventing that.

I looked and noticed that, sheltered by her barrier, the aberration was casting some sort of magic — most likely support spells to help the King of Assassins and his shadows.

I also realized that the shadows protecting her were not only keeping Figaro at bay, but also preventing him from going above her.

"They're not letting him use the ace up his sleeve," I said.

No matter how tough the barrier and how resilient the shadows guarding her, they could all be broken by powers surpassing them.

Figaro had one such thing — the Superior special reward, Gloria α's item skill, "Fang of Gloria: Overdrive."

During the Clash of the Superiors, it had delivered heat that'd completely annihilated Xunyu and even blown away the arena barrier's upper part. That skill could instantly vaporize the shades and make short work of the aberration's barrier.

The fight had been going on long enough for him to accomplish that feat without much trouble.

But, alas, he couldn't use it now.

Why? Because *we were at the royal capital*.

Indeed, The Lunar Society's headquarters was in one of Altea's residential districts.

If he were to launch Fang of Gloria, it would easily pierce the building and burn the homes outside the complex. To avoid that, Figaro would have to do as he'd done against Xunyu and slash upwards from melee range, or aim it downwards from above.

The enemies were fully aware of that, and they were making sure those scenarios didn't happen.

The shadows had surrounded Tsukuyo Fuso and were preventing him from getting close, hindering his movements so he couldn't go above her. This meant that as long as those shadows were there, Figaro couldn't use the ace up his sleeve... and had no chance of winning. However, he had yet to find the location of the King of Assassins, and there was little he could do against them.

To break this deadlock, we had to...

Nemesis sighed. "I don't even need to read your mind to understand what you're thinking."

Yeah, I thought. *We'll have to do this without becoming a hindrance for Figaro, but I've decided on what to do.*

There was only one way to turn this situation around — we had to get rid of the King of Assassins and make his shadows vanish.

It might've been bold to state that I could make that happen, but I had to kill him and let Figaro move freely if I wanted him to win against Tsukuyo Fuso.

First, I looked around, but I didn't see the KoA anywhere within my visible range.

Granted, the moving shadows and the darkening skies greatly hampered my visibility. Not to mention that...

"Though I'm free to move, it's clear that they have no intention of letting me escape," I said.

The crimson shadows were surrounding the battle area like a wall. The only shadows that hadn't been made crimson were those around me and the aberration. It was to protect her... and to keep me alive and bound. Whether by escaping or by death, they had no intention of letting me go.

Not like I wanted to run away, but still.

Honestly, I could probably break through the shadows surrounding us by imbuing Silver with Purifying Silverlight and charging towards them, but the KoA would most likely instantly curb me.

I'd been told that it was a job much like Death Shadow, so I simulated that scenario while picturing Marie in his place. She would attack me from a blind spot the moment I tried to move, and the King of Assassins was surely capable of the same thing. Of course, since they had no intention of letting me escape or die, he'd only make me Faint again.

"Hm?" I murmured.

Wait a second, I thought. *Something's not right here.*

If they really had no intention of letting me escape, why hadn't they just made me Faint again the moment I'd awoken? In the first place, why hadn't they just...?

"Gh..." My thoughts were cut short by Figaro's grunt, caused by one of the crimson shadows touching a part of his body.

From the point of contact, the shadow began to encroach on Figaro's skin, damaging him in the process.

This affected his speed, causing many shadows to charge and attempt to consume him.

He wasn't able to escape, and the crimson shades overwhelmed him, but then...

"■■■!"

...Figaro released the familiar, inhuman roar as he equipped his Gloria α and made the surrounding shadows evaporate.

He was using the standard version of the Fang of Gloria skill, not Overdrive. Instead of launching the vaporizing breath of light, it merely coated the blade in it. Nevertheless, its damage was immense, and it made short work of any shadows in its way.

I could even picture him charging through all the shades and closing in on Tsukuyo Fuso, but both she and the King of Assassins were aware and well-prepared for that scenario. Were he to get too close, Figaro would be completely surrounded by both the shadows and the Lunar Reduction Field.

No matter how powerful he was, he would be able to do little against such a number of shadows while weakened.

“Then perhaps he should refrain from using the sword, and instead opt for the appropriate ranged set-up?” Nemesis commented. “He was using arrows and chains until now, after all.”

That’s reasonable, but I don’t think it will work, I thought in response.

No matter how well-adjusted for the situation, I didn’t think that any ranged weapon he had could deal fatal damage to her while under the effects of the Lunar Reduction Field, and fatal damage was the only thing that could kill the High Priestess.

Again, the only real way to break through it was to use Fang of Gloria: Overdrive, which could instantly kill her even with all the defenses and damage reductions, and...

“...Wait.” I stopped my train of thought.

Nemesis, what did you just say? I asked.

“‘Ranged weapons’?” she said. “Or did you mean the thing about the arrows and chains?”

Chains... That’s right, the chains, I realized.

The Crimson Dead Keepers that Figaro so loved had the skills “Range Extend” and “Auto Enemy Detect.”

I’d watched Figaro hold mock battles against Marie before. When enhanced by his Superior Embryo, Auto Enemy Detect was so powerful that it could even find Marie when she was using her maxed-out Conceal skill. The only time the chains didn’t track her was when she used the Death Shadow ultimate job skill: the Art of Vanishing.

Because of this, the current situation struck me as odd.

Despite the King of Assassins hiding somewhere in the surrounding space, the chains Figaro had been using were *only* going for Tsukuyo Fuso, which could only mean that the King of Assassins *wasn’t* actually in this space. However, even if he’d disappeared with a skill similar to Marie’s Art of Vanishing, he was definitely keeping it active for too long. It should’ve been too taxing in MP or SP to both vanish *and* use his shadow attacks at the same time.

From what I could tell, Erlkönig was most likely a Type Territory Embryo. Many of that kind could only influence their Masters’ immediate vicinity, so it was hard to imagine that he was manipulating all these shadows here from a distance at which Figaro's chains, imbued with Range Extend, couldn't reach.

All of that made it clear that the KoA was nearby, but in a place where neither Figaro nor his chains could find him.

"Does such a place even exist?" asked Nemesis.

Normally, it wouldn't, I thought in response. *But if you ignore the means he would go about to get there, and assume based on what's happening... you can find one place.*

"Ah!" she gasped upon reading my mind, as certain questions flashed through my head.

Why couldn't Figaro's chains find the King of Assassins?

Why hadn't I been assigned a single person to keep me in check?

Why wasn't I able to log out?

Why hadn't they made me Faint to keep me from running away?

Why were they half-ignoring me?

All of that connected, and I came to a conclusion.

"Ray!" Nemesis exclaimed telepathically.

Nemesis! I replied in thought, giving her an order.

"Very well!"

She instantly transformed into The Flag Halberd, and I quickly imbued her spearhead with Purifying Silverlight. Then, silently, yet forcefully, I thrust it *into my own shadow*.

Instead of digging into the floor, the light-clad spear *sunk into my shadow* and made sounds of tearing and clashing metal as it hit something. After a moment of silence, something began pushing the halberd's spear back.

"How insightful of you," said a voice from inside as dual blades emerged from my shadow. They were holding my halberd from going any further.

Then came the arms, head, and the rest of the body. The King of Assassins was now *out of my shadow* and stood before me, in the flesh.

"I must commend you for realizing," he said as blood flowed out of his shoulder — most likely the injury I'd just caused. "For reference, would you mind sharing how you came to this conclusion?"

I'd expected to catch him completely off-guard, but it seemed that he'd stopped it with his dual swords before my spear had sunk in any further.

It was an impressive feat, considering how much he was focusing on controlling his shadows. Clearly, he was as skilled as the many rankers I'd faced. However...

"Don't you have something more important to do than checking my answer sheet?" I asked.

Right now, his focus had shifted away from his shadows. The movements of the crimson shades behind him had become *slightly* duller.

It was quite remarkable that my attack and our exchange had only had such a meager effect on his control. However, his opponent wasn't lenient enough to ignore that mistake, no matter how slight it was.

"■■■■HHHH!" the Over Gladiator roared as he carved his way through the minutely-slower shades.

Figaro rid himself of much of his equipment and adorned his AGI-focused gear, along with the strongest blade in his arsenal.

He dashed through the shadows, cut them down, climbed the roof, and leapt upwards, bringing himself above Tsukuyo Fuso — a place from which he could use his strongest attack. Then he began summoning all the brilliant light stored within Gloria α.

"Ah...!" Tsukuyo Fuso gasped as she quickly discarded the wand in her right hand and raised both her hands to the sky, as if to praise the *real* moon now lording over the young night. "Return to a Life Most Rightful — Kagu —" She spoke the name of her ultimate skill, but alas, she was too slow. Before she could complete it, Figaro had finished his swing.

They had both started their actions at the same time, so it was only natural for Figaro — the one with far greater AGI — to finish first.

Indeed, this moment of victory...

"Fang of Gloria: OVERDRIVE!"

...belonged to the swiftest and the strongest.

The pillar of light coming from above burned the crimson shades, the active barrier, the night Superior Embryo, and vaporized Tsukuyo Fuso.

Thus, the battle between the Over Gladiator and the High Priestess — two of the Kingdom of Altar's Big Three — ended with Figaro's victory.

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Following the conclusion to the fight, both Figaro and I faced the King of Assassins.

But instead of doing anything we'd expected...

"Gentlemen, allow me to express my gratitude."

...he actually thanked us.

"What do you mean?!" Nemesis exclaimed as she returned to her human form, the indignation and confusion in her voice all too palpable.

I was as surprised as her. I'd prepared myself to fight the KoA and other adherents as they tried to avenge their spiritual leader or something. Instead, all I'd gotten was gratitude.

Why?!

"Lady Tsukuyo desperately wanted a way to while away the time," he courteously explained. "Not being able to participate in the incident at Gideon made her quite frustrated, you see. She often asked me if there was something she could do to divert herself."

Wasn't she doing that just by being online on Dendro*?* I wondered, baffled.

"And now she's met a Master as intriguing as yourself, then gone on to fight a fellow Superior, and received the death penalty. In my humble opinion, that should be more than enough to disperse the frustration she's built up over the last month."

"So... she just wanted to kill time?" I asked.

"Indeed."

"...She's pretty dead, though, isn't she?"

"Indeed. I believe that experiencing death, too, was good time-killing."

I was speechless. *Wow, uh... This guy's actually the type who wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice his master if she so willed it.*

"You're the same as ever, KoA," said Figaro.

In response, the King of Assassins courteously bowed and said "Thank you for the praise."

"No one's praising you!" Figaro, Nemesis, and I replied in perfect unison.

I'd honestly had no idea Figaro was the type who could deliver a brusque retort.

"So, right now, Tsukuyo Fuso is...?" I asked.

"Lady Tsukuyo is most likely rolling around in her futon and throwing a tantrum while howling, 'I loooost!'" he answered. "She should regain her spirits once I prepare dinner for her."

...Is she twelve or something?

"Oh, with Lady Tsukuyo defeated, we have no reason to keep you here anymore, so you are free to leave. Apologies for the trouble. Here is your cartage fee," he said as he presented me with a bag of money.

...You're the ones who brought me here, you know?

"But before you leave, I would like to hear how you discovered me," he added. "I was right under your nose in the most adequate sense, and I thought it to be quite an excellent hiding spot." Oh, yeah. He'd asked me about that right after I'd found him out. Well, I didn't really see the harm in telling him.

"It's the only conclusion I could come to after considering several factors," I said.

They hadn't seemed out of the ordinary when separate, but putting them all together had made me think that that was the answer.

"First of all, Figaro's chains weren't able to find you."

This had made me conclude that he hadn't been using a Conceal-type skill, and had been hiding in a space where not even the chains could reach.

"When thinking of a place where they couldn't find you, I quickly considered your shadows."

Since he was able to control shadows, it hadn't been far-fetched to believe that he also had skills that allowed him to enter them.

"Well, Crimson Dead Keeper's Auto Enemy Detect doesn't reach pocket dimensions and the like," said Figaro. "I know how his skills work, so I also thought that he was in some nearby shadow. The only difference was that I expected him to be somewhere around Fuso, not Ray."

Apparently, because they'd been acquainted for long, Figaro had known how King of Assassins operated and had made his own conjecture about where he was. However, he'd had a reason why he didn't realize — or, rather, *couldn't realize* — where the KoA was hiding.

"Then there was the fact that you left me all by myself," I continued. "There are two points to this, actually."

First was the time I'd awoken in these headquarters, while the second was Figaro's battle.

"When I awoke here, I first thought that I wasn't being observed until the servant came to call me for food."

However, now I saw just how unlikely that was. Since they'd kidnapped me, they'd probably done their research and surely knew that I had Silver in my possession. If I'd felt like it, I could've attempted to get on him and fly off the moment I'd realized that something was wrong, and it was downright weird to not have anyone guarding someone who could escape just like that.

"And that was why you were in my shadow," I continued. "You were ready to jump out and stop me if I tried to escape, and you prevented me from logging out by secretly staying in contact with me."

Indeed, I hadn't been able to log out, not because I was in the effective range of a Type Castle or Territory Embryo, but because the King of Assassins had been keeping contact with me from inside my shadow.

"Yes." The KoA nodded. "Your assumption is most correct."

"Then there was the battle between Figaro and Tsukuyo Fuso. Instead of making me Faint again, you just let me do what I wanted, even giving me the option to influence the flow of the battle," I said. "It wasn't about me... it was about Figaro."

"Me?" Figaro said, looking startled.

That was the reason why Figaro had failed to realize that the KoA was within my shadow.

"You people know that Figaro becomes a worse fighter when he has allies, right?" I asked. "That's why you let me move around and tried to suppress him by making him recognize me as an ally."

If I'd started to move in a way that made it hard for Figaro to ignore me, his movements would've become worse, and that might've been exactly what they were aiming for.

"However, that's not the main reason why you let me do as I pleased," I said. "You had a different main reason."

"Which would be...?" the KoA asked.

"Figaro purposely ignored me."

Figaro couldn't fight as well when he wasn't solo, and he circumvented this flaw by doing all he could to ignore the existence of the allies on the battlefield. Though his fighting still became slightly duller, he could still hold himself in a proper fight, and it came at the cost of being thoroughly unaware of what was happening to his allies. And that meant that...

"As long as you were within my shadow, Figaro could never find you."

After all, he'd have no means of noticing the enemy beneath my feet if he didn't pay any attention to me.

"You said you were 'right under my nose,' and that could hardly be more fitting," I went on.

Figaro hadn't been able to discover him, and Auto Enemy Detect couldn't track him. In that particular situation, he would never have gotten attacked by Figaro, and would thus have been able to focus entirely on controlling his shadows, making it the perfect hiding spot.

"Magnificent," he said and applauded me. "Your words describe my intentions flawlessly. You have excellent situational awareness."

"...Thanks?"

"This has been a most productive time for not only Lady Tsukuyo, but myself, as well."

Despite the fact that I'd just told him the reason why his master had lost, he seemed strangely happy. Though not in the same way as the aberration, he was definitely just as much of a weirdo.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I must log out," he continued, clearly satisfied. "I must return and make dinner for Lady Tsukuyo, after all... Oh. Or would you perhaps prefer to give me the death penalty?"

"...No. Just go," I sighed. "I've had enough for today."

This whole incident had made me stupidly tired.

Figaro had been about to pull out his Gloria α, but he stopped upon hearing my words.

Maybe I should *just have him cut him down?* I pondered.

"Thank you kindly," said the KoA. "I will make sure to express my gratitude properly someday. Take care..."

"Ah, wait a sec," I stopped him as I realized I still had a question I wanted answered.

"Yes?"

"Well, this is about the battle between Figaro and the aberr— Tsukuyo Fuso." There was one point that still didn't make sense to me. "Why wasn't Tsukuyo Fuso wearing a Lifesaving Brooch?"

That accessory negated fatal damage, and it was pretty much a necessity in every battle between the more experienced players.

However, when the aberration had been bathed in light from Fang of Gloria: Overdrive, it didn't look like one had activated, meaning that she hadn't actually been wearing it. Its presence could've changed the outcome of the battle, and I couldn't help but ask about it.

"That's simply because Lady Tsukuyo is Lady Tsukuyo," the King of Assassins answered with a smile on his face and confidence in his tone, as if he honestly believed that that was the only possible response to my question. "All the best. May we meet again."

Then he went through the logging out procedure and vanished.

"Honestly, I'd prefer it if we didn't," said Nemesis, and I shared her sentiment.

After the KoA logged out, we walked out of The Lunar Society's headquarters.

Honestly, I'd expected to be attacked by the adherents here, but they didn't seem to mind us all that much, as if they'd been told to leave us alone. In fact, it looked like they were just too preoccupied with fixing the broken mansion.

Man, was the place in a rough state. Seriously, the destruction there rivaled the one left by the Clash of the Superiors, making it clear just how hard Figaro had been rampaging before the aberration came out to face him.

"All right, I'll go raid the Tomb Labyrinth now," Figaro said the moment we walked out.

I guess he went berserk on The Lunar Society and saved me only as an extra to his raid, I thought.

"Figaro, thanks for helping me," I said.

"It's fine. No need for that," he replied. "You worked really hard when dealing with Franklin and the Gouz-Maise Gang."

"Hm...?" I could understand Franklin, but where did the Gouz-Maise Gang come in all of this?

"Anyway, see you later. I'll be in the Tomb Labyrinth for a while, so if you need anything from me, just tell it to Shu and he'll pass it on."

With those words as his last, Figaro dashed towards the created dungeon. He was really fast, and it only took a moment for me to lose sight of him.

"All right, it's high time I log off, too," I said.

In real life, it was past 10PM, so I really wanted to get out, prepare for tomorrow, and go to sleep. Not to mention that I'd been getting alerts for hunger and bladder trouble for quite a while now.

“Very well,” said Nemesis. “Be the best college student you can be.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll enjoy my life for all it’s worth.”

“Do come back here, all right?” she added.

“Eh? Well, I’ll be online tomorrow night.”

For some reason, those words of mine made her seem somewhat... relieved?

“Good night, Ray,” she said.

“Thanks. You too, Nemesis.”

With those words as my last, after being online for a whole complete *Dendro* day, I finally logged out.

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“Damn that sickly meathead prince... And I was so close to *turning him back* like I did last time,” Tsukuyo grumbled.

“They say that luck is an important factor in victory. Unfortunately, unlike last time, the battle didn’t begin in the middle of the night.”

“And that’s exactly why he came early. And he destroyed the mansion so I couldn’t just hide until it was night... Hmph, oh well. It’s still just one loss, one victory for me.”

“Indeed. What do you wish to do now, Lady Tsukuyo? You cannot go online, so I would strongly recommend you go to sleep.”

“That’s probably best. Spring break is over, and I have lots to do in college tomorrow.”

“Truly. You were intending to gather new members for the club.”

“Oh, yeaaah. I hope I meet a freshman that catches my eye...”

Chapter Four: Real Life Encounter

Reiji Mukudori

It was the day after I'd been kidnapped by Tsukuyo Fuso and her Lunar Society.

I'd honestly been worried about how that would turn out, but thanks to Figaro, I'd had no trouble going offline, getting a decent night's rest, and making it to college.

The first day wasn't the entrance ceremony or the start of classes or anything like that. It was simply a guidance session about the college.

Things here were going to be different than in high school or anything we'd experienced before, so this was obviously necessary. We looked through the materials they gave us, listened to their explanations, made preparations for next week's lessons, and got a description of our schedule going forward, but there was nothing particularly strange about any of it.

I'd expected there to be a few days of group lodging to help us familiarize ourselves with our fellow students, but apparently, they didn't do those anymore.

Cool, that means I'll have more time for Dendro *now,* I instantly thought, before realizing that that probably wasn't something a model student would think.

Still, we were given some time to introduce and present ourselves to the fellow students with whom we would be learning until we split into different departments two years later.

Since I came from a distant countryside, I obviously didn't know anyone here, but the introductions were enough for me to memorize the names and faces of about 70% of the freshmen.

Also, I and four others revealed that we had *Infinite Dendrogram* as our hobby, so, come break time, we gathered up and had a talk about it.

As expected of college students my age, the rest either hadn't been able to play much because of exams or, like me, had started after their exams were finished.

I felt that five players was a very small number, but it made sense, considering that we were the unfortunate generation of college students whose exam prep had coincided with *Dendro*'s release.

Anyway, I was excited about the prospect of questing with my new college friends, but alas, all four of them belonged to Tenchi.

There're seven countries to choose from! Can such a coincidence even happen?! I thought, thoroughly surprised. The four seemed to share my sentiment, so it looked like it did, indeed, happen.

Naturally, going on quests with people on the other side of the continent was a difficult task. While most RPGs had teleports to fix such issues, in *Dendro*, teleportation was limited to Embryo unique skills, a way of leaving created dungeons, or just some weird accidents. Because of that, we had to postpone our questing to... whenever we had the chance.

Interesting thing to note: though all four of the other players were from Tenchi, they all served different lords, making them rivals, rather than allies. Their country was much like Sengoku Period Japan, so it would be apt to say they were like subordinates to Oda, Takeda, Chosokabe, and Shimazu.

If given the choice, I'd probably side with Uesugi, I thought.

So, with the guidance and orientations over, we freshmen were next confronted by countless canopy tents built on the college grounds — the club invitation zone.

The participants from all clubs were many, and they were full of zeal to gather as many new freshmen as possible. Many of us newbies were fully into it, while to some, this was just a bit too much.

I was one of the latter.

Struggling through the wave of people trying to invite me to their clubs, I made my way to the cafeteria to take a breather.

"Well, it sure looks like the culture gap between high school and college life is bigger than I expected," I muttered to myself.

Though not in the same way as the one I'd experienced with the foreign culture in *Dendro*, it was still pretty overwhelming.

Exhausted in both mind and body, I drank some tea while listlessly staring at the bulletin board, which, of course, had posters inviting students to clubs.

"Clubs, eh...?" I murmured.

Many people considered college students improper unless they joined a club and made the most of their youth forming bonds with fellow club members. However, doing so would definitely have a negative impact on my *Dendro* time.

I was fully aware that a college student had no business prioritizing an MMO over communication and bonds made in college, but I really wanted to preserve as much of my online time as possible.

“If only there was a *Dendro* club or something...”

If there was, I would get the collegian social experience and not lose any online time because of it.

However, while a club for all games could probably exist, a college would never, ever have a club focused entirely on one game. Ever. At least, that was what I assumed until I looked at one corner of the board.

“...There is?”

Sure enough, a poster there said “Club *Infinite Dendrogram*” in English, which was as much of a description as it was a title. I questioned why they hadn’t gone with a Japanese name, but I could only assume it had something to do with the abbreviation. “CID” was quite convenient.

Anyway, I wasn’t about to ignore this blessing of a discovery.

A *Dendro* club was a two-for-one deal for me. It would allow me to live the collegian social life *and* come to know new fellow players.

Well, things could get awkward if there were people from Dryfe, but that would be interesting in its own right.

I followed the map provided, and made my way to the CID room. It was my first time at this part of the college, so I felt a bit lost every now and then, but I eventually arrived at my destination.

The door had a somewhat fancy-looking wooden plate on it, saying “Club *Infinite Dendrogram.*”

Slightly tense, I reached out and knocked.

“Come innn,” called someone inside.

“All right, then,” I said as I opened the door.

At that moment, a certain, danger-sensitive part of my brain belatedly reacted to the voice coming from inside and urged me to *stop*. But alas, I’d already opened the door, and now saw what waited beyond it.

“A freshman, I assume? Hey theeere! Welcome to Club *Infinite Dendr* —”

That was the moment I closed the door.

I had every reason to do so.

After all, the face I'd seen there was one I'd involuntarily etched onto my brain. It was a visage I'd seen just yesterday... the one belonging to *Tsukuyo Fuso*.

I might've been mistaken, but I had no intention of opening the door and confirming it. It wasn't far-fetched to believe that the aberration, just like Shu, played as herself. Hell, considering the nature of her cult, it would be the obvious thing for her to keep her real face.

No, screw the reasons why she looked like she did, the person herself was a far bigger problem.

"Damn it! I should've been more cautious!"

I'd completely neglected the possibility of her being in the same college as me! I'd been told that cults often used clubs to gather new members, so why hadn't I connected the dots?! Shit! I'd gone out of the frying pan and into the fire! My college life was in danger of collapsing on the first day!

I hurriedly turned around and got ready to sprint...

"Why are you running?"

...but before I could dash, the door opened, and a slender hand reached out and grabbed me by the nape of my neck. I struggled to move regardless, but I couldn't make an inch of progress.

It seemed mechanically impossible, but once I glanced back, I saw the she-monster holding on to the frame of the door with her other hand.

Well, I... guess that's enough to render me completely immobile with one hand... LIKE HELL! What's up with this upper body strength?! What are you, my sister?!

"Wow, don't know why, but you seem really scared," she said, probably oblivious to the true cause of my panic. "Come on, there's nothing here to be afraid of. Let's go in and have some tea."

The aberration dragged me into the room with unwomanly — borderline inhuman — strength, making me feel like a hamster being swallowed whole by a snake. Then she pushed me onto the bed they most likely used to play *Dendro* on.

"You're here to join the club, aren't you? Why are you running?"

Was that even a question? I was basically encountering an eldritch abomination right after having a nightmare about one. Of course I'd run.

“Oh dear, what a bad expression. Why are you so...?” she said before looking at my student card. “Umm, your name is...”

“Ah?!” I gasped as I realized she’d taken the card case out of my pocket without me even realizing it. She was strong as hell *and* had sticky fingers!

“Okay, so your name is ‘Reiji Mukudori’... Oh?” She slightly tilted her head to the side, clearly noticing something.

Oh, crap.

“That look in your eyes, your voice, and... ‘Reiji Mukudori’? Ray Starling?”

Shit! This is what I get for just translating my last name into English! I should’ve made it less obvious!

“Oh, I see. So that’s what this is about,” she said and cracked a grin.

To me, that expression was the very epitome of horror.

“Well, well... you can’t run away here, can you?”

Oh no. This is really bad.

She was about to force me into joining her cult, and I had no means of escape. *How do I handle this...?!*

“Okay,” she said as she started slowly moving her hands. “Let’s begin with my thanks for yesterday.”

And then...

“Hello.” The clubroom’s door opened, and a third party entered the room.

A part of me thought it was King of Assassins, but it was actually someone I’d never met before.

It was a girl with long hair in a braid, slightly slanted eyes, and glasses, all of which came together to make her look like the diligent type.

“Vice President Tsukikage asked me to bring him the relevant papers to the club invitation tent, and...”

She stopped mid-sentence and noticed the situation in the room. The aberration — all smiles — was holding me down on the bed, while I — scared beyond words — fruitlessly struggled to escape. The sight made the girl heave a sigh.

"President, could you refrain from pushing boys down on college grounds?" she asked, speaking in such a normal tone that it almost didn't seem to fit the scenario. That made a flicker of hope light up within me.

This girl might actually be... I thought as I anticipated what she'd say next.

"More importantly, he doesn't seem to want whatever you're doing. Sexual misconduct against men is as valid as the reverse. Let him go ASAP."

She is. My God, she's actually normal.

She wasn't an eldritch being, nor was she some weird super secretary.

"Oh, come onnn, I just caught him, you know?" said the aberration.

I'm not some pocket monster for you to catch, damn it!

"I was about to invite him to the club... and make him one of us, of cooourse," the aberration purred.

"Don't you think you're being a little too forceful?" asked the normal girl. "Let him go."

"Nooo, I wanna make him miiine!"

I'd very much prefer it if you didn't!

"President, if you don't listen to me, I will leave the club."

"Eh?"

"That would leave only you and the vice president, and two people aren't enough to keep a club active, correct? Do you want that?"

The normal girl's words made the aberration falter. "That... would be a problem..."

"Then please refrain from approaching him improperly and inviting him so forcefully. I'll say it again. Let him go."

At this moment, in my eyes, she seemed somewhat divine.

"But..." muttered the aberration.

"'But' what?" demanded the normal girl.

"Okaaay..."

And thus, although reluctantly, the woman finally let me go.

Freedom! I thought as I jumped out of bed and distanced myself from the eldritch creature so much that my back was against the wall.

"He's so scared," said the normal girl. "Did you do more than just make unwanted sexual advances?"

"Nooo, I didn't do much. I just kidnap— invited him over in *Dendro*."

In response, the normal girl just looked at her in silence.

The aberration was clearly far too guilty to plead “I didn’t do much.”

The normal girl then sighed and said, “President, I have something to say to you. Please sit where you stand. Properly. On your knees.”

“Umm... but this is the floor.”

“No worries there. I’m sure your legs can handle it just fine.”

“That’s not the problem here...” The aberration was actually being overpowered.

Just what is this girl...? I wondered, astonished.

“You should run away right now,” the normal girl told me. “You can’t let yourself be caught by a person like... *this*...”

“Like whaaat...?” the aberration complained.

I felt like I’d been pulled into a boat when I was seconds away from drowning.

“Thank you,” I said, expressing my sincere gratitude. Then I left that wicked lair. Once outside, I took a moment to listen to their conversation.

“President,” said the normal girl, “I know that *Infinite Dendrogram* gives us great freedom, but you shouldn’t bring that mentality over to reality. You might’ve been able to kidnap him with no repercussions in the game, but here, unwanted sexual advances are a breach of public order and morals. Do you want to become a criminal?”

“Ehh? But you’ve got it all wronnng. He came here himself this time. And secondly, when you’re online, you also...”

“I separate my game life and real life, thank you very much.” The normal girl was thoroughly scolding her for this.

Anyway, thanks to her intervention, I’d escaped the aberration’s venomous fangs.

Oh, I forgot to ask for her name, I thought as I walked away.

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Thanks to the normal girl, I’d been able to escape the eldritch monstrosity. That was the second time the woman had held me in her grasp, and the second time someone had saved me from her.

Still, I couldn’t ignore the fact that she was in the same college as me. That could become a huge problem going forward. Though I’d avoided whatever she had planned for me this time, the aberration was now a part of my real life, and I definitely wasn't excited about that.

For some reason, she was obsessed with me, and that made me feel really unsafe.

I sighed, realizing that this might lead me to involve Shu... or perhaps even my sister.

No, that's not an option. Things would only escalate further, I thought as I pictured The Lunar Society's IRL building, completely reduced to rubble. If someone unrelated to the conflict got hurt, it would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

Anyway, after getting out of the lion's den, I made my way to the college library, since one of the fellow students I'd met today had told me something intriguing about it. He'd said he'd been there before, and told me that he'd seen several *Dendro*-related books.

Curious as to what they were like, I came to the library to check them out and read them, and it didn't take long for me to find where they were.

Though the publishers sold them as strategy guides, they had titles you'd expect to see on adventure novels or travel magazines. *Exploration Records of the Maxim Brigade, Twenty Thousand Metels Under the Sea,* and *Vagrants in Tenchi* were good examples.

Basically, *Infinite Dendrogram* was so vast that getting the required information for a proper strategy guide was no small task.

Not even the walkthrough wiki had all the info on all the maps, spawns, or dungeons, and some of it could even become obsolete as time went by. Like everything relating to Noz Forest.

Because of this, most of the so-called "*Dendro* strategy guides" were focused on describing the editors' personal experiences, rather than presenting data. I found that interesting in its own right, so I didn't hesitate to pick those three up.

With this, I'd have something I could use to keep myself occupied during breaks between lectures or other times I couldn't go online. Many of the books were about countries other than Altar, so I was looking forward to reading them.

Now, all I had to do was check them out, and...

"Ah," I exclaimed as I realized that my student card was still in the aberration's hands.

What now? I wasn't too keen on exposing myself to the danger of going there again, so... hm?

Without saying a word, I reached into my pocket and found the very same case I'd thought was still in her hands.

"That's even scarier than going back there," I muttered.

The eldritch creature had probably returned it, but just like with the time she'd stolen it, I hadn't felt it happen at all.

Monstrous strength, inhuman slyness... It wouldn't surprise me if I learned I'd actually labeled her correctly with the term "eldritch aberration." Anyway, with my student card on me, there was nothing stopping me from checking out the books.

With the three books in hand, I walked to the borrowing counter, where the nearby "New Releases" corner caught my eye. One of the books there was the *Dendro*-related *A Gourmand's Tour of Caldina.*

I reached to take it, too, but...

"Ah!"

"I'm sorry."

...my hand touched the hand of a girl who reached for it at the same time I did.

I apologized, hastily took my hand back and looked at her.

"Oh, you're the one from before..." she said.

"Ah, thank you for helping me back there!" I replied upon realizing that it was the normal girl from the club room.

My expression of gratitude made her look somewhat troubled. "No need for that... I'm just glad the club didn't end up having someone with a criminal record. Oh, where are my manners? My name is Kozue Fujibayashi. I'm a second-year in Liberal Arts I."

"I'm Reiji Mukudori. Starting today, I'm a first-year in Liberal Arts III."

I'd finally gotten her name and found out that she was an upperclassman.

Following our introductions, Fujibayashi said, "I want to make up for what happened back there," and invited me to a café on school grounds.

"But there's nothing for you to feel guilty about," I replied.

"Well, the president would never apologize for what she did, so, as someone who knows her, I feel I have to do it in her stead."

She really is diligent, I thought.

“I’m really sorry about what the president did. She doesn’t usually have this many screws loose.”

I wasn’t sure if I could believe that. From what I’d seen of the aberration yesterday and today, it seemed to me that she was always like this. Actually, I wasn’t capable of picturing her without any screws loose. That creature caused trouble wherever she went.

“This is actually the first time something like this has happened since I joined,” Fujibayashi continued.

I was inclined to believe the aberration had just been hiding her true self. Honestly, I’d probably prefer a literal wolf in sheep’s clothing over her.

“Oh, by ‘joined’ I only mean the club,” she added. “I’m not interested in her family’s cult in any way whatsoever.”

“I can tell.” I nodded. A cult adherent would never force their spiritual leader to kneel on the floor.

“How long have you been in that club?” I asked.

“A short while ago, the fourth-years and apprentices graduated or went professional. The club lost some members and they desperately needed more, so the president and vice president went around inviting people. That was when I decided to join... Oh, and in case you’re curious, both of them are third-year medical science students.”

...The eldritch being is a soon-to-be doctor? I thought, baffled.

“Also, I’m sure you’re aware of this by now, but those two are as crazy as their cult, so they didn’t have much luck getting new people. As far as I know, not a single freshman has joined today, either.”

Well, “as crazy as their cult” is pretty damn apt, I thought.

“Their lack of success is only obvious, I’d say,” she added. “In this college, The Lunar Society adherents are staggeringly rare, after all.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow.

“The cult is centered around escapism, so there aren’t many people here who would find it attractive.”

That made sense. I was told that The Lunar Society’s first teaching was “Escape the shackles of flesh and betake yourself to the true world of souls,” which basically meant “Escape this cruel reality” with fancy presentation. The cult’s believers picked *Dendro* as the “true world” they so revered, and they now lived on the other side at the expense of their real life.

Naturally, those who made it into this prestigious college wouldn’t be intrigued by a cult that thought this world was fake and tried to escape it.

When I think about it like that, the aberration’s and the KoA’s presence in this school seems really bizarre, I thought.

“And why did you join the club?” I asked Fujibayashi.

“For the info,” she answered.

“Info?” I tilted my head as she pointed at the books I’d borrowed.

“As you know from such books or the wiki, unlike walkthroughs and guides for other games, the ones for *Infinite Dendrogram* lack thoroughness and detail.”

“That’s true.”

“Well, and it just so happens that the president has vast amounts of detailed game info collected by her 1,000 followers.”

Well, I certainly can’t doubt the reliability and scope of data gathered by 1,000 no-lifers who see the world as real.

“Members of CID have free access to the info, so I joined because I wanted it,” she said.

“I see.”

“Of course, I ended up being the only one who joined. Everyone else was too scared off by the strong negative of ‘getting involved with The Lunar Society.’”

“I can understand why...”

I imagine people who simply wanted to enjoy a game weren’t too excited about the risk of having their real lives jeopardized by a cult.

“What did *you* think of that negative?” I asked.

“Nothing much. I was already involved with them beforehand,” she answered.

“Hm?”

“The president is a student at my family’s home.”

She then went on to explain what she meant.

According to Fujibayashi, her family were practitioners of the Way of Tea, and the aberration had been learning under them ever since she was young. They’d known each other for a long time, so joining the club hadn’t bothered Fujibayashi that much.

The fact that she’d been able to force the aberration to kneel made more sense than ever now.

"By the way, you were kidnapped in *Infinite Dendrogram*, weren't you?" she asked.

"Yes." I nodded. "They took me when I was sleeping there."

"...Again, I'm really sorry."

"Hey, it's not your fault."

80% of it had been the aberration's fault, while the rest had been the King of Assassins'.

"Today is the first day of college, so I assume you escaped by using the suicide function?" she asked.

"No, thankfully, I didn't have to resort to that. An acquaintance saved me."

Although, even if Figaro hadn't been there, instead of using the function, I'd have probably faced the head lunatic and KoA all by myself, completely ready to die.

"'Saved'?" she repeated, looking startled. "Crazy as they are, the president and vice president are really powerful. Just who in the world could save you from them?"

"Figaro. You might know him. He's the top of the kingdom's duel rankings."

"Figaro...?" The aura about Fujibayashi underwent a slight change as the eyes behind her glasses became a tiny bit sharper. For some reason, I felt a sense of contempt, or fear, behind her gaze. "You had the duel champion come and help you? Just who *are* you?"

"I met him soon after I started. I later found out that he was friends with my brother, too."

"Brother... Figaro... Superiors... Brothers... Mukudori..." she muttered, placing her hand over her mouth and pondering. "...The Starling brothers." Then, seemingly having come to some conclusion, she looked into my eyes. "Sorry if I'm wrong, but... are you Ray Starling of the Starling brothers?"

"Ah, yes. That would be me," I confessed.

Man, my real and avatar names were a bit too much alike. People were figuring out who I was way too quickly. Thanks to Franklin's broadcast, quite a number of people knew my avatar's name, which no doubt made figuring it out even easier.

"KoD's younger brother and the Over Gladiator's student? *That* Ray Starling?" Fujibayashi asked to confirm.

“I wouldn’t call myself his student,” I said. “We do spar every now and then, though.”

Also, this probably wasn’t a nice thing to think, but Figaro just wasn’t cut out for teaching. Honestly, even Xunyu was better at that.

...Although I didn’t know how to feel about being taught by a ten-year-old girl.

Oh, and Riser — the sixth in the duel rankings — was pretty good, too.

“I see,” Fujibayashi said before placing her hand over her mouth again and pondering for ten or so seconds. “Mukudori,” she said at last, seemingly having thought of something. “Would you go on a quest with me this weekend?”

It was an invitation to a *Dendro* activity.

“Sure. Gladly.” I accepted without hesitation, feeling that this was a start of a good relationship.

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“So yeah, that’s how it is,” I said.

“Right-o,” Shu confirmed. “Got it.”

I’d called Shu to tell him that I’d made plans to go on a quest with a new acquaintance, and that I’d take a while to return to Gideon. I’d also told him to pass it on to Rook and Marie, so everything should be settled now.

Mind you, it was a bit of a waste of time and effort to ask someone else to pass on my messages, so it was probably high time our party exchanged contact info.

“By the way, what happened to the fox that took you?” Shu asked.

The word “fox” momentarily confused me, but it didn’t take me long to figure out who he was referring to. There was only one person who fit the bill.

“Oh, you mean the aberr... Tsukuyo Fuso?”

While I saw her as an eldritch aberration, apparently Shu saw her as a fox.

“There’s a bit of a problem regarding her,” I sighed.

“And that would be?”

“She’s an upperclassman at college.”

“...That’s... just... grizzly...”

I don't know if you're surprised or shocked, but please don't bring your bear puns into real life.

"You all right, bro?" he asked, clearly worried.

"That new acquaintance I told you about helped me out, so yeah, I am, if only barely." I couldn't bear to think how things would've turned out if Fujibayashi hadn't been there.

"I see. Should I contact our sis? Just in case?"

"...Don't. I feel like whatever she'd do would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

She was a woman who seemed to be living in a different setting than the rest of us. I'd recently started reading Marie's manga, and I could honestly say that my sister would fit in there just fine.

Did I just think that she'd fit in a battle manga about superpowered professional killers?! I realized. *What the hell?*

"You still can't handle our sister, huh?" Shu asked.

Well, he certainly wasn't wrong about that. I didn't hate her or anything, but remembering what she'd done when I was young still made me shiver.

Ten years ago, up until that one Un-kra tournament, I'd been really attached to Shu. Looking back at it now, it had probably been a reaction in response to my fear of my sister.

"Hmm..." Shu pondered about something. "By the way, what did you feel when looking at Tsukuyo Fuso?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You found her *really* scary, didn't you?"

The question made my heart skip a beat. "...How do you know that?"

"Yeah, I thought as much... Then let me give you a little trick to make the fear go away."

A trick? Dude, this really doesn't seem like something that can be taken care of by just that.

"The reason why you're so afraid of the fox is very simple," he said before making a pause to emphasize the words that followed. "*She's just like our sister.*"

Ah.

"I don't mean her face, of course. It's the general feel about her. She's weirdly friendly, cheerful, childish, and mischievous, and yet she sometimes has the aura of a murderous animal aiming for her prey. She and our sis are extremely alike.”

“Guh...”

H-He’s completely right. That’s it. I finally know the cause of the vague, unknown fear within me.

It also made me realize why my mind hadn’t been able to connect the dots. Going down memory lane to find the reason why I was so afraid of the aberration would have meant digging through my traumatic memories with my sister.

“Just keep in mind that she and our sis aren’t the same, and she shouldn’t scare you anymore.”

“...Yeah.”

“That fox didn’t jump from building to building while holding little baby you.”

“...Yeah.”

“She didn’t escape a sinking passenger ship by breaking its hull.”

“...Yeah.”

“She didn’t jump out of an aircraft without a parachute and survive with just a few scratches.”

“...”

Just what the hell is my sister’s body made of?

Although I guess I couldn’t ignore that, with the third incident, she’d fallen on a soft, freshly-tilled grape field, and there’d been other people who’d survived such falls with minor injuries.

“So yeah, there’s no reason for you to be so afraid of the fox,” Shu concluded.

“Thanks,” I said. “That helps a lot.”

I really meant that. That exchange made me feel completely refreshed.

After the call, I went to have dinner and take a bath. Following that, I went on the *Dendro* news site, *MMO Journal Planter,* and checked if anything had happened in the kingdom while I was offline.

I saw headlines such as: “Shindo 3/Mercalli III-IV Earthquakes Happening All Over the Kingdom,” “That Big PK Joined That New PK Clan, Sol Crisis,” and “Gideon’s Next Big Thing! KoD-Approved Popcorn!”

“...”

I didn’t care much about the PK news, and I was too scared to read the one about my very own brother, so I went straight for the one about earthquakes.

According to the article, over the past month or so, weak earthquakes had been happening here and there across the kingdom. The hypocenters were scattered all over the country, and people still couldn't figure out what was causing it. Also, the places that suffered the earthquakes had a high chance of revealing new dungeons, UBMs, or hordes of strong monsters, making many believe that they were all related somehow.

I scrolled through the discussion board and saw people present theories such as: "Large monsters are wandering around the underground," "The environment control AI is preparing something big," "Someone's just practicing their earth magic," and "It's just Franklin being a terrorist again."

I was leaning towards the last one.

Once done checking the news, I equipped my *Infinite Dendrogram* gear.

I would now go on a quest with Fujibayashi.

Thankfully, tomorrow was Saturday and there was no college, so unless the quest was absurdly long, we shouldn't have any problems. Hell, and if we didn't find a quest that was right for us, we could just raid the Tomb Labyrinth.

"All right, time to go online," I said as I logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram* after a whole day away from it.

Chapter Five: The Impossible Quest

Paladin, Ray Starling

Fujibayashi and I had decided to meet in the capital, rather than Gideon, so I chose to log in at the place where I'd last logged out instead of my save point at the city of duels.

Sure, I had my worries about appearing right next to the aberration's lair, AKA The Lunar Society's headquarters, but thankfully, no one was waiting to ambush me.

Hold on, I thought. *The King of Assassins could be hiding in my shadow again.*

Just to be sure, I coated one of my Grudge-Soaked Greaves in Purifying Silverlight and kicked the ground beneath.

Nothing happened, which could only mean that my shadow was mine and mine alone, making me sure I was safe.

"It appears you had no trouble making it to college." Nemesis popped out of the crest and spoke to me. "But that seems to have led to even greater trouble."

She could only be referring to the fact that the aberration and I were in the same college.

"Well, I'm glad you were able to escape her clutches, but this makes it two times I couldn't help you in any way."

"Hm?" I raised an eyebrow. Nemesis seemed uncharacteristically down. It was as though she were deriding herself for something.

"While you were on the other side, I was thinking things through," she said in a slightly dejected tone, probably as a reply to my thoughts. "I was of no help to you during yesterday's battle. Even when attacking the King of Assassins, you could've used any other weapon, and the result would've been the same. My powerlessness back then made me consider whether I have really grown since our battle against Gardranda."

"But you did," I said.

And don't think otherwise.

"I knew you would say that," she sighed. "But you can't ignore that I haven't even evolved since then."

"But there's still stuff you've learned to do, right?"

"...Oh, you mean *that*? But it's a technique we didn't even have a chance to use against the High Priestess and King of Assassins."

"We'll use it eventually, properly paired with what *I've* learned. So yeah, don't be so down. And don't mind the skills and stats so much. I know better than anyone else that you're growing and working hard for it," I concluded with a light tap of her shoulder.

"I must say, you speak *very* passionately sometimes," she said and cracked a wry smile. "You sound like an overly-enthusiastic teacher."

Though probably not in the way I'd intended, my words seemed to have lifted her spirits.

"So," Nemesis spoke up again. "We're cooperating with one of your acquaintances from the other side, yes? If you exclude Brother Bear, this is going to be a first."

"That's true."

We arrived at the rendezvous point, the familiar fountain, and I became aware of a problem.

"While Fujibayashi seems to know me, I know neither her avatar's name nor what she looks like."

For reasons unknown, she'd insisted on telling me when we were online. I hadn't pushed it, but it was still going to be a problem when trying to find each other.

Things would be really easy if she, like the aberration, played as herself, but I certainly didn't expect Fujibayashi to take that route.

So how do we meet up? I wondered. *I don't feel good about just standing here and waiting for her.*

My voice was the same as in real life, so maybe I could just wait for the time to come and start shouting "I'm Ray! Right here!" or something?

No, things would be pretty embarrassing for me if she was late. Worst case scenario, I could even attract the aberration.

"Don't I have *any* good way to help us meet up?" I thought aloud.

Wait... Meet up... Fountain... Shu...

"Ah!" I exclaimed as I was struck with an idea.

"...You're really going to do it?" asked Nemesis.

“What choice do I have in this situation?”

A few minutes later, I was sitting on the edge of the fountain while holding a sign saying “Welcome, KF.”

“This should be enough for her to realize it’s me,” I said.

The letters “KF,” of course, stood for “Kozue Fujibayashi.” Things had come to this because I hadn’t been given her avatar’s name.

“...Is it just me, or are you attracting more stares than usual?” asked Nemesis.

“Well, of course. People with signs stand out, you know?”

And as many people as possible have to see it, just in case one of them is Fujibayashi.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” she asked.

“I get weird stares all the time these days. I’m more or less used to it by now.”

It was probably because of Franklin’s Game. My battle against the RSK had been streamed to both Gideon and the capital, so I’d become strangely famous.

I swear, nothing good comes from whatever that lab coat bastard does, I thought.

“I’m inclined to believe that most of the stares are because of your current appearance,” commented Nemesis.

“Hm?”

What do you mean?

“Anyway, I must say, you’re becoming more and more like Brother Bear.”

“Prepawsterous.”

“It’s spreading?!” she exclaimed with obvious shock in her tone.

Whoa there, I’m just joking. No need to shiver that much.

“Nh?” I added.

We — or, Nemesis insisted, I — had been attracting stares from many people here, but one person in particular had a relatively strange presence.

Since entering *Dendro*, I’d become quite sensitive to this sort of thing.

The peculiar stare was coming from someone mixed into a crowd. Specifically, from a *huge* person in appropriately large full armor.

None of that was an exaggeration. The person looked at least three meters tall, and his armor was so complete that I couldn’t see a hint of his skin.

However, his face was directed towards me, so I could only assume that he was looking at me.

As though realizing that I'd noticed him, the armored giant turned around and walked down the alley.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"A fan, perhaps?" suggested Nemesis.

While it was true that I'd had a few fans approach me since Franklin's Game, somehow, I didn't feel that was the case here. I couldn't see his eyes, but I felt that the armored person was... observing me. Also, I couldn't help but feel as if I'd seen that armor before...

"Well, he might've just been taken aback by the sign," said Nemesis.

That wasn't unlikely. I, too, had been shocked when I'd seen Shu wait for me here while holding his sign and wearing a bear costume.

I look way more normal than he did, though, I thought.

"Eh?!" Nemesis exclaimed, as though questioning if I was being serious.

Of course I do, I thought in response. *My gear's history might be dark, but it's all perfectly normal compared to a goddamn bear suit.*

Nemesis didn't argue. She just closed her eyes, sighed and muttered, "He's too far gone." I had no idea what she meant by that.

Twenty minutes had passed since I'd brought the sign.

"Are you Mukudori?" someone asked in a familiar voice, prompting me to turn towards them.

Though the voice was one I'd heard in reality not so long ago, the appearance was completely new to me.

"Yes, I'm Mukudori," I said. "Are you Fujibayashi?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Looks like we met up without a problem."

Her avatar looked decidedly plain and normal. Though there was little of her real-life self in her appearance, her height was about the same. The equipment she had equipped looked high-quality, but none of it really stood out, especially when compared to animal costumes and the like.

If I had to point out anything special about her appearance, it would be her glasses. She wore a pair in real life, too.

While the gear of the eccentric Superiors and duel rankers I'd been sparring against often weirded me out or put me on edge, she had an appearance that gave me peace of mind.

"I'm glad we were able to meet up, but I must ask, what's with the gea — I mean, sign?" she asked.

"My brother did this to me before," I answered. "Is it *that* weird?"

"...It surprised me, but that's the extent of it."

What's with that pause before her answer? I wondered.

"Anyway... You really *are* Ray Starling."

"Well, yeah."

"Being with someone famous makes me a bit tense."

I was silent.

Like Nemesis had mentioned, I'd recently had some people approach me as fans, so this wasn't completely new to me. Still, having a real-life acquaintance call me "famous" made me somewhat bashful.

"So, let's go to the guild," she said. "There are two of us, and we're both battle jobs, so I feel like a kill quest would suit us far better than a gathering quest. I'll leave the choice to you, though."

"All right," I said. "Oh, by the way, what's your job? I'm a Paladin."

"My current main job is Shield Giant."

I didn't know what kind of job that was, and once I asked, she said, "It's a high-rank job that focuses on shield skills, and it allows smooth usage of all shields regardless of size as long as you have the required STR."

It was probably a defensive job, but I couldn't help but note that the term "Giant" didn't fit Fujibayashi's slender frame at all.

Oh, there's something I must ask before we form a party, I thought. "What's your avatar's name?"

It couldn't be just "Kozue Fujibayashi," after all. She wasn't like that aberration or her super secretary.

"Well..." she said, before taking a moment to think. "Call me 'B3.'"

"Okay... Hm?" I complied, but then I realized that she'd said something off. She'd told me to *call her* "B3," strongly implying that it wasn't actually her avatar name.

"That's not my avatar's name, but 'B3' is how my close friends call me," she explained as she sent me a party invitation. "And my name is a little, uh... long too, so it's convenient."

The name I saw next to the invitation was indeed long, and it could easily be abbreviated to just "B3."

I accepted the invitation, and we became part of the same party.

Interesting note: she was level 485, making it very clear that she was experienced.

"I was maxed out just a while ago, but now I'm experimenting with various job combinations," she told me.

Oh, yeah. Shu had once told me that jobs could be reset and exchanged for other jobs.

I was still on my first, so that feature didn't really matter to me.

"Now that we're in the same party, let us introduce ourselves again," she said. "I'm B3. Nice to meet you."

"Ah, all right," I replied. "I'm Ray Starling. Let's get along."

"Greetings!" Nemesis joined in. "I'm Ray's Embryo, Nemesis. It's a pleasure, B3."

"Same here." With the partying up and introductions done, we headed out to the guild to pick up a quest.

◇

It was my first time at the capital's guild since Rook, Marie, and I had taken the quest to make a delivery to Gideon. Not even a month had passed since that time, so the interior hadn't changed a bit.

B3 and I sat down at a table and looked at the quests in the large magical catalog.

Unlike last time, when there had been many escort quests from people heading to Gideon or other countries, there were now lots of escort quests to some village in the north, and I couldn't imagine why. Ten minutes of quest-searching later, we still hadn't found the right one.

"...Nh?" I raised an eyebrow as I noticed that there was some trouble going on at the counter. It was caused by a young boy, desperately asking for something from the guild employee.

"Please, get someone to search for my dad! He's been gone for half a year now!" the boy pleaded.

"I'm sorry, but we cannot accept your request because it breaches one of the adventurers' guild's special rules," the employee replied, looking thoroughly troubled.

The adventurers around them seemed quite perplexed, as well.

Apparently, the boy was making a request, but for some reason, the guild wasn't taking it.

"A missing persons quest, huh?" I muttered.

"The adventurer's guild handles those, but they're not too popular," said B3. "They often take a long time, and they require a highly particular set of skills."

I see, I thought. *Depending on your perspective, killing monsters or just gathering stuff is way easier and simpler than searching for someone.*

Sure, search quests had an advantage in that they weren't life-threatening, but that wasn't that big of a deal for us Masters. Then again, the first quest I'd ever taken on had been a life-threatening search quest... though it probably didn't count as a search quest, since I'd already known where Milianne was.

"But there *are* skills that help search for people, right?" I asked.

"Yes." B3 nodded. "There are some of them among both job skills and unique Embryo skills. However..." she said before pausing and looking at the boy and the employee at the counter. "The worker mentioned a special rule, and if it's regarding search quests, that might be..."

Suddenly, one of the nearby tian adventurers, unable to bear it, placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and spoke to him.

"Kid, the man's been lost for nearly half a year, right? Sorry to break it to you, but your dad's probably—"

"He can't be dead!" the boy shouted defiantly as he escaped the man's hand.

For reasons unknown, I'd felt as though his shout was more than just wishful thinking... as if he was absolutely certain of what he was saying.

"I mean... my dad is..." he said before following it up with words that left me completely astonished. "He's my stepdad! And he's a Master!"

"Wh...!" I gasped.

A tian boy had just asserted that his dad was a Master.

"He's a Master, so he can never die," he repeated himself. "But he's been gone for half a year now... so I want someone to find him..."

The boy turned teary and spoke the reasons why he was making the request.

"My little brother or sister... Dad and Mom's child should be born soon. I want him to be there to meet him or her, and... and..."

He suddenly stopped speaking. He hung his head and started sobbing.

Seeing him like that made my heart ache, but at the same time, I was curious about several things.

"B3, I have some questions," I said.

"Yes, players and NPCs *can* get married," she answered before I could even ask. "As for children between players and NPCs, they're only possible in theory."

That was exactly what I wanted to know about.

"If they're old enough in real life for it — 18 or above in Japan — players can marry NPCs or other players... and partake in intercourse... *become intimate*, so to speak."

Well, I guess jobs like "Pimp" and "Harlot" are there for a reason, I thought. *I guess it's only obvious for* Dendro *to have that kind of intimacy.*

On a tangentially-related note, back when Rook had asked if Pimp was "a monster-taming kind of job," he had only been referring to the job as it was in *Dendro*. He'd been fully aware of what the word meant in real life.

"I knew about it. It's common knowledge," he'd explained to me later.

Are Pimps really common knowledge for people his age? I thought, and then suddenly realized I'd gotten sidetracked pretty badly, so I shifted my attention back to B3.

Probably because I'd appeared really contemplative, she looked like she'd been overthinking some things, too.

"Sorry, I guess you're too young to talk about this," she said with her hand over her mouth. Her tone was apologetic.

"Oh. No, no, I'm old enough for this..." I cleared up the misunderstanding, and my own words made me realize that I was already allowed to *become intimate* with people. I didn't really see myself ever using that feature, though.

"I see. I'll continue, then. While players can have intercourse, a certain problem makes it nearly impossible for it to ever result in children."

"And that problem would be...?"

"Take a look at this," she said as she reached into her inventory and took out a knife and a handkerchief, neither of which seemed special in any way. Then, not saying a word, B3 thrust the tip of the knife into the palm of her free hand.

"Huh?!" I exclaimed as the shock forced me to stand up.

"Hyah! Hyah!" she shouted, doing it again and again.

The knife didn't pierce her hand. No matter how many times she tried, it just couldn't break her skin.

Eventually, the speed of her attacks became such that it had me worried, but even then, B3's hand remained unharmed.

Normally, the palm would've been covered in holes all over at this point, but no, there wasn't even a hint of a scratch on it.

Soon enough, I began feeling like she was just showing me some trick, and that was about the time when she stopped.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I tried to release some blood to make my explanation easier, but my END is so high that this knife just couldn't do it."

"Ohh..." I expressed my understanding.

That reminded me that B3's job was "Shield Giant," and that she was a long-time player who'd once reached the maximum level available to non-Superior Jobs. It was only natural for her to have a high defense stat, and honestly, it wouldn't have surprised me if that palm of hers was tougher than my armor.

"We'll have to continue without an example," she said. "You *have* seen what happens when players get the death penalty, right?"

"Well... yeah," I nodded. *I've seen it plenty of times in the past month.*

"Have you noticed how their scattered blood and other bodily fluids vanish along with the body?"

"...I have."

The first thing that came to mind was Lei-Lei's battle that Marie had shown me on her crystal. The melted, liquid flesh and the shreds of skin of the Masters she'd killed had all became particles of light and vanished at the same time.

"This exact same phenomenon happens when you log out," B3 said.

"The exact same?" I raised an eyebrow.

"For example, if I had gotten some of my blood on this handkerchief and logged out, the blood would disappear at the same time as I vanished."

"I see," I said, fully understanding what she was getting at. "So you can't make children because bodily fluids disappear the moment you log out."

"That's exactly it."

It made perfect sense now. After all, we Masters simply *had* to log out every once in a while.

"However, some theorize that it might be possible if the Master stays online long enough for the zygote to properly develop."

Well, that was certainly a reasonable theory. I could totally understand why someone would think that a zygote wouldn't vanish if it was recognized as a separate organism, rather than just an egg with some genes sticking to it.

"But that's..."

...difficult, to say the least, I finished silently.

Yesterday, when I'd been kidnapped by The Lunar Society for just about a third of one real-life day, I'd become quite hungry and really needed to pee.

Being online long enough for a zygote to develop into its own organism — which could be anywhere from several days to a few weeks — seemed downright impossible.

"Then what about that boy's sibling?" I asked.

"In my opinion, the most likely case is that his mother cheated on the stepfather Master with another tian," B3 answered. "The second most likely case is that the stepfather is actually a tian merely pretending to be a Master, and the child is really his. The third and least likely scenario is that the aforementioned theory was proven right. Though, note that the second one would mean severe punishment for the stepfather, since the law in every country strictly forbids tians to pretend to be Masters."

"Then I hope it's the third one," I said. The other two would definitely leave a bad taste in my mouth.

"It doesn't look like there will be a good ending to this regardless, though," said B3.

"Why not? If it happens to be the third one, someone would only have to find the stepfather Master and... ah."

"You see the problem?" she said.

Sure, someone would only have to find him. However, it was likely that the search would go beyond *Dendro*.

"I didn't get to tell you about the special rule regarding search quests," she added. "The guild refuses to accept them when the one being searched for is a Master who hasn't been online for a long time. You understand why, don't you?"

Of course I do.

For tians, searching for offline Masters was downright impossible, and even Masters would find it extremely difficult. They might even have to hire a detective, and even then, the chances of success would be low.

After all, *Dendro* had players all over the world, not to mention that the only info you started out with was regarding them as they'd been *here*, not back on the other side.

"Finding Masters that haven't come online for a while is completely impossible," B3 concluded. "In fact, when they've been away from *Infinite Dendrogram* for so long, it's highly likely that they've quit, so even if you did miraculously find them, convincing them to return would no doubt be difficult."

She was completely right about that.

The tians and Masters around the boy knew that, too, and I could easily tell they were avoiding any involvement.

They were right to do so.

For tians, going to the world where Masters returned to — reality — was downright impossible, and though it wasn't so for Masters, they would still have a low chance of succeeding, not to mention that they had no obligation to dedicate their real-life time to a search because of something in *Dendro*. I could totally understand that, but...

"B3," I spoke up.

"Yes?"

"Sorry, but can we postpone today's quest for a later date?"

"Why?"

"I'm gonna accept that boy's search quest."

Despite it all, I just couldn't turn a blind eye to the downcast, crying little kid.

"I just explained that that quest is impossible," she objected.

"It probably is," I agreed. "But ignoring it would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

"..." B3 fell silent as she placed her hand on her mouth and thought about something.

That reaction was only natural. I was fully aware I was being unreasonable, and I didn't want to involve someone as logical as her into something so unsound.

"You should—"

"Then I'll join you," she cut me off with words I really didn't expect.

"Really...? Are you sure?"

"I said that I would ultimately let you choose the quest we would take, didn't I?"

That she had. However, I'd assumed that had only applied when we were talking about normal quests.

"Also, if you don't mind me borrowing your words..." she said in a gentle tone as she looked directly into my eyes. "Going my own way from here would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

"Thank you," I said gratefully.

Then I stood up, walked up to the dejected boy at the counter, and placed my hand on his shoulder.

"We'll accept your request," I gently said.

"...Eh?" he exclaimed, thoroughly surprised.

There was hope in his eyes. It was as though they were asking "Really?"

I nodded, and asserted, "We will search for your dad."

Thus, B3 and I began our first adventure together.

We would brave an impossible quest — the search for a Master.

Our goal... was a happy ending.

Let the quest begin.

◇

We'd accepted the request of the boy named Louie who was searching for his dad. However, it didn't even count as a quest. Not only did the guild not process it because of its special rules, but it also didn't appear in my log as an event quest. I didn't know whether that was some sort of accident, or whether the control AI that calculated quest difficulty just didn't recognize this as a quest.

Still, even without a difficulty rating, I could tell that a quest to find a person in real life would be, in a way, harder than any other quest in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

We were now at a diner adjoined to the adventurers' guild, where we had Louie tell us about his dad.

We asked for his name, job, and anything else that could help lead us to his real-life self. None of what we'd learned was much help, but at the very least, we'd gotten his avatar's name: Ichiro Shijima. If, as the name implied, he was really Japanese, our search would become somewhat easier.

The difficulty would drop again if that was actually a modified version of his real name, since it would limit our search to names such as "Ichiro Ishijima" or "Ichiro Ushijima," among others.

And, if we were to be greedy...

"It would really help if that's his real name..." I muttered.

"I don't think that's possible," said B3. "This isn't the president or the vice president we're talking about."

"Yeah, we can't expect everyone to be like the aberration or the KoA," I agreed.

"Indeed, the only people who would play with their real names are people such as myself, Lady Tsukuyo, and our Society's adherents."

"True..." I said, before realizing who I was talking to and replying with a sarcastic tone. "Ah ha ha... And why might you be here, King of Secretaries... nay, King of Assassins?"

Before we'd realized it, the KoA who was our upperclassman in college, Eishiro Tsukikage, was sitting at one corner of our table with a tea cup in hand, all smiles. He reminded me of Marie.

They're similar in more than just jobs, I thought. *Now that I think about it, the aberration did a similar thing yesterday.*

"I've been sitting here since halfway through the questioning, but since no one noticed me, I took the liberty of asserting my presence," he said.

"And why did you sit here?" I demanded.

"Lady Tsukuyo is still prohibited from logging in, so she had me deliver a message to you."

"Which would be?"

"It's a proposition. 'Now, I'll fix your arm up if you only join CID.'"

"Hm..."

That... was actually worth considering.

You would never see me become a part of The Lunar Society, but I wasn't too averse to joining the aberration's college club. I now knew why I was so afraid of her, not to mention that CID had B3, who would keep her in check. The conditions were definitely attractive, but...

"I'll give my answer after the weekend," I said at last.

"Very well."

Yesterday's memories were just too fresh in my mind to let me accept the offer so nonchalantly.

With his business done, I expected Tsukikage to leave, but he showed no intention to stand up from his chair. I glanced at him and noticed that he was looking at Louie.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Would you like The Lunar Society to help search for this boy's father?" he proposed.

I didn't know what kind of whim or plot had caused him to make this offer. Sure, having the cult's many adherents helping us would greatly increase the scope of our information network and make the search many times easier, but...

"Why?" I asked, not seeing the reason for this proposition.

The aberration wasn't here, and she probably didn't know that I'd accepted Louie's request, so it was highly unlikely that she was related to this offer. This would mean that it came from Tsukikage himself, but I couldn't see any reason why he would suggest it.

The aberration would obviously do this to make me owe her something, but somehow, I didn't see that being the case with Tsukikage.

Thus, my question.

"That's a secret," he replied.

The cloak and dagger in his words made accepting his proposition seem all the more dangerous.

"We'll ask for your help if we figure there's nothing we can do by ourselves," I said.

"Very well." He nodded. "We will be ready to assist you."

For now, I decided to keep his offer as an alternative.

Tsukikage stood up from his chair. Then, seemingly struck with an idea, he turned to say something more.

"Oh, by the way... Take this as simple advice, rather than a proposition, but I suggest you take your search for real-life information to young Louie's mother — Mr. Shijima's wife. Just as there are things only parents and children talk about, there are also private talks between spouses. Not to mention that you might find clues in their family home. You should only rely on real-life detectives, your brother, or your friends after you've exhausted such sources."

"...Thanks."

"With that settled, I bid you goodbye. May we meet again."

Following his long, oddly specific advice, Tsukikage sunk into his own shadow.

The sight greatly surprised Louie, but Fujibayashi — fully used to it, apparently — didn't even flinch.

Additionally, Tsukikage left behind a pouch with a little paper saying "Payment for my tea."

...Guy's a damn weirdo, but he sure is principled, I thought.

Anyway, his advice was completely sound. If we wanted to find a person in real life, we couldn't miss a single clue we could find here.

"Where do you live, Louie?" I asked the boy.

"In Torne village. It's in the north, about half a day away from here by carriage." That was closer than Gideon, but still pretty far.

"Did you come alone?" I asked.

"No." He shook his head. "I took a stagecoach that was passing through the village. I used the allowance I got from Dad to pay for it. I also thought of using the money to pay for the guild request, but..."

He then showed me the inside of his wallet, and it was doubtful if there was even enough for a carriage back to the village. In fact, it probably wasn't even enough to pay for the guild request, but in my eyes, that was a sign of just how desperate Louie was.

"I hope we find his father," Nemesis said telepathically.

Yeah, same here, I thought in response.

"All right, let's go to Torne, then," I said. "As for how we get there..."

Silver could fly us there in no time, but I could only let one other person ride with me, at most, so...

"You have a horse, don't you, Ray?" B3 asked, cutting short my train of thought.

"Ah, yeah, I do."

"Excellent. I don't have a horse, but I do have a carriage. Can we get your horse to pull it?"

"Sure." A carriage would let us all travel there at the same time.

With our destination and means of transportation all set, we began making our way towards Torne.

I'll admit, I'm kinda curious as to why B3 has a carriage, but no horse, I thought.

◆◆◆

???

After Ray's group left the diner, a girl sitting at a table some distance away from them, close to the exit, stood up from her chair.

She was just another Master who'd merely happened to be there at that time. However, since she'd seen something that she, as a member of a *certain clan*, just couldn't ignore, she left the diner right after confirming that Ray's group wasn't there anymore.

She quickly made her way for a certain establishment in the capital. These were the headquarters of her clan, and they had a Japanese aesthetic, though not in the same way as The Lunar Society's HQ.

It was obvious from its outward design. The building looked like the house of Japanese martial arts practitioners, and it had a dojo affixed to it. Another thing that stood out was the sign that had the clan's name on it, for it was written very skillfully.

"Big sis! I have something to report! It's urgent!" the girl from the diner shouted as she ran into the dojo and called for someone inside.

"Damn, you're loud," said a woman in a husky tone.

She surpassed 180cm in height, had a body covered in well-trained muscles, eyes that gleamed, and dangerously sharp fangs.

All that, combined with the wolfish ears on her head and the tail behind her, made her appear very much like a carnivorous predator. And because of such appearances, as well as her demeanor, those close to her often referred to her as "big sis" or just "sis" despite no blood relation.

The muscular woman stood in the middle of the dojo, spear in hand. Around her, there were a number of freshly downed Masters, all of whom looked nearly dead. They, too, were Masters belonging to the same clan as the girl who'd just left the diner and arrived here.

From the dire sight before her, the girl assumed that she'd arrived right as they finished training, and she couldn't be more glad that she was off-duty today.

"And? What is it, Tomika?" asked the muscular woman, making the girl snap out of it. “Weren’t you out to get a quest today?”

“Th-This is serious, sis!” the girl named Tomika shouted.

“Just tell me *what’s* so serious,” the muscular woman said. “Did my darling finally go online or something?”

The “darling” she spoke of was none other than the clan’s owner. Due to certain real-life circumstances, he hadn’t been able to log in for a while now.

Sadly for those in the clan, his absence had caused the muscular woman’s training to become more intense with every passing day. After all, it was well-known in and out of the clan that she was absolutely head over heels for the young leader.

“The Lunar Society might be planning something...”

“The lunatic cultists? I’m all ears.” Suddenly, the woman began emitting a menacing, pressurizing aura.

It was caused by not only her avatar’s stats, but also by the intensity of her emotion. Everyone present — even the downed clan members — felt it clearly.

“Th-The KoA was in the guild’s diner and, uh...”

“Oh? That hanger-on? By himself?” the muscular woman cut Tomika off and asked.

“Yeah. And he was happily talking with a certain party, and before disappearing, he left them a pouch with something written on it.”

Tsukikage never neglected to have a smile on his face, so it was hard to deny that he’d *looked* happy, and Tomika had been too far away from them to know that the pouch was nothing more than the payment for his tea.

As a result, the impression she’d gotten from their exchange was exactly as she’d described it.

“Hmm... You sure that wasn’t just a party of cultists?” asked the muscular woman.

“Well... he was talking to *that* BBB and Ray Starling, the guy who became famous after Franklin’s Game.”

“Ohh...?” The woman, intrigued, cracked a grin. The expression made her look like an actual predator. “The rumored ‘Unbreakable,’ eh? And B3? I was wondering what she’s been up to after disbanding her clan, but I never expected her to be dealing with the cultists. Guess this means the rumors are fake.”

B3 was, in fact, “dealing with the cultists,” but only as a member of a real-life club led by them, and definitely not in the way that the woman imagined it.

“And? What are they planning to do?” the woman asked.

“I don’t know that much... But before they left the diner, I overheard that they were going to Torne...” Tomika confessed.

“Torne? Well, Windstar Festival should start soon. Maybe that has something to do with it.” The woman repeatedly flicked her spear’s handle with her thumb as she tried to figure out the plot between Ray’s group and The Lunar Society — which didn’t actually exist. Though unable to find an answer, she was finally able to make a certain decision.

“All right,” she said. “I don’t know what they’re planning, but we’ll crush them anyway.”

Words to play by: *I don’t know, therefore I PK.*

“Let this be a little preliminary match before our actual revenge battle. We’ll screw up whatever the lunatics are planning.”

“But sis, our leader still isn’t...”

“Ha! The only reason why we got messed up by The Lunar Society is because we didn’t have my darling with us to take care of them. I don’t wanna involve him in the revenge match when it’s all our own fault.”

The woman then momentarily fell silent and took a deep breath.

“WAKE UP ALREADY, DAMN IT!” she howled so loudly that the whole dojo shook.

Her voice made all the members spread out on the floor jump up and stand straight.

“We... the K&R, are going on a hunt! Go and prepare!” the Nobushi Princess, Rosa, cried.

Hearing the order of their sub-leader, the members of K&R — the third clan in the kingdom’s rankings and the country’s strongest PK clan — began preparing for an attack.

Thus, because of a minor misunderstanding and a major lack of forethought, Ray’s search quest was about to be gatecrashed by the kingdom’s strongest PK clan.

Chapter Six: Along the Way

Paladin, Ray Starling

Riding our carriage as it left tracks on the dirt path below, we gradually made our way towards Torne Village.

Well, calling it "our carriage" wasn't exactly appropriate, considering the fact that it belonged B3 alone. Still, it was being drawn by my Silver, so that term wasn't entirely wrong.

B3 and I were in the coachman's seat, while Louie sat inside the actual carriage.

The vehicle was very well-designed. Its base was high enough for me to pass under it by simply bending forward, and it had tires akin to those on old off-road cars, letting it easily handle uneven terrain. It was also imbued with various magics, giving it functions such as air conditioning, impact reduction, interior space expansion, and a defensive barrier.

All in all, the carriage was the *Dendro* equivalent of an armored vehicle that VIPs would use. That made me all the more curious as to why B3 had *only* the carriage. After all, what good was a horse-drawn vehicle without a horse to pull it?

"So, why do you have *just* the carriage?" I let my curiosity take over and asked directly.

In response, B3 placed her hand over her mouth again and took a moment to think before matter-of-factly saying, "This carriage was the common property of my clan."

"You were the leader of a clan?"

"Yes. It's disbanded now, though," she said as she cast down her eyes, looking somewhat lonely. "It had many members who had busy real lives, you see. There were people with children or work to attend to, people in middle management, job-hunting students, police officers, college professors... they were all so busy, they made a college student's life seem easy."

She spoke with her eyes fixed upon the scenery directly ahead, but I felt as though what she was actually seeing were visions of the good old days.

"Despite their harsh schedules, we were able to get together and kill monsters, clear quests... go on hunts, have parties, and do lots of other fun stuff." The look on her face bore not a hint of dishonesty. She really *had* enjoyed her time with her clan.

...Wait, why are "kill monsters" and "go on hunts" separate? I wondered.

"Maybe she means scavenger hunts?" Nemesis suggested telepathically. "They would be different here than in your world, after all."

Well... that makes sense.

"But a short while ago, we were dealt a really hard blow. Many of us, myself included, lost gear and other items," she said before closing her eyes in a regretful manner and cracking a wry smile. "Because of that and the changes in our lives that came with spring, we decided that we'd had enough fun and decided to disband the clan."

"I see..."

Apparently, no matter how realistic it was, *Infinite Dendrogram* wasn't safe from normal MMO-like happenings such as the ending of clans.

"With the disbanding, the clan's shared items were distributed among the players that would continue playing," she said. "I can still remember the members offering this carriage to me while saying 'This slick ride should be yours, boss.' I appreciated their sentiment and gladly accepted it, but... eheheh." She giggled as she remembered something—

...Wait, "boss?"

"I accepted the carriage, but didn't have any monsters for it," she continued. "It slipped my mind because I always had clan members with tamed creatures that could pull it. Because of that, I haven't been able to use it once ever since the clan disbanded..."

Suddenly, as I held the reins, she turned to look at me with eyes that looked both slightly lonely and happy.

"It's nice that we got to use it today."

"Yeah." I nodded. "Thanks again, B3."

About three hours had passed since we left the capital. We were currently on a road called the "Fadl Mountain Pass."

Honestly, I felt that "Mountain Pass" was a bit of a misnomer, considering we were passing only hills, rather than mountains.

Anyway, according to Louie, we were about halfway there by now. We'd left before noon, so, at this rate, we ought to reach Torne Village before sundown.

That aside, I couldn't help but notice that this road was unusually active. Just like us, there were quite a lot of people heading northward, on foot and by carriage alike.

Many even had children with them, making it highly unlikely that they were going on hunting or trading trips.

"Is there something I don't know about?" I asked.

"The Windstar Festival is happening soon," said Louie as he stuck his face out through the carriage's window.

"Windstar Festival?" According to him, the Windstar Festival was an event held by a group of villages situated in the north of the capital, with Torne being the focus.

The festival was a long-running tradition by now, and it was renowned for the many pinwheel-like decorations all over the villages and the fireworks lighting up the night sky, attracting many tourists from both the local villages and the capital, who, in turn, attracted merchants aiming to profit from them.

"Well, that definitely sounds like a festival," I commented.

"It is!" Louie said excitedly. "Until last year, we would go there with Dad every year, and it was very fun! But now..."

He suddenly became downcast again. That was only natural, considering that the dad he so adored might not be there for the festival.

"We'll find your dad, so don't you worry," I said.

"Okay. Please find him, mister."

Chatting more about this and that, we continued following the road north. Eventually, we went up a gently-sloping hill.

"Ah..." Louie gasped, apparently realizing something.

"What is it?" I asked.

"This place..." he said as he looked around with nostalgia in his eyes. "This is where Mom and I met Dad."

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Four years ago, Fadl Mountain Pass

It had happened four years ago, in *Infinite Dendrogram* time.

Louie and his mother, Farica, were at the Fadl Mountain Pass, riding a stagecoach to the village of Torne. The aged Needleworker of the village had passed away, and Farica — bearing the same job herself — had been dispatched there by the Needleworker guild as the replacement.

It wasn't unusual for job guilds to transfer their members to the surrounding towns and villages, but such agreements were never forced, and Farica had volunteered for this role.

Her primary reasons for this were monetary. A year ago, she'd lost her husband, Louie's biological father, to an accident, and the money he'd left behind was beginning to run dry.

Though she herself had a career as a Needleworker, it wasn't quite enough for a single mother with a child as young as Louie, especially with the recent increase of skilled Needleworkers... the Masters.

Because of them, supply had started to outpace demand, and tian-made clothes, which were generally lower quality than those made by Masters, had gotten harder to sell. The drop in available work had made it difficult for Farica to get by, and though her situation wasn't dire, it was definitely getting there, so she'd chosen to take the transfer to Torne.

Since it was a guild assignment, she would receive both the payment for her work *and* financial aid from the guild, not to mention that distancing herself from the oversupplied cities would greatly increase the demand for her products. Spurred by the wish to have her son grow up healthy, away from the ails of poverty, she'd resolved to take him and move to the village of Torne, and that was no mistake.

Their small household would receive the money to get by, her son would grow up properly, and Torne would have a Needleworker. Everyone involved would benefit from this.

Indeed, Farica's decision wasn't a mistake... but alas, Lady Luck, capricious as ever, didn't favor her on the day of the move. The stagecoach she was on was attacked by over a hundred monsters.

From just over several hundred of metels away, they were charging straight towards the stagecoach, leaving a thick cloud of dust behind them.

It was a horde of "Violent Fanged Boars." True to their name, they were a brutal, carnivorous type of monster known to vehemently chase the smell of blood.

Though they were native to the area, it was rare for them to hunt in such great numbers. However, this was a world in which the spontaneous appearance of UBMs could greatly alter monster habitats, sometimes forcing them to form large groups. Thus, the boars' attack on the stagecoach was merely an unfortunate turn of events — one that greatly endangered those without the power to stand up to them.

The coachman hastily tried to turn the vehicle around and escape the boars, but the menacing horde scared the horses into rearing up, panicking, and making the carriage fall on its side.

Passengers and baggage alike dropped out of vehicle, and though nobody died from that, it didn't change the fact that the situation was nothing short of hopeless.

"Hurry! Stand up and run!" roared one the tian adventurers tasked with defending the stagecoach.

Faced with this threat, they had completely abandoned their roles.

Some tried to be the rear guard, protecting the passengers as they ran, but the experienced adventurers suggested against it, telling them that it was suicide.

Not many could fault them for that. Even if those adventurers had battle jobs, that number of boars was just too great for only a few sub-level 100 tians.

Escaping along with the passengers while avoiding encounters with monsters was the sound thing to do... the *right* thing to do.

Alas, doing the right thing was never easy, and this time, it came at the cost of sacrificing two lives — a boy and his mother.

After the carriage fell, Farica was still inside, and her leg was caught under the baggage, while Louie was crying at her side. He begged for someone to help her, but everyone else had already ran away.

It was only natural. The situation was dire, and every second counted. Anyone who tried to save them could easily end up as sustenance for the boars, and even if they were successful, Farica's bleeding and all the blood that had gotten on Louie would definitely attract the monsters. There was no viable escape plan that included the pair.

Their deaths were definitely unavoidable and perhaps even necessary, so the rest of the people ran while closing their ears to the boy's tearful pleas.

The cruel inevitability would soon spell the death of the mother and child, and the two had no means of overturning this harsh fate.

However, *they* did.

"Gringham!" someone roared just as a Boar was about to charge into the carriage's exposed base and break it open.

That word — no, that *call*...

"GROAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

...was answered by a giant beast that forced its fangs deep into the Boar's neck and shattered its upper spine, instantly ending its life.

It was a lion, bearing a mane as thick as wool and a size rivaling that of an elephant. It pulverized the carnivorous boars, asserting its position as the true apex predator on the scene.

"Are you all right, boy?" asked one of the two people that jumped off the lion's back.

The one who spoke was a bald warrior. He had the facial features of a person from Tenchi and a well-trained body covered in light armor.

The other was a girl with green hair. She glared at the Boar horde with a somewhat vague expression on her face.

The bald warrior ran over to Louie, who was too scared to stand at this point, and extended his left hand towards him. There was a blue crest on the back of the hand.

"That's my mount, Gringham," he said. "He'll keep the monsters away, so you just run, and..."

"M-My mom! My mom is still in the carriage!" Louie shouted, making the bald warrior turn to the vehicle, where he saw Farica, her leg crushed by the baggage.

He hurried to her aid and said, "I'll help you!"

"Don't mind me! Just save my son, please!" she protested, urging the bald warrior to focus entirely on Louie. That would be the reasonable thing to do. After all, her damaged leg not only rendered her incapable of running, but also made her attract the violent boars. "Only a miracle can save me now... So please, help my son..."

"I don't think so," the bald warrior retorted. "You will be saved if I kill all the monsters."

"But that's—!"

"If that would be a miracle... If a miracle alone can save you, then I shall become a miracle-worker!" He stood up, then looked at the boar horde fighting his trusty lion mount.

"Juno!" he called the green-haired girl's name, prompting her to become green and red particles of light that gathered in the man's hands, taking the shape of a spear in his right and an elliptical shield in his left. "Come, monsters! *This is the shield of miracles*!"

The man tightened his grip on his weaponry, ran up to his mount and jumped on its back.

He faced the numerous boars and roared, "I am a Myth Rider, Ichiro Shijima! Face me now!" before charging the overwhelming odds.

The result of this battle was obvious.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"Dad was... awesome. He and Gringham killed all those monsters and saved me and Mom," Louie finished.

"And that's how you met him?" I asked.

"Yeah. He also protected us all the way to Torne and even brought someone who could use healing magic to fix mom's leg."

Louie then continued to tell us that Mr. Shijima, concerned with their well-being, had regularly visited them in the village. Eventually, he and Farica had fallen in love, gotten married, and made a child.

I silently processed the story.

One thing that I couldn't help but note was the fact that Mr. Shijima was a *Maiden's Master*. If the words Hugo had told me were to be believed, it meant that he, too, didn't consider *Infinite Dendrogram* to be just a game.

The fact that such a person hadn't visited his *family* for half a year of this world's time made me picture scenarios I really didn't want to consider. When we found him in real life and discovered that he'd simply quit, I would like to, at the very least, convince him to come here and give Louie and his wife a proper goodbye.

However, if the reason why he'd disappeared was *one that rendered him incapable of ever meeting them again*, then—

"...What?" I asked suddenly as my thoughts were cut short by a low, distant sound, much like the howling of the wind.

The noise was repeated again and again, and seemed to come from several locations. Upon hearing one that came from relatively close, I realized that it was the sound of a conch trumpet.

Soon enough, the entire area's soundscape was dominated by the sound, and I had no idea if it was a warning, a message, or something else.

"B3, what is th—?" I tried to ask, but cut my words short upon noticing the drastic change in her expression.

If I had to summarize her face in just a word, I'd have probably used "fierce."

However, once I blinked in surprise, B3's expression was back to normal.

Did I just imagine that? I wondered as she looked into my eyes and began talking.

"Be alert, Ray. This conch is their signal."

"'Their'?" I asked, but before she could answer, a voice blared throughout the entire area.

"This is a message to all Masters passing through or hunting in Fadl Mountain Pass," the voice said loudly. It was obviously passing through a voice-amplifying item, and it reminded me of a female announcer in Japanese baseball stadiums. "In ten minutes, the PK clan K&R will begin hunting in this area. Those who do not wish to fight must leave Fadl Mountain Pass within this time."

"Huh?!" I exclaimed as the sudden PK announcement left me confused.

I wasn't the only one. There were other Masters nearby, and they seemed as puzzled as myself.

Meanwhile, B3, despite acting weird at first, seemed completely calm now.

I silently thought things through.

"Mister, what's going on?" Louie asked in a worried tone.

The announcement had stated that "Those who do not wish to fight must leave Fadl Mountain Pass within this time."

Since we had Louie to look out for, I really didn't want to get involved in any battles, so I considered making Silver hurry and using the given time to leave.

"I repeat. In ten minutes, the PK clan K&R will begin hunting in this area. Those who do not wish to fight must leave Fadl Mountain Pass within this time. Circle of Detect Life — Human."

Following that repeat and the skill activation, I felt something pass through my body, which was enough to make me gasp.

"They're just like always..." said B3. "Don't worry, this isn't dangerous by itself." Since she was clearly familiar with the magic used, she explained the spell's nature. "This is just a life search skill that had its range and precision enhanced by the announcement they used as a Chant. It's what they usually do."

Oh, so the announcement was a Chant, I thought.

The Chant skill used MP-imbued words to enhance magic effects, and since the user was free to set the words used, with the exception of a few special spells, even that announcement had been a proper Chant.

That aside... "life search"? I wondered.

"The search they made allows them to know the location and level of all the creatures in the area that fit the designated type," B3 continued. "They put the skill name in the announcement as a way of saying, 'There's no use in hiding. Either run or fight.' Oh, and just so you know, most K&R members are from Tenchi, and this is an Onmyoji job skill."

"K&R..." I murmured.

That name was familiar. Marie had mentioned it after the capital blockade incident, and I'd seen it myself on the bulletin board for clan rankings, where it was no. 3.

"They're third in the kingdom's clan rankings," B3 confirmed. "And if you consider just PK clans... With Mad Castle disbanding and Goblin Street moving to another country, they're the undisputed top."

The kingdom's strongest player killers... That certainly seemed like a force to be reckoned with.

"Also, though it pains me to say it, their leader was the top PK even when the other clans were active. In fact, you can even include that hitman, the Superior Killer, and he'd still be the best in the kingdom."

A PK stronger than Marie... the Superior Killer... the one who killed King of Plagues?

"Is he a Superior?" I asked.

"Not yet, as far as I'm aware, but he's well-known and very powerful," she said before making a short pause. "Kashimiya is third in the kingdom's duel rankings, after all."

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The third in the kingdom’s duel rankings was a person I’d heard of before.

Following one of our usual sparrings, Juliet, the fourth in the rankings, and I had gone off together to have some lunch.

Spurred by curiosity, I’d said, “I’ve yet to see the third and fifth in the duel rankings. What are they like?”

Through Figaro, I’d come to know the eighth, Chelsea the Vagrant Golden Sea, and almost everyone above her. By now, mock battles against these skilled players were a part of my daily life. However, I’d never even met the third and fifth. I’d even talked, though I hadn’t sparred, with the second one, Tom Cat, so I was starting to find this quite strange.

Speaking of him, Tom Cat was a weirdo who walked around with a cat on his head. Then again, most of the top rankers were weird in their own ways, so he might’ve not been all that special.

“So you seek tales of the ‘Guillotine’ and the ‘Bone-Eater’...” said Juliet.

“‘Guillotine’? ‘Bone-Eater’?” I asked.

“Indeed. The latter was conferred the name because of her Embryo’s ultimate skill, while the former was crowned as such because he beheaded all the rank-bearers below himself... including yours truly,” she said before placing her hand on her neck.

“Even *you*?” I muttered in disbelief.

Juliet was fourth in the rankings and bore the dark knight grouping’s Superior Job, Fallen Knight. In addition, her Embryo, Hræsvelgr, could become wings that greatly increased her mobility and gave her magic attacks, making her into a character perhaps as versatile as Xunyu. And yet, she’d still lost her head against the third.

“The Guillotine is strong,” she continued. “Though compatibility walls him away from the throne of the second, Monster Cat Mansion, he is undoubtedly a match for him. In fact, I expect that even the Endless Chain would find it a challenge to seize victory before the Guillotine’s blade reached him.”

“He can defeat Figaro in close combat?” I couldn’t even picture that. Just what kind of a monster was he?

"You might wish to know that you would never see him spar," Juliet added.

"Why?" I asked.

"He is a crest hunter... a player killer. On days without a ranked battle he must partake in, he indulges in headhunting 'outside.'"

"...Well, that sure sounds unpleasant," I said.

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I recalled having thought, *Man, I sure wouldn't like to encounter a ranked PK,* but that had turned out to be a jinx.

"Can't a man catch a break?" I complained. *Tsukuyo Fuso yesterday, the strongest player killers today... What the hell's up with my luck?*

"K&R is unique among PK clans because their hunting is limited by rules put there by their leader," said B3.

"Rules, eh?"

Well, considering they had the decency to announce it and give us time to escape, they were probably a better chance encounter than Marie.

"The rules include the necessity for announcements, giving time for people to escape, warning signs next to the roads leading to the area, and a ban on any attacks against tians."

"Well, that's pretty considerate of them... Definitely not praiseworthy, though." They were basically occupying an entire area, after all. It wasn't like that counted as a crime, considering they didn't hurt tians, but still.

"So we just happened to get caught up in their hunt, huh?" I asked.

"No." B3 shook her head. "I'm inclined to believe this is no coincidence."

"Hm?"

She opened her map window and pointed at a certain location.

"When the conch signal began, we were right here."

It was the exact center of the Fadl Mountain Pass.

"Wait, so..."

"Yes, and if it's no accident, it means they began their hunt exactly when it was hardest for us to escape. Ten minutes aren't quite enough for us to leave this area from here."

I've been singled out? Again? I thought, confused.

"It's not guaranteed it's because of you, is it?" asked Nemesis telepathically.

Well, yeah, but Louie was a tian, so he simply couldn't be a PK's target, while B3 was a normal player, so it was unlikely she had anything to do with this. I told her, *That leaves only me. I stood out because of what happened in Gideon, so I could easily have gotten into their sights. Damn you, Franklin.*

"Whatever the case, escape is unlikely, so it's best we ready ourselves for battle," said B3.

"All right, let's do this," I replied with no hesitation.

"You sure are quick to prepare."

"I'm used to it by now." This certainly wasn't the first time I'd been caught up in some sudden trouble, after all.

"Then let me tell you about the way K&R fights," B3 said.

"You know that?"

"To a certain extent, yes."

First the conch, then life search, now this... B3 seemed to be quite knowledgeable about K&R's methods. Well, she'd said that she'd joined CID because of the info they had, so it was no surprise that she was well-versed.

"Following the search, K&R's members split up into three roles," she said as she raised three fingers. "Group fighters — the ones that target the non-veteran players and wipe them out by overwhelming them; squad fighters — the ones that form single parties and go for the high-rank, max-level veterans; and solo fighters — their two Superior Jobs. One is the leader, Kashimiya, while the other is the sub-leader, Rosa. All the roles act simultaneously."

"Two Superior Jobs, eh?" And one of them was said to be stronger than any of the rankers I'd sparred against. I hadn't had many victories against any of them, and this was despite them letting me use a Lifesaving Brooch as a handicap. However, if I were to use the technique that got me some of those wins, I could maybe...

"If they're targeting us, they will attack right after the ten minutes are up," said B3. "And they will likely use their Superior Jobs, rather than groups or squads."

"So we'll have to fight two Superior Jobs?" I asked.

“Probably just one. Search-and-kill is more effective when they split up, and their fighting styles have little compatibility, so they’ll target different Masters and... Hm?”

Well, having to fight just one instead of two definitely gave me hope.

Oh, B3 seems to have realized something, I thought.

“...Odd,” she said with her hand placed over her mouth.

“What’s odd?” I asked.

“Now that I think about it, the very fact that we’re being targeted is strange.”

“They’re player killers, aren’t they?”

“Yes, and that’s exactly why it’s odd. Right now, we’re escorting Louie — an NPC. *A tian,*” she explained before looking inside the carriage. “K&R doesn’t target tians *or* Masters who are escorting them. That’s one of the rules put in place by Kashimiya. So, if they’re really targeting us, they either don’t know about Louie... or Kashimiya isn’t with them this time. I’ve heard rumors that he hasn’t been seen online for almost two months of game time, which makes it highly plausible.”

“So, if they’re targeting us despite knowing about Louie... they’re doing so because the leader isn’t here to enforce the rules?” I asked slowly.

“I believe that the rule has simply slipped Rosa’s mind. The woman is quite a meathead, you see, though not in the same way as the Over Gladiator... Basically, she’s not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

Coming from B3, that’s quite an evaluation, I thought.

Also, I couldn’t help but feel that her knowledge of K&R amounted to more than just what she’d learned through CID. It seemed kinda personal.

“That aside, if we’re really fighting just the Nobushi Princess, a job from the ambush-focused nobushi grouping, it means our opponent would have a limited set of moves. We could perhaps even counter her, and... Ray.”

“Yes?”

She looked directly into my eyes and asked “Do you want to try and defeat the sub-leader of the kingdom’s strongest PK clan?”

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Royal Capital, Altea

K&R’s headquarters, the martial arts building, was currently mostly devoid of people, as most of the members had gone out to hunt. One Master that had stayed behind was currently stressed out of her mind.

“Oh no no nooo... What have I done? Nooo...”

Her name was Tomika, and she was the exact same girl that had witnessed the conversation at the adventurer’s guild and reported it to Rosa.

Today, she was free from both training and hunting, so, after seeing off all the members who had gone to Fadl Mountain Pass, she’d stayed and looked after the headquarters. That was when she’d realized that she’d neglected to do something very important.

“I forgot to tell her they had a tian child with them... Oh noooo...”

Tomika had tried to fix this mistake by contacting the hunting party, but she didn’t know any communication magic, nor did she have any items that enabled it. She’d also considered using real-life emails, but unfortunately, all the members she could contact like that were off-duty, just like her, and thus weren’t participating in today’s hunt.

Sadly, there was nothing she could do.

“Oh noo... They’ll be maad... The leader will be mad at Sis, who will then be mad at meee...” she whined with both her hands on her head. “Something even worse might happen... Oh noo...”

K&R’s leader was a gentle sort. Gentle enough to become upset at PK that was senseless or involved tians. Not to mention that, in his absence, Rosa had become even more irrational and inconsiderate than usual.

That had caused her to participate in the well-funded newbie hunt despite it breaking K&R’s rules, and it had inspired her to reduce the time the clan gave to let people evacuate, among other things.

Tomika knew full well what the implications of the current hunt were, and imagining the worst-case scenario made her stressed beyond belief.

“Why would anyone be mad?” someone asked.

“S-Sis was all fired up about this... she might involve the tian in her fight... and if he dies, the leader... Sis... the entire clan would... aaahhhhhh!”

It was hard to tell what kind of future she pictured, but her tears made it clear that it wasn’t pretty.

“Hmm,” hummed the person behind her. “I don’t really understand, but it all seems complicated. Let me just try to contact Rosa, and... Oh dear, she’s not answering. Looks like she’s already hunting. Her communication device must be in her inventory by now."

The person had tried to talk to Rosa, but hadn't had any luck. It was only natural. During a hunt, the Nobushi Princess Rosa was a solo "search, ambush, and destroy" operative, so it was imperative for her to put away any magic devices that could give away her position. To avoid the effects of some search spells, she also didn't wear the likes of Telepathy Cuffs or exchange any info with the other members of the hunt.

This time, Rosa's meticulous preparation had worked against them, and the person concluded that contacting her — or anyone else — was now impossible.

"This leaves us no choice," he said. "We'll go there directly. Tomika, could you prepare the *car*?"

"Uohh... Okaayy... Huh?"

"So, where did they go?"

"Fadl Mountain Pass..." Tomika replied in a stupor as she finally realized who was there with her. "Umm... How long have you been online, *leader*?"

"For only three minutes. Come on, we have to hurry."

That person was none other than the leader of K&R — Kashimiya the Guillotine. At his side, there was an odachi — a blade so large it didn't suit his frame. It was connected to him by a chain hook bearing the semblance of a rabbit's skull.

Chapter Seven: Cross Hunting

Fadl Mountain Pass

“Ten minutes have passed. K&R shall now commence hunting in the Fadl Mountain Pass,” the same voice as before resounded throughout the area, declaring the end of the waiting time.

As the limit was reached, the Masters that had been unable to escape or were simply up to the challenge became on high alert, and justly so, as the first attacks began just as the time ran out.

First came a deluge of arrows.

From what seemed like out of nowhere, hundreds... no, thousands of arrows rained down upon the Masters. They were caused by the Heavy Bow Samurai skill, Early Summer Arrow Rain.

It released 100 arrows for every use, and when used simultaneously by the 30-strong K&R group fighters, it created a storm of 3,000 arrows. Each one of those arrows did less than 100 damage by itself, but those numbers easily made up for that, making this tactic quickly whittle away the life of most targets.

The Masters subjected to this lethal rain were less than a tenth of all those in the Fadl Mountain Pass, but that tenth included Ray and his group, who had yet to escape the area.

As the owner of Nemesis, Ray was capable of using a single Counter Absorption to withstand 200,000 points of damage from a single attack, but he was painfully ineffective against rapid fire from a distance he couldn’t hope to reach. Whenever Marie switched to such tactics in their mock battles, Ray always ended up completely crushed.

He might’ve been able to burn the arrows with Purgatorial Flames, but alas, he didn’t have the left hand for that.

Silver’s Wind Hoof had the potential to block them, as well, but Ray had neither the MP stock for it, nor enough time to activate it, leaving Ray completely powerless to defend against this arrow storm.

“Thousand Shutter!” B3 shouted the name of a skill as she jumped off the carriage, taking it upon herself to protect it.

Out of her inventory, she'd taken out a shield so large it covered her whole body, and once she held it up, a giant, blueish barrier of light appeared and shielded the whole carriage. The countless arrows falling towards them all hit the barrier, and not a single one passed through.

This was a Shield Giant skill, and it blocked any and all attacks that didn't deal more than 1,000 damage, meaning that the arrows — with their focus on quantity at the cost of quality — couldn't hope to pass this wall.

Following this act of defense, B3 took out a shield even larger than before from her inventory, probably one meant to be used by giants, and, right as the arrow storm ended, went on the offensive.

"Anti Gravity! Flying Shield!" she roared as she activated one of her Embryo's unique skills and paired it with another job skill, which involved *throwing the shield*.

She launched it in the direction where the arrows came from, combining her intuition, calculations, and experience to fine-tune her throw. The result? Pure success. The shield landed in the middle of the gathering of K&R's group fighters.

With that alone, the few that weren't wearing Lifesaving Brooches got the death penalty, and the ensuing confusion prevented the survivors from firing their next wave of arrows.

Ray hurriedly made Silver move, using this opportunity to try and take them out of the area.

Even as his left, prosthetic arm was fixed into holding the reins, he held sword-form Nemesis in his right, ready for whatever might come.

B3 jumped up on the roof of the carriage and held up her shield, making it clear she was on high alert as well.

Both of them were armed and ready, but even so, they failed to notice someone jump out from behind the tree and to the forward-right of the moving carriage. That "someone" was none other than the Nobushi Princess, Rosa.

She didn't miss the minor opening in their alertness.

"A Kill Supreme!"

And she used her Superior Job's unique skill on Ray.

◇◇◇

Five Minutes Earlier, Paladin, Ray Starling

"K&R's sub-leader is name Rosa. Rosa's job is Nobushi Princess, and it's the Superior Job from the nobushi grouping," B3 told me.

She'd started giving me info right after asking me whether I'd like to defeat K&R's sub-leader.

"Though Nobushi is a job branching out from Samurai, Nobushi and Samurai focus on very different things," she continued.

"As far as I know, Samurai are close to the Fighters or Gladiators we have here," I said. "So, what do Nobushi focus on?"

"Ambushes and first hits. The damage they deal with *the first attack they use on an opponent on that day* is ludicrous. Nobushi Princess's unique job skill can easily go into the hundreds of thousands."

Ambushes, eh...? I thought. *I guess it's a reference to Sengoku Era peasants who preyed upon deserters.*

Anyway, six digits of damage was no joke. That amount was matched only by the likes of Shu's punches or stabs from Xunyu's Yinglong's Fang.

Through all my sparring, I'd found that Counter Absorption could only take 200,000 points of damage before breaking, so unless the damage done was closer to 100,000 than it was to 1,000,000, not even we could survive it. Hell, it would come as a surprise attack, so I probably wouldn't even be able to activate it in time.

"There's no need to try and bear or dodge Rosa's first attack," said B3.

"Huh?" I raised an eyebrow.

"It's best to just let it hit you."

...B3, you've completely lost me.

"Nobushi ambushes were greatly feared for quite a while after the game began. And for a reason. The jobs are a great source of single-attack damage, after all. They were especially popular among PKs who liked to ambush, and many players ended up being OHKO'd by Nobushis. But eventually, things started to change."

B3 raised up her upper clothing and showed me the thing she was wearing underneath. It was an accessory that I knew very well. In fact, I was wearing one right now.

"What caused the change were these Lifesaving Brooches. When a certain portion of players began wearing these, Nobushi lost their advantage."

“I see...”

Since Nobushi were only strongest on their first hit, the existence of an item that negated fatal damage was their bane. Lifesaving Brooches canceled out their sole advantage, effectively turning the immense power of their first hit into no problem.

“It’s not unusual for certain MMO strategies to become obsolete as the environment changes,” B3 added. “I can also name the Guardian-Jaguarman strategy as another example. That one declined when the King of Beasts appeared.”

Basically, the game’s meta shifted. This was common in many multiplayer gaming scenes, and you could even see it in trading card games and the like.

“Mind you, the Nobushi Princess, with her Superior Job stats, still uses this strategy,” B3 said. “‘Breaks the Brooch? Good enough for me,’ and all that.”

B3 spoke as though she’d actually heard her say those words.

“Still, that doesn’t change the fact that our Brooches can negate her first — and strongest — attack. And, as you can imagine, when she does her ambushes, she’s almost completely on the offensive, meaning that...”

◇

Meaning that... for us, it was a great opportunity.

“Gh!” The Nobushi Princess’s attack pierced my chest, and all the damage done was negated by my Lifesaving Brooch. Her attack was many times more powerful than my remaining HP, and it came as no surprise that the Brooch inside my armor instantly shattered. But that was no loss, for the moment I felt the impact on my chest, I was already making my move, fully certain of how I had to retaliate.

I had to *aim for the exact moment her attack hit, and give it back twofold.*

“Vengeance...”

It was the technique I’d pictured when I’d prepared for death while facing Franklin’s DGP.

“...is...”

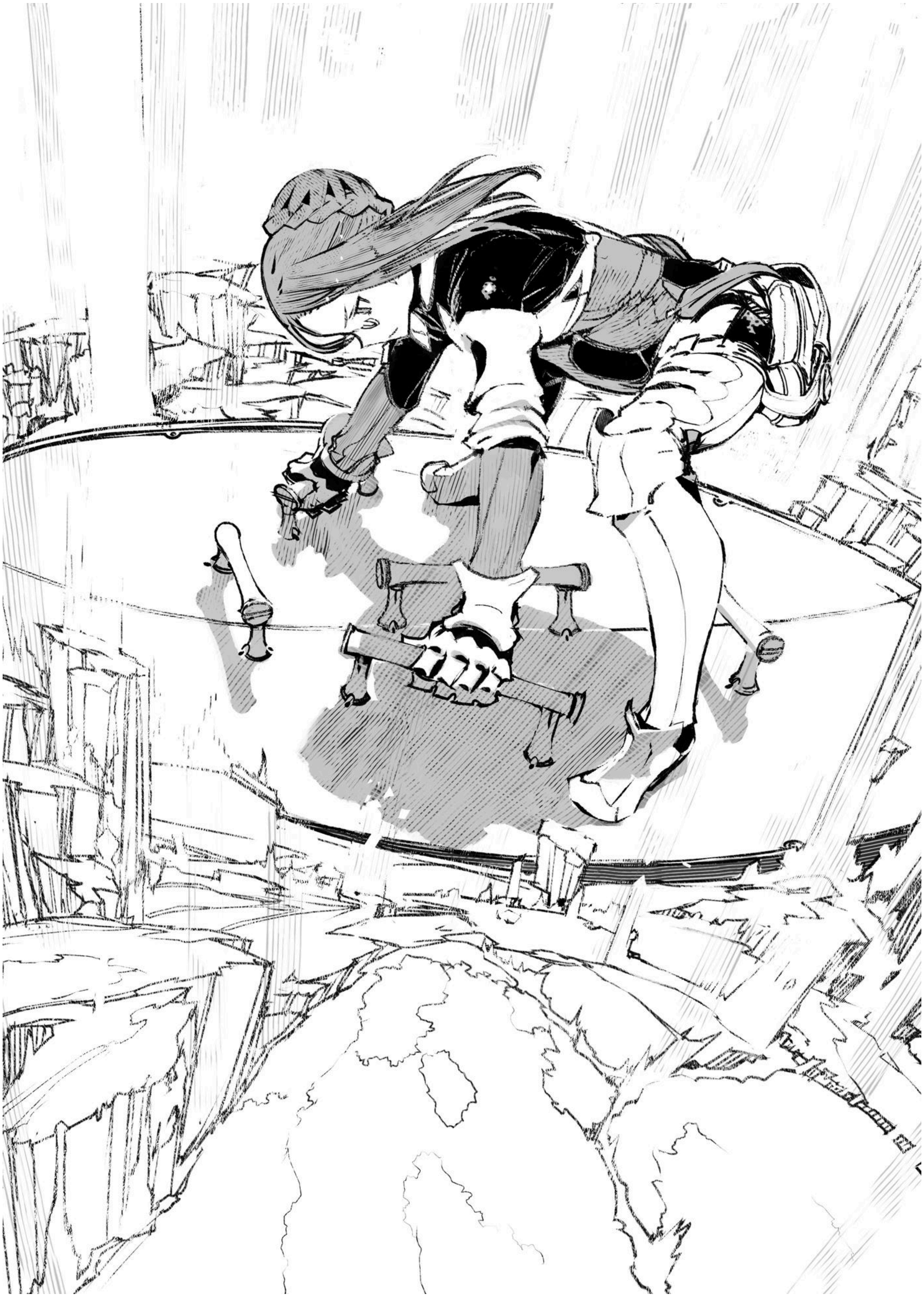
It was the move I’d mastered while sparring against the duel rankers.

“...Mine!”

And now, without a flaw to name, I used it on Rosa.

“Wha?!” she gasped in surprise as my counterattack forced her to drop down from the carriage. Her body skipped on the ground three times before she stopped, leaving her spread out and vulnerable.

“—las! Stronghold Pressure!” B3, not missing the opportunity, jumped off the carriage and crushed Rosa with her second giant shield.



Suddenly, I heard the sound of something wet being crushed.

"..." I had no words.

"Oh, dear," said Nemesis. "I'm actually scared of seeing what's going on under the shield."

B3 had mercilessly pulverized a downed enemy, but I didn't think it was relentless of her. After all, Rosa had been perfectly fine even after taking my Vengeance, which had dealt double the six-digit damage she'd done to me. That wasn't an amount that could be taken care of with just a Dragonscale Ward — which reduced incoming damage by 90% — so it was clear she'd also had a Lifesaving Brooch.

Unlike in my mock battles, my opponents could also use Brooches, so the result of my counterattack was pretty obvious. Still, B3's follow-up ought to be more than enough to finish her off.

As proof, the blood spreading out from beneath the shield was slowly becoming particles of light, making it clear that Rosa had received the death penalty.

"Well done, Ray," said B3.

"You, too," I replied. "And hey, you were right. She actually did go for me."

When we'd talked about how we'd deal with her, B3 had said that Rosa would most likely attack me first. I'd assumed she'd go for B3, considering she was a higher level, but she'd suggested otherwise, saying that, because I held the reins, taking care of me would reduce our mobility. That seemed like a good reason by itself, but I felt like B3 had had another basis for this assumption.

"Yes, I expected as much," B3 said. "She and I have fought before, and I used the same ultimate skill I used just now as a counter, in a manner similar to yours. I assumed she wouldn't attack me to avoid repeating the same mistake."

Oh, so you've fought her before, I thought. *That explains why you know so much.*

"But man, to think we won against an SJ so easily..." I said.

"Player battles aren't all about differences in levels and stats," B3 replied. "Preventing your opponent from using their powers, while using your own cards in the best manner possible, is far more important."

The battle just now had been the perfect example of that. We'd used my

Brooch to negate her primary power, and then used the resulting opening to launch a combination of my counterattack and B3's ultimate skill.

"I must say, your counter was quite a feat," B3 commented. "Not everyone can land a hit while taking a hit."

"Well, I've had tons of practice. The duel rankers helped me out a lot with that."

They'd helped me learn to launch a counter *while* receiving my opponent's attack. That wasn't a *Dendro* skill, but a technique I'd learned myself. Though I hadn't gotten to use it against DGP, I'd kept the idea in my mind, polished it in the many mock battles I'd had during the past in-game month, and become good enough at it to use it in a real battle.

All the sparring had given me many chances to test it, and Bishmal, the seventh in the rankings, had been especially passionate about helping me. After all, he had always, without fail, started every battle by charging towards me with his ultimate skill. He had obviously been taking that simple approach to help me learn.

I mean... that couldn't have been his actual fighting style... right? I pondered.

Anyway, because of that, he was the only ranker against whom I'd won more than I'd lost. The other rankers had been able to counter this technique after the first time I'd used it on them, but still, without it, we wouldn't have won this battle.

I said, "The counter not only had excellent timing, but—"

"A Kill Supreme!" B3's words were cut short by the activation of a skill. For a moment, I was completely lost as to what was happening.

Before I realized it, a spear had pierced B3's chest and launched her into the carriage's door.

Suddenly, it came to me that I'd heard the skill name and had seen the spear before. This attack could only have been done by one person. "Yeah, you're wearing a Brooch, too. No surprise there, B3." It was the Nobushi Princess, Rosa — the one we'd killed just a few moments ago.

"Well, I'm quite sure it's broken now," she continued.

"Why are you alive?" asked B3, still standing despite the impact and the damage from the spear. However, the shattered Brooch falling out of her clothes made it clear that she wasn't as good as she appeared.

"Ray's attack broke your Brooch," B3 continued. "So my ultimate skill should've killed you, right?"

"Well, normally, yeah," Rosa replied. "Your skill is as much of a big deal as ever, and the Unbreakable's counter was something else. Sadly for you, though..."

She cracked a grin and showed us the thing hanging on her wrist. Though it was wrapped around her arm like a bracelet, upon taking a better look at it, I realized it was a small, dried up doll.

"I killed a UBM recently and got this thing here. It's why I survived. You can guess what it does, can't you?"

"Considering there was blood and particles of light, I assume it 'Creates a substitute and replaces you with it right before you experience fatal damage.'"

"Not bad, you data nerd. You more or less got it."

So basically, Rosa had two accessories that let her avoid lethal damage.

...How is that allowed?

"Non-Brooch items that negate fatal damage are rare and precious," said B3. "You sure are lucky."

"Ha ha!" Rosa chuckled. "Good girls get good things, you know?"

"Is that a joke?" B3 snapped. "Because I'm not laughing."

Though they were talking like friends, I could sense an air of bloodlust gathering between them. It was reminiscent of what I felt when watching Figaro and Tsukuyo Fuso.

However, B3, being an endurance-type, showed no intention of attacking just yet. If she made one wrong move, Rosa would quickly take advantage of any openings in her defenses.

"Anyway, now none of us can do anything against fatal damage," Rosa spoke up again. "I also used my first attacks against you both, and B3's pretty little ultimate skill can't be used again until the cooldown's up. I'm not wrong there, am I? Your ultimate's cooldown ain't as long as *mine's*, but it still takes some time, doesn't it?"

B3 said nothing.

"Also," Rosa said before pausing and looking at me. "I now know about the Unbreakable's counter. You just used a skill that works as long as the sword touches the enemy, didn't you? The posture or the power you give it doesn't matter at all, right?"

"Ah!" I gasped. She already knew the workings of the counter I'd just used.

Indeed, Vengeance is Mine worked as long as the blade touched my enemy, delivering double the damage I'd received from them to that particular part of the body. Sure, I'd had to force the sword inside when fighting large monsters with cores in their bodies, but that wasn't necessary with human-sized opponents.

Regardless of how awkward my posture was or how little power I put into it, Vengeance activated as long as the blade was connected to their body, meaning that I could use it even when I was being hit and couldn't position myself properly.

That was exactly why the counterattack I'd used against Rosa had worked so well, and apparently, that alone had been enough for her to figure out how it worked.

"Guess you could call it an 'Impact Counter' or something," Rosa commented.

She'd actually given it a name. Well, it wasn't weird or anything, so I was fine with it.

"I've heard you've been sparring against the rankers. I can just imagine Bishmal charging at you, and you using him as a practice dummy for this trick."

"You seem quite knowledgeable about the rankers," said Nemesis.

"Well, that's because I am one." Rosa cracked a grin. "I'm the fifth, you know?"

...So it wasn't just the third. Both the third and the fifth were among K&R's player killers.

"There's not much to it," she added. "My darling plays along with my hobbies, so I play along with his. I kinda like duels, too. Even if I can't use my ambushes." She formed a smile.

"Yeah," I said. "To ambush someone in a duel, you'd have to be like Xun...yu...?"

Hold on, I thought. *She just said that she couldn't use her ambush attacks — the nobushi grouping's forte — in a duel. In that case... how did she rise up all the way to fifth?*

As if to answer that question...

"All right, then. I can't use my job's ultimate skill, so I'll take you on in a fair fight." Rosa reached into her inventory and took something out.

It was the skull of a dragon, probably a land-based one, and it was even larger than her body. She placed the skull on the tip of her spear and casually spun it before saying a certain set of words.

“Remnants of Warrior Dreams — Gashadokuro!”

The skull she had pulled out instantly became powder, which was then absorbed by her spear.

The sight reminded me that the fifth in the duel rankings was called “the Bone-Eater.” However, it didn’t end with *just* eating.

“Khaaaaghhh!” Rosa roared as her spear unleashed a light and a white aura, which soon engulfed her whole body.

At that moment, when the light and the aura made it impossible for Rosa to see...

“Stronghold Pressure!”

...B3 crushed her with the giant shield.

It was a repeat of the attack from before, but the results were drastically different this time.

“Not gonna work now!” Rosa shouted as she stopped B3’s attack with little effort.

She was now clad in a white exoskeleton. Her form was abnormal, like a forced merging of humanoid and draconic bones, and the presence she emanated was completely unlike before. It felt as though I were looking a hardened warrior and a mighty beast inhabiting a single body.

“Hh!” B3 gasped as she let go of the giant shield and jumped backwards.

“Hhaagh!” Rosa exclaimed as she pulverized the shield with just her exoskeleton’s right arm. Indeed — the stout, bulwark-like shield crumbled in but a single hit.

“Such beastly strength... It reminds me of Brother Bear,” commented Nemesis, and I was inclined to agree. Of course, Rosa was still nowhere near Shu, but her power was incomparable to what it had been before. It was, without a doubt, her Embryo’s ultimate skill, and it was an enhancement transformation type, just like Riser’s — the sixth in the rankings.

We were now faced with a player who had a real ace up her sleeve.

“She’s strong,” I muttered. The power and presence were enough for me to see that she was indeed a duel ranker.

And yet, despite that, I still believed... “...that winning is possible,” Nemesis finished my thought. “Correct?”

“Yeah,” I replied as I tightened my grip on my greatsword and resolved to battle the mighty foe before me. “But man, this sure is a bothersome ultimate skill.”

I’d spent a lot of the past month sparring against the rankers. Needless to say, they were all significantly stronger than me, and — barring one exception — I had repeatedly lost against all of them. However, I knew full well which one of them gave me the hardest time.

Ignoring Superiors like Figaro and Xunyu, the most difficult opponent for me was the sixth, Masked Riser.

You’d expect it to be the fourth, Juliet, who had a Superior Job, but no, I had more trouble with the high-rank Master in sixth. His Embryo’s ultimate skill was the type that transformed him and greatly enhanced his abilities.

Compared to ultimates that launched single, powerful attacks, prolonged status enhancements were far harder to counter for me.

It was made worse by the fact that, with my current stats, even the most basic attack post-transformation was lethal for me, and that alone was enough to make me wary of such opponents.

“Rhhaagh!” Rosa, now clad in her exoskeleton, roared as she attacked, as though flaunting the fact that she was exactly that type of fighter. The power of her attacks and the proficiency behind them made it clear she was on the same tier as the famed rankers.

“Goddamn, she’s trouble,” I grumbled.

However, though Rosa was on the same tier as Riser and had an ultimate skill similar to his, there was one way in which they greatly differed.

From what I could see, the Nobushi Princess was now an *endurance type*.

B3 and I had already taken advantage of several openings in her defenses and landed many hits on her, but it didn’t look like any of them had had an effect. In fact, I wasn’t sure if we’d done even a single point of damage.

“Ha,” Nemesis chuckled. “Most of the rankers were speed-focused, so we’re not used to this.”

Indeed, the duelists I’d sparred against had prioritized speed over toughness, and Rosa’s ambush had made me assume she was the same.

"Wait, maybe she..." *Maybe her battle style changed when she used her ultimate skill?* I wondered.

I was assuming this because she'd activated it by using the skull of a monster, and because, when Marie had shown me the clips on her crystal, Rosa's fighting style had been different than it was now.

Back then, instead of being completely covered by an exoskeleton, she'd only worn a bony set of arm and leg bracers. This made it safe to assume that the skill could create exoskeletons meant for different styles depending on what skulls she used, which would make it not only powerful, but versatile, as well.

"Aahahahahahah!" Rosa laughed out loud. "Come on, come on, COME ON!"

She charged towards B3 while masterfully using her bone-made, mace-like right arm and the spear — likely her Embryo — fixed in her left arm. Her power was great, and her attacks damaged B3's shield by merely grazing it.

Rosa now excelled at both defense and offense, leaving us overwhelmed despite it being a 2v1 battle.

"However," I said as I noticed something, "she's not fast."

She was nowhere near the speed of the duel rankers I'd fought against. In fact, she was even slower than me, which was crazy, considering she'd been much faster while ambushing us.

Most would assume she'd become slower because of the weight added by her transformation, but that was only half-right. She had certainly slowed down because of an increase in weight, but it certainly wasn't caused by the transformation.

No. The extra weight didn't even come from herself.

"I knew it would be like this, but I'm still surprised you can move while being so close," mumbled B3. "I mean, the weight can be as high as *500 times* greater than normal."

It was one of B3's Embryo skills.

Cracks were appearing around Rosa's feet, and her legs were sinking about ten centimeters into the ground. While the "Anti-Gravity" skill B3 had used had seemed to make things lighter, this one appeared to have the opposite effect.

However, despite being exposed to 500 times greater gravity and reaching the point where she started breaking the ground she treaded, the Nobushi Princess could still run towards B3 and attack her.

The skill slowed her down enough for B3 to be able to deflect Rosa's attacks with the curved surface of her shield. Still, it was clear that a proper, direct hit would break it, just like the other one.

I also noticed that B3 was defending against Rosa's attacks in a way that gradually distanced them from the carriage. Louie was still inside, hidden from the battle and protected by the vehicle's defensive barrier. However, it was obvious it wouldn't be much protection against Rosa as she was now, so B3 was making sure to lead her as far away from the carriage as possible.

Before the time limit hit, B3 and I had talked about the likelihood of K&R stopping their attack if we'd told them we had Louie, a tian, with us.

The clan had a set of rules, and no one there wanted to get on the wanted list, so if they knew about Louie, it was possible they would let us go.

However, B3 had said that: "If they don't stop, the situation will shift from bad to worse."

K&R had started the attack exactly when we were in the middle of the area, when it was hardest for us to escape. If they had some sort of reason they simply *had* to defeat us, telling them about Louie would most likely turn him into a hostage.

And now that we had the Nobushi Princess herself — the strongest among them — coming after us, it was clear they were intent on killing us.

Having to protect Louie made this an uphill battle in more ways than one, and it wouldn't be hard for Rosa to make short work of us if she knew of his existence.

According to B3, "We can't know how well the clan is protecting Kashimiya's rules without him there, so it's best to act while expecting the worst."

And because of that, we were now fighting while hiding Louie's existence and trying our best not to let any damage come to him.

Side note: I *had* asked about the life search skill and whether it worked on Louie, and B3 had said that it functioned based on levels, so a tian child would remain undetected. After all, normal tian children didn't have jobs and thus, levels, making them immune to the search.

This was supported by the fact that Rosa hadn't mentioned Louie even once, which meant she either didn't know he was here... or was merely pretending she didn't.

"Glad to see this skill again, B3!" shouted Rosa. "It's like I'm in the training arc of some manga! Though, you *do* know it's not enough, RIGHT?!"

"Gh...!" B3 exclaimed.

Their battle was turning more heated than ever.

The Nobushi Princess was obviously referring to the ultimate skill B3 had already used. If B3 had used it while Rosa's movement was as limited as it was now, she could easily have achieved victory. I recalled one of the PKs from Marie's crystal ball having used a similar combo.

"Tell me this, B3!" Rosa continued. "Why aren't you switching to your main job?! You making light of me or something?!"

"Oh no, this is the best I can do right now," B3 replied.

"Quit your acting and go all out, damn it!" And Rosa continued vehemently attacking B3, who did her best to defend against her.

I was left on the sidelines of all this, since Rosa didn't show any intention of hurting me. In fact, she didn't even give me as much as a glance. This woman was focused solely on B3.

"Hmph, looks like you became too famous," said Nemesis.

"...Yep."

The tricks I had up my sleeve, such as the powerful Counter Absorption-Vengeance combo, were already well-known by many.

This was all because the broadcast of my battle against the RSK had been voiced, and my voice had been heard as clearly as Franklin's. Because of that, it was now common knowledge that I had a skill that absorbed damage, and that I could return it back to my attackers. Anyone who was aware of that wouldn't willingly attack a counter-user like me.

Rosa seemed to know that my and Nemesis's Vengeance was about the only thing here that could break through her endurance and deal damage to her, so she was purposely ignoring me and targeting only B3.

I silently thought things through. With Louie being in the carriage nearby, I couldn't use Hellish Miasma. Sure, I could give him an Elixir, but the miasma could ride the wind and affect more than just us, so in the end, it really wasn't an option.

That left me with only one option: the usual Counter Absorption-

Vengeance combo.

However, to make it work, I had to get Rosa to hit me, and the only way I could make that happen was by slipping in between her and B3 while she was attacking.

That wouldn't be easy, considering I had to do it without her noticing me. She wasn't looking at me right now, but she would surely see me if I were to get close to them.

I looked around and examined my options.

"Ray! This is bad!" Nemesis exclaimed, making me hastily look back at the battle.

B3's situation was dire. Not in terms of who had the upper hand, but because of her position.

I didn't see how, but they had switched places, and the carriage was now *right behind B3*.

"HAHAAH! Let's go, B3!" roared Rosa.

Despite being affected by supergravity, she charged towards B3 with immense ferocity, shattering the ground beneath her. The force and vigor she emanated made her seem inhuman, much like the Pure-Dragon whose bones were used as material for the exoskeleton.

"Gh...!" B3 grunted in anger, not doing anything to avoid Rosa's incoming attack.

It wasn't because she couldn't — she simply didn't. After all, the carriage right behind her contained Louie.

This was one of the ways Rosa could make short work of us. If Rosa targeted Louie, we had no choice but to defend him, even if we had to abandon our ability to defend ourselves.

It didn't look like the Nobushi Princess had intended this, but that didn't change the fact that our situation was now more dire than ever.

If B3 averted a single attack in a way that made it go straight to the carriage, it would jeopardize Louie's life. Thus, she had no choice but to take the attack head-on.

"Fatal Defender!" She shouted a skill, making her shield momentarily shine, then break when hit by Rosa's attack.

The impact blew B3 away, making her crash into the carriage.

Rosa didn't miss this opportunity and attacked her again.

"HA! That skill raises your defense in exchange for destroying your shield, doesn’t it?! Pretty desperate, aren’t you?!”

“Shut up. Fatal Defender!”

B3 was able to take the following attacks by using the same skill again, but if every use of it really cost a shield, her situation was really bad.

I had to find a way to help.

“I have to go... *there*,” I said as I made my move, going as fast as I could while avoiding being noticed by Rosa.

I was heading for the side of the carriage opposite to the one they were at.

During that time, B3 lost a total of five shields, and was slowly starting to receive damage, which caused her to slow down while trying to prepare the sixth.

The Nobushi Princess wasn’t lenient enough to miss that opening.

“YOU’RE DONE, B3!” she roared as she swung both her arms.

The bone mace on her right and the spear in her left were closing in on B3, carrying enough power to finish her off.

However, right before they landed, I *jumped out from under the carriage*.

“?!” B3 gasped.

When Rosa was focused on her battle with B3 and attacked in the direction of the carriage, I’d slipped under the carriage from its opposite side.

The vehicle had been designed to handle uneven roads, and its base was high enough for me to go under by just bending forward. The area under the carriage was a blind spot for Rosa, since she was already pretty tall and her sizable exoskeleton raised her visual point even higher.

Of course, the carriage was also still taller than her, and that had allowed it to function as a wall that had prevented her from seeing me get to the other side and hide under it. From there, I had been capable of slipping in between B3 and Rosa, which had given me the perfect opportunity.

“Counter Absorption!” Nemesis howled and activated the skill.

“Shi—! Screw it, I’ll break through!” Rosa reacted, hesitating for a moment before attacking with even more ferocity.

She intended to shatter my barrier, me, and B3 all at once.

“RHAAAGH!” she roared as the bone mace on her right arm crashed into the barrier, making it crack. “RUOOAGH!” she roared again as she launched an attack from the spear in her left.

The barrier of light was no longer there to protect us, and the spear was quickly closing in to pulverize B3 and me both.

“Counter Absorption!” Nemesis triggered the skill again, putting up the *second barrier of light*.

A high-speed Counter Absorption activation. It was something she’d had to learn if we wanted to stand a chance against all the high-speed fighters in the duel rankings. The second barrier not only neutralized the attack that would’ve surely killed me, but also gave me a chance to launch a counterattack.

“Vengeance...”

This counter would carry the damage of two powerful attacks. Rosa’s exoskeleton prevented me from unleashing it on her body, and I doubted that it was enough to shatter the tough, large bones covering her now. However, I already knew where I had to aim for my counter to be effective.

“...is Mine!”

My blade was touching the tip of the spear she was extending towards me — *the main body of her Embryo, Gashadokuro*.

The moment I finished activating the skill, Gashadokuro was exposed to double the amount of damage I’d accumulated with my two Counter Absorptions.

It exceeded the Embryo’s endurance as a weapon, and a moment later, it shattered into pieces.

Chapter Eight: The Bad Dog and the Owner

Paladin, Ray Starling

Our counterattack landed right on Rosa's Gashadokuro, breaking it into too many pieces to count.

With the Embryo's destruction, the exoskeleton forged by its ultimate skill also crumbled away. However, *that was where the damage ended*.

"This woman sure is tenacious," commented Nemesis.

"Can't argue with that," I agreed.

Indeed, the Nobushi Princess herself was completely unharmed.

There had been a small window of time between the moment Vengeance connected and the moment the damage left over from Gashadokuro's destruction reached her. She had used this opening to discard her Embryo, remove the exoskeleton, and distance herself from us, likely to avoid B3's gravity skill.

That escape had been nothing short of spectacular, but it meant little against the fact that the tables had turned.

Sure, I only had one more Counter Absorption use in stock, but B3 already had a new shield at the ready, and she still upheld the gravity skill. Without her exoskeleton, Rosa would be unable to resist its effects.

"Hhaah... Hhaah," she panted. "You're pretty good, Unbreakable."

Not even losing Gashadokuro could wipe that ferocious grin from her face. A broken Embryo wasn't lost forever, but they still took quite a while to regenerate.

"Heh heh heh," Rosa chuckled. "So I used up my ambushes and lost Gashadokuro... So what? The fight's just getting started!"

Despite her dire situation, her fighting spirit was completely unbent, and I found it highly reminiscent of the duel rankers I knew.

She was fixated on continuing this battle, and though we had the upper hand, that was still pretty bad for us.

If this went on for too long, other K&R members might come to her aid and turn the tides against us again. The battle so far had left us drained, meaning that something like that would further endanger not only us, but Louie as well.

If B3 hadn't been there to protect the carriage, the boy could've already been a goner, and prolonging this fight would only up the chances of it happening again.

...Hold on a second, I thought. *Rosa's not in a state to immediately hurt him, so maybe it's safe to tell her about him now?*

I glanced over at B3, who replied with a light nod.

"Hey, Nobushi Princess!" I called out to her aloud.

"That's 'Rosa' or 'Bone-Eater' to you, Unbreakable!" she roared in response. "I don't like being called a 'princess'!"

"That so?! All right then, Rosa, listen to this! We're in the middle of escorting a tian child to Torne! I hear you at K&R don't hurt tians! What the hell will happen to him if we're gone?!"

I readied myself just in case she tried to take Louie as a hostage.

"Don't you worry!" she replied with a chuckle. "I'll take him to Torne right after I'm done with you two!"

Well, that's... considerate, I thought.

The woman had no intention of harming the tian boy. Cool. Great. It would've been better if she'd also said that she'd back down, but she hadn't, so we had no choice but to fight her, win, and escape the area before the other K&R members got here.

"All right, I lost my ambush *and* my follow-up, but I'm not letting go of this fight yet! I'll turn this around!" Rosa reached into her inventory and took out some spare weaponry: a set of equippable claws and fangs.

I responded by brandishing Nemesis, while B3 readied her new shield for another skill.

It would all be decided by the next exchange of blows.

I prepared to charge...

"Please stop, all three of you. There's no need for this."

A strange person came between us and Rosa.

It appeared as though he'd teleported here, but no, his spontaneous entry had been due to nothing but *pure speed*.

He wasn't using stealth skills such as Marie's Art of Hiding or those on

Shu’s Kim-un-Kamuy, nor had he activated some Xunyu-like teleportation. My experience from fighting the speedster rankers made me absolutely certain of this. Also, unless my eyes were deceiving me... he was actually faster than both Figaro and Xunyu.

“Please don’t move,” he said. “Just a few more steps and you’ll be in my range.”

The first word that came to mind upon seeing him was “fluffy,” for he was wearing a coat that seemed to be made from pure, unprocessed wool.

“Anyone who enters my range will lose their head.”

The second word was “katana,” because, at his sides, he had two odachi unbefitting his small frame, both of which were linked to him with chain hooks bearing the semblance of rabbit skulls. Eerily enough, all the rings in the chain looked like shark heads, while the rabbit eye sockets had faint red lights burning inside.

“You too, Rosa,” he continued. “Don’t move, please. The hunt is over, so put your weapons away.”

At that point, I finally realized that this small-framed person was *an actual child*. He looked even younger than Xunyu, and he was delivering his warnings with a soprano unique to young boys.

“D-Darling?!” exclaimed Rosa. “You can go online?!”

...Did she just call him “darling”? I asked myself, as if denying reality. *Again, did this tall, muscular beast of a woman just call this short, young boy “darling”?*

That question weighed heavy upon my mind, and yet, it was still blown away by the words I heard next.

“And so you show yourself,” said B3. “The Guillotine... The Unsheath, Kashimiya.”

“Eh?” I voiced my shock. Her words made me doubt what I was hearing.

That was the Guillotine? The one and only Kashimiya?

...Well, I already knew Xunyu, so it wasn’t too weird that he was a child, but I still had my share of comments and questions.

Why was he wearing wool while bearing the Japanese name for cashmere goats? Where had he appeared from? Could he even unsheath those odachi? His arms certainly didn’t seem long enough for them.

Shu had once told me that weapon-focused Superior Jobs from the “The One” series required great mastery over the relevant techniques, so I also found it odd that The Unsheath had ended up in the hands of a child.

However, my prolonged exposure to skilled fighters made me certain of one thing: despite appearances, Kashimiya was probably on the same tier as

Figaro and Xunyu.

That aside, I had to focus on what he'd just said.

"The hunt is over?" I asked. "Does that mean K&R's withdrawing?"

"Yes." The boy nodded. "The other groups have already left."

Honestly, I couldn't be more thankful for that. Being ganked by the members of the kingdom's strongest PK clan wasn't my idea of a good time.

"Darling! Sorry, but I can't have that!" Rosa protested. "This is the start of our revenge!"

Apparently, there was some sort of disagreement between her and Kashimiya, but she'd just said one word I couldn't ignore.

"Revenge?" I raised an eyebrow.

Whatever does she mean? Why is it just the "start," too? I don't recall ever getting on K&R's bad side. Is this about B3? She said she'd fought them before, so... maybe?

"They're teaming up with the damn cultists from The Lunar Society!" Rosa continued. "We'll crush them and their plans! It'll be the signal before we attack the lunatics at their HQ!"

Her words instantly made it all clear, and there was only one way B3 and I could respond to that.

"We're not teaming up with them," we said, completely in-sync.

"...What?" Rosa became puzzled.

"Their leaders are acquaintances from college, but we don't really cooperate in-game," B3 explained.

"Hell, they kidnapped me just yesterday and I barely escaped," I added. "Also, Figaro just destroyed their base, so I'm not sure if you even have to do anything to it."

"...?" Rosa tilted her head in confusion. "Wait, but Tomika said you were having a nice chat with that hanger-on KoA and that you got something from him..."

"We're college acquaintances. Chats between us are nothing special."

"Yeah, and all he gave us was the payment for his tea."

"..." It looked like she finally understood.

Seriously, though... us? Scheming alongside the aberration? What kind of sick joke was that? By whose design would you ever come to that conclusion?

"Rosa," said Kashimiya, causing the confused woman to freeze solid. "If it's really as they say, it means you started a self-centered hunt based on nothing but a terrible misunderstanding. You not only inconvenienced them, but also went against the clan's principles."

Well, I won't lie. This was a real bother, I thought.

"In fact, I don't think I can allow this revenge of yours," he added.

"Eh? But the cultists started it..." Rosa argued.

"Oh? And who, exactly, accepted a suspicious beginner hunt job for nothing but profit?" His words were razor-sharp and almost murderous in tone.

Over yesterday and today, I'd been exposed to bloodlust from Figaro, Tsukuyo Fuso, B3, and Rosa, but Kashimiya's was unlike any of them. It was keen. Honed to perfection. And it made me feel like my head could fall at any moment.

Okay, how the hell is an elementary schooler capable of such strong murderous intent? I thought.

"On my way here, I heard *all* about the blockade incident that happened while I was away."

"I-I had to take it to pay for our HQ expansion..." Rosa argued. "And we still protected the rules of the hunt."

"That might be fair for bandit clans like Goblin Street, villain role-players like Mad Castle, or hitmen like the Superior Killer, but K&R is a hunting clan. Tell me, did we establish rules so we could hunt beginners that are less than rabbits to us?"

"Ghh..." Rosa groaned and fell silent.

So, Rosa had decided to join the newbie hunt without the leader's permission?

Now that's a bad move, I reflected.

"Do you think that was a good thing to do?" Kashimiya pressed her again.

"N-No! I don't!" Rosa meekly replied.

She was no longer the ferocious wolf she had been in the battle. Now, she was more like a cat outside its territory... or a naughty dog with a strict owner.

Honestly, the difference in physique and apparent age between them made the scene all kinds of confusing. Rosa was significantly larger than the average adult, and she looked at least 20 years older than Kashimiya.

Just what kind of relationship did they have? Was Rosa actually a child, too? Were they siblings or something? Or was it the other way around and Kashimiya was actually an adult?

Overwhelmed by curiosity, I silently asked B3 to tell me more about them.

"Kashimiya started out in Tenchi, as a solo player killer," she said. "But instead of PKing indiscriminately, he simply did it because he wanted serious duels where the loser got the penalty. 'Consensual PK,' so to speak. Players with this stance aren't uncommon in Tenchi, and it's one of the reasons why he also participated in actual duels."

I see, I thought. *And he continued dueling even after moving here, eventually becoming third in the rankings.*

"Rosa, on the other hand, led a bandit-like PK clan. One day, they all fought against Kashimiya and suffered a staggering defeat. They tried attacking him many times after that, and, well..." B3 fell silent and heaved a long, tired sigh, as if she just couldn't find the words for this. "Apparently, Rosa eventually fell in love with Kashimiya..."

"B3," I interjected. "Kashimiya is..."

"...about as old as his avatar."

"And Rosa is..."

"...about as old as her avatar."

That's a crime!

"And just so you're aware, most of the clan's members feel the same way as her."

It's a goddamn fan club! An actual hive of little boy enthusiasts!

"Anyway, Kashimiya eventually had to move out of Tenchi, and Rosa and her clan followed and asked him to become their leader."

"...And?"

"Kashimiya accepted in exchange for having the clan adopt a set of rules, which brings us to the present."

Oh, so Kashimiya was mad at Rosa for breaking those rules.

"This is partially my fault for being away for so long," Kashimiya continued. "I went on a short homestay in America, had to visit my grandmother in Hokkaido, and then had to do the homework that had piled up. I'm really sorry that focusing on that made me unable to visit the clan."

Hey, no one can fault you for that, I thought. *Real life's important, too.*

"But still, PKing beginners for money is a very bad thing to do. If you're defeated by The Lunar Society because you did it, you're only getting what you deserve."

"B-But darling, the offer was just too delicious to pass up..."

"No matter how tasty, there are some things you shouldn't eat! That's what it means to be a moral person!"

"I-I'm sorry!"

I was actually watching an elementary school boy scold a woman in her twenties and teach her about morality.

"Rosa is a... simple person who doesn't think things through and rarely considers the after-effects of her actions," commented B3. "Kashimiya, on the other hand, is a bit... no, *a lot* more developed as a person than his age would have you expect, so scenes like this aren't too uncommon."

Well, I could definitely see what she'd meant when she'd called Rosa "not the sharpest tool in the shed."

"Not only that, but..." Kashimiya said as he looked Louie, who was fearfully peeking out of the carriage. "You also involved a tian child in your grudge match."

He then placed his hand on his head, as if to lighten a headache, and heaved a long sigh.

For someone so young, he sure doesn't seem to have it easy.

"Th-That's 'cause Tomika didn't say anything about him..." Rosa argued.

"I'M SOOOO SORRYYYYY!" cried someone hiding a short distance away from us.

I looked and saw a girl Master — likely another K&R member — secretly observing what was happening here.

"Tomika! You little..."

"Please leave it for later," Kashimiya cut Rosa's words short. "More importantly, about the moment Mister Unbreakable told you about the tian child..."

"Twitch..." Rosa said.

"'I'll take him to Torne right after I'm done with you two'? That's not how it goes, is it? We have a rule against attacking Masters protecting tians, don't we?"

"Twitch, twitch!"

...Is she vocalizing that sound effect on purpose?

"Rosa, please apologize."

"I-I'm sorry, darling!"

"No. Not to me."

Rosa reluctantly turned towards us...

"S-Sawree." It was one of the most awkward apologies I'd ever heard.

Her poor delivery aside, no one had died in this encounter, so I was entirely willing to forgive her as long as she didn't try to attack us again.

However, B3 seemed to have other ideas.

"No, that doesn't seem sincere," she said.

"...B3?" I raised an eyebrow and turned to her.

She adjusted her glasses, reached into her inventory, took out some paper, and began writing something. "I am willing to forgive the attack itself with just that sloppy apology, but it doesn't make up for the actual damage done. We both lost our Lifesaving Brooches, and I had to sacrifice a number of shields."

"Ah."

She had a point there. *Somebody* had to pay for all the shields Rosa had broken, and there was no better person for that than Rosa herself.

"With that in mind, this is the Contract for our damages. Please send the set amount of money to my account before the deadline provided." Contracts were a type of item used for setting and enforcing contracts, and B3 gave it to Rosa to sign.

"Tch, all right, all right," the woman grumbled. "...Wait, what's with this amount?! It's clearly above the market price! Hell, it's almost double!"

"Oh? Is that too much for you?" asked B3. "Didn't you make a killing from the newbie hunt?"

"You're damn right it's too much! This isn't just more than my share from the newbie hunt! It's more than my entire savings!"

"...'*My share?*'" Kashimiya overheard, repeated Rosa's words and emanated another wave of bloodlust.

"Ah!" Rosa gasped, realizing her mistake. She closed her mouth with her hand.

I looked to B3, who was adjusting her glasses as if proud of a job well done.

You made her walk into that one, didn't you? I thought.

"Rosa, you said it was to expand our HQ, didn't you?" Kashimiya asked in a menacing manner. "Did you actually pocket some of the money?"

"Well, I... That's..."

"Please pay for their equipment, okay?"

"...Okay."

And thus, Rosa reluctantly signed the Contract. When she did so, I noticed that B3 lightly, yet triumphantly, pumped the hand she was hiding behind her back.

Then she came close to my ear and whispered, "I'll give you half of the extra money we get."

Well, then, I thought. *For someone so gentle, B3 sure bargains hard.*

Anyway, the contract was sealed, and we were set to receive both the damages and reparations.

And from what I was hearing, K&R also planned to pay compensation to the victims of their newbie hunt.

Rather than using Rosa's money or the clan's funds, Kashimiya would take managerial responsibility and pay them money from his own savings.

There was a thing or two to be said about having an elementary schooler pay for your failure, but Rosa seemed to be fully aware of this. She was on her knees and palms, looking thoroughly dejected.

"The beginner hunt didn't fit K&R's policy at all," said Kashimiya. "Hunting beginners before they can grow is definitely not good PK."

"'Good PK'? What?" I raised an eyebrow.

"That would be PK where you hunt people you told you would PK, and they accepted the challenge."

Well, that's certainly "good," but I'm not even sure if that counts as "PK" anymore.

"But even if you tell them, you only give ten minutes to escape, right?" I asked. "Unless you're close to the edges, that's not enough to leave the area."

"Rosa..." he said with an ice-cold tone thick with murderous intent. Apparently, he'd found some problem with what I said.

The likely culprit, Rosa, was still on her knees and palms, but she was now several meters away from us.

What an impressive backwards crawl. She truly was the Nobushi

Princess.

“The time we give depends on the size of the area, but it’s never less than an hour, right?” Kashimiya asked icily.

“W-Well... the hunt doesn’t go as well when we give that much time...” Rosa meekly argued.

“It’s *supposed* to be like that. The rule is there so we don’t hunt just anybody.”

So, while he was away, Rosa had gone and changed the rules he’d set. It seemed like a generic scenario about a malicious substitute leader misusing his power, but in this case, all of it was simply because Rosa wasn’t the smartest individual.

I could only hope she wasn’t so prone to messing up in real life.

“I’ll ask more about what happened over the last two months from the other members,” said Kashimiya. “While I do that, you’ll stand in the hallway with buckets in each hand.”

“EEHH?!” Rosa exclaimed.

That was a very... elementary school-like punishment to give, but it was made far worse by the fact that the receiver was a woman in her twenties.

“Why not just, you know... do away with her?” asked B3. I couldn’t tell whether she was suggesting he kill her or just kick her out of the clan.

“No, this is partially my own fault, so I won’t fire her,” he replied. “And if you mean giving her the death penalty... the problem with that is that she enjoys being cut...”

I see. I see. She enjoys it. All right, then.

“However, if there are many incidents like this one, I’m thinking of abandoning the leader’s seat and leaving the cla—”

“I’m sorry! I’m *really* sorry! I’ll never do stuff like this again! So please, don’t leave, darling!”

“NOOOOO! NOT THE CLAN! ANYTHING BUT THAT!”

Rosa and the hiding K&R Master both went into panic mode and implored him to reconsider.

Yep, this really is an idol fan club, I thought. *I wonder if anyone reacted this way when Shu left show biz.*

“That thought made me picture Brother Bear say ‘I’m going back to being a normal boy!’ before taking off his costume and revealing his muscles,” Nemesis said telepathically.

“PFFT!”

The comment made me burst out laughing, but thankfully, the K&R clan drama kept everyone from noticing.

Anyway, everything was settled, and we were about to resume heading to Torne. K&R made preparations to return to their HQ in the capital.

“Sorry for all the trouble today,” said Kashimiya. “I’ll make it up to you when I get the chance. Feel free to call me whenever you need me.”

“Oh. Okay,” I replied. “I guess I’ll hold you to that.”

In all honesty, I hadn’t the slightest idea of what I’d have him do.

“Then this is goodbye. Tomika, please ready the car.”

“Okay! Oboroguruma!” The other K&R member on the scene, who was apparently named Tomika, raised her left hand and made an armored vehicle-like object pop out of her crest.

From the name “Oboroguruma,” I could only assume that it was her Embryo, and that Kashimiya had ridden it all the way from the capital to here.

Tomika sat in the driver’s seat, while Kashimiya went to the back. Only Rosa was left.

“Unbreakable and B3... sorry about what I did today,” she said, giving another awkward apology while facing away from us.

“No need for that,” said B3. “I just want the reparations.”

“Gnh, all right, all right! I’ll send the money over to you before next week!”

Rosa spun around and walked towards Oboroguruma. Then, as though remembering something, she looked back and said her goodbyes.

“See ya later, B3! We were enemies today, but if you ever find the time, *let’s go PKing again*!”

The words she used were nothing to some, and a real bombshell to others.

As though thoroughly oblivious to what she’d just said, Rosa sat down in Oboroguruma with a carefree expression on her face.

Chapter Nine: To the Windy Village

Paladin, Ray Starling

After the folks from K&R left, we resumed our journey towards Torne.

The sun had already set, and Silver was now pulling the carriage over a dark road lit up by magic lights installed into the vehicle.

There was traffic here and there. Groups of Masters who'd survived the hunt and tians who hadn't been targeted to begin with were heading in the same direction as us.

Apparently, the party behind us had lost two of their people, and I couldn't help but feel a bit guilty about that.

But then again, the only ones at fault here were K&R, or just Rosa, to be specific.

The chaos had left Louie all drained, and he was now fast asleep inside the carriage. Hell, even if this whole thing hadn't happened, Louie was a child who'd woken up early in the morning to travel to the capital and back, so it was only natural for him to be exhausted.

Honestly, I was pretty tired, as well.

Well, I haven't gotten a proper breather on this side ever since the kidnapping, I reminded myself.

"I hope we get to Torne soon," Nemesis said aloud. She was sitting to my right on the coachman's seat. "We might finally get some rest there."

I couldn't help but agree with her.

"Though, I must say," she continued, switching to telepathy, "B3 is strangely silent."

I threw a glance over to B3, who was sitting to my left.

"..."

Continued silence. She hadn't said a single word ever since our exchange with K&R. It was probably because of Rosa's words as she left. Specifically, "Let's go PKing again."

I'd heard Kashimiya tell her off for saying that, but that didn't undo the very fact that she'd said it, effectively revealing two truths about B3.

First was the fact that B3 was acquainted with K&R, and that they weren't necessarily enemies, while the second was that B3, too, was a PKer.

The fact that she'd been hiding this could only mean that she hadn't wanted me to find out. Well, the curtain had fallen and now I knew. And as for what that made me think...

"...It bothers you, doesn't it?" B3 asked, suddenly breaking her long silence. "You're probably aware of this by now, but I'm a PKer. In fact, I'm about as infamous as K&R."

I listened, not saying a word.

"I haven't been active lately, but before I stopped, I gave the death penalty to at least a thousand players."

"That is quite awe-inspiring," Nemesis commented.

As a first-hand witness of B3's battle against K&R, I couldn't help but believe her. She was extremely adept at analyzing her opponents.

"I probably should've told you right at the start, but I chose to hide it because I thought you might avoid me," she admitted. "I didn't want to lose a new junior friend like that... Sorry."

B3 looked into my eyes and bowed her head repentantly.

It was clear as day that she was earnestly apologizing for keeping secrets from me, but honestly...

"Umm... I really don't think much of it, though," I said. The fact that she was a PKer didn't bother me in the slightest.

"...Eh?" She looked up with a confused look on her face.

"I wouldn't avoid you just because you're a PKer," I repeated myself. "Sure, I'd be pretty annoyed if you came at me like K&R did just now, but that's about it."

As long as someone didn't act like a certain bastard in a lab coat and go around doing acts of terror that endangered tians, I really didn't care if they were a PKer or not. Hell, a certain PKer hitman who was responsible for my only death penalty was now a member of my party. PKer or not — it barely mattered to me at this point.

B3 silently stared at me, as if to assess whether I was telling the truth or not, then sighed in relief before forming a faint smile. "I can't tell whether you're just excessively tolerant, softhearted... or just naïve."

"Ha ha," I chuckled. "Well, I can't really deny any of those. But even so, I feel that you're someone I can trust."

There were Masters who didn't hesitate to commit genocide upon tians. The King of Plagues that Marie had defeated, the King of Crimes that Shu had told me about, and Franklin — who I'd faced myself — were all among them.

However, I could easily tell that B3 was nothing like those three.

My strongest argument for this was the fact that she'd sacrificed her shields to protect Louie from Rosa, but even if I hadn't seen that, I already knew that she was kind and considerate at heart.

"Hell, I wouldn't have cared about you being a PKer even if you'd revealed it to me right at the start," I continued. "Like when we were talking at the college café."

"...No," B3 said as she looked away from me. "I definitely couldn't have told you then."

"Why not?"

"...If I'd told you that I was the infamous PKer X, you would have researched me on the Internet before going online, right?"

"No, I wouldn't ha— Well, maybe?" I couldn't entirely rule out the possibility.

"That would have been... well... embarrassing."

"Hm? Embarrassing? How?"

"When I'm PKing, I become an entirely different person... and it's definitely *not* someone I'd like my real life acquaintances to see..." Her cheeks turned rosy, and she covered them with her hands.

The gap between her current expression and her usual, calm and collected self made her seem a bit... cute.

"Ah! I just felt a violent, inexplicable surge of danger!" Nemesis exclaimed.

Nemesis? What's wrong? I asked.

"Oh, uh... but B3," she said, ignoring my question. "You didn't seem to change all that much in our battle against K&R. That was PKing, wasn't it?"

"Back then... I wasn't *turned on* in that way."

"'Turned on'?" Our voices as one, Nemesis and I repeated the term.

Did she have some sort of switch at the back of her head or something? Did it make her turn into a PKer when on? Was it like a literal "*kill*-switch?" I considered asking more about this...

“Hh... Nnh, hm...?”

...but that was when I heard sounds coming from the carriage. Louie had woken up.

“You’re awake?” I asked. “We should be there soon.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I can hear it.”

“‘Hear?’” I strained my ears and opened my mind. Upon doing so, I could hear lots of faint sounds coming from the other side of the hill before us.

Before long, Silver went up and brought us high enough to see beyond it.

“It’s beautiful,” said Nemesis, clearly overwhelmed by the sight.

The road to Torne now had guardrail-like fences on its sides, and both of them had been turned into *an attraction*.

The tops of the fences were decorated by countless pinwheel toys, spinning in the nightly wind. The paint on those toys had to contain something, because they were emitting a faint, yet vivid, shine. Brightening the dark like guiding lights, they spun and turned as though inviting us over to the village.

The sight was truly wondrous, and it made me understand why this festival attracted so many people.

“It starts tomorrow, but they already put up the windstars,” said Louie.

“‘Windstars’?” I raised an eyebrow. *Not pinwheels, not windmills, but “windstars?”*

Upon closer inspection, I noticed they all had a total of five blades, and when looking from the front, they did indeed have the likeness of a generic star symbol.

“They’re based on an old story from here,” Louie explained. “Long ago, a star that fell from the sky when the wind was very strong sealed the evil monster ‘Blacksky’ deep in the earth.”

Was that the local belief or something?

Thinking of “beliefs” made my mind trail off towards the aberration, but I couldn’t let myself forget that there were faiths other than hers.

“Ah! You can’t take the windstars off the fences!” Louie shouted, and I instantly turned to see Nemesis frozen solid while reaching towards the fence on her side.

“...Nemesis,” I said.

"I-I just... I watched them spin, and I just couldn't help it..."

What are you, a cat? What kind of reason is that?

"If you want a windstar, you can have this one," said Louie as he reached into his inventory, took out a windstar, and handed it over to Nemesis.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yeah! I brought it with me for good luck, but we have more back at the village!"

"I see... Thank you." Nemesis held the windstar in hand, looking at it with a gleeful smile on her face.

"This is the first time I've seen you make an expression that fits your appearance," I said. "If I don't count the times when you eat sweets, anyway."

"Mrgh! How rude! I'm a lady, so I have to use my indulgent expressions sparingly!"

Is that really a lady-like thing? I pondered. *It sounds warrior-like, to be honest. And hey, you already sound like a warrior sometimes... Oh, well.*

Anyway, despite the minor hindrance along the way, we'd made it to the outskirts of Torne.

We'd take Louie home, and then, come tomorrow, we'd start our search for information which could lead us to Shijima's real-life self.

That would be the real start of this quest.

◇◇◇

K&R's Headquarters

In the leader's room deep inside K&R's HQ, Kashimiya sat on a floor cushion while examining a pile of documents held together by a string.

It had been created by a member using skills from the shoshi job grouping — a set of scrivener-like jobs from Tenchi. That gave it the format of an old Japanese picture book.

Kashimiya flipped through the pages until one part of it made him furrow his brow.

"What're you reading, darling?" asked Rosa, standing at his side with water buckets in both her hands and on her head.

True to his word, Kashimiya had given her the punishment he'd said he would. The bucket on her head was an extra, added because Rosa had revealed that B3 was a PKer.

At first, Rosa had been taking her punishment in the hallway, but since she always cheated without him around, Kashimiya had made her do it in his room. Then again, Rosa could've intended this.

"This is the report for today's pseudo-hunt," Kashimiya answered.

"Ghuh," she flinched.

Indeed, Kashimiya was reading the report describing Rosa's hunt, which had been sparked by a misunderstanding and fueled by a personal grudge.

Besides the Masters who participated in the hunts, K&R also had members who recorded the situation and presented reports to Kashimiya and Rosa.

Kashimiya had to pay reparations to the newbies and process two months worth of information, but he first wanted to take care of the most immediate problem.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" Rosa said meekly. "Can you let it go?"

"This time, we lost a few group fighters and an entire set of squad fighters," Kashimiya said, completely ignoring her words.

"...What?"

The death penalties among the group fighters had obviously been caused by B3's Flying Shield. The group fighters were full of low-level members, so it wasn't strange for them to have been utterly crushed by someone in B3's tier, but the same couldn't be said about the squad fighters. They were parties of level 500 high-ranks, meaning that they could easily stand their ground against other parties of such caliber and likely defeat them, as well.

Though this had been primarily a personal assault on Ray and B3, it had also been a K&R hunt, so, while the group fighters and Rosa had focused on the two, the four sets of squad fighters had been hunting as normal.

The fact that one of them had been completely annihilated before Kashimiya had told them to withdraw — within only a few minutes after the hunt began — was somewhat strange.

"The search didn't show any Superior Jobs, though," said Rosa.

Circle of Detect Life was a skill that checked levels, so they would've instantly known if there had been anyone above level 500. With the exception of Rosa, the highest level in that hunting ground had been 500.

"Yes, the report says the same thing." Kashimiya nodded.

“Then...”

“Apparently, they were outnumbered. Not every battle’s outcome is decided by the power of one, after all.”

Rose was speechless. *Are you sure you, of all people, can say that, darling?*

Kashimiya was the very embodiment of the power of one he’d just mentioned. He was literally a match for a thousand. Unleash a regiment on him, and all their heads would fall.

“Anyway, the enemies were acting strange,” he said as he examined the document again. The fighters who’d been wiped out had attacked a party with particularly high levels among those caught in the search.

At first, both parties had been equal and it had seemed like either side’s game, but then, about a minute after the battle had begun, a few nearby parties had gathered at the location. They had all begun cooperating flawlessly, and the K&R squad fighter set had been quickly destroyed. According to the report, they’d killed two of the enemies before the last of them fell.

“They got there too fast, and they cooperated too well for it to be improvised,” said Kashimiya. “This can only mean that...”

“...a single group split into parties and moved separately for some reason, right?” asked Rosa.

“Yes. I think so,” he said, approving of her theory.

Though Rosa was a tactless, dumb dog with no forethought to speak of, her extensive experience as a leader of PK groups made her more knowledgeable on some fronts than Kashimiya.

Battle tactics was one of those fronts, and because of this, Kashimiya and Rosa had clean-cut roles in the clan — him as the general manager, and her as the hunt strategist.

In fact, the clan’s group fighters had been her idea. She’d figured that the inexperienced members would be most effective when they banded up and unleashed focused waves of long-range attacks. She definitely deserved credit for that strategy.

“Isn’t that strange, though?” asked Kashimiya. “If they’re heading to Torne at this time, they must be Windstar Festival tourists, right? It would be normal for them to go all together, so why did they split up?”

“I don’t think they’re tourists,” Rosa said. “They’re fellow PKers.”

“How can you tell?”

“They’re using the same plays as I did back in Tenchi and B3 did before her clan split up. A load of people in one group really stands out, and it’s easy to tell when they’re about to do something, so you split up into parties, surround your prey, and take care of them before they can even realize what happened.”

Rosa then laughed, adding, “This move is sometimes used when hunting actual animals.”

Her laugh made her lose her balance, causing the bucket on her head to flip and spill its contents all over her.

“Ugh, I’m all wet now...” she complained. “Anyway, they were probably following some target of theirs. We got anything else on them, darling?”

“The party they first attacked had a person with this mark on them,” he said, showing it to her.

It was a symbol best described as a red circle and black circle stacked together, and from certain perspectives, it appeared to represent a solar eclipse.

Rosa was familiar with that mark. “It’s Sol Crisis,” she said.

“‘Sol Crisis’?”

“Oh yeah, you don’t know about them. It’s a PK clan that blew up after the newbie hunt we did. They’re basically trying to fill the hole left by Mad Castle and GS, and their playstyle is closer to GS’s.”

Basically, this meant that one of K&R’s squads had lost against a rising PK group. Rosa wanted to go on a revenge match against them, but she wasn’t certain what Kashimiya would say to that. PKers were probably fair game to him, but the recent events might be too fresh in his mind for him to allow it.

“I see,” the boy sighed with a somewhat gloomy expression on his face. “Things sure have changed over the last two months...”

It had been a turbulent time, indeed. Full of various happenings, twists, shifts, and turns. The fact that he hadn’t been able to participate in any of it had made Kashimiya feel a bit lonely, as if everyone had moved on without him while he was offline.

His gloomy expression had a strong effect on Rosa, but she was somehow able to hide it.

“B-By the way,” she said, changing the subject to help her calm down.

“There’s a weird rumor about Sol Crisis!”

“Oh?”

“They say there’s one PKer among them that stands out... though it’s more about the gear he wears than the actual person.”

“What gear?”

“It’s a set of armor, used by a certain PKer...” she said before momentarily falling silent and picturing a certain person. “People say they saw someone in Sol Crisis wear Barbaroy Bad Burn’s Legendary full armor MVP reward, Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus.”

Conjunction Episode: The News

Torne Village, Paladin, Ray Starling

We passed the windstar-decorated road and arrived at Torne.

Being a village, it was obviously a far smaller place than Altea or Gideon. There were only about 400 or so houses spread out over a wide area, and the few windmills standing tall here and there made me feel like I was inside a painting of the 15-16th century Netherlands.

Torne and its surroundings looked crowded and lively, most likely due to tomorrow's Windstar Festival. I could even see some people setting up tents to sleep in. They probably hadn't been able to get a place at any local inn.

"I don't think we'll be any luckier in that regard," I muttered.

"We can sleep in the carriage," said B3. "Its interior space expansion makes it a bit like a camping car."

Well, then. All that was left for us was to take Louie to his mom and call it a day.

...Alas, that wasn't as simple as it seemed.

"Louie, are you crazy?! You're not supposed to do that!" Farica scolded Louie as he cried, sobbing loudly.

A child, all by himself, had taken a stagecoach to the capital, passing the monster-filled Fadl Mountain Pass in the process.

It was fair to scold him for that. In fact, a scolding simply *had* to happen.

"Just how sad do you think I and your dads would be if something happened to you?" she demanded.

Dads. Plural. She was obviously referring to both the MIA Shijima and Louie's late biological father.

With both of them gone, Farica was looking after Louie all by her lonesome, and I could barely even imagine the anxiety this incident had given her.

However, I knew enough to conclude that she'd been overdoing it.

Apparently, she'd been waiting for Louie in front of their home ever since she'd found out he'd left for the capital.

Farica had spoken to the merchants she was acquainted with and many other people who were heading for the capital, and after figuring there was nothing more she could do, she had carried a chair over to the front of the house and just sat there until we arrived.

An environment with jobs and stats might make tians stronger than the average real-life person, but that still seemed like a bit much to a woman in the later stages of pregnancy. I could understand being worried about her son, but she shouldn't compromise her health for that.

"B-But I wanted to find Dad...!" Louie cried.

"You know what he's like," said Farica. "How many times do I have to tell you that you don't have to worry about him?"

"But we have to find him! When he found out about the baby, he was so happy he cried! Don't you remember?"

"Louie..."

"He wants to see the baby! I'm sure of it!" Though his words came through tears — or perhaps because of that — his words were full of certainty.

Farica looked like she wanted to say something, but instead, she just gently wiped his tears and embraced him.

I stood silent. This was a talk between mother and child, and it felt like we didn't belong here at all.

I considered leaving and letting them have their moment, but since she had been waiting outside, I couldn't find the right time to do it.

Well, we also had a few things to ask her, so it might be best to wait it out.

"Anyway, Louie... Who are these people?" Farica asked finally.

"These are the Masters who said they would search for Dad!" he replied. "Mister Ray, Miss B, and Nemesis!"

"And why don't I get a 'Miss,' if I may ask?" Nemesis grumbled.

Because you don't look that much older than him.

"Nemesis... are you a Maiden?" Farica asked.

"Indeed I am."

"I see. Just like Juno..." Farica suddenly became pensive.

Well, Ichiro Shijima, her missing husband, was a Maiden's Master, so seeing another Maiden might very well mean something to her.

"They're here to talk to you about Dad to help them search for him," Louie added.

"Search for him...? But..." Farica said and momentarily fell silent. "Very well."

"Excuse me," B3 broke her silence and joined the exchange. "May I have a moment?"

"Yes?"

"We're here to gather information that could help us search for Ichiro Shijima in real li— I mean, 'on the other side.' To that end, we wanted to question you about him and examine any items he's left behind, but..." She paused and adjusted her glasses. "I believe it's best to leave it for tomorrow. You seem quite tired today, and we wouldn't like to stress you or your baby any further."

I couldn't agree more. It was already late, anyway, so all that business was best postponed to when Farica was in a better state.

"Thank you," she said. "I appreciate... that... phew..."

While talking, Farica lost her posture and almost collapsed, but I ran up and kept her steady. The wait for Louie must've been more burdening than I'd thought. She seemed extremely tired and looked somewhat anemic.

B3 took Farica and, led by Louie, carried her over to her room and had her lie down. I wasn't involved in this because we decided that a stranger like me had no place in a woman's room. Instead, I took care of the chair out front and checked my inventory for any items that could help Farica feel better.

Since I had a tendency to get all sorts of debuffs on me, and because I had quite a fat wallet, I was now loaded with debuff-removing items. I even had a dozen Elixirs, which had a market price of 100,000 lir each.

Well, actually, half of them had come from my daily gacha rolls, but hey, they were a better hit than a Permit.

"Can a pregnant woman really drink items meant for combat use?" asked Nemesis.

"...Oh. I don't really know."

Though this world's medicines came with descriptions of their effects, they never had warnings or anything like that. I'd yet to see any potion say things like "Ages X and up" or "Not for use by pregnant women."

"I guess I'll just give her some food, instead," I said. "I'll go ask if I can use the kitchen."

I already had some ingredients on me, so that wouldn't be a problem. Most of those had also come from the gacha, and though they were cheaper than the money I'd thrown in, at least they were useful.

Farica didn't feel too good about us doing any more for her than we already had, but Louie approved of me using the kitchen, so that was exactly what I did.

The kitchen here had an oven, a gas burner, and lots of other expensive-looking cooking equipment, all of which had probably been provided for them by Shijima. It didn't seem like I'd have much trouble making food in here.

I concluded that Farica needed something light, and decided to make some minestrone soup.

Might as well make something for Louie and ourselves, while I'm at it, I thought as I heard someone enter the kitchen. Upon turning around, I saw B3.

"I'll help," she said, already wearing an apron. She looked pretty good in that.

From how confident she seemed, I was guessing she knew her way around the kitchen. B3 might be unexpectedly good at homemaking.

"Ngh! I just felt another inexplicable surge of danger..." said Nemesis. "Oh! Ray, let me hel—"

"Not happening. You'll eat most of it all during tasting," I rejected her. "Don't think I've forgotten how you ate half of the cookie dough when we were baking with Riser and Bishmal."

"Nhogh... You don't trust me at all when it comes to food."

I have every reason not to.

"Ray," B3 spoke up. "I'm more curious about how you ended up baking cookies with those two."

"Well, this and that happened and it led to that."

Basically, we had all been helping out at a certain arena charity event. One thing that had really surprised me back then was the fact that Bishmal's cookies had been baked to perfection. In all honesty, as rude as that was, I'd expected him to completely burn his.

"Hmm... Well, I have some store-bought bread on me," I said. "Guess

I'll make some minestrone soup and green salad."

"Then I'll make some Hamburg steaks with cheese," said B3. "I'm quite good at those."

We quickly started cooking, and in about an hour, we had a full course of standard Western food. Neither I nor B3 had the jobs for it, but Cooking was a sense skill, meaning that we could cook as well as we did in real life.

But then, I couldn't neglect to mention that there were people like Marie, who couldn't cook even if they had the Cooking skill.

"First you bring my son back, and now you make food for us," said Farica, seemingly humbled. "I don't know what to say..."

"Don't worry about that," replied B3. "We did this because we wanted to."

"It looks so good!" Louie said with a mix of excitement and surprise in his tone.

By the way, since it had me curious, I'd asked about the medicine, and apparently, there was a type of magic medicine which didn't give any side effects to pregnant women, which seemed really convenient.

"Wow! You're Masters, but you can cook!" Louie enthused.

...What does that have to do with anything?

"Could Shijima cook?" I asked.

"Not at all. He said that he'd never done it on the other side, either."

"...Hmm."

Could that work as a hint leading to his true identity?

Well, that and other similar questions were best postponed for tomorrow.

We all said our thanks for the food and began eating.

Likely due to Shijima's influence, this family expressed thanks before their meals in the Japanese way. That, combined with the fact that they were using chopsticks, made it safe to be completely sure that Shijima was Japanese.

Anyway, as for the taste of the results of our labor... the minestrone I'd made wasn't bad at all. Shu could probably make a way better one, but my work right here fully deserved a passing mark.

B3's Hamburg steak, however, was really good. If you just made it two times better, you'd have something that could rival Shu's cooking.

...Man, that brother of mine can do everything except art.

"Nh?" I noticed something.

Nemesis, sitting at my side, wasn’t eating all that much. Was she holding back because we didn’t have a lot of food today?

“Nemesis, you’re not eating. What’s wrong?” I asked, not holding it in.

In response, she lightly hung her head and said, “I’m not hungry.”

A moment later, my spoon fell out of my hand.

"*This can't be real...*"

Nemesis? *This* Nemesis? Not hungry?! In what world could this happen?! Was this the portent of some cataclysm?!

"It vexes me that you're more surprised by this than by Marie's or B3's identities," she said.

"Well... You know..."

You're Nemesis.

"I have no idea what you mean by that. And for your information, it's not just lack of appetite. My body feels heavy, and I'm being attacked by drowsiness..."

"Are you sick? Do you have a fever?" I asked as I pushed my forehead against hers, which didn't seem all that hot at first. *Hmm, I'd say it's standard... Perhaps even a bit below the average?*

"Ah! R-Ray...?!"

Oh, wait, it's a bit hot. You have a cold, don't you?

"Embryos don't get colds, you fool!" she shouted. "Anyway, my face feels warm, so I'll just go to sleep! You take responsibility and eat my food!" Having said that, Nemesis returned to the crest.

Embryos don't get colds? But I'm quite sure I've heard of Guardians catching Epidemics, I thought. *We have a pregnant lady here, so we can't be too careful.*

B3 was staring at me, not saying a word.

Was something wrong?

"Have you ever been called a 'natural womanizer'?" she asked.

"No," I replied. "Though, in high school, I've been called an 'all-nizer.'"

And I still had no idea why. By what design could anyone ever call a person an "all-nizer"? What did that even mean?

"Is it because he 'womanizes' all? Indiscriminately?" B3 muttered something I couldn't hear or understand.

Anyway, I began digging through my two portions of dinner.

Once I was done with that, we washed the tableware and excused ourselves from Farica's home.

She'd offered to let us stay, but we didn't want to bother her more than necessary and decided to sleep in the carriage, like we'd originally planned. However, we *did* ask to park it on their grounds, and she gladly agreed.

Speaking of which, for a family with such a modest house, they had a strangely large amount of land. I'd asked why, and apparently, Shijima had prepared it for his Aries Leo mount, Gringham. From what Louie told me, Gringham was a lion as large as an elephant, so having this amount of land made perfect sense.

Anyway, with Farica's permission and more than enough space to park, we settled the carriage and prepared to call it a day.

Of course, we had the option of logging out and taking naps, but that came with the risk of oversleeping. Also, for some reason, sleeping in *Dendro* made me feel as though I'd gotten more sleep. It probably had something to do with the fact that three hours in real life were nine hours here.

Mind you, if you slept here and logged out, you could still be greeted by a feeling of drowsiness, making you aware that all the rest you'd gotten here was just an illusion. Strange how that real-life feeling wasn't there as long as you were online.

All that aside, this carriage we would be staying in *had an actual shower room*.

There was a knob on a door, placed where nothing could possibly be behind it. But when you opened it, there was — oh me, oh my — a fully-functional shower room.

Space expansion was impressive, albeit trippy, stuff. Just what would happen to all this if the carriage broke?

I took a quick shower and prepared to go to bed.

Honestly, instead of showering, I could have simply logged out and logged in again, as that would have made all the dirt on me vanish — or, rather, fall off my disappearing body. However, over this past month, I'd realized that it felt better to sleep after cleansing your body in warm water. I'd bathed in real life before I'd met up with B3, so there was no problem in that regard, either.

As for where we would sleep, well... toppling... no, *flipping the seats upside down* caused beds to appear.

This carriage couldn't surprise me anymore.

Hell, despite having the appearance of a slightly luxurious carriage, it had more space inside than a large camping car. That, too, was the mysterious space expansion.

“How much did this thing cost, anyway?” I asked.

“Who knows?” B3 shrugged.

...Excuse me?

“It was a random drop from our PKing,” she continued. “Apparently, it’s a prototype of a new magic carriage model created by a Legendarian fairy workshop. I don’t even know how it ended up in the hands of the person my clan PK’d.”

“...”

“I was curious myself, and after a bit of research, I found out that the market price for models from the previous generation of such carriages is 100,000,000 lir.”

“...”

That would destroy my bank account. Were we inside the *Dendro* equivalent of a Benz Roadster? Or was this more like one of those pure gold Lamborghinis bought with Arabian oil money? No, this was probably more expensive.

“One of my clan members said it costs about as much as a tank,” B3 added.

“Ohh...” Well, that *did* seem like a better comparison.

Whatever the case, the carriage was a stupidly great luxury, and I had to help make sure it didn’t get damaged.

Today’s incident was a close call, I thought.

“I’ll turn off the lights, then,” said B3. “Good night, Ray.”

“You too,” I replied. “Good night.”

Thus we fell asleep.

The hectic day had left me completely drained, and I slept soundly, with no dreams to disturb me.

◇

The next day, I opened my eyes to see Nemesis staring directly at me.

“Morning, Nemesis,” I greeted her.

“You too, Ray,” she replied. “Anyway, I’ll get right to the point.”

She raised both her index fingers.

“I have good news and bad... or more like ‘mildly troubling’ news. Which do you want to hear first?”

“...Well, this is sudden.”

Good news and bad news, eh? Well, the bad news probably had to be dealt with first, but I didn’t want to start the day like that.

“Good news first, please,” I said.

“Very well,” Nemesis replied as she raised two more fingers on her right hand, for a total of three raised fingers.

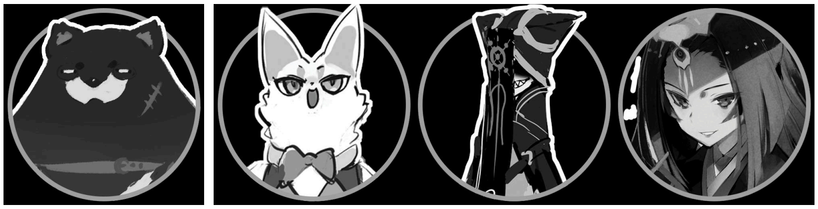
Then she made the revelation.

“*I’ve evolved to my third form.*”

“…What?”

To be continued...

Afterword



Cat: “Hello, I’m Cheshire and I didn’t get any scenes again.”

Bear: “I’m Shu, and I used my old skills to show off my beary beautiful voice. Anyway...”

Cat, Bear: “It didn’t come out at the end of the year! Sorry!”

Cat: “As you’re surely aware by now, this volume came out on February 1st (in Japan).”

Bear: “And that means that the previous volume’s announcement for this volume is now nothing but a lie. Appawling.”

Fox: “Seriously. That was my first announcement, and now it’s all ruined.”

Bear: “...And so the fox appears!”

Fox: “You make it sound like I’m a ghost or some other monster.”

Bear: “You might as well be.”

Fox: “How harsh. Oh, I’m sure you already know me from this volume, but I’m the Fox, Tsukuyo Fuso. I hope we get along.”

Cat: “‘The Normality-Consuming Nightmare, Tsukuyo Fuso.’”

Bear: “‘The Crawling Cultist of Chaos, Tsukuyo Fuso.’”

Fox: “You’re both so hard on me. You treat me like I’m some sort of yokai or eldritch creature.”

Bear: “You deserve that beary much.”

Fox: “How mean. You shouldn’t mistreat me just because I’m a yokai in real life.”

Cat, Bear: “You are?!”

Fox: “I’m joking. Why did you believe me?”

Bear: (Because it seems likely.)

Cat: “Anyway, back on track. Here’s the usual comment from the author.”

Thank you for the purchase, dear readers. I’m the author, Sakon Kaido.

Time flew by, and we are now at the 6th volume of *Dendro*.

After the release of the 5th, we were blessed with the pleasant news that *Infinite Dendrogram* had received 3rd place in Takarajimasha’s *Kono Light Novel ga Sugoi!* 2018 Bunko rankings, and 2nd in their new entries rankings.

This couldn’t have happened without the support from you — the readers. And you’re also the reason why volume 6 could be released and introduce you to the story’s second part.

It involves new characters, such as Tsukuyo Fuso, the kingdom’s final Superior; B3, the upperclassman Ray can rely on both in-game and out; and many others. Please look forward to the old and new cast’s new adventures in *Infinite Dendrogram,* and enjoy them for all they’re worth!

With that in mind, volume 7 will cover everything until the end of this quest, revealing things such as the whereabouts of Louie’s dad, what happens during Windstar Festival, and the nature of Nemesis’s third form.

The wind-clad, star-spangled volume 7. Little will give me more joy than your excitement for its release!

Bear: “Is it just me, or is the aufur a bit more hyped than usual?”

Cat: “He’s probably happy that his work reached volume 6.”

Fox: “Probably. And while you’re distracted by him, I’ll just announce another new thing!”

Cat: “?!”

Fox: “If all went well, volume 2 of the manga adaptation of *Infinite Dendrogram* should already be out! According to the author: ‘It’s so good! It’s much like reading Kami Imai’s own manga!’ More importantly, it’s the volume where I make my debut and show off my powers! Oh, and Rosa — who didn’t get an illustration in this book — also makes an appearance! And to top it all off, the end of the volume has an extra short story written by the author! It’s a real must-buy for any fan! *OH, AND VOLUME 7 OF THE LIGHT NOVEL IS SET TO COME OUT IN JUNE 2018!* (In Japan!)”

Cat: “Aggressive direct marketing! Is this the fabled Kansai entrepreneurship?! ...Wait, you even took the volume 7 announcement!"

Bear: "From the volume's beginning to the end, the unbearable fox was with us all the way through."

Fox: "I might've been defeated by Figaro in *Dendro* and by B in real life... BUT I STILL HAVE MY LATENT POTENTIAL!"

Cat: "Potential for what?! You just stole my announcement for the second time in a row! And stop speaking in caps lock!"

Bear: "...Give up, Cheshire. I can't bear to say this, but you probably won't be getting a chance to do an announcement until you show up in the main story."

Cat: "BNYAAGH!"

Fox: "Anyway, darlings, see you in volume 7."

Xun: "...I'm misSing out on a lOT of stuff, arEn't I?"

Bonus Short Stories

KoD-Approved Popcorn — The Ultimate Snack

Paladin, Ray Starling

On a *Dendro* day much like any other, Shu called me over to help him with something.

That big brother of mine was a man who could take care of just about anything by himself, so having him rely on me was definitely unusual.

Nemesis and I made for the location he'd given me. It led us to a place that seemed like a restaurant that had gone out of business. Obviously, it wasn't open, and it might not have been for a while.

"Is this truly the place?" asked Nemesis.

"Well, it's where Shu told us to come. He also told us to use the back entrance."

We walked around the building, found an unlocked door, and took the liberty of letting ourselves in.

It led us straight into the kitchen, where we found a person in a bear suit.

"...One milligram too much, eh?" he muttered. "No, wait, it's half of that."

My brother, the one and only, was using a scale to measure the weight of a shady-looking, white, powdered substance placed on specialized medicine paper.

"..." We watched him, not saying a word.

I'm afraid to ask what he's doing, I thought nervously.

"Oh, you're here. Beary good. Gimme a sec. I'm at an important part of mixing."

Mixing... what, exactly?

"I'll cut to the chase and just ask..." I said. "What are you doing?"

"Mixing some flavoring. Can't ya tell?"

Ah, so it's just flavoring, I thought in relief. *He should've said so from the start. For a second there, I thought he was making something he* *shouldn't be.*

"Just one lick of this one makes you lose your bearings. It blows your consciousness off to a whole new world of euphoria and—"

"You're not helping your case here!"

Am I behind the times?! Is "flavoring" the slang for some new illegal drug or something?!

"Recently, this and that happened and I ended up buying a whole lot of corn," Shu said. "So I decided to use that to begin a popcorn cart."

"Nothing you start can surprise me anymore, to be honest," I sighed. "And this flavoring is for the popcorn?"

"In this fantasy world, the bear minimum of salt and caramel ain't enough to have a chance against the other carts and stalls. If I wanna rise above the competition, I've gotta develop my own original flavor."

"And what, exactly, is our part in this, Brother Bear?" asked Nemesis.

"Popcorn quality check. It's hard fur me alone to tell the right measurements, you see."

Ah, so he's, once again, dense to the limits. If his description of the flavoring is anything to go by, then...

"So you merely need us to be your taste testers?" she asked. "I am fully willing."

"...Nemesis, this is Shu's cooking we're talking about."

"I know. You've already told me just how much of a master cook he is. However, this isn't some gourmet dish — it's mere popcorn. Surely it won't be anything ridiculous."

"Glad to hear it. Fur real," said Shu as he presented her with popcorn sprinkled with his flavoring. "Here's the prototype."

"Thank you," she said as she took a piece, put it in her mouth, and...

"HwAh?! HaUghaH! WaaAahHh...! Kfgh."

...released some of the strangest sounds I'd ever heard before passing out.

"...Bro, this is a no-no," I said.

"Yeah," he sighed. "*It's still too good*."

Shu's cooking was so delicious that it defied all reason, and the quality could even be felt through a single piece of popcorn.

The taste was so good that it flared up the local nerves and caused them to send out ridiculous amounts of signals. Unable to handle all the information coming in, the brain opted to shut off the consciousness, like a circuit breaker interrupting excessive current. Sometimes people passed out due to great pain, and this phenomenon was basically the opposite of that.

Needless to say, to be viable on the market, this popcorn would have to taste significantly worse than it did now. Otherwise, the streets of Gideon would be the picture of a very weird kind of hell, with unconscious people spread out all across the pavement.

"I can't taste test it myself 'cause I can bear it just fine, ya know?" Shu said, and I knew full well what he was implying.

I looked at Nemesis, who was on the floor, still twitching from the popcorn's effect. "Make it at least five tiers worse than what she had, and I'll test it for you."

But alas, the popcorn he brought me ten minutes later was still too good, and I, too, ended up losing consciousness and crashing right next to Nemesis.

Eventually, Shu created flavoring that was safe for consumption by normal people, and his "KoD-Approved Popcorn" became the talk of Gideon... but that was a story for another time.

KoD-Approved Popcorn — The Commercial Jingle

Duel City, Gideon

It was a standard day in Gideon.

In a certain area of the city, there was a restaurant that had gone out of business. From it, you could hear the methodical sound of nails being hammered into wood.

The one handling the tool was the current tenant of the building. Clad in a bear suit, he was none other than the King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

Contrary to what his rough-sounding job name and ludicrous STR would have you expect, he was working the wood with a relatively soft touch. Neither hammering nor planing posed any problems for him.

He was holding a few unused nails in his mouth. It was an action characteristic of skilled carpenters, but sadly, his attire completely voided the impression, making him look less like an artisan and more like a guy in a suit with nails poking into it.

Shu was in the middle of building a cart for his popcorn business.

Many would argue that he could've simply bought one, but he probably had some fixations and preferences which had compelled him to make it by himself.

"Beaar beaar bear-beaar beaaar..." he sang as he worked. "Bear's popcorn, beary good, yum. The beaary beest."

However, it was questionable whether the arrangement of sounds escaping his mouth was truly a "song." The vocals were there, sure, and — in contrast to the impression given off by his costume — they were absolutely beautiful. But alas, *that was the extent of it*. The phenomenal singing voice was wasted on lyrics and melody which were beyond bad.

"...No, it's unbearable," he lamented and despaired. "That jingle ain't an option."

Though Shu was no doubt a weirdo, even he could tell that he'd created a horrid song.

"This always happens whenever I try my paw at making an original..."

He processed blueprints with excellent proficiency and could build whatever was pictured without a flaw to name. The cart he was making was a prime example.

He was also a genius when it came to stimulating taste buds. The meals he made were "stunning" in more ways than one.

Talented as he was, however, Shu couldn't do art to save his life.

Anything he made with the intention of enchanting the eye or the ear always came out bizarre, like something humanity was too young to understand. (Then again, the exact same could be said for his hyper-delicious cooking.)

"I could probably make it work if I just had a bearable melody..." he sighed. "Shame I couldn't find those musicians anywhere."

People were saying that someone had been playing wonderful music during the events of Franklin's Game. Shu had wanted to ask them for help with his jingle, but sadly, he'd had no luck finding them.

"Hmm, should I just go to someone at the musician's guild? But as far as I know, the one at Gideon is pretty small..."

Turning pensive, he muttered and pondered as to what he should do next.

"Hey-ya, Shu," said a voice behind him. "What's with the nails in your suit? And what’re you mumbling about?”

He turned around to see a woman he knew very well. It was Lei-Lei — a fellow Superior of the kingdom and someone he was acquainted with in reality.

“I knocked, but you weren’t responding.”

“Beary sorry about that,” Shu replied as he realized that he wasn’t even working on the cart anymore. The jingle matter seemed to have been troubling him more than he’d thought.

“Something on your mind?” she asked.

“Well...”

He went ahead and unreservedly told her of his problem.

“Then I’ll make the song for you!” Lei-Lei responded excitedly.

“Whoa, seriously? You’re a lifesafur!”

She was a musician in real life. Composing ear-catching melodies was her element.

“You’ll pay for it in royalties. 8% from all your popcorn sales.”

“...Oh, you’re charging for it.”

Costs aside, Shu’d decided to give this job to Lei-Lei, resulting in the creation of the commercial jingle for his KoD-Approved Popcorn.

◆

After it reached the ears of the public, the jingle became known in Gideon for its strange mix of bizarrely good vocals, wonderful melody, and weird lyrics.

“*The bear’s popcorn! Oh gosh, oh boy!*
Eating them is so much joy!
Let your taste buds be destroyed!”

Xunyu’s Drawings

Paladin, Ray Starling

Nemesis and I were paying a visit to the knight offices in Gideon. As we passed by the waiting room, we noticed someone with a familiar appearance, but an unfamiliar height.

“Is that Xunyu I see?” asked Nemesis.

Blue daoshi clothing, a hat with a Fu covering the face... There was no mistaking it — that was indeed Xunyu. Our first meeting before the Clash of the Superiors hadn't been pleasant, but we'd put it behind us and gone on to become friendly enough to occasionally spar in the arenas.

"She's... kinda different, though," I replied.

Today, Xunyu was exceedingly *small*. She would normally look down on us from a height of over four meters, but now, she barely came up to my chest.

This was because she'd removed her Superior Embryo, Tenaga Ashinaga, and thus was reduced to the size of her avatar. She hadn't neglected to take off her long sleeves, either.

So, if you ignored the weird hat, the voice-changing Fu, loose trouser cuffs, blue skin, and sharp teeth, Xunyu looked like a normal girl.

"...No, she's still a far cry from 'normal,'" I muttered.

"HuHh? Well, if it aiN't Ray," she said, noticing our presence.

She held a writing brush in her hand and used it to draw something on a piece of paper on the waiting room's table.

Her low height made her seem like a little girl drawing pictures to pass the time, but I could never say that out loud. If I did, she'd probably tear my heart out again the next time we sparred.

"Morning, Xunyu. What are you doing?"

"Nh? Oh, uh, I carriED the ambassador here frOm the capital, and now she's in the middLE of some talk. Figured I'd make sOme Fus while I wait. My stocks aRe running low."

I ignored the term "carried" and looked at the paper. Now that she'd mentioned it, it looked about the same size as the Fus she used in battle.

"You have to make them on your own?" I asked.

"In Huang He, there're craftiNG jobs that make and sell 'em on the mARket," she answered. "You can't gEt 'em like that here, though, and honestLY, I prefer to make my own, since the Fu's quality depends on the mAker's level and skill."

Xunyu's job was Master Jiangshi. It was a cross between the daoshi and jiangshi groupings, and from what I'd heard, it was among the strongest known Fu-using jobs.

"Do you make *all* your Fus yourself?" I asked in disbelief as I remembered the countless Fus she'd used in her battle against Figaro.

“Nope, I just make oNE to be the base and usEd my Clerk job’s Auto Clerking skill to copY and paste it. It’s based on DEX, though, sO I mess up 30% of all I copy.”

Dexterity? Now that’s a stat I don’t see used often, I thought.

I’d heard that it influenced the power of guns, bows, and skills related to them, but one of the only two gun users I knew fired bullet creatures, while the other was a man I could actually picture saying “DEX? Whuzzat? Prebear to die!”

“I’ll be prINting 30,000, so that’s 9,000 doWn the drain,” Xunyu added.

It made me wonder about the cost of the materials for one Fu. The fact that Shu’d used over 3,000,000,000 lir’s worth of ammo when fighting Franklin gave me the impression that Superior battles weren’t cheap.

“You must be glad to have a weapon that doesn’t drain your wallet, hm?” asked Nemesis.

“...” I didn’t say a word back.

I was on the verge of thinking *“What if your eating habits become as expensive?”* but I was able to bury the sentiment before it reached her.

That evening, I calculated the grand total amount I’d spent on Nemesis’ food since she was born, and the result wasn’t pretty, to say the least.

Basically, if you somehow converted it to real money, you could probably buy a Porsche.

That realization made me more wary of her gluttonous nature, even though I was aware that it wouldn’t change a thing.

Brother Bear’s Fashion Collection

Certain day of a certain month

“This stays in here... This goes to the inventory...”

On a day like any other, the King of Destruction, Shu Starling, was sorting his possessions.

But he wasn’t merely managing the contents of the inventory he always had with him. Baldr, the man’s Superior Embryo, was a battleship. Like most similar constructs, it had a living space, complete with a closet to store clothes in, and that was exactly what he was organizing. All of that was there thanks to Baldr having Type Castle qualities.

Though not without their uses, such features were actually a cause of concern for Shu, as it seemed like a waste of Embryo Resources. There was also the flaw that anything stored within Baldr's battleship form could only be removed when it was in the same form.

So the fact that Shu was sorting his closet could only mean that Baldr was currently a battleship, standing tall in all its glory. And that could pose a bit of a problem.

"Dude, why the hEll're you parking this thing rigHT next to town? The guards're goin' nUts."

Along with those words, someone entered the room. It was Xunyu, a fellow Superior. She'd left the capital and arrived at Gideon to find the familiar battleship standing right next to its walls.

Not wasting a moment, she'd instantly jumped inside and walked right to Shu, making short work of any defenses along the way.

"Oh, I just wanted to sort the stuff inside Baldr," Shu said, not in the least surprised by her arrival. "Before, I had to be beary careful about where I brought this thing out, but now that Franklin's Game has revealed my identity, I feel safe to do it bearever."

"Well, *the people* sure dON't feel safe. There's a tiME, place, and occasion for things, mAn."

Not even Shu knew how to feel about having an elementary schoolgirl tell him off about TPO.

"What're ya organiziNG, anyway? That stUff?" she pointed at all the costumes lined up in the closet.

If her Identification wasn't malfunctioning, almost each and every one of them was an MVP special reward.

"These are the suits I bearly use," he said. "Having them all with me at all times is too much fur my inventory, so I just throw them in here."

"..." Xunyu silently stared at the costumes as a certain thought came to her mind.

These UBMs were probably ready to die and get turned into special rewards, but I don't think any of them were ready to become... this.

A famous tokusatsu studio had had a place where they stored the costumes of the kaiju defeated by the heroes. They had come to call it the "kaiju warehouse," and Baldr's closet was very much like it, in both nature and function.

"So, uh, yoU don't have tigers?" she asked as she noticed that, despite its great variety, the closet certainly didn't contain all the costumes one could have.

"I did meet a tiger UBM once, but it was taken by Figgy. It's the blue coat he usually bears. He even used it in your match."

"Oh, okay..."

Despite having "Yinglong" — "Responding Dragon" — as one of her nicknames, Xunyu found the dragon's nemesis, the tiger, far more adorable, so this made her somewhat disappointed.

She even had a giant plush tiger in her room in real life. Her parents had bought it for her, and she was very fond of it.

"Anyway, you're bOThering people, so just hide this thing alREady," she told him.

"Beary well, then. I already have all the suits I need, anyway."

Following this exchange, Baldr was summoned back into Shu's crest.

Though this whole incident wasn't seen as a crime worthy of a punishment, the fact remained that Baldr's presence had greatly troubled the people.

Because of this, Liliana let him off with just a stern, reasonable warning, much like the one she'd given him after he'd set the whole of Noz Forest ablaze.

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 6
by Sakon Kaidou

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2018 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: May 2018

Premium Ebook

Sakon Kaidou

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Infinite Dendrogram

7. The Shield of Miracles

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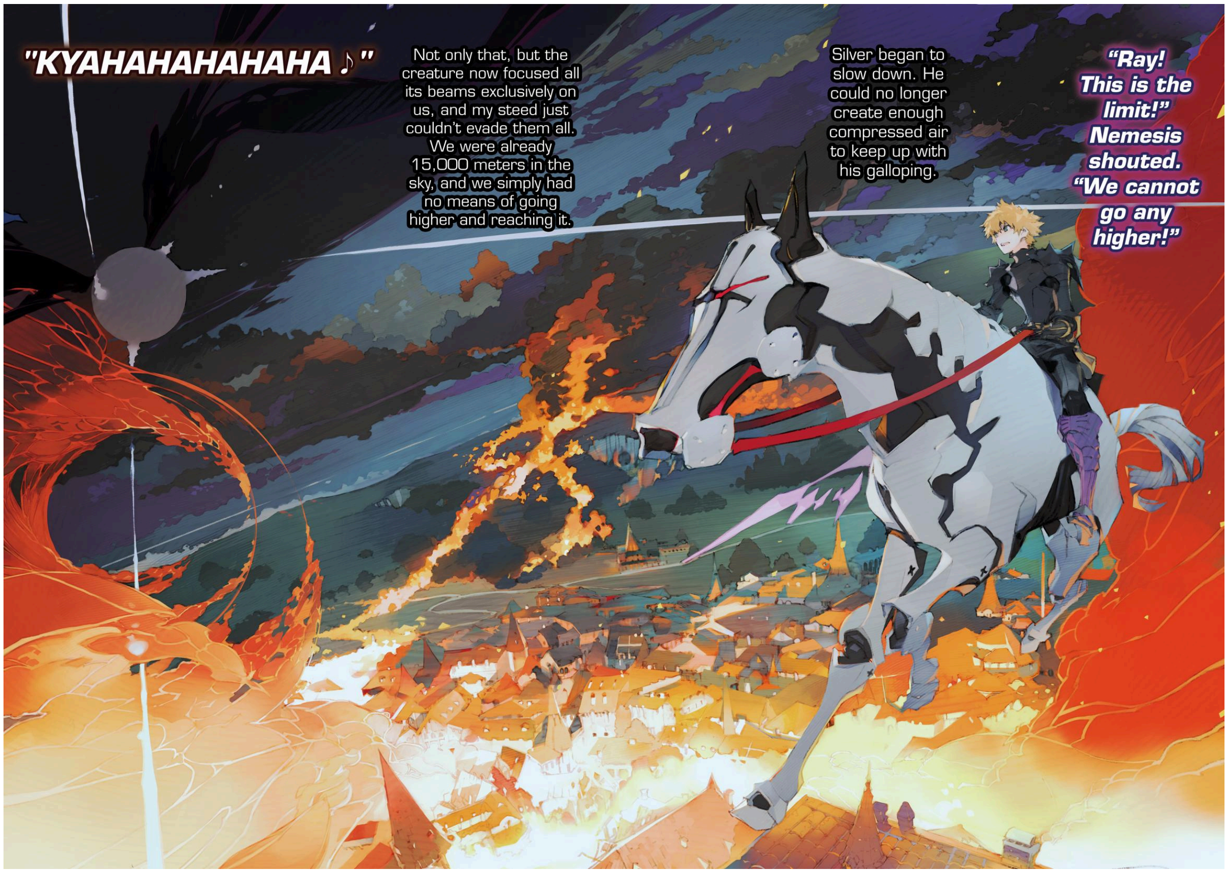
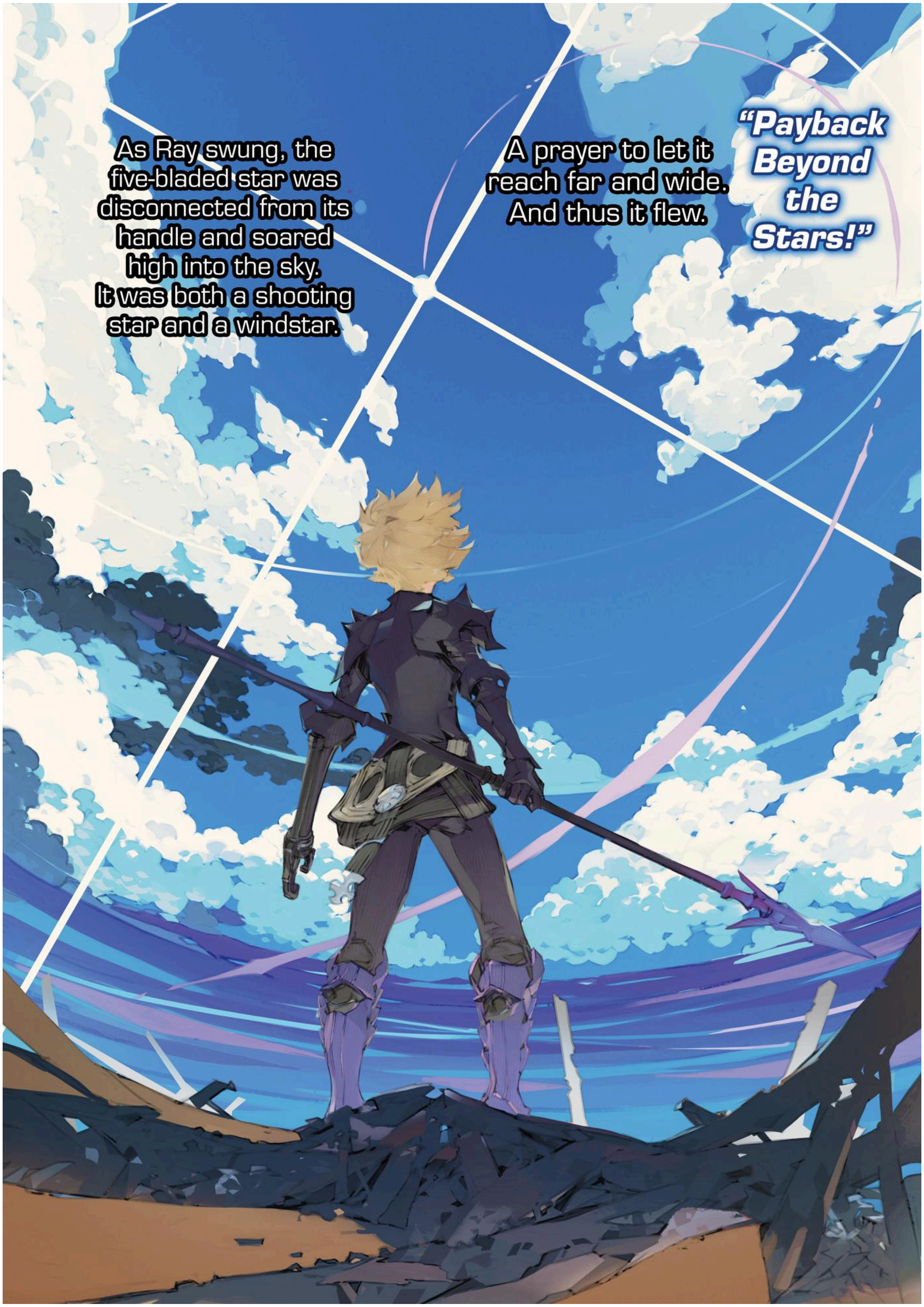


"KYAHAHAHAHAHA ♪"

Not only that, but the creature now focused all its beams exclusively on us, and my steed just couldn't evade them all. We were already 15,000 meters in the sky, and we simply had no means of going higher and reaching it.

Silver began to slow down. He could no longer create enough compressed air to keep up with his galloping.

"Ray! This is the limit!" Nemesis shouted. "We cannot go any higher!"


As Ray swung, the five-bladed star was disconnected from its handle and soared high into the sky. It was both a shooting star and a windstar.
A prayer to let it reach far and wide. And thus it flew.
"Payback Beyond the Stars!"

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Conjunction Episode: The Tale of a Star

Centuries Ago

Long ago, something star-like floated high up in *Infinite Dendrogram's* night sky.

It was best described as a jet-black mass of rock hanging in the border between outer space and the planet. It spent its days bathing in sunlight, gathering it within itself, and then releasing any excesses come nighttime.

The light emitted allowed it to blend in with the countless stars brightening the night sky, and because it didn't seem to belong to any constellation, the astronomers of that era often described it as a "vagrant star."

That term couldn't be less fitting. It was no star, but a type of monster.

An elemental, to be precise. It wasn't even special enough to wear the crown of "UBM." Though the fact that it had never seen others of its kind might've made it "unique," it wouldn't have come as a surprise if it had been discovered that others like it were floating around in other skyscapes.

But its mind was much like that of a plant, so the existence of its kin, or lack thereof, didn't bother it at all. It merely bathed in light during the day, and shone as a star during the night, paying no heed to anything around it and displaying no signs of consciousness.

No joys or woes, no friends or foes — it was a being made up of nothing but *itself.*

However, it eventually underwent a major shift.

It was caused by a light. Not one coming from the starry skies above, but from the planet down beneath.

For a shine coming from below, the light was unusually strong. So much so that it entered the creature's field of vision and caused it to become something entirely different. What it actually saw was lost to all but itself, but the sight's effect on it was very clear.

It stopped being a mere decorational object up the night sky. Neither rock nor plant or animal, it became an entity. It became the epitome of fear.

Thus, with great dread in their hearts, the people began calling it “Blacksky.”

Chapter One: The Black Shield

Paladin, Ray Starling

Nemesis had revealed that she'd finally evolved to her third form. The long month of waiting since the battle against Gardranda had finally paid off.

I wasn't really sure how to feel about just... waking up to this, though. It felt so anticlimactic.

Well, sure, I didn't want all our evolutions to be as dramatic and intense as the first one, but at the very least, it could've come after a battle or something, like the evolutions had for Rook and Babi.

I mentioned this minor peeve to B3, and according to her, evolutions that happened while the Master was sleeping weren't all that uncommon. Sometimes, Embryos needed a bit of time to do the required processing, and the completion could easily coincide with the Master's sleeping.

Basically, not every evolution was as flashy and instant as our first one.

B3 also added that "Evolutions like this often happen when you have more than enough experience and growth energy, but you aren't sure what kind of direction you want your next form to take."

That fit my situation. I was two forms behind Rook, so I definitely had more than enough EXP and energy. And the fact that the evolution had finally come could only mean that the "direction" had been set.

Anyway, let's check it out, I thought. *I wonder if it'll have a theme. Undead? Demonic, perhaps?*

I was probably just imagining it, but I thought I heard my right Miasmaflame Bracer respond with, "You have a demon right here, you know?"

Then we had breakfast and went outside to test the new form.

The sun was shining, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and a pleasant wind caressed my cheeks. I couldn't ask for a better day for this.

We were standing on the Shijima family's grounds. While we were eating breakfast, I'd asked Farica if we could use this place. She'd gladly allowed it, but she'd also asked us not to turn the lawn upside down. Though Shijima was gone, Farica was doing her best to make sure both he and his mount, Gringham, would feel right at home when they returned, and we had to respect this sentiment.

"You ready?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Nemesis.

She was currently in her first form, a greatsword, and I was about to turn her into her third.

With us were B3 and Louie, who seemed visibly intrigued. Farica couldn't join since she had work to do at home.

"Nemesis, third form."

"Form Shift — [ ]"

"Hm?" For reasons unknown, I couldn't hear her say the name of the form. It was as though it was drowned out by noise. "Wait, Nemesis, what did you just— oh?!"

She finished transforming while I was still confused by her words, so the thing she became caught me off guard and made me lose my balance.

"Whoa..." I was now holding Nemesis in her third form.

From the very first glance, it was obvious that it had a completely different nature than the other two forms.

While the greatsword and the halberd were clearly weapons, this was an object large enough to cover me whole.

It was a *giant, circular shield*.

“First it comes when I’m asleep, and now this,” I muttered. “This evolution is surprising in more ways than one.”

“I share your sentiment completely,” said Nemesis. “‘The Black Shield’ is apt for this form, I’d say.”

From a greatsword to a halberd to a... shield? Honestly, I wasn’t seeing the connection here.

I grabbed its lengthy handle and tried moving it around. Sure enough, the feeling was completely new to me. Handling a shield was nothing like swinging a sword or a halberd.

B3 had told me that mid-sleep evolutions often happened when the Master couldn’t decide the direction he wanted the next form to take. If there was any truth to that, this form might have become a shield because I’d watched B3 fight Rosa. It’d left an impression on me.

Then again, many of my battles so far had made me wish I had a means of defense that — unlike Counter Absorption — wasn’t limited by the number of uses, so this result might’ve been influenced by that.

“Though, if it actually considered my wishes, I’d have preferred it if it gave me a means of dealing with *hopelessly distant enemies*,” I muttered.

“Again, I share your sentiment,” Nemesis sighed as I recalled the time I had gone through a certain training course.

◇

It was a standard morning in Gideon. I was going around looking for my acquaintances and asking if they were free enough to spar with me. When I chanced upon Marie, she asked, “Would you be willing to try an odd type of training?”

“Odd... how?” I asked.

“Odd in that it allows you to experience something no duel may give you — a battle against a long-ranged enemy.”

I totally understood what she meant.

Through my sparring, I’ve learned the Impact Counter technique — credit to Rosa for that name — and many other things. However, because I’d only sparred in arena barriers, where the area was limited and my opponent was obvious, all of my new tricks could be applied only to face-to-face single combat.

Marie told me that all of that training could cause my skill as a player to become biased toward a select few situations, and she suggested this training to make up for that.

The design was simple: we first went outside, away from any barriers. She created enough distance between us that I couldn't even see her, and then she started attacking me, taking care to keep me alive.

She said that I was free to fight back, so I got all fired up and readied myself for what I thought would be an exciting battle.

Instead, I got a cold dose of harsh reality.

I couldn't do *anything* against her. Sure, I could defend against her attacks, but I couldn't launch even the simplest of counters.

Marie attacked me from distances I couldn't hope to reach and moved at speeds I couldn't follow, even while riding Silver. The training ended without me landing even a single hit on her.

Considering I'd been doing relatively well in our arena spars, this result came as a bit of a shock.

As a result, Nemesis and I became aware of just how weak we were against long-ranged attacks.

I had no means of defeating anyone who constantly stayed at a distance I couldn't reach. Marie was fully aware of that, and she'd given me this training as a practical reality check.

With this realization, both Nemesis and I thought the exact same thing:

I hope the next evolution has a ranged attack.

◇

And yet, what we actually got was a shield — pretty much the opposite of what we'd wanted.

This made both of us somewhat disappointed, but not enough to complain about it. If anything, the fact we'd finally paid the price for the first evolution and reached the third form was a cause for celebration.

"So," I spoke up. "What skills do you have?"

"This form can use Counter Absorption," she replied.

Hmm, that goes against one of my earlier assumptions, but I guess it fits. It's a shield, after all.

"Does it get more uses?"

“Alas, no. Though, I feel as though it became slightly more hardy. It’s... 1.5 times tougher, I believe.”

If that was true, it meant that a single Counter Absorption could now sustain 300,000 points of damage, which was pretty big. For perspective, it could now take a punch from Shu. His kicks would still be beyond it, though.

“So, what are the other skills?” I asked. “It’s not just Counter Absorption, is it?”

“I don’t know,” she replied.

...Excuse me?

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Exactly what I said: I don’t know the other skill. It’s there, most certainly, but I don’t know what it is.”

I had no idea what she was implying, so I brought up the menu and took a look at the “Embryo” section. There, I found this:

■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■
Skills:
Counter Absorption Lv3
■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■: (Analyzing)

“What the hell?” I exclaimed.

The form name and the unique skill were both unintelligible, and the skill’s effect was still being analyzed.

“Nemesis, you mentioned some ‘bad news...’ Is this it?”

“Indeed it is. I’ve evolved and gained new powers, but *not even I know what they are.*”

“...How does that even happen?”

Despite my words, I had an idea why it had turned out like this. Nemesis’s first evolution had involved some sort of mystery function. It had greatly extended the time until she evolved again, and it wasn’t unreasonable to believe it had also influenced the result.

Upon closer look, I noticed that the shield was different from the other forms in more than just shape and purpose.

First, the lack of a black aura. With the greatsword, it came out from the hilt and wrapped around my arm, while with the halberd, it flowed out of the back of the ax part. The third form, however, didn't have it at all, making it look like a normal — albeit huge and somewhat extravagant — shield.

Second, it wasn't exclusively black. Its front had silver lines and curves forming a five-sided pattern. There was nothing like that on either the first or second forms.

"It says 'analyzing,'" I spoke up again. "How long will that take?"

"It could be done today, but that might be too generous an estimate," Nemesis replied. "Picture yourself being given a paper of text in a language you have never seen or even heard of. You are also given a dictionary and have to translate and read it all. Oh, and the dictionary translates not to Japanese, but English. That is how this process feels."

That's some weird homework you got there, I raised an eyebrow.

Whatever the case, it was safe to expect to see it revealed within the next few days.

I was about to let it go and just wait, but then B3 gave a comment. "Even if the analysis isn't complete, you might reveal the skill by using it correctly."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I know someone who also had to wait for a skill to be analyzed, and the analysis sped up when he tried using the new form in various ways. Once done, the resulting skill turned out to have an activation method similar to one of the actions he tried."

"Oh, so making the movements that activate the skill can make the analysis faster, huh?"

Borrowing Nemesis's description of the process, it could be likened to a Japanese translation of the text. Anyway, I knew what I had to do now.

"Wait, Ray, what are y—NWHAAAAHHHHhhhh...?!"

Ignoring her words, I mustered my strength and *threw Nemesis as far as I could.*

"You fool! You unbelievable imbecile!" she cried.

"Sorry! That was definitely my bad!"

Unfortunately, she happened to land in a local farm's field.

All covered in mud, she returned to her human form, hit me with an intense dropkick, and drowned me in vocal fury. "Why did you throw me?! Who do you think you are, Captain America?!"

“Well, your third form was probably influenced by B3, so I thought that it might be related to throwing.”

Yesterday, B3 had killed a few K&R members by throwing her shield, so it wasn’t far-fetched to believe the skill would be based on that. Also, I had Counter Absorption as my main means of defense, so I didn’t really think the skill would be defensive.

Not to mention that I also want some ranged offense, I thought. *And how do you turn a shield into a long-ranged weapon? Well, you throw it...*

“Then don’t rush to act on that thought, you fool! At least tell me about it and throw me where it’s safe!”

“Again, sorry. I really regret that.”

I’d just decided to throw her where there weren’t any people, and it happened to be a muddy field.

“So, uh... Should I polish you?” I asked. Even her human form was covered in mud. *I do hope that cleaning her in her weapon form will clean all her forms.*

“Be thorough!” she said before returning to her Black Shield form.

I held her with my prosthetic, reached into my inventory, took out my cleaning supplies, and began polishing her.

“You seem used to this,” commented B3.

“I’m sure I do. She always asks for this after we fight undead and stuff like them.”

“It makes me a bit jealous. My Embryo is more Territory than any other type, so I can never touch it.”

“Oh, yeah, now that you mention it, it *did* seem pretty Territory-like.”

That means that all three CID members have Embryos of that type.

“Who told you to stop?” Nemesis asked grumpily.

“Okay, okay. Geez.”

I went on to polish her for the next 20 minutes, making sure to be as thorough as possible.

◇

We decided against doing any more third form tests.

Nemesis fervently insisted on analyzing the unintelligible skill by herself, and I wasn’t in a position to argue — nor did I feel inclined to, really.

With that entire matter pushed aside, we decided to focus on why we'd come here in the first place: gathering information for the purpose of finding Mr. Shijima in real life. We approached Farica with the intention of asking some questions about him, but...

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have to mend these clothes before noon."

Apparently, she had a Needleworker work order with today as the deadline. She had been planning to finish it yesterday, but Louie's disappearance had caused her to fall behind.

We couldn't really bother her if that was the case.

"I should be done by midday," she said. "Is it fine if we talk then?"

"Oh, yeah," I nodded. "We don't mind waiting."

Noon was only three or four *Dendro* hours away. Considering our quest was a search for a real person and how little time that was in real life, there was no reason we couldn't wait.

"Please enjoy the festival until then," she added. "The main event is the fireworks show which happens after dark, but the stalls and plays should already be up and running."

"Ohh?" Nemesis's eyes lit up.

Oh, dear. The biggest eater I knew was thoroughly intrigued by the word "stall."

Like, I knew she was hungry after skipping on dinner yesterday, but it didn't stop me from fearing for my wallet.

But man, she sure is a gluttonous creature, I thought.

"Nemesis, are you familiar with the concept of the 'seven deadly sins?'" I asked.

"Indeed I am," she nodded. "It has nothing to do with me, however."

"Reeeaaally?"

"What's with that tone of yours?!"

Continuing to banter like that, we made our way towards the stall-packed main street.

The idea of festival stalls made me remember the ones I'd seen in events held by the local shrine near my family home or the ones set up near cherry blossom viewing spots. The ones here in Torne weren't all that different from those. However, there were about 400 of them, which seemed a bit much for a village with only about 2,000 people.

As I bought crepes for Nemesis, I asked the shopkeeper why there were so many stalls, and he said that many of their owners were merchants from Altea who'd come here just for the festival.

Well, this did seem like a good time to make a killing, but I couldn't help but respect the mercantile spirit of the people willing to venture the roads stalked by monsters just for this. Mind you, from what I'd heard, a lot of those shopkeepers grouped up, pooled their money to buy some skilled escorts, and arrived here first thing in the morning of the festival day.

Also, the village surroundings were inhabited by monsters only a little bit stronger than those you'd find in beginner areas. Sometimes you'd get herds like the one encountered by Louie and his mother, but they were a once-every-few-years event, if not rarer.

Because of that, the journey wasn't a big deal for the escorts, either. The trip was also only about half a day long, so even Masters could take the job. And with them at the ready, not even a herd would be a problem.

Tourists were also requesting escorts here, so it finally made sense why I'd seen so many quests like that back at the capital's adventurers' guild.

Looking around, I saw many Masters who'd come here as escorts and were now partaking in the festivities.

Also, countless Masters and tians were holding one of those five-bladed pinwheels they called "windstars." We'd seen many of them decorating the fences next to the road to Torne. The passersby who weren't holding one often had them fixed onto their clothing.

Nemesis, too, had the windstar she'd gotten from Louie placed on her chest. She liked it a lot, apparently. She couldn't hold it in her hands, by the way, as she had a crepe in both.

"Mmm... " she hummed gleefully. "A good meal right after an evolution is simply unmatched."

"If you say so," I replied in monotone.

"What to eat next? I have room for far more than that."

The fact that she ate even faster than before and had gotten harder to fill up made me feel somewhat blue. *Please don't tell me her evolution made her an even bigger glutton.*

"Perhaps I should empty all the stalls here," she said.

"..." I froze, completely dumbfounded.

"That was a joke."

I found that hard to believe. There hadn't been a hint of falsehood in her eyes.

"Umm... there should be an ice cream shop there and a waffle shop over there," said Louie as he guided us. "And if you go there, there's a small stage where they do a play about the story of the festival over and over."

"Really?" I asked. "I'm interested."

"Okay, I'll show you. Ah..."

As we walked around, Louie occasionally stopped in place, fell silent, and just looked around. His expressions as he did so were always somewhat lonely, so I could only assume he was remembering the festivals he'd spent with his dad.

"Hm? Those are remberries, are they not?" asked Nemesis.

I followed her gaze, and sure enough, I saw the familiar fruits. Except here, they were frozen in ice. The sight reminded me of frozen mandarin sorbets.

I bought enough for us all and handed them out.

"Thanks, Mister Ray," Louie said before briefly falling silent. "Gringham also liked remberries..."

"Hm? Was he not a lion monster?" Nemesis raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, he liked meat, too, but he could also eat fruit, and he liked remberries a lot. He only ate them peeled and cut into pieces."

So, despite being a lion, this Gringham was omnivorous and had a strangely posh side to him.

"Oh, but Dad was the same," the boy added. "He could eat the skin, but he always peeled it. He also took away the white parts from citrus fruits. Oh, and he never ate the seeds."

Ah, so Gringham was just taking after his owner.

Shijima sounds like a fussy guy, I thought.

"He always used to say, 'I know it's all fine here, but I'm still a bit scared.'"

"Scared?" I raised an eyebrow. What could be scary about eating fruit? Was he allergic? But if that was the case, he wouldn't have been eating them at all.

"Also, Juno couldn't eat unless someone fed her. She said it was her 'Maiden eating habit.'"

"How odd," Nemesis commented.

You're not one to say that. Your stomach capacity is more than a good match for that oddity.

"Ah," Louie exclaimed and pointed ahead, cutting through my thoughts about Mr. Shijima. "See that stone stage? That's where they do the Blacksky story play every year!"

I looked and saw a crowd of people surrounding a small stage where they were doing the play he was talking about.

Though B3 and I could see it just fine, Louie and Nemesis were a bit too short.

"Well, then," Nemesis said. "I would like you to take me on your shoulder."

"Sure, I don't mind," I shrugged. "You come here, too, Louie."

"Eh? You can hold us both...?"

"Easily." I took them both, placed them on each of my shoulders, Louie on the right and Nemesis on the left, and held them by the thighs so they wouldn't fall.

As I was now, I had STR bonuses from Nemesis, my Miasmaflame Bracers, and a 1.2x STR accessory I'd gotten from the gacha, among other things, bringing my total STR into the quadruple digits. I was literally stronger than a 100 normal men, so holding two children on my shoulders was nothing to me.

"Ray, let me remind you that I am a lady, not a child," Nemesis put in.

"No talking during the play, please."

"Gnhh..."

Anyway, we were ready to watch the play, and thankfully, it was just about to begin.

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A tale of olden times

Long, long ago, Torne was a farming village far smaller and far more peaceful than it was now. It was always caressed by gentle winds that made its windmills busily creak and turn, for hours and days on end.

But one day, the peaceful village was overcome by *blackness.*

It was a flying monster that came from the eastern sky. It ate the light of the sun, the shine of the stars, and everything else that was bright, making everything around it pitch black.

Seeing the blackness up above, the people were filled with fear and cried, “It’s a black sky!” “*The* Blacksky!”

Blacksky ate everything that was bright, looked down on the ground from the heights of the heavens, and laughed as it brought chaos and suffering as it pleased.

All humans and beasts who were seen by Blacksky were turned into “torches” and then consumed.

The people were too scared to be seen, so they closed their doors and windows and stayed in their homes in absolute darkness.

Every now and then, there would be knights and hunters brave enough to face Blacksky, but no sword or arrow could reach the heights it was in. Some even tried to challenge it atop flying dragons, but not even those large wings could take them high enough.

The knights, hunters, dragons and their riders — all were turned into torches and consumed.

What hope was there when not even a dragon could hurt it?

The monster left its challengers defeated, and kept the survivors hiding in fear. Everything below it belonged to Blacksky. Anyone who tried to escape would instantly be seen and turned into a torch.

The people had no choice but to hide, crushed by fear and hunger. The wind passing the village could no longer be heard, and it felt as if even the sky had died. All that entered the people’s ears was Blacksky’s malicious laughter. Everyone in Torne was grieving as they began to feel that this was the end.

That was when the heavens took pity on the people and shed a single tear for them.

It slid down the sky, leaving a trail behind as it became a shooting star and hit Blacksky with such force that it fell down and was buried beneath the mountains.

Under the cold rock, there were none of the bright things that Blacksky liked so much. Without its food, it lost its power and became unable to escape the underground.

And so, the people were saved by the heavens’ tear, and Blacksky was sealed deep down within the cold earth.

As if to celebrate it, the wind returned to the village and the sky became clear again.

The menace of the Blacksky was no more.

Ever since then, the villagers had held a festival. Every year, on the anniversary of Blacksky's sealing, they would make star-like pinwheels and light up the sky with bright, vivid fireworks to thank the heavens that saved them.

And the people lived happily ever after.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"I see," I muttered.

The play was easy to digest, and I had no problems understanding how the festival had begun.

There was something I couldn't help but notice, though.

"So, B3, this play can be summed up as 'There was a really tough monster that got hit by a meteor and died,' right?"

"Probably," she nodded. "It was most likely a UBM. An astronomically unlucky one, at that. Then again, it only got hit because it made this area into its territory, so you might say it just reaped what it sowed. If the story is true, it didn't die and was merely sealed within the mountain. However, since it was described as a living creature, the lack of food and drink probably killed it centuries ago. "

Yeah, she was probably right about that, though some Masters around us seemed to think otherwise. They rushed towards the nearby mountains, and according to Louie, they definitely weren't the first to do so.

Every year, a number of Masters who'd seen the play would get the idea that the dying UBM might still be alive, and they hurried to look for it to dig it out and kill it for a special reward.

The fact that it still hadn't been found could only mean that it had already vanished years, if not centuries, ago.

Good riddance, I figured. A creature that could live for hundreds of years with no food or drink would be way more trouble than I'd like to deal with.

Following the play, we went exploring the stalls again. But this time, we didn't have Louie with us. At the play, the boy had bumped into a friend who'd invited him to enjoy the festival with him.

Though Louie had been hesitant about leaving us, I'd urged him to accept. We could find our way back to Farica without his help, and I thought that maybe playing with a friend would lift his spirits. Poor little guy seemed really down about his dad not being here.

Anyway, there were now only three of us: Nemesis, B3, and me.

"Are you thirsty, Ray?" asked B3.

"Ah, a bit, yeah," I nodded. I'd had a dry throat ever since the play started, but I couldn't have just gone and gotten a drink while it was still going.

"Then I'll go buy something for all of us. I saw a good-looking place nearby."

"Well, then I'll get something, too," I said. "Any requests?"

"Popcorn, please."

"Roger."

She walked away on the road we came from while we got in the line to a nearby popcorn stall.

The word "popcorn" made me recall the news about Shu's business I'd seen on *MMO Journal Planter* before logging in.

I'd tested his prototype popcorn. Even though it had been really good, the fact he'd refused to reveal the ingredients had left me somewhat scared. I also had a thing or two to say about the jingle that Lei-Lei had composed. I mean, seriously? "Let your tastebuds be destroyed?" The lyrics completely killed the nice melody.

"Hm?"

As I pondered Shu's weird song, some sort of trouble began at one part of the nearby road. I looked to see what was going on.

"Huhh?! Ya wanna go?"

"You're the one who bumped into me, ya shit! Bring it on! The Mohawk League never runs from a fight!"

It was basically the most generic clash of delinquents imaginable.

One group was wearing clothes with a symbol depicting a black circle over a red one, while the other was a bunch made up entirely of people with mohawks. Obviously, both sides seemed like trouble, but this seemed like nothing more than a minor hoodlum squabble. Additionally, they had crests on their left hands, making them all Masters.

Hoping that this didn’t escalate, I carefully observed the clash.

“What the fuck’s goin’ on here?” Suddenly, a new character joined the scene, momentarily breaking the tense atmosphere.

The person was three meters tall and wore armor large enough to cover his immense frame.

The full plate prevented me from seeing any part of his body, but it was easy to tell that he was huge.

At that moment, I realized that this was the same person I’d seen while waiting for B3 back at the capital.

“Sub-leader!” The circle symbol group welcomed him.

The mohawks were menaced. “Wh-Who the hell are *you*?!”

The armor guy then replied to the mohawks’ question. “What? Ya can’t tell just by looking at my armor?”

Uh... no, I can’t, actually, I thought.

“W-Wait, you’re the guy that... You’re him!”

“I’ve Identified it... It’s the real thing...” Unlike me, the mohawks instantly got his point.

I should get Reveal or Identification sometime, I thought.

“Got it now, huh?!” the armored brute roared. “We’re Sol Crisis! You know what that means, don’t ya?!”

“Go on, ya shits!” another person his clan yelled. “Drop a gold coin each or get ganked!”

So now it’s a shakedown?

“Sh-Shit...!” one mohawk growled.

“Kh! All right, but don’t get us wrong!” said another. “We just don’t wanna miss this festival ’cause of a damn death penalty! We’ll also have lots of cleaning to do after it, so we’ll back off this time!”

Intimidated by the armored individual, the mohawks said something really weird, threw some gold on the ground, and scrambled to run away.

“Did you see that, sub-leader?!” one of the other group became excited.

“Khahahah! Pathetic shits! Anyway, we’re off, boys!” roared the armor guyed as he got the circle group that was apparently named Sol Crisis to follow him and leave.

But then he paused.

“Hm?” he murmured, as he shifted his gaze towards my direction.

Though the helmet slits were too thin for me to see his eyes, I could tell that he was looking at me.

However, instead of saying anything, he just turned away and walked off.

What am I supposed to make of that?

“First at the fountain, now here... Why is he always looking at me?” I wondered aloud.

“Because you’re simply *that* noticeable,” commented Nemesis.

“I’m not holding a sign anymore, though.”

Nemesis said nothing in response. For some reason, she put on a tired expression and just continued eating her popcorn.

“Is anything wrong?” I heard someone say.

Turning to the side, I saw B3 holding a plate — well, a spare shield, actually — with three drinks on it.

“Two clans were mouthing off at each other just now,” I answered. “They were ‘Sol Crisis’ and... ‘Mohawk League,’ I think.”

“Oh, Sol Crisis is that new PK clan. I’ve never encountered them, but I hear the name quite often recently. And Mohawk League is a humanitarian volunteer clan.”

“...Excuse me, could you repeat that?” I felt like I’d just heard some words that didn’t belong in the same sentence as “mohawk.”

“Mohawk League is a humanitarian volunteer clan that started on the Internet,” she said. “Someone thought it would be fun to go around doing good things while looking like generic bad guys, and many people agreed. They have divisions in all the main countries, and they’re harmless unless provoked.”

“But... mohawks? Seriously?”

“Well, not everyone with a mohawk is a Mohawk League member, so you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. Even my PK clan had a person with a mohawk.”

Well, I could definitely agree that it wasn’t wise to make assumptions based on a person’s hairstyle...

“There’s one other thing about the whole situation that had me curious,” I said.

“Which would be?” asked B3.

“Sol Crisis had this guy in huge armor.”

“Armor?”

“Yeah. He was over three meters tall. Is it even possible to wear stuff like that?”

“It is,” she nodded as she gave us our drinks. “The easiest way is to start the game as a giant.”

Oh yeah, *Dendro* allowed you to play as races other than human. Rosa, for one, was a wolf beastman.

“Having a giant avatar doesn’t affect your stats, so the size is merely for show,” B3 continued. “Also, giants have a large hitbox, and the XL equipment they have to get is really expensive.”

It seemed the negatives greatly outweighed the positives.

“Also, the high-rank job ‘Full Armor Giant’ allows you to wear armor that’s too large for you as long as you have enough STR.”

“I’m guessing that’s the armor version of your Shield Giant job,” I commented. “But wait, even if you have the STR to wear large armor, wouldn’t you still have lots of empty space inside it, making it hard for you to move?”

“Full Armor Giants have the Armor Adjuster skill. It fills the empty space with a force field that feels much like highly viscous air, allowing you to move without minding the size. I would say it’s highly similar to powered armor from sci-fi movies.”

“Ohh...”

This world sure has some convenient skills, I thought.

Also, B3 seemed really knowledgeable about that job. She was a Shield Giant now, but perhaps she had been a Full Armor Giant before? Then again, B3 was versed in data relating to the game, so it was only natural for her to know about other jobs.

“Large armors are really great, by the way,” she added. “They make it easy to menace your enemies, and even if something pierces them, there’s a chance it will just hit the empty spaces.”

Well, that definitely sounds like firsthand experience, I thought. *Yeah, she probably did play as a Full Armor Giant before.*

“Though that means nothing when the ‘something’ splits your head in two,” she sighed and put on a distant expression.

Did she remember something she didn’t want to?

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“When’re we doin’ it?”

“After the festival should be good. Someone might get in the way if we go now.”

“If the K&R shits didn’t cock it all up, we’d have done it on the road.”

“It’s not all bad, though. Now he’s got a Superior *and* K&R on his name.”

“Khahah! The prey got fattened up, eh?”

“Damn right. And yeah, just like you said, when he’s going back after the festival is the best time to go at it. Though, uh...”

“I know. If we get a chance to gank him while he’s here, we’re taking it.”

Chapter Two: Ichiro Shijima

Paladin, Ray Starling

By the time the sun was exactly south of us, we'd already experienced most of what the festival had to offer, so we decided to return to the Shijima family home. The fact that the sun was south during noon meant that this continent was in the northern hemisphere, but since it was also the *only* continent in the game, that didn't matter all that much.

"Welcome back," said Farica, seemingly done with her work. "Where's Louie?"

"We ran into one of his friends, and they went off to play together."

"I see..." she sighed. I couldn't really understand why, but there was relief in both her tone and expression. Would it have inconvenienced her if Louie was here with us? "I'm sorry, but I still have some mending to do. Just two more articles of clothing, and I'll be free to help you..."

"Ah, that's fine. Please don't mind us and focus on your job," I insisted.

And so, B3 and I ended up having to wait a little more.

Nemesis felt that she could make some progress in the new skill analysis, so she returned to the crest and focused entirely on that.

I thought of whiling away the time by talking to B3, but I noticed her taking a metallic cylinder out of her inventory and holding it tightly in her hand. Upon closer inspection, I realized it looked somewhat like a bullet cartridge.

"What's that?" I asked her.

"It's an add-on item for a piece of my equipment," she answered. "They have to be filled with MP before use, and I neglected to fill this one. I figured I'd do it while we wait."

An add-on item...? Why don't I recall her using it in her battle against Rosa? I pondered. *Well, knowing her, she probably just wasn't using the equipment she mentioned. From what I can tell, she switches between her countless shields all the time, so the item might've not fit the situation.*

B3 and I continued to chat until Farica completed her work twenty minutes later. Then it was time for us to get to the matter at hand.

The three of us sat around the living room table, B3 and me on one side and Farica on the other.

B3 didn't waste any time. "Now, let us ask you some questions. Two, to be exact. First, did Mr. Shijima ever say anything about his life on the 'other side'? And second, did he do anything odd shortly before he disappeared?"

"Umm, before that, can I make something clear?" Farica asked.

"Certainly."

"I... I don't believe there's a need to search for my husband."

"Eh?" I voiced my confusion.

What was that supposed to mean? Shijima, her spouse, had been gone for half a year now. Why would she be against searching for him?

"But since Louie wants it, I am willing to tell you about him."

"Please do," I said.

Farica nodded, and then she began telling us what she knew of the man.

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About Shijima

Farica's first impression of Shijima could be summed up as "a man who gives far too much."

Their first meeting was the dramatic moment when she and her son Louie were attacked by monsters in the Fadl Mountain Pass.

Shijima appeared out of nowhere, fended off the horde of beasts, and saved both of them, which was more than enough to make him a savior figure in her eyes. But that wasn't even the only thing he did for them. Shijima showed no hesitation as he used his own healing items to give Farica a first aid treatment, and he happily volunteered to guard them on the rest of the way to Torne.

Once they arrived, he helped them move into their new home, as Farica's leg injury made it a challenge. He even called a black-haired Bishop he knew to take a look at her leg and heal it.

After that, he continued visiting them at least once every two weeks, never neglecting to bring treats they enjoyed.

In a word, his consideration for them was "excessive."

Though Louie, pure as he was, thoroughly enjoyed all that Shijima gave them, Farica found it a bit strange, if not downright eerie.

After all, their relationship didn't go beyond that of a savior and the saved. There was no reason for him to care so much about them, and he definitely didn't treat everyone else as well as he did them. It was only natural for Farica to think that Shijima had some sort of ulterior motive.

She decided to ask about it the next time he arrived, even if it would bring an end to his boons.

As usual, he came in riding on his Gringham, bringing a lot of remberries, a luxury fruit, as a souvenir. Louie was overjoyed, and the boy's gleeful expression made Farica hesitate.

Still, she knew she had to make things clear, so she re-composed herself before inviting Shijima to talk in private.

Though the man found it strange, he left his Gringham and Juno to look after Louie and followed after her.

Once they were alone, Farica got straight to the point and asked "Why do you look after us so much? What do you want from us?"

Upon hearing her words, she regretted using such blunt language. The words got her point across, yes, but she felt that a bit of sugar-coating wouldn't have hurt.

Overly blunt or not, the words were honest, and Shijima instantly understood her question and why she asked it. For some reason, the man's expression became regretful.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I didn't mean to make you uneasy."

Farica couldn't understand what made her deserving of an apology.

"You're right," he continued. "I went a bit too far. I'm sorry. I just don't know the standard when it comes to this."

Another apology. It truly seemed as though he felt that he'd made a mistake.

"When it comes to... what?" asked Farica.

"I don't know how much I have to do for someone when expressing gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

Who here is deserving of gratitude? He's the one who saved us, she pondered.

The words he spoke next completely blew away that thought of hers.

"I only wanted to thank you for saving me."

Those words made her doubt her ears. *She and Louie* were the ones who had been saved by *him*, not the other way around.

His words didn't stop there, however.

"Getting to save you while you could do nothing but wait for death made me the happiest I've ever been. It... it meant a lot to who I am on the other side."

His words were dense with all sorts of emotions, and Farica wasn't able to read them all. Even so, there was something she could easily understand.

Back on that fateful day, Shijima had saved Farica's life, but that heroic act had also saved Shijima's own heart.

That meant everything he'd done for them was completely genuine.

She then noticed that Shijima was on the verge of crying, which made all her suspicions vanish as though they were never there.

"Again, I'm really sorry," the man said, seeming fully aware of his mistake. "I don't want to trouble you again, so I'll just..."

He readied himself to leave their lives forever, but Farica stopped him.

"Would you like to have dinner with us?" she asked.

"Eh?" Shijima exclaimed, completely stupefied.

"I've invited you to join our meals many times now, but you have yet to accept even once."

"B-But I..."

"You have given us so much now... so please, let me give something back. In fact, I would like you to join us every time you visit."

"Miss Farica..."

"You gave us your thanks, so now let us give ours," she beamed, making Shijima smile in return. "Please wait while I prepare something. Oh, I should get Louie to help me."

"Um! May I help, too?" the man asked.

"Of course. Please do."

A short while later, Louie and Juno came back home to find Shijima and Farica preparing food together. Shijima seemed completely inept at it and made many mistakes, but both he and Farica were clearly having lots of fun doing it.

Though Louie found the sight strange, watching them laugh together made him happy.

Juno didn't say a word, but she seemed proud, like a mother pleased by her child's growth.

It wasn't long until Shijima began living with Farica, and the year after that, they exchanged marital vows.

It was the 27th marriage between a Master and a tian.

Shijima, Farica, and Louie had become a family, and few could match them in peace and happiness.

Though Shijima was Farica's second husband and Louie's stepfather, there was little to no distance between them. Biology didn't stop them from being a natural family.

Until a major change happened in their lives — Farica became pregnant.

It took a while for her to realize it. At first, she merely thought that she'd eaten a bit too much and that it was showing. No one could blame her. After all, she'd thought that Masters and tians couldn't produce children.

But her stomach grew larger with every passing day, and she eventually got her first morning sickness. She'd been with child once, so she quickly realized that yes, she was pregnant.

Even the Doctor said that there were no two ways about it — Farica was going to have her second baby.

It made her happy beyond words. Even though Farica loved Shijima and didn't want anyone else but him as a husband, she'd always thought that their family would never grow bigger. She had been plenty satisfied with just him, Louie, Juno, and Gringham. But now that she knew that someone else would be joining them, she thought that it would make them all even happier.

Besides, she really wanted to see Shijima's joyous face when he heard the news.

She returned home and announced her pregnancy when they were all having dinner.

Louie was unreservedly gleeful. Juno didn't say a word, but she congratulated them with applause.

Shijima, on the other hand, was crying.

There was pure happiness in those tears, but at the same time, Farica felt as though he was lamenting something. Being his wife for over two years had made her perceptive of such things.

That night, the two of them talked in their bedroom.

Shijima repeatedly thanked Farica for bearing his child, but then, he spoke a resolution.

"Farica," he said. "I have something I must do on the other side."

"Is it related to our child?" she asked as she caressed her stomach.

He nodded vehemently and said, "If I want to meet our baby, I have to go through a certain trial. And it's... it's so dangerous that it might cost me my life..."

"Oh no!" she gasped.

"I would've been fine spending the rest of my days living the life we have right now. But I really want to see our child... I want to live in a family that includes him."

And apparently, to do that, he had to take this "trial." Farica could tell he was determined, and that the endeavor was unavoidable.

"If you survive the trial, when will you return?" she asked.

"...After a month, at best. No, wait, that's three months in here. Well, it could be half a year, if not more."

"That's so long..."

"But no matter what, I *will* come back. Believe in me."

No trial on the other side could separate him from his family. She believed that.

Farica nodded and said, "We'll be waiting. Louie, I, and the child within me will wait for you for as long as we have to."

"...Thank you."

The two exchanged an embrace, full of love for each other and for the baby.

The next day, Farica woke up to find that Shijima had disappeared.

She asked Louie about him, and he said that Shijima had said goodbye to him and gone off somewhere. That was enough for her to conclude that he had gone to take his trial on the other side.

Farica didn't tell Louie that Shijima could lose his life, as it would only make him worried.

Besides, she thoroughly believed that her husband would return to his family.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"He will definitely come back," Farica concluded her story. "So I don't think there's any need to search for him."

Both B3 and I had no clue how to respond, and had no further questions. After all, she'd just given us everything we needed to complete the puzzle.

Shijima had left his family and was now on the "other side," doing something that required lots of determination.

That, combined with the information we'd gathered so far, gave us a good idea of what kind of environment he was in.

"Sorry," B3 broke the silence. "Would you mind if Ray and I had a brief private talk?"

"Not at all," Farica replied.

"Let's go, Ray."

Unable to say anything, I followed after her as she left the house and entered the carriage.

"This whole matter might be impossible to solve," she said right after the door closed.

"But..."

"Ray. You have an idea what happened to him, too, don't you?"

Yes, I more or less had an answer to the mystery of Shijima's disappearance. It was a combination of several factors.

First, for a Master like him and a tian to have a baby, he had to have been online longer than it was biologically possible for any normal player.

Second were his feelings towards Farica and Louie.

Third was the so-called "trial" he had to do on the "other side."

And fourth were his own words: *I would've been fine spending the rest of my days living the life we have right now.*

I had all I needed to form a proper conclusion.

"Shijima is— Hn?"

Before I could finish, the carriage suddenly began to shake. It continued for a short while before stopping.

"An earthquake?" I wondered.

If so, it wasn't all that strong. If I had to gauge it, I'd probably put it at Shindo 3.

That wouldn't cause much harm to people, and though the buildings here had a medieval appearance, Altar's architecture involved the use of magic strengthening, so the earthquake wouldn't damage them at all. The festival could go on without any problems to speak of.

However, it was possible that a utensil or something would fall off and hurt Farica.

"Let's go check on Farica," I said.

"Very well."

Inside, we found an open cupboard with some of its contents lying shattered on the floor. Thankfully, Farica didn't seem to be hurt.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes, none of it hit me," she replied.

"Let us help clean up," B3 said.

"But..." she tried protesting.

"You're pregnant, so please don't burden yourself. Ray, do you have any cleaning tools?"

"I do."

We each took out a broom and dustpan and began cleaning up the shattered tableware.

By the way, my broom and dustpan came from a Cooking Set I'd hit on the gacha. Weird to see something I'd thought was a bad roll becoming somewhat useful.

I gathered the shards into the dustpan and put them in an empty bag.

"...Huh?" I noticed something mixed in between the shards.

The things that had fallen out weren't just plates, so it wasn't strange for there to be more than porcelain. However, that particular piece struck me as odd. It was a small piece of silverwork, probably made using the Carving skill.

Though it wasn't unusual for a household like this to have such items, it felt somewhat off, as though it didn't really belong here. Also, I couldn't help but feel that I'd seen the design before.

"Ah!" I silently gasped as it came back to me. "Farica, have you seen this silverwork before?"

"Oh, that's something my husband used to wear before our marriage," she answered. "He stopped wearing it afterwards, so we just left it on top of the cupboard."

"I see."

Apparently, Farica didn't know anything about the group this piece of silverwork symbolized. No one could fault her for that, since she'd moved here from the capital about four years ago. And from what I could tell, this village didn't have any of their establishments.

"...So that's how it is," muttered B3 as she noticed what I was holding.

Naturally, she knew exactly what it meant.

"Apologies, but we have to leave for a moment," she said while facing Farica. "Oh, and we will finish cleaning up when we return, so please don't do anything."

"Eh? All right..."

B3 took me by the hand and led me out of the house.

"Ray, do you have a group talk app installed on your mobile?"

"I do."

"Then please log out and connect to the group with this ID. He should come soon, too."

She then told me the ID, and repeated it to help me remember.

I got it in my head and logged out.

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Once offline, I went to my mobile, activated speaker mode, and turned on the app. A few moments later, I heard B3's voice — or rather, Fujibayashi's.

"Seems it went well," she said. "I've already contacted him, so he should be here in a moment."

A brief while passed, and I heard a man's voice.

"Apologies for the wait. I was told you wish to talk?" It was none other than The Lunar Society's second-in-command, the King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage. "Lady Tsukuyo is busy at the moment, so I will speak in her stead."

"No, you are the better person in this case," said B3, and I couldn't help but agree.

"Tsukikage," I spoke up. "You knew all about Shijima from the very start, didn't you?"

"Yes. Indeed I did," he replied as though it was nothing. "Since you arrived at this conclusion, I assume the madam told you about... No, you found physical evidence, did you not?"

“A piece of silverwork. It had *a crescent moon and a closed eye* on it,” I said. To my knowledge, there was only one group of people that used that symbol. “He... Shijima was a member of The Lunar Society, wasn’t he?”

“Indeed he was.”

And that was exactly why Tsukikage had suggested helping us search for him back at the guild. Of course he could find the man — he already knew the answer.

Now that I think about it, that was probably the only reason why he made the suggestion, I thought.

“If you knew it, why did you say it was a secret?” I asked.

“Privacy is something to be respected, no?” he replied, and I couldn’t tell if he was serious or just blowing smoke.

“...All right, fine. But there’s something I want to know, no matter what.”

“Please, do ask away.”

“How... How’s Shijima doing?”

“That is private information, as well... But then again, there is no reason to hide it at this point...” he said before momentarily falling silent. “Very well. Allow me to explain it all from the beginning. When this is over, you will know his background... and his relationship to us...”

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Interlude: The Awakening

Torne Village, Outskirts, Underground, ■■■■ ■■ ■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■, ■■■■■■■■■■■

It awoke.

Not because of the recent earthquake, no. The earth’s rumblings were of no consequence to it. Even so, there was no denying that its awakening was related to the quake.

Briefly after the tremor, a few rays of light began to leak through a crack in the bedrock burying its frame.

The earthquake had left an opening the size of a needle’s tip between it and the surface.

The amount of light was so miniscule it could barely be gauged. Its bedrock tomb was as still as dark as a starless night. But it just so happened that it made a huge difference for the creature.

To it, a darkness completely devoid of light and merely the darkest night possible were as different as one and zero.

“KyAhaAh!” it cried, as absolute darkness coated the tomb.

No — light was still coming through the crack, but *it was consuming it all*.

“KYahAHahAH!” it cried — cackled — as it ate more light and turned it into energy.

It had slumbered for 300 years.

Buried within the earth, surrounded by unlight, with no food or drink for sustenance, still bearing the damage from the meteor, it had waited for light to finally reach it.

Like a hibernating animal, or perhaps a corpse, it had silently waited, unknown to anyone.

Now, this monster dreaded as “Ancient Legendary” had tasted its first light in centuries, and it couldn’t have asked for a better appetizer.

The once-slumbering entity would soon turn the aboveground festival into a *feast*.

Chapter Three: The Real Ichiro Shijima

The Tale of a Certain Man

As I’ve already mentioned, Ichiro Shijima is one of our adherents.

Although young Louie does not recall it, Lady Tsukuyo and I met his family awhile ago. After all, Mr. Shijima was the leader of The Lunar Society’s battle unit. We even went to congratulate him after he married Mrs. Farica.

Now then, of course we know of Mr. Shijima’s current whereabouts. But before I reveal them to you, I must tell you about everything else. From the beginning to the end.

First, allow me to tell you of The Lunar Society’s origin.

Now now, patience, please. No need for anger. I assure you, this is relevant. We cannot omit it if we wish to talk about where he is now.

Now, I’m certain Fujibayashi already knows this, but The Lunar Society was founded nearly a century ago, in postwar Japan. At the time, Lady Tsukuyo’s ancestor and the person who would go on to become the founder of The Lunar Society, Master Gessei Fuso, was working as a doctor.

As you surely know, the postwar period was a very dark time. People lacked the materials they needed to recover from the damage, and death was with them at every step.

Some had battle wounds that grew more severe with every passing day, some became ill due to malnutrition, some turned mentally or emotionally ill and attempted suicide, and some were even worse. In a word, it was “hellish.”

Master Gessei is said to have been a kindly doctor who treated people regardless of profit.

That, of course, attracted many patients to him, many of which brought even more death. Countless people lost their lives. Even those who could’ve been saved in optimal circumstances died because of a lack of food or medicine.

Eventually, he came to notice the abject despair in many of their eyes.

Some say that “health is a state of mind,” and if there is any truth to that, then the patients had a terminal illness. Their hearts were as good as dead.

Being the doctor that he was, Master Gessei spent a lot of time pondering how to help them.

At the very least, he wanted to give them hope.

Sadly, it was an age when there just weren’t enough material goods to remove their illnesses or hunger — the cause of their despair. Japan would need more time until it was back on its feet.

So, he figured that, if there was no hope here, he had to envision a different world. Even if the material world couldn’t save them, he could still try to save their hearts.

“Escape the shackles of flesh and betake yourself to the true world of souls. Embrace this free world and celebrate your liberty to your soul’s content.”

As you are aware, those are our teachings. Those teachings are what started The Lunar Society.

Our doctrine tells people that even if their bodies are impaired, their souls are always free to dream of a world where they’re unbound.

It was pure escapism. An idea based in fantasy, if not delusion. But even so, it made people think in terms their souls... effectively keeping their minds from yielding.

Indeed, our teachings can be rephrased as “Let’s feel good by thinking of nice things.” Many call it cult-like, but that’s all it is. It’s no different from modern mental health seminars.

Admittedly, the economic progress over the past century has turned Japan into a wealthy nation, and it’s hard to fault anyone for calling us a cult. Eventually, we gathered not only patients who had lost all hope, but also youths who were pessimistic about their futures.

Being the current spiritual leader, Lady Tsukuyo often worries if the foundation presented by Master Gessei suits the modern world. Things have changed a lot over the years, after all.

Eh?

“If she’s worried about her cult’s state, she should reconsider kidnapping people, you say?

That’s unavoidable, I’m afraid. Lady Tsukuyo’s personality and disposition as a woman are a different matter than her worries.

The way I see it, she wishes to have someone she has taken a liking to at her side. Ha ha ha! You're right. Truly, that doesn't change the fact that it's a bother to you, Mukudori.

Back to the matter at hand...

Even after founding The Lunar Society, the Fuso family continued to run a hospital. On the surface, it had nothing to do with our organization. Additionally, it specialized in something different from most hospitals.

The term for it was "terminal care."

It operated with the purpose of caring for those ailed by the worst of illnesses and letting them live out their final days in peace. But of course, if it was possible, we never neglected to focus on prolonging the patients' lives or curing them altogether.

Mr. Ichiro Shijima was one of the hospital's patients.

Before you make any assumptions, we did not urge him to join us in his moment of weakness — he was already an adherent before his disease worsened, and when it did, he was taken to the hospital.

Indeed, we are not *that* dirty. The Lunar Society avoids doing anything that could get us arrested. Honest.

"The fact that you're emphasizing it makes you look suspicious," you say? Please, there's no need to think that.

Anyway, let us go back to Mr. Shijima.

He was suffering from an incurable disease that set a limit on his remaining lifetime. He had been ardently seeking a cure ever since he was young, but alas, he had no luck.

Four years ago, our time, he joined The Lunar Society. He probably saw it as a good way to divert himself from his imminent death.

"Wasn't his family against it," you ask? The circumstances of his upbringing are personal information we are not allowed to reveal, but we can tell you that he had no living relatives at the time of his joining. What matters is that he joined and became one of our adherents.

We have a century of experience at diverting people, so I would like to believe we were able to ensure that his last four years weren't burdened by fear of death.

Yes, you heard it correctly.

He joined us four years ago, when he had four years left to live.

At the time, the present day was going to be his absolute limit. Oh, but two years ago, they discovered a means of curing his disease. However, it had only a 10% chance of success.

It was the type of treatment that the body could vehemently reject, resulting in an instant death.

Yes, he chose not to go through it *back then.*

He was continuing to live through his final days, trying to divert himself from his upcoming death, when a certain turning point changed his life entirely.

It was the release of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

By the way, you two, where do you think the true value of VR lies? Oh no, I'm not trying to change the subject. This is an important preamble to what I am about to say.

Well? What do you think?

Of course, I'm not talking of failures like *NEXT WORLD,* but fully complete, dive-type dream games like *Infinite Dendrogram.*

Yes. The best VR *transfers the five senses to the virtual world*.

This means that even those whose bodies barely function can dive and experience being healthy as long as their brains and thoughts work as intended.

Because of this, at the turn of the millennium, we at The Lunar Society began looking into and funding VR technology. It was another thing our patients and adherents could look forward to. It gave them hope.

Of course, in the end, the perfected VR wasn't any of those we financed, but one we knew next to nothing about — *Infinite Dendrogram*.

...Oh, but that is unrelated to the matter at hand.

By now, you can imagine just how much Mr. Shijima craved that.

No matter how hard he tried to ignore it, his end was drawing closer with every passing day. It was impossible for any of us to gauge his will to live and to *feel alive*.

Now, since we were making sure to try out all of the VR technology on the market, we secured a number of devices from *Infinite Dendrogram*'s first batch. One of them was presented to Mr. Shijima.

Thus, he logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram* and became the Master known as Ichiro Shijima, all for the purpose of escaping his limited days in reality and being free in the "true world of souls."

It released him from the distress of his fading life, the pain of the encroaching death, and the world with no hope for him.

Having gained a vigorous body, special powers, and a sense of fulfillment that could never compare with anything he could gain in reality, he went on to live out his second life for all it was worth. It would not be wrong to state that he was more content than any of us. After all, he was given everything he had not been able to gain in his entire life.

Having all but forgotten his state in reality, one day, he chanced upon a certain boy and his mother. They were overwhelmed by a horde of monsters — despair made manifest — and could do nothing but wait for death.

The sight likely made him feel like he was looking at himself in real life. Or perhaps it reminded him of his late family.

Whatever the case, Ichiro Shijima used his powers as a Master to save the mother and child. He, who could do nothing but await death, saved those two, who were in a similar situation.

Though they had met by accident, to him, it was surely fate.

He kept on interacting with them, and it wasn't long before they became a real family.

According to him, those days filled him with a warmth he had never felt before.

Yes, those are his own words. Exactly as I heard them.

After that, he went on to be blessed with a child, which was another thing he couldn't experience here in the real world. The joy the news gave him was so immense that it made him *remember himself on this side.*

He was half-dead by this point, kept alive only by various kinds of life support, and it would've been a great surprise if he had lived for more than two months longer.

That was a mere half a year in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Needless to say, time was short for him.

He would die without growing old with his wife, without watching his stepson mature... or even seeing the face of his real child. It made him remember despair.

Words couldn't describe the regret he most likely felt.

However, it wasn't enough to break him. He found new hope when he remembered the treatment he had once refused, and this time, he decided to take it.

Of course, the illness had progressed since then. The chance of success had dropped, and it was a question whether it even reached 3% now.

He needed a miracle for it to succeed.

Even so, he was determined.

Lady Tsukuyo and I both asked him, “Why?”

He responded, “For a future where I live with my family.”

Thus, he went on to return to reality and underwent the treatment.

With that, the story ends.

“How did it turn out?” you ask?

You likely already know, Mukudori.

Miracles are only miracles because of how infrequently they occur.

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Torne Village

After parting with his friend, Louie began to walk back home.

One of the festival’s main events, the Windstar Dance, would soon begin at the village’s plaza, and he wanted to go there with his mother.

It was an event where families or lovers paired up and danced to their heart’s content. Many from the “other side” would call it a “folk dance.”

Last year, Farica had danced with Shijima, while Louie had danced with Juno. Sadly, Gringham hadn’t had a creature to pair with — not to mention he was too big — so he’d ended up just watching the event.

Remembering the somewhat-downhearted look on the lion’s face made Louie giggle.

Then he remembered Shijima’s excited dancing as Farica led him. Combined with memories of Juno’s weird choreography, it brought a pleasant warmth to his heart.

This year, however, Shijima wasn’t with them. That meant that neither Juno nor Gringham could be here, too, as they were his Embryo and mount. Farica, being pregnant, couldn’t dance, either.

Even so, the Windstar Dance, and the rest of the festival in general, was an event that reminded Louie of the fun times with his family.

If nothing else, he wanted to watch the dance along with his mother. Even if they couldn’t dance this year, he hoped that his whole family would be there next time: Farica, Shijima, Juno, Gringham, and his soon-to-be-born little brother or sister.

“...Huh?” he exclaimed, stopping. Something strange was entering his vision.

It was a mountain not too far from the village. A flash of light burst out of one of its corners, and a short while later, a black object broke out of there and rose towards the skies.

It sounded a voice that could disturb the sanity of anyone listening.

“KyaHahAhahAHahAhaH!”

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Paladin, Ray Starling

Right after our talk with Tsukikage, we logged back in to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

We’d talked for about 30 minutes, which was an hour and a half in the game. The Sun was still high up, and the festival still had a lot going for it. But neither I nor B3 were in any mood to enjoy it any further.

“...”

We were both completely silent. What we’d heard from Tsukikage was too damn grim.

Louie was searching for his dad, while Farica was awaiting for her husband to return. But the cold, harsh truth was that they would never see Shijima again.

“...This leaves a bad taste in my mouth,” I muttered.

“Looking back on it, we could have predicted this when Farica suggested that we not search for him,” commented B3. “She already knew that Mr. Shijima was risking his life for something on the ‘other side.’ And the fact that he isn’t back yet... means she probably realizes what happened to him.”

“...I guess so.”

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, Masters were immortal. But back in reality, we were only human, as prone to death as any living creature.

That was one of the harsh truths of life.

“Even if she had a feeling he was dead,” B3 continued, “she could still believe he was alive somewhere as long as she didn’t know the answer. Farica likely chose to merely wait because she wished to keep that hope alive.”

And that was exactly why she had been troubled by our accepting Louie's request to search for Shijima.

Farica's feelings weren't unlike those of someone whose loved one had gone missing in some calamity or accident. As long as the body wasn't found, she could keep hoping he was alive.

This reminded me of the time when the ship my sister was on had sunk in the Pacific Ocean. When I was told her death was all but certain, I'd cried my eyes out.

Then, after a whole lot of grieving from us, she'd returned back home with a cheery "Hellooo!" as if it were no big deal.

When we'd asked her to explain her survival, shocked to see her...

"Oh, I broke the wall of the sinking ship and swam around in the Pacific Ocean until I found another boat."

I just didn't know what to make of her. Her existence was an enigma.

That was only barely related to the matter at hand, but thinking of my sister lifted my spirits a bit.

"What shall we do, then, Ray?" asked B3.

"Well, we have to decide whether to tell it to them or not..." I said, and sighed. Regardless of whether I did or didn't reveal Mr. Shijima's fate to them, it'd still give me a bad aftertaste.

Both telling them the horrible news *and* hiding the truth from them were options that made me feel bitter, but...

I steeled myself. "I'll tell them."

"Are you sure?" B3 asked.

"...Yes. If we don't tell them, they'll never learn the truth. Mr. Shijima's fate will be shrouded in darkness for the rest of their lives."

If we didn't reveal it, they would never be able to properly part with him. They would forever be bound by the question of his whereabouts.

"It'll leave a bad taste in my mouth, it's cruel, and they'll probably resent me for it, but... but still, it's something that must be done."

Despite my resolve, the fact that I would have to tell them of Mr. Shijima's death made my body shake.

It scared me. The idea of giving them despair frightened me to no end.

"If that is what you choose, then it's probably for the best," B3 said.

"B3?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You should be the one to decide this. I am not nearly as considerate of

NPCs... tians... as you are.” She looked to the festival off in the distance. Both tians and Masters alike were thoroughly enjoying the festivities. “I am what they call a ‘ludo.’ To me, this is nothing but a game.”

I was silent.

“Same goes for tians,” she said. “In my eyes, they are merely highly advanced AIs. If it had been up to me alone, I never would have even answered the request. Learning the truth, I would likely have disappeared from their sight, never actually deciding whether to reveal it or not. But now...”

She momentarily fell silent and looked right into my eyes.

“But now, right here, I see someone who outclasses every player I know in terms of consideration for tians. You see them as lives, grieve for them, and sympathize with them.”

She walked over to me and gently held my shaking hand.

“So please, don’t be afraid of your decision. There’s no Master who cares for them as much as you do.”

Her encouraging words had caused my trembling to fade.

“B3,” I muttered. “Thank you.”

“A good senior helps her junior,” she smiled in response.

Thanks to her, I was now ready. It was time to go and tell them. To reveal to them the truth about—

“KyaHahAhahAHahAhaH!”

A maddened cackle suddenly resounded around us. It was akin to the sound of scraping glass, but it came out as laughter of the purest ridicule.

“What?!” I exclaimed and looked to where it came from — the skies above a nearby mountain.

There, I saw a—

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Torne Village, Outskirts

A few minutes earlier...

“Shit! The assholes at SolCri cost us a bunch of money! We’ve gotta find something to make up for it!”

Ten-odd Masters were inside a mountain not far from Torne.

A group of them stood out, as they all had mohawks. They were the same Mohawk League members who'd faced off against Sol Crisis back at the festival. One of them was vigorously swinging a pickaxe, while another one heaved a tired sigh and spoke up.

"Hhhhaaa... but it's not like we'll find the UBM, right? The story is hundreds of years old, and people say that no one's found anything in the last two years. And hell, it's not like we can win against a UBM."

In response, the vigorous mohawk put up an indomitable smile. "Heh heh heh, I'm not going for anything *that* big. I just want the meteor!"

"The meteor?"

"Don't you know? In manga and light novels, the meteoric iron you get from meteors is a super strong weapon material. That has to be the same in *Dendro*."

"Ahh, I see. Even if the UBM is gone, the meteor that hit the creature should still be there."

"Exactly! So let's keep digging!"

"All right, all right."

Thus, they resumed their mining activities.

What they failed to realize was that, if the meteor had been large, all the villages around here would've been obliterated, meaning that the one from the story had to have been small. Even if they kept digging, they would leave empty-handed and return to the festival to try and lift their spirits.

Or so things would have gone, except... they were making a wrong assumption.

The thing they thought had disappeared *was still there*.

The thing buried beneath, now awakened by the meager amount of light, had realized that *there were "torches" above it*.

Not only that, but the "torches" it had drastically reduced 300 years ago had increased to incomparably great numbers.

Upon the moment of awakening, it hadn't had the power to escape to the surface. Since then, it had done nothing but wait while consuming the meager amount of light reaching it.

But its wait was now over.

Having absorbed enough light to regain some of its power, it recovered enough strength to escape to the surface.

"ＫｙＡｈａＨ!"

It extended a tentacle upwards — towards the crack leaking light into its tomb.

Having transformed all the light it gathered into MP, it used the crystalline protrusion at the end of it to fire a heat ray reaching thousands of degrees in temperature.

It hit the mark exactly, melting the bedrock and widening the hole to the surface.

That wasn't all. On its way, it hit the unenthusiastic mohawk Master, piercing him through the crotch to the top of his head, instantly evaporating him and giving him the death penalty.

The Master didn't even have a chance to realize what happened, and his friend wasn't quick enough to even notice, much less help. All he saw was his vanishing friend and the melting bedrock.

A moment later, *it* flew out through the hole.

It was a cracked, non-reflective crystal ball with a three metel diameter. It had black wings of an undefined shape. It had a set of four permeable tentacles with crystalline protrusions at the end.

It had no organs that could be used to express emotion... *and yet it cackled*.>

It had no mouth or anything that made up a face, and yet its crystalline body creaked out maddened laughter.

“ＫｙＨａｈＡＨａｈＡｈａＨａＨａｈＫｙａＫＹａＨ！”

It spread its dark wings and absorbed all the light that reached it, instantly restoring its MP reserves.

It became rejuvenated and overjoyed at the same time.

After all, there were so, so many “torches” here.

It was as happy and pure as a child about to blow out the candles on his birthday cake.

“Attack!” one of the nearby Masters shouted.

They had yet to realize what it really was, but they had more than enough reason to believe it was a danger and try to stop it with their skills and Embryos.

“ＫｙａＨａｈＡｈａｈＡＨａｈＡｈａＨ！”

But before they could do anything, *it flew up*. Up and up, higher and higher...

Ignoring all below, it rose to what seemed like thousands of metels above ground, if not more. Eventually, it passed the troposphere and arrived at the stratosphere.

To those below, it was nothing but a dot at this point.

“Did it just... run away?” asked one of the Masters.

The rest of them thought the same.

From there, the monster couldn’t harm them, nor could they attack it. They assumed the monster had felt cornered and escaped as high as it could.

But that couldn’t have been farther from the truth.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light from high above, and a few seconds later, one of the Masters on the surface was set aflame. His hair, the oil of his skin, the clothes on his back were engulfed in ultra-hot fire.

He stopped, dropped, and rolled to try and put it out, but since both his equipment and flesh were melting, that was far from enough, and he soon received the death penalty.

The sight made the other Masters tremble and look up at the sky.

"Eh?"

"No way... From *there*?!"

It reminded them of what they'd heard at the play.

But no sword or arrow could reach the heights it was in. Some even tried to challenge it atop flying dragons, but not even those large wings could take them high enough.

That play was the very reason why they were here. The words they'd heard there had inspired them to mine this mountain.

However, they had *slightly* underestimated Blacksky's altitude.

Still, no one could fault them for that, as expecting *this* would be insanity. After all, what madman could imagine *a UBM that has an offensive ability with a range of 10,000 metels and uses it to one-sidedly attack from high up in the atmosphere*?

"ＫＹａｈＡｈａｈＡＨａＨａｈＡｈＡＨ!"

Safe from all harm, the creature spread its dark wings even further and consumed all sunlight shining on the planet, effectively turning day into night.

As it ate the light, it used its supreme vision to look at the surface and light the "torches" below.

The heat ray it fired distorted the air around it as it reached the ground and set another Master aflame.

The sight brought it great joy.

Of course it did.

After all, it *liked* watching the "torches" burn.

Indeed, that was the one thing the play always got wrong. It didn't consume the light from the "torches." Sun and starlight was more than enough to give it the energy it required.

As an entity that ate only light and survived with just that, it had *no need* to harm any creatures living below.

But it *enjoyed* burning the "torches."

The sight of them burning, writhing, and dying always brought it great glee.

After all, that was its sole hobby.

"ＫｙａＨａＨ?"

Suddenly, it started to wonder.

If the creature had been human, the thought would have been something like this:

"This" has burned so much of them. But they don't burn like the "torches" "this" likes. There's not enough writhing and despair. Hey, but why? Why?

The Masters' sense of pain was disabled, so the agony of burning alive wasn't there. And it wasn't like they actually died, so their despair wasn't that great, either.

It didn't like that at all.

The torches with the funny patterns on the left hands are boring, it thought. *"This" has to burn the torches without them.*

It looked over the land below and instantly found what it was looking for.

The lively festival at Torne, bustling with tians.

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The disaster that had once attacked Torne arose from its 300 year sleep and once again set its sights on the village.

Its name was "Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome."

It was an Ancient Legendary UBM... and a creature that suspended itself in a domain none could reach.

Chapter Four: Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome

Paladin, Ray Starling

As the unnatural laughter resounded, the mysterious black object breaking free of the mountain rose up to the sky at an incredible speed. Like a rocket, it pierced through the clouds above and stopped when it was nothing but a mere dot in the sky.

A moment later, the heavens surrounding it winked into darkness.

Though evening was still a while away, it suddenly felt like the sun had set hours ago.

It made me recall the night summoned by the aberration, but this was probably the exact opposite cause. While her Superior Embryo had *created the night*, the dot in the sky was taking the light and effectively *robbing the day*.

B3 silently took out a binocular-like magic item and used it to look up at the dot. Her expression turned bitter.

"B3... what *was* that?" I asked.

"A UBM." She handed me the binoculars.

I took a look at the dot and saw a monster that had the appearance of a cracked crystal ball with a set of dark wings. Above it, there was the name "Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome."

"'Black Sky?'" I muttered. "Wait, that's...!"

It had to be "Blacksky," the UBM from the play. The monster from history who'd become the origin of the Windstar Festival.

The thing had been hit by the meteor and buried underground 300 years ago. Had that thing really survived all those centuries without any food or drink?

"So it's a light-eating energy life form... an elemental," said B3. "In that case, it's not too strange that it survived, but that doesn't matter now. What *does* matter is what it's planning to—"

Before she could finish, Monochrome made its move.

Still high in the sky, it began shooting beams of light. The first few went to the mountain it'd just exited, but then they started landing in the festival crowds. They birthed bursts of raging fire where they hit. Stands, households, and *people* were set ablaze.

And as though that wasn't enough, the beams didn't stop. They continued to drop like an unrelenting rain.

"KyaHAhAhahAHaaH!♪" the thing that caused them laughed. I could hear it clearly despite the distance between us.

The sound was thick with malice. It felt as though that was its way of telling the victims just how much fun it was having. The burning town, the terrified people, the children crying for their parents — all of it brought it great joy.

It watched the endless fear and tragedy and felt *nothing but glee.*

"You vile piece of..." I growled.

That monster made me feel exactly the same as when I'd found out about Maise's evils, when I'd faced Gouz-Maise, and when I'd challenged Franklin. My heart was pleading me, saying, *Do not stand for this.*

"SILVEEEERRRR!" Hearing my roar, my trusty steed appeared out of my inventory.

I jumped on his back, locked my prosthetic's hook on his reins, and used the MP stored in my Grudge-Soaked Greaves to activate Wind Hoof.

"Ray!" cried B3.

"You help Farica and the other tians find shelter!" I shouted. "I'll take care of that thing!"

Without even waiting for a response, I swung the reins and made Silver gallop towards the sky. A second later, the crest on my upper left arm began to shine.

"Ray!" cried Nemesis as she popped out of it, took her greatsword form, and wrapped around my right arm.

"You get the situation?!" I asked.

"Of course! We're shattering that damned crystal, aren't we?!"

"Yeah! That's all you need to know!"

Silver dashed towards the sky at a nearly 90-degree angle as I resisted gravity by charging magic into my prosthetic and adding force to my feet in the stirrups.

“What?” I burst out as I noticed something.

The vertical perspective was giving me a good view of Torne. Looking at it, I saw the silhouettes of four other flying mounts: a gryphon, a hippogryph, a wyvern, and a large skydragon — probably of Pure-Dragon tier.

All of them were being ridden by Masters who’d probably come to enjoy the Windstar Festival.

And now, just like me, they were taking to the sky to slay Monochrome.

“Hey!” the guy on the hippogryph called. “Hey! Aren’t you Ray Starling the Unbreakable?!”

“Yeah! Who are you?”

“I’m Lang, just a Gale Rider without a nickname! Riser told me about you! He’s a long-time member of our clan!”

“You know Riser?!”

“Yes! Anyway, talk about raining on a parade, huh? Let’s join forces and —” Suddenly, Lang’s head completely vanished.

“Wh...?!” I gasped.

In but a flash and without a sound, a beam from above had evaporated his skull. The body left behind was turning to particles of light, while his hippogryph was automatically returned to his Jewel.

“It’s intercepting us!” roared the heavily-armored Master on the Pure-Dragon.

Looking up, I saw the monster’s tentacles twist as their tips were directed at our direction.

“Hah!” chuckled the lightly-armored Master on the gryphon. “It’s like we’re in a shoot ’em up! Getting up close’ll be tough!”

“HyaHAH! We’ve gotta do what we gotta do!” exclaimed the wyvern-rider with a mohawk. “I’ll avenge my clan bro and the tians! We never run from a fight!”

They both made their mounts speed up.

“The beams go straight!” shouted the Master on the Pure-Dragon. “It’s not hard to dodge them! Just watch when the tentacles flash!” He was completely right about that. Though the thing had an immense range, evading its attacks was no challenge, and if we kept this up, it wouldn’t be long until we reached and killed it.

“Whoa, dudes, be careful!” said the mohawk guy. He sounded loud, probably because of some sort of voice-amplifying item. “I was there when it came out! Back then, it melted the bedrock and my clan bro in one hit, but when it shot from the sky, it just made the target burn! It means the beam power is inversely proportional to distance!”

“Ah, so its effective range is lower than the 10,000 meter actual range!” shouted the Pure-Dragon Master.

Basically, the real danger would begin when we got close to that monster.

If the power of the beams is still low, that means that Lang was instakilled only because it hit his head... Man, what an unlucky guy.

I heard a sound behind me and turned to see what caused it. “Hm?”

There were fiery fumes floating somewhere around the halfway point between us and the surface. It looked somewhat like a missile explosion.

“That’s exactly it,” said Nemesis upon reading my mind. “Someone on the surface fired a missile — most likely an Embryo skill — but it was shot down by the fiend’s beams.”

Being in weapon form expanded her field of vision, so she could see what was happening both above and below us.

Though the few of us here were the only ones who’d risen to the sky, someone left on the surface was trying to do something, as well.

“The missiles aren’t the only attacks coming from there, mind you,” she added. “But all the others, too, are being shot down by the beams.”

“All of them, huh?”

And yet, despite that, the remaining four of us flying riders were in peak condition. It was probably because we could dodge the beams, but I still found it pretty odd.

It felt like the monster was prioritizing stopping the attacks from the surface, *as if there was no need to take care of us.*

“Geez... Just how far *is* the damn thing?!” complained the gryphon Master, and I shared his sentiment.

Monochrome had started out at about 10,000 meters up in the sky, and though we were nearing that altitude right now, the distance between us still seemed about the same. The thing was actually *rising even higher*.

“Keh! What’s with its range?! It’s insane!” the mohawk guy complained, but he was probably reading the situation wrong.

“Indeed,” Nemesis agreed with my thought. “Its original altitude appears to have been the limit of its range. The beams have stopped reaching the surface."

Exactly. 10,000 meters was more or less the maximum distance those beams could reach before losing all their power and dispersing. But that had nothing to do with Monochrome's own maximum altitude. It could rise above that limit, and it wasn't hesitating to do so in order to avoid us.

There probably was a maximum height it could reach. At the very least, I hoped it couldn't leave into outer space, but even if it could, we had bigger problems.

"Ah...! Cra...p!" exclaimed the gryphon Master. His voice was starting to sound distant and meek.

Of course it did. We were 12,000 meters above the ground. The air here was many times thinner than on the surface.

"He...y, this is ba...d! My bod...y ca...n't hand...le this..."

This wasn't an environment that could support life. Even the jumbo jets in reality didn't go above 10,000 meters. The air beyond that point was way too sparse to allow long-term flight. The air density, temperature, and pressure here were far too low to allow the survival of any living thing, and even majestic flying monsters like gryphons and wyverns weren't welcome here. Unless we were supported by high stats, we Masters would either faint or freeze to death.

Monochrome, however, was still 10,000 meters above us, *and it was only going higher*.

Again, there might be a limit to how far it could rise. But even if it couldn't leave the atmosphere and escape to outer space, the limit for living creatures came *far earlier*.

That was the reason why it had focused on the attacks from the surface — it had known that none of us could reach it.

"Khh...! Sorr...y, I'm backi...ng o...ut...!"

"Shi...t...!"

The gryphon Master and the wyvern-riding mohawk had no choice but to give up. The Pure-Dragon was still holding out, but its movements had become too dull to be able to dodge the beam storm. It roared in pain as they burned its body, eventually piercing its wings and making it fall.

"Khh! Reca...ll!"

The Pure-Dragon's Master prioritized the mount's survival and returned it back to the jewel. Without anything to keep him in the air, the Master began to fall.

Crashing from this height would definitely give him the death penalty, but he was probably more than aware of that. After all, the look in his eyes was basically saying, “I’m leaving it all to you.”

“So we are the last ones,” sighed Nemesis.

“...Yeah.”

Silver was a Prism Steed, not a living being, so he could fly higher than the other mounts. Even I could survive thanks to his Wind Hoof. The skill created a faint membrane of compressed air that shielded me from the cold, oxygen-less atmosphere. But alas, our limit wasn’t far away, regardless of those facts.

“Ah!” I gasped as Silver suddenly stumbled.

Or, rather, the compressed air beneath his hoof *collapsed under our weight*.

I’d known it was gonna happen eventually. After all, Silver’s “flying” was actually “walking on hardened air.”

Here in the stratosphere, 15,000 meters above the surface, the air was far too thin for his Wind Hoof to form footing strong enough to support us, and giving him extra magic wouldn’t be enough to help.

Even the barrier that protected my life was on the verge of being broken by the beams grazing it. The surrounding air had less and less oxygen and more and more hazardous ozone. Going any higher would put me in danger of instant death the moment the barrier broke.

“Tch!” I looked up and saw that the distance between me and Monochrome was still as great as before.

“ＫｙＡＨａｈＡｈａＨａＨ!” It laughed raucously, and I couldn’t help but feel it was directed at us. Despite the overwhelming distance and the air around us being nearly nonexistent, I could hear its cackling all too clearly.

“That is most likely a skill,” said Nemesis. “One developed for the sole purpose of ridicule.”

“...”

Beams that could reach a whole 10,000 meters away, an ability to ascend into the stratosphere, a skill to mock its victims... All of its powers were focused on looking down on other creatures and completely extinguishing them.

“Ray! This is the limit!” Nemesis shouted. “We can’t go any higher!”

Silver began to slow down. He could no longer create enough compressed air to keep up with his galloping.

Not only that, but Monochrome now focused all its beams exclusively on us, and my steed just couldn’t evade them all.

We simply had no means of going higher and reaching the monster.

“Gh! We’re backing out!” I growled, trying not to give in to the rage storming within me, and ordered Silver to travel back to the surface.

He quickly turned around and began half-falling, half-galloping downwards.

Of course, that wasn’t enough for Monochrome to stop its attacks.

“ＫｙＡＨａＡａａＡａ!” it laughed, making me turn to look at it.

I saw all four of its tentacles flash and release the beams directly towards us. It clearly didn’t intend to let us retreat.

I gasped slightly, then took to action and roared, “Third form!”

“As you wish!” Nemesis instantly turned into the circular shield, and I used her to block the beams.

Upon hitting her surface, the deadly rays were dispersed to the sides.

The residual heat grazed both me and Silver, but there was little damage to speak of.

As expected, the shield’s defensive ability was on a whole different level than the greatsword’s and halberd’s. Though these beams were weakened by the nearly-10,000 meter distance they traveled, stopping them all without using Counter Absorption was no doubt an impressive feat.

“...What? It’s charging? Because of something other than standard damage...?” Nemesis muttered, but I was obviously too busy to listen.

Our resolute descent was almost perfectly vertical, so I fervently held the reins and tightened my legs around Silver to keep me from falling off.

Soon enough, we were over 10,000 meters away from Monochrome and escaped the range of its beams.

A few minutes later, we were back on solid ground.

“...Gh,” I vocalized my frustration. Sure, it was good that we returned alive and all, but that was synonymous with running away from that damn thing. It made me feel bitter, to say the least.

“The sheltering is... going well, it seems,” I muttered.

There were no people in our landing spot, but at the village, I saw a bunch of Masters protecting tons of tourists, helping them find a place to hide. Other Masters were looking up at the sky, thoroughly alert and ready for more beams.

There was no point in that right now, though, since the surface was still outside Monochrome’s range.

“KyAHakYahaKyaHaH!” Its laughter resounded despite the distance, bringing fear into the people’s hearts.

I knew that better than most, since my Grudge-Soaked Greaves were absorbing the surrounding negative emotions and turning them into magic.

The monster laughed again to induce terror while preparing to attack the moment the village was in its range again.

“At least it’s descending pretty slowly,” I said.

On our way down to the surface, I’d realized that it couldn’t go down as fast as it went up. Its descent was nothing compared to its rocket-like ascent. In fact, it was actually slower than free fall.

From what I could see, it would take about 30 minutes for it to return back to a range from which it could attack.

That was good. Considering that we now had more time to help people find shelter, our charge hadn’t been in vain.

“It’s grace, indeed, but we still have no means of shattering the crystal itself,” said Nemesis upon returning to her human form.

In her tone, I heard both vexation... and an unyielding fighting spirit.

We couldn’t even reach Monochrome, much less harm it, and yet she hadn’t given up. I was with her in that regard, of course.

“There’s another thing I noticed about it,” I said. “The thing’s probably not that tough.”

It had been shooting down all the anti-air attacks heading towards it. That might’ve been its way of showing its superiority, but what if it actually *couldn’t allow a single attack to hit it*?

“What’s your basis for that?” asked Nemesis.

“There’s a wound on the crystal ball making up its body.”

Looking at it through B3’s binoculars, I’d seen a pretty large crack, and since not one Master here had landed a single hit on it since it appeared...

“That has to be an old wound,” I said. “It’s probably the damage it got when it was hit by the meteor."

According to the play, it'd been shot down from the sky and buried deep within the earth for several centuries. However, the venerated meteor probably hadn't been all that large or powerful.

If it had been huge, it would've had obliterated both Monochrome *and* the surrounding villages, leaving no one to tell the tale. Therefore, it had to have been small enough to do next to no damage to the landscape.

Gouz-Maise or any of the tough UBMs Shu'd told me about could either bear such a meteor with their stats alone or easily regenerate from the wound it caused. Monochrome, on the other hand, had suffered great damage and hadn't even recovered from it yet.

From what I could tell, its fast ascent power, extreme range, and the ability to absorb light came at a cost of HP, END, and regenerative ability.

"This is just my intuition speaking, but I feel that a Vengeance with about as much charge as we used on Gouz-Maise would be enough to break it. Hell, even half of that might work."

And it was perfectly possible to charge that much by just letting the beams hit me and healing with consumables and my BR Armor.

"The problem is that we have no way to hit it," she said.

That was still the biggest issue with this monster. Even if it was one of the most physically weak UBMs, that wouldn't mean anything if we couldn't land a single attack on it.

"Living creatures can't get to it because it's up in the stratosphere, while attacks from the surface get intercepted. With that in mind, I can think of only two ways of dealing with it."

"Which would be?" asked Nemesis.

"Either we use an attack that ignores distance, like Xunyu's ultimate skill... or we use an anti-air attack that can't be stopped by its beams."

We didn't have Xunyu with us, so the former wasn't an option, and based on the fact that all the anti-air attacks had been shot down, no one here had any skills that fit the latter requirement. And of course, we were no exception to that.

Because of that, I thought the latter method just couldn't be put into practice, but...

Nemesis was silent. She seemed to have something else on her mind. At last, she said, "Ray, may I return to the crest for a moment?"

"What?"

Why now, of all times? I wondered.

"I am about halfway through the analysis of the third form."

Wait, do you mean that... "...the third form's skill can work on that thing?"

"It's not impossible. Although I must admit that what I've analyzed so far has more holes in it than swiss cheese. But I made progress when we shielded against its attacks."

When we shielded? B3 told us that the skill analysis speeds up when doing actions related to the skill. Is that what happened?

"The third form's skill is most likely similar to both Vengeance is Mine and Counter Absorption," she added.

"Wait, so..."

"What I know for certain at this point is that it's an offensive skill that accumulates damage from enemies and can only be used once per day."

So it basically combined the limitations of both Vengeance and Counter Absorption, which made it safe to assume it was more powerful than Vengeance. We still didn't know if the skill could reach Monochrome, though.

"This will be a double gamble," Nemesis continued. "We need to pray that the analyzed skill can harm the fiend... and hope we can use it well. If either of those don't come to fruition, we will be left helpless."

"But the possibility is there, isn't it?" I asked.

"Certainly."

Her answer made me form a faint smile. "Then..."

"...Your answer is already decided, correct?" She returned a smirk of her own.

Man, it's always the same with us, huh? I thought, drawing parallels between the current situation and our fights against Gardranda and Gouz-Maise.

In spite of everything at stake, the moments when Nemesis and I gambled on the future we believed in heartened and assured me like nothing else could.

"Get on that analysis, then," I said. "I'm counting on you."

"As you should. Expect only the best, Ray," she replied as she returned to my crest.

I gently caressed the mark before looking up at the sky, where I saw the malicious black grain of sand that was Monochrome slowly descend towards the surface.

There were a little under 30 minutes left before Torne was in its range. I could only hope that the analysis would be complete before then.

“KyaHAhaHahAhaH!” it cackled, as if to announce its approach.

I felt obligated to respond, and said, “I’ll shut you up... *for good*.”

The battle was only just beginning.

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“Is this an air-raid shelter?” I muttered as I looked up at a half-spherical building that hadn’t been there before.

I could see two other structures exactly like it, too. They’d probably been made by the cooperation between people with earth magic skills or Masters with earth-manipulating Embryos. Their material was the land itself, so they looked like they were buried in the ground.

Additionally, the structures’ surfaces were emitting a faint light. That was probably the result of some sort of barrier skills they were channeling in preparation for the attacks.

I had no idea whether those structures could take Monochrome’s close beams point-blank, but they could probably hold against its 10,000 meter range beams for a while.

I entered one of the shelters and walked around the crowds of tourists and villagers, searching for B3, Louie, and Farica.

We had about 20 minutes until Monochrome could attack us again, and Nemesis was still analyzing the skill, so I thought I’d spend this time by going to B3 and explaining the situation.

Finding her didn’t take too long.

“Let me go! Please!”

She was with Farica.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot allow you to exert yourself and risk hurting your baby...” B3 said.

The woman was desperately trying to leave the shelter, while B3 was holding her back. As I tried to understand what was happening here, I discovered that Louie wasn't with them.

A bad feeling came over me as I walked up to them and called out, "B3!"

"Ray, how did it go with Monochro—"

There was a menacing cackle from outside.

"Oh, I see." She instantly realized that the problem hadn't been solved yet.

"And what's going on *here*?" I asked.

"It's Louie!" cried Farica. "We can't find him anywhere!"

"He's not in the shelter?!"

"Right," nodded B3. "We looked in the other shelters, as well, but he wasn't there, either. According to one of his friends, right before Monochrome appeared, Louie went to invite Mrs. Farica to the dance."

"Ah!" I gasped. That meant that Louie had been all by himself at the start of the monster's rampage. I imagined the worst case scenario, and it made a chill go down my spine.

"I'll search for him!" I exclaimed.

"Let me join you," said B3. "Please wait here, Mrs. Farica."

"But Louie is..."

"For his sake, please don't go anywhere!"

After making sure she wasn't going to leave, we hurried out of the shelter.

Louie's life was in danger, so we had to find him as soon as possible.

Not much time was left until Monochrome's attacks would restart.

Please don't be hurt, I thought as B3 and I got on Silver and began frantically searching the village.

Interlude: Family

Torne Village

Louie was in one of the village's stone windmills, curled up and crying in fear.

The moment of Monochrome's first attacks, Louie had been on his way back home. Thankfully, due to having been away from the festival crowds, he hadn't been targeted by the monster, and had made it out completely unhurt. Nevertheless, the sight of the burning village had terrorized him into a panic, spurring him to run for it until he'd stumbled upon this windmill on the side of the road.

Going inside it had been no mistake. It did a good job hiding Louie from Monochrome's gaze, and it was too far away from the other houses to catch the fire. However, this place was nothing but a dead end for him.

Though it kept him safe from the immediate danger, he would instantly be burned by the fiend if he went out. The mill was both his shelter and his prison.

"Ohh..." he cried, all curled up in the corner.

The resounding cackling of the monster terrified him to no end, and the solitude made him feel helpless, but more than anything, he couldn't stop worrying about his mother, who, he thought, was still at home.

"If Dad were here, he'd..."

He'd save us just like he did back then, he thought.

This actually wasn't a situation that Shijima could have handled, but young Louie wasn't in a state of mind to consider that. Like the child that he was, Louie just wanted his *father* to save him.

The boy had adored Shijima ever since they'd met four years ago. Being his savior and an ultra-strong Master, the man was a real hero to him.

However, Louie's admiration was the kind you'd direct at superstars or famous sportsmen; Shijima definitely wasn't a father figure to him.

Because of that, he didn't know how to feel about Farica and Shijima getting married.

The boy's heart was rejecting the idea that Shijima was his dad now. His love and respect for the man was there there, but not his ability to see anything fatherly about him, which was perfectly normal for a child whose mother had just remarried.

That sentiment made it hard for the boy to idolize the man like before, and it started to create an awkward distance between them.

Shijima began living with them, and Louie behaved around him like a stranger, rather than the family they'd now become.

Neither Farica nor Shijima said anything about that. They believed that, regardless of how the boy went about it, Louie had to find the compromise by himself — by his own will. Because of this, Gringham and Juno were soon acting more worried than the parents.

After a whole month of awkwardness, the family came across a turning point — a visit to a certain grave at the capital.

It was the death anniversary of Louie's biological father, so they went to clean it up and decorate it with flowers.

The man had been a plain Carpenter who'd lost his life slipping off a roof and falling to the pavement below. The angle at which he'd hit the ground was so unfortunate that he'd died in an instant, not giving any time for healing magic to save him.

After cleaning the grave, presenting the flowers, and giving a prayer, Louie and Farica left the graveyard and prepared to return home, but that was when the boy realized they'd left their cleaning tools back at the grave.

"Wait here, Mom, I'll go get them!" he told Farica before speeding away.

Back at his father's grave, Louie found someone he hadn't expected.

It was Shijima, the man they'd parted from after traveling together to the capital. The man had told them he had business to attend to.

He placed some lit incense before Louie's father's grave, placed his hands together, and closed his eyes.

Shijima was so focused on his task that he didn't even noticed Louie hide behind one of the other graves.

After a long, silent prayer, the man silently spoke up, saying, "For as long as I draw breath, I will make sure they're happy."

Those were words directed at the person who'd protected Shijima's most cherished people before he'd come into their lives.

"So please... watch over us."

They were a promise to the man who was no longer with them.

Louie didn't come out of hiding and merely watched the scene, but it had a profound effect on him, culminating with a single thought:

Oh, he... he's a dad.

From that day forth, Louie slowly started to warm up to Shijima again, and they went on to become a happy father and son.

The Windstar Festivals the family visited after that were some of the best memories of Louie's life so far.

This one, however, was drastically unlike those.

"Why is this happening...?" Louie cried.

He was spending this Windstar Festival curling up, alone, and scared out of his mind.

Last year, he'd had his father with him, along with Gringham and Juno, but now, they were nowhere in sight.

He was even separated from his mother, leaving him shivering in solitude on the mill's cold stone floor while the dreadful cackling from above terrorized his heart.

"I want my mommy... a-and daddy too..." he continued to cry, with no one there to hear him.

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You might end up being released. If that happens, I won't be able to give you any orders. But if you... if the days we spent here are as much of a treasure to you as they are to me... if you see us as your family... then there's something I want you to do.

As those important words went through his mind, he slowly opened his eyes to find himself in a highly familiar landscape.

He'd been asleep for a full two seasons. Much had changed. And upon examining his current state, he realized that he'd lost his bond to someone he deeply adored, which made him profoundly sad.

"Eh...?" He then noticed that something was wrong with the sky.

He didn’t feel like it was night, and yet it was strangely dark, not to mention that there was an unpleasant laughter coming from high above.

Though the sound slightly annoyed him, he didn’t care about it too much.

However, the cackling was mixed with another sound — one he couldn’t ignore even if he tried.

After all, how could he disregard the cries of a child who was so precious to him? How could he act like he didn’t hear the weeping of a member of his *family*?

“GROAAAAAHHHHHHH!” roared the man as he kicked the ground beneath his four feet. He would give his heart and soul to run towards the voice. To protect his nearest and dearest.

Chapter Five: B. B. B.

Paladin, Ray Starling

“Where will we search for him?” asked B3.

“We’ll run around the festival plaza and the roads between the buildings!” I replied. “You keep looking around!”

“All right.”

We rode Silver as he galloped through the burning village.

Just an hour ago, it had been overflowing with people enjoying the festivities with bright smiles on their faces, but now, it looked completely deserted, and the only remnants of that fun were the countless windstars with their blades burned off.

Torne was filled with a blackness much like that of Monochrome itself. Burned and darkened remains were spread out as far as the eye can see. Homes, cattle, and even *people* had been bathed in fire and reduced to charred shadows of what they once were.

Hoping that Louie hadn’t ended up like that, I frantically searched for him.

B3 poked my side.

“...?” I raised an eyebrow. She seemed to have noticed something.

“My Killing Intent Perception skill is flaring up,” she whispered into my ear.

I gasped and asked, “Is it Monochrome?”

“No, it’s not. There are multiple sources, and all of them are approaching us.”

“Eh?” It took me a moment to process that.

Before I could ask her who could attack us *now*, of all times, I heard an odd set of words.

“Dreams of Electric Sheep — Gremlin!”

A moment later, Silver lost control of his legs and collapsed sideways, the running momentum taking him a fair distance forward.

I was still holding his reins with my prosthetic, so I fell along with him.

B3, on the other hand, instantly jumped off and landed beautifully.

"Gh... what the hell just happened?" I let go of Silver's reins and stood up. "Silver, what's wrong?!"

Still on his side, he wasn't moving. He didn't even twitch or anything like that. It was as though he was broken, malfunctioning like the machine he was, and I couldn't make sense of it at all.

"That thing won't be moving for half a day," said someone behind me. I turned around to see a malicious-looking man wearing a bandana with a mark depicting a black circle over a red one.

He wasn't alone. B3 and I were now surrounded by a group of ten-odd Masters bearing the same mark.

"Gremlin's this guy's Embryo. It turns off machines and stuff," the bandana guy said while scratching his chin and pointing at the man next to him, who formed a mean grin.

"So you're the ones who stopped Silver," I said. "What's your problem?"

"We've got some business with you, Ray Starling the Unbreakable," the bandana guy said.

It definitely wasn't the first time I'd been called by that nickname. That Lang guy I'd met before had used it, too. Unlike him, though, this man here didn't seem friendly at all.

"We're Sol Crisis, the PK clan," he said. "I'm the leader, Dum-dum Dan. Call me 'Dum-dum.' Not like that matters. We won't know each other for long."

Sol Crisis? I thought. *Well, now that I think about it, some of them seem familiar.*

They were the ones who'd wrangled with those mohawks at the stalls. The armor guy wasn't with them, though.

"Guess there's no point in asking what you want from me," I said.

They were a PK clan, so it was kinda obvious that they wanted to PK me. They'd made it hard for me to escape, and then come out to introduce themselves to make it easy for them to prove they'd defeated the Unbreakable later. There would be no point in killing me in a surprise attack and making it hard to tell who did it.

Hell, some small man in work clothes was actually filming this, so their motive was all too clear.

“Can’t you leave it for after Monochrome is taken care of?” I asked. “I’ve got something more important to do.”

“Not happening,” said Dum-dum. “Now’s the perfect chance.”

What?

“Sol Crisis is pretty well-known now, but we don’t have any real achievements to our name, so we wanna do something big and make our name blow up for real.”

“...Then why don’t you just kill Monochrome?” I demanded.

“Come on, dude, tons of people have killed UBMs at this point. It ain’t all that special. Not to mention that we can’t even touch the damn thing. Trying to take it out is just stupid. I mean, really, even *you* ran away.”

I had no counterargument to that.

Still, the fact that someone who was doing nothing against Monochrome was making fun of everyone who’d tried to fight it was seriously pissing me off.

“So yeah, we can’t beat the UBM up there, but it’s all good, since we’ve got some way better game right here. It survived against a goddamn Superior and the self-proclaimed strongest PK clan, despite not even being level 100. If that ain’t top-tier game, I don’t know what is.” The bandana guy named Dum-dum pointed at me and grinned. “I’m talking about *you*, guy.”

Well, I got their motive right, at least.

“Now’s not the time for this, damn it!” I shouted.

“Kyah ha ha! You dumbass! It’s the *perfect* time for this!” someone other than Dum-dum replied.

I looked over at the source of the voice and saw a guy in full armor surpassing three meters in height. The charred buildings at his sides were crumbling. It definitely wasn’t the first time I’d seen that armor. I’d seen it back at the capital’s fountain and here in Torne, during the wrangle between Sol Crisis and Mohawk League.

Wait, I think I’ve seen it elsewhere, too...

“When you were in Gideon, we couldn’t take you out ’cause of all the rankers and KoD, but now, that woman’s the only one with ya!” he laughed out loud. “And there’s no one here to bother us, either! You’re a really fucking easy target right now!”

He seemed pretty pleased about the situation.

"So yeah, that's how it is," said Dum-dum. "We also did our homework and found out you're not too hot when fighting lots of people and when the fight drags on. Think you can hold out against us?"

I was silent. He wasn't wrong about that. My defense had a limited number of uses, so prolonged fights against many people were my bane.

Damn you, Franklin. I'm too well-known now.

"Not to mention we've got a secret weapon — me!" roared the armor guy. "Name's Barbaroy! I'm the sub-leader of Sol Crisis and the strongest one here!"

"Hh?!" I gasped as a sudden chill went down my spine.

The moment he'd said those words, there was a surge of overwhelming rage and killing intent. However, it didn't come from the armor guy, but from my side. I turned and saw my only ally on the scene.

"Heh heh," she giggled.

Indeed — *B3* was the source of the surge. I didn't know why, but she was emitting an aura so intimidating, it couldn't even be compared to the one she'd had when fighting K&R yesterday. It was strong enough to make me shiver, yet she looked as composed as ever.

...No, scratch that. I looked and noticed that her shield's handle was bent.

For some reason, the armor guy was making her *really* mad.

"That armor has a nice *design*," she said.

"Kyah ha ha! I know, right?" laughed the armor guy. "It's the one and only Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus! A special reward I got from a UBM!"

"Oh my, that is quite impressive."

The armor guy continued to flaunt his gear, completely oblivious to B3's murderous aura.

"Now, if I may ask... who are you to be wearing such armor?" she smiled. I hadn't known her for long, but even I could tell she was faking it.

"Kyah ha ha ha! I already introduced myself!" he laughed again. "And what, ya can't tell by my armor? You don't know much, do ya?"

"...Perhaps. So, may I have your name?"

Armor dude, please stop. B3's murderous aura is turning so strong that she's scaring me more than the aberration. I don't know what's going on here, but you're clearly walking on a minefield.

“Kyah ha ha ha! I’m Barbaroy Bad Burn the ‘Crushing Canopy’! I’m the man who used to lead Mad Castle, and now I’m the sub-leader of Sol Crisis! There! Satisfied?!”

“I see.”

I have no idea how I am the only one here who feels the aura... I thought. *Hm? Wait.*

“Hold on. ‘Barbaroy’?” I muttered to myself. That name seemed familiar...

“Ah,” I exclaimed as I glanced at B3, then at my party’s stat summary. Suddenly, it all made sense. I understood why B3 was so mad, and what kind of person this armor dude was.

“Huhh? What’s up, Unbreakable, ya don’t know me, either?” he asked.

“Oh no, I do,” I replied. “‘Barbaroy Bad Burn,’ huh? Yeah, I know that *name* very well.”

“Kyah ha ha! Of course ya do! Try using Reveal or Identification if you want. See for yourself.”

The fact he mentioned those skills probably meant that you’d see exactly what he claimed you would, but I more or less knew what was happening here, so that didn’t matter to me.

“Killing you will make my and Sol Crisis’s fame skyrocket even higher! Man, am I glad I saw you back at that fountain yesterday!”

“Damn, dude, you sure are hyped,” commented Dum-dum. “I gotta say, though, when you told me you’d seen that guy alone at the capital, I thought it was just an early April Fools.”

“Kyah ha ha! C’mon, leader, you know you can trust me!”

Oh, yeah, it’s April Fools’ Day in reality right now, I thought. *Talk about timing. This whole situation feels like a bad joke.*

“Ray,” B3 spoke up.

“Yes?”

“Leave them to me and go search for Louie.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want him to get hurt while we’re dealing with these guys,” I conceded. “Is it really a good idea to leave them all to you, though?”

“Yes. In fact, *let me have them*,” she said as she lightly pushed me.

I nodded and went to retrieve Silver, who was still immobile. After putting him back in my inventory, I hurried away from there.

“Hey! Don’t think you can escape!” shouted the armor guy. The whole of Sol Crisis moved to stop me, but before they could do anything...

“Heaven’s Weight!” B3 activated the gravity field she’d used on Rosa, pushing the PKers to the ground.

They were rendered incapable of doing anything to me, so I quickly made my escape.

I left Sol Crisis to B3 and focused entirely on searching for Louie.

But man, some people sure have some weird ideas, I thought. *I mean, there’s just no way that trick can work for long.*

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Torne Village

“I... I can’t move!”

“What the hell?! M-My bones are breaking!”

“Is this a gravity field? Wait, don’t tell me that...”

None of the people Ray had left behind were moving.

To be precise, there was one person who *didn’t* move, while the rest of them just *couldn’t* move.

The latter were the Sol Crisis members, bound by a high gravity field, while the former was B3 — its creator.

She looked down on them as she reached into her inventory and took out a Job Crystal. It was a consumable that allowed the user to switch their main job.

B3 shattered the Crystal, changing her main job from Shield Giant to something else.

“Now then,” she said in a cool tone as she leisurely walked up to the armored man. “There are three things I feel I must point out to you, Mister ‘Barbaroy.’”

She gently touched one of the protrusions on his armor and just *tore it off.*

“Huh?! How the fuck are you do—?!”

“It’s not hard enough,” B3 cut Barbaroy’s words short and forced her fist into his abdomen.

She wasn’t using her bare hands. While no one was paying attention, she’d equipped a pair of gigantic gauntlets.

That description really was apt, for they seemed like a pair of metallic gloves a giant would wear. Not only that, but they looked *very much like* the gauntlets from Barbaroy's armor set, which, by the way, now had a number of cracks around its abdominal area.

"The real Magnum Colossus isn't nearly as fragile," B3 continued. Her tone had little emotion to it, making her give off the vibe of someone telling an apprentice cook about their mistake. "Although the appearance is good, you should have used a tougher metal."

In contrast to her mild mannerisms, her attack had left Barbaroy completely bewildered and barely able to breathe.

"Next point. I checked your name using Reveal, and true, it's 'Barbaroy Bad Burn.' However..." she stopped for a moment and cracked a faint grin. "On my screen, in my language... It's written in katakana."

As Barbaroy, on his knees, groaned because of the punch, B3 placed her foot on his head and stepped down on it.

Barbaroy's helm sunk a bit into the ground, but it was unable to withstand the impact and shattered, revealing a feeble-looking man.

"Th-The hell are you talking about...?" he asked. Losing his helmet made his voice lose its echo and with that, its power.

"The real Barbaroy Bad Burn's name isn't written in Japanese katakana," she explained with an emotionless voice. "I know it's hard to tell when we have the translation feature, but it's nothing you couldn't find out with a little bit of research."

B3 opened a window and showed him her status summary.

"The real one's name uses the English alphabet," she continued. "Like so..."

The window displayed B3's — B.B.B.'s — full name.

Plain as day, written in clear English, was "Barbaroy Bad Burn."

"Huh?!"

"Ahh... Thought as much," B3 said.

"Eh?"

"Wh-What's going on here?!"

Some Sol Crisis members reacted with mere surprise, while others looked thoroughly confused. Barbaroy — or, rather, the one who claimed to be Barbaroy — and Dum-dum, along with a couple of others, were the ones who seemed merely surprised. The latter were far more numerous.

"Oh, I see you haven't told your entire clan that *you're a fake*," B3 commented.

"N-No...!" said the armor man. "I'm Barbaroy and I'm wearing the Magnum Colossus! Reveal and Identification can prove it!"

"Yes, and that makes the truth that much easier to see. You have an Embryo that lets you falsify names, don't you?" She exposed his lie with a forced smile on her face. "Swindler and similar jobs have the 'Falsify Name' skill, but that can be exposed with a high level Reveal or Truth Discernment. Your Embryo has a skill that's above those two. Simple as that. After all, an Embryo skill's effect is much stronger when it's more restricted."

Ultimate superior job skills like Franklin's Analyzing Eye of Wisdom could probably expose the man, but luckily — or perhaps unluckily — the fake Barbaroy had never encountered anyone with such abilities.

"I considered that it could be a skill from a special reward," B3 continued, “but I cannot imagine someone wearing that fake armor ever becoming an MVP.”

“Gnhh...!” The fake Barbaroy didn’t know how to respond.

“It’s a great skill for tricking people, and pretending to be an influential player to make your clan more prestigious is definitely a good application of it. However, there is a limit to how many members you can gain before the truth comes out. From what I can see, many of them here did not know about this.”

Indeed, about half of the members present had thought that their Barbaroy was the real one, and many of them had joined just because of the name’s reputation. Now that the truth had come out, they gave suspicious glares to the members who’d known about this.

“That’s why you targeted Ray — you wanted the prestige.” B3 continued. “And when you were done with him and had an actual achievement to your name, you planned to make up a reason why Barbaroy had to leave and make him do exactly that. The prestige your clan would have then would be just enough to fool people and make them come to you even if you didn’t have him anymore.”

“Y-You bi— Stop!” The fake Barbaroy tried to shut her up, but he couldn’t move because he was far too close to B3, giving him the full effects of Heaven’s Weight: ultra high gravity and the Binding debuff. He simply didn’t have the STR to break free.

“The reason why you chose Barbaroy is simple — it’s because you cannot change appearances. Be it a battle or a public place, Barbaroy is known to always wear full armor, and that made him an easy choice, correct?” She momentarily stopped and looked down on the fake. “Your other options weren’t nearly as good. The Superior Killer was decent, but no one knows his name, so it would’ve been difficult to prove you were the real thing. The Unsheath and King of Burglary’s faces are too well-known for your plan to work, while the King of Crimes is in the gaol, so he is not even an option. You ended up choosing Barbaroy through simple elimination.”

“N-No! Don’t believe her! I’m the real deal!” shouted the fake.

“Well, let’s see you prove it, then,” B3 said as she freed him from the effects of Heaven’s Weight.

Being able to move again, the fake slowly stood up, then gasped as he realized what she meant.

"If you're truly the real Barbaroy, defeat me all by yourself and turn this situation around. Of course, I won't be holding back, either."

"Ghnhh..."

The fake couldn't even bring himself to nod to that, and that was more than enough to show how unauthentic he was.

"I'm a fake..." he gave in and admitted.

The members who'd been fooled began jeering at him.

"You tricked us!"

"Fuck! I can't believe I let this faker act like hot shit!"

"S-Screw you! Don't act like you didn't use Barbaroy's name to extort tons of money from people!"

The ones who were in on the plan retaliated, splitting Sol Crisis into two sides. Their relentless arguing resulted in lots of noise.

"*Shut up*." But all of it stopped with just those silent, yet extremely menacing, words.

Needless to say, the one who spoke them was B3 — the most infuriated person on the scene.

"Excuse me, but there's no need for you to quarrel. Regardless of anything you say, I'm about to *kill you all*."

The ones who were tricked argued against that.

"W-We were cheated!"

"It's not my fault! I don't have anything to do with this!"

"But you *did* use Barbaroy's name to rob people, didn't you?" B3 pointed out. "The fee for that will be your life. In fact, I am a player killer, so I do not need such excuses. Someone opposes me? I merely *kill them all*."

Her words made all of Sol Crisis, torn apart by the lie, unwittingly become one again. The gravity field made it impossible for them to escape, so they all were aware now that they were about to be massacred.

"Anyway, I suppose this isn't something you say so deep into a conversation, but I am quite upset right now," B3 continued.

Yeah, we can tell, they thought in response. The way she'd treated the fake was more than enough to see that she was furious.

"Do you understand why am I so angry?"

"B-Because we used Barbaroy's name...?" asked the fake.

"No. I actually *don't mind* that you chose Barbaroy as the imitation. Well, it's true that the low armor strength, low stats, and general lack of research somewhat vexes me, but the fact that someone used the name means that it holds enough weight to be used, so it's definitely not the focus of my anger."

"Th-Then why...?"

"There are two reasons," she said in an ominously gentle tone. "The first one is the fact that you used the name of the leader of Mad Castle on the *sub-leader* of your third-rate clan."

The members of Sol Crisis needed a moment to process what she'd just said, but they instantly understood just how mad she was. Her ferocious expression and fiery eyes spoke volumes about her rage.

"Th-Third rate?!" howled the fake. "You makin' light of us?"

"Heh heh heh. Yours is a clan that acts all big and tough when all you have is borrowed fame. If that isn't third-rate, I have no idea what is." B3 chuckled. "And despite being so lowly, you had the gall to disgrace both Barbaroy and Mad Castle, effectively putting that clan below your third-rate Sol Crisis."

Indeed, the true reason for her anger was her feelings for the now-gone clan. She had nothing against someone else using her name, but bringing it down was simply unacceptable in her eyes.

"Barbaroy Bad Burn isn't forgiving enough to ignore this."

B3's tone was composed, but the pressure she was emitting was immeasurable, making Sol Crisis realize what just kind of beast they'd been dancing with.

"As for the other reason why I'm upset..." she continued as she raised another finger on her giant gauntlets. "You stood in his way and ridiculed him when he earnestly struggled to stop this tragedy."

The passion in her tone made it clear that this upset her as much as the insult to her clan — if not more.

"And that's why *I'm gonna trash you all*," she changed her tone as a large set of armor covered her from neck to toe.

It looked exactly like that of the fake Barbaroy's, but the aura it exuded was incomparable, for it was the real Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus.

"Oh, right, I forgot to point out the third thing," she said as all the bloodlust and anger vanished like mist.

“Th-Thing?” the fake meekly repeated her.

“Yes. I said that I have three things to point out, but I’ve only pointed out two so far.”

She’d mentioned two of the mistakes the fake had made, namely the armor durability and name display, but she’d yet to tell him the third.

“The third thing...” she said, still with a calm expression, as she took out the headpiece of the Gunhammer Plate from out of her inventory. “The third thing is that Barbaroy Bad Burn *turns on* his PK mode when he hides his face.”

She then placed the helm over her head.

“Oh, I just realized that I haven’t properly said it yet.”

The moment the plate covered her whole face, she declared, “The big boy Barbaroy Bad Burn we’re all talkin’ about... is *me*.”

Thus, one of the kingdom’s leading PKers, Barbaroy Bad Burn the Crushing Canopy, was reborn.

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About Sol Crisis

It all began with the Embryo of a Master known as "Vermin." Its name was "Amanojaku," and it had the ability to change the names of his items and himself.

Unaware of the Urikohime folk tale, Vermin wondered why it was a name-changing Embryo, but he liked its ability a lot. He figured that Amanojaku could work wonders for him if he used it well.

Infinite Dendrogram was a game where the system itself prevented name changes, so having the privilege of actually being able to do that gave him a great advantage.

Vermin used that power to swindle countless Masters. He avoided targeting tians because he didn't want to end up in the gaol, but that would never happen with his fellow players, so he went wild scamming them one after another.

Eventually, he met up with a pair of other Masters who also went around doing bad deeds: Dum-dum, an ambusher PKer, and Blue Screen, a player who'd gotten on Dryfe's wanted list for breaking too many machines.

They all found each other to be kindred spirits — or, rather, people they could use — and went on to join forces.

That was the start of the Sol Crisis clan.

Later, the new partners in crime wanted to do something big, and they eventually got the idea to fake an infamous PKer.

By using the name of someone feared and powerful, they could menace and coerce tons of other people, and if someone doubted the fake PKer's identity, they could freely show them the name, which would be changed by Amanojaku.

The stronger and more feared the PKer, the more it would frighten those who saw it.

Though the Embryo didn't allow appearance changes, they could still imitate PKers that didn't show their faces. Not even MVP-exclusive special rewards would be a problem if they just made items that looked similar and changed the name to make them appear real.

Additionally, upon reaching the sixth form, Amanojaku became able to fake not only names, but stats, as well.

They definitely had the means to pull off the lie, and after a short investigation, Vermin found the perfect PKer to fake — Barbaroy Bad Burn.

Before the Superior Killer settled in Altar, there were a total of five PKers who were particularly feared:

The sole Superior was the King of Crimes, Sechs Würfel.

K&R's leader, The Unsheath, Kashimiya.

K&R's sub-leader, Nobushi Princess, Rosa.

Goblin Street's leader, King of Burglary, Eldridge.

Mad Castle's leader and the sole high-rank job among them, Full Armor Giant, Barbaroy Bad Burn.

These PKers were greatly feared by Masters all across the kingdom. Of course, the KoC was dreaded by the tians, as well, and since he was quickly put on the country's wanted list, it was hard to consider him a Master belonging to the kingdom.

If Vermin wanted to pretend to be anyone in the kingdom, these five would be the most effective, as they were the most infamous PKers there.

Kashimiya, Rosa, and Eldridge were still actively playing, so they were instantly excluded from the possible choices.

As for King of Crimes... right before the war against Dryfe, he'd fought against someone *unknown*. They'd both ended up defeated, and KoC had been sent to the gaol, so he wasn't even an option.

Besides, even if he had still been here, taking up his name would just be far too dangerous, since the slightest mention of him would make the kingdom's officials instantly jump into action.

The kidnapping of the third princess, the massacre at Count Friebel's mansion, the deprivation of The Saint, et cetera... The many crimes committed by KoC had turned his name into a sort-of taboo word in the kingdom.

Because of all that, Barbaroy was the only real choice, and as luck would have it, his current situation was just perfect for Sol Crisis's plan.

After being defeated by the Over Gladiator, Figaro, Barbaroy's clan was dissolved, and he himself seemed to have disappeared.

There were rumors that he'd quit because of the shock from the defeat, making him the perfect person for Vermin to fake.

So Vermin did just that, becoming a Barbaroy Bad Burn that couldn't be exposed by any Reveal or Identification, letting them pressure other Masters like never before.

It didn't take long for the fake Barbaroy to uplift Sol Crisis and make it a relatively well-known PK clan. The fame attracted many new members, making it a highly popular underground option.

With that, however, came a certain problem.

There were now far too many members who didn't know that their Barbaroy was a fake. If he was somehow exposed, the entire clan would be at risk of collapsing.

So their countermeasure to that was to get fame from something other than Barbaroy.

Specifically, they decided to PK Ray Starling the Unbreakable — the famous Master who, despite being a newbie, hadn't broken before a Superior.

Achieving that would be proof that their Barbaroy was more than just for show, and the clan would no longer be in danger of collapsing. In fact, it would only grow bigger.

However, Ray Starling was almost always surrounded by duel rankers, his weird comrades, and even *the* King of Destruction, making him a scary target to attack.

There were probably many other PKers who wanted to take out the Unbreakable, but were giving up for that very reason.

But then Vermin saw Ray Starling at the capital's fountain. He was accompanied solely by Nemesis, so they figured it was a golden opportunity for them to take him.

Dum-dum used his trailing-specialized Embryo to track where he was going, then gathered the members and went after him, looking for a chance to PK him.

They planned on attacking him when he was at the Fadl Mountain Pass, but then their attack coincided with K&R's hunt.

Two of their members ended up getting the death penalty, but they figured that K&R's interference was actually worth it, since now the Unbreakable would also be known as the one who not even K&R could defeat.

If Sol Crisis managed to succeed where they'd failed, they would become an even bigger name than K&R.

With that positive, yet misguided mentality, they used Monochrome's attack to assault Ray Starling. Since next to no other Masters would interfere, they figured this was a perfect opportunity for them. The incident was working in their favor, and things couldn't be going any smoother for them.

However, they neglected to consider three things:

One — no matter how many tricks they used to make Sol Crisis appear strong, it would never be representative of their own strength.

Two — the one they thought had quit the game was still very active.

And three — they never pictured just how badly the real one would *snap* when their actions were uncovered.

Those were Sol Crisis's fatal mistakes, and retribution was dealt back to them in the form of an enraged juggernaut — the third strongest PKer in the kingdom.

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Torne Village

Sol Crisis was now looking at the real Barbaroy Bad Burn, clad in gigantic armor and donning a full helm that covered her entire face.

Putting on that helmet was what made Barbaroy "turn on" to her PKer mode.

Scared as they were, upon being told that, the members of Sol Crisis had wanted to laugh at her manga-like roleplaying. But once she actually equipped the helm and became the renowned PKer, all their amusement was blown away.

Even though she looked exactly the same as their fake had, the intimidating air she emanated and the ferocity leaking out from her armor were on a completely different level. Her presence was so intense that anyone who knew what it felt like would have easily been able to tell the fake from the real one, even if the fake wore her name.

"Right, then. Like I said, you're all about to get trashed." Barbaroy's words echoed within the armor. Her voice sounded somewhat masculine. "You can't move for shit right now, so I could take my time and kill you slowly."

Sol Crisis shivered in fear.

Each and every single one of them were currently bound by the high gravity field spread out around Barbaroy. Depending on the distance from her, that field multiplied their weight by a minimum of 200 and a maximum of 500, so they couldn't make any significant movements. The wide reach of the skill had allowed her to catch the entire clan.

At the edge of the field, the gravity was 200 times higher than normal, so those located thereabouts could move if they had 2,000 STR, which was 200 times higher than a normal person. It was a burden that most capable vanguard roles with low and high-rank jobs could carry with little trouble.

However, those positioned further away from Barbaroy were either ranged attackers or supports. And since magic, archery, or gunnery didn't scale with STR, they didn't have enough of it to be able to escape the 200 times greater than normal gravity.

And that was only for those who were at the edge of the field. Those who were closer could be exposed to 300, 400, and even 500 times greater gravity, and even, to top it off, receive the Binding debuff. Even max level high-ranks with good stat growth bonuses from their Embryos would find it hard to escape that.

Not to mention that merely *being able to move* wasn't enough, as the extra weight would still dull their mobility and make it impossible for them to fight properly.

For these many reasons, Heaven's Weight was a truly terrifying skill.

Of course, it wasn't absolute. During the capital blockade incident, Figaro had been able to break out of Barbaroy's maximum gravity field.

But if you looked at it another way, Figaro was the *only one* who'd succeeded at that, and he was a Superior.

The mix of Barbaroy's Heaven's Weight and ultimate skill had even killed Superior Jobs like Rosa and Eldridge. In fact, Figaro's feat had only been possible because of the powerful buffs from his Embryo and skills on his special rewards.

Naturally, Sol Crisis had nothing that could overcome this. So great was the gravity that some were forced to the ground and had their bones break.

Man, shame I'm not closer to the outside, thought the leader of Sol Crisis, Sneak Raider, Dum-dum. He was regretting setting the clan's battle arrangement to what it was, and the reason for that was simple. *I might've* *been able to escape after she ran out of MP taking care of the rest. Just my luck.*

Indeed, he would have liked to avoid the death penalty by using his clan members as decoys, and it wouldn't exactly have been impossible, either.

Though Heaven's Weight was strong, it also drained a lot of MP.

According to Dum-dum's Reveal skill, Barbaroy now only had about a third of her max MP left, and he expected it to run out before she PK'd everyone.

Thus, Dum-dum could have survived if he'd been at the edge of the gravity field. However, as a vanguard fighter, he'd been placed at the front of the encirclement.

He gave up and just hoped that he wouldn't drop any valuable items, but then... Barbaroy said something that made no sense to him or the rest of Sol Crisis.

"I'm gonna cancel this field now." The armor giant ignored their confusion and continued. "It'd piss me off something fierce if you started whining and telling everyone that you only got beaten 'cause I took you by surprise and crushed you when you couldn't move... so I'm giving you all a fighting chance."

Barbaroy began to slowly walk through the barrier.

For some, that made the burden lighter, while for others, Barbaroy's approach increased the gravity and made their bones break. However, those who could more or less move now chose to stay still and watch what Barbaroy did next.

"The rules are simple," she said. "You all come at me, and anyone who can take a tenth of my HP within five minutes gets to go."

"What do you mean by that?" Dum-dum asked.

"If you can manage that, I'm not gonna attack you at all. Hell, I'll even write a Contract for this. 'I will not attack anyone who, within the next five minutes, damages me for a tenth of my health' or something should do the job."

"Wh-Why five minutes?" Dum-dum ventured.

"What, you don't see the shitty UBM up there? I've gotta go and help my boy Ray deal with that damn thing."

In other words, five minutes was the approximate amount of time it would take for Monochrome to resume its attacks, and that was all the time

Barbaroy was willing to waste on Sol Crisis.

"You can try and run, but I already looked at you all with Reveal," she added. "Got all your names and stats in my cranium. Not gonna forget your mugs, either. My memory's pretty damn good."

So even if they escaped here and now, she'd kill them some other time — and probably more than just once.

However, Sol Crisis saw that her conceit was giving them a chance.

The fifteen members of the clan looked at each other. Both the deceived and the deceivers put their antagonism aside and became united again.

"Hey, you said that a tenth's fine, but, uh..." said Dum-dum, the leader. "We *can* kill you, right?"

"Sure. Do that, and you're all free to go."

With that, they had a verbal promise, and Barbaroy didn't neglect to fill out a Contract, either.

The sight made just about all of Sol Crisis silently chuckle. Dum-dum was no exception.

She only has about a third of her MP left, he thought. *If we all attack her at once, she'll lose all of it before the fight ends. That'll be my chance. If I let the other guys distract her, I might become a PKer who's killed the real Barbaroy.*

He tried to keep a serious face so that no one would realize what he was thinking.

Others might be picturing scenarios similar to his. Barbaroy was probably aware of that, but she showed no interest in it.

"By the way... Do you numbskulls seriously think I'm givin' you this chance just so you wouldn't have any excuses?" she said with a voice thick with frightening bloodlust.

Dum-dum faltered. "What... What do you mean?"

"Yeah, I bet you're curious. Anyway, just get ready to be broken in more ways than one," she said, causing a chill to go down each of their spines. "All right. I'll cancel it in three seconds. Threeeee..."

The countdown to the battle began...

"Two. Stronghold Pressure!"

...but then, before she was done counting, she canceled the gravity field and used both her shields to crush two of their casters.

Stronghold Pressure was a Shield Giant skill that turned defense into offense. Though she'd switched her job to Full Armor Giant, she could freely use the skill because she was using the appropriate weapon type — a shield. Of course, the damage dealt was more than enough to make short work of the casters' low HP and END.

If the expressions on the halves of faces that they still had left were anything to go by, the two unfortunates had no idea what had just happened.

After the first attack pulverized a large part of their skulls, Barbaroy confirmed that they were still conscious, then crushed them again.

This time, their heads were reduced to mince meat, and it didn't take long for the two to get the death penalty and vanish. One of them was a central figure of the clan and the one who'd stopped Silver — Gremlin's Master, Blue Screen.

"Huuuh?!"

"Th-That's so unfair!"

Sol Crisis' members stood up and distanced themselves while telling Barbaroy off, but she didn't seem to care in the least.

"Huhhh?" she sneered. "I said I'd cancel it in three seconds, didn't I? What the hell're you callin' unfair?"

Indeed, she'd canceled the skill exactly three seconds after saying that. She wasn't lying at all. However, she had purposely begun a drawn-out, purposeless countdown to make Sol Crisis believe that the battle would begin the moment she finished counting.

Also, they just hadn't been able to imagine that a person who wanted to fight after undoing her highly advantageous field would actually fight unfairly.

"And hell, what's wrong with a PKer being unfair?" she continued. "Got taken by surprise? Well, that's your own damn fault. If you want a fair battle, go and get your head lopped off by Kashimiya. Kyah ha ha ha!" Her belittling laughter was dense with cunning. "By the way, about why I canceled the field and gave you a chance..."

She'd chose to turn a slaughter into a fight, and the reason for that was...

"You dumb shits went and faked me, so I wanted to show you Barbaroy's *style* and DRILL IT INTO YOUR DAMN HEADS!"

And to that end, she was willing to discard her overwhelming advantage.

Her roar made all of Sol Crisis completely forget the notion that they could win if they just waited for her to run out of MP. It made them aware that they had to go all-out or be mercilessly PK'd.

And if they were to fight seriously, the fact that they'd just lost two casters was a huge problem.

"That bastard went and started with our magic attackers!" Dum-dum shouted.

"Who're ya callin' a 'bastard'?!" roared Barbaroy.

When fighting Full Armor Giants, who excelled at physical defense, magic was your strongest weapon. Barbaroy was fully aware of that, so she'd promptly and preemptively taken out the casters, not letting them do anything.

Having lost his offensive casters, Dum-dum focused on the next best thing. "AGI dudes, move around and confuse her! She's an END type!"

But alas...

"N-No dice... My leg broke while the gravity field was active."

"A-And I broke a hip."

Those two were both specialized vanguards with high AGI, but low STR and END. Their bones had broken while Barbaroy was walking around with an active barrier.

"She even took out our AGI builds...!"

Barbaroy herself had said that she'd learned all their names and stats through Reveal. It seemed she'd finished analyzing Sol Crisis's builds and preemptively crushed the weak END members with her gravity field.

"Get our Bishop to heal the—"

Before Dum-dum could finish his sentence, something flew through his vision.

It was a shield.

Barbaroy used the Flying Shield skill to throw one of hers *towards the Bishop.*

It hit him directly and, making short work of his low HP and END, cleanly split him in two.

"Damn, you're slow at makin' decisions," said Barbaroy. "And I know he's low level and all, but you're seriously underestimating my boy Ray. I mean, not one of you so far has had a Brooch. Are you dead broke or something? Also, you could at least get a maxed-out support."

After all, a max level Bishop would have had good chances of surviving a single Flying Shield. Though, in that case, Barbaroy would've taken care of him some other way.

“Tch...” Dum-dum voiced his frustration.

The battle had just begun, but he’d already lost three members — five, if you included the incapacitated AGI builds. And they weren’t even fighting a player with a Superior Job or anything else that deviated from the norm. Barbaroy was a high-rank — on the same tier as them — and these results were caused by nothing but her precise and ruthless tactics.

That was Barbaroy’s style.

She roleplayed a vulgar, violent, murderous, and antagonistic PKer while using well-crafted tactics that utilized the enemies’ job configurations and mental openings.

This was the reason why, despite being a high-rank, she was always grouped with the Superior Job PKers in Altar.

According to her, “Player battles aren’t all about differences in levels and stats. Preventing your opponent from using their powers while using your own cards in the best manner possible is far more important,” and she embodied these words well.

After all, she had been able to act on those words to crush both Rosa and Eldridge, solidifying her position as the third strongest PK in the kingdom.

Not only that, but *she was now stronger than she had been back then.*

“Gh... No! We can still win!” Dum-dum roared with more power in his words than usual. “She has less than a fifth of her MP! Same for her SP, too! Just keep attacking, and we’ll win! Don’t let her rest!”

He’d realized that his clan’s spirit was on the verge of breaking and saw the need to enliven them.

Some members who’d been fooled by the fake Barbaroy were still antagonistic towards Dum-dum, but they knew that he was telling the truth. If Barbaroy ran out of MP and SP, she’d be unable to use any skills, giving Sol Crisis a huge advantage.

“We’ve got no choice!”

“Eat THIS!”

Two members — a Strong Swordsman and a Strong Lancer — simultaneously used stat-buffing skills and rushed Barbaroy to make an attack.

They both excelled in terms of STR, so they could’ve dealt damage to her directly through her armor. However...

"Astro Guard!" Barbaroy activated a skill, repelling their weapons and protecting her from even the smallest bit of damage.

"Huhhh?!"

"Wha—? No way!"

The two were thoroughly dumbfounded by what'd just happened, but to Barbaroy, things were going exactly as expected.

Thanks to Reveal and Identification, she knew their stats and jobs, so she was fully aware what kind of damage they could deal.

Not to mention that Barbaroy was now even tougher than she had been back when she'd fought Figaro. After all, following her defeat, she'd gone on to reconfigure her build.

Picking Shield Giant as her sub high-rank job had raised her base defense from 3,000 to 5,000, so using Astro Guard, which quintupled the user's defense in exchange for rendering them immobile, increased her defense to 25,000.

As the leader of Mad Castle, necessity had required her to keep one of her two high-rank job slots dedicated to Commander, which increased the stats of her party and clan. Thus, back then, even if she'd boasted battle prowess that could make most non-SJs envious, she definitely hadn't been the best solo fighter she could be.

Things had changed since then. Following Mad Castle's dissolution, she'd repurposed her clan leader build for solo battle.

There was no need for her to lead anymore, and she wanted to become strong enough to hold herself against foes like Figaro.

She'd been so invested into perfecting her build that she'd accepted Tsukuyo's invitation to CID in order to gain access to their data.

As a result, she'd acquired the Shield Giant job, which now gave her new skills and greatly increased her stats.

Additionally, she still had skills from before the reconfiguration, such as Damage Decrease and Damage Reduction.

Due to all that, to damage Barbaroy in her Astro Guard state, one had to break through the 25,000 defense, make up for the 20% decrease, and still deal more than 500 damage.

According to her calculations, the only ones who could do that purely with stats and job skills were the two level 500 offense casters... the ones she'd crushed when the battle began.

Therefore, Sol Crisis could only damage Barbaroy if she ran out of MP and couldn't uphold her Astro Guard anymore, or if they had some sort of Embryo capable of that.

While considering what they'd do next, Barbaroy decided to continue reducing their numbers.

Thus came the ultimate skill.

"Emancipated Giant — Atlas!"

It was the ace up her sleeve — an ability that, for 10 seconds, multiplied her defense by 10 and transformed it to attack power.

A tenth of a second after using Atlas, she deactivated Astro Guard, and used her immense, greater than 250,000 offense to pulverize both the Strong Swordsman and Strong Lancer in one hit each.

Eight left, she thought, and it was hard to tell whether she was referring to the enemy count or seconds remaining for her ultimate skill.

Once Emancipated Giant's effect was over, it could only be used again after an hour-long cooldown, so Barbaroy didn't want to waste a second of it.

She took to repeatedly using the Flying Shield skill and throwing her 250,000 damage shields towards Sol Crisis members.

Though it lasted for a mere ten seconds, her ultimate skill gave her attack power that matched the one and only King of Destruction.

Under its effects, Barbaroy was a messenger of ruin. She pulverized her surroundings and ground Sol Crisis members into dust, one after the other.

True to her nickname, she *crushed* them before they could even scream.

And by the time the ten seconds were over, there were only three people left on the scene, Barbaroy included.

"So *one* of you survived, huh?" she said.

As the dust raised by the destruction began to settle, Barbaroy saw two other people. She'd *purposely let one of them live*, but the other had survived despite her trying to kill him.

The one she'd let live was the faker, Vermin, who was now cowering with his hands on his head, while the one who had survived was the leader of Sol Crisis, Dum-dum.

He wasn't in a good state, though. Barbaroy's attack had lopped off his right arm.

Dum-dum had his pain set to off, so it didn't hurt at all. Nevertheless, the feeling of not having a limb made him break out in a cold sweat.

"Damn monster," he spat out. "And you're supposed to be a high-rank like us?"

"It's all 'cause of the difference in our Embryo traits and the effort I've spent on developing my build and learning when to use my skills."

"You ain't wrong there. Not wrong at all." Dum-dum formed a self-deriding, wry grin. "Man, the devs keep talking about possibilities or whatever, but Embryos are just straight-up broken. There's weak shit like this guy's — only good for cheating people — and then there's beastly stuff like yours, which lets you fucking demolish everyone by yourself. It's just unfair. But still..."

He momentarily stopped talking and turned his grin into an indomitable smile before continuing.

"...I do like my Embryo. I'm not tough enough to win this, but this baby should at least let me take a tenth of your HP."

Dum-dum took out a billhook-like blade and brandished it with a backhand grip. That weapon, too short to be a longsword and too long to be a shortsword, was his unique Embryo.

Thus, the ex-leader of Mad Castle and the leader of Sol Crisis faced one another.

Dum-dum moved slowly, while Barbaroy was completely idle.

An AGI build looked for an opportunity to strike, while the END build prepared to counter it, making it a highly standard *Dendro* battle.

However, there was a great difference between the two players.

Barbaroy's MP is almost out, Dum-dum thought while using Reveal on Barbaroy. *I've got a chance.*

Using Astro Guard and her ultimate skill had nearly emptied Barbaroy's remaining MP, while all the Flying Shields had reduced her SP to below the tenth of her maximum. In just a few seconds, her passive skills would reduce her MP to 0, and that very moment would be Dum-dum's only chance.

He waited for it as Barbaroy waited for him.

Soon enough, the time came.

"OAAGH!" Dum-dum let out a war cry as he charged directly towards Barbaroy, who responded by preparing to pulverize him with her shields.

Dum-dum hit the shield like a bunted baseball, and...

“She Stands Behind You — Bloody Mary!”

...vanished.

He next appeared in the air right behind Barbaroy.

That was the ultimate skill of his sword Embryo, Bloody Mary. It made him teleport behind his target and raised the power of his next attack. Additionally, he was a Sneak Raider — a high-rank job from the raider grouping — so the damage he dealt increased even further when he was undetected by his enemy.

I’ve got her now! he thought as he swung his Bloody Mary, certain that he’d take away a tenth of her HP.

Without any MP, Barbaroy would be unable to use any defensive skills like Astro Guard, and Dum-dum was sure that she was just bare enough for his attack to damage her.

But that conviction of his disappeared the moment something cylindrical flew out of Barbaroy’s armor.

Being an AGI build, Dum-dum could make out that it was actually *a bullet case*.

It dropped out of her armor as if flying out of a shooting gun.

What was that? Dum-dum thought, but before he could reach a conclusion, Bloody Mary’s blade reached the back of Barbaroy’s neck...

“Astro Guard!”

...only to be deflected by a skill — one that she supposedly couldn’t use because of a lack of MP.

“What...?!” Dum-dum exclaimed, but Barbaroy made her move before he could make any sense of the situation.

She turned around, let go of her shields, formed spear hands, and directed them at Dum-dum. Being in mid-air, he wasn’t capable of evading what came next.

“Double Gauntlet Trigger!” she roared, causing two more bullet cases to fall out of her armor, accompanied by a thunderous sound akin to a cannon shot.

Following that, *her gauntlets were fired forwards*.

Barbaroy’s aim was perfect, and they cleanly hit Dum-dum’s stomach.

“Gh-ah...!” he exclaimed. The attack was both unexpected and powerful. Though he’d withstood the first with his Lifesaving Brooch, the second one split him in half. “Wh-What...?”

"If you're gonna fake my armor, at least learn its skills," said Barbaroy as she looked down at Dum-dum's separated halves and re-equipped the gauntlets. "Well, not like you could. I didn't leak 'em anywhere."

Exactly. Both the MP regeneration and the attack had happened because of her special reward: the Legendary Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus.

The reason why it was titled "Gunhammer" were the bullet-shaped cartridges it used as the price for its unique skills. Their content was the MP that Barbaroy had channeled into them ahead of time.

One of the armor's skills was "Gauntlet Trigger," which used all the MP in a single cartridge to fire a gauntlet which dealt damage almost as great as that of ultimate skills.

The other skill was "Charge Trigger," a battle ability that injected the MP in a cartridge into Barbaroy, restoring her MP much faster and more effectively than Potions did. A single use gave her half of her maximum MP.

She could have a total of six cartridges, and she'd finished charging all of them just this afternoon.

That meant that she'd had enough to completely restore her MP three times, so *there had never been a chance she wouldn't have enough of it to take care of Sol Crisis.*

While they'd believed they'd have a chance if Barbaroy ran out of MP, she herself had never worried about it at all. If her MP reserves had been an actual problem for her, she wouldn't have wasted time examining them all with Reveal or undoing her Heaven's Weight.

In fact, she'd intentionally made them believe that her MP was her weakness and had them act accordingly. There was logic behind it.

"Ah, shit," Dum-dum grumbled. Despite being split in half, he could still talk just fine. "I thought I had it."

"Well, Mary sure ain't the only thing that's 'bloody' here anymore," Barbaroy commented. "I've gotta say, for someone lookin' like a Teke Teke, you seem pretty good. That a skill or something?"

"Nah. I have a bit of HP left, but this Bleeding'll kill me in seconds."

He wasn't wrong. It wouldn't be long until the death penalty took him and made him vanish.

"Oh, maaan," Dum-dum muttered with slight regret in his tone. "The scheme is over, the pretense is off, and we don't have any prestige anymore.

Guess that's that for Sol Crisis... Shame. It wasn't too bad."

Looking at his state, Barbaroy, being an ex-leader of a PK clan herself, felt like she had to make a comment, so she said, "Create a proper PK clan next time. If you ask me, you can easily make it to second-rate."

Her words were barely any consolation.

"Ha ha..." Dum-dum chuckled wryly. "What the hell's a 'proper' PK clan?'"

With those words as his last, the leader of Sol Crisis received the death penalty.

"And that leaves just you," said Barbaroy as she turned around and looked at Vermin — the fake.

"...Kh." He was silent. At first, Vermin just lay on the ground and lightly shook. The quivering gradually grew stronger until, it culminated in a thunderous, out-of-control laughter. "KYAH HA HA HA HA! Dumbasses! They all lost like the weak shits they are! I knew it! Without my skill, Sol Crisis was just a bunch of hopeless parasites!"

"Kyah ha ha!" Barbaroy chuckled. "You really think *you* can say that?"

"Shut up! You should've just retired like the loser you are! You just *had* to show up now, of all times! Fuck you!" Vermin stood up as his shattered armor made a clanging sound. Then, he pointed at Barbaroy and said, "And what the hell are you planning?!"

"Whaddya mean?"

"You weren't attacking me at all!"

Barbaroy heaved a sigh before replying, "That's because you were dialing defense skills like there's no tomorrow."

Indeed, Barbaroy hadn't left Vermin alive because the fake made her sentimental or anything. He'd used nothing but defensive skills throughout the whole massacre, increasing his defense so much that she'd figured it was best to take care of the others before dealing with him.

"You're a Full Armor Giant, too, so you can also use Astro Guard. And you were squatting and cowering for your sub job skills — Beast Boxer's Turtleshell Stance and Monk's Prostration Barrier. All of them multiply defense several times over, so even I can't do much when they're stacked."

"Well, aren't you a know-it-all," said Vermin. Though it didn't show, the fact that she'd pointed out his skills so precisely made his heart rate intensify.

“Well, I just barely redid my build. I considered takin’ those jobs, so I looked ’em up.”

They had been a decent choice if she wanted to buff her defense and maximize the damage of Emancipated Giant. However, she’d decided against them because they had worse limitations than Astro Guard. Turtleshell Stance would only activate when placing your hands on your head, while Prostration Barrier could only be used when you were prostrated on the ground.

“So, why’d ya finally decide to stop tanking and stand up?” Barbaroy asked.

“’Cause I’m done preparing to kill you!” Vermin shouted as his left hand began glowing and something appeared in his palm.

It was a pen — a fountain pen made of something that emitted an amethyst-like gleam. That was Vermin’s Embryo.

“The False Bride — Amanojaku!” he exclaimed as he crushed it in his hand.

That was the activation of his ultimate skill — the ace up his sleeve that he’d even hidden from the other Sol Crisis members.

A moment later, Vermin’s body was engulfed in a purple light similar to Amanojaku’s.

“I’m winning this shit!” he shouted.

“I see what’s goin’ on here,” Barbaroy said as she noticed a change in what her Reveal skill was showing.

Vermin’s stats and job config were now the same as Barbaroy’s.

With the exception of offense and defense, which also gained bonuses from equipment, he had *the exact same stats* as her.

Considering Vermin’s track record, it would have been fair to assume that it was just more fakery, but Barbaroy was experienced enough to tell that it wasn’t.

“So it’s a skill that lets you go beyond descriptions and perfectly copy the actual abilities, huh?”

“You got it right! It’s like copying and pasting! I now have the same powers as you! Including your Embryo!”

Barbaroy took a moment to consider whether he was bluffing, and concluded that such an ability was, indeed, possible.

The fact that he had to destroy his Embryo to activate it says a lot, she thought. *There are probably other limitations, as well. For example, copying people with a higher total level or Embryo form would probably make the result incomplete. And there might be a time limit, too.*

Barbaroy was assuming right, and that was exactly why The False Bride was functioning so well. After all, since she was in the middle of leveling her new build, her total level was lower than Vermin's — who had it maxed — and their Embryos were both in their sixth forms.

"I watched you fight and now know how to use your skills!" Vermin shouted with excitement. "Your crazy powerful ultimate skill, the Shield Giant attack skill, the Binding gravity field — I know them all!"

"So you focused on defense to watch me for as long as you could."

"Exactly! And that's why I can fight like you now! But there's one difference!" He reached into his inventory and took out a shield. "While you're still on your ultimate skill cooldown, I can use it just fine! Heaven's Weight!"

Vermin used the gravity field that he'd been subjected to just minutes ago on the original user herself.

The distance was such that the gravity around Barbaroy became 400 times greater. Though it wasn't enough to bring her to her knees, it rendered her immobile.

Despite being a copy, the field was about as strong as Barbaroy's.

"Astro Guard!" Vermin howled as he traced the steps taken by Barbaroy when she'd used her ultimate skill. "You're done! Emancipated Giant — Atlas!"

Vermin activated it the same way she had. In an instant, the great defense he'd earned through Astro Guard became even more immense offense.

Not wasting a moment, he charged towards Barbaroy. His extraordinary attack power made every step he took pulverize the ground beneath him.

Having gained such great damage potential made him shake with excitement.

The stat summary at the edge of his vision said that his current offense was over 100,000. It was lower than Barbaroy's due to the difference between their equipment bonuses, but it was still more than enough to break through her Astro Guard.

Vermin was assured of his victory.

Because of that, Barbaroy's next move amused him.

"—avity!" she shouted a skill, but he couldn't hear it well. "Looks like you'll need a *fourth* pointer. Heaven's Weight."

The fact that she'd activated the gravity field made him laugh. "You 'tard! Like that'll be enough to stop *this* powe—!"

Vermin had pictured himself pushing through the field like it was nothing and crushing Barbaroy with little effort.

However, what actually happened was that he stopped in place before getting to her.

"...Huh?" he exclaimed as he became immobile the same way as Barbaroy had just moments ago. "H-How?! I've got *this much* power! This shouldn't stop me!"

The seemingly impossible situation perplexed him. He struggled to break free, but Emancipated Giant's ten seconds expired before he could.

"Wh-Wh... Why?" he muttered, still utterly confused.

"You know how you said the word 'power'?" Barbaroy said as she sighed. "What the hell're you *actually* talkin' about?"

The question puzzled Vermin even further. "A-Attack power! Offense, damn it! It was so high, so why couldn't I move?!"

While under the effects of Emancipated Giant, Vermin had an attack power of over 100,000. Though it was lower than Barbaroy's because he couldn't copy her equipment, it was still more than 10,000 times greater than a normal person's.

There was no denying that it was immense. However...

"Yeah. Attack power," she replied. "*Not STR.*"

"...Eh?"

Barbaroy showed her stat window and continued, "STR increases attack power, but offense doesn't do shit for STR, and Emancipated Giant is a skill that raises attack power *directly*. No matter how high your offense gets, STR won't increase a bit. Here's a good comparison for ya..." She paused briefly and waved her finger. "If a guy gets a crazy powerful weapon, does his STR grow any higher?"

"...Ah." Vermin finally understood it.

Though Emancipated Giant greatly increased the user's attack power — their influence on the outside — it did nothing for their own physical strength. Naturally, since STR was the stat necessary to resist the effects of the gravity field, the ultimate skill didn't help dealing with it at all. If the person whose stats Vermin had copied couldn't move, it was only reasonable that he would be immobile, as well.

"Huh?" he suddenly realized that Barbaroy actually *was* moving in the field. "Y-You're...! How?!"

"Yeah, I bet you're curious," Barbaroy laughed.

The reason for this mobility was another skill that she had used in conjunction with Heaven's Weight. It was "Anti-Gravity," which, true to its name, reduced the gravity of whatever she used it on.

During her battle against K&R, she'd used it to throw a shield, but she could also use it on herself to cancel out the effects of Heaven's Weight.

"I-If you can do it, so can I!" said Vermin.

"Well, yeah, you can," she replied. "*If you know it, I mean*."

"...!" Vermin responded with just a gasp.

"Your ultimate skill lets you copy the abilities, but *your windows don't give you the details about them.*"

"Whuh?!" Vermin was at a complete loss for words. He had no idea how she'd figured that out.

"If you'd had descriptions and stuff, you wouldn't have screwed up like you just did, and you would've known how to escape the gravity."

She wasn't wrong. Vermin really did have Anti-Gravity among his copied abilities. However, he had no idea which skill it was. After all, Barbaroy hadn't used it during her fight against Sol Crisis.

Vermin could never know it, nor speak its name.

It was as difficult as trying to figure out a password with an unknown number of characters.

That was the limit of Vermin's copying ability. He'd thought he'd understood what he was copying after seeing just the surface of what Barbaroy could do.

It was less about the skill and more about his own nature, and that was exactly why he'd ended up being nothing but a cheap knock-off.

"Another thing," Barbaroy continued. "The defense skills you've stacked up are all there to help you take a beating while you figure out what skills the enemy has before you copy them and retaliate, right?"

He was dead silent.

Vermin knew little about Barbaroy's tactics, while she knew all about his. That was a clear difference between them that was in an entirely different realm than mere stats or Embryo powers.

"All right, time to wrap things up," she said as she walked through the gravity field as if it had no effects on her. "The five minutes are almost done."

Instead of holding shields, she formed spear hands and prepared a Gauntlet Trigger, the same skill that'd ended Dum-dum.

It would be enough to break through Vermin's Astro Guard and fatally wound him.

Barbaroy's approach made him imagine himself getting split in half, so he gave in to fear, and...

"C-Cancel! Turtleshell Stance! Prostration Barrier! Astro Guard!"

He deactivated The False Bride and returned to his original configuration before stacking his three defense skills and dropping to the ground.

"This again? You like prostrating *that* much?"

"Y-You can't hurt me when I'm like this! This defense is perfect!"

It had been enough to prevent Barbaroy from attacking him with her ultimate skill, so Vermin thought that she was now incapable of doing anything to him.

"You serious? Breaking through this is easy," said Barbaroy, not worried about it at all.

"Y-You're just bluffi—" Vermin tried to say something, but Barbaroy cut him off by *picking his body up and throwing him into a nearby irrigational aqueduct.*

The water inside was only up to the waist of an adult man.

"Ghbh! Thhellrudoohng?!" Vermin tried to get up and shout "The hell are you doing?!" but he was unable to do so. As if pushed down to the bottom, he couldn't rise up from the water.

Needless to say, it was caused by Heaven's Weight. Vermin was sunk to the bottom and held there by the ultra-powerful gravity.

Barbaroy looked down on him and said, "PKing ain't all about duking it out. Even if your defense is huge, you can still lose HP and die by suffocating. And that's why your 'perfect' defense is flawed. You're screwed the moment someone tries to hurt you with somethin' other than physical damage."

It was hard to tell whether Vermin was hearing her words. All he did was lie immobile at the bottom of the aqueduct and leak air out of his lungs with an anguished expression on his face.

"By the way, I'm speaking from experience here... suffocation is pretty bad," she said. "Unless you mess with the settings, this game turns all pain into basic impacts, but it can't do the same for suffocation. This does wonders to break people's spirit. That's been confirmed by both me and the Over Gladiator. Sure, diving without a parachute was pretty damn bad, too, but I can't pull it off as well as that guy. Also, I dunno if you can even hear me, but a faker like you deserves a fifth pointer."

As the original, she felt that there was something she just *had* to say.

"Whether you're studying, doing tea ceremony, or playing a game, starting by imitating someone else ain't a bad thing. Everyone begins as imitators, but as they put effort into polishing the art, it gradually becomes their own."

It was the like the concept of Shuhari. In fact, Barbaroy's own build and tactics included many features from the builds of those who'd come before. She'd imitated them, using her gathered data to polish her config, and eventually made it complete.

That was why, even though she'd found it malicious, she wasn't actually mad about Vermin faking her shape. The things that *had* made her mad were the devaluing of her clan and the fact that they'd gotten in Ray's way and ridiculed him, even though she was aware that she'd probably have said similar things as the leader of Mad Castle.

"But get this..." she'd said. "Effortless imitation won't get you anywhere."

Vermin had the form, but not the substance. He wasn't giving his all to the falsehood; he was satisfied with just using Barbaroy's name and appearance while imitating the target's crudeness.

In her eyes, that was exactly why he'd ended up at the bottom of this aqueduct.

There was one other thing Barbaroy wanted to add. "Oh, yeah, about the way you fought... Though all your ultimate skill does is imitate, it was clearly an original tactic you made up to make the most of it. There are flaws, sure, but it has good synergy with your Embryo. If you polish it a bit, you could..."

But Vermin wasn't there to hear it anymore. His body had changed into particles of light, leaving behind a significant amount of items.

"The suicide function, huh?" she murmured.

Indeed. Instead of suffering suffocation for a few more minutes, he'd chosen to escape it by suicide. Vermin's spirit had been shattered.

With the last one of them having received the death penalty, the battle between the real Barbaroy and the fake Barbaroy's Sol Crisis now reached its conclusion. Despite being outnumbered, the real Barbaroy had achieved an overwhelming victory.

The only thing that had damaged her was Dum-dum's ultimate skill, and that hadn't hurt her for as much as a tenth of her HP.

Despite it all, Barbaroy came out with the impression that Sol Crisis wasn't a weak bunch. She had no idea how the battle would've gone if she hadn't started by taking out the offensive casters.

If she hadn't incapacitated the AGI builds, they might've held a bit longer, too.

If Dum-dum had had more attack power or a special reward with strong debuffs, the tides might've been completely turned around.

If Vermin had had a better grasp of Barbaroy's powers and had done more research on how to wield them, she might've ended up thoroughly defeated.

And most of all, things would've been completely different if they'd had the cooperation and tactics of a proper PK clan.

Those, among others, were the reasons why they'd lost.

What Vermin and the rest of Sol Crisis had done could all be fixed if they listened her fifth pointer. If they truly wanted to be a big-shot PK clan, they had to put effort into their imitation.

Sol Crisis had gotten too big with too little work and ended up being crushed because of it. As the one who'd done it, as a PKer, and as an ex-leader of a clan, Barbaroy felt slightly conflicted about it overall.

However, it wasn't the time to think about that.

"Well, I'm done here, so I'll just hurry to Ray now."

It wouldn't be long until Monochrome's attacks restarted.

Barbaroy herself had no means of dealing with the UBM, but she figured that she'd be a good tank for her junior.

A man like him, so kind and prone to getting in trouble, could definitely *use some protection from his senior,* she thought as she rushed into the village to search for him.

Chapter Six: The Shield of Miracles

Torne Village, Windmill

It was difficult to tell just how long Louie had been holed up in the windmill. Perhaps the minute hand on the clock hadn't finished a single rotation yet. However, Louie felt like he'd been in there for many hours now.

All he saw were stony walls and floor, and all he heard was the laughter from above.

Whether it was a coincidence or a side effect of Monochrome's influence upon the environment, no wind was blowing upon the village. So, naturally, the boy couldn't even hear spinning from the windmill he was in.

"...?" Louie became confused as the laughter from above suddenly stopped. The monster's malicious laughter could no longer be heard.

Louie wondered what had happened to it.

It could've been defeated, or it might've flown off to a different area.

Regardless, with the laughter gone, Louie was now sitting in absolute silence.

The *one* thing he could almost hear was his own heartbeat.

"This reminds me of that time..." he murmured, recalling the morning when Shijima disappeared.

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On that day, Louie happened to wake up before sunrise.

It was the first time he'd ever awakened before the cries of the village's roosters.

Too early for anyone to be awake, yet too late for nocturnal birds and bugs to make their sounds, this time of the day had a kind of silence to it that made it feel like the whole world was asleep.

The were two beds in the house's children's room. One was occupied by Louie and the other by Juno, who was still sleeping soundly, wholly unaware that he'd woken up.

Outside the window, he saw Gringham asleep, spreading his large body upon the ground.

There was nothing strange about that scenery, but a short distance further, on a slightly taller hill near the house, there was a person he knew very well — Shijima.

He was standing still, all alone, as he observed the panorama of Torne before dawn.

Louie was somewhat concerned, so he walked out of the house, making sure not to wake up Juno or his mother.

When he opened the door, Gringham woke up and silently raised his head as if to ask, "What's wrong?"

Louie gestured to him to not mind him and keep sleeping, then walked up to the tall hill Shijima was standing on.

Once there, he called out to him, "What's the matter, Dad?"

"Oh, Louie," Shijima said, slightly surprised. "You're up early. Good morning."

"Good morning," Louie replied. "Why are you up so early?"

"...It's nothing. I just felt like looking at the village."

"Mh?" Louie tilted his head in confusion.

"I've been living here for more than two years, but I've never had the chance to take a good, long look at it. So I felt like burning it into my memory while enjoying the gentle wind here." Shijima looked down at Torne, which was still shrouded in darkness.

All Louie could see was the village's outlines, so he said, "But you can't see anything. Shouldn't you wait for morning?"

"Ha ha," Shijima laughed. "Don't you worry. I see well in the dark. Once, I even had to ride Gringham through a forest at night. It was the time I fought a UBM that'd wandered into Noz Forest."

"That happened?" Louie asked.

"Yes, it did. I was with many other Masters back then, but the enemy was very tough. He looked like a normal goblin, but he was faster and stronger than Gringham. And if you lost sight of it, it could attack you after transforming into something else, like a wolf or a bat. It was a very hard battle for all of us, but we were able to surround it and give a chance for Tsukikage — a person I know — to finish it off."

"Wow!" Louie exclaimed. Although brief, Shijima's story was enough to move and intrigue a child like him. "Hey! Do you have any more stories like that?"

"Ha ha. Of course I do," Shijima laughed. "Now, which one to tell next...? Here's a good one. It happened after I married Farica, but my friends called me over to help defeat *the* Tri-Zenith Dragon!"

"EEH?!"

Thus, Shijima and Louie talked.

The man spoke of his memories, while the boy listened with wonder, surprise, and a gleam in his eyes. The conversation fully befitted a father and son, and it lasted until the sun began to rise.

"...Oh. It's the sunrise," said Shijima. He'd just finished speaking one of his tales, and now he merely watched the sun rise from the eastern sky, looking both dazzled... and regretful.

"Dad? What's wrong?" Louie asked, worried about his father.

Shijima looked into Louie's face, seemed to think of something, and tried weaving the words. "Louie. I..." he said, but then fell silent again.

"Dad?"

"Louie... Juno, Gringham, and I have to go somewhere for a while."

"Will you fight another UBM?" the boy asked, still thinking of the tales he'd just heard.

Shijima shook his head, "No, but... it's an even bigger adventure."

"Really?! Then do your best!" At this moment, Louie felt nothing but admiration for his father.

The fact that Shijima was going on an adventure gave the boy relief. After all, being a Master, his dad was immortal, so he would come back home, no matter what.

He'd even died a few times in the stories he'd just told, yet he was still standing before the boy, alive and well. There was no reason for Louie to worry.

But...

"Yes... I'll do my best," Shijima said with a weak smile on his face.

The man's expression, combined with the sight of Juno riding Gringham up the hill, made Louie feel like something was off.

"Grooaoh," Gringham added.

There was nothing strange about the situation itself. It was only natural for Shijima to head out on adventures along with his trusty mount and Embryo.

Yet, for some reason, watching them prepare made Louie feel uneasy.

Spurred by the feeling, he held Shijima by his sleeve, looked up at his face and said, “You’ll come back, right?!”

The boy didn’t know why he was acting with such urgency. The worry coming over him was just so strong.

When asked, Shijima looked like his expression was about to crumble, but then, he formed a smile and patted Louie on the head. Then, with a voice as though he was doing his best to not to sound teary, he said, “Of course. I’ll surely... I’ll surely come back here. I’ll return to you and Farica... no matter what.”

Louie could tell that his voice was dense with emotion.

“Okay... All right,” he said as he let go of his sleeve.

He saw the man off with the words, “Later, Dad.”

“I’m off.”

The words weren’t rare or special in any way.

They were what people commonly said when a family member was going out somewhere.

However, they left an impression on Louie, as they were the last words the two had ever exchanged.

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Being in this silent windmill reminded Louie of that time before dawn.

No light was leaking inside, and no sounds could be heard.

But Louie hadn’t feel nearly as helpless then as he did now, which was surely because he didn’t have his family with him this time.

As Louie thought about things like that...

“Someonnne! Anyonnne! I’m here to helllp!” a voice came from the outside. “Heeey! Anyonnne! Are you heeere? Come out if you aaare!”

It was a loud voice calling out for survivors in the vicinity.

“It’s all fine nowww! The monster is gonne! Run while you caaan!”

Hearing that relieved Louie, as it made him certain that the laugh had stopped because the monster in the sky was gone.

“I’m saved... Oh right, if it’s gone, I have to go find Mom!” the boy cried. As glad as he was that he was saved, he found it more important to go to his mother and show her that he was okay. “I’m sure they kept her safe...”

Louie was certain that his mother was unharmed. After all, she was with Ray, Nemesis, and B3. Those three had accepted his search request when no one else had. Not to mention that they’d taken care of all the trouble they’d encountered on the way to Torne. To Louie, they were heroes who almost matched Shijima.

“Heeey! Someonnne! Are you therrre? Say something if you aaare!”

“Ah, yes! I’m right here!” Louie replied to the voice and left the windmill.

The boy had failed to realize that, despite the laughter stopping, *the sky was still dark*.

“Eh?” The boy went outside and voiced his perplexity. He’d expected to see the person searching for those in hiding, but he saw no one.

There were no people, the sky was black, and...

“Someonnne! AnyonNne! AnYoNnNe...!” the voice calling for the people became distorted and dense with *a familiar malevolence*. “FOUNDYOU... KyAHahAhaHaHAhAhaHah!”

It soon became the evil cackle from before.

Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome’s laughter ignored distance and differences in speed as it reached the most far-off of creatures. That was all it did — it could neither deal damage, nor protect the monster.

However, it could be used for more than just ridiculing those below.

300 years ago, Monochrome had developed the skill to *lure out the people in hiding*, just so that it could burn them.

“Ah...” Louie uttered as he looked up at the sky and saw a beam coming from beyond the clouds go straight towards him.

A moment later, he felt an impact, a sudden heat, and smelled the reek of burning flesh and blood.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

“Louie! Where are you?! I’m here for you!” I shouted as I ran around

Torne in search of the boy.

All I got as a response was the crackling sound, coming from the burning buildings all around me. For some reason, a moment ago, Monochrome's annoying laughter had stopped.

No matter how much I called, I couldn't hear anyone.

"Shit!" I cursed. "I could cover so much more ground if Silver were all right."

Sol Crisis's ambush had deactivated my trusty steed, and he was still in that state. I was doing my best to run with my own two feet, but with my level and AGI, I definitely wasn't very effective.

"That thing's about to be able to attack again, damn it!" I swore.

Monochrome was almost back at the altitude from which it could fire its beams.

There was basically no time anymore. Every second counted. I had to find Louie as soon as possible.

"Ray!" Nemesis appeared out of my crest. She'd been inside because she'd been focusing on analyzing the third form's skill, and the fact that was out now could only mean one thing.

"Nemesis! You're done analyzing?!" I asked.

"Indeed I am! I've finished it!"

We'd gambled on the skill being something that could deal with Monochrome, and now, the results were in.

As we still ran around and searched for Louie, Nemesis gave her report.

"I will start with the conclusion," she said. "The third form's skill gives us *a chance to win against Monochrome*."

"...For real?!"

"Yes. But be ready for yet another gamble. What the skill does is..."

Nemesis went on to give me the details of the third form's skill.

Sure enough, it was capable of reaching Monochrome, but Nemesis was very right that it'd be a gamble. It would be a battle that would test my and Monochrome's limits.

"It might reach it, or it might not," said Nemesis. "It all depends on how long we can—" Her words were cut short by a flash in the sky.

A phenomenon like that could only mean one thing.

I'd become all too familiar with it and stupidly sick of it back during our rise to the sky.

It was a sign that Monochrome was attacking, meaning that *the surface was finally within range*.

“Ray!” Nemesis cried as she became the shield and tried to protect me.

But the beams didn’t head towards me — they were directed at a stone-built windmill about a kilometer away from us.

“No way!” I’d shouted. The sight made a chill go down my spine, and I didn’t hesitate to rush towards the building, pleading for Louie to not be the one there.

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Torne Village, Windmill

Louie couldn’t understand what had happened to him.

A voice had lured him outside, the sky had flashed, he’d felt an impact, a sudden heat, and then smelled charred flesh.

The change was so sudden and bewildering that he still couldn’t grasp the state he was in.

All he knew so far was that he was lying on the ground.

He couldn’t open his eyes because of the soot in them, but he felt the cold surface on his back, and a heat caressing his cheeks.

Louie had never been burned before, so his hazy mind could only assume that this was how it actually felt.

But... he thought as he realized he felt not just heat, but warmth, as well.

Louie was lying on the ground, and the warm thing was covering him.

It had a familiar, nostalgic texture and smell.

What was this, again...?

He worked his hazy mind, trying his best to remember, and it didn’t take long for him to reach a conclusion.

“Groaoh...”

“Ah!” The thing covering him made a single sound, which was more than enough for Louie to realize what it was.

The haziness over his mind suddenly cleared, and he quickly rubbed his eyes to get the soot out of them, then open them and look at the thing.

“Gringham...” he uttered the name of a family member that was supposed to be gone.

The lion-like monster covered Louie, using his own body to protect the boy's life from Monochrome's beams. They were raining down on him in large numbers, yet Gringham shielded Louie without voicing any pain.

The only reason Louie had survived despite being targeted by the UBM was because his dear *family* was here to protect him.

It was an event many would think impossible.

Sure, one of the game's laws made it so that the monsters stored in a Master's Jewel would be released if the Master wasn't online for half a *Dendro* year, but who could've imagined it happening here and now?

Then there was the fact that a released — freed — monster had returned to where it used to live with its Master instead of going back to the wild like they normally did.

Lastly, the idea that an untamed creature would risk its life to protect a person was simply absurd.

All of those seemed like things that could never occur.

And yet, they had actually happened and aligned to save Louie's life.

The only word fit to describe this event was "miracle," and the only word fit to explain it was a "bond."

Shijima had disappeared from *Infinite Dendrogram* half a year ago, taking his Embryo and mount, Juno and Gringham, along with him. However, their disappearance hadn't been nearly enough to sever the familial bonds between these two.

"Grin...gham..." the boy shed tears as he called out the name of his family member. His face was a mess, and he cried like he'd found a priceless treasure he thought was lost.

"Grooaoh..." Gringham responded with a mild roar.

The beams from above were burning his back and causing him great pain, but he wanted to be the same Gringham Louie had always known, so he acted like it was nothing.

Two members of a family, once separated, were now reunited.

"KyAHaHahAHahAhaH!"

Alas, despite Gringham saving Louie, the situation hadn't improved.

Monochrome laughed again, as though ridiculing the large "torch" that wasn't avoiding any attacks and was just letting itself get burned.

If the laughter could become words, they would be, "I want both the big and small torches to burn and show me their despair."

"Grrrrr..." the Aries Leo growled.

He didn’t have any way of dealing with the monster trying to take Louie’s life. Though strong, Gringham was but a land creature.

His claws and fangs were meant to be used on the ground, and they could never reach the skies. Being an animal prevented him from ever defeating Monochrome.

All he could do in this situation was to use his elephantine frame to cover Louie and protect him using his HP.

Again — Gringham couldn’t win against the UBM, and that wouldn’t change even if his owner, Shijima, was here.

They had no cards to play here. Gringham would eventually die and become particles of light, and then the beams would burn Louie.

They could only wait for their deaths, and only a miracle could save them now.

Thus, despite already having wrought a miracle, Gringham pled for more.

Ah, please... You can use my life if you have to... I beg you... Anyone... Give me a miracle that could protect my little family...

As if picking away at his plea, Monochrome fired another beam at Gringham’s back. The energy used in it was greater than in the previous ones, which immensely increased its penetrating power.

It was enough to pierce through Gringham’s large frame and burn Louie.

“GROOAAAOHH...!” he roared as he felt the energy from above and sensed that the incoming attack was incomparable to the ones before.

He braced himself in the hopes that the beam would stop with just him, but it was thoroughly meaningless.

A shield of flesh simply wasn’t enough to stop this particular beam. Both Gringham and Louie would die.

However, right before it hit...

“Lend me your back for a sec.”

...a certain man said those words and jumped up on Gringham.

He then held the black shield in his hands towards the sky and stopped the devastating beam.

Unable to penetrate the shield, it scattered and rained on the surrounding buildings, either setting them aflame or downright melting them.

However, the heat from the beam increased the temperature of the shield the man was holding, leaving him scorched.

Though burned by both heat conduction and radiation, he continued holding the shield up to protect both Gringham and Louie.

Eventually, the beam stopped.

After protecting their lives, there was an interval in which Monochrome didn't fire anything, likely because it was charging another powerful beam.

The man used this opportunity to talk. "Do you hear me, Monochrome?!"

The UBM's laughter was still reaching his ears, but the man didn't know if *his* voice reached Monochrome.

"Your eyes look down on us all, but do they even *see*?" he continued regardless, presenting the monster with a question that came from his heart... and a declaration just as passionate. "There's *nothing* here for you to break."

Perhaps he was talking about the exact place he was in, the burning village, the miracle wrought by a certain family, or all of them at the same time.

"I won't let you take another life."

The pleasant time at Torne had ended with the advent of the tragedy above. It had brought pain to many and was endangering Louie's and Gringham's lives at this very moment.

The man claimed that he would put an end to that — that nothing would be lost now.

This man, Ray Starling, took a deep breath and gave his whole heart into the words he said next.

"Come, monster! *This is the shield of miracles!*"

They were the same words Louie had mentioned when talking about Shijima.

When Louie and Farica had been attacked by an inescapable despair, the man had spoken them before braving the horde of monsters in order to save the mother and child.

He had no doubt been a miracle worker, and Ray thought it seemed right to start his battle against Monochrome by borrowing those words.

Just like Shijima before him, he was determined to destroy the sky-nesting despair before it could take Louie’s life.

That declaration was the trigger that started the final fight between Ray Starling the Unbreakable and Monochrome, the Void of the Black Sky.

Chapter Seven: Soar High, Shooting Star

The Tale of a Star

Monochrome didn’t know its own origin. It wasn’t even aware if it had been birthed by nature or created by someone’s hand.

The name above its head was something it was never conscious of, either.

The world called this monster the “Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome,” but the creature never considered itself any such thing.

To it, the world was made up of only “this” (itself) and “everything else,” so coding things with names was simply unnecessary. All that was important was the fact that it had a set of powers, and it was complete with nothing more than that.

As a being that gained all the energy necessary for its activities by merely absorbing light, Monochrome had no reason to do anything. And thus, ever since its appearance, it had done absolutely nothing. There was no necessity to do anything, so it didn’t even think about doing anything.

In fact, it didn’t *think* at all — nothing ever made its mind or heart budge.

That was its existence long before it was dubbed the “Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome.”

It merely floated high up in the sky and did nearly nothing but “exist” — just “being there,” so to speak. It ate all the light it needed to survive, and radiated any excesses come nighttime.

Those looking up at the sky would see it as just another star. All that made it different from the rest was the fact that it was slightly brighter than most and that it wasn’t fixed.

That was extent of its existence, presence, and effect on the world.

It would have been entirely possible for it to mindlessly float in the sky as a faux-star for aeons and beyond, but somewhere along the line, it became Monochrome.

The thing that caused the change inside it was a light it saw on the surface several hundreds of years ago: a fire burning throughout a city-state below.

Monochrome — or, rather, what it was before it got the name — looked down upon the scorching flames of war.

Man killed fellow man. Many were hurt, their homes were burned, and their lives were extinguished as the air became dense with anguish and despair.

But despite the horror, someone was looking at the scene while laughing with pure glee.

The commander of the invaders cackled loudly as the enemy nation burned to the ground.

A display of emotion so intense was something that the plant-like creature up in the sky wasn’t familiar with, and looking down at the scene made something within it — something that had been dormant all this time — suddenly stir.

Heart, mind, core — there was no telling what it actually was, but the fact remained that it was moved, and it had no idea why.

Regardless, it was the first change the creature had ever experienced since the beginning of its plain, almost rock-like existence. Due to that, it didn’t find it important whether the horrible scene’s effect on it was positive or not.

It only cared that the presence of despair caused it to change, like it caused change to those in pain and those who laughed.

That realization was so fresh and unknown to it that it quickly took it upon itself to bring new despair.

It had already known that focusing its excess light allowed it to fire a heat beam that could reach the surface, and that was exactly what it did.

Mimicking those fighting in the war below, it used its own power to hurt and burn, starting with the one who laughed at others’ despair.

The result?

The person anguished — showed *despair*.

“...Kya... ha.”

Watching the sight, the creature felt its core stir once more. Even its voice function, never used before, began to play a sound.

“KyA…ha…Ha.”

It fired more beams, creating even more people who drowned in anguish and despair, and they died without even realizing what was happening to them.

As the suffering grew, the creature felt something be born within its core, which had once been akin to rock.

“KyAhaHAhahAHaHahAh!”

Eventually, its voice function began releasing a loud laughter.

Pure and innocent, it laughed like an infant it had once heard while looking down at the world, making its joy known far and wide. It found pleasure in its changes and reassessed its consciousness.

Let’s burn more and more. Those are “torches.” When they burn, they light up this heart.

Somewhere down the line, it was given the name “Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome,” but it didn’t care about that in the least. Monochrome simply continued floating in the sky and burning animals to see them despair.

Every now and then, there would be those who’d challenge the creature, but they would all end up burned to death before they could even reach it.

Monochrome realized that its core was stirred the most when the determined faces of those who struggled against it became overcome with despair, and due to that, the entity eventually decided to stay in one place.

If “this” stays here and waits, “this” will get to see torches with determined faces show despair, right?

With that thought, it began nesting in the sky above the place that would come to be called “Torne Village.”

That eventually led to it being hit by a meteor and getting buried underground for 300 years, but those centuries would do nothing to change its nature and modus operandi.

Monochrome continued to stay in place and wait for determined “torches” to challenge it, and it didn’t take long for its wish to come true.

After all, right now, right below it, there was a man who was struggling against it with more determination than anyone ever had before.

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Torne Village

That man, Ray, was using Nemesis in her third form to defend against Monochrome's beams.

The shield prevented all direct attacks, but part of the heat they carried reached Ray's hand by conduction and left it hideously burned.

Even so, he did not yield or even consider letting go of his shield. He merely spammed his healing magic while intently listening to Nemesis's words.

"27,210... 30,635..."

They were nothing but numerical values. Nemesis voiced a greater number with every beam that came. It was much like her usual damage counter, but there were a few differences.

Ray assumed the damage already accumulated was more than enough to defeat Monochrome, but even so, he continued taking the attacks.

Even when reduced by the shield and Paladin's Aegis, the raining beams still dealt more damage than Ray healed with his magic and BR Armor's Bloody Regeneration, but the difference wasn't particularly great, so Ray's HP was being scorched away only gradually.

"Mister Ray!" Louie cried, looking at him, still protected by Gringham.

Ray was no longer on the beast's back, for Monochrome had already switched its focus away from Gringham over to the Master fighting it. That was clear because the beams weren't raining down on the unshielded parts of the beast, but instead following after Ray.

Thus, he'd jumped off Gringham and faced the rain all by himself.

At this point, the beast was damaged so badly that he could barely move, but even so, he continued protecting his dear Louie, who was looking at Ray as he struggled against Monochrome and its beams.

"ＫｙａＨＡｈａＨａｈＡｈＡＨ!" the entity laughed.

Its field of vision captured countless things on the surface.

It saw the armored "torch" running towards the windmill.

It saw the many torches hiding at the shelter built against it.

It saw the beast torch and the little boy torch it was protecting.

It saw the men and women torches hiding within the dark.

It saw a few torches preparing to attack it again from the surface.

It saw the mohawk torch preparing to take to the sky, only to be stopped by another torch.

But none of those torches mattered to it anymore.

Monochrome was now interested in and cared about only one torch: the one that was directing the strongest feelings towards it.

Indeed, that torch had captivated it, and that was something that had never happened before.

Until now, the creature had never paid much attention to torches separately. To Monochrome, the world was just “this” (itself) and “everything else,” where the latter were mere torches that burned in anguish and despair, and thus never had to be differentiated in any way.

This torch was on the verge of being the only exception. From the surface, it looked up at Monochrome with not a hint of fear or despair — only pure rage.

The creature gazed back at the torch that was Ray Starling, and pondered.

Yes. That’s him. He’s the one who came closest to “this.” What’s different about him?

It recognized the man as one of those who’d tried to approach it not too long ago, and despite having been brought down once, the man still looked at Monochrome with a challenging expression, which the creature found highly peculiar.

All of those struggling against it in the past had had something they wholeheartedly relied on. Some had been skilled with the sword, some had had excellent archery skills, while some had fought alongside dragons.

Oftentimes, upon realizing that their favored arts, tricks, and beasts had no effect, their daring expressions would change into those of despair, and those faces were the ones that shook Monochrome’s core more than anything else.

Ray, however, was still struggling. His heart hadn’t yielded after failing to reach it by flight, after having his flesh seared by its beams, and even after having seemingly no moves he could play against it. He just didn’t *break*.

Thus, he made Monochrome think, *Then let’s go all-out.*

This would be its first time using its full power since its appearance hundreds of years ago.

It converted light into MP, changed the MP into beam energy, and continuously gathered it within itself.

After repeat converting and charging, Monochrome eventually had the maximum amount of energy it could sustain, and condensed it all in its crystalline body, rather than the tips of its tentacles.

The crack on the crystal began leaking waves of energy that evaporated the surrounding clouds and created a space of clear sky around the creature.

Monochrome's body began to shine so brightly that it was hard to believe how dark it had been just moments ago.

It was preparing to unleash its trump card — not just a powerful-yet-nameless beam, but a uniquely-titled skill.

The creature spoke its name: "SHINING DESPAIR!"

For reasons unknown, the pronunciation of the word "despair" was unlike that of Earth's, being closer to "disappear."

Nevertheless, the text was honest — the skill was most definitely a light that could end all hope, carrying energy incomparable to all the beams that came before.

Before its might, even the loss of power due to distance was negligible. If it stormed down to the ground, it would not only evaporate people, but destroy and scatter an immense part of Torne itself.

People could feel it in their bones by simply looking up at Monochrome, as proven by all the despairing faces the creature saw.

"KyAhaHAhahAHaHahAh!" it cackled. The movement in its core made it far too happy.

Then, it looked at the face it wanted to see the most — Ray's.

Did ya despair? Hey, did ya? Did ya... Huh?

However, Ray's face was one of the few that showed no grief. He merely looked up at Monochrome with even more rage in his gaze than before.

Despite the abject dejection around him, his two eyes remained those of an unyielding challenger. If they could speak, they would surely say, "I will defeat you."

Scary, Monochrome thought, the first time it felt something that wasn't joy.

However, the sentiment was only momentary, as Monochrome quickly prepared to fire another beam of Shining Despair towards him.

Perhaps the creature was spurred into action by its first taste of fear.

Even so, Monochrome was far too clueless. It didn't know that the man was called "Unbreakable."

Even when faced with countless tragedies and disasters far exceeding his own power, Ray had never even considered backing down.

Even when dealing with evil and despair that could bring most to their knees, he'd stood tall by the sheer force of anger alone.

And he'd seized miracles for every single one of those disasters.

Monochrome knew none of that, but now, it would become painfully aware of it.

"Gringham!" Ray shouted while looking at Louie. He could tell that the immense sky beam would soon be fired down.

With just that alone, Gringham understood what he had to do. He raised his hurt body, took Louie in his mouth like a parent cat takes a kitten, and dashed away to distance him from what will soon be ground zero of the massive beam strike.

"Gringham! Mister Ray!" Louie called out as he was taken away.

Ray didn't say anything and instead responded by raising his shield to the sky.

And thus, Ray and Nemesis were the only people left in ground zero.

He wouldn't run.

Even if he tried to, he'd only be caught up in the destruction, not to mention that the tians in the shelters would fall prey to the beam's power.

He couldn't back away.

"That must be the fiend's ace," said Nemesis. "I wonder how powerful it is."

"Well, it's clear that one won't be enough," replied Ray. "Two might do the trick, but I can't be sure."

"Do we not have Brooches?"

"I'm all out. I put my last ones on Louie and Gringham."

Lifesaving Brooches prevented fatal damage, and before heading to Torne, Ray had had three of them in stock. However, having had used one up in yesterday's battle against Rosa, and handing the rest to Louie and Gringham today, he currently had none left. Nevertheless, he didn't regret the act at all.

"So... it all depends on us," he concluded.

"Very well. You may count on me."

"Yeah. I believe in you."

They had two more uses of Counter Absorption.

If they, his shield, and his passive defense skills weren't enough, Ray would surely receive the death penalty.

If that happened, he wouldn't be able to launch his *counterattack*, and Monochrome would reduce all of Torne to ash.

Out of all the gambles they'd taken today, this was likely the greatest.

Stats, skills, equipment, Embryo — this moment would test whether all they'd acquired during their time in *Infinite Dendrogram* would be enough to resist the despair about to rain down from the sky.

"SHINING DESPAIR!" Monochrome repeated the name of the skill again and launched the devastating beam of light directly from its crystalline body.

It was akin to a pillar linking heaven and earth, and it was dense with a heat so immense it could easily scorch the surface.

Were it to hit the ground, it would surely evaporate the area and turn Torne into a land of death.

The light made the many lives in the village be overcome with despair.

They, however, didn't break.

"Counter Absorption!" Nemesis shouted, calling forth a different barrier of light.

This new one momentarily stopped the might of the pillar, but then it was shattered. Even so, it was clear that it had an effect — the pillar's diameter had gotten smaller.

Then the beam was blocked by yet another barrier of light exactly like the one before.

It was a chained Counter Absorption activation — a technique Nemesis had acquired over the last month. One that they'd already used against Rosa.

The second barrier kept the pillar of light at bay longer than the first, but it, too, was shattered, letting the beam reach the surface.

The beam that was supposed to scorch a vast amount of land around it had lost most of its power to the barriers. What could have potentially annihilated the whole village had been reduced so much that it only affected an extremely small area.

Even so, the energy that made it past Ray was nothing to dismiss.

The ground zero of the explosion caused included the nearby windmill, which melted and all but vanished, while the surrounding ground became covered by an insufferable heat and turned red with fire. It looked akin to the depths of hell, and it was hard to imagine that someone could stand there alive.

And yet, there *was* one.

“We... did it...” Ray muttered, still alive in spite of it all.

His state was such that words like “hurt” or “injured” seemed too lax to describe it. It was a wonder he was even alive.

A person didn’t have enough fingers to count the debuffs he was affected by, while the heat was such that it colored his skin red or even black.

Some pieces of his equipment, too, shattered and fell into the lava below. These included his accessories and the prosthetic on his left arm.

His BR Armor was melting, but it still held well enough to continue bestowing its Bloody Regeneration.

Ray’s hellish state was not enviable in the least.

“...Heh,” Nemesis chuckled. “Its trajectory got knocked slightly off when it passed the second barrier. Most fortuitous. You probably wouldn’t be standing right now if it’d hit you directly.”

“Yeah,” Ray forced a reply. “What a stroke of luck.”

Even if the strike hadn’t been direct, Ray was still exposed to its aftereffects. He was currently surrounded by a molten, heated hell.

Of course, being a Master, he felt no pain, but he could still feel the searing heat touching his skin and taste the throat-scorching air entering his body. The red-hot hell burned his legs, but even then, his knees didn’t give in — and neither did his heart.

“*We’re using it*, Nemesis,” he uttered, and you could almost picture Nemesis nod in response.

“We have accumulated about 650,000...” she said. “That would be *65,000 metels*.”

“Will it reach?”

“I shall make sure it does.”

“I’ll leave it to you, then.”

Following that exchange, Ray began holding the shield in a different manner.

Instead of making its surface face the enemy above, he held it in front — like a weapon.

“Nemesis. Third form β.”

A moment later, the shield changed its shape.

The handle he was holding slid and extended to turn Nemesis into a strange *long-handled weapon with a shield at the tip*.

The shield itself changed, as well. The five-sided silver pattern on its surface emitted a light and *opened up*, effectively unfolding the shield.

It looked akin to a flower bud beginning to bloom — no, like a pinwheel spreading its blades. And with five blades in total, it was much like what those from Torne called a “windstar.”

Indeed, this was a *convertible weapon* that changed from a shield to a star-like pinwheel.

“Form Shift...”

Thus, they declared the name of their new power — the title of Nemesis’s third form.

“...Shooting Wheel!”

Fittingly, it was a mix of “Shooting Star” and “Pinwheel.”

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A few minutes before Ray jumped in to protect Louie and Gringham and went on to face Monochrome...

“In short, this skill is basically a ranged, homing Vengeance,” Nemesis said.

Ray was still searching for Louie, and as he did so, Nemesis told him the details of the new skill.

“Ranged and homing...?” Ray asked.

“The damage taken in shield form is stored as propulsive power,” Nemesis continued. “Then, once activated, it chases after even the most distant of enemies, hunting them down and dealing double... no, *triple* damage.”

It was clearly a strong skill. Not only did it make up for their weaknesses against distant and fast-moving opponents, it also carried more power than the standard Vengeance is Mine.

In fact, it was *far too strong*, even when you considered the fact that it could only be used once per day.

Due to this, Ray instantly assumed that it had other conditions, and he was correct.

"But there are two problems with it," said Nemesis.

"Which are?"

"First is the fact that it bases not only its power, but also its speed and distance flown, on the damage dealt by the enemy."

According to her, the skill used a tenth of the damage taken as the value for its distance and speed. For example, with 10,000 damage taken, it would chase the enemy for 1,000 metels at 1,000 AGI.

"Yeah... that *is* a gamble," said Ray.

The highest distance Monochrome had reached during the pursuit was 25,000 metels, meaning that the damage they would have to accumulate to reach it with that condition was at least 250,000.

And that was only assuming that that distance was its absolute limit. For all they knew, the creature could be double that far away, and gathering enough damage to cover that distance would be no small task.

"Second, its activation takes *one minute* of preparation," Nemesis continued.

"...Seriously?"

"During this time, you obviously won't be able to use the shield, nor will you have Counter Absorption as an option. We will have to survive the time in some other way."

In other words, once they were done gathering the damage, they would be fully exposed to Monochrome's beams for a whole minute.

Ray instantly remembered the moment of Lang's head vanishing right before his eyes, but even that wasn't enough to affect his choice.

Even if the minute would severely endanger him, he would still use the skill, so that definitely wasn't wasn't the main issue here.

"Regardless, that's the only thing we have that can get through to the damn thing, right?" he said.

"Indeed," Nemesis nodded.

So, what mattered the most was whether the skill would reach it or not.

This would be a battle between two decisive numbers — the maximum amount of damage Ray could gather without dying and the maximum altitude Monochrome could arrive at.

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And now, after weathering many beams and the monstrous Shining Despair, the Shooting Wheel accumulated the greatest damage they could possibly expect in the situation.

“Start up,” said Nemesis, causing the damage gathered when she was in third form α — the shield — to become propulsive power for third form β.

The five black blades on the Shooting Wheel slowly began to turn and spin, gradually accelerating as though dancing with the wind.

Despite the air being still just moments ago, a fierce wind began to blow as though summoned or caused by the spinning wheel.

Ten seconds after the start, the blades were turning so fast that it was hard to see them with the naked eye, and Ray used his sole right arm to tighten his grip around the handle, as if to prevent the centrifugal force from taking it away.

The spinning was the very process of converting the accumulated damage into the power needed to reach the target.

Ray’s tooth and nail struggle had led to him gathering somewhere over 650,000 damage, meaning that the attack would be a supersonic seeker boasting a 65,000 metel flight distance and AGI of the exact same number. And upon landing on Monochrome, it would unleash nearly 2,000,000 points of damage.

No doubt, *if released*, it would be a decisive blow that would surely end the fight.

“ＫＹａａＡａＡＡａＡａａａＡａＡＡａＡａ!”

Monochrome in the skies above no longer laughed or expressed joy in any way.

After all, Ray had survived the greatest beam it had ever released.

Not only that, but the man was facing the creature with an even stronger spirit while wielding a weapon bearing energy so immense that even Monochrome felt it.

It was overcome by an ominous certainty.

“That” cannot exist. If “that” exists, “this” will be broken. It will be

ended.

The entity had given up on trying to make Ray despair. It felt only fear that it would be ended if it didn’t end the man first.

It was the first time that Monochrome, the untouchable sky-dweller, had ever felt the danger of death. That feeling was something not even the meteor from centuries past had been able to give it.

“ＫｙＡｋａＫＹａＡａｋＹａＡＫａＡａａＡＡａＡＡａ!”

The creature charged energy for more beams.

Having attacked him many times by now, it assumed that weak beams, no matter how many, wouldn’t be enough to defeat Ray. Regardless of what the truth really was, it just didn’t think that the beams it used to light the torches would be enough against someone who hadn’t broken after all the attacks so far.

However, Monochrome didn’t have the time to fire another Shining Despair, so it opted to use the piercing beams it’d fired at Gringham.

They were quite powerful in their own right and charged much more quickly, so it thought to end the fight by firing them a few times.

“The fiend isn’t firing... but it’s gathering power!” yelled Nemesis.

Twenty seconds had passed since the spinning began.

Not a single beam had dropped during this time, but that definitely wasn’t something to be glad about. Just like Nemesis had realized, Monochrome was preparing to instantly kill Ray.

She was also aware that her Master didn’t have the power to avoid it anymore.

Even if they were all out of defensive options, he might have been able to survive if he could just move well enough.

But alas, Ray was far too heavily injured. It wouldn’t be strange if he fainted right then and there, and the fact that he’d even activated the skill was nothing short of miraculous.

“What do we do?!” Nemesis panicked. “The charging will take forty more seconds! We don’t have a means to defend against the beam!”

Just as the Black Shield was a form focused entirely on defense, the Shooting Wheel was a form focused solely on offense.

As she was now, Nemesis had the power to defeat the enemy, but not the power to protect Ray, and thus she thought that it was all over.

Her Master, however, seemed to think otherwise.

"Hey, it's fine," he said.

"Ray?"

A single look at Ray's face was enough to tell her that he wasn't just putting up a front. Despite being nearly thoroughly drained of power, he still seemed to believe in something.

"What do you mean, 'fi—'?" Before Nemesis could finish her question, something above them changed.

Monochrome was done charging, and it prepared to release the piercing beams that would obliterate Ray.

"Ray!" Nemesis shrieked.

Ray, on the other hand, showed no fear or pain, and calmly said, "We're making quite a show here. Anyone would notice this."

There was no doubt he believed in something. In fact, he was so confident that he put on a smirk.

"And if she noticed... she'll surely come."

Then Monochrome fired a number of fatal beams. A single one of them was enough to make short work of Ray's current HP and make his body evaporate, along with any chances of turning the tide.

Even so, Ray showed no fear, again looking like he believed in something... or *someone*.

"Right? B3?" he called.

"Ya don't even gotta ask!" And *she* brashly answered.

"Fire Resistance! Astro Guard!" the three-metel giant named Barbaroy Bad Burn roared as she jumped in between Ray and the beams, protecting him from harm and becoming his shield by using skills that upped her fire resistance and defense.

"Tch...!" she shouted. "Damn asshole went through the elemental def like it's paper! But hell if it'll be enough to break through *my* defense!"

The hail of fatal beams continued for over twenty seconds, and yet, like an all-enclosing canopy, she shielded Ray from them all.

"Ha," she chuckled, looking somewhat satisfied in spite of the white smoke coming off of her armor. "There goes almost a third of my HP. That shitty thing has power, I'll give it that."

Her words and state made Ray form a wry smile. Nemesis, on the other hand, looked thoroughly confused.

"B3...? Eh? This is B3?" she asked.

"Well, yeah..." Ray replied. "No matter how you look at her, it's B3."

"'No matter how you look at it'?" Nemesis repeated. "But the armor design is the same as... oh, never mind. I must say, though — first Marie, now her. I'm quite impressed by how good you are at recognizing people."

Despite her perplexity, Nemesis didn't stop spinning the Shooting Wheel. Only twenty seconds were left until the third form's power would be unleashed.

"Here ya go," said Barbaroy.

"Ah..." Ray lightly exclaimed as she poured an HP Recovery Potion of the highest quality on him.

"So that skill's gonna reach Monochrome, right?" she asked.

"...Yes!"

"Then you just think only about getting the stuff to the damn thing. I'll eliminate anything that gets in your way."

"Thank you!"

Ray entrusted his defense to Barbaroy and focused entirely on Nemesis's skill.

Half-frenzied at this point, Monochrome continued raining down its beams towards the surface.

It had clearly stopped thinking about the balance between power and energy regeneration, and kept on attacking while breaking its limits.

The crystalline tentacles it used to fire were now heated and smoking, but Monochrome continued using them regardless.

Despite that, not one of the beams reached Ray.

"That ain't enough!" shouted Barbaroy.

She was acting as the best tank Ray could possibly hope for in this situation — the beams couldn't take his life, no matter much effort the UBM put into it.

Thus came the time.

"Ray! The preparation is done!" Nemesis declared.

"Give it hell, Ray!" Barbaroy encouraged.

"Yeah!" Ray answered.

As the Shooting Wheel stirred the air at supersonic speeds, Ray brandished it behind him as if preparing to throw a ball into the sky and began speaking a set of words.

"Payback..."

It was the Shooting Wheel's unique skill — the crystallization of Ray and Nemesis's hopes.

It was their oath to overcome their weakness and the manifestation of their wish.

It was the materialization of their desire to prevent tragedies that were outside their scope, and its name was a prayer to let it reach far and wide.

"...Beyond the Stars!"

And thus it flew.

As Ray swung, the five-bladed star was disconnected from its handle and soared high into the sky.

Being both a shooting star and a windstar, it made you wonder why it was so reminiscent of the legend of Monochrome's sealing and whether it was a coincidence or not.

Leaving a trail of black aura behind, Nemesis, the supersonic shooting star, rose towards the dark star up in the sky.

"KyAaAAaaAAAahAaaAaAAaAaAaaaAaH!"

Upon seeing the shooting star flying at it at speeds several times greater than sound, Monochrome shrieked and began soaring higher.

It didn't even consider shooting it down, for the shooting star's speed was far too immense for its beams.

The creature flew away at full power — at speeds it had never even tried before — greatly exceeding its previous record.

Both the chaser and the runner stars rose to the sky with supersonic velocity.

To those on the surface, the sight would be akin to seeing two shooting stars fly from the earth to the heavens, rather than the other way around.

But reversed or not, shooting stars all shared the same fate — to flash through the sky, fade, and expire.

"KyAaAAaaaAAaaAaHaAaAAaaaAh!"

Monochrome flew upward — soared higher and higher.

It paid no heed to its MP reserves or even considered using any power to convert light into it.

It focused all of its functions and mechanisms solely on speed to escape the black shooting star behind it.

They were already far past the limit any living animal could bear, and yet, the chaser showed no intention of stopping.

The pursuit showed no sign of ending even as Monochrome itself surpassed the greatest height it had ever reached.

The altitude was now over 35,000 metels. The world beyond was alien even to the creature, and there was no telling how long its cracked frame would last. But even so, it continued flying, for stopping meant certain extinction.

Escape, it thought. *Escape escape escape! "This" will end if it doesn't escape!*

What it felt right now was perhaps the very same feeling it had been causing all this time.

Despair — the sole source of its joy.

No, it wasn't despairing quite yet, for it still had some hope.

With that speed, "that" shouldn't be able to fly too far! "This" has a limit! "That" has to have a limit, too! "This" will not end if "that" reaches its limit first!

That was its hope, and it wasn't wrong in the least. The Shooting Wheel's limit was 65,000 metels — the distance it could fly after converting the accumulated damage.

The altitude had now exceeded 50,000 metels.

There were only about ten seconds left until the Shooting Wheel lost all its propulsion power.

The outcome of this chase would surely be decided here in the thermosphere — the place where shooting stars are said to expire.

"Such beauty," murmured Nemesis as she continued the vehement chase.

As an Arms type, she had a large field of vision, so she could both focus on Monochrome *and* see the world below.

She could now look at the planet without the horizon cutting off her vision.

Her eyes could now see far beyond the single kingdom she and Ray spent their time in. She could see some activity in the neighboring countries and even catch glimpses of the unique sceneries from those far away.

There was also something gigantic far off in the distant south.

Nemesis could now see both the extent and vibrance of this world, and she found it nothing but beautiful.

She hoped to someday get a good, long look at this scenery with Ray at her side.

“But now... there’s something I must do.”

She had to destroy the tragedy that had appeared before her Master. Ray had entrusted her with the role, and she wanted to do it, too.

The Shooting Wheel’s limit was close, but Nemesis still flew, swearing to make it reach.

“You could have just watched the world from here,” she uttered while looking ahead. The words merely escaped her mouth, but that was probably her final, ultimate sentiment towards Monochrome.

She forced out the last of her power.

The end! Monochrome panicked as the shooting star approached. *“This” will be ended!*

It had already lost all hope of escaping. With all its core, the centuries-old UBM feared the coming end — the gaze of death.

Because of this, it began to think things it had never considered before.

“This” will be ended! If it ends...! If it ends, then...? it thought and paused as an alien idea came to its mind. *Wait... What would happen if “this” ended?*

For the first time in its long existence, it thought a question that most minds would come across at their earliest stages.

It had never considered that back when it was plant-like, and ever since becoming Monochrome, it had done nothing but *cause* ends, but now...

Huh? Why doesn’t “this” want to end?

As a creature that had originally been nothing but a star-like *thing* hanging in the sky, it shouldn’t have had anything to feel about its own end.

Before becoming Monochrome, it hadn’t even considered whether it existed or not.

By witnessing a human conflict, it had learned of despair, learned that made its core stir, deemed it to be joy, and decided to mass-produce despair to please itself.

Right, if “this” ends, it won’t see more despair. And if it doesn’t see despair, it won’t feel joy.

It didn’t want to end because it wanted to feel more bliss.

But then, it suddenly began to question the centuries-old principle of its behavior.

But then... why did "this" enjoy it?

It finally realized that, in its first exposure to despair... the one who'd found joy in it wasn't Monochrome, but some human on the surface.

The creature's own joy was just a borrowed imitation, and it had misinterpreted that by thinking that it had gained a desire, despite the fact that it had absolutely no necessity to derive joy from despair.

Thus, the belated question made Monochrome slightly slow down its ascent, letting Nemesis catch up to it.

One of the Shooting Wheel's five blades bit into the creature's crystalline body...

"Farewell, star of the black sky!" she screamed.

...and returned triple the damage it had done to Ray and Nemesis.

The vast amount of damage delivered by Payback Beyond the Stars was too much to bear, even for an Ancient Legendary UBM — especially one that had sacrificed its endurance for other qualities.

Ah, then... Monochrome began to weave a thought, but it was cut off by its own extinction.

No one would ever know the conclusion it came to.

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That day, there was a dazzling bright light in the sky.

It was the light stored within Monochrome, now released by its collapse.

However, it was nothing like the scorching beams it had fired when active — it was only a pure shine, much like the one the creature had emitted before becoming Monochrome.

In a certain village in Altar, a boy was looking up at the sky alongside his little sister.

"Wow! It's so pretty!" she said joyously.

"Yeah! It's sparkling!" he agreed.

Exposed to the unusual light in the sky, the innocent little children felt nothing but jubilation.

Such exchanges were common among those who saw the light, and there was not a hint of the despair Monochrome had once brought. Those who saw it merely reveled in the joy inspired by the beauty of the sight.

Perhaps this had been a common spectacle back at the age before Monochrome became a creature of despair.

The entity that had spent the last few centuries leading a false existence spent its very final moments lighting up the world as it had originally... and then vanished completely.

Epilogue

Paladin, Ray Starling

Upon confirming that Monochrome was gone for good, I passed out instantly.

I didn't *just* get the Fainting status effect, either — I actually became so relaxed that my consciousness turned off.

I felt like I slept the whole time I was inside that weird space you go to when you're out cold.

Also, it might've just been my imagination, but I thought I saw a blackish, reddish humanoid silhouette act all sulky, saying, "I finished it and you come here like this..." or something.

Anyway, upon waking up, I was greeted by several changes, with the first of them being the special reward, which, just like you'd expect, went to me.

It was called "Black Warcoat, Monochrome," and it was basically a crystalline, transparent greatcoat.

Upon seeing it, Nemesis... oh, right.

Speaking of her... after defeating Monochrome, she, still in her Shooting Wheel form, simply came back down to the surface like it was nothing, merged with the handle I was still holding in my hand while unconscious, and turned back into her human form.

Now, upon seeing Monochrome's special reward, she muttered something like, "How unexpected. Knowing you, I assumed it would be black and appear far more sinister," which I found very rude. Just what made her automatically assume that my gear would be sinister?

Anyway, the Black Warcoat had a passive skill called "Light Absorption," and when I equipped the coat and activated it, it instantly went from transparent to black. True to its name, the skill absorbed light, and it seemed to do it so well that the whole coat turned completely dark.

"I knew it," said Nemesis.

That aside, Light Absorption wasn't the only skill it had.

I expected the other skill to have something to do with flying or voice, but its name — "Shining Despair" — basically said it all. As expected, its description said that it fired a beam, and I could only assume it was a weaker version of the greatest one fired by the UBM.

However, it left me wondering about something.

When the monster fired that beam, I'd heard it say "Shining *Disappear*," rather than "Despair," so I was slightly curious why the pronunciation had changed after it became a special reward. Was it adjusted to me or something?

Come to think of it, in *Infinite Dendrogram*, certain English words were used or pronounced differently than in real life. Was there something going on with the translation function?

Regardless, on to the next change.

While I was out cold, everyone in Torne had been fully healed.

Like, even those with severe Scorches all over their bodies, and even those who'd lost limbs were now in perfectly good health — and *I was among them*.

Most of the wounds I'd gained in my battle against Monochrome had vanished, and not only that, but the left arm I'd lost before this incident had grown back. The arm worked as smoothly as it did in reality, and it honestly felt like it had never been gone.

According to Nemesis and B3, the healing had happened while they weren't looking.

I'd call this a mystery, but I had a strong guess about who was responsible. After all, the kingdom had only a single person who wielded healing magic powerful enough to cure loss of body parts.

"So you were here, too... Miss Aberration," I muttered.

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A certain pair of people

"Ohhh, dear, am I tired. Weird, considering I didn't do anything."

"Most excellent work, Lady Tsukuyo."

The spiritual leader of The Lunar Society, Tsukuyo Fuso, was in an empty part of Torne village, lying down on and rolling around the low grass as though it was the floor in her home.

Her Mythical junihitoe was now covered in grass stains, but she didn’t seem to care one bit.

“Hey, I didn’t do anythiiing,” she said. “They just became healed for some reason. Oh dear, what a shame, and I was planning to have Ray join us in exchange for healing his aaaarm. Just what in the woooorld healed them allll?”

“I fail to see the need to feign ignorance when I was there to see it,” he responded. “And I feel you are overdoing it with the monotone.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Very well, then.”

Despite being there to witness his mistress walk around the village and heal everyone, Eishiro Tsukikage was the first to give up.

Anyway, to answer the question of how long The Lunar Society’s top had been in Torne... they’d actually arrived here long before Monochrome had appeared.

Yesterday, Eishiro had told Tsukuyo that Ray was heading there alongside Shijima’s son-in-law.

At first, her reaction was just a lukewarm “Really now?” She didn’t seem to care at all.

But come morning, she said, “I wanna go see the Windstar Fest. Oh, but it’s got nothing to do with Ray,” and then went out to Torne.

This seemed to be something she’d decided on after a whole evening’s worth of consideration. Perhaps she wanted to see what kind of choice Ray would make when faced with the Shijima family’s problem.

Tsukuyo was accompanied by Eishiro, and for their means of transport, they invited a member of The Lunar Society — a Master who used a *Pure-Dragon-tier skydragon*.

Thanks to that, they arrived at Torne in no time. But right after they did, B3 called Eishiro on his real life mobile — yes, the same call in which she and Ray asked about Shijima’s relationship to The Lunar Society.

Eishiro had to log out to answer, while the Pure-Dragon’s Master had to look after his creature, so Tsukuyo ended up walking around the stalls all by herself.

Of course, with her being an infamous, stand-out beauty known to wear a junihitoe, there could’ve been many people noticing her and realizing who she was, but that was countered by the disguise Eishiro had given her before logging out.

Tsukuyo went on to have a decently good time walking around the stalls, and upon Eishiro's return, he told her about the situation.

Then, once Ray logged in again, they went on to watch him from the shadows — quite literally — and Tsukuyo was somewhat satisfied to see him resolve to tell Farica and Louie about Shijima.

But then she said, "Oh, dear. We should stop this. Kage, what did you even tell him?" and tried to call out to Ray, but that was exactly when Monochrome appeared.

Ray instantly took to the sky, and even their Pure-Dragon rider joined him and challenged the UBM.

Tsukuyo had heaved a sigh, but then, she and Eishiro had begun walking around the attacked places in order to heal the ones who'd been critically hurt.

"Oh deaaaar, I could make a really good deal with the first princess if she was here, but now I'm working for freeeee," she whined despite indiscriminately healing all those injured while still hiding in the shadows.

Thanks to her efforts, not a single tian died.

And during it all, she watched over Ray's struggle and *didn't do more than that*.

"Shouldn't *we* have been the ones to defeat the UBM?" Eishiro asked.

Though she'd helped the tians, Tsukuyo had done absolutely nothing to influence Ray's battle.

This was despite having the options to assist Ray directly or to defeat Monochrome by themselves and taking the special reward.

The reason why she didn't do that was simple.

"Ehh? But that would've been boring."

And there was nothing more to it.

She'd watched Ray the whole time — saw his resolve and the actions he'd taken — but not even once had she considered assisting him. She believed it would've sullied the purity of his behavior.

Tsukuyo wanted to see Ray at his most natural. In a way, she was continuing the observation that had been ruined by Figaro's intrusion back at their HQ.

The conclusion? Tsukuyo ended up liking Ray even more than she had after their conversation when she'd kidnapped him. So much so that she'd cast Mercy of the Holy on him, giving up on using it as a card in a deal.

"Oh deaaaar, Ray's healed and I didn't even do anything, so now I'll have to put off inviting him to CID until the next time he's almost dyiiiing," she whined.

Eishiro gave her a flat look, not saying a word.

When it came to deals, Tsukuyo's style was to present the other party with severe conditions and wait until they had no choice but to accept them. In this case, however, she'd betrayed her style twice — first by lowering her condition to him joining CID, rather than The Lunar Society, and then by actually giving him the treatment for absolutely no reward.

Her strong, continuous, repeated assertion to Eishiro that she hadn't done anything back there was just her way of denying the reality that she'd departed from her principle and helped Ray for nothing.

She reminds me of herself when she was a child, Eishiro thought in response to the highly unconvincing and ineffective denial. He chose to say nothing more.

"But... well..." Tsukuyo continued. "At least Shijima's family is saved, and Ray gave me a good show. I guess that was his way of seizing miracles."

"'Miracles,' you say?" Eishiro commented. "I believe people consider wounds that cure themselves to be miraculous, as well."

"I don't know what you meaaaan."

"Oh yes, of course, of course. I must say, though..." Tsukikage sighed at his mistress's obstinance before letting out a whisper. "Miracles are certainly commonplace nowadays."

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Paladin, Ray Starling

One more thing seemed to have happened while I was asleep: Louie and Farica received a letter from Mr. Shijima.

It was from before he'd taken the surgery. Apparently, Mr. Shijima had put it in a metal pipe and given it to Gringham ahead of time so the lion could deliver it to them just in case he himself wasn't back after half a year had passed.

The man had entrusted it to Gringham, believing that his loyal beast would listen to his desire even after returning to the wild.

Mr. Shijima's letter said that he was fighting his illness and that the fact he wasn't back yet meant that it was lasting longer than he'd expected. However, he also added that he would *definitely* come back.

Aside from that, it contained his most heartfelt feelings for Louie and Farica.

Upon hearing that, I decided to call off telling them what I'd found out before Monochrome's appearance.

The letter contained Mr. Shijima's own words, so I had no business getting involved in this anymore.

Not to mention that there was a decisive *misconception* on our part regarding this whole situation.

When I'd asked Tsukikage how the man had ended up, the goddamn King of Secretaries had put on a depressed tone and said, "'Miracles' are called 'miracles'... because they're *unbelievably rare*."

Those words had seriously shocked me, but now that I thought about it... that sneaky bastard *hadn't said anything about the miracle not happening or the man dying*.

And to top it all off, when I'd logged out just a moment ago and ran a search for "Fuso hospital terminal illness" I'd instantly got a result for a medical article from two months ago, titled, "SURGERY FOR GLOBALLY INFAMOUS DISEASE SUCCESSFUL IN JAPAN FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER!"

It said that the patient would have to spend a few months in an ICU for follow-up medical care, and that *the patient's condition was stable*.

Out of respect for his privacy, the man wasn't named, but it was more than likely that it was our guy.

The miracle... had actually happened.

"Man... I've been had," I muttered.

I knew today was April Fools' Day. And, well, I had clearly been fooled. Hook, line, and sinker.

Was I feeling bad about that, though? Nope. Not at all.

That evening, after thanking me for saving him and Gringham, Louie went on to withdraw his request, saying, "I'll keep waiting for Dad with Mom, Gringham, and my little brother or sister! He *will* come back!"

He made the right choice, if you asked me.

After all, the day he was waiting for wasn't too far away.

◇

It was the first morning after the Monochrome incident.

B3 and I were about to leave Torne as Louie, Farica, and Gringham were seeing us off.

Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention that Gringham was tamed by Farica. If he'd stayed untamed, he might've been accidentally killed by someone, so yesterday, she'd gone out to get the Tamer job and made him hers.

Of course, an Aries Leo wasn't exactly a creature that could be tamed by a completely new Tamer, but it was different in Gringham's case. They were family, and he'd *wanted* to be tamed, so the process had been completed without a problem, and he was now lying asleep on their grounds like some enormous housecat.

Now, he too, would be waiting for his original owner alongside his family.

"Thank you so much for everything you've done," said Farica as she bowed her head. Louie followed after her. "You helped with Louie's request and even saved us from *that* Monochrome..."

"No need for that," I replied. "I did those things because I wanted to."

It would have left a bad taste in my mouth if I hadn't done them, and having done them, I was feeling nothing but refreshed. That alone made it all worth it.

"Oh, right," said Louie. "I canceled the request, but the money..."

"Oh, no need for that, either." I raised my hand to stop him.

"Yes," B3 nodded. "We never agreed on an amount."

Exactly — we hadn't decided on a reward. Not to mention that...

"Thanks to this matter, we chanced upon a windfall," she continued. "And that's payment enough."

...Yeah, the reparations from K&R would do just fine.

I'd gotten a closer look at the contract and found out that the interest for delayed payment was insane in more ways than one. If Rosa didn't hurry and pay up, she'd be in for a serious debt hell.

Anyway, we were about to depart, but before that...

"Louie," I addressed the boy.

“Yes? What is it?” He looked up at me.

There was just one more thing I wanted to tell him before I left.

“Make sure to support your little brother or sister when he or she’s born, all right? Little brothers rely on their big brothers more than you’d expect.”

“...Okay!”

And with that exchange as our last, we left the Shijima household.

Silver, having recovered from the effects of that “Gremlin” Embryo, was pulling B3’s carriage forward.

Nemesis, B3, and I were all on the coachman’s seat.

Looking around, I could see people reconstructing the parts of the village Monochrome had destroyed yesterday.

A group of Masters with mohawk haircuts looked particularly enthusiastic about their volunteer work.

Can’t judge a book by its cover, huh? I thought as I watched the scenery when I felt B3 look at me, both silently and intently.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked.

“No, it’s just that... I find it strange that you aren’t saying anything about me when I was in armor. Tone, looks — nearly everything about me was different, so I expected you to ask.”

Yeah, she’d definitely been more manly back then. That was what she’d called being “turned on” or something. Nevertheless...

“Well... I’m used to it.”

“‘Used to it?’”

“I have two family members and a few friends whose tones and behaviors, like yours, drastically change depending on the situation, so I don’t really mind it at this point.”

“I... I see?”

Both of my siblings, Marie, Hugo... probably Rook, too. Looking at it like that, I realized I had quite a number of two-faced characters around me. But at least they were all good people at heart.

“By the way, may I ask you something?” Nemesis joined the conversation with a question for B3. “What should we call you from now on? ‘B3’ or ‘Barbaroy’?”

“Oh, uh, please use ‘B3’ when I’m not wearing my armor and ‘Barbaroy’ when I am.”

She separates them...?

"Hm... Why the separation?" asked Nemesis.

B3's face turned slightly red as she said, "Well... That makes it cuter... *and* cooler, right?"

Those words of hers made me suddenly burst into laughter.

She turned all sulky and lightly whacked my head a few times before escaping into her carriage.

Yep. She's an unexpectedly charming person, I thought with a grin. *...Those hits took some of my HP, though.*

"You have no one to blame but yourself," said Nemesis.

Can't argue with that.

And so, our carriage left Torne.

I turned around for the last time and took a look at the village, now a small dot on the horizon.

"Now that I think about it... what will happen to the Windstar Festival now?" I muttered.

Monochrome, the origin of the festival, had awakened, greatly damaged the village, and vanished.

Though not many had been hurt or injured, the same couldn't be said for their homes, which were charred or even burnt to the ground.

Reconstruction would take a lot of time, and it wasn't certain whether they could continue the Windstar Festival tradition.

"It will go on," said Nemesis, sounding certain. She was sitting off to my right.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"People are creatures that advance forward while etching their pain and grief into the past, so I'm certain they will do the same with this incident."

I silently pondered, thinking that it seemed much like throwing a festival during the anniversary of an air-raid or some other calamity in order to comfort the dead and pray for restoration.

"You and I are like that, as well," she added.

"You, too?"

"Indeed. I am an Embryo that changes your pain and sadness into *power that lets you keep moving forward*," she said as she gently grasped my left hand — the one I now had again. "But the *will* to do that is none other than yours... and the same applies to everyone else. So if those calling this village their home have the will to move on, it will be restored in no time, and the festival will continue to happen as it always has."

"...That's true."

We rode the carriage as it traced the road leading back to the capital.

A gentle wind was blowing over it, spinning the windstars decorating the fences.

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The following year’s Windstar Festival happened without a problem to name.

However, there was a slight, but noticeable, change — the windstar decorations were now being held up by small paper dolls, which seemed to represent the person who’d shattered the star of the black sky.

At the year’s Windstar Dance, one could see a certain family dancing among the crowd — a wife with her husband, and a young boy with a silent girl.

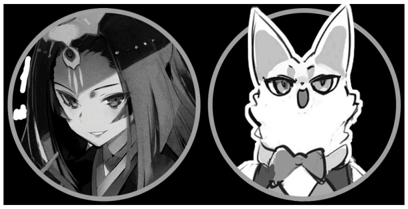
Not far away from them, there was a lion with a baby sleeping on its woolly mane.

Though it was much like the scenes from years before, it was definitely new.

And that day, too, there was a pleasant wind that gently spun the windstars.

END. To Be Continued in the Next Episode...

Midword



Fox: “Lookie here, we got the good ending! Things like this make waiting for the new volume allll worth it!”

Cat: “Indeed they dooo. Now, if only *someone* didn’t destroy the aftertaste.”

Fox: “Eehh? Whoever do you meaaan? Ah, almost forgot. I’m the fox, Tsukuyo Fuso.”

Cat: “I obviously mean you. I’m the cat, Cheshire. And I didn’t have any scenes again.”

Fox: “Our presence in the story sure is strangely patterned, isn’t it? Where’s the bear?”

Cat: “...In jail.”

Fox: “...Huh?”

Cat: “For more about that, read the following side story! It takes place during the events of volumes 6 and 7.”

Fox: “...So this volume also has side stories shoved in after the main story, huh?”

Cat: “We have our reasons for this. Promise.”

Side Story: The Case of the Unknown Murders — The Situation

Lost Heart, Rook Holmes

That day, I was in Gideon's first district, carefully observing all the people passing by, immersing myself in deep thought while at the same time gathering information regarding my surroundings.

My father had trained me in that, along with other such skills as lipreading, lockpicking, and reading mystery novels in a... somewhat peculiar manner.

Specifically, rather than trying to unravel the tricks and mysteries within the work itself, I'd been trained to read while getting into the mind of the author and trying to understand his personality well enough to guess what kind tricks he would be inclined to use in his story, which... might be a sub-optimal way to read a book.

Regardless, on the day Ray was kidnapped and the day before that, I was undergoing a change in my schedule that had me skipping out on the training from my father.

I had to attend the hellish training prepared for me by Ray's brother.

Of course, "hellish" is not an adjective you use lightly, but all things considered, there was just no better word for it.

After all, I was told to *turn on my pain setting* and come close to the death penalty *over and over again*.

I couldn't even describe the pain I felt when I had only 1 HP left.

Most would surely think that anyone providing or accepting this training had issues with their sanity, but Shu had said, "You're the type of guy who's fine with this, aren't ya?"

And yes, indeed I was.

According to him, "It's not guaranteed, but people-like Embryos sometimes have their evolutions influenced by the Master's needs or intense feelings. The more hardship you face, the more likely it is that your Embryo will be able to counter difficult situations."

And looking at Ray, I could fully understand what he meant.

Nevertheless, Shu's training had been so hellish that Marilyn and the other girls became cross with him, and I couldn't quite fault them for that.

I was supposed to be undergoing that training today, as well, but there had been an issue on Shu's end, so now I was just sitting here in front of the knight offices, thinking about... his arrest.

"Rook," Babi spoke up.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I was sleeping, so I didn't hear the reason. Why did they arrest the bear man? Food fraud?"

"No. Nothing like that." I could concede that the materials used in his popcorn were a mystery in itself, but that had nothing to do with his arrest.

The reason for that was...

"Serial burglary and murder."

Indeed. Shu was suspected to be the one behind a case troubling the city.

It all began in the evening two days prior, when someone discovered the gory remains of a certain head of a merchant family.

It was in such a terrible state that they didn't even realize it was him until they restored his body.

It was obviously no accident or suicide, so Gideon's authorities instantly took to action, and as soon as they began the investigation, they discovered that all the money and goods in the hidden safe had been stolen. The evidence suggested that they'd been taken before the murder.

But they hadn't been able to find a single trace of the culprit even after mobilizing all those with investigative sense skills.

The household also had an alarm system with potential equivalent to high-rank magic, but there were no signs that it had been triggered.

They failed to find a single piece of evidence that the culprit had even been there.

The only exception was a *strange card placed next to the remains*.

None of those officers were able to read the language on it, so although it was an important piece of evidence, it wasn't quite good enough to be considered a clue.

The following evening, there was another burglary-murder at another merchant's household.

Like in the previous event, the remains were in a dreadful state, the money and goods had been stolen, the alarm had failed to activate... and there was a card left nearby.

That was more than enough for the officers to become certain that the culprit for both incidents was the same.

The details of the investigation hadn't been made public, so it was impossible for it to be a copycat killer.

Now, about the cards... they both had the exact same text on their front, but different text on their backs. However, the text of both the front and back were written in languages unknown to the investigators, so they weren't able to read them.

They created copies and spread them out to the relevant institutions, but no tian working at them recognized the letters or characters.

But then there was a ray of light. Marie happened to visit the offices due to Elizabeth-related business, and when she caught a glimpse of the card the Knights had, she read it aloud, saying, "'I am Unknown?'"

That was the nickname of Ray's brother, Shu Starling, the King of Destruction.

Though his identity had become unveiled during the previous incident, he had yet to be given a new one. Then again, his face was still a mystery, so people were probably fine with keeping the nickname "Unknown."

"Oh," Marie continued, "and this weird character on the other side looks like a bear. Did the furball write this?"

With that new piece of information, the case moved from its standstill, resulting in Shu's arrest.

He protested verbally, saying, "I've been fur-amed!" But he didn't resist his arrest, possibly because he wanted to be considerate of the investigators who'd been given the absurd, unreasonable task of taking *him* — a Superior — in.

Their expressions as they did were both venerably resolute and heroically tragic.

Apparently Shu logged out every now and then, but he respected his situation and always returned to the knight offices.

Currently, he was being subjected to investigation and questioning using various skills.

Naturally, one of them was Truth Discernment, but its results weren't considered all that important because they assumed that a Superior could have a means to fool the skill.

Ironically, the man's status and the unknown extent of the power that came with it actually worked against him, keeping him as the prime suspect.

Truth Discernment was one of the most important factors in this world's judicial system, yet even that was considered inadequate against a Superior.

Additionally, there was circumstantial evidence that suggested that he *was* the culprit.

First, of course, the card implied the connection. Second, his Mythical special reward, Kim-un-Kamuy, had camouflage and presence manipulation skills powerful enough to fool the alarm systems.

As for motive... he was currently short on money, so it was not unreasonable to believe he would commit burglary.

Due to all that together, he continued to be held as a suspect.

I had received all that information directly from Ray's brother by using Telepathy Cuffs. Thankfully, they hadn't confiscated his possessions.

"Considering the motive, means, and opportunity, Shu happens to be the only suspect the investigators have," I muttered. "Which makes him the prime suspect."

"But Mr. Bear wouldn't do that, right?" Babi asked. "Don't you think so?"

"Babi, detectives are human, too, and yes, we do have our share of preferences when it comes to people, but those shouldn't be incorporated into our investigative deductions."

In both reality and fiction, there had been countless cases of detectives believing that a suspect was too good a person to be the culprit, and then gone on to have that belief betrayed.

"Then... what's your deduction?" she asked.

"Shu isn't the culprit," I said. "That's far too obvious."

Indeed, I could take it for granted that him being the one who did it was downright impossible.

"If all he needed was money, then there was no need for him to kill anyone," I explained. "Not to mention that he wouldn't leave a card saying that he did it. He is not some phantom thief you'd find in fiction."

In fact, not even my mother would do work this... trifling, I thought.

"This is definitely a crime committed by a person who's trying to make it seem like it's Shu. The true culprit... is someone else."

The unknown murderer was still at large, laughing after having transferred the blame to someone else.

It was in my nature — in my genes from my father — to want to expose his identity and close this case for good.

I knew exactly what I had to do now.

Shu might've had told me all that information because he'd guessed what course of action I would take. In that case, this might be part of the training.

Regardless, for the first time in a while, I once again had an objective.

When it came to using my parents' lessons, the only thing I'd been doing recently was teaching Elizabeth my mother's thieving techniques. But now, I would put into practice what my father had taught me.

"I'll expose the culprit... and bring him to light." *I swear that upon my father's honor.*

"Rook... That line is a biiit..."

"I know. I regret saying it now."

Anyway, I began the investigation.

"First we have to find out how the culprit got in, right?" Babi asked.

"No, actually. The 'how' is thoroughly meaningless here."

This world had an awful lot of skills, including ones from Embryos that were unique to each Master, so the means of passing the alarm system were far too many. Even I personally knew of two people who could do it — Shu and Marie.

"So we will look into the method last," I said. "First, we have to work out the culprit's mentality."

"How will you do that?"

"I'm thinking on it now while I'm recovering my detective's intuition."

I sat on a bench in front of the knight offices in the first district, observing the people passing by. It was both preparation for my first detective work in a long time, and part of the investigation.

On the nearby notice board, the authorities had left a brief explanation regarding the murders.

This was true for many other incidents, and the text on them followed the format of “This and that happened, and this and that person was caught.”

I was observing the reactions of the people looking at the board.

If the culprit was interested in how the case was proceeding, he might come to take a gander at it, and depending on his reaction, I might find my target early in the investigation. Still, it wasn’t too likely that the culprit would come here, so my hopes weren’t high, and most of my focus was on recovering my intuition and gathering my thoughts.

“’Male suspect,’ eh?” I muttered, still on the bench, looking at the notice board several meters ahead.

The explanation for the murders described what had happened and ended it with just a “We arrested a male suspect.”

Shu’s name was nowhere to be seen, partly because it wasn’t certain that he was the culprit yet, but mostly because the news of one of the kingdom’s Superiors getting arrested would be far too shocking.

During the incident started by the Giga Professor, Shu had revealed his identity as the King of Destruction and destroyed Pandemonium and the horde of monsters attacking Gideon.

The significance of those feats couldn’t be taken lightly. Just like the moment of Ray defeating the RSK, Shu’s feats had given hope to the people of this declining kingdom.

In fact, that might very well be the reason why the culprit was framing him.

Arrest alone wasn’t enough to send a Master to the gaol, and if they had save points in other countries, they could come back through those. According to Shu, he had marked save points in all seven countries, so that wasn’t a problem.

However, if he was put on Altar’s wanted list and lost his nationality, he would obviously disappear from the country’s rankings, making it impossible for the King of Destruction, the top of Altar’s kill rankings, to participate in the war.

And with him being the hope of the kingdom, his exit would mean far more than just a severe loss of war potential. It would be a severe blow to morale.

Then... was this another strategical move by the Giga Professor?

"...No," I murmured.

It didn't make sense for these murders to be part of a plot to remove Shu from the war.

If someone truly wanted to achieve that, they would have framed him for a crime grave enough to get him on *all* the wanted lists.

If that had been *my* objective, and I'd had the means to do it... I would have killed Elizabeth, who happened to still be here in Gideon.

If I framed Shu for *that*, he would instantly become wanted everywhere — no two ways about it.

His next death penalty would send him to the gaol, and the fact that their own Superior had killed their princess would drop Altarian morale to an all-time low, giving Dryfe a great advantage in the war.

"But as things are now..." I murmured.

Since this was *just* a case of two merchants being murdered and having their possessions stolen, it was likely that the country would suppress this whole event. The crime was certainly severe, but it was nothing compared to the future that would come if they lost their greatest force in the upcoming war. As the idiom goes, "desperate times call for desperate measures."

From Shu's standpoint, it would be quite disgraceful to be released despite not being proven innocent, but even if it made him feel bad, he would become free nonetheless.

I found it hard to believe that the true culprit would be unaware of that, so I still couldn't tell what the culprit's goal was.

I needed more information, and quite a lot of it, as well, so I made my way to a place that could give me what I wanted: the local DIN branch.

I went inside and bought copies of the documents relating to the murders and the cards found on the crime scenes. The fact that the DIN had documents for an ongoing investigation as though it was nothing made me somewhat wary of their organization, but for now, I decided to use it to my advantage.

Besides, not even they seemed to know who the real culprit was, and they said they would pay a lot for that information.

It was pretty evident that they didn't believe Shu was the culprit, and according to the documents, many of the knights seemed to feel the same way.

Due to the incident's prime suspect being a Superior, and due to the crime having happened in Gideon, which was currently hosting the second princess, the Royal Guard were also taking part in the investigation.

Liliana and a number of other Paladins in the group were strongly asserting that Shu wasn't the culprit.

"Is this an example of that?" Babi asked. "That thing you said was bad?"

"Yes and no, Babi," I replied. "What I said was bad was for detectives to let their preferences warp their deductions. Everyone else should believe in whoever they want, so Liliana and her knights aren't mistaken to do so."

And that was why I'd taken it upon myself to find the culprit. I knew enough to assume that Shu wasn't the one who'd done it, but I would do my best to not let my investigation become warped if I discovered proof to the contrary.

"Rook, will you be on the lookout tonight?" she asked.

"No. I haven't the slightest clue where to go on the lookout. Not to mention that no murder would happen with things as they are now."

"Why? Shouldn't it happen tonight, too?"

"No. Because Shu is currently in jail."

If I was the culprit, I would never do anything while he was still arrested, for that would greatly reinforce his innocence.

The next murder would surely happen the next time he was released, or if he logged out and disappeared from jail. Shu was almost certainly staying inside because he was thoroughly aware of that.

"Instead, tonight, I will focus entirely on deciphering these cryptograms," I said as I looked at the cards in my hand — the copies of the ones left behind by the culprit.

They had cryptograms on their backs, and I would spend the night solving them to see if they had any hints.

Let's see what secrets you hold, I thought while eyeing the characters.

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And so came the next morning.

Just as I'd expected, nothing special had happened during the night. I'd spent the whole time deciphering the cryptograms on the cards and, well...

my silence as I looked at the results said all that had to be said.

"Rook, you look so displeased," Babi commented. "How rare."

Of course I'm displeased, I thought.

The cryptograms were basically sets of words written with their characters randomly switching between different languages. While the one making it had only needed to type it down into some dictionary app, I, as the solver, had to use all the possible combinations for every character.

The base was clearly the alphabet, and he replaced a lot of the letters with the corresponding characters from other writing systems, but every now and then, the rules of conversion changed, and there were some *actual mistakes*.

For example, despite using readings or order until that point, he eventually equated "E" with the Japanese hiragana for "i." Going by the rules used for the other letters, it had to be either the Japanese "ii," the "e" in their transliteration of Latin characters, "o" — their fifth character overall, or "ho" — the fifth character in the Iroha.

It'd taken me far too long to understand that part was nothing but a mistake by the culprit.

It wasn't the only mistake, either, and I'd spent a lot of time racking my brain trying to figure out if there was any meaning to those things, only to finally realize that they were nothing but pointless errors. Honestly, it made me more vexed than I had been facing that young lady back during the incident.

This person was highly insincere when it came to making cryptograms. He'd clearly intended to have someone solve them, but he'd also neglected to check how solvable they were, and that, in my eyes, made them some of the most abysmal cryptograms I'd ever encountered.

Insincere as these cryptograms were, however, I'd still solved them, which made me aware of an even more annoying fact: the culprit didn't care about them at all.

That was the reason for both the mistakes and for the actual content:

Card 1: "Today's lunch is a hamburg steak at Tricellas."

Card 2: "Today's dessert is a pudding parfait at Café White Sugar Peach."

And that was it.

Those establishments *did* exist here in Gideon, but the lines were clearly just some basic social network posts, turned into cryptograms for seemingly no reason at all. They had nothing to do with the incident, and all they did was irritate the one who solved them... but that was exactly what made me realize something.

Since these cryptograms used Earth's languages, a tian could never, ever solve them, and if there was any non-tian who might lay his eyes on the cards, it would be none other than Shu.

The criminal had figured he might try to prove his innocence by solving them, only to get these meaningless words... and that would surely get on his nerves.

If there *was* any sort of purpose for these cryptograms, that was exactly it — to anger Shu after having framed him. That was the only real damage being done to him by this whole situation.

And, assuming that was the culprit's intent, it led me to another realization.

The fact that Shu was the prime suspect was being kept hidden from the public, and the only ones who knew that he was in jail were he himself, the authorities, personal acquaintances such as me and Marie, the DIN, and the real culprit.

That knowledge would never have stayed contained if the reason for it was a personal grudge.

For example, if Franklin had successfully framed one of the Starling brothers, who were his sworn enemies, he would have made sure that all of Gideon and Altar knew about it. Then he would have followed it up by spreading vile rumors about them, both here and on the Internet, in order to make sure they never recovered.

If this was personal, the culprit would've done at least *that* much, and yet he hadn't.

The framing, the disgraceful release that was sure to come, and the cryptogram wasn't quite enough to ruin Shu. It seemed as though all the culprit was doing was playing around with society and Shu in order to upset them.

"But what does he gain from all this?" I murmured.

Money was the first thing that came to mind, but if that was all the culprit wanted, he wouldn't have left the cards. They'd made Shu into the prime suspect, but if he hadn't left anything, there wouldn't have been any suspects at all, and the case would never have been solved.

Due to that, it was safe to assume that there was meaning in the very act of playing around with Shu — that the culprit's desire was to toy with the King of Destruction.

"It's as if he wants to show that the KoD is an entity so meager that he can get him to dance on his palm," I muttered. "Or perhaps it's the other way around? This whole plot would never come into fruition if Shu hadn't been powerful and famous. The framing itself would have failed."

In that case, this could be the culprit's way of asserting that he was above Shu.

"Is he merely trying to show someone who knows that he's the culprit that he can lead the KoD around by the nose?"

Is it a strange sort of sales promotion? I thought.

It wasn't certain if this assumption of mine was correct. With all the mental leaps I was making here, that deduction wasn't all too reliable.

However, it fit all the details I knew so far... not to mention that my intuition was telling me that I was on the right track, so I decided to search for the culprit from that particular perspective.

"Currently, the only clues I have are these cards," I said, looking at them.

The cryptograms on them had been written by the culprit, no two ways about it. I momentarily considered that he could've made a tian write this and then killed them to hide the evidence, but I quickly dismissed that idea.

The cryptograms used many Earth languages, so tians would find it extremely difficult to copy them properly, and I didn't see a single bit of hesitation in the writing. Despite the errors, this had been written with confidence.

Then perhaps the culprit had another Master partner-in-crime?

No, that couldn't be the case, either. After all, this culprit seemed to feel a dark sort of exhilaration due to playing around with someone as strong as Shu, so I found it unlikely that he would share this "great deed" with another Master.

Not to mention that Masters couldn't be silenced, and due to the risk of them revealing the truth on the Internet and the like, the culprit was most possibly a solo criminal.

Additionally, with these cryptograms, the culprit was both hiding *and* asserting his existence. That might seem contradictory, but it was evident due to the fact that the hidden text revealed what he was doing.

It seemed to me that he wanted to show that he was here while at the same time avoid being exposed.

Honestly, I could probably find him by waiting for a few more cryptograms and deciphering them, but it wouldn't be good to let the number of victims increase, so I needed to find the culprit before that happened.

"Sooo... will you analyze his handwriting?" asked Babi.

"Babi, that's only effective if you have handwriting you can compare it to."

Without any writing by the culprit, I couldn't match it to what I had on the cards. People had to give signatures whenever they took quests from the adventurers' guild, but if the person in question hadn't taken any quests here in Altar, that wouldn't mean much to us.

All I knew at the moment was that the handwriting on both cards was a perfect match.

"This would be far easier if there was an Embryo that could trace a person just by looking at their handwriting," I said.

"But Rook, wouldn't that be boring?"

"Babi, making things interesting is the domain of the phantom thief," I said. "A detective's sole interest is in unraveling the truth."

To that end, I would do many plain, difficult, and yes, even outright boring things. I wouldn't hesitate to request the help of a person with the aforementioned Embryo. Sadly, I wasn't aware of anyone like that.

"Wait..." I murmured.

I actually did become acquainted with someone similar recently, I thought. *Her Embryo's power might prove to be a great help. I'll have to contact her.*

"To find anything that could lead us to the culprit, we should first take another look at what he did," I said.

During the murder-burglaries, he'd stolen the goods and money from the hidden safes before going on to kill the heads of the households.

The murder had come *after* the theft to make it easier for the culprit to escape once the smell of the blood and the like led to the incident's discovery.

This implied another fact about the culprit — instead of uncovering the locations of the safes by interrogating the victims, he'd known where they were ahead of time and had removed the contents before the murder.

Now that I think about it, I haven't yet investigated anything about the residences besides the hidden safes and the alarm systems, so let's try approaching this case from that angle.

I paid another visit to the DIN and bought the additional information regarding the two crime scenes. The organization knew so much that it felt as though its sole purpose was to make detectives' jobs easier.

"So both of the hidden safes were coupled with something in the houses, eh?" I noted.

Apparently the walls slid open and exposed the treasure only upon pushing a bookcase or inserting a gem into the eye of a statue. Being a fan of retro games, Shu would probably call it a "Capcom-like design."

Such mechanisms seemed to be quite popular among Gideon's wealthy, and it was imperative that they were installed during the construction phase... and both the households that had suffered the murders had been built by the exact same contractor.

I see, I thought as I considered the three possibilities of why the culprit had found the safes so easily.

One: he had an Embryo with such abilities. Since this theory left little room for a detective to work in, I skipped it for now.

Two: he'd decided which houses he would commit the crimes in ahead of time, and then gone in to secretly take a look at the blueprints in the contractor's offices. Considering how skillfully he'd snuck into the residences, that wasn't too far-fetched.

Three: he was an employee of the contractor who'd designed the houses.

Also, I asked the DIN, and they confirmed that the culprit couldn't have bought the info, like I'd done — I was the first one to ever show interest in it.

Anyway, the only real connection between the two murdered merchants was the fact that their houses had been built by the same contractor. What they'd traded in and the scale of their business had been entirely different.

If I were urged to name another similarity between them, I would add that both had dabbled in methods which, though not illegal, were definitely crooked.

They had probably been chosen because they seemed like people Shu *might've* targeted, but he certainly wasn't the kind of person to do it, and even on the off chance that he had, he definitely wouldn't have been secretive about it. In a way, this choice of targets was proof that the culprit hadn't observed Shu for long enough.

Additionally, according to the DIN, there hadn't been any recent assassination contracts in Gideon lately, so it was highly unlikely that the murders themselves were the goal.

In fact, the city was currently being patrolled by a group of ninjas hired by the count, and the intelligence network they provided made it extremely difficult for assassinations to occur, as they would quickly get wind of a disturbance of public order as major as an assassination plot.

...On the other hand, that meant that the culprit was above not only the house alarms, but the ninjas, as well.

Now, if it wasn't a hired murder, it could also be a personal grudge, but I'd already established that the link between the two victims was far too thin to think the culprit would kill them both two days in a row using the same method.

And according to the DIN, I was the first to acquire the info that both residences had been built by the same contractor, so if the culprit was someone uninvolved, he couldn't have known where they'd been designed or where to find their blueprints.

A part of me felt like he'd chosen his targets based on who had safes he could easily rob of gold and goods, and that would make the third theory highly likely.

"I should go for a little questioning," I said, preparing to pay a visit to the contractor in question.

Before going there, I first went to one of my contacts, little Elizabeth, and asked her to make me a temporary investigator.

She immediately replied with a lively, "Anything for my teacher!"

I went straight to the one in charge and asked if they had any Masters among their employees.

The answer was "No," and from his expression, it didn't seem like he was lying.

I followed it up by asking whether they had designers working at home, and he said that they had a total of eight, so I asked for their addresses and took my leave.

“Sooo... there was no culprit, huh?” asked Babi.

“We can’t be certain of that yet, Babi.”

“Ehh? But there aren’t any Masters working for the contractor, right?”

Indeed, I thought back. *At the very least, the chief was being honest about that.*

“However, Babi, Masters may pretend to be tians,” I said.

Though it was a severe crime for tians to pretend to be Masters, there was no law or punishment for the reverse.

Consider Ray: he’d lost his left hand and now used a prosthetic. The left hand was where we Masters had our crests, and losing it made it move to a part of the left arm that was still healthy, be it forearm or — as it was in Ray’s case — upper arm.

I didn’t know what happened when a Master lost his whole arm right up to the shoulder, but I was certain that it moved in that case, as well.

Now, what if someone who’d lost their left hand began using a prosthetic that, unlike Ray’s, focused not on function, but on looking as much like a real hand as possible?

You would have a *person who didn’t have a crest on his left hand*.

Now, all he’d need to do was to proclaim himself a tian, and he would appear to be such, even under the scrutiny of Reveal. Though that skill had no trouble with names, jobs, and stats, it didn’t give any information about Embryos.

That person would look like a tian as long as you weren’t around to see the moment he summoned his Embryo from his crest.

“Oh, I get it,” Babi nodded. “But why are you only looking at those working from home?”

“No matter how well they fake being tians, Masters are still Masters,” I replied. “They log out every now and then, and if someone found that suspicious, it would invalidate the rest of what made up the façade. Because of this, a fake tian cannot work alongside others.”

They could only do jobs from home, where they were by themselves.

In that case, our culprit could easily come to see the plans of the houses he’d committed the crimes in if he’d just went and said something like, “I need to see the previous blueprints to help me with my work.”

“Wouldn’t he just quit right after seeing the blueprints?” asked Babi.

“Anyone would be able to see the link between a person who quit upon getting a gander at the blueprints and the incidents that happened at the residences based on them,” I said. “The culprit should still be working there, in order to avoid that scenario.”

If all my deductions aren’t off the mark, anyway.

“Also, there’s probably another reason,” I added.

“Another reason? For pretending to be a tian and working at the contractor?”

“There *are* Masters that do such jobs and do them properly, but this time, we are dealing with someone who commits burglary and murder. For all we know, he might be planning something.”

If I was correct in my assumption that the culprit wanted to flaunt the extent of his power, it was likely that he had someone who knew of his situation — someone who, the culprit believed, would be impressed by his deeds.

In that case, there might be some sort of secret organization involved here.

“The culprit and his ally were planning something, and he began working for that contractor as part of the preparation for it,” I said. “These murders were a personal plot that had nothing to do with the original plan. That’s what it seems like, anyway.”

That assumption gave me a decent idea of what the culprit was like. He was part of an organization, but his position there wasn’t all that great. He was dissatisfied with that and didn’t have the patience to hold back from acting on his own authority to prove his ability.

He was also so imprudent that he hadn’t considered what it meant to use the blueprints he had handy for a crime. He’d thought leaving behind cryptograms would be more than enough.

“Hm...”

The really troublesome part about this person was that, despite all the flaws, he actually had an impressive set of abilities.

Just as I’d told Babi, the “how” of this incident wasn’t too important.

Even so, his feat was such that I only knew three people who could do it: Shu, who had his Mythical special reward; Marie, a Superior Job from the onmitsu grouping; and the King of Assassins, who’d kidnapped Ray.

That made it safe to assume that the culprit had powers matching theirs.

To summarize: our person was an extremely rash, thoughtless, Superior-tier fool with a strong desire to stand out.

“Oh, dear,” I muttered.

I was capable of finding the culprit, but it didn’t seem like I would be able to do anything about him.

The situation would turn quite dangerous if the situation became rough, so I had to think of someone who could fight against him. Marie, Figaro, and little Xunyu came to mind, but they were all outside of Gideon right now, so the only one I could rely on was... *him*.

At first I would have to handle the situation all by myself, but I was sure I could do it long enough for him to finish the culprit off.

I’ll probably have to ask Elizabeth to help me with the legal process, I thought. *This incident certainly has me relying on her a lot. I’ll thank her by teaching her a high-level thief technique.*

I couldn’t imagine Liliana and her Royal Guard liking that, though.

“Nngh...” Babi groaned.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Your thoughts just now were either toooo fast or allll over the place. They’re hard to understand.”

“I don’t feel that way myself, but I guess it might seem that way to someone else,” I conceded.

Oftentimes, I had developed convictions that looked like far-fetched gambles to others — mostly my mother and father.

“But enough about me,” I said. “Let’s go question those working from home.”

“Okay.”

Before that, however, I had to go meet someone.

I’d contacted her ahead of time, so all I had to do now was go to the designated place.

“Hello, Kasumi,” I greeted the girl. “I’m glad you could help me.”

“I-It’s nothing... I-I’ll do my b-best!” she meekly replied.

The girl was Kasumi — a person I’d partied up with many times before.

Her Embryo, Taijitu, would be invaluable in this case.

It was capable of locating nearby Masters, and if it discovered one of them among the "tian" employees we were about to question, it would greatly increase the chances of them being the culprit.

"Rook, I feel that you're bringing something waaay too useful and boring to this mystery," Babi complained.

"Babi, just as I said, a detective's job is to unravel the truth. If a method is effective, it has to be used, even if it's excessively convenient."

Not to mention that I have no obligation to be considerate of a culprit who is so insincere towards the mystery genre.

"We should go, then," I said. "Oh, before that, though..."

There was another bit of preparation I had to do before walking around the houses.

"Babi."

"What is it?"

"Can you break my right arm?"

"Okay."

"Eh?" Kasumi became perplexed as Babi took my right arm with both of hers... and snapped it in the middle of the forearm, just like that.

It was now bending in a direction it shouldn't be.

"E-Eeeehhhhh?!"

"There we go," I said. "Looking good."

"N-No you aren't!"

"No, this is good because I now have a reason to use my left hand."

Assuming the culprit was hiding his left hand using a prosthetic or something else, it was necessary for me to touch it directly to check if there was anything strange about it.

A handshake was a good method to do that, and if I had a broken right arm, it wouldn't seem unnatural for me to shake hands using my left.

Handshakes, questioning, Kasumi's Master detection, and *one more thing* — I would search for the culprit using this four-layer check.

"Y-You could've just put on a cast..." said Kasumi.

"If the person has Reveal and takes a look at my stats, it would be off if I wear a cast while not having the 'Broken Right Arm' status effect," I explained. "Don't worry. I will definitely heal it after all of this is over."

Kasumi looked at me like she didn't know what to say.

I guess seeing an acquaintance break another acquaintance's arm was a bit of a shock to her, I thought. *That's no good. I'll have to make it up to her,* *somehow. Both for her help and for giving her a scare.*

And so came the time to walk around the houses of those working at home.

I started by showing my investigator badge and exchanging a left-handed handshake with each person.

Not hiding anything, I revealed that both of the buildings in which the serial murders had happened had been designed by the contractor they were working for and that I was investigating the case from that angle. I then gave them a few questions made with the assumption that they weren't the suspects and keenly observed their reactions.

Along with asking Kasumi if the person ever showed up as a Master, I repeated this process on seven out of eight of the employees. Some among them hadn't known that the residences had been designed by their own, while some hadn't even known about the murders altogether.

None of them seemed to be lying, and I never saw anything strange in their reactions to my questions.

"Missing the mark this many times makes me think that my deductions were mistaken," I muttered.

Or perhaps, like I'd once considered, the culprit might have an Embryo that could discover safes.

But since I had only one more employee to check, I decided to redo my deductions after finishing this.

And so, we arrived at the eighth person's apartment building.

I looked at Kasumi, and she silently shook her head.

So she's not detecting any Masters here, too, eh? I thought.

Nevertheless, I wanted to be absolutely certain, so I left Babi and Kasumi behind and made my way towards the employee's apartment.

I rang the bell, heard a "Coming!" from inside, and a moment later, the door was opened.

"Ah... Umm... Yes? Who are you?"

The person behind the door was a young woman — probably in her late teens. Assuming she was a tian, she was clearly an adult by this country's standards, and she didn't have a crest on her left hand, either.

"Good day. I am Rook Holmes," I introduced myself. "I am a temporary investigator on a quest to investigate the series of burglaries and murders that began three days ago."

“Oh, my.” Despite the lack of crest, I didn’t see the need to shake her hand to confirm whether it was a prosthetic — it was obviously flesh and bone.

However, *this person was clearly the culprit*.

Upon first seeing me, there had been a brief moment of surprise on her face. Then she’d quickly put up an expression of confusion. It was obviously a reaction one would make if they recognized me, but tried to hide it.

And it wasn’t far-fetched to believe she would know me. She’d tried to frame Shu, so it was only natural for her to look into those around him, and since I was being trained by him, I would definitely be among them.

As indelicate as it would be for me to say it myself, I didn’t exactly have a face so plain it could be easily forgotten, and that was exactly why the last part of the four-layer check was *my own face*.

Her reaction to it had been far stronger than that of someone who’d merely caught a glimpse of it before, and she’d instantly tried to hide it. That was more than enough to make her seem suspicious.

Still, since I didn’t have any positive proof, I had to dig deeper.

“The two residences that have been targeted were both designed by Fródi Construction — your place of employment,” I said. “I am currently visiting the employees to see if you might have any useful information.”

“Oh, I see,” she replied. “We shouldn’t stand around while talking. Care to come in?”

“...If you don’t mind.”

I walked through the door to her apartment, feeling like I was entering the lion’s den.

The young lady introduced herself as Gerbera. As I sat down on the sofa, she presented me with tea and doughnuts, saying, “Here you go.”

“Oh, thank you very much,” I replied.

“Heh heh. Those are the new doughnuts from White Sugar Peach Café. They’re delicious.”

...Eh? But that was the name of the shop in one of the cryptograms. Why would she present me with pastries she’d bought there?

“Well, they certainly look like they are,” I said.

“They’re more than just looks, I assure you. The café had some great pudding parfaits, too, but their doughnuts are just amazing.”

Was she aware that I was suspicious of her? Was she trying to confuse and trick me? Her expression didn't make it seem like it was so. Still, there was a hint of ulterior motive towards me.

Did she actually assume that the cryptograms still weren't solved? In fact, it almost felt like she wasn't even aware that the cryptograms and this conversation could be linked.

...No, surely she couldn't be *that* unobservant.

It made me wonder if I was just misunderstanding things, and she was just a simple tian.

"So, you wanted to talk about the serial burglaries?" she asked.

"Yes," I nodded. "Would you mind if I asked you a few questions?"

"Not at all."

And so, I began giving her the same questions I'd given the other employees.

Ten minutes later, I had to struggle to keep my eye from twitching.

Why? Because the thoughtlessness behind her answers was even greater than I'd expected.

During the first half of the questioning, I asked, "Have you seen the blueprints of the two residences where the murders happened?" to which she replied with a "Yes."

But then, during the other half, I asked, "Have you shown any of the contractor's blueprints to anyone not involved in the company?" to which she said, "No. I only recently became an employee, so I haven't seen any of our previous blueprints."

She was blatantly contradicting herself. From what I could tell, she'd made the decision to act like she didn't know the blueprints *while I was still questioning her*.

It was common practice in police inquiries to ask a question, wait a while, then ask a similar question in order to see if the questionee slips up, but this was the first time I'd seen a person contradict herself so quickly. Not only that, but she didn't even seem to realize she was doing it.

She could've at least prepared a proper, polished cover-up story, I silently lamented.

"Thank you for your time," I said.

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm glad I could help," she replied. "But... this is awfully troubling, isn't it? I mean, this incident got the King of Destruction arrested."

"...Truly," I said.

Lo and behold — what a finishing blow.

Once again, I momentarily thought that she was trying to trick me, but that didn't show on her face.

She actually, honestly believed that speaking of the KoD's arrest — *information currently unknown to anyone but a select few* — was good small talk material. She obviously hadn't even checked to see how the incident had been described to the public.

This woman was thoroughly convinced that, because *she* framed and had him arrested, society *surely* knew about it already.

It was only natural to expect the public to show a far stronger reaction if that had actually happened, yet she'd failed to even check, feeling absolutely nothing strange about the unchanged state of the city.

I already knew from the cryptograms that the culprit lacked sincerity towards the mystery genre, but not even I could predict that the extent was *this* immense.

My deductions were mistaken. I'd pictured the culprit as "an extremely rash, thoughtless, Superior-tier fool with a strong desire to stand out," but it also turned out to be "a person so exceedingly careless that she constantly piled up mistake upon mistake, yet never recognized them as such."

Father... The situations you put me in during my detective training never had a criminal as hopeless as this. She's a bit... beyond the boundaries of my hypothesizing.

Nevertheless, it was settled — this person going by the name "Gerbera" was definitely the culprit.

She didn't have a crest and couldn't be detected by Kasumi's Taijitu, but that was probably just because her Embryo was specialized in concealment. All I had to do now was leave her flat and prepare to corner her, but...

"To think that the King of Destruction would do such a thing..." she said.

Those words compelled me to respond.

"He's not the culprit," I said. Though my tone was plain, I probably wasn't so composed on the inside.

After all — I wasn't ignoring what I probably should be.

Careless as she was, this woman had definitely killed two tians and framed Shu for the crime, and the fact that she'd said such a thing as though she had nothing to do with it made me so vexed that I simply had to retort.

As evidenced by her twitching cheek, she was displeased with my response, which probably didn't fit her plot, so she asked, "Then, in your opinion, what kind of person is the culprit?"

"*An idiot*."

There was no hesitation in my response. It came out reflexively, not giving me a single moment to consider my words.

Apparently, this criminal's insincerity towards the mystery genre had made me more irritated than I thought.

My response was so unexpected that her eyes were wide in shock.

However, I wasn't able to take back what I'd said, so I chose to continue instead.

"An idiot with a poor grasp of the personality of the person he's trying to frame. An idiot whose whole 'steal, murder, leave a card' schtick is nothing but a ridiculous mess. An idiot who doesn't even realize that even a child could understand that this is merely a plot to frame Shu. An idiot who ciphered some of the most immature text on the cards. An idiot who made mistakes in his ciphering, but didn't even bother to check. An idiot whose crimes are so basic that even leaving cards doesn't make him seem like any less of an idiot. An idiot who might actually be idiotic enough to believe that *this* was enough to successfully frame Shu. An idiot who considers other people idiots to a downright unbelievable extent. An idiot who thinks other people are idiots despite he himself being such an idiot that he doesn't even notice his own mistakes. An idiot who — and this is just conjecture, by the way — despite having such strong convictions regarding other people, doesn't understand why he's being thought of as an idiot, is thoroughly convinced that none of it is his own fault, and thus ends up going around in circles like the idiot he is. To summarize: he's an idiot."

With that, I released all of the frustration that'd been building up since I'd solved the cryptograms.

And yes... not even I had realized I was *this* upset.

Still, it was too late for me to take back what I said, so I just prepared to take my leave, leaving behind the culprit — who looked shocked beyond words.

"Apologies for the intrusion," I said. "I have to continue the investigation, so I will be leaving now. Thank you for the doughnuts and tea."

And so, I walked out of Gerbera's flat.

Right after I left, I heard an enraged scream and the sound of porcelain being shattered in a fit of rage.

Hearing that made me assume that, if I'd taken just a few moments longer to leave, she'd have attacked me regardless of the fact that it would've exposed her.

When I entered an alley that couldn't be seen through the apartment building's windows, I was approached by Kasumi and Babi.

"H-How was it?" asked Kasumi.

"If that's not the culprit, I'll give up on being a detective."

She was just *that* undeserving of any sort of investigative deduction.

"Also, I'll probably be attacked tonight," I added.

"Eh? W-Will you be all right?!"

"I should prepare for it, at least... She might prove to be troublesome."

"Ehhh?" Babi voiced her confusion. "But she's sooo hopeless that you easily found out that she's the criminal, right?"

Indeed — Gerbera truly wasn't suited for crime. Not because of her disposition as a person, but because she was just *that* inept.

"Even so, she made it past the alarm systems unnoticed and fooled the sense skills of many investigators," I said. "She herself isn't fit for crime in the least, but... I think that her Embryo is an entirely different story."

Its category was most likely in the Guardian series.

Other categories would've probably had her going out to the scenes herself, so there would've been even more mistakes on her part.

And assuming it was a Guardian, its current form would be...

"The situation could become even more dangerous than the night Franklin's Game happened."

Worst case scenario, we might've been dealing with someone on the level of a Superior... or an actual Superior.

"Still, it isn't like we don't have ways of dealing with her," I muttered. "Babi."

"What is it?" she replied with a smile. I couldn't tell why, but it looked like she was having fun.

"There's something I'd like you to do..." I said.

And I named *two* things I wanted done.

◆◆◆

Dead Hand, Gerbera

"THAT SHITTY WEAKLIIIIING!" I shouted as I threw the cup with tea in it towards the wall. "That non-Superior weakling thinks he can say whatever he wants just because he has a pretty face!"

I really liked that part of him — he was a total freakin' cutie-pie — but everything else was a "no" from me.

I'd tried to soften him up with doughnuts and tea to casually seduce him, but no — he was no good.

I'd wanted to make him fall for me, but now, I just wanted to tear his insides apart.

"Heh heh," I giggled. "He said he's investigating it, but he still doesn't know that it's me."

If he had, he never could have said all those insults straight to my face. But he could still get in my way and stop me from cornering the King of Destruction.

"I would be done with that in just a few more days, so I'll give him the death penalty to take him out long enough for that."

I'll make him regret saying those baseless insults about the true culprit: me.

Of course, he would never know why he'd even gotten the death penalty. No one knew what my Embryo was, and no one could kill it.

"My Embryo... is the strongest," I said before looking to my side.

Common people wouldn't see anything there, but *I* did.

It had a body covered in hard leather. A set of bull-like horns. The teeth of carnivorous beasts. A head without any eyes. An arm similar to that of a praying mantis. A human-like, bipedal lower body.

It looked like a monster from a horror film, but that was very fitting for what it was.

This was my Superior Embryo.

Only I could see it. Only I could hear it. Only I could smell it. Only I could taste it. Only I could feel it. Only I could realize it was even there.

It was my very own "Ego Sublime, Alhazred" — the strongest Embryo that wouldn’t lose to anyone.

“Ahahahahahahahah! I’ll rip you to pieces, you shitty weakling!” I yelled.

Tonight, I would repay him for that humiliation, and imagining the moment made me laugh out loud.

Side Story: The Case of the Unknown Murders — The Solution

Lost Heart, Rook Holmes

A few hours had now passed. I was having dinner at a popular restaurant. There were many customers here, but I was eating alone.

Kasumi and I had parted ways soon after I'd found the culprit, while Babi was out following my orders.

On top of that, Marilyn and Audrey were in my Jewel, so the only company I had right now was Liz, who, as usual, I wore as an article of clothing. Since it had gotten warmer over the previous month, she was a jacket, rather than a coat.

Ever since leaving the apartment building, I'd purposely stayed exclusively in crowded places. No matter how hopeless she was, Gerbera had powerful concealment abilities, and I wasn't neglecting to be wary of them.

Given that, I figured she wouldn't attack me if I was in an area with many Masters. After all, things would become quite dire for her if someone had an Embryo that could trace her.

I assumed she'd wait for when I was all by myself, and since I hadn't been attacked yet, I was probably correct about that.

Of course, she might currently be observing me with her Guardian, but nevertheless, I was glad to know she wasn't careless enough to attack with so many people... around... and...

"...Huh?"

The thought that "Gerbera wasn't careless enough to X," had just passed my mind, and now that I'd actually talked to her directly, it made me consider a question that had never came to mind before:

Just how much of an idiot is she?

Though it sounded like a casual insult, it was an actual question — I wanted to know the extent of her stupidity.

What I'd said before leaving was the equivalent of telling her, "I already know that you're the criminal." And yet, although my words had greatly enraged her, she hadn't chased after me when I left.

It wouldn't have been surprising for her to attack me in order to silence me, abate her anger, or because she believed I was already preparing to get her on the wanted list and to either arrest or defeat her.

The fact that she hadn't done that could only mean that she was trying to keep her identity as the culprit a secret.

Indeed — *she actually believed that she was still unexposed*.

It wasn't logical for her to stay unaware despite all I'd said, but in all honesty, she certainly *did* seem like an idiot foolish enough to stay clueless.

But now that I knew she had enough discretion to not attack me in public, it left me with a new question.

"Did the extent of her stupidity change...?"

She was certainly a careless idiot, and I was more than confident that the disgraceful behavior she'd shown me in person was no lie or act.

However, that wasn't quite enough to explain her excessive naïveté when it came to perceiving the situation as it was.

There was also her Embryo to consider.

The crimes committed made it safe to assume it was a Guardian specialized in concealment, and that was most likely based on the Master's personality, as was the case with most Embryo abilities.

Could the Embryo have truly developed into what it was if she was *just* an excessively careless idiot?

Of course, the relationship between a Master's personality and an Embryo's powers wasn't absolute, but considering the immense strength of her craving to stand out, it was pretty curious for her Embryo to have ended up having abilities that seemed like a direct opposite of that.

"The result is the same... but the equation is different," I muttered. "That's the impression this is giving me."

Both "2 divided by 2" and "2 times 0.5" result in 1, but the nuance of those equations is entirely different.

Her actions were careless and foolish — no doubt about that — and they brought about fitting results. However, I might've made a mistake while deducing her thought process leading to them.

"Let's think about this a little..."

The case had already been solved. There was no need for me to make any further deductions about that, so this was nothing but a superfluous extra — a deduction for the sole purpose of understanding her character.

Thankfully, I still had time until the moment she would attack me, so I immersed myself in thought and used all the information I'd gathered to re-assess the nature of the Master known as "Gerbera."

◆◆◆

Dead Hand, Gerbera

It was a few hours after sunset. Through Alhazred, I watched that guy slowly walk over from the other end of the street.

He was the dumb, shitty weakling whose only plus was his pretty face. He probably didn't even realize it, but I'd known him before our meeting today.

I'd seen him when I was investigating the KoD before starting the murders, so I knew the inn he was staying at, and could easily ambush him — like I was about to do right now.

Through Alhazred, I looked at him while standing in the middle of the road, and that shitty weakling didn't even realize I was here.

My Alhazred was the strongest Embryo, after all.

Completely focused on concealment, he couldn't be noticed by any of the five senses, and even skills like Danger Sense and Killing Intent Perception had no effect on him. He couldn't be caught by machine or magic sensors, either.

No one could ever know that Alhazred was there.

He could sneak in anywhere and kill anyone, so, obviously, if he wasn't the strongest — no one was. But for some reason, *my clan members* couldn't see that. They really needed to have their eyes checked.

Remembering them made me a bit angry, but whatever. I had a plan to get back at them.

For now, I just had to wait for when the KoD left jail and then commit another murder. I'd keep framing him and lowering his reputation over and over until he became so angry that he'd stop caring about appearances and go out to search for the true culprit. And then, I'd gladly battle him.

He'd be crazy with rage, so he wouldn't care and would fight me here in the city — *where he couldn't use his full power*.

If my Alhazred had a flaw, it would be his weakness to random attacks that covered an area so wide that it didn't matter if they knew where he was or not — and those were the KoD's specialty. So, if I wanted my Alhazred to kill him, I had to limit his firepower.

He couldn't use his wide-area attacks in the city, because if he did, he'd get on the wanted list. I wouldn't mind if that happened — it'd still be clear that *I* was the one who'd pushed him to that point.

Anyway, if he wouldn't use his firepower, he'd only have his stupidly high strength. He'd be useless, and I could easily kill him with my Alhazred. No matter which one of those happened — the fact would remain that the KoD would be defeated by my planning and my Embryo's power. That would surely make my clan members rethink their opinion of me.

"Before that, I have to crush this annoying, shitty weakling," I muttered.

My unnoticeable Alhazred started walking towards him.

First, I'd slowly tear off his limbs, and when he started to bawl, I'd cut his face into pieces. My heart danced as I imagined that moment, and then I made my Embryo run forward.

But when he was only about 50 meters away, *the shitty weakling jumped away from Alhazred*.

He was wearing the same metal slime he'd wore while training with the KoD. It grew tentacles that hit the ground and launched him to the other direction.

It almost felt like he knew my imperceptible Alhazred was here and was trying to escape him.

"It's just a coincidence!" I snarled.

He just couldn't have avoided what he didn't know was there.

I went after him again and attacked from a completely different angle. Alhazred's Resources were focused on stealth, so his speed stayed below the speed of sound, but it was good enough to catch up to this shitty weakling.

I quickly got close, and...

He jumped in the opposite direction right before I could attack, just like he'd done the first time.

"Again?!"

It wasn't just a coincidence. He was actually perceiving my imperceptible Embryo.

But how...? I thought. *And even if he knows my Alhazred is there, how did he expect to be attacked by an invisible enem— Huh?!*

“Gh?!”

Suddenly, my vision changed from Alhazred’s to my own avatar’s back in my apartment.

I came back to find the room on fire. The window was broken, and next to it, there was a red-haired devil — the shitty weakling’s Embryo.

“Little Flare! Petrifying Breath! Grand Dash!” She launched skill after skill, not holding back at all. She was clearly treating me as an enemy.

Wait... does he actually know that I’m the culprit?!

How could he have realized that just from our talk?! The way I’d answered the questions and controlled the conversation was perfect!

Is the shitty weakling actually some sort of genius?!

◇◇◇

A Few Minutes Ago, Lost Heart, Rook Holmes

It was a few hours after sundown. The sun’s warmth had already faded from both the air and the ground.

I finished gathering my thoughts about Gerbera and made my way back to the inn I was staying at.

There was no one nearby, so I was walking this nightly street all by my lonesome.

“Hm...” I murmured.

I presumed that Gerbera would only attack me when I was all alone, and this seemed like a great opportunity.

“Liz,” I whispered my slime’s name inside my mouth, making sure to not make it audible, and she responded with a single tap on my arm inside my sleeve.

So there’s nothing yet, then... I’d prefer it if she attacked me before I reached the inn. Breaking it would trouble those working there.

As that thought ran through my mind, Liz tapped my arm twice. It was a code we’d decided on ahead of time, and it meant “Something invisible is closing in.”

A moment later, Liz jumped to the side opposite of whatever was approaching us. She was moving the same way she had when fighting that young lady during Franklin's Game — by hitting the ground with tentacles she extended from her jacket-like form.

However, they weren't the only thing that were reaching out from her. She'd also used the part of her that didn't make up the jacket to spread out *countless thin and shiny threads* all over the surrounding area.

Mithril Arms Slimes like Liz were capable of turning themselves into armor as well as weapons, and in this case, she'd turned herself into threads.

Of course, the focus on thinness and length came at the cost of attack power and endurance, making them break upon the slightest touch. However, that was intentional. Their purpose was to detect, and *breaking* was how they did it.

I'd determined that Gerbera's Embryo was a Guardian focused on concealment, and based on the... better parts of her performance as a murderer, I'd made a guess that it was also invisible, soundless, and odorless. Considering the absurdity of Superiors, it was also likely that you couldn't be aware of it even if you touched it.

That was why I'd made Liz spread out a number of weak, easy-to-cut threads. Even if she couldn't see it or feel it by touch, Liz could still notice when *she lost parts of herself*.

This could only be done because Liz was a slime — a creature that could change shape and didn't seem to feel pain.

But the fact that I was able to counter that *wasn't* the actual crux of the matter. The very fact that I was even capable of thinking of such a countermeasure made it clear that Gerbera had already made a grave mistake.

An invisible Embryo was no doubt a scary concept. No one could defend against a creature that you couldn't even feel by touch. However, *that only applied if the target didn't know of its existence*.

Gerbera had committed crimes that were thoroughly based on an extremely high concealing and stealth abilities, and that was exactly what had allowed me to guess her Embryo's powers. By giving me the information that I was "fighting against an enemy with a perfect stealth ability," she'd made it possible for me to develop a functioning counter.

Such a power would lose half of its value if the target merely knew that it was there, and that was Gerbera’s greatest error — even greater than leaving all the evidence I’d found.

She so confidently believed in her Embryo’s “unknowability” that she’d effectively made me aware that an “unknown” entity actually existed. It was as though she’d colored everything surrounding something colorless, making its shape stand out.

If she’d tried to assassinate someone without trying to stir any sort of murder-mystery drama, her Embryo would have been able to accomplish that without a flaw to name. Even the likes of royalty would’ve been easy targets. But now, the “colorless” existence was no longer imperceivable.

“Babi should be attacking her right now,” I muttered.

After the questioning, I’d asked her to do two things. One of them was to observe Gerbera, which was easily done with the Optic Camouflage skill she’d gotten from a monster by using Drain Learning.

Babi was to observe the apartment building, follow Gerbera if she left, and be on standby to attack her if she attacked me using her Embryo.

Even if it was Superior, the fact that it was a Guardian meant that it had a certain unavoidable weakness: its Master. No matter how tough and strong the Guardian, it couldn’t protect its owner if it wasn’t at its side.

Due to this, Gerbera and I were tied now.

However, I had the advantage in the fact that I’d predicted her attack, while she hadn’t even considered that could happen.

“Now, it’s just a matter of which Embryo defeats which Master first.”

Naturally, in terms of overall battle potential, their side was far above ours, but due to the excessive focus on concealment, her Guardian’s speed and power weren’t particularly great. By running away as I was, I could keep buying time for a decent while longer.

The only thing we actually had to worry about now was...

“...whether or not Babi can take care of Gerbera in time,” I murmured.

She, too, wasn’t a particularly powerful Guardian. Due to dedicating her Resources to charm, drain, learning, and the merging power, her base stats were lower than that of other Guardians in their fourth forms.

As an incognito employee, Gerbera might currently have jobs such as Carpenter, Architect, and Swindler, but even so, she was a Superior, and it was highly likely that she was max level.

It was a gamble whether Babi would be able to defeat her... In fact, it was best not to expect that to happen.

Babi's attack *wasn't the main part of the plan*.

I was suddenly overcome by a mild shock. Liz had just touched me in a way that said, "It's not coming after us."

The Guardian had probably returned upon realizing its Master was in danger.

That reaction was only natural, and I'd hypothesized that it could happen.

So now, to switch to the main part of the plan, I made my way to Gerbera's apartment.

Upon arriving there, I found her standing there with wounds covering her entire body, and on the floor next to her, there was a broken Brooch.

Looks like Babi did a good job cornering her, I thought.

"Mrrgh!"

My Embryo kept on attacking her, but all her attacks were stopped by something invisible standing before Gerbera. Apparently, the Guardian was focusing on staying in one place to protect its Master.

Even the way Gerbera used her own Embryo seemed to be greatly flawed. Gerbera should've simply made it drop defense altogether and just defeat Babi.

"So you're here... 'Rook,' was it?" she said while looking at me through her invisible Guardian. "I don't know how you did it, but you found out that I'm the true culprit."

"Yes..." I replied. "You're the one behind the serial murders here in Gideon."

Somehow, I *could* accept that she'd still believed she wasn't found out yet, but the fact that she didn't even know why I'd found her out had me at a loss.

No, wait. She was merely *acting* as if she didn't know.

In her mind, she already understood the reasons.

"Yes. That's right," she continued. "I am Unknown — the one behind those murders."

That certainly doesn't seem like a nickname you would use to refer to yourself, I thought.

Nevertheless, I now had the culprit's confession. My work as a detective was done. Case closed.

"It seems unbelievable, but did you also actually find out my Superior Embryo's... Alhazred's power?" she asked.

So the invisible Guardian was called "Alhazred," eh? Also, though I'd expected this myself, she'd actually just revealed that she was a Superior.

"Yes," I nodded. "It probably cannot be perceived by the five... no... the six senses."

"Exactly. Alhazred is an Embryo that only I can feel... Heh heh heh heh heh." Gerbera began laughing for some reason. Her smile was... ridiculously unpleasant. "You completely exposed my plan... You must be a real genius."

Though it sounded like it, she wasn't praising me. In fact — it was the exact opposite.

"Even if you raise me up, it will not change the fact that you were outdone by a newbie," I declared.

As long as she couldn't consider me a genius or something else outside the norm, it would *make her consider herself inferior*.

My words made her face, still displaying that unpleasant smile, turn stiff. She didn't speak a word in response.

Yes. Of course you'd react like that, I thought. I'd already developed a decent grasp of her mentality, the extent of her thoughtlessness... and the *essence* of the very core of her heart and mind.

"During this investigation, I considered you not just as a criminal, but as a person, as well," I continued. "When I visited you here today, I said that the culprit was an idiot. But now..."

I hadn't been mistaken, but that assessment wasn't quite complete, either.

"Now... I see that you're more than *just* a thoughtless idiot."

I'd arrived at a single conclusion that answered everything there was to know about her person.

It was the reason behind her excessive carelessness, the naïveté behind her evaluation of Shu, the mistakes in her cryptograms, the lack of caution in her words, and the fact that she hadn't realized that I'd found her out even when I'd basically spelled it out for her.

All of that stemmed from a single problem.

"*You only see the world how you want it to be.*"

She stared at me, still not saying a word. However, something in her eyes had changed.

"You don't think you will fail, so when you *do*, you don't understand the reasons why," I said. "You don't want to believe that others are better than you, so you evaluate them as inferior to yourself. You think your targets will fall for your schemes, so you don't even try to confirm whether you're off the mark or not."

Yes, in order to see more value in herself as she appeared in her own mind, she averted her eyes from reality.

Of course, there was some actual idiocy in her, as well, but most of her failures had their roots in the fact that she always turned away from her own absurdity.

Because of this, others always saw her as an abject idiot, her plans always ended up being sloppy, and her behavior was always thoroughly thoughtless.

I was certain that she couldn't even listen to others without warping their words beyond recognition, and it was probably so bad that even the most reasonable of warnings seemed completely off base.

"However, your evaluation of *me* was correct," I continued. "I am certainly below you, and it's fair for you to see me as a weakling."

Gerbera hadn't warped reality when it came to me — I was, no doubt, inferior. But that was exactly why the truth-filled tirade directed at her had delivered such a powerful effect. She'd taken the words into her mind without warping them in any way, and they had become like venom to her.

She'd then hastily tried to mend her image, convincing herself that my words were absurd and warping them to conclude that I hadn't yet figured her out.

"You tried it just now, as well," I said. "You're cornered by someone far below yourself, so you tried to convince yourself that I'm actually *not* below you."

It was all for the purpose of keeping her perceived reality in line with her ideal. Gerbera wanted to be free to believe that *she hadn't failed or made a mistake — she'd just encountered a really bad enemy*.

That was how she functioned, and it even showed in her Alhazred, which was based on her personality.

"That's why you are the only one who can see your Embryo. You only see the world as you want it to be, so your Embryo became a creature that can only be seen by you alone."

It was a being that only lived in the vision of one person — much like an imaginary friend. And yet it followed her whims and influenced the world like a sort of phantasmal beast. That was what her Guardian was, and there was much to be said about a mind that could birth it.

"That is the truth behind your Embryo... and you yourself," I declared. "You're no 'Unknown.' You're merely someone who avoids her own truth, senses, and even the nature of her mind. In other words — an *immense idiot*."

If words could truly hurt people, then what I was saying was a double-edged sword, for they hurt *me*, as well. I, too, was avoiding my own truth and path in life. But even so, I spoke those words to her.

"Eh... No... I... That's... not..."

Gerbera was unable to refute what I'd said.

She swallowed all the responses she tried to speak. Although she was trying her hardest to ignore the inconvenient reality as she'd always done, my words were like a wedge keeping her from escaping it.

Unveiling the truth behind her heart made it impossible for her to subconsciously avert her gaze from her failure, stopping her every time she tried it.

The words had now been carved into her mind, and she would remember them every time her escapism made an attempt to take over, forcing her back to reality. Having heard my words, her brain was correcting her every time she tried to avert her gaze.

For all I knew, she might even be remembering the many failures she'd committed throughout her life. Those were surely memories she'd rather have forgotten.

"Aaahh, aaahh, AaAAhHh!" Gerbera wailed as she strongly covered her eyes with her palms, as though to say that she didn't want to see this reality.

But alas, her mind had already seen it — her heart had witnessed the truth.

She could no longer convince herself that she was the greatest, or that she'd never failed.

"...AHhhH." Gerbera suddenly moved her hands from her face, and her eyes looked directly at me. They showed no emotions I could easily read — all I saw was an amalgam of countless feelings. However, they all converged into a single emotional vector, which was best translated into "*I have to erase him.*"

She now had a strong will to eliminate me.

"Who... a...m... I?" she asked. The words had a meaning, but it didn't feel like was actually talking to me... or anyone else, for that matter.

"You're Gerbera, no?"

"N o," she shook her head. "I a m U n k n o w n."

A moment later, she began *losing parts of herself*.

Not bleeding a single drop, she gradually vanished as though eaten by the air itself. No — she was actually becoming impossible to see.

Like the mad wizard her Embryo was based on, she disappeared as though she was eaten by an invisible monster.

"Total Eclipse of the Flesh — Alhazred." She spoke the name of her ultimate skill. The process was now complete, and Gerbera was nowhere to be seen.

I silently gasped as I realized the skill's effects. It was akin to Babi's Union Jack — the merging of Guardian and Master. It made Alhazred take in Gerbera's only weakness — herself — and make them both imperceptible.

"Babi! Liz!" I shouted, giving them the order to attack the place where she'd just been.

Liz's threads had already been spread out around the room.

None had been cut yet, meaning that Gerbera was still there.

If she tried to evade, I would simply refocus the attacks to where she moved.

She had no means of escaping this.

"Huh...?!"

And yet, it didn't seem like any of the attacks were landing.

In fact, it was as though...

"Is this more than *just* imperceptibility?!"

[I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown], [I am Unknown]

Before I realized it, the surroundings had completely changed.

The walls were now covered in carved writing, all saying just “I am Unknown.”

The term was repeated countless times, and it felt as though she was trying to assert the words to me, or perhaps even to persuade herself.

It was no exaggeration that the words appeared “before I realized it.”

I hadn’t seen the moment the words were carved, nor had I heard the sound of it happening.

Additionally, all of Liz’s threads had been cut as if they’d never been spread out.

“The concealment power is even greater than before...!”

Originally, it’d only concealed Alhazred, but now, it extended to *anything it influenced*, making it impossible to perceive the moment it changed something.

This was the apex of concealment. It affected the world and prevented anyone from noticing any changes made.

“Good grief...” I muttered.

It was clearly among the most troublesome Embryo abilities I’d ever seen.

However, despite displaying such power, Gerbera was still being herself.

After all — there was no need to carve any letters on the walls.

Gerbera could’ve easily given me the death penalty and escaped this place, yet she was wasting time on this meaningless nonsense.

It was a testament to just how strongly she was clinging to her old self and wanting to get back at me.

She was asserting her presence while trying to imprint the “ideal Gerbera” back into her subconscious, which I found... terribly pitiful.

“Ah...!”

Suddenly, I realized my left hand had a laceration on it and was covered in blood.

It had obviously been inflicted a few seconds ago, yet I’d only noticed it just now.

“What’s going onnnn?!” Babi, too, was being tormented by wounds that increased without her even realizing it.

Babi and Liz were indiscriminately and randomly attacking the surroundings, but I couldn’t even tell whether the attacks were hitting or having any sort of effect.

Although it focused on concealment, we were facing a Superior's Guardian that no doubt had its stats increased due to the merge with its Master. We, on the other hand, weren't a particularly powerful group. There was no hope of winning for us if we didn't focus our firepower, but we couldn't do even that.

I momentarily considered using Union Jack to become a Metal-Devil-Man, but I realized the situation wouldn't change in the least — in fact, I wouldn't even be able to use it. We simply couldn't win this.

"Looks like this is it," I silently spoke. There was nothing more I could do.

Before I realized it, my Lifesaving Brooch shattered and fell from my neck.

Looks like she had enough messing around and decided to end it, I thought, realizing that it was over. *Still, there's one thing I can say here...*

"You truly are careless."

The very fact that she'd actually taken the time to corner me meant that she'd done the worst thing she could have. She might've been able to use her increased stats and concealment power to instantly kill me and run away.

But instead, she'd wasted precious seconds on me... *giving him enough time to make it here.*

"Sorry 'bout that, kiddo," said a voice coming from the outside. "I took the shortest path, but it still took longer than I thought."

A moment later, the wall facing the road was pulverized, and someone human-sized jumped into the room.

I knew full well what... no... *who* it was.

Today, I'd asked Babi to do two things.

One of them was to observe Gerbera, while the other was... to deliver a message.

She'd told it to Elizabeth, who'd then passed it over to the authorities, and it went: "I will expose the true culprit, so please release him once I'm done."

I looked through the window — or, rather, through part of the wall where the window was — and saw a flying eyeball with bat wings growing out of it.

It was a Broadcast Eye — a communication monster first created by

Franklin, now salvaged and used by Gideon.

Through it, the authorities at the knight offices would've seen and heard our entire exchange here, so the investigators should already know that Gerbera was the true culprit.

She was probably already on the wanted list, and more importantly — Shu had been released and was now here.

"And so... the star of the show enters the stage," I said.

"Yep," he replied. "Kept you waiting, huh?"

The moment I'd considered the possibility that Gerbera might be a Superior, I'd entrusted this incident's resolution to him. For that, it had been necessary to prove that Gerbera was the true culprit, so I'd gotten her to confess to it.

The preparations were now complete.

A detective's job is to expose the truth — not to arrest or defeat the culprit.

That role belonged to Shu — the real Unknown.

"I heard about ya through both the eye's feed and the Telepathy Cuffs," he said. "You're still here, aren't ya, Miss 'Unknown'?"

He was not in his bear costume, but in the "Godcloth" he'd worn when fighting Franklin back on that day. It was proof that he was ready to fight with his full power — as both a Superior and the King of Destruction.

Thus, this would be exactly what had happened during Franklin's Game — a Clash of the Superiors.

"As you clearly know, I'm the ex-'Unknown,' Shu Starling."

There was no response to those words, and I couldn't tell whether it was because we couldn't notice it or if she actually wasn't doing anything.

Still, it was obvious that she was listening. If she'd been the type of person to escape with Shu's appearance, things wouldn't have gotten to this point in the first place.

"I got tons of things to say to you, but it doesn't look like we can have a conversation here, so I'll just say one thing," he pointed at his neck with his thumb. "I won't run or hide, and I'll fight you right here, so just bring it on, will ya?"

It was no mere provocation — he was completely honest.

And those words signaled the start of the battle.

Since Gerbera's ability was perfect stealth, the thing she had to be most wary of from Shu's arsenal was the battleship focused on wide-scale attacks. Because he couldn't use it here in the city, this was probably the very situation she'd been yearning for. However, she didn't attack him once even after a whole minute had passed after his words.

Did she escape? I thought. *No, that can't be it.*

"Oh, right," I said. "She's actually being cautious."

Gerbera was wary of how Shu could counter her attack. Although he was focused on STR, a single attack from her wouldn't be fatal, and even if it would be, he still had his Brooch. She, on the other hand, would die from just a single lucky hit by him.

For Gerbera, who'd already lost her Brooch, that wasn't a gamble she could take.

"Oh, you're worried about *this*?" Shu said while pointing at his Lifesaving Brooch. He too, realized the reason why she wasn't making her move.

He then took the Brooch in hand and...

"There."

...crushed it to pieces.

"I just have one life now. So come on, don't be shy. Kill me and take the 'Unknown' title."

A destroyed Brooch couldn't be replaced for the next 24 hours. With this, Gerbera and Shu were on even ground.

Part of his face was hidden by bear fur, but you could still see him crack an indomitable smile as he said, "*Bring it*."

Those words seemed to work as a trigger, since the situation visibly changed, even if all I could see were Shu's movements.

The left hand he'd extended suddenly became a blur, and the next moment, it was tightened next to his neck.

"*There* you are."

His whole body became filled with vigor as he performed a Kodachi — the roundhouse kick I'd seen him do many times during training.

From my perspective, it didn't look like he'd grabbed anything *or* kicked something.

Suddenly, the scene drastically changed again.

Blood began gushing out of Shu's neck, a large hole opened up in the wall, and I could hear someone's — most likely Gerbera's — scream coming from far in the distance beyond it.

After that, there was nothing.

He didn't follow after Gerbera, nor did anything else break.

"Ow ow ow," Shu lightly groaned, and that was the sole notable thing about the situation.

As I silently watched, I could make a conjecture about what had just happened here, but it was difficult to understand and accept that as the reality behind it all.

The wound on Shu's neck had come from an attack by Gerbera.

The hole in the wall had been made by Gerbera when he'd blown her away with his kick.

And the scream had been Gerbera's voice after suffering so much damage that the Master-Embryo merge was undone.

Basically, Shu had perceived the attack on his neck, stopped it with his hand, and defeated her with just one hit.

As for how he could perceive the imperceptible... his groaning was an excellent hint.

"*You turned on your pain?*" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered. "I already heard that she had powers that made her hard to perceive, and I could somehow tell that she also hid her influence on other stuff, so I tried to see if that worked on pain, too, and sure thing, it hurt like hell."

Pain was something that most of us Masters had turned off, and we couldn't experience it here in *Infinite Dendrogram* unless we willfully turned it on. I hadn't known just how bad the pain could become until I'd gone through the hellish training, and I was quite sure that Gerbera had never known any in-game pain, either.

It was quite reasonable for Alhazred — an Embryo that could only be felt by Gerbera — to be unable to conceal pain — a sensation that she couldn't feel.

"How did you know that pain was still there?" I asked. It was the only thing I still didn't understand.

It would make sense for him to turn on pain and confirm whether it was there after some time into the battle or after getting a scratch, but Shu had just arrived here, and he hadn't suffered any damage until the final attack.

Liz couldn't experience pain, so not even I had known about the fact that it was still there. His knowledge of this had me curious.

"I have a bunch of reasons... but they all boil down to *intuition and experience*. Rules of thumb and all that jazz," he answered, not giving a single proper detail.

I looked at him in silence. This was a man who'd turned on his pain to fight an enemy he couldn't perceive, gambled that it would work on her, and actually succeeded as though it was nothing.

He really is Ray's brother, I thought. *They're very alike in just how absurd their methods are.*

"Heh heh," I chuckled. All the thinking I'd done on this case suddenly seemed exceedingly comical.

"All righty then!" Shu said as he switched from his Godcloth to the bear suit. "The culprit's blasted off, so let's go get some chow! I'm beary hungry fur some non-prison food!"

"Ah, but I just ate, and—"

"Rooook..." said Babi while looking at me with lots of resentment in her eyes. "I haven't had aaany dinner yet... And I worked sooo hard observing her... Nom nom!"

And thus she chomped at my head.

Err, I would prefer it if you didn't bite into my head. You remind me of Nemesis.

"Let's go eat." I gave in.

"Hell yeah! It's on me! Come on, I'll take you around fur a while! I couldn't *bear* not to take you! Let's go where I usually go whenever I eat out!"

From Shu's voice, it was easy to tell he was enlivened. No one could fault him. The man was tasting freedom after being in a cage longer than a day.

Anyhow, all's well that ends well, so... ah.

"May I ask you something?" I said.

"Hm? What?"

"Just what, would you say, are those holes on all those buildings?"

Beyond the wall he'd broken through, I could see countless structures with holes similar to the one we had here. It seemed as though *something human-sized had moved here while breaking through every wall in the way*, and it felt like it continued all the way to the offices in the first district.

"I was in a rush, so I went *straight* here."

Well, he *had* mentioned using the shortest path. Though breaking walls slowed down most people, Shu was on such a level that they were barely a hindrance.

Merely by looking outside, I could tell he wasn't lying about having come *straight* here. I also saw the people in the now-holed buildings start to evacuate.

"Sh-Shu Starling!" roared one of the investigators who'd just rushed in through the apartment's door. "Y-You're under arrest for property damage!"

"Gyaah! It was an emergency! Sbear meee!"

...It appears that he will stay in jail for now, I thought.

Alas, this was a case I could do nothing about.

◇

A short while later...

Due to no one being injured, some mediation by Elizabeth, and the fact that it had been for the purpose of taking care of the culprit, Shu had ended up only having to pay for the damages.

I could recall him shouting, "This is gonna cost me all my bearnings!" as he continued vigorously selling his popcorn.

Thus, the curtain fell on the serial murder case that had shaken Gideon.

Although, it was still a mystery who, exactly, Gerbera had been trying to show off to by creating this incident.

Side Story: Epilogue — Outlaw

The Gaol, Dead Hand, Gerbera

I logged in after 50 hours of being offline and found myself somewhere that wasn't Gideon.

With dirt roads and dusty wooden buildings, it looked like a set for a western. The scenery obviously didn't belong to any of the seven countries.

"How unexpected," I said. "I thought the 'gaol' would be more... jaily. Like... an indoor institution with thick walls."

I looked up and saw a blue sky, but then I realized that there weren't any birds or clouds. It was also bright, but I couldn't see the sun anywhere.

Maybe this actually is indoors? I wondered.

"Well, at least it looks like a nicer place to live in than I thought it'd be. Then again, I'm breaking out soon, anyway."

Yep. I've been sent to the gaol, but I'd be leaving in no time. I could just use my Alhazred's ultimate skill and escape this stupid place, as easy as pie. And then I'd be the first Master to ever break out of the gaol!

That's my countermeasure to this situation!

"...Which is probably just another thought he'd consider to be 'warping reality into what I want it to be,'" I muttered.

This was the first time I'd even had the idea of a "countermeasure." I'd never thought I'd ever mess up, so I'd never even bothered to think of anything like that.

I now knew that I'd been warping reality to make it convenient to myself... and it was all because of him.

"Argh! I'm such a mess!" I shouted.

Ever since hearing Rook's words on that day, I'd started worrying all the time. When I tried to think something that made me feel good, I always questioned myself.

It wasn't just for what was happening *now*, either. Even my fun memories and the old moments of thinking I was great were falling apart.

This had been happening ever since that moment. It was why I hadn't been able to log in right after the death penalty ended. I'd needed time to get a grip.

"I won't forgive him for this!" I swore.

I'd make Rook pay for digging into my mind and making a mess out of it.

I also had a bone to pick with the KoD for destroying me and my Alhazred, which should've been invincible even without my warping, but that grudge was nothing compared to what I felt for Rook.

Now that he'd said those words to me, I couldn't have even a bit of fun. I couldn't even become my ideal self back in reality. His sharp words prickled and bit me like a curse.

That was why I decided to do everything to escape this gaol and get my revenge.

It's the reason why I even logged in!

"First, I'll make Alhazred check up on the gaol's structure... But wait, if the rumors are true and it's a different server, then escape is impo— No, *I* should still be able to... cough!"

As I thought aloud, I suddenly started to choke on the dust in the air.

Ugh! I can see that this place is based on westerns, but the amount of dust is awful, I complained. *I want to rest in a clean place somewhere. They do exist here, right? I've heard that prisons that charge you are like hotels, not to mention that this is part of* Infinite Dendrogram, *so there should be more proper places here.*

If there weren't, I'd find and force someone with a building-related Embryo or job to make me one. I had taken some construction jobs for my infiltration, so I could make designs. All I needed to build something was labor and materials.

Yes — though it would only be a temporary home, I was a Superior, so I could obviously stand at the top of this place.

Heh heh, becoming the queen of the gaol sure seems like tons of fun, I grinned. *There might even be a hidden Superior Job for that! If I got it, my clan members would obviously think more of me!*

"But... can I really do it...?" I began to worry again. "Argh, come on, now!"

"Hey there," some man with a basic-looking avatar spoke to me. "Some new girl, aren't ya? What's with all the faces you're making?"

His appearance made it clear that he was some sort of PKer. He was obviously a shitty weakling.

"Does it matter to you?" I snapped. "Get lost. You're annoying."

If you don't, I'll tear you up with my Alhazred. He's right behind you.

"Whoa. Scary," he said. "Well, I guess it's normal to be mad when you arrive here for the first time. When I came here after the Prodigy of Feasts killed me at Wez Sea Route, I also..."

He's actually talking about himself. I'll just kill him.

"Oh yeah, by the way," he said before I could do that. He then gave me a book. "You should have this."

"What's this? I'm not joining any cult."

"Hey, it's nothing like that. I'm not the damn Lunar Society. This is about that," he said as he pointed at a piece of paper on the notice board.

[Every day of the month that is a multiple of 10 is for reading. If you read a book from the library and write a review, you will receive 100 of the gaol's currency, jailir. Everyone is free to participate.]

[Note 1: When reading, make sure to do it in silence. And those who aren't reading, please make sure not to disturb those who are.]

[Note 2: Reading enriches both mind and heart.]

- [The Gaol's Control AI, Red King.]

"...Is this a school or something?" I muttered.

And if 100 jailir were worth the same as 100 lir, that was just a miserable sum of money.

Also... me? Reading books? Do you think I'm stupid?

"Are the prisoners here *that* bored?" I asked. "If you are, why not just go stealing or something?"

You're all on the wanted list, so this place has to be crawling with thieves, right?

"Most of us don't actually care about the Red King and the guy's good conduct and morality events," he replied. "But you should still have a book, just in case. *He* is very passionate about this."

"'He'?"

"His name is Sechs. He's one of the four Superiors here in the gaol. The man's a model prisoner, and he's pretty big on these events."

"...Huhhh?" I let out a confused sound.

I obviously knew about the King of Crimes, Sechs Würfel, but... was I really supposed to believe he was a model prisoner enthusiastic about morality events? What kind of stupidity was that?

Just think about the job name, "King of Crimes." Why would such a person ever enjoy reading, writing reviews, and getting a little money for it?

"So yeah, it's better if you act like you're participating in the event. It'll reduce your chances of getting on his bad side and— GHEH!"

I grabbed the well-informed shitty weakling by the collar and asked, "Where can I find this 'Sechs' person?"

Using the info I got from him led me to a place that looked pretty clean, especially for something in the gaol.

It looked like a café. Its white walls didn't have any dirt on them, and it seemed to be taken care of so well that it felt like it belonged in Gideon.

The place was called "Dice," which was probably why it had a wooden die as its front-door decorative feature. After getting a better look at it, I realized that all the faces on the die had six dots each.

Shouldn't cheat dice be four-five-six?

"Ah, now that I think about it..."

When making up the cryptograms for the cards, I'd used characters from several languages, so I remembered a few words from them.

If I recalled correctly, in German, "six" was "sechs," and "dice" was "würfel," which meant that "Sechs Würfel" was "six on a die."

Wait, so maybe the die isn't a café feature, but his own symbol? But why is it in front of a café, then?

"Maybe he uses dice to mark his territory?" I became a bit more cautious and opened the glass door leading to the café.

I was greeted by a mechanical waitress speaking in monotone. "Welcome."

It didn't look like there were tians here in the gaol, so I could only guess that customers were served by these machine dolls.

Does nobody break those things and take what they have?

Also, this one was so well-made that I almost thought it was a person at first. All that made it obvious it was a doll were the spherical joints and the diamond-like gem buried in the forehead.

I became curious, so I used Identification on it and found out that its name was "Diamond Slayer," and that, according to the description, it was a "Prism Person."

?! I realized. *Wait... Forget about stealing what it has — the thing itself might be a crazy luxury good...*

Trying to imagine the market price of the doll made me all dizzy.

"Is a-ny-thing the mat-ter, miss?" the doll asked.

"...Huh?!" I quickly went back to my senses and did what I'd come here to do.

"Sechs Würfel!" I shouted as I stopped the doll from trying to take me to a table. "Is the King of Crimes here?!"

The customers sitting here and there looked at me like I was some weirdo, but I didn't care. I didn't know what Sechs Würfel looked like, so I couldn't find him if I didn't call for him.

He should be here somewhere!

"I'm Gerbera!" I shouted. "A member of Illegal Frontier! The clan you made! I came because I want to talk to you! Are you here?!"

Yes, Sechs Würfel was the leader of IF — the secret organization I was part of. It was a clan that only allowed Superiors who were on wanted lists.

I'd been picked up by the clan after he was jailed, but I'd heard lots of things about him from other members.

That was why I'd targeted the King of Destruction. If I'd killed the one who'd sent our leader to the gaol, it would have proved to everyone else in the clan that I wasn't to be taken lightly.

Well, that hadn't worked out and I'd ended up here myself, but I thought I should at least show myself to him.

None of the customers came out to claim they were him.

For some reason, they just sighed like they were relieved and began reading books.

Yes — all of them were reading books.

"What's going on?! Is he even here?!"

None of the customers were reacting, but right as I was about to assume he wasn't here, someone spoke to me, saying, "Err, may I have a moment?"

It was a plain-looking young man wearing an apron and black-rimmed glasses. He was probably the shopkeeper.

And here I thought the gaol didn't have any tians.

"What?!" I shouted. "I'm not ordering anything! I just came here, so I don't have a single jailir! Got a problem with that?!"

"No, I did not want to ask for your order. What I want to know is, are you really a member of IF?"

"I just said I am! So just bring the King of Crimes to me, and—"

"That would be me."

"...Eh?" For a second, I couldn't understand what he'd just said. But then I looked at the back of his left hand and saw an Embryo crest, making it obvious he wasn't a tian.

"I am the King of Crimes, Sechs Würfel," he said. "A pleasure to meet you. May I call you 'Gerbera?'"

The plain-looking young man was nothing like what I'd imagined the King of Crimes to be.

A few minutes later, I was sitting at the counter and drinking coffee he'd prepared for me. It kinda angered me that it was actually good.

For some reason, the snack he gave me with the coffee was popcorn, and when I asked about that, he said, "A friend of mine has been absorbed in popcorn recently, so I tried my own hand at it, as well."

The KoD had a popcorn stand, too. Was it trendy or something? Honestly, though, I would've liked doughnuts way more.

...Remembering popcorn and doughnuts made me angry again.

Damn you, Rook and KoD!

Once he showed me his stat summary, I finally accepted the truth.

"Wow... you really *are* our leader."

His name was clearly Sechs Würfel, and his job was definitely King of Crimes.

His total level has to be some sort of glitch, though.

"Yes, I am," he said. "But I find it rather questionable whether I am truly the leader."

"What do you mean?"

"I only filled the position because Zeta and Rascal asked me to, so you might consider me to be a leader in name only. Also, I was sent to the gaol soon after the creation, so they are the ones doing most of the clan administration now....”

Rascal was the Superior who’d invited me to the clan, and yes, he was the one operating it now.

Uh huh, this man really is our leader, I thought. He didn’t act like it, and didn’t look anything like a “King of Crimes,” but it was definitely him.

I’d honestly expected him to be someone violent and wild-looking, or like a mafia boss with a cat on his lap.

“Why are you the shopkeeper of a café?” I asked.

“I had a lot of free time, so I thought I’d get a hobby. I’ve become quite good at preparing coffee over the past half a year.”

“If you’re this good without any skills, you should open a café in real life.”

“Oh my, I didn’t expect such praise... Thank you very much.”

He’s so... modest and soft. Is he really the King of Crimes?

“By the way... all the customers here are reading books,” I said.

“Indeed they are. This is a reading day, after all. They’re quite enthusiastic about it.”

“Mhm...”

I looked over the counter, saw Nightingale’s biography with a bookmark in it, and realized that he, too, was juggling work and reading.

It was obvious that he was passionate about it, but this choice of book made him seem *way* too well-conducted. There was a limit to just how much of a model prisoner you could be. Once again, I could hardly believe he was the King of Crimes.

...I’ll just ask about it.

“I heard you are a model prisoner,” I spoke up. “Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re the King of Crimes, so I thought you’d be controlling the gaol from the shadows and raising hell.”

“Oh no, that’s quite wrong,” he replied. “Criminals that serve their time are supposed to follow the prison’s rules. *That is why I am doing just that.*”

“I see... Hm...?” It seemed like his words were strangely nuanced. Was I just imagining it?

Because of Rook, I was starting to overthink a lot of stuff like this.

“By the way, you talk to Rascal and Zeta by mail, right?” I said as I recalled reading something like that in a clan notice.

"Yes. I have to rely on translation software a lot, though."

"Next time you send something, make sure to tell them about me. That I'm 'escaping this place soon.'"

"You intend to attempt escape?"

"Of course. My Embryo is... probably not the strongest, but it's suited for this kind of thing."

It hurt that I couldn't say that my Embryo was the strongest.

Damn you, Rook.

"Then you should consider waiting a short while more," he said.

"Why?"

"Candy... the King of Plagues is currently trying to defeat the Disaster Bioweapon. Once the preparations are done on that front, the three of us will definitely be able to escape."

I'd heard of the King of Plagues. That was the criminal who'd killed the most tians ever and come here after being defeated by the Superior Killer. I was pretty worried about that one because our compatibility seemed really bad, and... wait.

"'The three of us'?" I asked.

"Yes," he nodded. "Hannya's term will soon be over, and we couldn't make Fu'uta cooperate with us, so that only leaves us three."

Those were probably the names of the other Superiors here, but that wasn't what I wanted to ask.

"*You're* escaping, too? Aren't you enjoying your life here?" I mean, he even had his own café.

"Yes. After all, felons obediently serve their time while at the same time trying to escape. *That is why I will do just that.*"

There it was again.

Something about his words felt weird, but I couldn't really tell what it was.

"Oh, speaking of escaping, why are *you* here in the first place?" he asked.

"Well... I..."

It was hard for me to speak the reasons and details about that, because it meant speaking about my failures using my own mouth.

The "me" from before I heard those words would probably speak a tale of success, but as I was now, I really couldn't do that, so I gave up and spoke objectively.

From start to end, I told the leader about everything that had happened in Gideon. He silently nodded while refilling my coffee every now and then.

Also, when we started talking about this, all the other customers read the mood and left the café. It seemed like they were used to this.

“Then, I fought the KoD to prove my power... and lost miserably,” I mumbled.

Talking about my failures made me very tired.

“That must have been hard,” the leader said while nodding. “I understand how you feel. I, too, am here because I lost to Shu.”

“‘Lost’? But I heard it was a draw...”

“No. I lost, fair and square. I received my death penalty because he gave it to me, while he got his death penalty because of a side effect to doing that to me. It’s definitely my loss.”

He spoke calmly while admitting his own defeat. It didn’t look like he was the least bit frustrated about it, and I couldn’t tell whether it was because he’d made peace with it while being here, or whether he had never been bothered by it at all.

But... for some reason, it felt like he was talking about the KoD with affinity instead of hostility.

“I must say, I do wonder how Shu noticed your Embryo,” the leader went on, pondering something for a moment. “He perceived Alhazred despite it being impossible to perceive, yes?”

I’d already told him about Alhazred’s powers. The other clan members knew them, so I thought I might as well tell *him*, too.

“Yes... and I still don’t know how,” I answered.

“I see... Let’s test it, then,” he said as he walked out from behind the counter. “Please attack me.”

“Eh? Wait, but... Eehh?”

What kind of person just asks to be attacked? Is he a masochist or something?

“There’s no need to hold back. It doesn’t matter where. Please, do attack me with your Alhazred.”

“Don’t complain about it after that.”

It didn’t seem like our conversation was going to go any further until I attacked him, so I gave in and did it.

I made Alhazred move and stand next to him, and it didn't look like he knew he was there. Then I made Alhazred swing his sickle-arm to slightly cut his upper arm, when...

"Oh, we should also spread out some newspapers so that—"

"Ah! Don't move...!"

A moment later, the mantis arm that was supposed to just lightly cut into his arm *cut off his head instead.*

"AAAAAHHHH!" I screamed as his head rolled on the floor and hit the glass door.

The Masters outside who saw it also screamed and ran away.

"O-Oh no... Wh-What do I do...?!"

I accidentally gave the death penalty to our leader! Wait, is this really my fault?! What if the other members think that I killed him just to prove my power?! What do I do now?!

"The pain is still there, it seems." I suddenly heard the same voice I'd been hearing until a few dozen seconds ago.

"...Eh?"

I looked and noticed that our leader's headless body wasn't turning into light.

Not just that, but it was actually speaking, even though it didn't have a head.

"April," it spoke again. "Sorry to bother you, but would you kindly pass me my head?"

"Un-der-stood, my ve-ne-ra-ble ow-ner," the doll next to the glass door — April was her name, probably — replied as she took the leader's head and threw it towards his body, which easily caught it.

"I figured it out," he continued speaking without even connecting his head to his body... not like I knew if he *could*. "Your Alhazred doesn't cancel pain."

"E-EEHH?! Forget about that! Your head's clearly not where it's supposed to be! Are you okay?!"

"I am quite okay, yes. It's normal for me to lose body parts or be blown to smithereens. Our clan member Emily is the same in that regard, no?"

"She is?!"

I didn't know that! I've never seen her become like this!

“A-Also, why are you talking without a head...?” I burst out.

“Vocal cords and lungs aren’t in the head, after all,” his body said. “Isn’t it only natural to speak through here?”

There’s nothing natural about losing your head and acting like it’s nothing! And wait, “pain?!” Did he really just say that?! He was being so calm despite having his head cut off with his pain set to on?! Excuse me?! Is he some sort of monster in real life, too?!

“Allow me a moment to reconnect. I cannot even look you in the eye like this,” he said as he placed his head where it had been. A moment later, it reconnected and became as normal.

The sight was more shocking than the decapitation. Pain and all that aside, though, as unusual as the scene was, it was probably possible if it was caused by an Embryo.

“...Gross,” I muttered. “Is your Superior Embryo based on a Dullahan?”

“Dullahans, you say? That’d be quite the cool concept, but no, my Embryo is based on something else.”

Then what other kind of Embryo can let you stay just fine without a head?!

“For now, let’s keep talking about your Alhazred. Just now, when you cut off my head, I felt pain, most likely because Alhazred cannot hide it. Shu surely knew about that.”

“How could I have expected *that*?” I exclaimed.

I mean, you’d have to be insane to turn on your pain. And wait, you turned on your pain and seriously asked me to attack you? Are you okay in the head?!

“This time, attack me with your pain turned on,” he said.

“Okay,” I replied as I prepared Alhazred. Swinging had resulted in disaster, so this time, I’d lightly pierce him, and...

“Oh, about what part of me you should targe—”

“I told you not to move!”

The tip of the sickle was going for his upper arm, but then he turned around and it penetrated his heart.

Come on, now, why does this keep happening?

“I see. I understand now,” said the leader. Like before, he didn’t get the death penalty and actually looked pretty fine.

Is he immortal...? KoD, just how did you kill and send this thing to the *gaol? You seriously freak me out.*

"This time, I didn't feel any pain," he kept talking. "It seems to be based on your own senses."

So, apparently, Alhazred's ability to hide pain was based on whether I had my own pain set to on or not.

I'd never realized this. And I was Alhazred's Master.

"But Masters who play with their pain on are rare, so it's not really a weakness, right?" I asked.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he argued. "There are some Superiors who turn it on, depending on the situation. And some even have it on all the time."

All the time...? Are they idiots? Or just a bunch of masochists?

"Then I'll have to avoid Masters who might turn it on, and—"

"But you have an even simpler method. *You merely have to always have it on yourself.*"

...Huh?

"No no no no, not happening," I insisted. "Are you even listening to yourself? Are you stupid?"

His crazy suggestion made me reply to him without any respect, but he didn't seem to care and just placed his hand on my shoulder.

"No need to scared. There is a way to make you capable of living like that," he said as if presenting the greatest idea ever. "*Training straight from hell.*"

Below the café, there was a stage that looked like a smaller version of the dueling arenas in Gideon.

"They only look the part, though," the leader said. "Unlike in dueling facilities, we don't have any convenient barriers here. Are you ready?"

"Yeah, yeah..." I replied with melancholy in my tone as I turned on my pain setting.

He would basically do to me what the KoD had been doing to Rook. Except here, it wasn't to influence Embryo evolution, but to make me get used to pain.

I didn't want pain, and I'd tried to resist, but in the end, the leader's words and his weird, intimidating aura had made me consent.

Honestly, at that moment, he looked more like a "King of Crimes" than at any other time.

"Also... I need this training to become stronger, I guess," I muttered.

Alhazred's weakness would stay if I didn't do this, and I couldn't have that. I wanted to once again believe that he was the strongest, and I was willing to bear some pain for that.

It's all so I can honestly claim that I have the greatest Embryo.

"I will begin, then," he said.

"Please don't make it too painful," I pleaded.

"Sorry, we cannot have that. I will begin by tearing out your tongue, so it should hurt a lot."

"Eh?" I couldn't react in time to prevent him from taking my jaw and, just as he said he would, *tearing out my tongue*.

For a moment, my mind became filled with pain and shock so powerful I couldn't even think anything.

"Wha har hou dhoinh...?!" I cried with a mouth full of pain. Blood flowed freely from my face.

"I did say it would be training straight from hell," he answered. "If you become used to the pain of losing your tongue or limbs, you will be able to fight without caring about any damage you take."

"Buh haht's...!"

Training that involves losing body parts?! Are you insane?!

"No need to worry about the damage done," he said as he took out and used a Job Crystal, changing his job to something other than King of Crimes before whispering, "*The Saint's Prayer.* I healed you just now. Please see for yourself."

I hesitantly tried to move my tongue. The feeling was enough to tell it was there again. I then touched it with my fingers and yes, all seemed to have gone back to normal.

"What was th—" I began. "Eh?!"

As I looked up, the changes on the leader shocked me way more than the healing. Up until a moment ago, he had been a plain-looking man wearing glasses. Now, however, though the clothes were the same, his chest was now big, his stature had changed, and his hair had grown — he had clearly become *a woman*.

My Reveal skill said that I was looking at The Saint, Sechs Würfel.

I couldn't understand anything that was going on here — I had no words for it. The fact that I'd had my tongue torn out, the healing that had instantly made the wound vanish, or the fact that the King of Crime had become The Saint.

This reminded me that one of the KoC's crimes was "the dispossession of The Saint."

I had always thought that there was a strange meaning behind the name of that incident, but it might've actually been exactly what it said.

"With me here, even the heaviest of wounds can be healed without having to resort to the death penalty," he said. "So please, be at peace and lose yourself in this training."

Also, it made me come to understand another thing about our leader.

His demeanor was soft and he was definitely a calm person... but *every single one of his screws were loose.*

"Today is your first day, so let us start off with something lighter... *Loss of all four limbs. Ten times*."

"A hah hah hah hah." A dry laugh escaped my mouth.

Suddenly, I realized something. I'd always thought I was above other Masters and always acted like it, but ever since meeting our leader, I'd never once looked down on him.

It was probably because — as stupid as other people thought I was — even I could understand, with just my instincts, that *I was no match for him.*

"Hhhhaaa," I sighed, gave in, and prepared to go through the training.

Now that I thought about it, that Rook guy had gone through this, as well.

I will overcome this, too, become flawless, and get my revenge on him after becoming the strongest I've ever been!

"...Go easy on me," I said.

"Apologies, but no. Going easy isn't quite enough to cut it, you see," he replied while raising his hand.

"Wait, you're using a knife hand? That's just sca— AAAAAHHHHH!"

And so began my life at the gaol... and my days of hellish training. A long road that would lead me to my new destination.

Damn you, Rook... I'll make you pay for this someday!

The End

Afterword

Cat: “With the side story over, it’s time to jump into the afterwooord!”

Xun: “I wasn’t in thE midword, but I’m ‘Xun,’ fOR ‘Xunyu.’ So, where’s the beAr?”

Fox: “He couldn’t be here ’cause he’s still in jail. The afterword is related to where we are in the story, isn’t it?”

Xun: “Well, there *was* thAT time he wasn’t hEre ’cause he was waiting for his tUrn.”

Cat: “The afterword is a mystery space where the fourth wall doesn’t exist and characters who never interact in the actual story get to talk to each other, and it changes depending on what’s currently happening.”

Xun: “Is that hOW it is?”

Cat: “Yes. Anyway, it’s time for the customary serious comment from the authooor!”

Thank you for your purchase, dear readers. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

With this *Dendro* volume, I’ve been able to conclude the first arc of the second part of the series.

In this part, you will see many more stories focused on tians. Volumes 6 and 7 were the first step into it, and they presented a story about close bonds between players and tians.

In *Dendro*, players are split into worlders and ludos, and I believe the same applies to the readers, as well. Many of the happenings in the story will likely appear different depending on which kind of reader is reading them, and that too, is a very important part of this work.

Volume 8 will introduce a character who is very important for both the setting and the work itself. Little would give me more joy than your excitement for her first appearance on the stage of this story.

Fox: “Now that that’s done, can I ask something?”
Cat: “Go aheaaad.”
Fox: “Why did you add a side story after the main story? You did the same in volume 3, but still...”
Cat: “First of all, the reason why they exist in the first place is because there are things we can’t show if we focus only on the events that involve Ray. We have the side stories to compensate for that, and the information in them is necessary for the main story.”
Fox: “Oh, I can see why they’re important. One of the side stories in volume 3 gave us the identity of the Superior Killer, and heeere, we had the King of Crimes.”
Cat: “That’s exactly why we need them. However, as things are, we can’t release a book with nothing but side stories.”
Fox: “True.”
Cat: “That’s why we will be adding them next to the main one. It’s all so we can tell as many *Dendro* stories as possible.”
Xun: (He sounds a bit like the author’s serious comment right now.)
Bear: “I’M BACK IN THE WILD!”
Bear: “VOLUME 8 IS SET TO COME OUT AROUND OCTOBER, I GUESS, SO BEAR IT UNTIL THEN!”
Cat: “That was too sudden! And you completely ruined the flow!”
Bear: “We have a limited amount of space fur the afterword! Sudden or not, it’s time to announce the next volume!”
Cat: “That’s so meta! You actually can’t say that anywhere else but here!”
Fox: “Here I was thinking he wouldn’t appear here this time, but he barged in and took an important honor and the entire spotlight allll for himself...”
Xun: (This afterword sure had a lot of talk about the afterword itself...)

Bonus Short Stories

Signed

Paladin, Ray Starling

Normally, the monsters of *Infinite Dendrogram* had their names displayed above their heads.

As game-like as that sounded, however, the names were visible even to the tians who called this world their home. When you think about it, it was kinda obvious those names would be, considering they were by far the simplest way to differentiate human from monster. At the very least, not having them would definitely make things a lot more confusing and difficult.

I used "normally" for a reason, though. There were exceptions — monsters with names you didn't always see, such as those who could use conceal, stealth, and similar skills.

Prime examples of this were the Mimics. These RPG favorites were present in *Dendro*, just as in many other games, and most of them had skills that hid their names. Indeed, you'd find many unfortunate souls lured and defeated by a Mimic's promise of immense loot.

With all that in mind, I was currently faced with a certain choice.

"All right... Is this one safe?"

I was in the now-familiar Tomb Labyrinth, looking at the end of a hallway, intensely pondering the treasure chest placed there.

Unlike in other areas, the monsters in created dungeons automatically respawned, and the same applied to these treasures. They were scattered around randomly, and though they could be very hit-or-miss, the hits had the potential to be really great. Figaro, for instance, had gotten a Prism Steed from one of those.

That was all well and good. Treasure was always welcome. But that was where the Mimics came in.

Mimics replaced some of these chests. Sure, you were about as likely to encounter one as you were likely to find a rare item, but even those on the lower levels were absurdly strong — about Pure-Dragon-tier.

“If only the others were here,” commented Nemesis.

Yeah, I thought in response.

Today, things hadn’t panned out according to plan, and I’d ended up exploring the lower levels of the Tomb Labyrinth all by myself.

That was how I’d chanced upon this treasure chest. Opening it without anyone to help me out was dangerous, but with these things, the one who’s first takes it all, so it definitely wouldn’t be here by the time I returned with my party.

“Ignoring it would be the safe choice here,” I pondered out loud.

“But that would be quite a waste.”

Yep. Leaving behind the first treasure chest I ever found would definitely sting.

“All right...!” I shouted. “I’ve decided! We’re opening that chest!”

“Then I shall prepare to use the Counter Absorption, just in case!”

We gathered our resolve, and I kneeled before the chest. Tightening my right hand’s grip around Nemesis, I pushed it open with my left and... found a single scroll inside.

“...Seems like it was no Mimic.”

“Yeah. No surprise attacks or anything.”

Overcome by relief, I took out the scroll, and the chest became light particles and vanished the same way Masters and monsters did. In a way, this scroll could be considered a drop from the chest.

“All right, let’s check this thing out,” I muttered excitedly. “Perhaps this is one of those item recipes I’ve heard about.”

I undid the string, opened the scroll, looked at the content, and saw the text with the largest font pop out at me, saying “Tomb Labyrinth Exploration Permit.”

“GHAH...!” I exclaimed as I was overcome by shock and pain far greater than any Mimic could give me, bringing me to my knees.

“Oh dear... Just how many of these have we gotten by now?” asked Nemesis.

My daily gacha rolls had made me more familiar with these than I ever wanted to be. Unlike those, however, this one was diligent and automatically signed itself with my name before I even opened it.

"Why the hell would you give TL Permits to someone already exploring the TL?! Why would you auto sign it and make it worthless on the market?! No one could need this! Ever!"

My pained shout resounded, but gained no response, and I was now the not-so-proud owner of yet another Permit I could add to all those I'd gotten so far, making up a grand total of I-actually-forgot-how-many.

A Certain Interview at a Certain Contractor's Office

Dunton Contractors

Three days had passed since the terrorist incident at Gideon.

The head of the Dunton Contractors, Rob Dunton, was thoroughly troubled.

"There's so much work to be done, but I don't have nearly enough workers..."

Gideon was currently overflowing with emergency requests. Countless residences, businesses, and even some arenas had to be rebuilt or repaired due to the damage they'd sustained during Franklin's Game.

In a way, this was a great time to make a killing, but Rob didn't have enough Designers and Carpenters to answer all the requests. Some had fled the country once the war began, and even more left because of the incident, leaving him with a lack of labor too damaging to accept all the jobs, and forcing him to make the painful decision to reject some of them.

"Well, at least there's a new Designer coming for an interview," he murmured.

He intended to take what he could get, and he wouldn't hesitate to accept any new workers even if he had some issues with them. And so, an hour later, he was interviewing a certain woman.

"Let us start with your name," Rob said.

"Gerbera!" she replied proudly.

He found it strange that she didn't have a surname, but he didn't ask anything about it. There were places where surnames didn't exist, after all.

"So, Gerbera, do you have any experience working in other offices similar to ours?"

"Nope! This is gonna be my first job!"

Rob raised an eyebrow, unsure of what to make of her. She'd just proudly revealed that she had no work experience to speak of, yet was behaving as if the job was already as good as hers.

“May I have your statistics, please?” he asked. Levels, stats, and the presence of construction skills played an important part in getting a job in this field.

“Here!” She readily presented him a paper that showed her stats, and...

M-Max level...?! Rob was overcome by shock.

It showed that she was level 500 — a true rarity among tians. Each tian had different talents and maximum number of jobs they could take, making any tian who reached that level a product of both talent and hard work.

She... She is a tian, right? he pondered.

Level 500s weren’t all that uncommon among Masters, but since Gerbera had no Master symbol — the crest on her left hand — he concluded that she had to be a tian.

I also feel that her AGI is strangely high.

Jobs like Architect Designer and Carpenter should’ve raised primarily DEX and STR, but her stats made her seem like a battle job.

Perhaps she was a fighter until now and just decided to settle down and get a job?

People who raised their levels through battle weren’t all that uncommon, after all.

Her DEX is higher than your usual Designer’s, and I certainly don’t see any problems with the construction skill levels...

All in all, Gerbera seemed like a highly promising individual, especially for an employer as desperate for new workers as Rob.

“So, Gerbera, do you have any requests regarding your employment with us?” he asked.

“I want to work by myself! From home!”

This interview so far was enough for Rob to realize that it was best to let her do her job alone, so he had no problems with that. He continued asking questions, and though some of her overly confident answers confused him, Rob became more and more certain that he would hire her.

“I will tell you right now — you’re hired,” he said as he extended his hand to Gerbera. “Let’s make this a relationship that benefits us both.”

“Okay! I’ll benefit you!” she said as she shook his hand. “Also, I’d like to see the blueprints of the buildings you’ve built in the past. It’s to help me with my work.”

“Very well. I’ll show them to you.”

Gerbera’s words greatly impressed Rob. *She talks a bit strangely, but she’s clearly passionate about the work.*

With that, he finished welcoming the new employee into his workforce.

There’s no shortage of work, and we just got a skilled worker... Things are looking up! he thought with nothing but certainty.

Some time later, the inquiries and investigations about the incident caused by Gerbera greatly affected his work, but that was a story for another time.

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 7
by Sakon Kaidou

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Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2018 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2018

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8. The Hope They Left Behind

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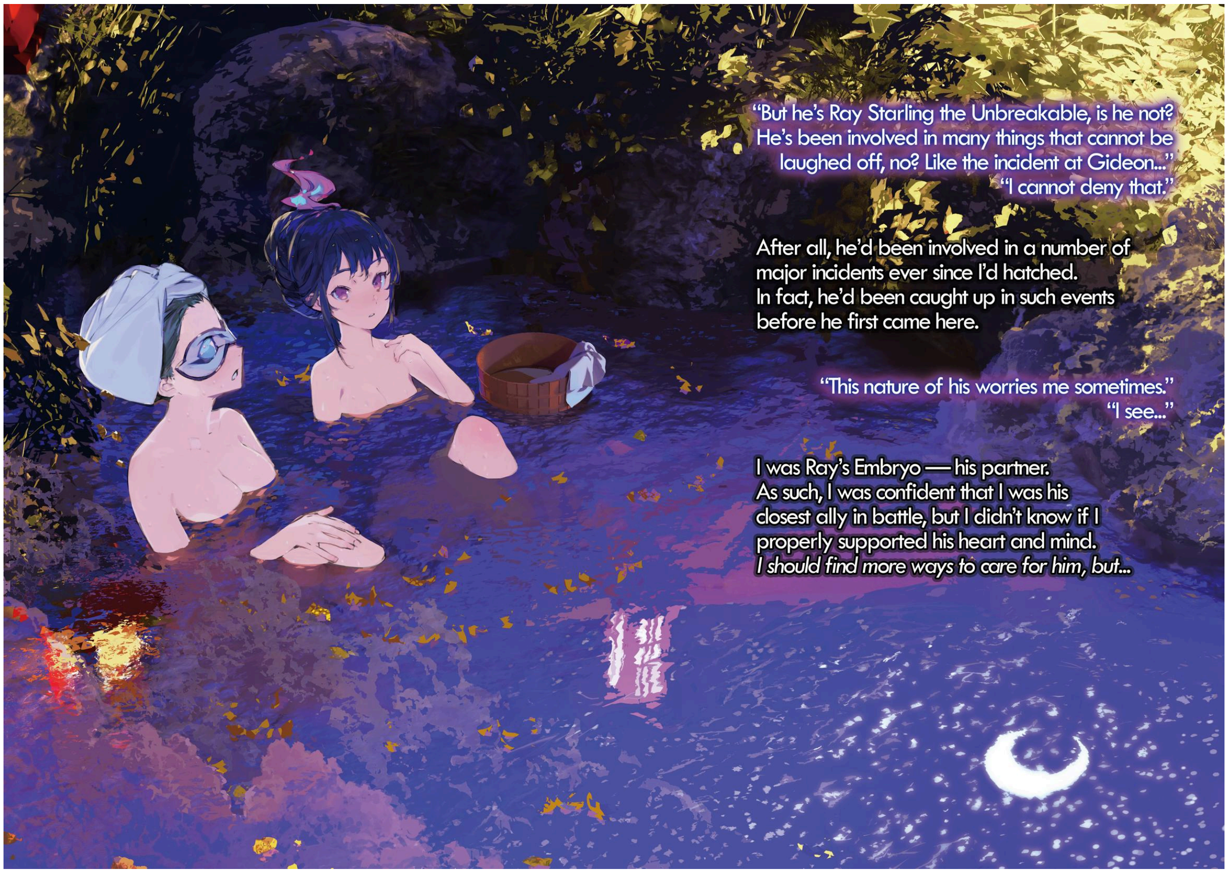


"But he's Ray Starling the Unbreakable, is he not? He's been involved in many things that cannot be laughed off, no? Like the incident at Gideon..."

"I cannot deny that."

After all, he'd been involved in a number of major incidents ever since I'd hatched.

In fact, he'd been caught up in such events before he first came here.

"This nature of his worries me sometimes."

"I see..."

I was Ray's Embryo — his partner.

As such, I was confident that I was his closest ally in battle, but I didn't know if I properly supported his heart and mind.

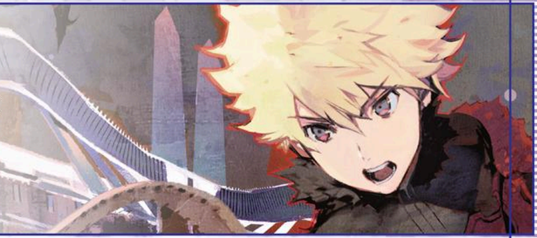
I should find more ways to care for him, but...

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

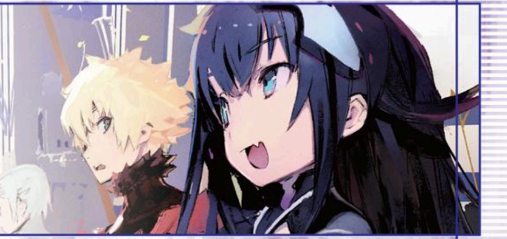
A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



Nemesis

Nemesis

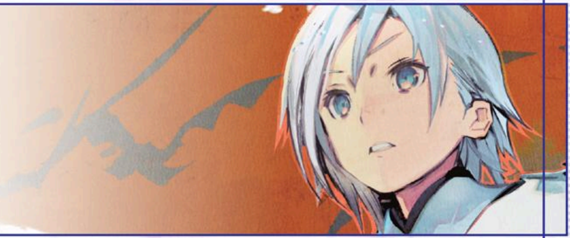
A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword or a halberd, and is equipped with skills such as Vengeance is Mine, which damages enemies for twice as much as they damage Ray.



Rook

Rook Holmes/Lucius Holmes

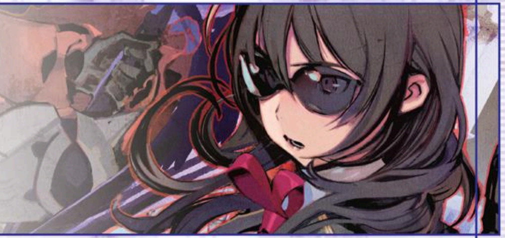
An astonishingly beautiful boy in Ray's party. His job is "Pimp" and he fights using his tamed monsters. His Embryo is the Type Guardian "Depraved Devil, Babylon."



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

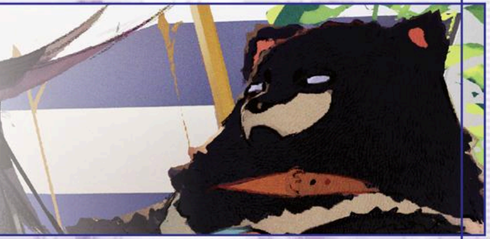
A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's brother and the one who invited him to the game. He wears a suit because, during character creaton, he accidentally made himself look just like he does in real life.



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Prologue One: A Glimpse Into Days Long Gone

Those who know true hope are the ones who stand on the brink of the abyss of despair.

Those who have already fallen into it can never hope again, and those on the precipice are more hopeful than anyone else.

◇◆

An amber dragon was speeding through the heavens.

It was a majestic entity, clad in armor that shone like precious gems.

Its eyes, however, had no trace of life in them. They were window-like, and you could see the silhouettes of men inside.

The dragon's head was a cockpit, and those within it were managing various control columns and gauges.

This was the Zweier Imperium's First Special Machine Force.

Its name was Amber Abyss, and it shared the name with the dragon-like weapon they were operating.

There were four people inside, each with their own role in managing the artificial skydragon.

"Captain. With our current speed, we will arrive at the battle area in 20 minutes," said the one in charge of the radar to his commanding officer. He was a man in his thirties.

"I see," said the captain, nodding. His voice was heavy. "So it's about to begin."

"Dr. Flagman finished this Prism Dragon just recently. This is its first battle, isn't it?!" asked the youth holding the control column. In contrast to the captain's voice, his voice was cheerful.

"Indeed," the captain replied. "This Amber Abyss isn't the only one of its kind, though. We've shared Mr. Flagman's technology with other countries, and they're making their Prism Dragons, as well. I also hear that Mr. Flagman's very own Prism Steeds and Prism Persons shall soon be used in battle, too."

"That's great!"

The youth's glee made the captain crack a wry grin and think, *It means that the situation is so bad that the countries have to ignore all their differences and cooperate in order to win.*

Exactly. Everything on the continent — be it the Zweier Imperium or any other nation — was on the verge of collapse.

And it was all because of a certain enemy.

"That aside, what of our advance unit? Have the Skydragon Knights responded yet?" asked the captain.

"No." The subordinate shook his head. "Apparently, there's a powerful magical force obstructing all communication magic."

"...I see," the captain muttered. "Keep trying to contact them."

The lack of response made a cold sweat run down his back.

Overcome with worry, he looked over his subordinates.

That was how he noticed that the one on the control column was smiling while looking at a photo.

The captain looked and saw that it displayed a young woman with a baby in her arms. She looked about as young as the youth holding the photo.

"Sublieutenant, what's that?" the man asked.

"Ah, Captain!" The youth jumped a bit, then spoke with joy in his tone. "Heh heh heh. Well, this is a photo they sent me from the evacuation center! I'm a father now! It's a boy!"

"What...? Then why didn't you refuse this mission?! Right now, we're heading fo—!"

"I know!" The sublieutenant cut the captain's words short. "I know what all of this is! I know this weapon was sent out without any trials, and that we're facing those abominations!"

"Sublieutenant..."

There was none of the man's cheer from before. The happiness he'd expressed talking about his child hadn't been fully genuine — he'd forced it to try and dispel the fear.

Right now, his expression was one of absolute desperation, but at the same time, it was also the face of a man who had looked ahead and knew what he needed to do.

"But I can't just escape," the man said. "If we don't defeat them, the Imperium... Amelia and the son we haven't even named yet... will die...!"

"Sublieutenant..."

"That's why I... *we* have to defeat them! With this Amber Abyss! We have to show everyone that there's hope!"

"...You're right."

The youth's words made the captain subdue his fears and face ahead.

"My friends," he muttered. "Let us win, and attain this hope."

"Yes, Captain!" they shouted in unison.

Their wills were now united. They were determined to head into the battlefield and become a beacon of hope for all humankind.

They prepared to face the enemy approaching the man-made dragon as they confirmed what information they had.

"Prism Dragon Unit 1, *Amber Abyss,* has arrived at the airspace of the battlefield!"

"There's still no response from the Skydragon Knights!"

"We're picking up an immense energy signal! It's a servant of the Extra-Continental Vessel... the Incarnation of Armaments!"

It was far beyond the distant horizon, but their radars were already capturing absolutely obscene amounts of energy.

"The Incarnation of Armaments will be visible on the horizon after 25 seconds!"

"Get its attention!" shouted the captain. "We'll take care of it with the first attack!"

"Understood! Abyss Cannon... prepare to fire!"

As ordered, everyone readied the man-made dragon for its greatest attack.

The Amber Abyss opened its maw and started charging the weapon inside — the compressed magical baryon acceleration cannon. The artificial dragon's power reactor created energy greatly exceeding 1,000,000 MP, then began gathering and compressing it all.

The magic became an ultra-hot ball of fire. If its mouth hadn't been protected by a special barrier, the dragon would most likely have evaporated on the spot. In spite of that, the energy only continued to increase.

"The energy is at 80... 90... 100%!"

"Blow it away!" roared the captain. "Wipe it out with the horizon itself!"

The moment it reached the limit, the sublieutenant pulled the trigger on the column.

"Abyss Cannon... FIRE!"

And so, the artificial dragon released the fireball from its jaws.

Distorting the very space around it, it flew towards the ground and shattered the earth, directly hitting the enemy in the distant horizon.

The ground around it instantly evaporated, and the enemy's approach was halted.

Then, with a searing blast, all the magic compressed within the core was released. Half of the unleashed power was used for a long-distance gravity spell, while the rest became an even greater heat.

This was the true nature of the Abyss Cannon — it was a fatal weapon that sank and settled the target with an immense gravitational field, then burned it until not even ash remained.

A few seconds later, the distant abyss it created spat out an enormous pillar of fire. And, as one would expect, nothing inside it was moving.

"The Incarnation of Armaments has fallen silent!"

"Yes!" shouted the captain, completely overwhelmed. "We did it! The Prism Dragon's Abyss Cannon worked!"

"We finally defeated one of them..."

"Indeed," nodded the captain. "And this won't be the final victory we claim. If we can beat one, we can beat the rest of them."

"Though I imagine that the Incarnation of Beasts will be quite troublesome."

"But I'm sure it's possible. There's still hope."

They all cheered. They had every reason to. After all, the man-made dragon they operated had become a sign of hope in this desperate war. It would still be an uphill battle, but just having a means of fighting back was more than enough for them to feel hopeful.

However... needless to say, that only applied if this means was *actually successful*.

"...Eh?" the one in charge of the radar exclaimed.

“What is it?” asked the captain.

With a face warped in shock, he replied, “The Incarnation of Armaments is active again!”

You didn’t even need a radar for this — you could see it clearly through the optical sensors in the dragon’s eyes.

Something was rising from the abyss they’d created.

It was a humanoid figure surrounded by thousands of Legendary-tier shields, which it had just used to protect itself from the greatest attack mankind had at their disposal.

It was the inimical entity that freely commanded a seemingly inexhaustible arsenal — the Incarnation of Armaments.

“Charge it again!” the captain howled.

Alas, they hadn’t the time to prepare another Abyss Cannon.

The Incarnation of Armaments instantly unequipped the thousands of shields and instead took out a single blade.

Like All the Stars in the Sky — Kaleidoscope.

In a blink of an eye, the single blade became several thousand, and the incarnation launched them all, creating a barrage of Legendary-tier blades that easily exceeded the speed of sound.

They all went towards the *Amber Abyss,* piercing its heavy armor with next to no effort.

The outer shell, designed to shield it against its own devastating Abyss Cannon, was no match for the bladestorm.

The captain wailed and instantly died as one of the blades pierced into the cockpit and fatally wounded him.

“AMELIAAAAAAAA...!”

The sublieutenant and the other members faced a similar end.

They and their hope, the *Amber Abyss,* became atomic dust in but a blink of an eye.

◇◆

The battle between the Amber Abyss and the Incarnation of Armaments was just one of the many encounters between this continent’s humanity and the Extra-Continental Vessel.

The war certainly wasn’t limited to just the sky.

“Th-This is the Seventh Magical Infantry Division! We need reinforcemen— No! Tell the rear area to evacuate! We can’t hold much longer!”

“We’re fighting the Incarnation of Beasts! We don’t know their total number, but there are so many, we can’t see a single patch of ground!”

Infantries were being annihilated by a force of beasts so great that they drowned out the land.

“This is the Zweier Imperial Fleet! The final line of defense was consumed!”

“It... The Incarnation of Maelstroms is about to reach land!” A fleet all but vanished, consumed by a black, vortex-like space in the sea.

None of what they had seemed to stand a chance.

Faced with an overwhelming power they couldn’t hope to match, mankind — the prosperous society that would eventually be known as the “pre-ancient civilization” — was facing its demise.

All-dominating weapons blotting out the sky.

Countless beasts covering the ground.

A bottomless maelstrom consuming even the ocean itself.

With forces so staggering all united to annihilate them, humanity had no choice but to despair.

◇◆

Having heard the news that all the front lines were lost and that the three incarnations were closing in, the capital was in a state of absolute panic.

The people of the Zweier Imperium were desperately trying to escape to either the edge of the world or the underground.

There was a man observing them.

He was the Imperator of the Zweier Imperium, which was once the most advanced nation on the continent... now on the verge of collapse.

“God does not exist,” he muttered as he watched his proud country wither.

He couldn’t believe that there was any meaning in praying to God in a world so cruel that it would allow everything that men had created to collapse so easily, especially when the incarnations responsible were so God-like themselves.

“I am certain that, after this, no one will pray to gods ever again,” he continued. “That is, assuming humanity somehow survives...”

As the Imperator looked upon his dying Imperium, a youth called out to him, saying, “Your Majesty, we have finished evacuating the people to the underground and sealed the various underground factories.”

“I see...”

“Four of the five Prism Dragons have been confirmed to be thoroughly destroyed. The last one sank into the ocean and isn’t coming back up. Three Prism People have been thoroughly destroyed. Two are missing. All of the Prism Steeds are lost, as well.”

“I see...”

“As confirmed before, the throne isn’t working. The natural magic channels leading to the construction zone have been cut, so activating it will take 100 times longer than originally planned... which will probably be over a 1,000 years. However, we have successfully constructed an automatic mass-production system for the Prism Person and Prism Rider series. We have set it to sleep mode underneath the Eldim Mountain Range. Acra-Vesta — our ultimate weapon no. 3 — is also being constructed there.”

“I see...”

“Acra-Vesta will be automatically designed and constructed based on the data gathered from the incarnations. The operation will be executed in a way they won’t discover. Considering the overwhelming power of what they’re based on and how difficult it will be to counter them, I believe that constructing it will take between 3,000-4,000 years.”

“Heh heh,” the Imperator chuckled. “That will certainly require some patience.”

“Indeed,” the youth replied. “However, I will eventually get back at the Extra-Continental Vessel. I shall not die until I witness that happening.”

“I see... Then, please, do it for the both of us. My friend... Flagman.”

“As you will. Then I will go make preparations in countries that still exist.”

“Very well. Do your best.”

“I will... Thank you, Your Majesty... for everything,” said the youth, Flagman, as he left the Imperator’s presence. He was fully aware that the man would want to accept his demise like any ruler should.

“Now... which one of them shall give me my end...?” the old man murmured.

Too many of his people had lost their lives against the Extra-Continental Vessel’s incarnations, and thus, he thought he would go out the same way they did.

This would be his end.

However, their will wouldn’t die with them.

Though faced with complete and utter annihilation, they still had a desire within their hearts.

“I will be waiting for you to join me on the other side, Flagman,” the Imperator said as he saw a score of beasts break through the walls. “The Incarnation of Beasts, eh? Perhaps I should be glad that it’s a foe I’m not helpless against — I can die fighting.”

He then stood up and covered his body in a set of mechanical armor.

“I am Imperator Machina, Wolfgang Magna Zweier. Face me in my final battle as the ruler of this land... Incarnation of Beasts!”

“■■■■■■——!”

◇◆

This was a slice of history etched onto the stage of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Going by the world’s time, it had happened 2,000 years before the first players arrived. That was the end of the period now known as the “pre-ancient civilization.”

The ruler of one of the countries from that era faced his demise at his very own throne.

His was not the only country, and he was not the only ruler to die in such a way.

However, they did not vanish without leaving anything behind.

The seas and the underground were comparably safe from the onslaught, so many facilities were left there. The later generations eventually started calling those places simply “ruins.”

Within them were powers left over from the people of that era, which could become a source of hope for what remained of mankind — artifacts and technologies carrying the will to revive the dying civilization.

Even after two millennia passed, they were still waiting for the arrival of the later generations.

However, those who left the hope behind had made two major mistakes.

One was not of their own fault. It was the complete and sudden disappearance of their enemies, the incarnations, and their mothership — the Extra-Continental Vessel.

And the other was the fact that they failed to consider how the hope they left behind would actually manifest. Many of the technologies they entrusted to the later generations started acting completely unlike how they intended.

One underground facility held environment-fixing bacteria, which went out of control and started consuming other living creatures.

An underground town had a defensive golem weapon, Magnum Colossus, which went haywire and began annihilating all who came close.

Some were due to glitches in the technology, others due to the effects of time, but the things the pre-ancient civilization left behind began acting in ways their creators hadn’t intended.

The hope they’d entrusted to the future was warping into despair for those living in the current era.

It was a nightmare scenario for both the ones who’d left it behind and the ones who were given it, making it very clear that something had gone very wrong in the process.

Thus, certain people started calling these occurrences “errors.”

One such error could be found in the ruin in the Eldim Mountains — though the place now had a different name.

Millennia after the era of the Zweier Imperium, the land now belonged to another country.

It was now the territory of The Kingdom of Altar — specifically, the Quartierlatin County — and it was right next to the border to the Dryfe Imperium.

Prologue Two: The Unearthed Ruins

Her dream

She saw a dream.

“Father! Do you really intend to go to battle?” she cried.

It was a dream showing a past event. Not even a year old, it was still painfully fresh in her mind.

After all, a mere three days before, the first princess of Altar, Altimia A. Altar, had lost much of what she held dear.

“Why are you not doing what the imperium’s doing, offering rewards to the Masters who join the war?!” she desperately asked her father and king, Eldor Zeo Altar.

He was a gentle-looking man, who looked younger than he really was.

“Altimia,” he began. His tone was gentle, but it had a certain power behind it. “I did not do that because this is a revolutionary era. The once-few Masters started growing in number a few years ago, and the kingdom alone already has thousands of them.”

“But that is exactly why you should make an ally out of them!”

Masters were immortal entities bearing the supernatural powers of Embryos.

The Contract of War prohibited all except certain rankers to participate, but even so, few could match those Masters in battle. They were significantly stronger than the tian majority, and they would never be at risk of losing their lives.

Even so, Eldor had rejected the idea that Masters should be hired for this battle.

“Altimia,” he said. “If you speak of them that way, you are basically saying that they have been increasing for that sole purpose.”

“Eh?”

“There are more Masters now, and there will likely be even more in the future. They are bound to change the world. I believe them to be the current era’s agents of revolution, sent by the world itself, and believe that their special powers exist for that purpose. However, I don't believe that using them for war is a good thing. A world where we tians see them as nothing but tools of war, and a world where Masters acknowledge that... is far too bleak," he said as he looked outside the window — into the world beyond. "That is why I cannot allow myself to be like Dryfe and warp their wills with the promise of rewards."

After saying so with absolute certainty, Eldor smiled.

"Still, I cannot begin to express my thanks to the Masters who have chosen to stand with this country regardless."

On this day, Eldor had recruited Masters to stand and defend against the imperium. Because of the aforementioned reasons, he hadn't promised any rewards, but some had stood up to protect the country, regardless.

"But...!" Altimia protested. Both she and her father knew full well that the quality of those Masters was significantly lower than that of those fighting for the imperium. "But the kingdom will surely lose! If you can't win, try making peace with—"

"We cannot." Eldor rejected the idea in an even stronger tone. "Altimia. The current imperator... Leinhart is dangerous. If we do not stop him, he will become a threat to the world itself."

"Father...?"

Back when the kingdom and the imperium had been on good terms, Altimia had lived in the country as a foreign transfer student.

Thanks to a certain connection, she'd met and talked to Leinhart for a bit, and he hadn't seemed particularly dangerous.

However, Eldor's expression as he mentioned that man was intense beyond words, making it quite likely that Leinhart was the reason why the two countries were now going from allies to enemies in such a short amount of time.

"Father..." she said worriedly.

"Don't worry, Altimia. I used to fight at Langley's side as a Paladin. And our teacher... the Arch Sage... is with us, as well."

"Father... Then..."

Altimia was about to suggest something to him, but Eldor cut his daughter's words short, saying, "One more thing, Altimia. This doesn't just apply to Masters. I do not want to push people to fight just because they have the power to."

"But..."

"And that's why, Altimia..."

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Altimia woke up right as her father was about to say something.

The dream just now had shown her last conversation with him. She'd seen it countless times after he'd passed away.

"Your Highness! Marquis Findle is here!" The voice coming from beyond the door was the reason why she had awoken. It was her attendant. "He has urgent news! Please hurry to your office!"

"Coming," Altimia said, as she wiped the tears that gathered in the corners of her eyes as she slept, got up, changed, and went out to her office.

"Is that information reliable?" she asked one of her retainers.

Marquis Findle was the one in charge of intelligence, and right now, he was bearing a valuable piece of information.

"It most certainly is," he replied. "Ruins have been discovered to the north of Altea... in the Quartierlatin County, bordering the imperium."

"I see," Altimia said, and began to ponder.

Ruins were best described as "dungeons left behind by the pre-ancient civilization." Both tians and Masters would understand that.

The pre-ancient civilization had held magic and science far more advanced than the people of the current day, and the ruins left over from their demise contained many relics of that era.

Considering that those ruins had once been fortresses, research facilities, or castles, it was fair to consider them a kind of natural dungeon.

The ruins discovered so far included Dryfe's foundation, The Underground City of Granbell, as well as the seven Seafloor Excavation Fortresses Granvaloa had found at the bottom of the sea, and the countless, nameless ruins in Caldina.

Ruins oftentimes contained technology that couldn't be made today. Much of Dryfe's magic machine tech and Granvaloa's shipbuilding knowledge came from analyzing and applying the information found in such ruins.

Though that was a definite perk to such facilities, there were downsides, as well. Particularly, when the technology inside somehow went out of control. It wasn't rare for them to house dangerous UBMs, as well.

For better or for worse, ruins had the potential to drastically change a country's power.

The fact that such a place had been found in the kingdom was critically important, but there was a problem in that it was in Quartierlatin — a county bordering Dryfe.

Dryfe had invaded through another area last time, so it hadn't ended up becoming a battlefield, but there was no guarantee that it would escape that fate the next time — it could easily become the front line.

It was an area of such importance that both armies had fortresses full of soldiers around it, and now there was a ruin there... something that could change the fate of a country.

"Does the imperium know about this?" she asked.

"I would like to hope not... but they have Masters helping their intelligence operations."

Embryo unique skills could easily include powers of interception or clairvoyance. It was best to assume that Dryfe knew about this, as well.

That fact made Altimia anxious. After all, the technology in the ruins had the possibility of restarting the war earlier than expected.

"Your Highness?" Findle prompted.

"No, I'm fine," she replied. "Now, what of the imperium? Have they done anything?"

"We haven't seen any movement from the army garrisoned at the border. It's hard to think that they would use the appearance of these ruins as an opportunity to invade again."

"Then they might be considering an ambush, or stealing the technology in the ruins."

"Yes. I believe the imperium's Masters will make a move, like they did back during the incident at Gideon."

He was referring to the major act of terrorism by Franklin, one of Dryfe's superiors, in the kingdom's strongest city. He'd kidnapped the second princess, brought destruction upon the city, and even planned to completely annihilate it with a horde of monsters exceeding even the number he'd used in the war.

Thankfully, the kingdom's Masters — including one Superior, the King of Destruction — had stemmed the flow of Franklin's abominations at the source and defeated the mad scientist himself.

Remembering the incident, something she'd only heard about while suffering the Epidemic, Altimia clenched her fists in determination.

She couldn't stand the fact that Dryfe's Masters had sparked the act of terror, and that Masters had been the ones to subdue it.

Only she would understand who this frustration was directed at, however.

Why did...? she thought, but then shook her head and came back to the matter at hand.

"Let us do something about it, too," she said. "We will send someone to investigate the ruins and counter the forces sent by the imperium."

"Very well," nodded Findle. "Then I shall contact the guild and ask them to prepare quests for powerful Masters, so that—"

"Do not do that."

"Huh?"

Following the appearance of Masters in the world, requesting Masters to deal with difficult problems had become the optimal course of action.

However, Altimia rejected the idea.

"I will send someone of my choosing. And I do not deem it necessary to contact the Masters or the adventurers' guild about it. Prohibit it and the job guilds from making any quests related to the ruins."

"But if the imperium is sending Masters, only other Masters would be able to counter th—"

"That is my decision as acting ruler."

"As you command." Marquis Findle made a pose of acknowledgment.

"You may leave. Also, keep in mind that I might not respond for a few days as I deal with this situation. I will tell this to the other departments."

"Very well." Findle bowed lightly and excused himself from the office.

Altimia stood up from her chair and walked to the front of the full body mirror.

"Tians have little chance against Masters... I know that much," she muttered to herself.

She looked into her own eyes and remembered those defeated and dead at the hands of Dryfe's Masters. A number of them had been especially dear to her. Even her own father had been beaten by a Master and eaten by his monsters.

"Even so, I cannot rely on Masters to accomplish something that could have such a powerful effect on the war," she whispered as she touched the mirror. "I cannot use them as tools of war."

Those were the words she'd heard many times in the dream of talking to her father for the last time.

Masters were the current era's agents of revolution. They should not be used in tian... "human" battles.

That was how she understood those words.

Though her interpretation was slightly different from her father's will, she was determined to abide by it.

Then she considered another thing.

During the war, many Masters had sided with Dryfe for the rewards. Her father had offered no rewards to the Masters of his kingdom, leaving Dryfe with far more of them.

Just like her father, she was thankful for the Altarian Masters who'd participated.

However, she couldn't help but feel hatred for the many Dryfean Masters who'd fought the kingdom, grudge for the many Altarian Masters who'd done nothing, and rage at the Altarian Superior who had made absurd demands in exchange for her participation.

She even felt like things would never have turned out like this if Masters had never existed in the first place.

Altimia knew full well that this was naught but the result of war. Dryfe's Masters had only acted as they were requested to, and the kingdom hadn't made the request because her own father willed it.

Even so, Masters... Superiors... have taken far too much from her, and thus, her mistrust for them ran deep.

"But..."

There were some things that shook her mistrust.

During the capital blockade incident, Masters had formed vigilante groups to take care of the ones responsible.

During the Epidemic, some Masters had walked around nursing people without asking for any reward.

And then there was Gideon...

"But now..."

The matter of the ruins was related to war. Regardless of her likes or dislikes, she wouldn't rely on Masters, for she wished to respect her father's will.

Thus, she would do something else.

"This is a job for Azurite."

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After leaving the first princess's room and walking a short distance away from it, Marquis Findle took something out of his pocket.

It was a magic item used for magical communication, and he used it to connect to one of his subordinates in the intelligence department.

"It's me," he said. "Send a request to DIN to leak the information about Quartierlatin's ruins to the kingdom... Yes, that would be enough... Prohibit all ruin-related guild quests, just as she ordered. They... The Masters will act on their own."

With that, he cut the communication.

"I understand what Her Highness is saying, but Masters are best left to other Masters," he murmured.

Even if there was no official request, the Masters investigating the ruins on their own volition would deal with any attacking Dryfean Masters.

Also, if the kingdom's Masters sold any of the technology they found there, it would improve Altar's economy.

If it turned out to be something particularly important, the country itself could send its agents to buy it off of them.

The people they called "Masters" rarely considered life-related risks, and acted mostly on curiosity and potential returns. That was why Marquis Findle thought that this was the best way to deal with this.

"But... No, there is no use in thinking about that."

With those words as his last, he returned to his office.

There were still many things he had to do in regards to the matter of the ruins. That order to his subordinate was just the first step.

Marquis Findle dealt with the next step while thinking of both the current situation and Altimia's consideration for her father's will.

One believed that Masters shouldn't be used for war, while the other thought otherwise, but both believed themselves to be right, and neither could be proven to be completely wrong.

However, regardless if they were both right or wrong... it would all be pointless if the *Masters sent by Dryfe were significantly stronger than the Altarian Masters investigating the ruins.*

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Dryfe Imperium's Imperial Palace — Throne of the Imperium, Dryfe Imperstand

Dryfe Imperium's capital, Vandelheim, had two faces.

One face was relatively modern, while the other was a face of clockwork superscience.

There were two prime representatives of the latter.

One was a large research institute right outside of the capital — the headquarters of the Triangle of Wisdom.

And the other... was this imperial palace.

On the outside, the palace looked like little more than an extension of the modern city surrounding it.

However, the same couldn't be said about its core — the heart of the palace.

It was best described as an "enormous clockwork fortress," a castle of ever-moving gears bearing the name "Throne of the Imperium, Dryfe Imperstand."

It was an ancient construct that was both Dryfe's core, its strongest weapon, and an existence some would refer to as an *Irregularity*.

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A weapon and the imperial residence at the same time, the Imperstand also had offices for the senior statesmen.

In one such office, two people were having an exchange while enjoying a game of chess — or, at least, a game that looked like it.

"A short while ago, I was informed that one of our Masters had confirmed the appearance of ruins in the kingdom's Quartierlatin County," one of them said. The other silently listened. "Could you send the Hell General there?"

"May I ask why, Prime Minister Vigoma?"

One of them was Prime Minister Nobrome Vigoma, the one in charge of the imperium's internal affairs. As for the other...

"That's simple," said Nobrome. "Because there is no method with more certainty, Field Marshal Barbaros."

"...I see."

The Zero General, Field Marshal Gifted Barbaros, was the one in charge of the country's military, and easily the strongest tian in the imperium.

He was both a General and a field marshal at the same time. It wasn't unusual for tians to have different jobs and official roles. Though there were Superior Jobs, such as "Commander-in-Chief" and some that included the word "General," a "Field Marshal" job simply didn't exist, so there was no helping that.

Despite being the top of the country's military, Gifted Barbaros was strangely young — somewhere around thirty — and didn't seem to have the air of command you'd expect from a leader.

To put it frankly, his eyes seemed dead.

"He is in the field marshal faction," Nobrome continued. "If you convince him, he—"

"We only share a method and approach. He's not part of any faction," Gifted argued. "But... very well. I'll try to persuade him."

There was next to no vitality in his response, either.

Two of the leaders of the three factions that comprised this country's forces were sitting at the same table, but he felt nothing about that or the fact that he was one of them. He merely replied emotionlessly and moved the pieces on the board.

But Prime Minister Vigoma didn't care about the man's attitude.

After all, he had known him for a long time.

Because of that, he knew better than most that Gifted was akin to a sleeping lion — no, something far scarier than that — and understood that, unless the situation called for it, it was best to let him keep sleeping.

"I must say, this is quite unexpected," Nobrome added. "I expected you to ask more, or outright reject what I want to ask of Hell General."

"Masters are free," Gifted replied. "They aren't bound by rank or faction — they do what they feel like doing. Even their lives are secondary to them."

"That is true," Nobrome agreed, but Gifted's words couldn't help but make him think, *Doesn't that apply to you, as well?*

"Also, I understand the situation," Gifted added. "You're giving this request to Logan because the one you're sponsoring, Franklin, is currently unusable... or, rather, you mustn't use him."

"Oh?"

"Franklin's strength is the strength of variety. He lost his forces in the previous incident, and is now being pressed into developing new units and stocking up on the mass-produced ones. The matter of the ruins and the potential technology found inside is important, but mostly in the long-term. It will have little effect on the upcoming war. Therefore, you can't send out a force that's being developed for the sake of the war — you need them to focus on growing. Then there are the recent additions to our Superior forces — the King of Chariots and the King of Thieves — but you have reservations about using them. I'm with you on the latter. Though we've hired that one with a detailed contract, a criminal who's wanted in many places is still a criminal." Vigoma silently listened.

"That leaves only the other two senior Superiors. The King of Beasts is the epitome of solo strength — an absolute powerhouse that needs no price or preparation. However, she's a tad *too* strong, which makes it likely that she will damage the ruins if she goes there. She has a track record of doing just that. By contrast, Logan needs to pay a price, but he can prepare an army instantly and adjust it easily. If you just give him a sacrifice, he will surely agree. And that's what makes Logan the optimal Superior to hire in this situation. That's my assumption, anyway."

"...Goodness."

Looking lifeless the whole time, Gifted had fluently spoken pretty much everything Nobrome was thinking in regards to this.

Though the man was a field marshal at his young age for reasons other than his eye for strategy, there was no denying that he was an excellent army man, as proven by his conjecture.

"Heh heh," the Prime Minister chuckled. "If you know that much, then I don't think I have to tell you anything more."

"Then I will immediately arrange a meeting with Logan."

"Excellent. Thank you very much, Field Marshal."

Nobrome extended his hand for a handshake, and Gifted responded, his eyes lifeless still.

"I must say, you evidently have the skill to do it yourself, so why do you leave the army management to your subordinates?" Nobrome asked.

"I still don't understand why I'm the field marshal. I'm just a soldier. I'm not fit to lead people."

"Ho ho ho!" Nobrome laughed heartily. "I sometimes question why I am the prime minister, as well. After all, we were simply the most influential of the few military and civil officials who sided with the one who became the imperator."

Upon hearing those words, Gifted showed emotion for the first time — it came out as a heavy sigh.

"Too many people died during the imperator selection and the chaos that followed."

"Indeed. But I am truly glad that you, I, and your subordinates remained."

"As am I."

People liked to say that the imperium was split into three forces: Prime Minister Vigoma's, Field Marshal Barbaros's, and the current imperator's. That wasn't false in any way.

Even though the imperator, the highest authority, occasionally participated in politics from the shadows, he spent most of his time messing with machines, training, and other affections. And those left in charge, Vigoma and Barbaros, had different ideas about what was best for the imperium.

That didn't mean they were antagonistic to each other. Though they had different approaches, they shared two common goals: to bring about the best result for the imperium, and to fulfill the will of the imperator. Thus, they had no reservations about cooperating whenever it was best to do so, as in the current matter.

They were no monolith, but they were facing in the same direction.

"Prime Minister," Gifted spoke up. "May I ask something?"

"Yes?"

"You said that the ruins are in the Quartierlatin County?"

"...Yes."

"I see. Then I shall send a special soldier."

"A special soldier? But they are... wait! Do you mean...?"

“There’s no better person for the job. Wouldn’t you agree?”

And so, their flexibility and coordination birthed a nightmare scenario for the kingdom — the dispatching of a Superior and another powerful force.

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Thus, the kingdom’s and the imperium’s intentions intertwined, setting the stage for a new incident surrounding the ruins at the Quartierlatin County.

However, there was another faction making a move, too. It was a group that no one, tian or Master, could anticipate or understand.

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“Pre-ancient civilization ruins were discovered in the kingdom, point A05.”

“Reallyyy?”

“A change in the crust exposed it to the surface. Tians and Masters went on to find it.”

“Well, the Earth recently started lots of earthquakes therrre. But it didn’t appear on the ruin search, did iiit?”

“Apparently, this one is a facility from the later period. It used highly advanced anti-discovery technology. It’s somewhat like the Red King’s gaol.”

“Then I guess we should worry about what’s insiiide.”

“There won’t be a problem if it’s your average ruin, but there’s no guarantee that it doesn’t hold weaponry that exceeds Prism Dragons or the throne. If either the kingdom or the imperium uses something like that in their war, the already-shaky balance might completely collapse.”

“It’d be much easier if the Masters were the only ones breaking balaaance... I should say that to Jabberwock, too. Anyway... All right, I’ll go investigaaate. Such chores are part of my job, after aaall.”

“We’ll leave it to you.”

“Oh, and I’ll ask for permission to use the original, just in case.”

“I’ll ask, too.”
“Please dooo.”
“Be careful.”
“Sure. All right, I’m offff.”

Chapter One: Change of Clothing — Dark Edition

Paladin, Ray Starling

"Hmm..." Sitting on the coachman's seat of the carriage, I made an audibly perplexed groan.

The reason for it was the transparent mantle that became black when worn, "Black Warcoat, Monochrome."

It was the day after the deathly struggle against the Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome, and we were heading back to the capital in B3's carriage, drawn by my Silver.

On the way, I considered testing the Black Warcoat, just like I'd done with the Miasmaflame Bracers and the Grudge-Soaked Greaves. After all, special rewards were often, well, "special" in how they functioned, so using them without the proper testing was somewhat scary.

They weren't like Nemesis, whose new skills somehow always provided the desired results shortly after we got them.

Anyway, the reason for my groaning were the specs of my new special reward:

Black Warcoat, Monochrome
Ancient Legendary Item
An ancient legendary item embodying the concepts surrounding the false star that consumed light, shrouded itself in darkness, and devastated its targets with searing light.
It has the power to consume light that touches it, gather it within, then fire it.
This item cannot be transferred or traded.&#10;No level limit.
Equipment bonuses: None.
Equipment skills:
Light Absorption

Yes — the Black Warcoat didn't give any stat bonuses. I'd been told that the higher tier special rewards were generally greater in that regard, so I felt a bit disappointed about that. (I'd also found out that the +100% to STR on Gardranda was actually a jackpot of a bonus.)

Anyway, I didn't know if it was to make up for it, but the Light Absorption skill it had was completely passive — as in, constantly active.

Its effect was "Absorbs 100% of the light damage it takes." That sounded pretty strong. After all, though limited to a single element, it negated all damage.

However, according to B3, "For example, if you were attacked by a sword or anything else covered in light, it would prevent the light damage, yes, but you would still get the damage from the sword itself," which basically meant that Figaro's Fang of Gloria would still make short work of me.

I then asked her how it would work against enemies who used light itself, such as yesterday's Monochrome, and she said, "The coat would prevent that, yes, but until light attacks hit, they often carry heat, so, when dealing with beams like the ones from yesterday, you would negate their light damage, but still end up being burned by the heated air they bring. The coat would need to have something like 'Heat Absorption' as well, to prevent that."

And in case it wasn't obvious, Light Absorption did nothing against fires such as the ones from Purgatorial Flames.

Having heard her explanations, I now realized that enemies who attacked using light were extremely rare to begin with. The only ones I'd ever fought were the RSK and Monochrome.

That was the reason for my groaning — it seemed like a really difficult skill to use. And as for the other, Shining Despair... well, I could only hope that time would make it clear.

"I must say," Nemesis commented, "a coat of darkness that absorbs light is far from 'Paladin-like.' I would even argue that it's quite the opposite."

"Wow, rude," I replied. "I'm a proper Paladin... even if I don't have Grand Cross yet."

Killing Monochrome made me reach the job's max level, though, I thought. *Liliana's Paladin level is lower than mine, and she has it... am I missing something?*

I raised the question to B3.

"Grand Cross?" She raised an eyebrow. "You can only increase the chance of getting it by helping people through Paladin quests."

I see, so I need to help... eh?

"This isn't bragging or anything, but I'm quite sure I've done a lot of quests where I helped people," I said.

"You always run head-first into the most troublesome matters, after all," Nemesis commented.

Well... you're not wrong.

"I'm aware," B3 said. "I'm saying that the only people who count are the ones you help in Paladin job quests."

"...Paladin job quests?"

"Yes. Grand Cross has a 'number of people helped in Paladin job quests' times 0.5% chance to be acquired when leveling up."

I began, "Is that on the...?"

"No, you won't find it on the wiki. It's a conjecture The Lunar Society made, based on their data."

"Ohh..."

Then that was most likely true. Though I didn't trust them as an organization one bit, I did trust them to have more reliable info than the wiki.

Anyway... job quests, eh?

I'd almost forgotten that, in addition to random event quests and adventurers' guild quests, there were also quests exclusive to certain jobs, managed by the relevant guilds.

While we were still at the capital, Rook had leveled himself through Pimp job quests, and ended up getting Marilyn.

I, on the other hand, had become a Paladin after skipping the relevant low-rank jobs, so I'd figured I didn't have the power most would expect from your usual Paladin, and thus avoided the job quests... only to end up here, with the job maxed-out without me having taken any of them.

"But I can't get any more levels," I said.

"No need to worry," said B3. "You can still learn it as long as you keep Paladin as a sub-job. You won't be barred from taking job quests, either."

“What a relief...”

Then I’ll be able to get Grand Cross without any problems. I guess I should thank B3, the Paladins, and even the eldritch abomination for this.

Suddenly, a certain thought came to mind. “Hm?” The fact that The Lunar Society had data on this meant that a significant number of them were Paladins.

Switching to the job required you to fulfill three conditions: to defeat a boss monster (and be responsible for a decent part of the damage dealt), to donate to the church, and to get a recommendation from someone in the knight order. The first two wouldn’t be hard for The Lunar Society, considering they had their own churches, but how did their members get the recommendations?

Curious, I asked B3 about that.

“The Lunar Society gets recommendations for free,” she said.

“Why?!”

“It’s the result of a deal.”

According to her, it all went back to the previous war with Dryfe.

Needless to say, it had been a crushing defeat for Altar. The knight orders had returned completely devastated.

Many of them, including the venerable commander, had lost their lives. Survivors had been heavily wounded, with some of their lives at risk, others facing a future of living with heavy disabilities even if they made it. If that had happened, many of the knight orders would have simply collapsed.

That was when the aberration, as though waiting for this, had offered to help them. “If you promise to write recommendations for any Lunar Society members who want knight-related jobs, I’ll heal alllll of you.”

It was a deal the knights simply couldn’t have refused. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

Thus, the first princess and the knight representative, Liliana, had accepted the deal.

Ever since then, the knights, having had their lives saved by the aberration, had had no choice but to write recommendations for any Lunar Society members who wanted them.

That’s probably a small price to pay to keep their lives, but man, Miss Eldritch sure likes employing dirty methods, I thought. *Well, she’s still saving lives, though, so it’s definitely more good than bad.*

"Back to the jobs," B3 spoke up again. "What job are you planning to take next?"

"I still haven't decided, actually."

If I took Priest, like Liliana, I'd improve the power of my healing magic. If I wanted to get skills that were useful in the general sense, I'd take jobs from the thief or adventurer groupings.

Simply picking Knight to learn the relevant sword skills was pretty sound, too.

Regardless, it would be my second job, so it was time I started taking my build into consideration.

"Oh, then use this," B3 said as she reached into her inventory and took something out with a curious flourish. "The Suitable Job Diagnostics Catalog."

I'd seen that type of presentation before. It reminded me of Shu taking the same item out.

Is there some sort of rule that makes it necessary to mimic Doraemon whenever taking these Catalogs out?

"Well, that's definitely a useful thing whenever you're not sure what job to take next," I said. "I'll gladly use it."

"Do go ahead."

I still had the Catalog I'd borrowed from Shu, but since she'd taken hers out, I might as well use hers. Just like the first time, I began answering the questions and diagnosing myself. I was done in about ten minutes, and the job I got suggested was... the low-rank job called "Prism Rider."

It was definitely a job I hadn't considered.

Also...

"Did this page even exist before?"

I could've sworn it hadn't been there when I'd been casually checking the Catalog about two weeks ago.

"I don't know it, either," admitted B3.

"Not even *you* know it?"

That meant it was a job alien even to her... a person with access to The Lunar Society's database, significantly more knowledgeable than the average player.

Anyway, I figured I might as well look at the conditions to see what kind of job it was like.

This was what it said:

Conditions:
Possession of a Prism Beast (any kind)
Horse Riding or Riding skill level 5 or above

Just like you'd expect from a "Rider" job, it involved, well, Riding. And then there was the other condition, which implied that it was related to Prism Steeds, like Silver. Though it said Prism "Beasts," so there were probably more than steeds.

"For a low-rank job, the skill condition is quite harsh," I said.

"It's not unheard of for low-rank jobs to be difficult to acquire," B3 explained. "Such jobs are quite rare, though. The stats they give aren't that much different from other low-rank jobs, but they often give unique skills."

I see. It's the first time I've ever heard of such jobs.

"Whatever the case, neither of us know enough about it," said B3. "Let's log out and check the wiki... no, we're close to the capital, so let's see if the DIN knows anything."

"All right."

And so, we soon arrived at Altea and made our way to the city's DIN office.

They actually had information about the Prism Rider job.

Or, rather, they'd *just* gotten it.

Apparently, the job had been discovered only two days ago, *Dendro* time — right as I'd been making my way to Torne.

According to the DIN, ruins of the pre-ancient civilization had been discovered to the north of the capital, in an area called the "Quartierlatin County."

When touched by a Master exploring the ruins, a giant crystal there had displayed the conditions to switch to the Prism Rider job.

The discoverer hadn't owned a Prism Beast, but one of the other Masters exploring the ruins had, and he'd been able to become a Prism Rider.

What the job actually did was yet to be verified, but apparently, it had skills that improved the Prism Beasts you were riding.

"So they discovered a lost job," said B3.

The term "lost job" was used for jobs that not a single person had at this point in time, and the conditions for which were lost. Regardless of whether they were low or high-rank, lost jobs didn't appear on the Catalog.

The concept of version updates didn't exist in *Infinite Dendrogram* — the whole world was already complete as it was. There were probably still many jobs, Superior or otherwise, that had yet to be discovered.

"Just as you would expect from the conditions, it appears that Prism Rider really is a job focused on Prism Beasts," B3 said. "And it seems that both originals and replicas work for it."

"Originals and replicas?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Let's take this outside."

For some reason, she cautiously looked around the DIN office we were in, and then led me out.

She took me to a relatively empty café, where we both ordered something, and she continued.

"Prism Beasts come in two forms: originals and replicas, focused on easy mass production. Replicas are much like the imperium's Magingears, in that they use MP to move, but your Silver doesn't... which means that he's an original."

"Seems like it."

He did consume lots of MP for powerful Wind Hoof barriers, but I couldn't recall him ever taking any of it when simply moving. Also, his description mentioned something about some artisan.

"As far as Prism Beasts go, the Prism Steed series is particularly well-known, as some of them have already been discovered," she said. "There's the kingdom's now-lost national treasure, the lightning-based Gold Thunder. Then there's the earth-based Obsidian Earth-Edge that the Over Gladiator uses for mounted battles. And there's the fire-based Ruby Ignition that's owned by a Superior from Huang He."

Oh yeah, I almost forgot that Figaro has a Prism Steed, too, I thought. *He says he only uses his for the race battles in the eighth arena because it's faster for him to just run, though.* Apparently, he'd acquired it deep in the Tomb Labyrinth.

"However, it's still unknown where the ones based on other elements are," B3 said. "And it's highly likely that your Silver is the wind-based Prism Steed."

The X rarity and the power of his Wind Hoof made it clear that he was no ordinary item, and what she was saying confirmed it.

But wait, his official name is "Zephyrus Silver," right? The way the others are named would have you guess it's "Silver Zephyus," but it isn't. Why? Is there a reason?

"So he's really valuable, huh?" I asked.

"Oh, he is," said B3. "If I were still in Mad Castle and we weren't acquainted, I would have attacked you for him."

"He's that expensive?!"

"He's worth *at least* 500,000,000. You could probably get billions for him in Caldina's auctions."

Silver... I had no idea you were such a treasure, I thought. *I'll polish you real good, all right?* "Man, am I thankful that no one's stolen him from me."

"While in Gideon, you had the likes of Brother Bear and Marie with you," Nemesis commented. "I would like to believe no one is idiotic enough to steal from you in that environment."

True.

Sol Crisis hadn't exactly been wrong about me being a difficult target while in Gideon.

Wait, doesn't that mean that I'm in danger now that I'm away from there? I'm kinda worried.

"Replicas are often silver, so it's also likely that they simply didn't realize that Silver is an original," said B3. "However, there's no guarantee that people won't, so why not buy an inventory that prevents Steal and similar skills? It will be expensive, but it will completely negate even the highest level Steal."

"Good idea. That'll be reassuri—"

"But Superior Jobs might still steal him with their ultimate job skills."

"Well, you don't normally run into them," I said.

Superiors focused on thievery (like King of Thieves or something) were probably few and far between. Like, in the low single digits in this entire world.

"I'm sure I won't run into them."

Her eyebrow arched. "You say that, but how many Superiors and Superior Jobs have you met already?"

You have a point.

Well, I would probably meet more Superiors sooner or later, so I could only hope that they wouldn't be in the thief or burglar groupings.

Speaking of which, the only one of the four people in charge of the capital blockade incident that I'd yet to meet was the Superior Job of the burglar grouping, King of Burglary, Eldridge.

I'd heard that he was a really crafty PKer who controlled the flow of battle by stealing both his enemies' equipment *and even their body parts.*

There was little doubt that he would be a formidable foe. I could only hope that I wouldn't meet him.

"But... 500,000,000 minimum is really big, isn't it?" I asked.

"It really is, but most of that value is not because of the Prism Steed's abilities, but because they're antique, and often thought to be works of art," she said. "Think about it: it's an OOPArt from 2,000 years ago that's in a perfect state. There's no way it wouldn't be expensive."

"2,000 years... so that's how old the pre-ancient civilization is."

"Yes. The ancient civilization ended around that time, too."

"Hm?" *The "ancient" and the "pre-ancient" both ended 2,000 years ago?* "Shouldn't the pre-ancient civilization have ended before the ancient one?"

"I've only read a little bit on this in the data gathered by The Lunar Society, so I'm not all that knowledgeable, but that seems to be the conclusion historians have come to."

Two civilizations, both of which had died 2,000 years ago...

Silver was a relic from the pre-ancient civilization, so this definitely piqued my curiosity. I wanted to look into this.

"Anyhow, you're picking Prism Rider as your next job, yes?" she asked.

"Yes," I nodded. "Might as well. And if I go right now, I should be able to switch during this weekend."

Right now, in real life, it was Saturday afternoon. We left for Torne on Friday night, and I'd spent two days here since then, but I still had more than half of the weekend left. I had about four days I could use here.

I'd heard that the distance between Altea and the town at Quartierlatin was about the same as the one between Altea and Torne, so I ought to be able to go there, switch jobs, and even go exploring for a bit.

"If you want to switch, you will have to enter the ruins themselves," B3 said. "Since it was just discovered, many experts must have gathered there.

Some of them might even have an answer to your question."

"I see..."

Great! So I might get an archeology lesson. I'd been into history since I was a boy, so I was kinda excited.

"This should be exhilarating," said Nemesis, who sounded genuinely curious.

"Yeah," I nodded, sharing her sentiment.

All right, my next course of action was decided. My goal was to switch jobs and investigate the history of the two civilizations!

My destination was the ancient ruins in the Quartierlatin County.

Let the quest... begin!

◇

However, right as we were about to take off for Quartierlatin, something happened.

"Ah, sorry," said B3. "Someone's calling me. I'll log out for a moment."

And she did just that.

Someone seemed to have called her on her phone.

When you set up a link between your *Infinite Dendrogram* hardware and mobile, you could set it to inform you of calls, messages, and social network alerts, the same way it informed you whenever you needed to sleep or go to the bathroom. I'd set up a link, myself. It ignored messages, but it always informed me of any calls.

Usually the only people who called me were my parents and Shu, so it was always best to answer right away.

"Ray," Nemesis spoke up. "Since you're heading for another place instead of returning to Gideon, you might want to contact Brother Bear about that."

"You have a point," I said. "An update certainly won't do any harm."

I'd already told him that I was going to spend the weekend questing with B3, but I had no idea how long I would be switching jobs and investigating the ruins. For all I knew, I might only be able to return to Gideon next weekend or something.

He could be planning something under the assumption that I would be back soon, so it was best to inform him of this.

Just in case B3 returned before I was done, I left a note saying, “I’m also logging out to make a call. — Ray Starling,” and went offline.

I called Shu and told him all I needed to, but I didn’t really understand what *he* was saying.

He kept complaining, telling me something about how he’d been arrested, that he’d destroyed some buildings but was still innocent, and that it was all Gerbera’s fault or whatever, but I wasn’t listening properly.

Who the hell is Gerbera, anyway?

It felt like he wouldn’t shut up, so I just hung up and logged in again.

I looked around. “So B3’s not back yet, huh?”

“Mm-hm,” Nemesis nodded. “It must be a long call.”

We continued to wait for another five minutes or so. Then B3 logged in again, looking somewhat apologetic.

“Sorry for the wait,” she said. “I... My family told me to come to them.”

B3’s family are practitioners of the Way of Tea, right?

“I can picture it with B3,” Nemesis said telepathically. “But trying to imagine Barbaroy performing a tea ceremony brings up some amusing results.”

“Nhh!”

Damn it, you almost made me spit my drink!

“B-By the way,” I stammered, doing my best to keep myself from laughing, “where is your family home, anyway?”

“Kyoto.”

A refined place, indeed. It was also in Kansai, which would explain why Miss Aberration, who’d studied there when she was a child, now talked in this weird mix of Kyoto and Kansai dialects.

B3 explained, “My parents planned to invite a very special guest and start a Fujibayashi-style tea ceremony, but everyone there became ill.”

“Oh, uh, that sounds pretty bad.”

“It is. And since we can’t have a tea ceremony without a Fujibayashi there, I’m the one who needs to do it. I have to be home by the evening.”

In a maglev, the journey from Tokyo to Kyoto took only a bit over an hour, but there were preparations and the like, too. And that meant that...

“Sorry,” she said. “I won’t be able to join you at the ruins.”

“Hey, there’s no helping that,” I replied. “Family and real life are important.”

In fact, I doubted I could've survived the K&R attack and the Monochrome incident without her, so I had no idea why she was apologizing to me.

"I'm grateful you say that, but... will you be all right?" she asked.

"Don't worry. I've got my left arm back, so I'm sure I can handle the monsters on the road to Quartierlatin."

From what I've been told of the current monster distribution, the ones in that area were at about the same level as the monsters in newbie hunting grounds, or just a bit higher. Apparently, monsters escaping the burning of Noz Forest had gone northwards, making the entire distribution shift a bit in that direction.

I was capable of using Purgatorial Flames again, so I shouldn't have any problems there. And if things looked really bad, I could just hop on Silver and ride in the sky.

"That's not what I meant," said B3. "You might be attacked by PKers like Sol Crisis again. Not to mention that someone might try to take your Silver..."

I'd almost forgotten that the wilder Masters were way scarier than the wildest of monsters. "I'll buy an anti-Steal inventory before I go."

With that in mind, it was time to shop.

B3 still had some time until she had to leave, so she would accompany me for that.

"I suppose we're heading to the shop where you messed up and bought a Permit?" she asked.

Yeah, "messed up" is pretty apt. I didn't intend the result of that at all, I thought in chagrin. *But that was my own fault for not investigating enough — I won't blame the shop.*

Anyway, the shop had lots of rare and curious items, so it was likely it would have the inventory I was looking for.

I ran through my memories to try to remember where it was, and it didn't take me all that long to figure it out. So we headed there right away.

Standing outside the shop, I noticed a detail I hadn't paid attention to before, which was that the the sign at the front said, "Monster King's Antique Store, Central Continent Branch."

But there's only one continent, right? Or do they have shops in Granvaloa, too?

The name made me raise an eyebrow, but I quickly shrugged it off and went inside.

Just like last time, the place was completely devoid of customers, which I found strange, considering that it had some pretty good items.

The shopkeeper inside was the same hooded fellow from last time. I wasted no time in calling out to him.

"Excuse me, do you have any inventories that aren't affected by Steal?"

"Yes," he said. "We have quite a selection. Give me a moment to bring them from our stores." Then he went deeper into the shop.

Just so you know, there weren't any other employees around. The rarity of the items here made that seem extremely careless.

Well, I guess I'll wait while looking around, I thought.

B3 looked around at the shields. She'd gotten a number of hers broken by Rosa, so she was probably considering stocking up.

"I should buy some defense, too," I muttered.

Most of my defensive equipment, including the BR Armor, had been burned by Monochrome. I could fill the bracer, boot, and coat slots with my special rewards. However, I had no proper upper and lower body armor, so I was wearing some really weak clothing I'd gotten from the gacha.

"Lose that, and you would be a naked guy in a coat," Nemesis commented.

"Now that would just freak people out."

"Well, what you have been wearing up until now was quite freaky, too, to be honest."

"You need armor?" B3 joined our conversation. "Should I give you what I have?"

"Eh? Your armor?"

The first thing that came to mind was the Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus — her Barbaroy mode armor — but special rewards like that one were bound to the MVP. Not to mention that she wouldn't hand it over even if she could. That meant that she intended to give me something else.

"You mean... lady armor?" I asked hesitantly.

Crossdressing is a big "no" for me, to be honest...

"Heh heh," she giggled before I could voice my thought. "Heh heh heh... sorry. And no, I don't mean my old armor or anything like that. I mean armor that's been left to me by my clan members."

"Clan members... ohh."

Her clan, the great Barbaroy Bad Burn's Mad Castle, had split up because of the results of their battle against Figaro, and also because many of them were simply too busy with real life. At the time, the members quitting had given their items over to the ones continuing.

"My job is Full Armor Giant, you know?" she said. "That's why most of the members, the girls and the guys, gave a lot of their armor to me... heh heh."

Again the giggle. She seemed to be remembering something funny, so I decided to just ask what it was.

She replied with, "Oh, one of the members accidentally *handed* me a speedo-shaped piece of armor, so everyone else ganked him and it became a real bloodbath... heh heh heh."

Is that really something you remember fondly and giggle about?

"Back to the matter at hand, that's the male armor I want to give you."

"A speedo?!"

"Not that. I mean something normal."

Man, what a relief... It felt like the conversation was going in that direction.

"I have my Gunhammer Plate, and whenever I wear something else, like right now, it's always female armor, so I've never really used the male armor they've given me. They're like gifts, so selling them wouldn't sit right with me, and that's why I'd like you to have a set. Thankfully, the one I'm thinking of is better than any armor here, and you only need a total level of 100, so you can use it right away."

I hesitated. "Are you sure I should have it?"

"Yes. Tools are meant to be used, so would this armor be better off in your hands." She reached into her inventory and took out a set of armor that would cover both the upper and lower body. It was a composite work, combining crimson beast leather and black metallic armoring.

"This is Volcanic Darkmetal Armor, otherwise known as just 'VDA.'"

That name almost made me say, "Wow, that sounds strong," but that felt too ten-year-old, so I just kept my mouth shut. Even so, there was no denying that it sounded and looked both strong and cool.

"It's magic armor made in Legendaria," B3 explained. "It has Fire Resistance and Dark Resistance, both level 4, meaning that it reduces fire and dark damage by a whole 25%. Even its leather bits are strong and really hard to burn. And, most importantly, the crafter used their crafting skills to keep the level limit low."

Whoa, that's really grea— hold on.

My Black Warcoat — an Ancient Legendary item — cut light damage by 100%. That meant that a combined resistance of 50% was also reasonably powerful.

"How much does it cost, by the way?" I asked.

"I feel like you won't accept it if I say the price, so I won't," she replied.

So it's really expensive.

"I really shouldn't—"

"It's pointless to leave it rotting in my inventory. Please take it."

"Then at least let me pay for—"

"I don't want money for something I was gifted."

She's pretty obstinate.

"You, Marie, and Rook weren't any better after you defeated Gardranda," Nemesis commented telepathically.

Oh, you mean the time when we were splitting the reward.

It'd happened only a bit over a month ago, but I already felt nostalgic about it.

Back to the matter at hand... how do I get us both to agr— ah.

"Let's do it like this," I said. "if I take this armor, I won't take any of the reparations from Rosa."

"That is... tolerable."

Doing it that way, she wouldn't be making money from this gift, and I wouldn't feel like I was getting too much.

And so, I accepted the VDA and quickly equipped it.

"You look good," said B3. "It really complements your bracers and coat."

"I feel the same way," I replied.

This is great. I've gotten something that both has good stats and matches the rest of my equipment!

I looked to my side and noticed Nemesis, staring at me in silence.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, it's nothing," she replied. "As long as you are satisfied, then... Yes, don't mind me."

What's with her? I wondered.

With vacant eyes, she murmured, "I completely forgot that B3's equipment was in the same vein as his... Can't expect her to point it out..."

So she's thinking about my and B3's equipment...? Oh! Does she also want something else she could wear in her human form? I guess I should find something for her... but wait, this is an antique store. I should visit something with newer clothes for that...

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While Ray was pondering that, this was what went on in Nemesis' head:

I appreciate his sentiment, but the problem is with his clothing — not mine. That set... That armor... No matter how you look at it, it's the attire of a villain. Of course, I'm aware that it came from a clan of villain roleplayers, so that is only to be expected. Still, unlike how he looked with the pirate hook and the spiky armor, there's far more consistency here, making him appear even more sinister than before.

She heaved a heavy sigh before concluding:

I feel like his appearance makes him look far more evil than Sol Crisis.

This somewhat worried her... but she had no idea that her worries would soon come to fruition.

Chapter Two: “I Ran Into Someone Shady” x2

Paladin, Ray Starling

After B3 gave me the VDA, the shopkeeper brought out four kinds of anti-Steal inventories — bags, wallets, rings, and small side-pouches.

I opted for the last one, because it was easy to take stuff out of it and because it matched the rest of my equipment. It looked somewhat like a deck case worn by characters from card game anime, and it reminded me of the president of EGRS.

One thing about this inventory, though: in exchange for its resistance to Steal and other types of destruction, it had a limited number of item types it could carry.

Though it had about as much space as my other inventory, it could only carry ten types of items. Strange as that seemed, adding resistance to Steal came at the cost of storage variety.

Because of this, I would continue using my previous inventory for general storage, and use this new one for whatever was really precious, like Silver.

By the way, this inventory cost me 10,000,000 lir, which was... kinda expensive, but the fact that I was even able to afford it spoke volumes about how much my situation in *Dendro* had changed over the past month.

As for Nemesis’s clothing... we didn’t find anything that suited her perfectly, so we decided to leave it for another day.

With the shopping done, we saw B3 off as she logged out to prepare for her visit back home, and then we headed out to our destination.

I considered taking a monster-slaying Paladin job quest to make the most out of my trip, but for some reason, there were no job quests relating to the ruins in Quartierlatin County.

I had expected there to be something, considering that new ruins seemed like a big deal but, apparently, that was off the mark.

Giving up on the job quest, I just headed straight to the Quartierlatin County.

Surrounded by a pleasant heat, Nemesis and I rode Silver on the path to our destination. Though he wasn't running at full speed, he was at least twice as fast as he'd been when pulling the carriage. We'd probably be at the town of Quartierlatin by evening.

Silver was clever, so he automatically made his way to the destination and avoided all obstacles and passersby as long as I held his reins. He even knew when to slow down and speed up.

Looking at him again, he really was something special.

I'd never really put much thought into him before, but having heard B3's words made me somewhat curious about him.

The ruins we were heading to right now were a place where you could get a job related to Prism Beasts, so it was likely that we could find info on them there, too, and I was reasonably excited about that.

"Now, Ray," Nemesis spoke up. "Silver is moving automatically, so why not check how it's doing?"

"'It'?" I raised an eyebrow, not sure what she meant.

"Shining Despair's charge."

Oh, that.

"Right-o." I opened up the menu, went to my equipment details, and picked the Black Warcoat's equipment skill, Shining Despair...

Shining Despair: Releases the light accumulated through Light Absorption to melt all things with a scorching beam of despair.
Active Skill.
Charge: 3%

"It's only increased by 1% after a whole four hours." I heaved a sigh.

This skill was no doubt the devastating beam attack used by Monochrome. I knew its power better than anyone else. It'd shattered two of my Counter Absorptions, yet still delivered enough damage to almost kill me.

Being able to use it myself would be... pretty good, to say the least.

However, we had a problem in the "charge" part. It displayed how much of the necessary light the coat had absorbed so far. And despite me wearing it ever since I'd gotten it yesterday, it had only gathered 3% of the amount needed for Shining Despair.

"Basic math tells me that I'll need a whole month before I can fire it for the first time," I complained. Considering that I'd be logging out for college and so forth, that was probably quite off the mark, too.

I can't even try it out like this, I thought.

"If only you could fire it with small amounts of charge," Nemesis commented. "The fact that it can only be used at 100% makes it quite inflexible."

And it makes actually using it kinda scary, I added.

Though it would be significantly weaker than Monochrome's original beam, you couldn't know what to expect. The original had almost blasted away all of Torne. Though toned-down, the coat's version was bound to be something fearsome.

"What can we do about this, anyway?" Nemesis asked. "Merely letting it burn in the sun is far too inefficient."

Considering how the Light Absorption skill functioned, Shining Despair was probably based on the premise of gathering light from light-based attacks, rather than charging through exposure to the sun. However, opponents who used light-based attacks weren't exactly common.

"What about Figaro's Fang of Gloria: Overdrive?" Nemesis suggested. "That seems like it could charge it up in an instant. If you take only the beam, you wouldn't suffer the blade damage, so you would only need to do something about the residual heat, no?"

"I'd rather not..." I said.

That sounded like it was one slip-up away from suicide. Not to mention that Figaro was currently soloing the Tomb Labyrinth.

"Perhaps you're right... I wonder if it would work with strong light that is not necessarily of the light element?"

"Strong light, eh?" I muttered. "Ah!"

I actually did have something that fit the bill.

Not wasting any time, I used Purifying Silverlight on the Black Warcoat. Normally, equipment affected by this skill emitted a silver glow, but the coat stayed all black, probably due to Light Absorption.

In other words, Silverlight *was* being absorbed. It was of the holy element, rather than light, so I had my doubts about this working, but if basic sunlight counted, perhaps this result was only obvious.

With this, I could charge the coat with both sunlight and Silverlight, which ought to speed up the process a bit.

“It’s pretty smart, if I say so myself,” I muttered.

“Agreed,” Nemesis nodded.

High and proud, I continued riding Silver while using the skill.

An hour later...

“Man, am I tired...” As Silver’s movement shook me, I lazily hung my head.

“You look like you have summer heat fatigue,” commented Nemesis.

“It’s probably close,” I muttered.

I was wearing the Black Warcoat’s hood to both hide from the sunlight and absorb more of it, so I couldn’t fault Nemesis for thinking that I looked like the heat was doing me in.

“I am unsure if it’s because of Light Absorption, but the Black Warcoat’s hood makes your face really dark and hard to see,” she commented.

“Really?” I couldn’t tell by myself. The hood didn’t limit my vision or anything.

“Mm-hm,” Nemesis nodded. “It’s like the darkness is hiding the upper half of your face. You look somewhat like a ghost-like monster, and even though I know it’s you, it makes me a tad scared.”

“Just wearing a hood makes me look like an undead?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t say it’s *just* the hood...”

“Is that so?”

Well, my appearance aside, what we had to consider now were my summer fatigue-like symptoms. They were caused by my continued use of Purifying Silver.

It had greatly increased the Black Warcoat’s charge speed, and it was now at 6%. However, doing this wasn’t good for my MP, and I’d already run out of all the MP I’d had at the start.

I still had the MP my Grudge-Soaked Greaves had accumulated during yesterday’s Monochrome incident, but I decided to keep it just in case I needed to use Wind Hoof.

Because of this, I had continued using Silverlight by restoring my MP with Potions, but after a while, it was making me feel a weariness much like summer heat fatigue.

Considering I was just riding Silver, this wasn't all that bad, but I couldn't say the same if I somehow got into a battle, so I decided to stop.

But how else can I charge it? I thought.

"Ah!" I lightly exclaimed. "Maybe I should buy lots of light element attack Gems and fire them at the coat?"

The idea sounded like it would eat a lot of my money, but if I was careful with how I used them, I wouldn't be harming myself.

I should've thought of that before leaving the capital, I thought. *I guess I'll have to buy them in Quartierlatin before exploring the ruins... Hm?*

"What is it?" I muttered as I felt that something was wrong.

Unlike B3, I didn't have any skills like Killing Intent Perception, but I still had my natural intuition.

I couldn't guarantee its reliability, but I couldn't help but feel like something disquieting was happening nearby.

"Nemesis," I said.

"Aye." Instantly understanding, she transformed into a greatsword and went into my right hand.

"Over there!" I shouted as I heard a faint sound coming from the dense broadleaf forest at the side of the open road.

The sound was followed by a scream that made me gasp.

Realizing that Silver couldn't go through the forest all that fast, I returned him to my inventory and started running on my own two feet.

Ten-odd seconds later, I found the sources of the sounds.

"Ah... aahh..." One was a girl, scared to the point of being unable to stand.

And the other was a mechanical humanoid approaching her. "Threat level — E. High-ly op-ti-mal. Se-cure tar-get."

It appeared to be a monster, as evidenced by the name above it — *Teal Wolf.*

"In what world is that a...?!"

I knew full well that Teal Wolves inhabited the north of the capital. But this thing before me was metallic, rather than furry; bipedal, rather than quadrupedal; and used some gun-like arm attachments as its weaponry, rather than claws and fangs.

It was nothing like the Teal Wolves I'd fought before.

In fact, this thing was more like a Magingear.

"De-ter-min-ing threat lev-el."

The mechanical Teal Wolf (?) noticed us and made its helmet-covered head turn to me.

The way it talked was blatantly robotic, but upon closer look, I noticed that it had animal fur sticking out through the spaces in the helmet and the mechanical parts.

Is the text actually right, then? Is that really a Teal Wolf? I thought.

"Threat le-vel — B+. Pri-or-i-ti-zing e-lim-i-na-tion o-ver re-triev-al."

My observation mattered little to the Teal Wolf (?). The gun-like attachment on its arm began spinning.

The sight gave me a sense of deja vu and made a chill go down my spine. I instantly jumped to the side.

A moment later, countless bullets pierced the space I had been in, turning the trees a distance away into swiss cheese.

"A Gatling gun," I muttered. "First time I've seen someone other than Shu use one."

Even Hugo's Magingear had used a single-shot gun.

Though this Teal Wolf's (?) Gatling gun wasn't nearly as menacing as Baldr, it still wasn't something you'd want to face.

"Pur-su-ing."

Making all its metallic pieces clang, the mechanical beast turned its weapons towards me.

I continued moving, effectively dodging all that came my way.

The bullets flew in a straight line, and they didn't have a particularly powerful impact. They didn't chase after me, have needlessly high penetrative force, blow up the surroundings, or become manga characters.

Compared to my mock battles against Shu or Marie, this was actually really tame.

"Hold on... is that the smell of gunpowder?" I asked.

I suddenly realized that the weaponry wasn't based on magic, but some sort of explosive chemical substance.

"Then I can use *that*!"

The monster had even moved away from the girl to focus on its attacks on me. The situation was perfect.

"Gardranda," I said as I raised the left arm I'd regained just yesterday and, for the first time in over a month, brandished the left Miasmaflame Bracer. "Purgatorial Flames."

It had always been my main weapon against monsters, and I didn't hesitate to use it on the Teal Wolf (?).

A moment later, the construct underwent a dramatic change.

The flames scorching it quickly ignited the chemicals inside its weapons, causing it to swell... and blow up.

"Fire safety's important, you know?" I grinned.

As I looked at the smoldering mechanical remains, I was relieved that my idea had worked. It had been entirely possible that the weapons were fireproof, just like Baldr. Then again, the fur sticking out had made that very unlikely.

"What *was* that, anyway?" I asked.

The exploded, blackened remains of the Teal Wolf (?) were spread out on the ground.

I walked up to take a better look at the machine's interior.

There was some open space inside, but there was nothing there — not even the owner of the fur that had been peeking out. During the explosion, I'd seen some light particles, so I could only assume that it was dead. However, the machinery, despite being all burned and broken, was still there.

It didn't look like it was about to drop something — it was now just scrap metal spread out on the ground.

I picked up a piece of the scrap and opened the menu for a description, but all I got was, "The remains of a mysterious machine."

Still, the fact that it got an item description and the fact that there was no name above its head meant that the remains didn't belong to a monster.

"What the hell is this?" I wondered out loud.

Machines and monsters made me think of Dryfe... particularly, Franklin. However, I had a feeling that he wasn't involved in this.

That lab coat asshole would've been way more nasty with his work. At the very least, he'd have made sure that burning it would've caused a far bigger explosion, or a release of some poison gas.

"Well, there's no point in thinking about it now." Albeit still curious, I put the remains in my inventory.

The fact that I can do this is conclusive proof that it's not a monster...

right?

“All right. Now...”

The girl who’d been attacked by the Teal Wolf (?) was now unconscious because of the shock from the explosion.

However, it didn’t look like she was hurt in any way, so it was safe to say that this little bit of trouble was over. Still, even though that weird Teal Wolf (?) was dealt with, I couldn’t really leave an unconscious girl here in the forest all alone.

I walked towards her to see if she was all right.

But then, as though to stop me, a blue flash ran before me.

“Nh?!”

It was a sword. It separated me from the girl... then changed its course, and *went for my neck*.

In haste, I raised the left Miasmaflame Bracer to block the blade. It was more of an act of instinct, rather than thought, but it worked.

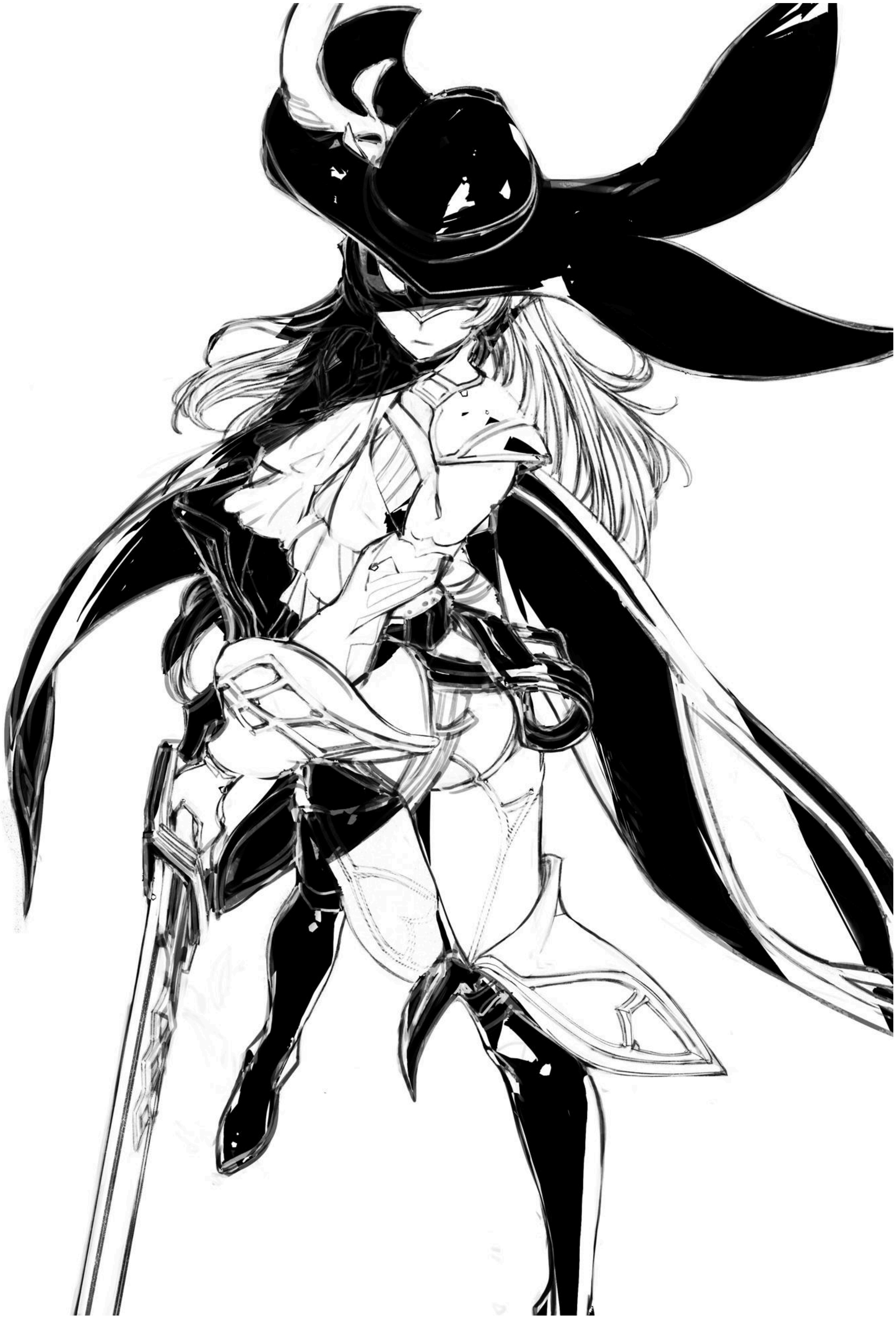
Thankfully, the blade stopped after digging just a little into the bracer. If I hadn’t been so lucky, I could’ve lost my left hand... if not my head.

“Who’re *you*?” I asked, as I assessed the trajectory and threat level of the attack. It had clearly been meant to kill me instantly, which reminded me of Rosa. It shook me so much that my heart began to race.

Wondering what I’d done to deserve this attack, I turned, puzzled, and looked at the attacker... only to be taken completely aback.

The attacker looked *that* shocking.

It was a swordswoman with long, azure hair and a mask on the upper half of her face. Her noble-looking clothes were partially reinforced with metal, and in her hands, there was a blue blade with a strangely pressurizing presence.



There was only one thing I could say about a person who looked like that.

“Shady!” She and I simultaneously spoke the same word.

Excuse me, but why?

“That sinister apparel...” she continued. “A perfect fit for a shady scoundrel rotten enough to assault a helpless girl in broad daylight.”

“Assau— ‘Scoundrel’?!” I exclaimed.

I’m not sure how to feel about a shady masked woman who attacks people out of the blue speaking such baseless slander about me.

“What do you mean, ‘a perfect fit’?” I sputtered. “Do I look like some villain to you?!”

“She is definitely misunderstanding your actions,” commented Nemesis. “But I can’t help but agree with her on the apparel.”

“Nemesis?!”

Why would you say that?! Do you have the Confusion debuff or something?!

“Funny you mention debuffs,” Nemesis said. “Not a day goes by when I do not wonder how many Elixirs it would take to fix your fashion sense.”

A damaged sense would’ve probably been a mental debuff, though. Elixirs didn’t work on those.

Wait, I mean, why are you even saying that? I asked Nemesis telepathically. *It’s nothing like an animal suit, being shirtless, a junihitoe, a four-meter-tall jiangshi, or a damn lab coat.*

“Don’t use Superiors as your standard! They’re all nuts!”

...You have a point.

“But Nemesis, all I’m wearing is demonic gauntlets, corpse boots, a light-consuming coat, and red and black composite armor. None of these are that bad, right?”

“ALL! OF! THEM! ARE! Spend just a second thinking about the meaning behind all of these things, you fool!”

“Hmm...”

When you put them all together... I guess it’s a bit villain-like.

“‘A bit’... You know what, that’s fine. It’s better than not seeing it at all.” Nemesis calmed down.

Anyway, back to the masked woman. She was still brandishing her sword in my direction, not moving a muscle. That, combined with her comments on my appearance, made it pretty clear that she was far more wary of me than she had to be.

But... to be fair...

"I don't think I want to hear anything about my apparel from someone wearing a mask that shady."

"I... umm... I must hide my face because I am on a secret mission from someone very important!" the swordswoman argued. "It is nothing like some scoundrel's heinous clothing!"

"Well, *I* only ended up looking like this because of what I was given or gifted," I shot back. "And come on... this isn't *that* bad, right?"

"I simply cannot trust a person who sees *that* as 'not that bad'!"

"What a dodgeball game of a conversation," Nemesis sighed. "Or perhaps it's just catch where both sides are only hitting the other? Why is this even happening? How did Ray end up talking about fashion with some masked woman he ran into in the middle of the forest?"

Hey, I'd like to know that, too, I thought. *Anyway, I should get her to calm down, so—*

"Anyhow," she cut my words short. "I cannot ignore a scoundrel who assaults girls. Forget the details — I shall incapacitate you and hand you to the authorities!"

"The details are important, damn it!"

And did she actually just say "incapacitate"?! Is she another meathead?!

"You seem to be running into more and more of them recently," commented Nemesis.

Yeah, like Rosa!

However, the masked swordswoman was, in a way, worse than her.

Her left hand was exposed, and there was no crest on it, meaning that she was a tian, rather than a Master, and she was only hostile to me because she genuinely thought I was a dangerous person and was trying to protect the girl from me.

Considering that it was all a misunderstanding, I really didn't want this to get violent.

Still, it didn't seem like she'd be willing to listen to me if I tried to explain.

All of this made her a real trouble to deal with.

“Hey, listen, I just—”

“Enough talk!”

“No, it isn’t! Come on!”

I made Nemesis switch into her shield form and protected myself from the masked woman’s blue blade.

“Whoa, the speed!”

She didn’t move at the speed of sound yet, so she was definitely slower than Figaro, Xunyu, or a number of other duel rankers. However, she was approaching their speeds in spite of the fact that she was a tian.

Additionally, she was clearly a skilled swordfighter, and her attacks were hard to defend against for reasons other than speed.

Shu’s skill as a fighter made his fists hard to avoid, and the same logic applied here. I wouldn’t have been able to defend against this if I hadn’t switched to the Black Shield.

“Gh... Hm?”

Though her swordsmanship was scary, something about it felt off. If I had to explain it, I’d say that I didn’t seem to be taking damage I was expecting to take.

Of course, I was using a shield, but there was a great difference between what my senses were telling me and the actual damage I sustained.

The thing my senses were telling me about was that blue blade. It had an absurdly dense air of intimidation around it. In all honesty, it was far more menacing than the masked woman herself.

In fact, the power I felt from it seemed to be on the same level as Figaro’s Gloria α... or perhaps even higher.

Despite that, I wasn’t taking nearly as much damage as that impression would’ve had you expect. It was a curious blade that didn’t seem to live up to its aura.

But even if her sword was weaker than expected, she handled it beautifully.

The most skilled tian fighter I’d met was Liliana, but this woman was clearly above her. Though she looked weird, she was definitely a first-rate fighter.

The relentless chain of attacks, similar to Liliana’s, was pretty hard to defend against, most likely due to stat differences.

“...Hm?” My own thoughts just now made me realize something.

The masked woman's swordsmanship was really similar to Liliana's. Similar enough to make me feel like their style was the same.

However, Liliana's sword-fighting technique wasn't the same that was popular among this country's knights. She herself had once told me that her technique had been invented by her father, the Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria. It was a unique mix of pirate sword-fighting techniques he'd brought from his birthplace of Granvaloa and the knight techniques popular here in Altar.

The only people who could use this technique were the late Langley himself and Liliana, who'd learned directly from him. Otherwise...

"Langley Grandria," I said.

The masked woman gasped.

"Did you learn swordfighting from Liliana's father?"

Indeed, that was the only other possibility.

"You know Lilia... Vice Commander Grandria?" she asked, as she made some distance between us. She was still brandishing her sword, but at least she was willing to listen now.

"I'm Ray Starling," I said. "I happen to be a Paladin, and Liliana's my friend."

"Ray... Starling?" she said, as she made a dubious face.

I proved my identity to her by removing my hood and showing myself.

Her gasp made it clear that she knew my face.

"You are the same one who appeared on the broadcast of the events in Gideon! The one with one arm!"

"Yeah." Thanks to Miss Aberration, I wasn't one-armed anymore, but it was clear that this woman knew me.

"Why is one of the main people behind the stemming of that incident assaulting a girl in a place like this?!"

"I'm telling you that I'm not!"

"Eh?" She made a surprised face.

"I beat a monster that was attacking her. She fainted, so I went to see if she was all right."

"Ehhh?!" the masked woman cried. She looked around at the trees damaged by my battle against the Teal Wolf (?), and then muttered, "Why didn't you say so?"

"I tried, but you just said, 'Enough talk!' and jumped at me!"

"You could have said that instead of making comments about my mask!"

She has a point. I guess we're both at fault here.

"Hold on! But you attacked me before we even talked!" I cried.

"I thought it was an emergency! My teacher told me that, in emergencies, victory goes to those who make the first move!"

Well, I couldn't guarantee that I wouldn't have gone with a preemptive strike in her situation, either, but...

"Hey, I'd understand taking that approach with a monster, but don't go for a guy's neck just because he looks a bit bad," I said.

"Do you have a mirror?!" she exclaimed. "I'll show you what you're calling 'a bit bad'!"

"Oh, yes, we actually have one in our inventory." Nemesis, turning back to her human form, started to dig through our stuff.

Nemesis dearest, why, might I ask, do you insist on taking her side on this?

"I am happy to have finally found a person who shares my sentiment about your fashion. Everyone else ignores it, after all."

"Is my gear *that* bad?"

"Why do you think I am looking for a mirror?"

As we had such an exchange, the masked woman looked at Nemesis in surprise.

"An Embryo who can become human..." she said. "So you're a Maiden, just like that parasite's... I mean... High Priestess's Embryo."

Wow, "parasite" is pretty harsh, I thought. *Well, Miss Aberration is pretty infamous.*

"Mm-hm," Nemesis nodded. "I am Nemesis. Ray's Embryo. Here. Mirror."

"Thank you," replied the masked woman. "My name is... Azurite. I am a Swordmaster."

Swordmaster was a swordsman grouping high-rank job with very difficult conditions.

Anyway... "Azurite," huh? That name sure suited her azure hair.

"That aside, I'll say it again," Azurite continued. "Your equipment is both black and has a sinister design. Even the Fallen Knight pales in comparison."

"Hey, Juliet's armor has a different direction," I say. "Hers is gothic, while I look like... a bit of a bad boy?”

“You look like *at least* the final member of an evil ‘big four,’” said Nemesis.

“You remind me of Lord Ira from a play I saw once,” Azurite agreed. “Except worse.”

Do I really look that bad?! I’m genuinely concerned now.

“As you should be,” said Nemesis. “Let’s forget about fashion for now, though. While you two were having this meaningless dispute, the girl seems to have woken up.”

Azurite and I looked at the girl and, sure enough, she was slowly getting up.

The girl introduced herself as “Shirley.” Her parents owned an inn in Quartierlatin, and she’d come here to this small forest to forage for edible mushrooms and wild plants.

She was using a monster-repelling item that kept the low-level monsters here at bay. However, it hadn’t had an effect on the machine-wearing monster, and we’d come right on time to save her from it.

She also remembered that I’d come to help her, and that completely cleared up Azurite’s misunderstanding.

All’s well that ends well, I guess.

Anyway, there was no guarantee that another machine-wearing monster wouldn’t show up, so we decided to escort her back to Quartierlatin. We were going there to begin with, so that certainly didn’t inconvenience us. And apparently, Azurite was heading there, as well.

“Nemesis and I are going to the ruins they found there,” I said. “What about you?”

“I’m going there to investigate the ruins, too.”

So we had the same destination, huh?

Well, these were the first ruins ever found here in the kingdom, so they were bound to attract many various people.

“Really?!” exclaimed Shirley. “Then please come stay at our inn! You saved me, so I will ask them to make it cheap!”

She tightly clenched her fists in front of her chest. It was some impressive enthusiasm.

“But I—” Azurite spoke up. She probably wanted to say something about the fact that she hadn’t fought the monster, but Shirley just cut her off.

“I’ll tell Mom and Dad everything that happened, then ask Lefty to prepare a chicken... Ah, the customers really liked the quiche I made recently, so maybe I should...” The girl just didn’t give Azurite a chance to say anything.

“Hey, you were just trying to help her, too, right?” I said to Azurite. “Don’t sweat it.”

Sure, she’d been trying to protect the girl from *me*, but that wasn’t a big deal. Really.

“Ah...” Azurite opened her mouth to say something, but decided against it.

According to Shirley, Quartierlatin was less than an hour’s walk away.

That was why I chose not to get on Silver and just walk there alongside these three.

Thirty minutes passed. As I talked with Shirley, who was still as energetic as she’d been at the start, something began bothering me.

Azurite was silently walking behind me, and I could feel her gaze on me.

I had no skills that would make this possible, but that was just how intense her stare was.

Why is she looking at me like that? Does she still suspect me?

“Hm?” I exclaimed as something held me back. I turned around to see Azurite, grabbing the edge of my Black Warcoat.

“...” She still didn’t say a word. She was hanging her head, so I couldn’t see her expression.

As I was about to ask what was wrong, she finally opened her mouth.

“Sorry... for attacking you back then...”

“Ohhh.”

So she’d just been looking for the right time to apologize for her sudden attack. Well, all that tit-for-tat we’d gone through had made her miss her opportunity. Still, I had no reason not to accept her apology. It seemed a bit awkward, like she wasn’t used to saying sorry, but I could tell she was trying.

“It’s fine,” I said. “We’re both okay, and you were just trying to help her, too.”

“But...”

“Again, it’s fine. But keep in mind not to judge people based on appearance. I might look like a bit of a bad boy, but there are people in the world who look downright heinous, and are actually pretty nice.”

My words make her giggle for some reason before saying, “All right... Th-Thank you.”

All tense, she gave me gratitude, and I felt like she was even less used to that than apologizing.

Chapter Three: It’s Not Against the Rules

Paladin, Ray Starling

Just as Shirley had said, the walk to Quartierlatin took only a little under an hour.

The town was paved with stone, and all in all, it looked significantly more well-maintained than the usual village here in the kingdom. There were trees and flower gardens everywhere, making it feel like a place where humanity and nature thrived in harmony.

Needless to say, it was quite unlike Altea, Gideon, and Torne.

The beautiful townscape made me stop in place and look around.

“This is one flowery town,” I muttered.

“Indeed,” nodded Azurite. “This was done by the will of Countess Quartierlatin. The lady has a taste for gardening. Her mansion’s gardens are particularly splendid. She oftentimes invites orphans and travelers to have tea parties with her.”

“Well, someone’s knowledgeable,” I said.

“The one I serve is close to the lady.”

Uh huh. I guess she works for some noble, then, I thought.

“A-Anyhow, let us hurry!” she urged me. “The Sun will set if you let the flowers divert you like this.”

“Right-o,” I said as I resumed walking, still observing the sights.

Shirley’s parents’ inn was in the outskirts of the town.

It seemed a bit inconvenient for shopping and the like, but from what she’d told us on the way, it was close to the ruins we were after, so that was good.

Suddenly, I noticed white smoke coming from further in the inn. Then I felt a certain scent tickle my nose. It was familiar, and it reminded me of a family trip I’d gone on...

“Why build outside the town?” asked Azurite. “It seemed to me like there was quite a bit of open space in the center.”

Shirley pointed at the nearby mountains before answering, “This place is close to the mountains, right? Well, that’s probably why my prospector grandpa accidentally dug up a hot spring here!”

“Oh? That sounds nice,” I commented. I haven’t gone to a real-life hot spring for a while now.

By the way, although she’d said that his role was “prospector,” it turned out Shirley’s grandpa’s actual job was “Adventurer.”

She explained, “He was crazy about Tenchi to begin with, and finding the hot spring lit a fire in him. That’s why he went ahead and built a hot spring inn!”

“I see,” I said.

So the smoke was actually steam from the open-air baths, and the scent was from the hot springs. I couldn’t smell much sulfur, though. This spring wasn’t particularly odorous.

“I’m baaack!” said Shirley, as she opened the door.

A moment later, a woman — presumably her mother — ran up to us. She looked exactly like you’d expect a hot spring inn hostess to look.

“My,” she spoke up. “Why are you so late? You had us all worried.”

“I ran into trouble, and these people here saved me!” was how Shirley prefaced her talk. Then she told her mother what had happened.

“Oh my,” the mother gasped. “Thank you so much for saving my daughter...”

“Anyway,” Shirley continued. “I’d like you to let them stay here for cheap!”

“Forget ‘cheap’ — they don’t have to pay us a single lir. But... oh dear, this is troubling,” Shirley’s mother said as she placed her hand on her cheek and made a... well... troubled face. “Because of the ruins, we’re currently full of customers, so the only place where we have space is the annex.”

“Ehhh? But that place is a bit...” Shirley made a troubled face, too.

“What’s the annex?” I asked.

“It’s a Tenchi-style building Grandpa built just because he wanted to,” Shirley explained. “It’s so different from Western buildings that our customers find it hard to stay there...”

“Guests don’t even have beds,” added her mother. “They have to spread the bedding directly on the floor.”

Shirley added, “Putting some beds there would make it way easier... but Grandpa’s will said that we’re supposed to leave it as it is...”

Hearing them talk made me get the gist of it. Basically... the annex was a Japanese-style building. Tenchi was much like Sengoku Era Japan, after all, so that was completely certain.

That’s no problem for me, then, I thought.

“I don’t mind using the annex,” I said. “I’m (probably) used to Tenchi-style buildings.”

“Really?” Shirley’s mother asked, and I nodded in response.

“I am fine with it, as well,” said Azurite. “I have yet to experience staying at a Tenchi-style building, and it certainly won’t hurt to try.”

Thus, it was decided that we’d stay at the annex.

A short while later, I was standing in front of it, and it was... somewhat different than I’d imagined.

“Tenchi-style,” I muttered in perplexity. “Tenchi-style, eh...?”

While choosing my country during character creation, Tenchi had looked much like Japan during the Azuchi-Momoyama period.

However, the building right before my eyes was quite unlike that.

What’s the best way to describe this...? I thought.

“Going by your memory, it looks like a depiction of an old Japan you would see in foreign movies,” said Nemesis.

There. That’s perfect.

It got some things right, but it also made some really blatant mistakes. The coloring, for instance, was completely off, and all in all, it wasn’t a building I’d expected when I’d heard “Tenchi-style.”

I couldn’t help but wonder whether this was actually how Tenchi-style buildings had been in her grandpa’s time, or whether the one who’d built it had the wrong image of the country.

Guess that’s something I’ll have to confirm when I actually go there someday.

“So this is a Tenchi-style building,” said Azurite, as she looked at a shisa-like komainu. Her eyes were gleaming with curiosity. “What an exotic decoration.”

I’m really not sure if that thing’s really Tenchi-style, either...

We entered the building, and Shirley led us to our rooms.

As I considered the fact that sliding screens couldn’t be locked, I discovered that the rooms here were actually using doors.

That's wrong! Wait... I guess this is right for a hot spring inn.

"Here is your key!" said Shirley. "You can have dinner at the main building between six and eight o'clock!"

"We'll keep that in mind."

"The annex has an open-air bath, so please use that! We're really proud of our hot springs!"

"Ooh, that's good to hear," I said. I was the only guy here in the annex, so I'd be able to have a really relaxed bath.

"Do you have any other questions?!" asked Shirley excitedly.

"Only one," said Azurite, as she raised her hand a bit.

"Ask away!"

"Does this annex have any... home warashis?"

"It doesn't!"

"I see..." Azurite muttered, seemingly disappointed.

"What's a home warashi?" I asked.

"It's a creature they speak of in Tenchi. They are 'yokai' said to look like young children. They live and play in human households like an odd sort of neighbor, and I hear that having them around is a blessing."

"But we're in Altar."

"That matters not. I was recently bathing in the castle and saw a little girl appear out of seemingly nowhere. That must've been a home warashi."

I stared at her.

Forget the home warashi, how did you end up bathing in the castle? What are you, even?!

"Speaking of that home warashi," she continued, "I couldn't see all that well due to all the steam, but she looked much like Liliana's younger sister."

"Are you sure it wasn't actually her... Milianne?"

"The castle's baths are trapped to prevent assassinations. A child like her could never get in."

"You have a point..."

That made it likely that they actually did have a home warashi. Unless Milianne was some infiltration expert who could bypass those traps, anyway.

Though, we already had a natural escape artist in the second princess, so that didn't seem all that unlikely.

◇

Going into the room filled me with relief.

Though the coloring was still far from Japanese, it had a tatami floor, zabutons, zaisu — more than enough to make it feel like an actual Japanese hot spring inn room.

I can chill here just fine.

"The color is discomforting," said Nemesis. "But the smell of the tatami and the zabuton make me feel... nostalgic, for some reason. This is pleasant."

She was finding the atmosphere of this room (which, despite it all, felt Japanese) to be soothing, most likely because of her usual peeking into my memories.

Also, about four-fifths of all the tea snacks that had come with the room were already gone.

Oh, well.

"All right, then..."

I removed my equipment so I could relax properly.

I couldn't really wear my special rewards and VDA in a place like this, so I took it all off and stored it in the pouch-shaped inventory I had bought today.

Counting my three special rewards, the VDA, my accessory (I hadn't found anything useful in the shop, so I only had a Lifesaving Brooch right now), my spare weapon, and Silver, I now had seven items inside it.

You could only put ten types of items inside it, but even with everything unequipped and stored, I still had enough space for three.

Though I'd unequipped everything, I didn't want to walk around in just my inner clothing, so I got into the yukata that came along with the room.

Now this really feels like a hot spring inn, I thought, which made me want to go take a dip right then and there.

"Hm?" Nemesis read my thoughts. "The sun is still up. You intend to go this early?"

"Yeah," I said, but then I remembered something I was planning to do today. "Wait, no. I'll go in after cleaning Silver outside. You can go first."

Having found out just how much of a luxury Silver was, I wanted to give him a cleaning. Once I was done with that, I'd go to the hot spring and get all the dirt off of me.

Also, as a girl, Nemesis would probably bathe longer than me, so it was probably best to let her go first.

Hell, there were probably separate baths for guys and girls, so there was no need for us to go at the same time to begin with.

"This'll be your first ever hot spring experience," I said. "Enjoy it for all it's worth."

"Mm-hm," she nodded. "So I shall."

And so, I went to clean Silver, while Nemesis went to the open-air bath that the inn was so proud of.

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Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis

"This is exciting," I muttered.

As Ray's Embryo, I'd inherited my general knowledge from him. Thus, of course, I knew of hot springs.

Warmth, pleasantness, health, hot spring eggs, beauty, hot spring manju, the epitome of anything Japanese, hot spring water, drinks under the moonlight... All such information was already in my head.

However, I'd never experienced it for myself.

In fact, most of the time, I relied on Ray logging out to clean me up, so I barely even knew what a normal bath was like.

And now that we'd chanced upon a hot spring, I simply had to try it out for myself.

Excited, I walked past a piece of cloth — called "noren," according to Ray's knowledge — that said "women" on it in both old Tenchi language and common, opened the sliding door, and entered the changing room.

"Nh?" I said.

"...Eh?"

Someone — Azurite — was already there. She was placing her clothes away into a box-shaped inventory. Her blue blade was placed against the clothing shelves.

She wasn't wearing her mask, either. Her face was fully exposed.

"...?!" A second later, she whipped her mask out of her inventory with a haste that made me wonder if she'd reached supersonic speeds and instantly equipped it.

"..."

"..."

I looked at the girl — fully nude, except for the mask — and wondered what had gotten into her.

She looked back at me, clearly shaken by the fact that I'd seen her bare face.

After a brief silence, I opened my mouth. "Keep your mask on if you'd like. Let's just enter the bath, shall we? Standing naked like that is how you catch illnesses."

"G-Good idea!" she nodded as she picked up her blue sword and left the changing room.

Eh? You're taking that thing, too? I raised an eyebrow.

We both followed the instructions on the "Etiquette" sign, cleaned our bodies by dousing ourselves in water, walked into the hot spring, sat next to each other, and heaved a relaxed sigh.

Truly, this was really something wonderful.

It was as though pure, undiluted comfort was permeating my body.

How long is Ray planning to stay here in Quartierlatin, I wonder? I hope we're here for three or four more days.

Suddenly, I noticed that Azurite was acting like she wanted to say something.

The glass on the eye area of her mask was misty, so she probably couldn't look at me directly. Still, she was facing my direction, and she opened her mouth to say something I more or less expected. "Keep my face a secre—"

"Just so you are aware," I cut her words short, "I have no knowledge of what your face implies. Ray doesn't recognize it, either. That moment back in the changing room was the first time either of us ever saw it. It exists in neither of our memories."

"Really?" she asked.

"You can confirm it yourself, no? You seem to have Truth Discernment, after all."

That skill was surely the reason why she'd so readily understood that

Ray was telling the truth after the battle at noon.

"Eh? But... is that really so? He's a Paladin, right?"

"It really is so."

"I... see..." She seemed relieved, yet troubled about something else now. Though, it was hard to tell, considering I could only see the bottom half of her face.

"If I may ask," I spoke up again and pointed at something right outside the bath. "For what purpose did you bring that sword here?"

This was my first time in a hot spring, but even I knew that it was rude to bathe while armed.

"This sword cannot be stored in inventories," she explained. "I've no choice but to carry it around."

"How cumbersome..."

I'd never heard of an item that couldn't be stored for any other reason than inventory capacity. Not even Gideon's rankers spoke of items like that. Then again, it didn't seem like she was lying, so I assumed she wasn't.

Azurite presumably realized that bathing with a blade handy wasn't good, so she went ahead and began trying to hide it with the tubs and buckets here.

That changes little, if you ask me...

"Mh?" I looked at Azurite as she stood there, still trying to hide it, and realized something. "You have quite a nice figure."

"I do?"

I could see her bare body quite well from here. It was well-proportioned and held a good balance between "muscly" and "soft." Her chest was sizable, but not enough to lose grace, and the curve from her shoulders to her rear was really smooth.

Mhm, it's of a fine mold, indeed.

"But you're also..." Azurite spoke up before stopping. "Sorry."

"Should I take that 'sorry' as a declaration of war?"

So my body looked seedy even through her misty lenses, eh? Well, it wasn't like I wasn't aware that there wasn't much to my chest. In fact, considering my overall frame, a big chest would only make me look unbalanced.

"No matter," I continued. "My Master is not the type to care about women's figures or breast sizes. Being considered 'flat' doesn't bother me all that much."

"So he doesn't judge books by their covers?" Azurite asked. "But then, why did he pick on my mask?"

"Oh no, that isn't the reason," I replied, before explaining why Ray cared little for the female figure. "He said that he lost all interest in nude women after his sister took him to a jungle where he ended up being chased by a horde of naked amazons."

"Ehhhh...?"

When I'd first heard it, I'd also thought, *Eh? That happened on Earth? Not here?* Needless to say, his sister had left him with quite a bit of trauma.

Still, even if naked bodies didn't excite him, he had a decent interest in love and affection, and his heart could still race for reasons related to such things, so he wouldn't have any trouble entering a relationship or becoming intimate with someone... probably.

"It certainly looks like he has his share of troubles," Azurite sighed. She was probably imagining young Ray's trauma.

I grinned. "That story is only something to laugh about at this point, though."

"Perhaps. But he's Ray Starling the Unbreakable, is he not? He's been involved in many things that cannot be laughed off, no? Like the incident at Gideon..."

"I cannot deny that."

After all, he'd been involved in a number of major incidents ever since my hatching.

In fact, he'd been caught up in such events even before coming here. Though the other side wasn't nearly as life-threatening as this one, there was, for example, that thing that had happened before Brother Bear's tournament fight when he was little.

For all I knew, Ray might've been born under just that kind of star.

"He seems to be predisposed to never ignore any tragedies before him, which makes him end up carrying some heavy burdens," I said.

The greatest example of that would be the whole matter that had surrounded the Gouz-Maise Gang. It had been nothing but painful to him, and as his Embryo, I knew that far too well.

"That nature of his worries me sometimes," I sighed.

"I see..."

I was Ray's Embryo — his partner. As such, I was confident that I was his closest ally in battle, but I didn't know if I properly supported his heart and mind.

I should find more ways to care for him, but...

"...Hm?" My thoughts were cut short by a changing room's sliding door opening.

It wasn't the same one that Azurite and I had gone through, which made a certain question come to mind — *Why are there two doors?*

Before I could figure out the answer, the door opened up... *and Ray came through it.*

He had a towel around his waist and still wore the pouch-inventory, but that was the extent of it.

I, on the other hand, hadn't gone into the spring wearing a towel, so he could see me clearly through the water.

Azurite was actually standing, so he could see her whole and bare whether he liked it or not.

"..." Ray and I didn't say a word.

"Umm," Azurite spoke up. "My lenses are misty, so I can't see well. Did someone come in?"

An inexplicable air surrounded us, and Ray, for some reason, turned around and walked back into the changing room... only to *come back out again in about ten seconds.*

Then, as though it was nothing, he walked up to the open-air bath, doused himself in water, got inside, and sighed in satisfaction.

Then, he said two things. "It's mixed bathing time right now. Also, though the dressing rooms are different, the hot spring is the same."

A moment later, I hit him with a drop kick, and Azurite — who must have realized who it was by his voice — crushed him with the broad side of her blade. The combined force of our attacks instantly reaped his consciousness.

I know I was only just thinking about how to care for him, but he definitely deserved this.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"I'm in this dream again," I muttered.

Nemesis and Azurite had given me the Faint debuff, sending me to the dreamspace I'd been in a few times now.

I was pretty used to Fainting in *Dendro* by now, so even if this place looked different, I could tell it was that by the feel alone.

Last time, this had just been an empty space with a "Coming Soon" sign, but now, it looked much like my room in real life. It had probably been recreated from my memories.

"Honestly, how I ended up Fainting concerns me way more than how this space looks right now," I muttered as I sat down on a chair — which felt just like the one in real life. "I was properly following the rules of the bath. Isn't this result a bit unreasonable?"

I'd gone out to the open-air bath, only to find both Nemesis and Azurite. Thinking I'd made a mistake, I'd gone back to the changing room, but I'd seen a sign saying that it was mixed bathing time. Figuring that meant it was all fine, I'd gone back to the spring, only to be abused like that.

Incomprehensible.

"Oh, but you have to comprehend it... don't you?" said a small girl, sitting formally on my bed.

I shrugged. "Hey, Shu told me, 'You must never panic when you accidentally walk in on women bathing. If you falter or turn red, you'll just make them scream. That's why you have to keep your cool and act like it's no big deal, then calmly explain why you came in.'"

"I don't know if that's true or not, but if it is, does that mean that Mr. Bear did it... too?" the reddish-brown girl tilted her head.

"I think he also said, 'You just have to make them think like there's nothing weird about you being there.'"

"But that's clearly strange... isn't it?"

It is. I nodded. *Now that I think about it, Shu might've been joking.*

I'd taken a joke seriously and done something bad...

But, wait, it was mixed bathing time, so it wasn't against the rules to enter, right?

"Even if it's not against the rules, what's embarrassing is still embarrassing, and what makes you angry still makes you angry. That's obvious... isn't it? Manners towards girls are important... right?"

"Right," I said. "I guess the sudden event made me lose my composure."

I belatedly realized that I’d been a bit out of it back there. Even if I’d felt no sexual excitement, the very fact that I’d been in a bath with girls who weren’t family had made me lose myself.

That was definitely all my bad.

“You have to apologize... right?” said the girl.

“Yeah, I know. I’ll do it after I wake up,” I said. “By the way...”

“What?”

I turned around and looked at the horned, reddish-brown girl before asking, “You’re Gardranda, right?”

“Yes... I am.”

Chapter Four: The First Night

Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda.

That was the name of the first UBM I'd ever encountered here in *Infinite Dendrogram*. It was the creature that had gone on to become my first special reward — Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Now, I was facing an entity that seemed to represent the will of that item, and this wasn't our first meeting.

My first encounter with her had been back when I'd passed out while fighting my second UBM, Gouz-Maise, in the middle of a dream depicting my memories.

Back then, she had been nothing but a red-black silhouette of few words, none of them spoken fluently. Now, however, she was clearly visible and could hold a proper conversation.

"I saw the 'Coming Soon' sign a few times," I said as I looked around the room. "And it looks like it came."

"Mm-hm," Gardranda nodded. "Everything is prepared... I guess?"

Why does she sound so uncertain about everything she says? I wondered.

"So, let's start with a question... What are you, anyway?" I asked.

Shu and Figaro had told me that they'd never heard of a defeated UBM showing up to someone while they were unconscious. Those two were veterans who had beaten Mythicals and even an SUBM, and yet not even they had ever experienced it.

Why, then, was it happening with Gardranda?

Since I didn't know, I asked her.

"I am what became of the power and mind that the original Gardranda didn't use... I think?"

You "think," eh?

"You can also say that I'm the child that was inside her... maybe?" she added.

"*That* was a pregnant lady?" I raised an eyebrow.

Tian lives had been at stake, so I didn't regret beating the creature, but this revelation did give me a bit of a bad aftertaste.

"That was the kind of creature it was... right?" she said. "It was like an egg shell... I guess?"

"An egg shell?"

So the Gardranda I fought was like a limbed egg, while the Gardranda I'm talking to is like a... true Gardranda?

"We were a mother-and-child two-layered design?" she continued. "Even I don't really understand it... I think?"

"So how is it, really?" I asked.

"Okay... I'm manifesting like this because I was defeated before the conditions to unleash my true power were fulfilled and I could break the shell and be born... probably?"

The only reason why I'd beaten Gardranda so easily was because Cheshire had hinted that the core was in the stomach. So, I could only assume that, if I hadn't known about that, the situation would've gotten worse, and it would've entered its final form — this girl right here.

Anyway, though she wasn't the Gardranda I'd fought, she was Gardranda nonetheless, meaning that UBMs could have a mind even after becoming special rewards.

That fact made me concerned about something.

"Could this happen with Gouz-Maise and Monochrome, too?" I asked. Would the man-eating revenant and the black star manifest before me again?

"It won't happen with Gouz-Maise... surely," said Gardranda. "It's nothing but a vessel now. As for Monochrome... I'm not very sure."

"Why not?"

"It has a longer history and a higher status than me. But its powers are focused on a single thing, so it won't show... I guess?"

The "single thing" had to be the skill that I couldn't use yet.

That aside, if she was right, I probably didn't have to worry about those two coming back to haunt me.

I was ready to send Gouz-Maise back to hell if it ever appeared before me again, but if that never happened, then all the better.

While Gardranda and Monochrome had been creatures acting within non-human frameworks, Gouz-Maise had been a wraith bursting with human malice and evil conviction, and I had no tolerance for that.

Needless to say, hearing Gardranda's words put me at ease.

"So," I spoke up. "Why did you bring me here?"

Last time, she'd wanted to get to know me, the one who'd beaten her, and now, whatever had been "Coming Soon" had come, but I still didn't really know what it was.

I have a good guess, though, I thought.

"Lend me your ear... will you?" she requested.

"Hm? Sure."

We were the only ones here, so I was curious why she saw the need to whisper, but I went and did as she wanted. I gently brought my ear close to her, and...

"Amph!"

...she bit into me... *Wait, WHAT?!*

"GYAAHHH?!"

There was no pain, but I could feel it clearly!

Did she seriously just bite me?! Are you kidding me?!

"What the hell are you doing?!" I shouted.

"My mother didn't get to eat you while she was alive, so I just tasted you a little... I guess?"

"..."

Of course. How could I forget that she was a man-eating demon? Well, technically, that was her mother. I wasn't about to blame her for her parent's sin, but she was one step away from making a sin for herself.

"I didn't bite it off, but I did get a lick. It was good... you know?"

"Shut up," I snapped. I felt no pleasure in getting praise for the way I tasted.

"Now, for the main matter... okay?" Gardranda said as she fixed her posture and looked directly at me before continuing. "Because you defeated a third UBM, you unlocked the third skill on the Miasmaflame Bracers... you know?"

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I woke up shortly after finishing my conversation with Gardranda.

Silently, I reached into my inventory and equipped the Miasmaflame

Bracers.

The item description proved that what I'd just seen had been no dream — the third skill was unveiled and explained.

"Hhhh..." I sighed.

After telling me that the skill was now available, Gardranda had gone on to explain its effects... and conditions.

I could see them before me right here in the menu, and I could say one thing about this skill — it was on a whole different level than the skills you'd usually find on items, special rewards included.

In fact, many would consider it broken and unfair.

Sure, it was below the likes of Figaro's Gloria α's skill Fang of Gloria: Overdrive, but the very fact that I was thinking of that when trying to come up with comparisons spoke volumes about it.

But there was a problem...

I sighed. "And so, I get yet another unwieldy skill."

Even Shining Despair was easier to use, and that one had obscene charge rates.

The conditions for Gardranda's third skill were so harsh it would actually be better if I never got into a situation that called for it.

Basically, it was as unwieldy as it was powerful.

Still, in the off chance that I found myself in a scenario where using it was my best option, it would definitely be a reliable skill.

"Hm? Ray. You're awake," said Nemesis as she opened the door, ending my train of thought. Her long black hair was damp, and she was clad in a yukata that came with the room.

Her appearance made me stare blankly and my heart skip a beat.

"You were still in the hot spring?" I asked.

"'Still'? No, I went in there *again.* After you Fainted, I took you to the changing room, dried you up, put a yukata on you, and brought you here. It made me work up a sweat, so I needed to bathe a second time."

I looked down at myself and, sure enough, despite losing consciousness naked, I was now in a yukata.

"I see," I said. "Sorry... and thanks."

She fully deserved an apology for my misdemeanor, as well as gratitude for taking care of me while I was out cold.

"Well, I couldn't possibly leave you there in the cold," she said. "That's how you catch illnesses. I didn't want something like that hindering whatever we would be doing tomorrow and beyond. Also, I don't mind what happened all that much, but you should definitely apologize to Azurite. She seemed to be quite shocked that she was seen... and by what she saw."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm not sure if she'll forgive me, but I'll apologize when I get the chance."

"Good. That aside, I have a question for you."

"What is it?"

Despite us being the only people in the room, she closed in on me for a whisper.

That made me a bit tense, as it reminded me of Gardranda's bite.

"You looked awfully composed back there," she whispered. "Did you actually feel nothing about our naked bodies?"

Now, that was a hard question to answer. I felt that she wouldn't be satisfied with any answer I could give her.

Still, this was all my bad, so I had to be honest, at least.

"I only *looked* composed back then," I replied. "In hindsight, I was probably panicking pretty badly. And, uh..."

"And...?"

Urged, I went ahead and spoke the words stuck in my mouth.

"The sight didn't get me excited... but I did find it beautiful."

Suddenly, silence fell upon the room.

"..."

"..." Neither of us said a word.

It wasn't a cold sort of silence, but it wasn't warming, either — I wasn't sure how to describe it.

I belatedly realized the gravity of what I'd just said. It made it hard to look at Nemesis's face.

"...Which one of us do you mean?"

"Both," I answered without as much as a second after the question.

Crap... I don't like where this is going.

"Which one of us was more beautiful?"

"Let's leave it at that!" I exclaimed to prevent myself from remembering what I'd seen and comparing them.

"Gngh..." Nemesis voiced her frustration, and I was afraid to look at her.

I said way too much, I thought. *But I can't go without saying another thing...*

"Speaking of 'beautiful,' you look great in that yukata. It suits you really well."

Those were my honest thoughts. Her long black hair, pallid skin, and facial features matched the yukata perfectly. In fact, I'd have gone as far as to say that I'd never seen a person in a yukata look as beautiful as her.

"R-Really?" she said. "I see..."

I expected more words, but she fell silent with just that. I was unsure of what else to say, and she didn't speak, either.

As silence permeated the room again, someone knocked on the door and said, "Mr. Starling, are you awake? Would you like dinner?"

The person sounded like a young man. His voice was unfamiliar to me, but his words made it safe to assume that he was a worker here.

"Oh, right," said Nemesis. "He dropped by about an hour ago, while you were unconscious."

I looked at the clock and saw that it was seven o'clock. It reminded me that Shirley had said that dinner would be between six and eight.

I guess it's a good time to have some food, then.

"Ah, I'll go right away," I said, as I took my inventory.

We both left the room.

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The male worker who led us to the cafeteria was... different, to put it lightly.

First of all, there was a wooden mask on his face. Unlike Azurite's, which only hid the upper half, this one covered it whole — it only had holes for the eyes.

Second, his right hand was a prosthetic, just like my left hand had been until yesterday.

He didn't seem all that aged — in fact, he appeared and sounded younger than me — and yet he'd somehow already lost an arm.

I couldn't help but wonder what had happened for him to end up like this.

He noticed my gaze and greeted me. I apologized for my inappropriate staring and asked about him.

Apparently, he had been heavily injured in the war and then saved by the owner of this inn, a soldier himself. However, the injuries had made him lose his memories, and he hadn't had anything on him that could prove his identity, leaving him with no place to go. And so, after the inn's owner had cared for him, he'd gone on to become a worker here.

Apparently, the kingdom had a large number of people in situations similar to his. Many had ended up in their circumstances because of the Tri-

Zenith Dragon, Gloria, rather than the war that had followed, but regardless, the scars on the kingdom ran deep.

Liliana and Milianne, for example, had lost their father in the war.

Things might've gone differently if more Masters had fought for the kingdom.

Alas, the Masters who'd participated were few, and the Superiors, Shu included, hadn't been among them.

I'd heard that this was due to the kingdom choosing not to reward any participants, instead relying only on the Masters' personal choices.

The Superiors had all had their reasons for not participating, such as Figaro's condition (although I wasn't too sure about Miss Eldritch having a good reason).

I felt like the outcome of the war had been the result of circumstance.

Even so, that didn't change he fact that many tians had probably felt abandoned.

That fact left a bad taste in my mouth.

I hadn't been here during that war. But if something like that were to happen again, I... I would surely...

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As the masked youth led us towards the main building's cafeteria, we passed by many other people who were staying here. They had probably just finished eating.

Many of them were fellow Masters, who were surely here for the ruins. Some of them were even wearing yukatas, just like me.

As we walked, I ran into someone particularly unique. My gaze met theirs.

"Ah."

"Oohh?"

The gaze my eyes met weren't those of the person — those eyes were completely hidden by the front bangs. The eyes I was looking into right now were those of the *chubby cat on the person's head.*

Indeed, it was a young man with a cat on him. He looked curious even by *Dendro* standards, and I knew who this person was.

"Ohhh?" he said. "Well, if it isn't Nemesis and Raaay. I didn't expect to see you heeere."

"Likewise," nodded Nemesis.

"Hello, Tom," I said. "Why are you in this town?"

This person was Tom Cat — the second in the kingdom's duel rankings and the bearer of the nickname "Monster Cat Mansion." His job was "The Lynx."

He had been the reigning duel champion before Figaro took the crown, and he was now keeping Kashimiya — who was in third — from advancing any further.

Needless to say, he was a big deal. Even if the cat on his head and his mild demeanor made that hard to believe.

"I'm here to explore the ruinnns," he said. "Kashimiya seems to have come baaack, so I decided to re-train myself and make some money heeere."

"Ah, I see," I nodded.

The top three rankers could only be challenged to a ranked duel by those one rank below them. Now that Kashimiya, ranked third, was back, he could challenge Tom for the throne of the second. Tom had every reason to prepare for that.

This reminded me that, because no one had been there to challenge him, I'd never actually seen him fight.

He'd never participated in the mock battles, either. Hell, we'd only became acquainted because of a chance meeting during lunch with other rankers.

"Are you after the ruins, toooo?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I'll be changing my job."

"Oh, right, they found a lost job heeere."

Leave it to a seasoned ranker like him to already know about it.

"We might meet in the ruins, thennn," he said. "Let's be friendly if that happens. Goodniiight."

"Goodnight," I replied.

"You too, Grimalkin," said Nemesis as she looked at the cat on Tom's head — his Embryo. "Sweet dreams."

Grimalkin meowed in response, and Tom walked off, casually waving as he left.

"What an unexpected meeting," said Nemesis.

Seriously. He was a particularly rare encounter among Gideon's rankers, so I never would've expected to meet him in a place like this.

Also, why can't I shake the feeling that I met him before our introduction in Gideon?

◇

The cafeteria was really crowded. Which made sense, considering that it was dinnertime.

"Ah! Mr. Ray!" Shirley saw me and ran up. "I'll lead you to your table! Thanks for bringing him, Lefty!"

The masked youth responded with a light nod and walked away to do some other work.

"'Lefty' is his name, I assume?" asked Nemesis.

"Yeah!" said Shirley. "The name's based on a Master word!"

So instead of a name referring his lack of right hand, they'd gone with a name pointing out the fact that he did have a left. *The glass is half-full, huh?*

Anyway, Shirley led us to a round table, which looked somewhat off, given that all the others in the room were rectangular.

I could only guess that the rectangular ones had originally been here, and they'd had enough of them for all the guests in the main building, but not enough for those in the annex, and that was why they'd brought this round one here.

Azurite was already sitting on one of the chairs around it.

"..." She silently stared at me through her mask.

It was awkward, to say the least. It almost made me remember what I'd seen before passing out.

Still, I couldn't really act like it hadn't happened.

"Azurite," I spoke up. "What happened was all my bad. I should've been more careful... Sorry."

Seriously, I could've figured out what was happening the moment I'd realized that someone was inside. Also, no matter how perplexed I'd been, actually joining them should have been an obvious, really big no-no.

"It's all right," she said, as she kept staring at me. "You forgave me for attacking you because of a misunderstanding. I can do the same for you."

And so, it was all water under the bridge.

"Thanks," I said.

"Again, it's all right. Anyhow, it's dinnertime. Let's indulge ourselves."

"Let's!" said Nemesis, clearly ecstatic.

In conclusion, the food was really good.

The delicious, locally-procured ingredients were well-prepared to make a number of excellent dishes. I particularly enjoyed the wild vegetable-chicken quiche.

Once we finished that main course, I started in on the fruits for dessert.

Since we'd each only gotten a single person's portion, I was sure Nemesis still had vast amounts of space in her stomach. She'd probably ask for a midnight snack at this rate, so it would be better to feed her now, but...

"All I have is Shu's popcorn," I told her.

"Delicious, but not exactly filling."

"Some place nearby might still be open. Go get something," I said as I took 10,000 lir out of my wallet and handed it to her.

"Very well," she said as she took it and left.

It just hit me that I casually handed her an amount of money equivalent to 100,000 yen, I thought. *Thanks to all the windfalls I'm getting and Shu's influence, I seem to be getting a warped sense of money.*

"All righty, then," I said.

Azurite had already excused herself, apparently having seen something, so I was the only one left at the table. She'd said she'd pass on dessert, and left the cafeteria. Naturally, her dessert was now in Nemesis's stomach.

Anyway, I'm done with dinner, so what do I do now? I wondered. *This is a hot spring inn, so now that the girls are out, maybe I should take a relaxed dip?*

Speaking of hot springs, the main building obviously had some, too. This was evidenced by the fact that a lot of the guests here in the cafeteria were wearing yukatas, just like me.

It wasn't every day that you got to wear this Tenchi-style clothing here in the kingdom, so it was probably popular just because of the novelty value. However, they clearly didn't know how to put them on properly. The way they were wearing them was messy, and you could see exposed chests and legs everywhere.

Most of those wearing them like that were men, though. The women either wore their normal clothing, or had plain-looking innerwear underneath.

All sexual interest or lack thereof aside, that was actually pretty sad-looking sight. I felt like I was looking at a girl wearing a skirt over sweat pants.

Thinking this and that, I left the cafeteria.

Upon entering the lounge right next to it, I found a strange gathering of people.

"Hm?" I murmured.

Their ages and appearances told me that they weren't part of a single group.

Curious as to what it was all about, I went over to the crowd, discovering that they were surrounding a single man.

He wasn't wearing a yukata, but he had no upper clothing on, making him look pretty casual.

He was wearing a thick set of glasses, so it was hard to tell precisely, but he looked around thirty years old.

"Doctor, I'm thinking that this is my biggest catch today. Is it?" said a muscly guest, clearly a tian who had explored the ruins. He handed a fist-sized, diamond-looking object to the man with the thick glasses.

"Ohh, *bello... Molto bello,* but this is no real gem, yes?" he said.

Strange how he can sound so foreign when we have universal translation, I reflected.

"It's-a false diamond for-a the laser lenses," he continued. "*Bene* and *largo,* but ah, how you say... worth less than a real one."

"Oh..." The man with the diamond slumped his shoulders.

But then the man with the thick glasses smiled. "But there are *dilettanti* who collect-a many things like this. To them? *Molto... Molto prezioso!* 200,000 lir."

"Seriously?! That's great! Now I can get something for my mother back home! Thanks, Doctor!" The tian man joyfully put the artificial diamond into his inventory.

"Who is next?" the man with thick glasses asked.

"Me! I wanna ask about this metal plate."

"*Che bello!* It's-a plate used in the pre-ancient civilization's battle units. Even before any processing, it's tougher than the weaker magic shields."

One after the other, guests presented the man with things they'd found in the ruins.

I could tell that this was basically a meeting for appraising antiques, but who was that man with the glasses?

Shirley happened to be passing by, so I took the opportunity to ask, "Who's that person they keep calling 'Doctor'?"

"That is Dr. Mario," she answered. "He's a doctor of archaeology who's been staying with us since yesterday. He said he travels the world investigating the ruins of the pre-ancient civilization!"

"I see."

I guess it's only natural for ruins to attract archaeologists. I've gotta say, though...

"That name makes it sound like he jumps really high and dives through pipes. Maybe kills viruses for fun on the side."

"Wahoo!" the man laughed. "*Cinque...* That would be-a the fifth time a Master has-a told me something like this."

Whoops, he overheard us.

"Ah, sorry," I apologized.

"It's-a no trouble, no trouble at all... It's clear that you're fond of the name, after all."

Despite sounding like a fake foreigner, he didn't seem like a bad guy.

"If I may ask, what makes your appraisal different from the Identification skill?" I asked.

"You-a cannot find out everything about a pre-ancient civilization relic with just-a Identification. *Non posso,*" he explained. "If you don't-a have the, how you say... special knowledge and skills, many descriptions would-a say 'Details Unknown.'"

"...Ohhh." Now that he mentioned it, Silver's description was brief, and it ended with exactly that.

"The explorers here let-a me see their finds, and in exchange, I appraise them for them. *Valutare, si?*" This way, Dr. Mario got to examine the items from the ruins, while the finders learned the worth of what they'd discovered — a win-win situation if I ever saw one.

Wait, this is a perfect opportunity. I should get him to take a gander at Silver.

"Um, I also have something from the pre-ancient civilization," I said.

"Would you like to look at it? It's not from these ruins, though."

"*Nessun problema!* No problem!"

"It's large, so I can't take it out here. I'll show it to you outside once you're done appraising the others' things."

"*Nessun problema,*" he nodded. "Then please, *trenta minuti*... ah... how you say? Thirty minutes!"

"All right."

Yep. This is good, I thought.

I'd get to find out more about Silver on the very same day I'd become curious about him. What a stroke of luck.

Now, to find a way to kill time while waiting for Dr. Mario.

◇

As I walked around the inn with no real goal in mind, I found Azurite.

She wasn't alone, though. She was talking to the masked inn worker, Lefty.

"So you have no memories of anything before the war?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Nothing at all..."

They were clearly talking about the same thing we had talked about while he led me to the cafeteria.

However, Azurite looked strangely stern. "Are you familiar with the family name 'Brittis'?"

"Brittis... Sorry, it doesn't ring a bell."

Azurite looked a bit disappointed by the response. "I see... Could you take off the mask?"

"I... Apologies, but my face is nothing I can show."

"...Very well. Sorry. That was unreasonable of me."

"Not at all. Anyhow, I have tasks I must attend to, so I shall excuse myself," said Lefty, before leaving.

Left alone, Azurite dropped her shoulders and walked in my direction.

"Ah!" she exclaimed as she finally realized that I was here.

I was curious about what I'd just seen, so I went ahead and asked, "Is Lefty noteworthy, somehow?"

"'Somehow,' as in... how?"

My question had been relatively casual, but...

"Your attitude made it look like you were confirming something, rather than just asking," I said.

"So you *can* be observant... If only you had used some of this ability before entering the hot spring. It would've spared us both the unpleasant experience."

"Again, that was all my bad... But there *is* something about Lefty, right?"

"There is. His voice was much like that of a friend — one who participated and died in the war."

"Well... damn."

So this is a day of chance encounters not just for me, but for Azurite and Lefty, too.

"But his face is supposedly injured, and he has no proof of his identity. His stature and voice are so much like that of my friend's, though. If it's really him, I'd love to take him to his family..."

"Then why not ask Miss Aberratio— I mean, the High Priestess for help? If she heals his face, then—"

"*Do not mention that parasite in my presence.*"

"...Okay."

That livid tone had been legitimately scary. Not in the same way as my sister or Miss Aberration, but still...

Just what had that eldritch monstrosity done to make the mere mention of her name incur such anger?

"..."

"..."

Crap, that'd completely soured the mood.

It didn't look like I could do anything to improve this by myself, but Nemesis wasn't here, either.

What should I do...?

"Ray! *Ragazzo!* So this is where-a you were," said Dr. Mario as he joined the scene.

Salvation!

"Ray. Who is this man?" asked Azurite.

"Dr. Mario," I answered. "He's a guest at this inn. He's an archeologist who heard about the ruins and came here to this town to find out more about the pre-ancient civilization."

"I see... For a scholar, he was certainly quick to find out about this."

"Hm?"

What does she mean by that?

"So, *ragazzo,* what-a item did you-a want to be showing me?" asked Dr. Mario.

"Oh, this guy right here," I replied as I took Silver out of my inventory and showed him to him.

Azurite had a far stronger reaction than he did.

"A Prism Steed?!" she exclaimed. "And wait... this is an original, isn't it?!"

"Ah, yeah, he is."

"H-How did you get this?! It's one of the five Flagman units! One of those that hasn't been discovered yet! It's on the same level as a national treasure!"

I hesitated. Her intensity made it really hard to say that I'd hit him in a gacha.

Looking at her reaction, I imagined that the very idea that I'd gotten a national treasure that way would probably make her faint.

"Wait," I said. "You saw the broadcast of the battle in Gideon, right? Didn't you notice it back then?"

Considering our talk at noon, I assumed she'd witnessed me use the Wind Hoof bomb.

"How could I?! It's impossible to tell the difference from a replica unless you see it with your own eyes! Also, in that motion picture, it was never clear what phenomenon was caused by which item or Embryo."

So that's how it is, eh?

Oh, yeah... That might've been the reason why no one had tried to steal Silver from me — they hadn't realized that he was the real thing.

Well, I was a newbie, so I couldn't really blame them for not assuming that he was.

"Just how did you get your hands on an original?" Azurite demanded.

"Well, I guess you could say I know people..."

I'd hit it at the gacha at Alejandro's shop, after all.

"Oh, I see. So it's all because of King of Destruction... your brother," she said, nodding in understanding.

It really helps to have an eccentric older brother in situations like this.

Anything goes when he's involved.

"Hmm..." While I was talking to Azurite, Dr. Mario examined Silver.

He focused on him through his glasses one moment, then switched to look at him with his naked eye the next. It was hard to tell through his thick glasses, but he had clear blue eyes that seemed somewhat weary.

"*Interessante,*" he said. "*Ragazzo, ragazza...* this is most-a definitely an original made by Flagman — not a replica. *Decisamente.* However, it's not-a one of the five Prism Steeds."

"Eh?" Azurite and I exclaimed simultaneously.

It's not one of the five?

"But the description says that he is..." I began.

"*Sì è vero.* Correct. The descriptions on Gold and Ruby told us-a that there were a total of *cinque,* five. On the surface, this Silver is-a part of them... but that's actually wrong. *Scorretto.*"

"In what way?" asked Azurite.

"*In primo luogo,* firstly, about the five Prism Steeds that Flagman developed... the five positions are already filled. *Un set completo.*"

"They have?" I asked, astonished.

"Gold Thunder, Ruby Ignition, Obsidian Earth-Edge, and recent explorations of a Dryfean ruin led to the finding of Jade Storm, a wind-based Prism Steed. The discovery-a was accompanied by a text that implied a 'Sapphire Wave,' which makes a total of five. *Solo cinque. Capito?*"

"So what's the deal with my Silver?" I asked, baffled.

Is he a fake...? No, Dr. Mario just said that he was made by Flagman.

"It's-a not formally in the five, but it's close. So much so that even the basic description assumes it is. But it's actually an unofficial prototype unit, or an experimental one — either of the two. *Non ufficiale.*"

"What do you mean?"

"It's-a most likely a unit developed with similar standards and a similar base frame as one of the five Prism Steeds, most likely Gold Thunder. *Simile, ma non autentico.* That's-a the reason for the error in the base description. This Zephyrus Silver was also equipped with some experimental systems and functions. But, ah... how you say? *Non sono sicuro.* I'm unable to tell whether it was created before or after the five."

I see. It makes sense to think that Silver's either a test or an experiment.

So Silver was either a prototype made before Gold's development, or an experimental unit made using Gold's spare parts post-development. That was probably the reason why his name was different from the others'.

"*In ultima analisi,* it doesn't seem as complete as the other Prism Steeds," said Dr. Mario. "And it doesn't seem as focused on-a offense as they are."

It was hard to argue with that. The third skill was still a mystery, but the two skills I could see were just air-running and a compressed air barrier. The Wind Hoof bomb I'd used against the RSK probably hadn't been intended by the creator. After all, who would design something with the premise that it would use hundreds of thousands of MP?

Though I doubt I'll ever use it again, even if I had that much.

"Speaking of Prism Steeds and their offensive abilities..." I said.

During a duel race against Shu, Figaro's Obsidian Earth-Edge had made countless rocky stakes pop out of the ground and galloped upon them with his eight legs like the divine horse from Norse myth.

Those stakes had been powerful enough to blast Shu's tank out of the course, and the race would've ended right there if he hadn't brought it back through sheer force alone.

Are those the kinds of skills he had in mind? I thought.

"Well..." Azurite spoke up. "Gold Thunder could release lightning matching high-rank ultimate job skills to create an electromagnetic barrier, and use magnetic repulsion to go through the sky at extremely high speeds."

I wasn't sure if it had anything to do with them having the same base frame, but that seemed pretty similar to what Silver did.

However, I doubted that it cost hundreds of thousands of MP to use that, and the barrier probably provided more defense than compressed air... so it was probably much more reliable.

Still, I didn't like the idea of constantly firing lightning everywhere, so I still preferred Silver.

Silver suddenly rubbed his muzzle on me.

What's up with you?

"Regardless, it's *molto prezioso,* a very beautiful thing, so please treasure it," said Dr. Mario.

"Thank you very much," I said, bowing my head.

The words we concluded with felt like they belonged in some appraisal show, but nonetheless, I couldn't be more glad that I had asked him about

Silver.

“By the way, are you two-a going into the ruins?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Apparently, you can get a Prism Steed-related job there.”

“I’m going there to investigate,” Azurite added.

Our words made Dr. Mario smile. “Ohh, *molto bene!* Please do-a come to me if you find something for me to look at.”

“Sure. We’ll be counting on you for that.”

With that, Dr. Mario went back into the main building.

The moment he was out of sight, I spoke up. “Azurite.”

“Yes?”

“Is there something strange about him?”

My words made her look surprised. “You really *are* observant.”

“With siblings like mine, you have to be. So, what’s bothering you?”

“The very fact that we have an archeologist here,” she said as she folded her arms. “The kingdom has banned all the requests and stifled all the information regarding the ruins here. It’s hard to believe that an archeologist could find out about them.”

All right now, hold on a sec.

“Stifled all the information?” I asked. “But I easily bought it at the DIN.”

“Eh?” She opened her eyes wide in surprise. “Eh? Huh? So you’re not here because of some shady information source you got through the King of Destruction?”

“Nope, this info’s on the market.”

Azurite sat down and covered her face. “Just what *is* that news company...?”

I knew exactly what she meant. The DIN was so well-informed, it was freaky.

Then again, they had Marie, the Superior Killer, among their special correspondents, so it was far from normal, really.

“By the way, you mentioned that you’ll also be going into the ruins, right?” I asked.

On the road to Quartierlatin, she’d said that she was here to investigate, but I hadn’t realized that she would be going in.

“Yes, I will,” she nodded. “I need to get a grasp on what kind of place these ruins are.”

“What kind of place could they be?”

“Ruins are treasure troves, full of pre-ancient civilization technology, but in some cases, they’ve contained dangerous weapons that’ve gone out of control.”

“For example?”

“A good one is the Fourth Seafloor Excavation Fortress in Granvaloa. It became a source of countless carnivorous monsters that almost destroyed the ecosystem. In the end, the one called ‘Human Bomb’ incinerated it along with the entire sea space. Mind you, it happened shortly before his final battle against the Dual White Whale, so it was somewhat overshadowed.”

Human Bomb...? Oh yeah, that’s Koukin Shoyu, Master of Abura-Sumashi.

I’d heard of him a few times, and I had always been thrown off by how big the stuff he did was, compared to the banality of his name — “antibacterial soy sauce.”

“I assumed that ruins could only be full of treasure,” I said.

“Of course, many ruins contain useful technology, and it would be great if this one did, too,” she replied. “If it doesn’t, a factory to create something good would be favorable, as well.”

“And you are here by the order of some powerful individual to investigate it, eh?”

Azurite was stronger than even Liliana — the current top of the Royal Guard. It wouldn’t be strange for her to receive such a task.

“Yes. I... the person who sent me here has the kingdom’s future in mind. As you are aware, this country is on the verge of destruction,” she said. “As things are, it will surely be overthrown. That’s why we need the technology inside the ruins. Resisting what we haven’t been able to resist before now will require something we didn’t have before.”

She talked while looking at the mountain where the ruins were, then threw a glance down at the sword on her hip.

“What you didn’t have before, eh?” I raised an eyebrow. “If you’re talking about the war, doesn’t that include Superiors and other powerful Masters?”

Suddenly, I felt her attitude change. I didn’t need to see the top half of her face to know that she was against that idea.

"I... no... the one who sent me has no intention to ask for any Masters' cooperation," she said.

I was silent. There was no need to ask why.

This reminded me of my first meeting with Sir Lindos back in Gideon. It was perfectly reasonable for the people of the kingdom, especially those who'd gone to war, to not think highly of Masters.

There had been few on their side, many on the enemy side, and our powers were overwhelming.

Masters were the reason why the kingdom had suffered such a staggering defeat at the hands of Dryfe. There was no room for argument about that.

Azurite had clearly been Langley Grandria's pupil, so she knew the pain of having lost her mentor to a Master. The person who'd sent her here had probably lost someone dear to him, as well.

Therefore, asking why that person was against hiring Masters would be nothing but rude.

But there was something I could confirm here.

"You have no intention to ask for Masters' cooperation, huh?" I asked. "Does that mean it's fine if we participate on our own? You know, to intercept the Dryfean Masters or something."

"Eh?"

"Tian rules don't apply to confrontations between Masters, right?"

"R-Right. That's true."

"Then I'm sure you'll have lots of people who come, even if no one asks them to."

Shu's face came to mind, then Rook's, Marie's, and then the faces of the many rankers and Masters I'd become acquainted with in Gideon.

Then there was B3's face and uh... yeah, actually, even Miss Aberration was there.

I wasn't sure why, but I felt like these people I'd just thought of would definitely come to Altar's aid during its eleventh hour.

Some of them were weirdos or schemers, but I didn't think that any of these people hated this country.

Some had Altarian tian friends.

Some avidly bettered themselves in the Altarian arenas.

Some had Altarian adherents.

...I wasn't too sure about that one, honestly.

Still, none of the people that came to mind actually wanted this country gone.

Okay, sure, Marie and B3 had played a part in the blockade, and Miss Aberration was a schemer, but even so, they wouldn't be able to sit idly by as this country evaporated.

I was pretty sure that we all liked Altar at least *that* much.

"But..." Azurite said, and then fell silent again.

"At the very least, I know I'll be joining the war," I said. "Sure, I know that doesn't mean much from a newbie who's not in any ranking, but I can participate by briefly joining the clan of an acquaintance."

The idea of joining The Lunar Society scared me, so I'd probably go for Chelsea's Golden Pirates.

"So, even if there aren't any requests for our cooperation," I said, "I'd appreciate it if you accepted any Masters who volunteered to help."

"That's... not something I can decide by myself."

"I figured. It'll be a big help if you pass that over to the person you work for, though. Sorry if this seems a bit out of left field."

"It's fine. I don't mind."

I could see her close her eyes behind her mask's lenses. It looked like she was thinking about something.

Oh, right. Speaking of cooperation...

"Also, can you let me help you out with your ruin investigation?" I asked.

"Eh?" She opened her eyes wide in surprise.

"Like I said, I'm only here to switch jobs. Other than that, I'm mildly interested in history. I have the time and I'm not preoccupied with anything, so I'd like to help you out with whatever you'll be doing."

I planned on joining the war, of course, but if the investigation here would also have a great impact on the future of this country, I wanted to help with that, too.

I really didn't want to just leave after doing nothing more than the relatively minor thing I'd come here for.

"But this is my duty," Azurite argued. "Also, something that could impact the fate of the kingdom might happen there. I can't make a Master like you be responsible for something like that..."

"You're right. It's your duty," I said. "But I don't think it's something that you have to bear and do all by yourself."

"...!"

"I'll help however I can, as long as it doesn't break confidentiality," I said.

If I didn't help and something bad happened to her, that'd leave a bad taste in my mouth.

"Also, you mentioned being responsible for the fate of the kingdom... I'm kinda already there, you know?" I added. "Thanks to the scheming of a certain bastard in a lab coat... Mr. Franklin."

"...Ah."

Naturally, I was referring to the battle against the RSK during Franklin's Game. If it hadn't been taken care of in time, a horde of monsters would've been released into the city. The vile asshole had even broadcast the battle to all of Altea and Gideon.

"So yeah, considering what I went through then, there should be no problems with me helping you ou— Why are you crying?"

Azurite was staring at me while bawling her eyes out for reasons I couldn't fathom.

Hold on, did I say something bad? Wait, she's an Altarian tian. Did the very mention of the lab coat shithead resurrect some unwanted memories? That bastard...!

"Sorry," she said as she wiped her tears. "You're right. You were... back then..."

It was hard to understand what she was trying to say.

Once done wiping her tears, she looked directly at me.

"I understand how you feel," she said at last. "Can I trust you to help, then? With the investigation, I mean."

"Of course."

"Thank you," she said as she extended her right hand to me. "I'll be relying on you tomorrow."

"As you should," I said as took her hand and shook it.

Thus, it was decided that Azurite and I would be investigating the ruins together.

◇◆◇

A record of a certain magical communication

"Where are you now, Logan?"

"Just entered Barbaros territory. I'll be at Quartierlatin tomorrow night. You?"

"I'm staying at a nice little inn not far from the ruins."

"Sure they don't know about you?"

"No one in the kingdom knows my face. And I have a web set up. If someone finds out who I am, I'll be the first to know."

"All right. Then we can get this over with the day after tomorrow, just as planned. That works for me. I have things to do on Monday in real life, so... Well, just keep in mind that I can only cooperate until the day after tomorrow. You won't have me if this takes any longer than that."

"Understood. I'll prioritize your circumstances in this arrangement. I doubt this would take long, anyway... Oh, and I have some extra information."

"What?"

"The younger of the Starling brothers is here."

"The younger... him?! The guy who messed up Franklin's plans twice?! The Unbreakable?!"

"Yes, the same one."

"That is some good news."

"Why? I told you about him as a heads-up — a warning."

"I've had my eye on him ever since he beat a Demi-Dragon at level 0, and him beating Franklin gave him even more value. It's a good chance to make those who think they're better than me shut up. So yeah..." There was a pause for effect.

"The Unbreakable is mine."

Chapter Five: Countess Quartierlatin

Paladin, Ray Starling

Thus began our second day in Quartierlatin.

The skies were pleasantly clear, and the morning sunlight leaking through the window was gently warming the room. It was the perfect day for an outing, but sadly, we would be heading for the ruins buried deep inside a mountain.

“How regrettable,” said Nemesis. “This day is far better suited for sunbathing, picnics, or barbeques.”

Two of those are food-related, which says a lot about you, I thought.

“Well, I got an unhealthy amount of sunlight just the day before yesterday, so I’m perfectly fine with not getting to sunbathe,” I said.

“I’m not quite sure I can see that as a joke,” she shot back.

Too soon, huh? I guess you’re right. Our battle with Monochrome was just two days ago.

For all I knew, if Miss Aberration hadn’t fixed me up right then and there, I might still be getting essential medical care at right this very moment.

Ah, speaking of Monochrome... I’ll have to get some light magic Gems before I go to the ruins.

“That’s certainly important,” said Nemesis. “But first, we must have breakfast!”

I sighed. “I knew you’d say that.”

All the food she’d eaten last night had done nothing to lower her appetite for today’s breakfast. How very like her.

I sighed at my partner’s gluttonous nature, and we both left for the cafeteria in the main building.

Once done with breakfast, we went to the lobby to wait for Azurite.

However, she wasn’t showing up, even when it was past the time we’d agreed to meet.

“Did something happen?” I wondered.

"She *is* a girl, after all," said Nemesis. "Perhaps she needs time to work on her appearance?"

"Well, I guess that makes... wait, no, hold on."

She wears a mask. What good would make-up do?

Right as I thought that... speak of the devil... Azurite walked into the lobby.

"Sorry for the wait," she said.

"That's fine," I replied. "What took you so long, though?"

"...I slept in."

Now that was a shocking truth. I hadn't known her for long, but she definitely didn't look like the type to do that.

"Ahem." She cleared her throat. "Now, about our plans for today... would you mind postponing the exploration a bit?"

"I don't mind, but why? You got something going on?"

"I must report my arrival to Countess Quartierlatin and tell her that I will be investigating the ruins. I intended to take care of that yesterday, but things did not go as planned."

She'd just casually said that she would meet the noble in charge of this area.

"It's really easy to meet up with nobility and royalty in Gideon, so I guess the same goes for other counties too, huh?" I commented.

"Of course not," she shot back. "What nonsense are you saying?"

"Hold on..." I said. "You know how the second princess is in Gideon right now, right? Well, she constantly escapes the place she's staying at and runs around town."

And I worked directly for Count Gideon as a de-curser.

Azurite made an expression I found hard to describe, and it wasn't because I couldn't see half of her face.

Having been taught by Mr. Langley Grandria, just like Liliana, she'd probably had to deal with Elizabeth's escapes, too.

On the way to the count's residence, I asked her, "Why did you sleep in, anyway?"

"I'm not accustomed to using bedding you spread on the floor, so it took a while for me to fall asleep."

"Ohh..."

The kingdom almost exclusively used beds, so that had to be a way bigger deal than just switching your type of pillow.

"The hot spring was magnificent, but getting used to Tenchi-style sleeping would take a while," she went on. "It's mildly odd, considering that I had no trouble sleeping in Granvaloa-style beds."

"Granvaloa uses hammocks, right?"

From what I'd heard, they had proper beds, but since the people there constantly used ships, they often had to sleep in hammocks.

The idea makes me kinda giddy.

"Yes," Azurite nodded. "I've learned about them through my mentor. He was from Granvaloa."

"Basically, bedding can be really different across countries, huh?" I asked.

"Indeed. You would be especially surprised by Legendarian beds."

Legendaria was the country south of Altar, and it was the most fantastical place in this whole world.

I recalled Marie saying that their Superiors were the weirdest people of all.

...Was it even possible to get weirder than our bear-suited KoD, the mild-mannered meathead Over Gladiator, and the High Priestess, AKA Miss Aberration?

"The beds there are *that* strange?" I asked.

"Oh yes," said Azurite. "They sleep on large flowers or floating clouds."

"That's straight out of a fairy tale!"

So you can't even sleep there without being immersed in fantasy.

"The country is rich in natural magic, so everyday life there is drastically different from here or in any other country," she said. "That's why they use such magical beds."

"Why does it feel like anything goes as long as you add 'magic' before it...?" I muttered, then noticed something up ahead. "Hm?"

It was a cat. Not just any cat, but a bipedal cat sìth.

"That's..." Azurite said as she eyed it. "It's immune to Reveal, so it must be an Embryo."

Seeing a cat Embryo reminded me of Tom, but his Grimalkin looked like a common, quadrupedal cat. I'd never seen it walk, either. It was always on Tom's head.

Also, this cat sìth had another special quality — it was carrying a flute.

"Hm?" I murmured. *A cat sìth with an instrument? That seems familiar, but I can't remember why.*

"Meow... meow," it meowed as it walked around.

It reminded me of that one children's song.

"'Oh, little kitty, lost on the road. Where, oh, where is your home?' and all that, I guess."

Come to think of it, I remembered having thought about this song in *Dendro* before. Nemesis hadn't liked the fact that it ended without the problem being solved. I'd thought something like, "Well, it asked for directions from a crow and a sparrow. Of course it wouldn't find its way."

That had happened at the arena, right before Figaro and Xunyu's Clash of the Superiors, and...

"Ah," I exclaimed as it came back to me. This cat sìth had been one of the animals playing music in the plaza outside of the arena.

The one conducting the orchestra had been an elderly Master with a bird-like hat, but he was nowhere in sight here.

The way the Embryo walked helplessly around made it pretty clear that it was actually a lost kitten.

Ignoring that would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

"Hey," I called out to it. "Where's your Master?"

"We got se-pa-ra-ted," it replied, not by voice, but by the music it nimbly played on its flute.

Was that a skill or something?

Some might wonder if it was even possible for a Master and Embryo to get separated, but I could assure them — it was.

Nemesis would sometimes wander off by herself to go on eating sprees in restaurants and the like.

It would help to have a GPS-like way of knowing where your Embryo was, but apparently, that required a separate skill. If all Embryos had come with such abilities, I'd never have walked in on Nemesis and Azurite bathing.

"Do you know where your owner... I mean... Master went?" I asked.

"He said he was called by the count-ess," it replied.

What a coincidence. We had the same destination.

I turned to Azurite. "Then I guess there's no reason not to take it there, right?"

"True," she replied.

"Then it's decided. We're going to the countess, too. We'll take you there."

"Thank you ver-y much."

And so, led by Azurite, we all made our way to the countess's residence.

The Quartierlatin mansion was quite unlike the Gideon mansion, which was the only other count's residence that I knew of.

The Gideon residence was split into a simple, sturdy-looking main building and a luxurious guest house, while the Quartierlatin residence was somewhere in between.

The building was refined, but it didn't put luxury above all else, and it was nowhere near as noteworthy as the gardens.

Even from the outside, I could see a wide assortment of colorful flowers and trees, gardened so harmoniously that it was almost fantastical.

I'd already thought that this town was in harmony with flora, and it seemed like the countess's residence was the prime representative of this unity.

"As I said when we arrived at the town, this is all due to the countess' tastes," explained Azurite. "I hear that she's been working to make this garden and the town the way they are now ever since becoming the ruler of the county thirty years ago."

"Thirty years..." I murmured. That must've required a lot of labor and passion.

Does the countess have a reason for making this town as vibrant as it is?

Azurite talked to the guards at the gate, and, following some verifications, we were all let inside.

White pavement was leading the way from the gate to the building, but everything besides that was the garden I'd seen from the outside.

There were many people here.

Most of them were children. They looked somewhat unkempt, but they were having lots of fun. Some were eating sweets they'd been handed, some were playing around the fountains, while others were just looking at the flowers.

The adults here, however, didn't have a uniform look. Many were masters, and many looked exactly like you'd expect "travelers" to look.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"The children are from the town's orphanages, while the adults are guests from outside of town," Azurite explained. "I hear the countess invites people to such tea parties every now and then."

Was this all just philanthropic work?

Even if it wasn't, the garden, town, and the faces of the children here made it hard to imagine that the countess was a bad person.

Suddenly, the mansion's main door opened up, and a gentle-looking, middle-aged, noble lady walked out.

"Oh, my. Thank you so much for coming here all the way from the capital," she said, as she walked up to Azurite and bowed.

Huh? She's enough of a big deal to have a countess bow to her?

"Hey, Azurite, you—"

"No," she cut my words short. "I'm only getting respect because I represent a certain someone. Am I right, Countess Quartierlatin?"

"Eh...? Oh, certainly. Ohohoh..."

It seemed kinda fishy, but if they insisted that was how it was, I had no choice but to leave it at that.

Anyway, Azurite and the countess's talk needed to include confidential matters. Even though I was a cooperator, I was still an outsider, so I was told to wait in the waiting room until they were done. But...

"Can I wait in the garden, instead?" I asked. "It's really magnificent, so I'd like to look around."

"I see," said Azurite, as she turned to the countess. "Would that be all right with you?"

"Certainly," the lady said. "Look at it to your heart's content."

The countess gladly approved, and so it was decided that Nemesis, the lost cat, and I would stay outside.

Right after the two of them entered the building, we went to the garden that was full of playing children.

Oh, I almost forgot! I realized. *The lost cat's Master should be somewhere here.*

I walked up to a nearby servant and said, "Excuse me, this cat is—"

"Wind!" Someone off to the side cut my words short. "Where were you?"

It was an old man accompanied by a centaur, kobold, and a harpy. They looked like Embryos, and they all had instruments in their hands.

I could remember seeing the two besides the harpy back in Gideon, so there was little doubt that this man was the cat sìth's Master. Also, unlike in Gideon, the man wasn't wearing a mask this time.

"Meow!" The cat named Wind meowed and leapt over to the old man.

Well, I'm glad to see the search didn't take long, I thought.

Then the man and his Embryos walked over to me.

"Are you the ones who brought Wind to us?" he asked. "Thank you very much for that. Wind is quite curious, you see. It's not rare for him to get lost."

"No need to thank us. We just happened to have the same destination," I said.

"I'm still grateful, though. We almost started to perform without a wind instrument."

"Perform?"

"Oh, we are a group of traveling musicians. We were performing on the streets of the town this morning, and a servant of the countess invited us over to play for the orphans she'd invited for a tea party."

I see, I thought. *From what I've heard back in Gideon, he and his Embryo play music that's first-class. It's sure to make for a great tea party.*

"Although my forte is composition, rather than performing, I couldn't refuse the request of someone enchanted by my music..." he said. "Oh, where are my manners? I am Veldorbell, a wandering composer without a country. And these are my Embryo — Wind, Clavier, Percussion, and Strings."

He gestured to each in turn, introducing the cat sìth, harpy, kobold, and centaur, in that order.

Names based on music... a group consisting of a cat, bird, dog, and horse... I mean, donkey... I guess the Embryo was based on the Town Musicians of Bremen *musical.*

"Ah, I'm Ray Starling." I introduced myself, too. "And this is my Embryo, Nemesis."

"Indeed!" she said. "I'll be looking forward to your performance!"

"Heh heh, as you should... Hm?" Mr. Veldorbell seemed to realize something, looking at me curiously. "Ray Starling...? Are you the one they call 'Unbreakable'?"

"Yes, that would be me."

Man, I sure am used to that nickname by now...

"I see. I was there during the incident at Gideon, but I was given the death penalty before you entered the stage and shone. Such a shame I didn't get to see it."

"Oh, uh... that's unfortunate," I said and thought, *Man, yet another victim of the lab coat shithead.*

Oddly, Veldorbell's reaction to my words was strange. He looked surprised, then made a wry grin.

He muttered something that I couldn't make out. "She didn't tell anyone? Well, neither my name nor face was on the wanted list, and I could use the save point without an issue, so I thought that was the case, but..."

"Um, is something wrong?" I asked.

"Oh, not at all. Anyhow, I got the death penalty for a reason. I don't mind it, and neither should you."

"Really?"

"Really. Now... the young lady, here, seems excited for our performance, so we will start right away. Are you ready, Wind?"

"Al-ways am!"

"Very well. Let's begin," said Veldorbell as he and his Embryo gathered in the open space prepared for them. "We shall now start our performance. I hope the music we play here tugs at your heartstrings as well as all the beautiful flowers here."

Following a bow, they began playing.

The moment the music reached my ears, I actually gasped.

I was used to absurdly good music because I had the jack-of-all-trades Shu for a brother, but this performance, conducted by Veldorbell and played by his Embryo, was so good that it actually overcame that and gave me goosebumps.

The servants and the travelers were visibly awed, and the children, in all their purity, were completely moved and overjoyed to hear it.

I'd heard their music in the plaza before the central arena in Gideon, but this performance was on a whole different level.

Suddenly, I realized that the harpy with the keyboard hadn't been with them back then. This time, the whole group was here, and they seemed to be even better than they had been before.

Listening to their music made me lose track of time. The performance was over before I realized it, and everyone — myself and Nemesis included — showered them in applause.

“Play something cool next, mister!” shouted one of the children.

“No! I want a cute song!” exclaimed another.

This was obviously their first exposure to music of this quality. They passionately asked for an encore.

“Heh heh. No need to rush me, children. You will all get a turn,” said Veldorbell as he began the next song, clearly enjoying what he was doing.

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Residence of Countess Quartierlatin, study

Deep inside the mansion, in the countess's study, Azurite and the lady were having a conversation.

"So you will be exploring those ruins, then?" asked the countess.

"Indeed. I wish to find out what kind of facility it is as soon as possible," replied Azurite as she examined a set of documents handed to her by the countess. They contained all the information on the ruins that had been gathered since the ruins' surfacing three days ago. "It seems like there hasn't been much progress beyond the hall with the job change crystal."

"Yes. They say there are lots of monsters beyond it... the mechanical sort, specifically."

"Golems, I assume? Ruins are often full of them. What are they called?"

Normally, monsters had their names displayed above their heads. That was one of the laws of this world, which was the reason why Azurite was asking that. But...

"Apparently, their names are... varied," said the countess with a hint of awkwardness.

"Hm?" Azurite raised an eyebrow as she turned a few pages on the documents.

She quickly saw that there had been encounters with machines called "Little Goblin" and "Teal Wolf," among other things, and that they didn't vanish when beaten.

"What could that mean?" she wondered. "Perhaps this is linked to the nature of these ruins. I'll investigate that, as well."

"That's great to know," said the countess. "Thank you very much."

"No need to thank me or bow your head," replied Azurite. "I'm only doing what I must. After all, *I* am the one who hopes that these ruins will have something that can turn the tide in the second war with Dryfe."

Her eyes as she said that were full of either sorrow or resolution — it was unclear which.

"Then, will you involve Maste—?"

"I have no intention of using them in the war, countess," Azurite cut her words short.

“But your companion is—”

“H-He’s...!” she roughened her voice for a moment before regaining her composure. “He is merely a cooperator in this investigation. That and the war are entirely different matters.”

Then, as though to gloss over the subject, she shifted her gaze back at the documents.

“I see,” said the countess as she looked at Azurite with gentle eyes. “But you trust him, do you not?”

“N-No! This isn’t trust!” she denied, as the small part of her cheeks visible below the mask turned red. She didn’t intend it, but the words that followed came out as bashful muttering. “It’s only that... I owe him a lot, so I had no choice but to accept his offer to cooperate. That’s all there is to it.”

The countess observed the blushing girl, with a smile on her face.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

Veldorbell continued his performance, filling the children’s little hearts with endless glee.

But man, there sure are a lot of children. I’m quite sure the number exceeds fifty.

I asked a servant about it, and was told, “These tea parties are a once-a-month event, and we invite all the children living in the town’s two orphanages.”

“There are a lot of orphans here?”

“Yes... many of them lost their fathers in the war, then lost their mothers some other way.”

War again, huh?

According to what Lefty had told me yesterday, Shirley’s father, the owner of the inn, had been a soldier in the war, too. So the knights definitely weren’t the only ones who’d suffered in the war.

“Oh? We can go indoors, too?” I muttered, as I discovered that the tea party’s area was not only restricted to the garden outside, but also contained a spacious room connected to it.

There was a sofa, a table, chairs, and so on. The children, who were tired from being out in the sun for too long, were cooling off here.

Curious about the interior, I walked inside.

There were lots of flowers growing within luxurious-looking vases, making the place feel both calming and gaudy. The walls had a number of portraits on them.

My guess was that the people portrayed in the portraits were the heads of this family, lined up in a chronological order. They had a sense of intimidation unique to such portraits, and some of the children were staring at them with both fear and respect in their eyes.

"Hm?" I murmured.

The portrait at one edge — likely the newest one — was different from the rest.

Instead of displaying only the head of the family, it displayed three people — a man in his twenties or thirties, and a younger-looking lady with a baby in her arms.

After a moment, I realized that the lady was the countess when she was young.

"What's this portrait?" I asked the servant in the room.

"That is a portrait from thirty years ago, when Lady Zermina was still young. The ones with her are her husband and their son."

So the countess's name is "Zermina," huh? I thought.

That aside, I couldn't shake the feeling that the servant found it hard to talk about this.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Shortly after this portrait was made... her husband and son both passed away."

"That's just... How?"

"Apologies," he said. "I cannot say anything more about their death."

"It's fine. Sorry for being presumptuous."

So now I knew that Countess Quartierlatin's husband and son were gone, and that she was controlling this region all by herself.

"That might be why she's so kind to the orphans," commented Nemesis.

"True..."

Perhaps her fixation on gardening had something to do with that, as well.

A few dozen minutes later, we were joined by Azurite and the countess.

The children instantly ran up to the lady, thanking her and chattering to her, all smiles, making it very clear just how loved she really was.

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Later on, Azurite and the countess began a tea party and, as Azurite's cooperators, Nemesis and I were invited to join.

It was held on a second-floor balcony from which we could see the entire garden. Naturally, the balcony was covered in flowers, too.

Veldorbell was still playing, and we could hear the performance from here. He didn't even take breaks between songs. He would finish one child's request and then instantly answer some other child's request, making it obvious that he was enjoying this immensely.

Though, I didn't know how to feel whenever he started playing some anime song, or the BGM of some famous movie.

The tea party with the countess consisted of her thanking us for cooperating with Azurite and explaining the inner structure of the ruins, based on the explorers' accounts.

But when that was all done, we started to have an idle chat, and Nemesis, still curious about what we'd learned in the room, soon asked, "Why do you invite the orphans to these tea parties?"

The countess showed no aversion to giving an honest answer, and said, "I call the little ones here to distract myself from my loneliness. I once had a son — Emilio. While I was ill, my husband took him on a trip, only to be attacked by monsters."

I was silent.

"I lost Emilio before he was old enough to run around... so seeing healthy children always soothes my heart," she went on as she looked at the orphans in the garden. "It's also the reason behind this garden. My husband was an Altarian diplomat, but he had gardening as a hobby, so being surrounded by flowers helps me remember him. The large tree at the center of the garden was transplanted there while he was still alive and well."

The children... the garden... all of it was just a means of dealing with the loneliness from losing her family.

As saddening as it was, that wasn't something anyone could fault her for.

As she looked at the orphans, I looked into her eyes, which made me realize something.

"Heterochromia...?" I murmured.

Her eyes had slightly different colors — the right was blue, while the left was green.

Hearing my mutter, the countess faintly smiled and spoke, "These eyes are quite common in the Quartierlatin bloodline. My son had them, as well."

"Really?"

"Yes... They're actually the reason why I also invite travelers to my tea parties."

"You invite them because of heterochromia?"

How are those two things linked?

"After my husband and Emilio were attacked by monsters, my husband's body was brought back to me, but they couldn't find Emilio's. He was but a baby, so maybe there was nothing left, but a part of me believes that he might've been saved, and that he is still alive and well somewhere..."

I was silent.

"That's why I ask travelers whether they've seen a man with eyes like mine. It's been thirty years since then, though, so I've half-given up on this." She formed a listless smile.

I couldn't help but open my mouth. "The possibility may be low, but as long as it isn't zero, you should continue doing it. I think that, if you give up only half-certain about what became of him, the regret will haunt you far longer than it would otherwise."

I was merely speaking my mind. We'd met each other today, so I probably wasn't in a position to say something like that, but I didn't care if I came off as impertinent. I honestly thought that the regret would be far worse if she gave up.

"That's true," she said, agreeing with me. "You are absolutely right. As his mother, I can't give up on the possibility of him being alive. Thank you, Mr. Starling. You are exactly as the rumors say you are."

"It's nothing, really..." Honestly, I was mildly curious about what the rumors said about me.

I hope I'm not as infamous as Miss Aberration, at least.

"Now that we are on the subject," she spoke up again, "have *you* seen a man with eyes like mine? He should be over thirty now."

"Well, I'd be happy to tell you if I did, but you are the first tian with heterochromia I've ever met..."

It was a pretty common thing to see among us Masters, though. Some people — like Juliet, for instance — went out of their way to give heterochromia to their avatars during character creation.

Tians are a different matter, though. I've never seen a tian with eyes like hers... hold on a second.

"Now that I think about it, I think I know someone with the same right eye color," I said slowly.

"If you mean me, then that is only obvious," said Azurite. "My mother had Quartierlatin blood in her."

"Ohh, I see what you mean."

Sure enough, Azurite's and the countess's eyes were much alike.

However, the person I had in mind had the *exact same* right eye color as the countess.

"But there's no way, right?" I murmured.

I mean, both of his eyes were blue.

The tea party ended shortly afterwards, and we left the residence grounds to head to the ruins.

"Thanks," said Azurite, right after we left.

"For what?" I raised an eyebrow.

"For what you said to the countess. She has been searching for her son for thirty years, and despite appearances, she seemed quite exhausted. Hearing your sincere words must've been uplifting for her."

Oh, that.

"I just said what I thought. I don't deserve any thanks for that."

"Indeed," said Nemesis. "Ray says exactly what he thinks far too often. Just yesterday, after the bath incide-mghmghmh..."

I shut her mouth before she could tell Azurite about what had happened after my waking up from Fainting. I'd been so straightforward, back then, that even I was embarrassed about it now. I didn't want it dug up.

"Well, anyway," I said. "It's finally ruin time, right?"

"Yes," nodded Azurite, starting to walk. "Let's head to the— Hm?"

She noticed something and stopped.

I followed her gaze to find someone I was acquainted with.

“Dr. Mario?”

It was the archeologist we’d met yesterday.

He seemed to be looking through the fence surrounding the countess’s residence, to watch the magnificent garden beyond.

Many would find the fact that he was looking at a place full of children to be... questionable, to say the least.

However, the way he looked at the garden made it obvious that he was lost in deep thought, and not even his thick glasses detracted from that impression. It seemed as though he was trying hard to... remember something.

“Ah. Oh. If it isn’t-a young Ray and the young lady,” he noticed and greeted us. “Oh, and who is this dark little *ragazza,* hm?”

“Oh, she’s my Embryo, Nemesis.”

“Mm-hm,” Nemesis nodded. “I must say, you have quite a dubious manner of speech.”

“I get-a that a lot! Ha ha ha!” Dr. Mario was speaking the same way as yesterday — like a fake, cheerful foreigner. And yet, for some reason, it felt somewhat different.

“Why were you looking at the garden like that?” Azurite asked him, with a slightly harsh tone.

“*Mi dispiace!* Forgive me!” he bowed his head. “The garden is so beautiful. I couldn’t-a help but stare. Forgive my lack of manners...”

“I see,” she said suspiciously. “Be careful. Stare too much, and you’ll be arrested.”

“Oh... *Molto paurosi!* That would be scary. I’ll-a take my leave!” he said, then turned around and started to hurry away.

While Azurite simply glared at his back, I couldn’t help but ask him, “Dr. Mario, are you acquainted with the countess?”

My question made Azurite and Nemesis raise their eyebrows.

Honestly, I wasn’t too sure why I’d asked that, either.

If I had to name a reason, I’d point to what the countess had told me during the tea party and what I’d seen yesterday.

A part of me expected my question to hold no meaning to him. However, he stopped walking and, after a moment of silence, said, “No. There’s no connection between us. Of that, I am certain,” and then resumed walking away.

Oddly enough, he spoke without any of the unusual accent. As he left, I caught a glimpse of what was behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

His eyes, still as exhausted-looking as when I'd seen them yesterday, were of a blue highly similar to the countess's right eye.

Chapter Six: Ruins

Paladin, Ray Starling

As we were leaving the inn, Shirley told me that lots of merchants set up shop near the ruins to sell battle items for the explorers.

And that was no lie — there were lots of simple stalls on the sides of the path leading to the place. They felt somewhat like festival food stands or small jewelry shops.

I bought all the pure light magic attack Gems I saw and walked while using them on my Black Warcoat. Doing that seemed to be clearly way more effective than normal sunlight or Purifying Silverlight.

"What are you doing?" Azurite asked. I couldn't blame her. It was pretty weird.

"This coat is a special reward," I answered. "One of its skills can only be used when it absorbs enough light damage."

"You have a Prism Steed *and* a special reward?"

"Not just one. These bracers and boots are special rewards, too."

"Normally, only Superior Jobs have that many. In fact, three is rare even for them..."

That reminded me that Marie, who had a Superior Job, had only two. Strange to think that I'd already surpassed her on that front.

Not that that meant I was better than her. It would be a long time before she would be below me as a fighter.

"Anyhow... light damage, you say?" Azurite continued. "I have a light-based attack skill called 'Laser Blade.' Should I try feeding it to your coat?"

"I'll pass," I replied. "That probably deals physical damage, too."

For all I knew, it might even be capable of damaging my coat. Not to mention that its name made it sound like a sure-kill attack.

Talking about this and that, we walked on a freshly-made footpath leading up to the mountain, and it didn't take long until we saw the entrance to the ruins, surrounded by lots of armed people, Master and tian alike.

I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen Tom in the inn this morning. He wasn't among these people, either, so I could only assume that he was already inside.

"So... we're finally here," said Azurite.

"Yeah," I nodded.

Her mask did nothing to hide the fact that she was absurdly tense about this. Although a part of me felt like she was overburdened, rather than just tense.

It would make sense, too. Yesterday, she'd told me she felt like the very fate of the kingdom depended on this investigation.

I might have to keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn't do anything rash, like her attack on me yesterday, I thought.

"Let's go inside, you two," she said before walking ahead.

"Yeah," Nemesis and I replied and walked after her.

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The entrance to the ruins was entirely dirt at first, but halfway in, it became covered by a strange, glossy metal.

However, some people were using tools and attack skills to remove it, which made me assume that they were responsible for the dirt walls leading to this point. The entrance must've been metallic, too, at first.

Well, I can totally understand taking this metal. It's probably a good material, I thought. *But shouldn't places like this be preserved?*

"Whatever is most important here has to be deeper in. Let's move on ahead," said Azurite, as she threw a glance at the wall-breakers.

The hallway was completely devoid of monsters, but the burns and bullet holes in the walls told me that it hadn't been like that at the start.

These ruins weren't a created dungeon, so monsters would never spawn here for no reason. The monsters in this part of the ruins had clearly been beaten over the course of the three days since their discovery.

And so, following an uneventful walk through the hallway, we arrived at a larger space.

It was about the size of a high school gym. The floor and ceiling were metal, too, but the design seemed to be different than the hallway's. At the very least, the metal didn't look like it would be as easy to remove.

"Perhaps this is where these ruins *truly* begin," said Nemesis.

“Perhaps. This place even has *that*,” I replied as I pointed at the large crystal at the center.

A few of the Masters that were already here were looking at it, touching it, or opening their menus around it.

That had to be the crystal I’d heard about — the one that let people switch to Prism Rider. I’d interacted with a similar one back in a church where I’d become a Paladin.

A while had passed since then, so it was best to refresh myself on how these things worked. I took a few minutes to do so.

These large crystals were the reason why certain jobs were limited to certain areas of the world.

You could switch between jobs you’d already acquired at any save point or by using a small, consumable Job Crystal. However, getting a new job required more than just fulfilling the job’s conditions — you also had to touch the appropriate large crystal.

That was why Xunyu’s Master Jiangshi job could only be acquired in Huang He, while Miss Aberration’s High Priestess job could only be acquired here in the kingdom.

Speaking of Miss Aberration and job switching, there was a little something regarding that.

All the crystals for priest grouping jobs were within churches.

Or, rather, churches had been built around those crystals.

Naturally, those priest grouping crystals were limited, and that was the reason why Miss Aberration, instead of building her own churches, had tried to acquire the ones owned by the state religion.

After all, churches built in random places were little more than empty boxes.

Because of her slimy dealings, she now owned quite a large number of such facilities.

...Too many, actually.

At this rate, she would monopolize the priest grouping, and then make it a rule that anyone who wanted to take those jobs would have to join her cult.

Since *Infinite Dendrogram* had healing magic, the church were both a religious and a medical group, meaning that Miss Aberration was doing the equivalent of putting every hospital in Japan under her cult’s control.

No country or person who knew how bad cults could be could tolerate something like this.

However, despite Miss Aberration's obvious efforts to drive them out, the state church didn't seem to be all that bothered by this. In fact, they welcomed it.

This was because their doctrine could basically be summarized as "Use priest grouping skills to heal the ill."

Thus, they gladly let The Lunar Society take their churches and crystals, saying things like, "There is no problem as long as we get more Priests," "We lost a few churches, but this allows us to dedicate more workers to other medical facilities and orphanages. A lot of us were lost to Gloria, you see," and "Let us do our best for the sake of the people, together."

Basically, they were good to a fault — too clean to deal with this appropriately. And this despite the fact that they would be the ones most hurt by Miss Aberration's scheming.

I mentioned all that to Azurite. "The higher-ups in the capital must feel really uncomfortable about this."

"Oh, they are..." sighed Azurite with an odd degree of certainty. She seemed to be connected to the country's leadership, so she might've experienced that firsthand. From what I could tell, the person she worked for was really troubled by Miss Aberration's machinations.

"All right, then..." I muttered, as I touched the large crystal.

I got a list of jobs I could switch to, and instantly found Prism Rider.

Before choosing it, I looked at the other options.

There were Mechanic, Engineer, Pilot... a bunch of really "Dryfe-like" jobs.

Forget whatever's deeper in — this crystal by itself may have a great impact on the war, I thought.

"But the kingdom doesn't have the foundation to make good use of these jobs, right?" Nemesis commented.

"Oh, that's true."

Mechanical knowledge wasn't something you could gain overnight. The kingdom would need a lot of research to reach the technological level of Dryfe.

"Well, whether they even want to do that is up to the kingdom," I said as I resumed doing what I'd come here to do.

Touching the large crystal again displayed a menu of jobs I could switch to. Without any hesitation, I picked Prism Rider and initiated the process.

There was no sound or fireworks or anything — the main job in my stat summary just changed to Prism Rider, and that was it.

Becoming a Paladin, a high rank job, I remembered there having been some light, so this felt a bit underwhelming.

Shu and Marie told me that the switch to Superior Jobs is really flashy... I wonder if I'll ever get to see it.

Suddenly, I got a message saying, "Switching your main job has rendered some of your skills unusable."

Oh, right. Certain jobs couldn't use skills that were from groupings too distant in nature.

I looked at my skills to figure out which skills I'd lost.

Naturally, Horse Riding was still there.

Paladin's Aegis and Purifying Silverlight were available, too. They were Paladin skills, and I could only guess they had stayed because Paladin had elements from the rider grouping.

The only skill that was now unusable was the healing spell.

I had been able to learn it as a Paladin because that job was partially in the priest grouping, but switching to Prism Rider had severed that link.

Oh well... I'd been questioning my healing magic's usefulness, anyway. The amount it restored wasn't too great. Instead of moping over that, I would just be thankful that I still had Aegis and Silverlight.

"Though you might need to start keeping a keener eye on your healing item stocks," commented Nemesis.

"True," I nodded.

Losing that skill made me wonder if I'd gained any new ones, but when I checked, I found nothing.

I guess I'll need to level up, just like with Paladin.

"Are you finished?" asked Azurite.

"Yeah," I nodded. "That's my objective done. Now I can focus on helping you."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Anyway, where do we go now? There are four paths we can take here."

Three, if you ignored the one we'd come through.

“According to the information I was given, the path leading deeper underground is beyond that door,” Azurite said, as she pointed to one of the paths.

There was an automatic door there, and many people, tian and Master alike, were walking through it.

From what I could tell, the hallway beyond it was at least five meters high, and it was fittingly wide, too.

“You’ll fit there just fine, Silver,” I said as I took my trusty steed out of my inventory and jumped on him.

This was my first time riding him as a Prism Rider, but nothing seemed different from before.

“It might be related to some Prism Rider skill, so I’ll ride Silver, if you don’t mind,” I said.

“I have nothing against that, but...” Azurite muttered.

Hm? But what?

“If you don’t have anything against it... could you let me ride him later?” she asked. “I’ve always wanted to ride an original, but my mentor only let me ride his during special occasions.”

Well, Langley Grandria’s Gold Thunder was a national treasure, after all. It’s not something they can put up for rent, I thought. *There might’ve been other reasons, but still.*

“Why not just sit behind me?” I asked. “You’ll have to get off when we run into monsters, but it should all be fine until then.”

“Can I really?”

“Yeah.”

I can’t imagine why you couldn’t, honestly.

“What of me?” asked Nemesis. “Should I sit before you?”

Oh, right, it’s about Nemesis.

“Well, either that or you go into weapon form.”

“Mm-hm. Very well. This is a dungeon, and you can never be sure what will come for you, so I will go for the halberd for now. There might be nasty debuffs waiting for us.”

And so, she became The Flag Halberd.

Figuring she had a good point, I put on the Black Warcoat’s hood to prepare for any ambushes.

“Excuse me,” said Azurite, as she sat behind me.

It suddenly hit me that Silver was carrying two people and a pretty hefty weapon. The combined weight had to be pretty big, but it didn't seem like much for a Prism Steed. We went deeper in without any trouble at all.

"Just what I expected of a Prism Steed!" exclaimed Azurite. "We will reach the inner parts of these ruins in no time!"

"Yep!"

Careful not to trample over the people surprised by Silver, we made our way deeper in.

In unrelated (?) news, later in the day, a strange rumor was born. People said they saw an unnerving creature holding a dark flag, as well as a shady-looking masked woman, both of whom were riding a silver horse...

◇◇◇

Thirty minutes on horseback later, we were in so deep that there was literally no one nearby.

Still, I kept Silver galloping slowly enough to not crash into any people that might jump out at us.

"What are we gonna do when we're there, anyway?" I asked Azurite.

"First and foremost, we will investigate the technology kept in these ruins," she replied.

"You said that you can never tell what these ruins contain, right?"

"Yes. Also, there are two types of ruins — storehouses and factories."

"Oh?"

"Storehouses are full of items left behind by the pre-ancient civilization," she explained. "But there is no equipment to produce more of them, so you never gain much technology from them. You can salvage parts of it from the items, but it's still very little. Factories, on the other hand, are places that actually make the items. If the equipment isn't broken, you can use it for production right away, and even if it is broken, you can still look into how the items were made."

I see, I thought. *Storehouses are like huge treasure piles, but factories are way more useful to countries.*

"What do you think about these ruins?" she asked. "Is it a factory or a storehouse? I don't mind if you aren't too certain."

"A factory," I replied with confidence. "Yesterday, Dr. Mario was asked to examine stuff like artificial diamonds and metal plates — things that were more like materials than products. I think it's likely that this is a factory where they were making items using those and other things."

"But that's not quite enough to discard the possibility that this is a storehouse, is it?"

"Yeah. And that's where the large crystal comes in."

She nodded. "Fair point."

It was just like the matter of Miss Aberration and the state religion's shared monopoly over the priest grouping crystals.

Looking at it from that angle, it was safe to assume that the crystal here was secured so that the workers here could have easy access to jobs like Engineer and Mechanic.

Or, rather, this whole factory had been *built around that crystal*.

"I saw no corrosion on any of the walls here," said Nemesis. "If this is a factory, the equipment must be intact, as well."

"True," Azurite nodded. "That is likely."

The idea that a factory could still be running after two millennia spoke volumes about the technological prowess of the pre-ancient civilization.

Thinking about that made me wonder how a culture so advanced had collapsed in the first place.

Hugo had told me that it was destroyed by a god and his thirteen servants, while B3 told me something about another ancient civilization that had collapsed at about the same time.

I couldn't help but wonder about that.

"I'll have to ask Dr. Mario," I muttered.

An archeologist like him is bound to know something about that... hm?

"Ah!" I gasped as I saw a light coming from further ahead in the hallway.

In a haste, I moved my Black Warcoat to hide my face with it, and a second later, I felt it absorb something.

"Ray!" Azurite exclaimed.

"I'm all right! But there's something up ahead!"

Soon enough, the monsters that were out of sight came into vision.

There were two of them, and they were much like the construct that had attacked Shirley yesterday.

That extended to having names that didn't suit them at all — Goblin

Warrior and Pashi Rabbit.

One of them was wielding firearms similar to yesterday's Teal Wolf (?)'s, but the other one had a design focused around the energy pipe it had for a head.

"That's the thing that fired the beam!" I exclaimed as I made Silver accelerate towards them, figuring that being too far away from them was a bad idea.

The one with the firearms responded by attacking us with bullets and shells, but I avoided them by making Silver gallop across the wall.

The one with the beam gun aimed at us and fired again, but just like the previous beam, I saw it coming.

"OARGH!" I roared as I made my Black Warcoat dance and block the beam.

Soon enough, I was right next to them. Not wasting any time, I howled, "Vengeance is Mine!" and destroyed the head of the beam model (Goblin Warrior).

As I did that, Azurite used what looked like the skill she'd talked about, Laser Blade, to split the firearm model (Pashi Rabbit) in half.

The two monsters stopped moving, released particles of light, then ceased all function.

"Phew..." I sighed in relief. That battle had been really sudden, and I was glad it'd gone so smoothly.

"The first attack you received here was a laser straight to the face," commented Nemesis. "How gruesome."

Yeah. If I hadn't had Monochrome, I'd have probably lost my head, I thought in response.

It had given me some Shining Despair charge, though. A silver lining.

I asked, "You okay, Azurite? Got hit by any stray bullets?"

"No, I'm unharmed. That aside, these monsters with absurd names... I've heard of them from the countess."

Azurite and I examined the two monsters we'd beaten. The names above their heads had already vanished, and the particles of light were a sure sign that the monsters were dead. However, the machine parts, though broken, were still there.

It was the same as yesterday.

"This one's the same model as the one I saved Shirley from," I said.

“Are you implying that the monsters from these ruins escaped outside?”

That would’ve come as no surprise. Ruins were natural dungeons, meaning that, unlike how it was with created dungeons, the monsters inside weren’t bound to them. It was entirely possible that they’d leaked out.

For all we knew, there might be ways out of here other than the main entrance, and the monsters might be capable of leaving through them. Thus, the idea of them leaving the dungeon wasn’t strange at all... unlike these things.

“I heard of this, but it’s still so odd,” muttered Azurite. “These are monsters, so why are they not disappearing?”

Azurite had the exact same question as me.

Normally, monsters became light and disappeared the moment they were defeated, and non-living creatures, such as golems, were no exception. I’d seen this happen many times with the Balloon Golem Kasumi often summoned, so that was pretty much certain.

Despite that, these mechanical monsters actually had physical remains.

And no, these weren’t drops... Based on what’d happened yesterday, it was clear that these were their actual parts, left behind despite their destruction.

I picked up a part, examined it, and just like yesterday, the only description I got was: “The remains of a mysterious machine.”

Perhaps an archeologist like Dr. Mario would know more about this? I thought.

“Let’s take these remains with us, shall we?” Azurite suggested.

I nodded in response, and we gathered the pieces and stored them away.

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Ten-odd minutes had passed since our clash with those two monsters.

We were in another part of the hallway, stunned by what we were seeing.

“Looks like those two were left functioning by accident,” I muttered, as I eyed all the mechanical remains lying around.

These remains were of the same types as the two we’d encountered, but there were at least ten of each.

“The destruction on the surroundings is fresh, and the split constructs are still sparking," said Azurite. "They were destroyed only recently."

She wasn't wrong there — the damage on the machines was clearly new. The damage looked pretty varied, too. Some machines had three parallel cuts on them, some had a single cut that split them apart, some had holes that looked like they were caused by arrows in them, et cetera.

It felt like the aftermath of a fight from someone in the gladiator grouping. Someone who'd used many various weapons.

There was another thing of note, here...

"These are... traps," I noted.

There were machines poking out of the walls and the ceiling.

Most of them were gun-like in appearance, but there were also some lens-like devices that seemed as though they'd been designed to horizontally slide on the walls.

That's the generic SF laser trap that splits people apart, isn't it?

"It's quite clear that these traps were triggered," said Azurite.

"There's nothing on the ground, though, so whoever triggered them made it through."

A tian's body wouldn't disappear, and a dead Master would leave behind a set of random drops. This meant that whoever had passed this place had been unfazed by the traps and gone on ahead.

The kind of person could do that and... Hm?!

There was a sudden sound that seemed very familiar.

"Ray!" Azurite called out.

"That sounds like battle, all right," I nodded.

"Mm-hm," Nemesis joined. "Those echoes are coming from further in the hallway."

The hallway took a turn about 100 meters ahead, and it sounded like someone was fighting someone up ahead.

"Let's go check it out," I said, as I made Silver gallop towards the source. He arrived at the corner in a flash, and we could now see what was happening beyond it.

There was a bigger space, much like the room with the large crystal. Floor, ceiling, walls... everything was covered in metal.

And there were nearly 50 mechanical, battle-ready monsters.

However, not a single one of them was looking at us.

They were shooting their guns and lasers at *something* moving in seemingly every direction at incredible speeds.

As I watched this dumbfounding battle...

“Grimalkin at the mercy of the waves.”

“Grimalkin at the tail of the wind.”

...I heard someone recite a poem.

Despite all the gunfire, I could hear it pretty clearly.

“Grimalkin under the leaves.”

“Grimalkin in the shade of fire-sparks.”

The source of this poem was the thing the machines were aiming at, the thing they were firing at, but were unable to shoot down.

It was a man with a cat on his head.

“Grimalkin beyond the stars.”

“Grimalkin within the heart.”

He was The Lynx, Tom Cat — the second in the kingdom’s duel rankings, and the reigning champion before Figaro’s taking the title.

“Now dance, *Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin*.”

The moment he said that, Tom’s trademark cat, Grimalkin, jumped off his head.

The Embryo landed on all fours, then stood up on its back legs.

It didn’t end there. The cat then grew, lost its fur... and became another Tom in a blink of an eye.

That was surprising enough, but there was even more. Both the original Tom and the Tom that had been Grimalkin multiplied, and the two Toms became four.

Then the four Toms became eight.

“Grimalkin says goodbye.”

Suddenly, they all attacked the mechanical monsters.

They were too fast for me to follow with the naked eye.

I’d already seen supersonic movements from Figaro, Xunyu, and other top duel rankers. Thanks to all the mock battles I had with them, I was more or less used to such speeds.

It was pretty obvious that Tom’s job, The Lynx, was an AGI-focused job that allowed supersonic movement, and normally, I’d have been able to follow him with my gaze.

However, I couldn’t do that with eight of him.

Some were running on the floor, some dashed up the walls, others moved through the air.

All eight moved in all three dimensions, and with unparalleled precision. They even left afterimages so solid that they seemed like new clones, making it even more difficult to follow them.

One had claw-like bracers, one had a longsword, one had a bow... their weapons were varied, and it felt like there were even more of them than there actually was.

Eventually, the entire room became completely filled with Toms and their afterimages. It was as if this very space belonged to him alone.

Their ferocious, supersonic attacks quickly dealt away with the mechanical monsters.

“Monster Cat Mansion.” I unwittingly muttered his nickname.

This was the first time I’d seen him fight, and it was abundantly clear how he’d gotten that nickname. It was his immensely powerful self-cloning ability.

Of course, this wasn't the first such ability I'd seen. Marie's Death Shadow job gave her something in the same vein. However, that skill divided her stats between the clones. The more clones, the weaker they were.

Considering that made Grimalkin seem even more fearsome. Creating seven clones as powerful as yourself was stunning, even for an Embryo's ultimate skill, and combining that with a speed so great that you formed solid afterimages was just insane.

Staring at the eight, I couldn't follow them at all.

"Right, up... landed," muttered Azurite, standing at my side.

She was moving her head as though she was looking at something... someone... specific.

"Are you still following the original Tom?" I asked.

"Yes. Only barely, though."

That wasn't something I'd expected from a high-rank job. Perhaps there was truth to the idea that tians were the better technical fighters, and we Masters only surpassed them because of skills and stats.

Well... there were exceptions like Shu and Figaro, but my point still stood.

"That aside, do you perhaps know Monster Cat Mansion?" she asked me.

"We're acquainted, yeah. You too, I assume?"

"I do not know him in person, but I have heard of him, of course. He was the kingdom's duel champion for years, after all."

"Good point."

Tom had been the king of the arena until Figaro had come and taken the crown, so it was only natural for tians to know of him, too.

Hold on, I thought. *Figaro became top duelist when he was still in his sixth form. That was over two years ago in* Dendro *time, so... when, exactly, did Tom become the champion?*

"Ah! Ray!" Azurite exclaimed.

"Eh?!" I brought my attention back to Tom's battle with the monsters.

With most of the monsters destroyed, the winner here was as good as decided.

But then, a great number of gun-like objects with lenses at the muzzle protruded out of the walls.

They were the same as the sentry gun traps Tom'd destroyed in the hallway.

I didn't know if it was because they were old, but only about half of them properly worked. However, that was more than enough.

The Toms were suddenly assaulted by a barrage of lasers, more than 100 of them. Not even supersonic speeds allowed the many clones to avoid that number of high-velocity projectiles. Both the afterimages and the actual clones alike were shot.

"They hit the original!" Azurite exclaimed.

"What?!"

Azurite pointed at one of the countless Toms.

The Tom wielding claw-like bracers was shot in the head and became particles of light... but then transformed into a fat cat, meowed, and vanished.

"Huh... eh?" Azurite was dumbfounded.

"Sure it wasn't a clone?" I asked.

"N-No! I was certain that was the real one... huh?"

We looked back at Tom. The afterimages had vanished, and only one of them was left now.

He then became two, and a second later, the one that had been there from the start was turned into swiss cheese by a barrage of lasers.

However, despite seemingly being the original, he became a cat, meowed, and vanished.

Then the Tom that was seemingly a clone began multiplying again.

And so, the Toms were eight once more. They started moving at supersonic speeds again, creating afterimages and making short work of the sentry guns.

"What *is* that?" Azurite exclaimed, utterly flabbergasted by what she was seeing.

I, on the other hand, now understood the true nature of Tom's ultimate skill.

It didn't create "clones," oh no.

It created new "originals."

From what I could tell, they all shared a single consciousness, but when the "original" housing the consciousness was beaten, it would move to another "original." Thus, the supposed "original" would become a "clone."

That ultimate skill couldn't be countered unless you defeated all eight Toms quickly enough to prevent the remaining ones from multiplying.

This was the power of Grimalkin, the Embryo of the previous duel champion.

"You didn't know about this, either?" I asked Azurite.

"I only knew that he could create clones... I never saw any of his duels."

I see. I never saw him fight, either, so I'm pretty shaken right now.

"Few Embryos give their Master as much survivability as this one does," commented Nemesis.

Yeah.

This also gave me a decent idea of how Figaro had won against him.

At first, he'd focused entirely on defense, bearing Tom's onslaught until his battle length-proportionate enhancement had given him the power he needed to defeat the Toms before they could multiply again.

And then there was Kashimiya — the third in the rankings. Juliet had told me that he couldn't beat Tom because of compatibility issues, which probably meant that he had no way to stop him from multiplying again.

And that was exactly why I had no chance against him, either.

"Strange to think that he isn't a Superior," I muttered.

I felt Nemesis nod in response and continued to watch Tom clear the room.

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Once the room was completely emptied, Tom noticed us, waved, and walked over.

"If it isn't Ray and... a masked lady I don't know. Hellooo," he greeted us.

"Meoww," Grimalkin joined him. Despite having disappeared many times during the fight, he was back on Tom's head as though nothing had happened.

"Good job handling them," I said. "That was an amazing battle."

"Well, there were lots of them. I had to give it all I haaad!" Tom replied before bending forwards a bit and sighing. "I'm realllly tired..."

I had no doubt that he was telling the truth, but the way he was bending made it look like he was weighed down by the cat.

"I'll leave today's exploration at that and go back to the inn," he said. "Ah, it's safe to explore the room now. There should be no more traps."

"Eh? Thank you," I said, slightly confused.

"Thank you," Azurite joined in. "But shouldn't you be exploring this place, as well?"

I could see why she was asking that. All Tom had done here was take care of the monsters and traps. He hadn't looked around for any magic items or anything like that. In fact, he wasn't even retrieving the remains of the monsters he'd beaten.

"I'll be fine," he said. "I don't need any of thaaat stuff. Do what you want with it."

"Meoww."

With those words as his last, Tom casually waved his hand and walked away.

The moment he went behind the corner in the hallway, Nemesis muttered, "What was his purpose here, I wonder...?"

I was curious about that, too, but my top priority right now was the investigation.

We got off of Silver and started exploring the room. Nemesis went back to her human form.

All the machine remains here made it a pain to get around, but this place was much like the room with the crystal.

The most notable feature here was the large painting on one of the sides of the room. Although, it looked less like it was painted and more like it was burnt into the wall.

That painting displayed countless people clashing with a horde of beasts, then another horde of beasts howling atop a place that looked like a castle.

There was some writing under it, but unlike the text you'd find on signs and the like, it wasn't getting auto-translated.

It seems pretty important, though, I thought.

"Can you read this?" I asked Azurite.

"I can't."

If a tian like her couldn't read it, it meant that this wasn't written in *Infinite Dendrogram*'s common, but some language they'd used in the pre-ancient civilization.

In that case, all we could do was show it to Dr. Mario.

"Do you have a camera?" I asked. "Polaroid or digital cams would be the best for this."

"I don't know what 'Polaroid' and 'digital cams' are, but I have a magic camera that instantly develops the picture," she said, as she reached into her inventory and took out an object much like a polaroid camera.

Well, she sure came prepared. It's clear she's taking this investigation seriously.

Azurite took a number of pictures and gave me one displaying everything on the wall, including a close-up of the unreadable text.

"You'll be showing this to the archeologist, I assume?" she asked.

"Yeah. Is that bad?"

"It isn't... but I will want to hear the translation, as well."

"Of course," I nodded as I took the photos.

I couldn't shake the feeling that Dr. Mario was making Azurite uncomfortable. Yesterday, she'd said that it was strange for an archeologist to be in the area this early. However, he was the only archeologist we had access to, so we had to rely on him if we wanted to know about this text.

"You don't trust Dr. Mario?" I asked her.

"This is not about trust. I'm merely uncomfortable about involving outsiders. If it was possible, I would make this investigation more confidential... but the kingdom currently has next to no people who know archeology."

"Really?"

"Yes. My teacher, the Arch Sage, was well-versed in many things, archeology included, but he passed away in the war. His apprentices, too, were lost either in the war or during Gloria's attack."

"Ohh..."

According to Liliana, the knight orders had suffered severely in the war, and it looked like the other major groups of the kingdom were no different.

"These ruins are far larger than I anticipated, and there's a lot of specialized language that's a challenge to analyze," said Azurite. "We need outside help to find out what this factory produces."

"What?" I raised an eyebrow. "But we already know what they make here."

"...Eh?"

Azurite looked surprised, but it seemed plain to me that we already had enough info to make an educated guess about the nature of this place.

Yesterday, someone had brought Dr. Mario a metal plate as tough as a magic item and an artificial diamond used for lasers.

Additionally, despite presumably protecting this place for two millennia, the machine monsters were functioning without any problems to speak of.

About half of the sentry guns here weren't working, so it was odd that the monsters we'd fought had been running so smoothly.

Which led me to believe that this place was...

"It's producing mechanical monsters," I said. "These ruins are basically a weapon factory."

What we'd defeated weren't guards from millennia ago, but newly-produced machines.

"A weapon factory," Azurite muttered as she put her hand on her forehead and began thinking.

If used well, a weapon factory would surely be a powerful asset to the kingdom. Nothing would increase the country's military strength as greatly as that.

However, there was a problem...

"Ray," she spoke up. "Assuming this place is what you say it is and these machines are the products... there's still one major question that remains unanswered."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

I knew exactly what she was getting at. It was the most notable thing about these mechanical monsters.

"That doesn't explain why they have unrelated names like 'Teal Wolf' and 'Goblin Warrior,' right?" I asked.

"Exactly."

Normally, monsters had their names displayed above their heads. Golems and the like were no exception.

However, these monsters here were different. There were only two models, but the names above their heads were many, varied, seemingly random, and had little to do with machines.

The only explanation I had for this was the idea that producing these machines required using other monsters as material.

The fact that fur had been sticking out of the machine I'd destroyed in the forest made it likely, but...

"Monsters that are produced like that always end up having names different than their material," said Nemesis.

"Yeah, exactly."

Franklin's creations were a good example of that.

The base monsters had different names than the resulting ones. If this really was a factory that made mechanical monsters from other monsters, there was no reason for the names to stay the same. In fact, I would expect the two models to have their own names, which would be uniform across all units.

Not to mention that, unlike these machines, produced monsters would become light and vanish just like any other monster.

What the hell is this?

"I must say," Nemesis spoke up, "these look much like Hugo's Magingear."

"Well, it was made by the lab coat bastard's clan, but the tech was still Dryfe's, and since Dryfe's tech is based around analyzing the pre-ancient civilization's tech, there's a link there, so... ah!"

A sudden realization made me cut my words short.

Magingears.

Pre-ancient civilization tech.

Silver and replicas.

Reactors and a lack of them.

This factory and the mechanical monsters.

Those keywords came to mind, and everything slotted into place.

The conclusion I came to made me cover my mouth.

"Ray? What's wrong?" asked Nemesis.

"You don't look well," commented Azurite.

So it shows on my face, huh? Of course it does. The conclusion I came to is just that bad.

I hadn't felt this way since entering the basement in Gouz-Maise Gang's hideout.

...Disgusting.

"What did you realize?" asked Nemesis.

"These aren't monsters at all," I replied.

My words made her and Azurite tilt their heads in confusion.

Ignoring that, I continued speaking the truth of these ruins. "These things... all the scrap here... is special equipment."

"Eh?" Azurite muttered as she looked at the only functioning piece of special equipment in this room: Silver.

Nemesis closed her eyes. She was probably thinking about Magingears.

"But what about the names above their heads?" Azurite asked.

"They disappeared because the monsters equipping them died. All that's left here is the equipment. There's nothing more to it."

"So, we were attacked by armed monsters?"

"No. If that was the case, completely different species like Goblin Warriors and Pashi Rabbits would never cooperate. Hell, Tom fought fifty-odd machines in this room. Did you see any infighting between them?"

"...No."

Exactly.

"Their cooperation when fighting Tom was flawless, like they were commanded by a single will."

That was the keyword here — "command." The monsters inside meant nothing.

"Ray, you don't mean that..." Nemesis muttered and looked at the remains with an astonished expression.

And so, I spoke what they really were: "These things are *special equipment that take control of the user*."

"?!" Azurite gasped in shock.

I was fully confident I was right.

Not every piece of equipment was good for the user.

The Cursed Bloody Regeneration Armor that I'd uncursed and used before Monochrome's destroying it was a prime example of that.

"This is cursed special equipment... no... they were designed to be like this," I muttered.

"Wait. Ray, hold on!" Azurite raised her voice, still unable to fully process what I'd just told her. "Why would anyone make special equipment like that?"

"My Silver is an original Prism Steed," I said. "He has an engine that produces all the MP he needs to gallop around, so he doesn't have to drain my MP."

Based on what Hugo had told me, the pre-ancient civilization's machines made their own MP. Though Silver was an unofficial prototype or an experimental unit, he still had the engine for it. However, the same couldn't be said for the replica Prism Steeds.

"Replicas, by contrast, function by using the MP of those riding them. This is probably because of cost. They couldn't fit all the mass-produced units with the MP engines."

Original Prism Steeds were amazing pieces of equipment, after all. If the creators could have, they surely would've made more than just five of them, and we'd have more of them in the world today. However, most of the ones around were replicas.

"So what about these, then?" I asked.

"...!" Azurite gasped again.

"We've seen dozens of them so far, and they are now scrap on the floor. Do you think they're luxury units with engines, or your common mass-produced models?"

She was dead silent.

"It's pretty obvious that it's the latter. And that's why they need fuel... *living creatures*."

They were clearly great war machines. Not every unit had to be as luxurious as an original Prism Steed. Sometimes quantity produced way greater results than quality.

The fact they could function just fine after taking in weak monsters like Pashi Rabbits and Teal Wolves showed they also had good MP efficiency, as well.

The equipment took something that couldn't be used in battle and turned it into something useful, and there was no arguing that it made them into excellent weapons.

I'm gonna be sick.

"Yesterday, when I ran into the first one of these, it was assaulting Shirley," I said. "However, *it didn't try to kill her*."

It'd fired at me the moment it saw me, but it had treated Shirley differently. It'd attacked the Master, but not the tian.

"*It was planning to take her back alive.*"

"Wait... are you saying that...?!" Azurite raised her voice, the panic in her tone all too apparent.

I nodded and spoke the answer that made me so nauseous.

"To these things, *even people are just fuel*."

Chapter Seven: Power and Will

About a certain weapon

Prism Persons.

That was the name given to humanoid automata with superhuman abilities.

They were one of the pinnacles of technology — so advanced that even the pre-ancient civilization thought they greatly surpassed the norms of their science.

Many considered them to be the perfect fusion of magic engineering and magic biology, the apex of both form and function.

They possessed humanoid frames of great beauty, intelligence to communicate with mankind, and they behaved like the most disciplined of people.

Their battle prowess, too, was simply phenomenal. They matched Superior Jobs, and sometimes even surpassed them. A Prism Person known as “Diamond Slayer” was said to have defeated the Over Gladiator of their era without suffering a hint of damage.

Prism Persons, much like Prism Steeds, were considered to be some of the greatest things the supreme artisan Flagman had created.

Thus, it was only natural for people to consider mass-producing them.

But of course, doing so meant removing a large number of the functions available to the originals. After all, mass-produced Prism Steeds had to drop their special functions and lose their highly-expensive reactors, making them use the riders’ magic instead.

The Prism Persons were no different. Installing reactors in all of them was impractical, so they had to use other sources of magic. However, unlike Prism Steeds, which were designed to be mounts, Prism Persons were meant to be autonomous weapons. Turning them into mounts powered by the riders’ magic would go against their primary design concept.

Besides discarding the reactors, the mass-produced units also didn’t inherit the humanoid, superhuman beauty of the originals, nor did they receive their unique powers.

As a result, the blueprints depicted machines that used the people riding them as their source of magic, were humanoid in design — albeit rough and mechanical — and made up for their lack of special abilities with external weaponry.

In a way, they were much like the Magingears that would come to be used in the Dryfe Imperium two millennia later.

This made them completely unlike the original Prism Persons.

Even Flagman himself was dissatisfied with the blueprints he'd drawn, and the Prism Person mass-production project was halted before a single unit was produced.

That was the reason why, in the future, Dryfe's technology salvaging operations would only result in tank and exoskeleton Magingears. Humanoid mechs would only be invented by Masters.

Still, the invasion of the incarnations forced the ancient people to restart the project. Their fight for humanity's survival needed all the firepower they could get.

They had newer, more powerful weaponry, such as the Prism Dragons, but they were severely lacking in numbers.

Their infantry divisions were annihilated by the inexhaustible Incarnation of Beasts, pressing them into developing a force that, unlike the mass-produced Prism Steeds, could fight on its own.

Thus, they resumed the Prism Person mass-production project and began developing the first units.

Flagman rushed back to their blueprints and quickly began building the "Prism Soldier" auto-production plant.

However, he quickly hit a wall.

According to the blueprints, the mass-produced Prism People had to be controlled by trained Pilots.

However, they had already lost too many soldiers to the incarnations, so they didn't have enough people qualified to become Prism Soldier magic sources.

This lack of personnel was something that not even a genius like Flagman could solve, so his solution came from another angle — a single thought, both simple and reasonable.

It doesn't have to be people, does it?

The only reason why Prism Soldiers needed people was their lack of a reactor. They needed Pilots to provide them with magic, and that was all there was to it.

In other words, as long as they had magic, even non-humanoids — monsters — were viable sources.

If they were to capture them and give them no means of control, wild beasts and the like could be used as batteries that powered the machines while their programming did all the fighting.

This realization was a light of hope for Flagman.

But then he ran into another problem.

Specifically, it was the matter of how the program would differentiate between sources of magic and the enemy.

He had the option of leaving a few commanding officers or engineers to control it as they deemed appropriate, but it was likely that they would eventually die in the incarnations' onslaught. For this system to operate smoothly, they had to make it completely automatic.

Ideally, Flagman wanted to make it so that, as long as at least one plant was active, it would automatically mass-produce Prism Soldiers that would continuously fight the incarnations.

However, mass-produced units weren't capable of processing instructions that were too complex.

Thus, Flagman solved this by using two simple settings.

First, he recorded all the humanoid races living on the continent in his era and made it so the machines saw them as neither hostiles nor magic sources.

The other setting made it so the machines would annihilate anything with a threat ranking of C or above, and use anything D or below as energy sources.

"With this, we'll have soldiers who automatically power themselves while fighting the incarnations and dangerous monsters. They will be mankind's hope for all eternity," Flagman muttered to himself as he finished the auto-production plant.

But he also knew that, were he to activate it right away, the incarnations would surely discover it and destroy it. That was why he made it go into sleep mode and set the plant to produce Prism Soldiers slowly and in secrecy. Then, when certain conditions were met, it'd send its soldiers out to capture more sources and fight the incarnations.

Thus, just like the other ruins, the Prism Soldier plant was left behind to become the hope of future mankind.

Now, the reason why this plant eventually became an error was a major flaw in Flagman’s genius design.

Specifically, it was all in the machines’ targeting setting.

The ruins had been left behind two millennia ago, and the list of humanoid races was as old as they were.

Naturally, that was more than enough time for tians to start to differ from the list, especially with how heavily the incarnations had altered the environment. For one thing, the amount of atmospheric magic had never been the same since.

Just as people in colder climates gradually evolved to have more body hair, so did tians slightly change to better fit their environment. There was nothing strange about this.

Alas, it just so happened that the primitive program of the Prism Soldiers couldn’t understand those minute changes — if a species was even slightly off the humanoid list they were provided with, *it was not human*.

A true Prism Person would’ve had the intelligence to see the nature of these changes, but the mass-produced Prism Soldiers were too lacking in intelligence.

And so, though built to protect humanity, they now saw them as nothing but hostiles or energy sources.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The moment I told Azurite that the machines saw people as nothing but fuel, she turned pale and eyed the metallic remains.

She had come to these ruins hoping to find something that could save the kingdom from its dire state, only to find a factory of murder machines that used people as sources of energy. She had every reason to be shocked.

“If that is true, then this place and the Gouz-Maise Gang are much alike,” commented Nemesis, and I could see exactly what she meant.

To these things, all lifeforms — monster and tian alike — were just a source of energy. That was why they wandered about, gathering creatures they could use as fuel for their brethren.

If I hadn't come on time yesterday, Shirley might've suffered the same fate.

Just imagining that made a cold chill go down my spine.

Then again... for all I knew, some people might've already been turned into fuel.

"I'm gonna be sick," I muttered.

To these machines, people were but tools, and their lives were nothing but fuel. Nemesis was right — they were like Maise, the Lich from the Gouz-Maise Gang.

He, too, had only seen children as materials or money. That was the main reason why this realization disgusted me so much. It was all a bit too reminiscent of those memories I loathed so much.

I sighed and unconsciously looked down at my feet.

"Ah!" I gasped as I saw something with a close link to what I had just been thinking of: the Grudge-Soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise.

The Gouz-Maise Gang had once been an existence that all of Gideon feared, and even after dying, it had continued to be a major threat as the Revenant Ox-Horse.

These things on my feet were what it had become, and, according to Gardranda — a fellow special reward — they had no will of their own now. They, too, reminded me of that awful time back in the basement.

"But..."

But without these Grudge-Soaked Greaves, I couldn't have won Franklin's Game.

As bad as Gouz-Maise originally had been, it had gone on to become an item that, combined with the pre-ancient civilization's Silver, could defeat the RSK. Its existence had once been nothing but vile, but there had been a future that it alone could open up.

"Just like the Gouz-Maise Gang, huh...?" I murmured.

The power on these greaves was the same as that Revenant Ox-Horse's, but what it did was the complete opposite.

Perhaps the same could eventually be said about these ruins?

"Azurite," I spoke up.

"Ray." She turned to me, looking somewhat meek.

"Can I give an opinion about this place?"

“...Please do.”

“I think we should stop the factory and break all the machines that are still moving.”

“That... seems to be the only thing we can do here...”

These ruins were far too dangerous. As long as the factory here was active, it would only become more of a threat the more time went by. And that, of course, meant that more and more people would be captured to be used as fuel.

Not to mention that this place worked fast, too. The fact that the monsters inside were alive meant that the machines had started going outside only recently — most likely after the landscape change leading to the discovery of these ruins.

The machines were using some paths to the surface to go outside and start collecting more sources. And the factory had produced this many machines in such a short time. If we left it active, their numbers would grow even larger, perhaps resulting in an all-out invasion of the surface.

We had to stop the production as soon as possible. And then...

“And then you can try to find out how you can put the technology here to good use,” I said.

“...Eh?” Azurite voiced her surprise. “We’ll use this technology here?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, you’re investigating this place from that angle, right?”

“Yes... But the power in these ruins is dangerous and fearsome, no?”

“I know that much. That’s why I’m saying that we’ll destroy all the active machines and stop the factory, even if we have to break it.”

That much was set in stone. I couldn’t ignore the man-eating machines here. The aftertaste in my mouth would be way too bad.

“But there’s nothing stopping you from searching for ways to use this tech for the kingdom... for the good of the people... right?” I asked.

It was doubtful that the whole “monsters wearing them” thing was an option, and getting tians to use them was just plain wrong, so this would definitely call for some rethinking.

Nevertheless, this place was a treasure trove of pre-ancient civilization tech — a thing that the ancestors of the current tians had left as a hope for the people of the future. There was no way that this place didn’t have anything that could be used for good.

Or perhaps that's just what I want to believe, I thought.

"But that is far too dangerous," said Azurite. "We don't know if we can use the technology properly."

I knew full well what she was trying to say.

In fact, a large part of me agreed with her.

This place was seriously dangerous, and perhaps it was best to just blow it all up until there was nothing left.

However...

"Yeah, you can never be sure if you can use any power correctly... but no matter what the power is, *trying* to use it correctly is never a mistake."

"...!" Azurite gasped.

The machines these ruins were making were just sickening, but that didn't mean that this sickening technology couldn't become a key to a better future. We had Gouz-Maise as a great example of that.

"By itself, power isn't good or evil," I said. "I've come to realize that those things only apply to the will of those who wield it. That's why we'll destroy the system — the will — that's running this operation fueled by life, and then the kingdom's will can take the power and decide how to use it."

"Power... and will..." She repeated the keywords.

"Basically, it's all about whether those who use the power are wrong... no, wait... it's all about what they want to do."

She silently looked at me and Nemesis. Then she looked at her own sword, just as she had last night. "The same goes for you, I assume?"

I felt like that "you" included more than just me and Nemesis.

She was probably talking about all Masters and their powers, their Embryos. Masters with wills belonging to Dryfe had used these powers to ravage the kingdom, but there were also Masters who'd used powers of a similar nature to stop them.

Yeah, I guess we're the same in that regard.

"I understand," Azurite said at last as she turned around and walked towards the hallway. "Let us return to the surface. I must talk to the countess... while considering your opinion, of course."

"Yeah!"

We left the room, got on Silver the same way we had to come here, and headed back to the surface.

"Ray," Azurite muttered from behind me. "Thank you for giving me hope. Both this time... and back then."

I didn't really know what she meant by "back then," but her tone was definitely lighter than before.

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Once outside, we went straight to the adventurers' guild.

We did that so that we could tell them about those constructs, and create two quests — one for the destruction of the machines wandering the surrounding area, and one to get someone to keep watch over those ruins.

Apparently, Azurite held the right to start quests in the name of the kingdom, and because of that, those quests could be put up as "urgent."

She had a private talk with the top of the Quartierlatin guild, and before long, the quests were available to be picked up.

The wandering machine destruction quest was aimed at Masters. It had no people limit and the reward was great, so the Masters in the guild quickly jumped on it.

The guild's own, experienced tians were tasked with keeping watch over the ruins.

"One by one, those machines aren't much for a battle-focused Master with a high-rank job," I muttered. "And when the machines that gather the fuel are gone, the production of new ones should stop, too. This buys us some time."

Looks like I won't have to worry about the machines kidnapping people for the time being, I thought.

Azurite also set up a quest to search the ruins for a path leading to the factory.

The room we'd arrived at was a dead-end, and we hadn't run into any more machines on the way back. Therefore, the factory was probably on a route other than the one we'd taken, or it could only be accessed from another entrance.

To stop the factory, we first had to know where it was.

"I guess all we can do is wait for someone to find it, huh?" I said.

"Indeed," nodded Azurite. "If someone finds the factory tonight, we can send people there to stop it tomorrow morning. We must talk with the countess about this, so let us head there after that happens."

"All right."

Azurite looked far better than she had back in the ruins, which was probably thanks to the fact that she'd created a countermeasure to all that was happening in the ruins, and now felt hopeful about the technology there.

After leaving the adventurers' guild, we went back to the countess's mansion.

This time, I could join the conversation right from the start, and we started out by telling her about the machines in the ruins and how dangerous they were.

"I see," the countess said in response. "What a coincidence. Just today, I was told of odd mechanical constructs wandering the surrounding area. I believe they were the same as the ones you saw in the ruins."

"That means that the unit you said you destroyed yesterday was not the only one to leave the ruins," said Azurite as she faced me.

"Or maybe the few units that were already functional secured enough creatures to activate more units," I said. "If that's true, their numbers will just keep increasing until... hold on."

"Ray?"

As I spoke, I was hit with a realization.

Their numbers were growing because they were securing more fuel.

Their fuel was living creatures. They couldn't move unless they got MP from a life form.

Which meant that...

"Hey," I spoke up. "At first, they didn't have a single creature they could use as fuel, right? So... how was the first unit able to function?"

"Wh—!" Azurite gasped.

It shouldn't have been able to. However, the reality was that it had. The first unit had been functional, their numbers had increased, and their numbers were still growing.

Did they happen to capture some animal that accidentally wandered into the ruins? Or...

"Maybe there's a unit that can move on its own?" I pondered.

Like... a unit with a reactor, just like Silver.

"A commander unit, of sorts?" asked Azurite. "Would you assume it exists?”

I was silent, thinking about it. *I would.*

It wouldn’t be surprising if that horde of machines was led by a non-mass-produced leader unit. Which would make stopping the factory far more difficult.

That idea made the mood turn sour.

Munch munch! Crunch crunch!

But Nemesis was just chomping on cookies as if it were none of her business.

“Nemesis...” I muttered disapprovingly.

“H-Hey! We were in the ruins for most of the day, so we didn’t have any lunch!” she argued.

Well, that’s true.

“But wait, we had a light meal at the tea party before we went in, right?”

“Exactly! A *light* meal! That’s not enough for me!”

Man, she always found the strangest times to become the embodiment of appetite.

Also, I couldn’t help but feel that it was starting to happen more often.

“Hee hee,” the countess giggled, clearly amused by our exchange.

Azurite was smiling wryly, too.

“Sorry about my glutton,” I said.

“‘Glutton’ sounds rude! I am a lady! Call me a ‘gourmand’!”

Ladies. Never. Eat. That much. Ever.

“Oh, no need to apologize,” said the countess. “Surely she only wanted to lighten the mood.”

I sincerely doubt that.

“Y-Yes! That’s exactly it!”

Come on, now.

“I baked those myself,” the countess told her. “How did you like them?”

“They were delicious!” Nemesis smiled wide.

The countess’s own cookies, eh? Had she perhaps baked them for the orphans she’d invited today?

“I’ll try one, then... wait, there are none left.”

The plate that had been full of cookies at the start of our conversation was completely empty now. There weren’t any crumbs, either. It was as if the cookies had never been there to begin with.

Nemesis...

She looked away and whistled like she had nothing to do with this.

You're the only suspect, you know?

"We still have some left," said the countess. "Would you like to take them with you?"

"Certainly!" Nemesis instantly replied.

...Leave some for me this time.

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The visit had come with an unexpected comedy skit, but we'd told the countess all we needed to. Thus, I was told to go rest at the inn, while the countess and Azurite thought about countermeasures in more detail.

Just like Azurite's private talk with the head of the guild, it was probably something that an outsider like me couldn't hear.

Anyway, Nemesis and I went back to the inn. The place was significantly more empty than yesterday, most likely because a lot of people had gone outside to do the urgent quest. Even the dinnertime cafeteria was relatively free of people.

However, in the lobby next to the cafeteria, there were two notable people who *hadn't* left to do the quest.

One of them was Tom.

From what I could tell, after leaving the ruins, he and Grimalkin had gone to wash away their fatigue in the hot springs before going to eat dinner.

Now, he was relaxing in the massage chair, saying, "Ahhh, this massage chair is basic, but it takes away some of the tiredness from all the hard work I dooo..."

The other person was Veldorbell, the musician I'd met at the countess's mansion. He, too, was relaxing in the lobby alongside his Embryos.

I asked why he was here, to which he replied that the countess had recommended this place to him.

Incidentally, Tom's Grimalkin and Veldorbell's Wind were glaring at each other, completely still, which probably had something to do with the fact that they were both cats.

"Hm?" Shirley made a confused sound. She came to the lobby alongside

Lefty and the hostess, bringing tea and snacks. “So many guests are refusing dinner. Did something happen?”

“Dangerous monsters are leaking out of the ruins,” I answered. “There’s an urgent quest to destroy them, so many are too busy with that.”

“You mean... monsters like the one that attacked me?”

“Yeah, the same kind.”

“That’s kinda scary,” she said, no doubt remembering the events of yesterday.

“No need to worry, young lady,” Lefty said calmingly. “The Masters are sure to make short work of them.”

“I’ve gotta say, it’s good that there’s a quest for them nooow,” Tom said, still enjoying the massage chair. “I mean, there are so many of theeem.”

I had no idea how to feel about hearing that from the one who’d taken care of all those machines and traps in that room and the path leading to it all by himself. He was the reason why we’d been able to reach that place and figure out the true nature of the ruins, so, in a way, Tom was today’s MVP.

“So, lots of people took that quest, huh?” said Shirley as she looked around, noting how empty the inn was.

“Yes,” I nodded. “The reward is good, and since the machines don’t disappear when they die, many Masters think they can make some serious money selling them. The kingdom’s started buying them, too, so... Hm?”

My words reminded me of a question I’d considered back at the ruins.

Nemesis and I had wondered about Tom’s reason for going to the ruins. After all, he hadn’t even collected the machines he’d destroyed.

He’d come here to prepare himself for his duel with Kashimiya and to make some money, according to what he’d said yesterday. Despite that, he’d left behind the machines he destroyed... the fruits of his fighting. Not to mention that he hadn’t even explored that room.

I’m still kinda curious about that.

“Hrmm, machine monsters, you say?” asked Veldorbell. “Were they humanoid, perhaps?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Then perhaps they are the same as the one I defeated on my way to Quartierlatin,” he said as he reached into his inventory and took out the remains of a machine — the head of the firearm model.

"Yes, this is it," I nodded before raising an eyebrow. "You defeated it?"

Isn't he a musician? As in, a non-battle job?

"Oh, I have my ways. After all, if I couldn't fight, traveling would be out of the question."

Good point, I thought.

"That's the King of Orchestras for youuu," said Tom.

King of Orchestras?

"Hrmm, did you use Reveal?" asked Veldorbell. "I certainly didn't feel it."

"Well, I'm The Lynx, after allll."

"Oh, so you are the one they call 'Monster Cat Mansion.' Allow me to introduce myself, I am Veldorbell, and I'm the King of Orchestras, the Superior Job from the conductor grouping."

"I'm Tom Cat, and I'm The Lynx, the cat-specialized Superior Job. I hope we get alooong."

Sorry, but "cat-specialized Superior Job" tells me nothing, I thought. *His battle style wasn't all that cat-like, was it?*

"Mm-hm, so we have two Superior Jobs here," said Nemesis. "How reassuring."

"Reassuring? What do you mean by that?" asked Veldorbell.

I replied, saying, "Those ruins are producing those dangerous machines as we speak. We need to destroy the ones still active and stop the factory inside. Once we find the route towards it, we'll charge to it as early as tomorrow morning."

"I seeee," said Tom. "So you need people for that, huh? Well, I don't mind joining. Don't have anything better to do, anywaaay."

"Hrmm, I am intrigued by this adventure, as well," said Veldorbell. "But tomorrow is no good for me."

"You have plans?"

"The children from today's tea party begged me to come to their orphanage to play again. They said there is a girl who couldn't come because of an illness. I was told that she truly loves music and would be overjoyed to hear my compositions," he said with a smile. "Since they value my Embryo's playing so highly, I see no reason not to answer their calls for an encore."

"That's true," I said. "You should do just that."

Having a Superior Job like him around would’ve been a huge help, but that promise had to come first.

As we talked about this and that, the hostess, who was giving out tea for the guests in the lobby, joined the conversation, saying, “To think that those ruins are creating such monsters... I hope we don’t have another Edelvalsa on our hands.”

“Edelvalsa?” I raised an eyebrow. I didn’t know that word. It sounded like a noun, but for what?

“It was a monster that appeared about thirty years ago. It was one of those U...something monsters that were very strong. I was still a little girl back then, so I don’t remember it well, but it was called, umm... N... Nay...”

“Nameless Army, Edelvalsa,” Tom helped her out as he blew on his tea to cool it down.

“You know about it?” I asked.

“Yeah. It was a UBM that appeared at the kingdom-imperium border about thirty years ago. Its rank was Mythical, which means that it was the worst kind of monster you could run into... Ouch. Hothothot.”

A Mythical UBM that had appeared thirty years ago...

These days, it wasn’t rare for Superiors to beat Mythicals. My very own brother had his Kim-un-Kamuy that proved he’d done just that. However, Superiors hadn’t existed thirty years ago. In fact, not a single Master had been around back then. Marie had suggested that there might’ve been some beta testers that long ago, but if so, they had definitely been few.

A Mythical UBM appearing in a world which held only tians was nothing but a calamity.

“Edelvalsa was a colony-type UBM,” Tom continued. “It could use plants, ore — pretty much anything — to create humanoid monsters that would fight for iiiit. The UBM would just continue growing in number until you beat the main bodyyy. I imagine it was a pain to deal with.”

“You sure know a lot about this,” I said.

It was a UBM from thirty years ago, yet he spoke of it like he’d actually seen it himself.

“Mm-hm. I know someone who knows a lot about UBMs.”

Well, B3 has access to Miss Aberration’s database, so it wouldn’t be surprising if Tom also had a friend with obscure knowledge.

“Yes, that sounds about correct,” said the hostess. “Edelvalsa appeared right when the countess's husband and child were heading to the imperium..."

"Eh?" I gasped.

"My knowledge of this is limited to the official announcements and what I read in the paper, but..."

The hostess began telling us about the incident.

It had happened about thirty years ago.

The kingdom's Quartierlatin County and the imperium's Barbaros County were at the border between their countries, and their relationship couldn't have been better.

In fact, back then, Altar and Dryfe were allied, just like Altar and Legendaria. The three western countries were at peace.

Because of this, both countries often sent envoys to the other.

The captain of one particular mission was the husband of Countess Quartierlatin, who was an Altarian diplomat.

One of his official duties was to bring his one-year-old son with him. There was an agreement to bring the Quartierlatin and Barbaros families even closer through marriage, so this was done for an early introduction of the groom.

Some would've questioned bringing a baby on such a long trek, but the path connecting the two countries was lacking in powerful monsters, so safety wasn't a big issue.

In addition, they had the best guard an Altarian could ask for.

His name was Aslan Faldreed, and his job was Sacred Blazer.

He was one of the kingdom's four Superior Jobs at the time, with the other three being the Arch Sage, the Celestial Knight, and the Hierophant (aka High Priestess, but owned by a male).

Originally a vagrant, Aslan's ability, nobility, and loyalty had led to him becoming an important retainer of the king. The fact that he was being sent to protect this mission spoke volumes about how greatly the kingdom valued their relationship with the imperium.

Additionally, Aslan himself volunteered to do this, since the next head of the Barbaros family, The Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros, was his close friend and rival. After arriving at the destination, he planned to have a duel against his friend in one of Barbaros's sparring facilities.

Thus, this was a good journey for everyone involved, and all was looking bright... until they arrived at the buffer zone *and were attacked by a Mythical UBM*.

It wasn't known why the UBM appeared there at that particular moment, or whether it was a coincidence or someone's intention.

Regardless, the Nameless Army, Edelvalsa, attacked the kingdom's mission.

Aslan rushed to the front to protect everyone and downed over a thousand of the doll legion. However, Edelvalsa had several thousands more where that came from.

They were desperately outnumbered. The dolls swarmed over them like a crushing wave. They broke through Aslan's line of defense, and the mission suffered greater damage with every passing moment.

Aslan tried to make his way to the main body, but the army was simply too much for him alone. Right when he began to think that it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed, a certain someone from the imperium came to their aid.

It was The Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros.

Upon hearing that his friend and the mission he was defending were in danger, he had rushed to their aid, all by himself.

And so, the two Superior Jobs faced the imposing Mythical UBM.

"...And?" I asked. "What happened then?"

"By the time Barbaros County soldiers arrived, everything was over," said the hostess. "Edelvalsa was defeated, but both Aslan and Ronaldo were dead. And, according to Dryfe's investigation reports, everyone in the mission was gone."

So it was a draw, huh?

During the tea party, the countess had told me about her husband dying and her son going missing, but I never would've thought that a Mythical UBM was involved in that.

"Hmm?" Veldorbell tilted his head. "Did you say that Edelvalsa used dolls?"

"Yeeep," said Tom. "It was a UBM that created dolls and used them to fiiight."

"I see. That's almost like... but it's been thirty years... it's impossible."

"What's impossible?" I asked.

He made a wry grin and replied, "In Dryfe, there is a tian who uses a special reward to create dolls and wield them in battle. I found it curious how similar the powers seem. But the man is still quite young, so it's simply impossible that he became the MVP in a Mythical UBM fight a whole thirty years ago. He must've gotten it from another UBM."

"Ohh, well, there are UBMs with similar powers," said Tom. "Special rewards that make monsters and items aren't that rarrrre."

And with that as the conclusion, we stopped talking about the subject.

...However, for some reason, I couldn't help but feel that I was overlooking something really important.

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After the hostess finished telling us about Edelvalsa, everyone in the lobby retired to their rooms.

Everyone besides *me*, anyway. I stayed behind and examined the lobby's bookcase for more info about the incident, but honestly, I had no luck.

"That is not the sort of reading you keep in a lobby," said Nemesis. "You might have better luck in the local library."

"Good point."

Libraries were probably closed at this time of day, and I'd be busy with the ruins tomorrow, so I probably couldn't dedicate any time to look this up. Reluctantly, I returned the book in my hand back into the case.

"Hm?" I raised an eyebrow as another book caught my eye. "*The Legend of the Sacred King*?"

It was clearly a children's picture book. The reason why it stood out for me was the word "Sacred" in the title — it reminded me of the Sacred Blazer from the hostess's story.

I took it in hand. The cover displayed a cutesy, distorted character holding a blue sword... which reminded me Azurite's.

"What's this?" I muttered.

"Hm?" Nemesis looked at the book. "I'm fairly certain that is the most popular picture book in the country. As far as I know, it's based on a true story. I saw it in Gideon, once."

"...Huh? You did?"

"Yes, when I was out eating by myself."

...Oh yeah, yesterday wasn't the only time she's gone on an eating spree,

I thought.

Anyway, her words intrigued me.

I could still remember how shocked Liliana had been when I hadn't recognized Elizabeth. Maybe I could prevent similar incidents from happening by finding out more things that were common knowledge here in Altar.

I opened the picture book and began reading it.

It went as follows...

◇

Hundreds of years ago, the plains in the west of the continent were home to many countries.

They were almost always at war, and it wasn't rare for nations to collapse or for new ones to appear.

One day, a fearsome creature called simply "The Evil" appeared in those lands.

The Evil had thousands of minions it used to ravage the warring countries.

They tried to fight back, but no nation could match it, let alone defeat it.

That was when a certain king rose up to face it.

He was the young ruler of a small, newly-built kingdom.

The Evil had already destroyed many larger, more powerful countries, and normally, the young king wouldn't have stood a chance.

However, the young king wasn't normal.

He was but a mere shepherd until he happened to dig up a certain sword.

The blade was like no other. It was a sacred weapon with the mysterious power to cut through anything.

Upon taking it, the young shepherd gained a special job and supreme power to go with it.

He soon quit the shepherd's life to become an adventurer.

Wandering the land, he helped countless people and sometimes even became a war hero.

Eventually, he was surrounded by a party of comrades. More and more people flocked to him, and he soon became a king.

Indeed, the king of the small, young country was none other than the strongest hero of all — the Sacred King.

And so, he and his comrades challenged The Evil.

They had to face hordes of minions and harsh trials, but he prevailed, and eventually, The Evil was struck down.

Countless people extolled him, and the Sacred King, still worn out and crying, accepted their praise.

The kings of the many warring countries even asked him to become their king, and he didn't hesitate to agree.

He then erected his royal capital over the land where he defeated The Evil, and named his new, powerful country after the blade that has been with him on all of his adventures.

Thus began the history of the Kingdom of "Altar."

◇

The book had a surprisingly hefty number of pages, and going through them took me longer than I would have expected.

The lobby was silent. The only sounds were those of the turning pages and of Nemesis eating the tea snacks.

She was eating silently, most likely to not disturb my reading. I appreciated her consideration, but... couldn't she just *not eat anything*?

Anyway, I more or less understood what the book was about. It read like a fantasy work or a myth, but I felt there was more to it.

Shu had told me that *Infinite Dendrogram* had an actual history.

It had either been set up that way, or it had been woven using time acceleration way above the 3x we had right now. Personally, I felt that the latter was a lot more likely.

Take the hostess's story, for example. Listening to her, I could just *sense* that she had been alive back then.

The history of *Infinite Dendrogram* simply had to have been woven by tians — no two ways about it.

The same surely applied to the story in the picture book.

There had once been a Sacred King — a Superior Job, surely — wandering the land as an adventurer until fighting and defeating The Evil — another SJ. This had directly led to the creation of the country I belonged to, the Kingdom of Altar.

It was the nation's origin story, and it made sense for it to be Altar's most well-known. But... there was one thing I didn't quite understand.

"...Why was he crying?"

After defeating The Evil, Sacred King had begun to shed tears.

Some might interpret that he was crying out of relief or accomplishment, but I felt that wasn't quite right. I wasn't really sure why, though.

Once I was done pondering the story, I left the lobby and began walking around the inn, just like yesterday.

My brain was becoming a huge mess, thanks to all the events and the info I'd gathered these past few days, so I needed a light change of pace.

I was by myself. It was girls' hour at the baths, so Nemesis was off to take a dip in the hot spring.

It felt like I was taking advantage of the fact she wasn't here, but I was walking around while eating my portion of the countess's cookies. They had a gentle taste. I liked them, though in a completely different way than I enjoyed Shu's stuff.

As I walked around, I eventually chanced upon Dr. Mario, sitting on a wooden bench and looking down at Quartierlatin.

"Hm?" I murmured.

It was already pretty dark outside, so I couldn't see his expression well enough to read it.

"Ohh, young Ray," he said, noticing me. "*Buonasera!* How you say, uh... good evening!"

"Good evening, Dr. Mario."

"They, uh... the cookies! They seem *molto delizioso,*" he said as he looked at the snacks I was eating.

"Want some?" I asked and extended the bag to him.

"Ooh, *grazie,*" he said as he took one and bit into it. "What a gentle taste. Were these made by the hostess or young Shirley?"

"Uh, no, these are the countess's cookies. She gave me some when we stopped by to talk about the ruins."

I was saying nothing but the truth.

However, for some reason, it made Dr. Mario gasp and lose his words.

It didn't seem like mere surprise, either. There were some feelings there that I couldn't quite understand.

He muttered something I didn't hear well. "Th... So *this* is how they taste...”

"Dr. Mario?" I spoke up.

"Ah...! *Che sorpresa!* Oh my, what a surprise! These-a are-a made by the countess herself!? I thought my heart would stop!"

I could understand how he felt, but I did found his reaction a bit... excessive.

"I must say, everyone is really busy tonight," he went on, changing the subject. "Not many are coming to have their things appraised, so I was just walking around and enjoying the scenery. *Che bella...*"

"Well, there's been some new info about the ruins," I said.

"Oh, I've heard. It turned out to be a dangerous place, hasn't it? *Molto pericoloso.*"

I don't mean to sound like Azurite, but man, he's really up to date.

"Oh, right," I said, then reached into my inventory and took out the photos of the painting. "While exploring the ruins today, we found a painting with some writing we couldn't read. Can you read the text on this?"

"Hmm. *Un minuto.* Give me a moment," he said as he took out a lantern from his inventory and lit up our surroundings.

Yeah, you can't really read in this darkness.

"Let's see here... Hmm..."

Dr. Mario took off his glasses, illuminated the text, and began reading it. Once again, I couldn't help but feel that his eye color was much like the countess's.

"You can read without your glasses?" I asked.

"Ah, *si,*" he replied. "In fact, they-a get in the way whenever I try to read something too close."

So they're not for nearsightedness, huh?

"I've read it. Here's what it says," he said, then began reading the text aloud. "'The day the Incarnation of Beasts devastated our four infantry divisions is still fresh in my mind. It overwhelmed the horizon, and we matched it in neither quantity nor quality. Are we finally lost? Nay — it is not over yet. There is still hope. Here, within this facility, we will complete the... mass-production of the Prism Soldiers, and one day defeat the countless Incarnations of Beasts. With that oath in my heart, I chose to depict our defeat.'"

His voice was fluent, and there was no sign of his usual speech quirks.

“That is what the painting says,” he concluded. “It is a sort of monument.”

“One depicting their defeat, huh?” I muttered.

Ieyasu Tokugawa had left a picture of himself to commemorate his defeat against Shingen Takeda in the Battle of Mikatagahara, so this wasn’t all that odd.

What *was* odd, however...

“‘Countless Incarnations of Beasts’...?” I muttered.

“Oh? Anything wrong with that?”

“Well, I just felt that the number has grown a bit since my friend told me about them,” I said, as I remembered Hugo’s words from the Gouz-Maise Gang’s hideout. “He said that the pre-ancient civilization was so scientifically advanced that the people became arrogant and incurred the wrath of some god and his thirteen servants, who then went on to destroy them all.”

Then, yesterday, B3 had told me that the *ancient* civilization had disappeared at about the same time, so I was pretty lost about the history of it all.

“Oh, that’s just the mainstream interpretation,” said Dr. Mario. “It involves elements from the religions that came afterwards. That’s what a lot of the post-collapse texts say about these events.”

“Religions?”

“Yes. Uh, *si.* Speaking of which, do you know what the kingdom’s religion is about?”

“About healing people using Priest powers. It’s built around the job, right?”

“Yes. It’s assumed that there were god-worshiping religions prior to the collapse, but now, it’s believed that they either don’t exist or are exclusively gods of retribution. Besides that, there’s also the ‘The One’ series of jobs.”

I could understand the idea that gods didn’t exist and the thing about “The One” jobs, but...

“Gods of retribution?” I asked.

“*Si, si!* Like you mentioned, many believe that the destruction of the pre-ancient civilization was divine punishment — that-a it was a tale of retribution.”

I was silent.

Hugo had mentioned that countries besides Dryfe and Granvaloa purposely avoided technology to avoid incurring the gods' divine wrath again. Mind you, the kingdom was also dabbling in it to get out of their dire situation.

Anyway, gods of retribution, huh...? I pondered that. *Nemesis is based on one, isn't she?*

"But again, that-a is the religious take on it," Dr. Mario continued. "Reading historical documents written during the collapse itself gives you a, how you say... different perspective. Have you heard that both the pre-ancient and the ancient civilization collapsed at the same time?"

"I did," I nodded.

"According to the documents from that time, the two civilizations in question developed on different continents."

Different... continents?

"There's another continent?" I asked him.

"There *was* another continent, rather. It somehow sunk, leaving only a solo flying ship... and that's what we call the 'ancient civilization.' The texts often mention an 'Extra-Continental Vessel,' you see."

"'Extra-Continental Vessel'..." I murmured. A continent had vanished, and all that had remained of it was a single ship...

"They arrived at this continent, but the prosperous civilization that was already here didn't accept them. In fact, the countries at the east of the continent began attacking the vessel for its technology, which sparked a war between it and the entire continent. Countries in the west — the Zweier Imperium and the like — must have been truly bothered by this."

So it was an unfortunate clash between civilizations from across the sea, huh? That kinda stuff happened all the time back on Earth.

"Of course, the ancient civilization retaliated," Dr. Mario continued. "Their numbers were low, but they had these powerful creatures called 'Incarnations.'"

"How powerful, exactly?"

"Absurdly. If the texts are true, they were as strong as — if not stronger than — Gloria. *Si,* I mean *that* Gloria."

He was obviously talking about the SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria. It was the strongest monster the kingdom had ever faced. Beating it had required the combined powers of Shu, Figaro, Miss Aberration, and her

Lunar Society. Shu had been the only one left standing when it was all over, which said everything you needed to know about the thing's fearsomeness.

"The Incarnations are said to have been like UBMs or Embryos in that they wielded various unique powers," he said.

Then he went on to describe those unique powers.

One could blot out the Sun with the weapons it pulled out of empty space.

Another was a beast that could multiply and bury the horizon in itself.

Another could consume countless boats along with the very sea they were in.

Another was an orb-like entity that could use thousands of unknown powers.

The ancient civilization's ship had contained these beings with extraordinary powers. The Incarnation of Beasts depicted in the portrait was one of them. The Incarnations numbered thirteen... fourteen if you included their so-called "god," the Extra-Continental Vessel.

It seemed like a meager number, yet it had been enough to crush the entire continent.

"The pre-ancient civilization stood no chance. It collapsed in no time," Dr. Mario continued. "And that's the reason why we have no details about what happened to the ancient civilization. It seems to have just... disappeared after the clash. Both of them were gone, and that's it."

Thus, he ended his history lesson.

It gave me a lot to think about, answered a few of my questions... and gave me a bunch of new ones, like, "If the ancient civilization was so powerful, why didn't they contact the pre-ancient civilization earlier?"

With all the power of the Extra-Continental Vessel and the Incarnations, crossing the sea should've been child's play.

"A keen observation," Dr. Mario said. "Many scholars argue this, as well. The fact that there was only one vessel leads many to assume they had some obscure, yet powerful, reasons for that — perhaps religious, perhaps geopolitical. We can't know for sure unless we discover some ancient civilization ruins or something, but all their civilization had was a ship, so all we ever find are pre-ancient ones. Still, I do hear that Granvaloa is exploring the sea floor for the continent that sunk."

"Do you think they'll find it?" I asked.

“Who knows? There should be traces of it somewhere, if you ask me. After all, if it didn’t exist, where else could they have come from?”

Well, I can’t argue with that, I thought. *But wait, he said the pre-ancient civilization’s ship was flying, right? Then... couldn’t it have come from outer space...?*

...Nah, there’s no way.

Thinking of this reminded me of Franklin’s words from the Pandemonium:

“Anyone who thinks this is *just a game* is either retarded or a child who believes everything he’s told.”

“I have no idea what all of this actually is. I’d assume it’s the human experimentation phase for the creation of a nation... no, world-wide virtual reality, but...”

Even if this world was aligned with his words, the devs couldn’t have made this world extend all the way out to far space. There was just no point in having done that.

He’d also said something else back then... What was it, again...?

“I have a question for you, as well,” Dr. Mario said. “May I?”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“Do you know anything about the Prism Soldiers mentioned here?”

“We saw some machine-armor constructs both in and out the ruins. They’re set to capture monsters and tians and use them as fuel. Pretty sure it’s those things.”

“Hmm... Autonomous weapons that use creatures as pseudo MP tanks, eh?” he pondered, looking disturbed.

“Hm?” *Is it just me, has he been acting a little different for most of this conversation?*

“They-a sound a lot like Dryfe’s Magingears,” he spoke again, his demeanor back to normal. “Well-a, those-a don’t have autopilot systems, but still.”

“Yeah. The system is dangerous, though. We’ll destroy all the running units and stop the factory as early as tomorrow morning.”

“*Si, si!* I’ve heard the guild is working on it. How unfortunate. *Che sfortuna.* At least everyone’s gained-a something from this,” he beamed.

Dr. Mario still had his glasses off. The lantern was lighting up his face, giving me a good look of the tired look in his blue eyes. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the color in one eye was slightly different, but not enough to stray from "blue."

My gaze made him curious. "*Qualcosa non va?* What's the matter?"

"Do you have Altarian noble blood?" I went ahead and asked him.

"Why would you assume that?"

"Countess Quartierlatin has eye color that's much like yours. She said it runs in her family."

She was also heterochromic — her right eye was blue, while left was green.

Azurite had said she also had Quartierlatin blood. Her eyes were much like the countess's right, and the same could be said about Dr. Mario.

"I understand," he nodded. "*Si,* it's true — I have Altarian noble blood. And I've been told-a that some of it is Quartierlatin. Though my generation has already lost the, ah... how you say? Status."

"So... you have Altarian nobility in your ancestry, but the family split, and your branch isn't noble anymore?"

"*Si.*"

That explained his visit to the countess's mansion today. He must've been curious about his ancestors' home. The words he'd said as he left also made more sense now.

...Still, something didn't feel right.

His reaction to the cookie was still on my mind, too.

"I'm quite sure I'd find being a noble to be uncomfortable, in any case," he said. "I very much prefer field work like this — it takes away the weariness from desk work."

"Desk work?"

"Yes. By that, I mean the nonstop glaring at draft budgets, applications... things like that. I'm far better suited to act on my own... I find that being important is tiring."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

The way he put it made it likely he was a professor or a director in some academy somewhere. And again, I couldn't help but notice his speech slip.

That reminded me that he hadn't told me where he was from.

I had a rough idea, though, so I just went ahead and asked.

"*You're from Dryfe, aren't you?*"

Chapter Eight: Freedom

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Dr. Mario answered my question with another one. “How do you know that?”

He didn’t pretend I was wrong or try to silence me — he just stared at me with his blue eyes, curious about what had given it away.

“I’ve had a hunch since our talk yesterday,” I said.

“Yesterday?”

“You knew about Jade, didn’t you? They found that Prism Steed in Dryfe. I know someone who knows a lot about stuff like that. Just yesterday, she told me about the Prism Steeds she’d heard of, and Jade wasn’t among them. Someone who knew about it before she did has to have strong ties to the place where it was found.”

“There’s more than that, surely,” he said.

“Yes,” I nodded. “These days, the only countries looking into the pre-ancient civilization are Dryfe and Granvaloa, right? Well, you said your research involves official desk work, so it’s pretty likely that you’re from either of those places.”

That was two reasons out of the way, and I also had a third.

“You also said that you have Altarian noble blood. Altar and Dryfe might be at war right now, but I hear they used to be great allies. Consider that, and it’s not all that weird that a Dryfean has Altarian nobility in his ancestry.”

I also had another reason I didn’t feel like saying out loud. Azurite was extremely wary of him — a mere scholar. And she was an operative working for someone in the kingdom’s upper echelon.

As such, she might be acting with the assumption that Dryfe, too, had sent someone to investigate the ruins.

“A+,” he said. “Your conjecture is correct.”

Can’t say I expected to be graded, but okay.

“I certainly am from Dryfe,” he continued. “I came here to investigate the ruins. Whatever is hidden inside could have a great impact on our country.”

“And...? What’s the conclusion?”

“The imperium will surely deem the Prism Soldiers unnecessary.” He showed no intention of trying to hide Dryfe’s plans from me.

“Why?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Because we already have something similar. I know you’re well-acquainted with Mr. Franklin and his Triangle of Wisdom. Surely you’ve heard of their Marshal IIs.”

“Ah.”

“Of course, Prism Soldiers have the autopilot system. That is a great advantage, but in the current climate, it will only provoke us more enemies. Acquiring the system would be time-consuming, not to mention that we would have to modify it, as well. The pre-ancient civilization’s programs are quite unlike ours, you see. We won’t manufacture decent amounts of the machines unless we port it, so it’s best to rely solely on the Marshal IIs we already have.”

So, they wouldn’t see any need for the Prism Soldiers because they were much like Dryfe’s current war machines.

“What if the kingdom gets them?” I asked. “Wouldn’t it be bad for you if we fixed the autopilot system?”

“The kingdom knows nothing of technology. How many years would that take them?”

“...Good point.”

So Dryfe assumed the war would be over and the kingdom would be annexed before it could pull that off. Then, after things settled down, they would take over the project and take their time reprogramming the system themselves.

“To Dryfe, these ruins would only matter if there were technology we didn’t know anything about or if they contained a finished weapon we couldn’t afford to let fall into the kingdom’s hands. Especially not before the war. This place has no significance to us otherwise. Do you understand, *young lady?*” He turned away from me and looked into the darkness some distance ahead.

“Truth Discernment tells me you speak the truth,” the shadows replied in a familiar voice.

“Azurite...” I said, surprised. I had no idea she’d even returned from the mansion, let alone that she was right here.

“Truth Discernment makes this really simple, young lady,” said Dr. Mario, nodding. “Or should I say ‘Miss Altarian Spy’? Or perhaps, ‘the kingdom’s—’”

“And what of you?” Azurite cut his words short. “You’re not a scholar, are you?”

In a split-second, Azurite closed in on him and swung her blade so fast I couldn’t follow it.

“Gh..!” I clenched my teeth as I pictured Dr. Mario being cleaved in half.

My imagination was completely off the mark, though — he jumped backwards and evaded it.

Standing at a safe distance, he looked directly at us. His blue eyes contained a powerful glare. It felt as menacing as Shu or Figaro when they were serious.

“That was very violent of you. *Molto violento,*” he said.

“Perhaps,” Azurite agreed. “Now, if I may ask... how did a mere scholar dodge my blow?”

Oh, so that was a preemptive attack to test Dr. Mario’s identity and... WAIT, NO, HOLD ON!

“Whoa whoa whoa! Did you think this through?! What if he’d been the real deal?!” I yelled. *He would’ve been split in half!*

“No need to worry,” she said. “This blade of mine cannot cut now. Unless I aimed for his head, he’d have only ended up with a few crushed bones.”

“Goddamn, you’re such a meathead!”

Not as bad as Figaro, though! That guy’d probably just shove a chain into his face and turn his head into mush!

“You’re one of Dryfe’s special soldiers, I assume?” Azurite asked Dr. Mario.

“Special soldiers?” I repeated. I wasn’t sure I understood what she meant.

“Dryfe’s Special Mission Task Force, often called just ‘special soldiers,’” she explained. “It’s a group comprised entirely of fully-trained battle jobs or Superior Jobs, all specialized in single warfare... or infiltration, like what we have here."

A group of maxed-out high-ranks and Superior Jobs? I guess they're like Dryfe's version of the Royal Guard before their post-war decline.

Dr. Mario nodded. "*Si.* That is correct."

"'Mario' isn't your real name, I assume?" I asked. "Also, if you ask me, that manner of speech stands out far too much for an infiltration. Is there something else you're hiding that makes it part of your camouflage?"

"You aren't wrong..." Dr. Mario slowly nodded. "Except about one thing — I really am a scholar with a doctorate in archeology. Mario may not be my real name, but it *is* my name as a scholar."

So even if it wasn't his real name, he was still Dr. Mario.

"Anyway, I've been found out, so I guess this is it... Oh, before I forget..."

He took something out and threw it to me.

As I caught it, it made a hard jingling sound.

"What's this?" I asked.

"The payment for my stay here. Could you give it to the hostess? Oh, and please tell her that the food was delicious and the hot spring felt amazing. I could feel my exhaustion just... fade away."

"...Okay."

He was one of Dryfe's special soldiers and he'd infiltrated Altar, but... he really didn't seem like a bad guy.

"What if that'd been a bomb? You'd be one-armed again," commented Azurite.

"Ah." I hadn't even considered that.

"You're easy to fool, aren't you?"

"No I'm not. Sure, I had a secret player killer in my party, didn't know my brother was the KoD until the thing at Gideon, and drank the drug-slime mixture Franklin gave me, but that's it, really."

"...Let me rephrase. You are *absurdly* easy to fool. Such a simple man." She looked at me with an indefinable expression.

Dr. Mario watched our exchange with a friendly smile, then said, "It's a shame, but I must take my leave now."

"You truly believe you can escape?" Azurite pointed her blade at him.

"My dear. I already have," he replied, and a split-second later he vanished, leaving behind only a small bird.

“Wha—?!” Azurite exclaimed.

I gasped. “That’s...”

I recognized the creature. The bird was a monster created by Franklin. It was designed for Castling — a skill that switched the position of the user and the target monster. Gideon’s Masters often called it “Chimaera Wing.”

“Well, he’s a Dryfean soldier,” I murmured. “No surprise that he has access to Franklin’s stuff.”

Castling couldn’t have taken him too far, but the man had moved fast enough to dodge Azurite’s blade. Catching up to him would be a challenge, to put it lightly.

“Might as well assume we lost him,” Azurite sighed. “He’s a special soldier. He might have prepared something for us in the ruins or its surroundings. We should urgently hire someone to investigate.”

“You think he... or Dryfe, rather... will do something there?”

“Yes, I do. In fact, I came here exactly *because* I assumed Dryfe will make a move.”

“Huh?”

I didn’t really understand that. I figured she’d known Dryfe would make a move, but I hadn’t thought she was here *because* of that. What did that mean?

“That aside,” she sighed again, “don’t you think you showed him a bit too much? He is a Dryfean special soldier. The portrait from the ruins is one thing, but he could’ve assaulted you just for your Prism Steed.”

“Well, I was told that all original owners were at risk of being attacked for them.”

Even B3 would’ve attacked me if she’d been an active PK and if I hadn’t been her friend.

“I’ll run into people gunning for Silver sooner or later,” I said. “Besides, he analyzed Silver for me. My gratitude for that outweighs the risks.”

“Is that how it works?”

“In my mind, anyway. Also, I know he’s from Dryfe and all, but he really doesn’t seem like a bad guy.”

He hadn’t hesitated to teach me, an enemy Master, about the pre-ancient civilization. He could easily have lied, but Azurite had confirmed that he hadn’t.

Enemy soldier or not, the man seemed cordial and honest — qualities you rarely found in bad people.

“You really *are* simple,” Azurite grinned wryly. “But I have friends in the imperium, as well, so I can’t deny those words.”

“You have friends in Dryfe?” I asked.

“Yes. Our countries used to be allied, after all. I was a transfer student there, and...” She gained a nostalgic look and fell silent. “Oh, this is no time to talk about the past.”

True, we went off on a tangent.

“Back to the matter at hand...” she said. “According to Truth Discernment, he didn’t speak a single lie, but we should still be cautious.”

“Speaking of which, how long were listening to us?” I asked. “You make it sound like you were there from the start.”

“That’s because I was. I tried to call out to you, but you began speaking to him before I could.”

I had no idea she was there! I thought, somewhat surprised.

“Again, he didn’t lie... but his manner of speech was off in more than just quirkiness. It was technical, designed to conceal the truth without saying a lie. Most army men know how to speak like that. Special soldiers doubly so.”

“Yeah. I also feel that he wasn’t lying, but it did seem like he was hiding something.”

It had to be related to the portrait — something hadn’t felt right about the way he was talking about it.

“As for what it is...” I said, pondering.

He’d claimed, without lying, that Dryfe had no need for Prism Soldiers. However, that was still only Dr. Mario’s own take on it. We couldn’t rule out the possibility that Dryfe would come for them anyway.

Besides, even if that didn’t happen...

“These ruins might contain more than just the Prism Soldiers,” I said.

◆◆◆

Quartierlatin, mountain

“So there was no point in trying to fool them, huh?” the man named Dr. Mario muttered. Thanks to Castling and his own two feet, he was now a fair distance away from the youngsters he’d just talked to. He wasn’t using his speech quirks anymore — this was his natural mode of speaking. "Knowing them, they've probably figured out what I was hiding."

He was speaking about what he'd seen in Ray's photos.

There was a part of the text that he hadn't read aloud:

"Here, within this facility, we will complete the *anti-incarnation superweapon, Acra-Vesta,* and the mass-production of the Prism Soldiers, and one day defeat the countless Incarnations of Beasts."

The part he'd kept secret spoke of a weapon that would make the Prism Soldiers pale.

It wasn't news to him, though. He'd already concluded that the ruins contained a supreme weapon based solely on the objects the other explorers had brought him.

"A pre-ancient civilization superweapon..." he murmured. "We might be dealing with something as powerful as the Imperstand... or perhaps something greater."

He heaved a heavy sigh, both because he had to deal with something like this and because ignoring it wasn't an option.

"I can't let it end up in the kingdom's hands... the imperium would suffer if I did."

The special soldier looked at the mountain hiding the ruins. His eyes were bright blue, but his glare did nothing to complement the vividness.

Ray might have felt that he looked tired, but that was an understatement — the eyes were downright devoid of the spark of life.

He reached into his inventory, took out a magic comms item, and connected to a certain number. "Logan," he said. "Are you near?"

"Yeah. I'm in the nearby mountains. You?"

It was Hell General, Logan Goddhart. He was his collaborator in this operation. The only one, in fact. But that mattered little, for he was sole, *but many*.

"They found me out," Dr. Mario said.

"Now, listen here...!"

"Easy there. They only figured out that I'm a special soldier. They still don't know who I really am."

"They ought to know that you're the only special soldier who backed the current imperator and survived the civil war for the throne! Then again, Altar's idiots don't know shit about Dryfe's internal affairs."

“The operation starts in the morning, just as planned. Our goal is to either capture or destroy the superweapon in the ruins, Acra-Vesta.”

“Understood. But why aren’t we doing a night assault? My devils can see in the dark.”

“Not even the kingdom knows where Acra-Vesta’s stored yet... and I need some time to prepare.”

“...Oh yeah, that.”

“Mm-hm, I need more Edelvalsa marionettes. I brought some with me, but these numbers won’t do. If I use Marionette Platoon Creation right now, I should have a thousand by morning. That’s the maximum I can control at the same time. You go ahead and create your Demi-Dragon-class devils — at least two thousand of them.”

“That’s more than we originally planned...”

“Well, the plans have changed. We didn’t know about the Prism Soldiers in the ruins, or that Altar’s The Lynx and the Unbreakable were here, too. It’s necessary to be a bit excessive.”

The Hell General was silent. *I alone am already a bit excessive, to be honest,* he thought. *The second in Altar’s duel rankings? Some promising noob? A bunch of machines? They’re nothing to me.*

“Anyway, summon more than planned. Besides that, the plan is the same. I’ll go secure the technology while you keep Altar’s forces occupied.”

“All right.” Logan didn’t speak his thoughts and simply agreed. “I’ll respect your decision and accept this quest, Field Marshal Gifted Barbaros.”

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The Prism Soldiers might not be the only kind of weapon in the ruins.

Even if the constructs were of no use to Dryfe, the spies from Dryfe were bound to make a move if they were interested in the other thing.

We rushed to use comms magic and warn the countess and the guild that the imperium might do something. Good thing Azurite had taken a guild comms item the last time we’d gone there.

“There’s one good thing about Dryfe’s involvement in this,” said Azurite. “If they attack, it will confirm that the second weapon truly does exist. We certainly won't overlook the far greater danger these ruins hold."

I shrugged. *That's one way to look at it.*

"But man, this escalated quickly," I muttered.

At first, it had just been the Prism Soldier factory, and now we also had some other weapon and Dryfe. I had a feeling that this whole thing might turn out to be even more trouble than Franklin's Game.

Still... no matter what came, I'd face it head-on.

"Dr. Mario knows that we're stopping the ruins tomorrow," I said. "Assuming Dryfe attacks, when do you think it'll happen?"

Would they come to take the weapon before or after the Prism Soldiers were all shut down? Or would they wait for the actual war?

All cases seemed likely.

"I haven't heard of any movements from Dryfe's army," said Azurite. "If they attack sometime around the deactivation, it's bound to be a blitzkrieg with a select few."

"A small, handpicked force, huh?"

"Yes. Special soldiers like that 'Mario' person, or Masters who excel at battle."

That reminded me of what Franklin and Hugo had done in Gideon, but this wouldn't be anything like it. Back then, they'd used The Clash of the Superiors and Cyco's compatibility with Gideon's Masters to declaw the kingdom's forces.

This time, they had no means of doing anything like that, so they'd likely use pure power.

"The numbers would be low, though, surely," added Azurite. "These ruins were discovered a mere three days ago. They haven't had the time to prepare in the way they did in Gideon."

"Even Masters who could pull something like that off are few and far between, yeah," I said.

Of course, the same could be said for us. The only Masters here were the few who'd come to explore the ruins and the ones who had Quartierlatin as their main haunt.

If Dryfe did what they'd done in Gideon and brought a Superior, the only one who'd stand a chance would be Tom, our previous duel champion.

Or maybe...

"Regardless, we must be alert," Azurite said.

"Yeah. How many Masters do we have?"

"Well, there are the ones who took the quest to stop the ruins, but..." Azurite fell silent mid-sentence.

I knew exactly what she *didn't* want to say.

Yesterday, she'd said that she was against using Masters in war. She would tolerate our help in exploring the ruins and stopping the factory, but she didn't want to force us into a direct clash with Dryfe.

This was like a pre-war skirmish. She probably thought we had no place in it.

"The other tian fighters and I will stand to defend," she proclaimed. "You join the other Masters and stop the ruins."

The gravity of the situation clashed with her line of thinking, causing anguish you could almost hear in her tone.

Still, I couldn't agree.

"No," I said. "I'll stay on the surface and fight Dryfe's Masters."

"Ray!" she exclaimed judgmentally.

I didn't give in. "Didn't I tell you that Masters would come to help Altar when it needed them?"

"...You did."

"And I also said I'd be one of them. So yeah, I'm fighting Dryfe's Masters tomorrow, and that's final."

I was choosing to fight, just as I'd said I would.

"But that's *my* role! I thank you for your help with the investigation, but you Masters mustn't take part in—!"

"Speak up."

"...Eh?"

I knew I had to fight, but I didn't know why Azurite was so against it. I needed to find out her reasons before the battle began.

"Why are you against us Masters joining the war effort? Give me a reason. Tell me your feelings."

"M-My feelings?"

"Why don't you want us in the war?"

I couldn't make a choice that respected her feelings if I didn't even know what they were.

Azurite fell silent, but it didn't seem to be because she didn't want to talk about it. She was just conflicted... contemplating something.

Soon enough, she opened her mouth, “Very well... I have two reasons, actually. The first is that I simply don’t trust Masters.”

I’d already guessed that one. Thanks to the war, many Altarian tians no longer trusted Masters, and Azurite was among them. Masters had killed her mentor, Langley Grandria, and her teacher, the Arch Sage, and for all I knew, there might’ve been many more. I really couldn’t blame her for not trusting us.

“But the reason I refuse *your* assistance is different,” she went on. “I don’t hold any mistrust towards you.”

That was as good as saying she trusted me. And yet she was still rejecting me.

“My second reason... is my late father’s words.”

“Your dad’s?”

“Yes...” Azurite said. “He was one of the people in the center of Altar’s government, and he thought a lot about the stark increase in Masters that started four or five years ago.”

That was more or less when *Infinite Dendrogram* had come out. Shu and the other first-wave players had gotten online and started messing things up or solving them.

“He used to think a lot about what would happen if these powerful, immortal beings kept growing in power and number.”

“Did he think we’re a danger or something?”

“No... the other way around, in fact. Father considered Masters to be inhuman agents of revolution who would lead humanity and the world to a better future. In his eyes, you were akin to divine messengers I’ve read about in legends.”

“Divine messengers?” I raised an eyebrow.

Well, that’s an... interesting way to look at us.

It made me think of the Extra-Continental Vessel, the god and the servants, but that was probably unrelated.

“That’s why my father refused to hire Masters for war,” she said. “He believed that there was no future for a world in which Masters were seen as nothing but sellswords for war. You are so much more than that. You are saviors from another world.”

I was silent. *Wow, he sure put us on a pedestal.*

That line of thought didn’t even align with the vast majority of Masters.

After all — all of us had started out with the intention to play.

Even if there were people like me, growing to value the lives of those who called this world their home, none of us came here to make this world a better place.

I was pretty sure not even Miss Aberration was an exception, and she was a damn cultist.

If Azurite's father really was a big name in Altar's government, this misconception might've been one of the reasons why the country was in such a dire state. After all... we Masters were no saviors or divine messengers.

"You don't agree with him on that, do you?" I asked.

"I don't. Even so, I'll follow his words until the end. They... They were our last..."

She fell silent again.

From what I could tell, her father must've died in the war.

Not even a year had passed since then. The memory had to be fresh enough that merely talking about it opened the wound again, making it hard for her to speak.

I silently pondered. It was easy to say that she was just a slave to her father's memory, but if it was near and dear to her heart, who was I to ruin it for her?

I couldn't take that angle, so...

"Before I came here, someone told me this," I began.

"Eh?"

I began to quote. "'You can become a hero or the demon king, a king or a slave, a good person or an evil person. You can do something, or you can do nothing. You can stay in *Infinite Dendrogram,* or leave it. It's all up to you. If it's possible, then you can do anything you want.'"

I was speaking about myself... or, rather, *us Masters*. That was what Cheshire had told me when I'd asked about the goal of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"Who said that?" asked Azurite.

"Those were the words I was told before I came to this world as a Master," I answered. "As far as I know, most Masters are told something similar."

According to Figaro, his control AI had seen him off with, "Blessings upon your days and the freedom they bring."

That was most likely the thing the control AIs — the devs — found most important.

Basically... it was all about freedom.

"Masters are free," I said. "Whatever we do is up to us to decide. We're not some single mass going around changing or destroying the world."

She was silent.

"All Masters follow their own wills and choose how they're gonna be," I continued.

Masters were free — we always had a choice. We were free to choose whatever we wanted, even if it came with a lot of responsibility, or it came at the expense of somebody else.

Many Masters, myself included, had made many choices during their time here. And it was time for me to choose yet again.

"As a Master, I choose to protect you and Quartierlatin."

My choice was probably against Azurite and her father's wishes, but I would stick with it until the end.

She gasped softly.

"This isn't some supreme Master consensus," I said. "Your dad's ideals, or your own, have nothing to do with it, either. This is all just me, my freedom, and my selfishness."

I would choose to protect Azurite even if she was against it, which was probably the purest expression of Master-like freedom.

"Why are you so considerate of me?" she demanded.

It was a very valid question.

"I... I'm not really sure either, if I'm honest."

I'd only met her just yesterday. What reason did I have to care about her so much?

"...Because you saw me naked?"

"NO, DAMN IT! The reason I want to protect you is..."

I didn't know why myself, but I was pretty damn sure she was off the mark with that guess. A few seconds later, I finally figured out the real answer.

"...it's because I just couldn't ignore you."

"What do you mean?" Azurite asked.

"You are by far the most tense person I've ever met. It feels like you're completely on-edge, even when we’re just talking like this.”

This impression had reached its peaks back at the room with the portrait... and right now too, actually. She seemed on the verge of breaking or bursting, yet she was still giving her all to fulfill her duties.

It made me want to support and protect her. Sitting by and just watching her waste away like this would leave a bad taste in my mouth, surely.

“In my heart of hearts, I just want to support and protect you,” I said. “There’s nothing more to it.”

“...I understand,” she said slowly.

“So yeah, I’m going to be with the defense tomorrow. I won’t tell you to drop your outlook or go against your dad’s will — I’ll be by your side just because I’m selfish.”

“I can’t even tell if your logic is flawed or flawless... I just can’t...” Azurite spoke in a teary voice. However, the edges of her lips were bent slightly up. “Still... thank you.”

She was both smiling and crying at the same time.

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A few minutes later, the two left the scene to get ready for tomorrow.

They needed to shut down the factory, prepare for Dryfe’s assault... there was no shortage of things to be done.

However, neither of them realized that they hadn’t been the only ones there.

Silently, the third person showed himself.

It was The Lynx, Tom Cat.

“Freedom, eh...?”

Just like Azurite before, he’d hidden himself nearby and eavesdropped on their conversation, He’d heard everything from Ray’s calling out to Mario.

“Looks like those words *do* reach people.” For reasons unknown, he smiled incredibly broadly. “First Sechs, then Benetnasch, and now Ray... that’s three Masters who’ve taken the words properly. Yup... I knew he was a good kid.”

The mentions of the King of Crimes and King of Tartarus would catch the attention of many, if they heard him, but few would be able to understand what his words truly meant.

A few seconds later, he walked away, finally leaving the scene completely empty.

Chapter Nine: The Three Armies

Quartierlatin, mountain

There were ten-odd parties pulling an all-nighter on the mountain containing the ruins.

They were all Masters on a quest to kill and collect the Prism Soldiers near Quartierlatin.

“Aaaand that’s seven. Damn, we makin’ mint here,” said a member of one such party.

“Honestly, that’s pretty freaky,” another replied. “The three of us ran into a whole seven of them. Imagine how many there are on this entire mountain! Gives me chills, man.”

One party member was a Strong Lancer, another was a Strong Bowman, and the third was a Bishop, making it a well-balanced group.

Thanks to the vigorous work of this and other parties, the Prism Soldiers in the mountain were gradually dropping in number.

“You said there’s gonna be a quest to stop the ruins, right?” one of them asked. “We taking it?”

“Damn right we are. Just think what’ll happen if these things keep pouring out. Our town’ll be gone!”

“True. They’re only about as strong as Demi-Dragons, but that’s still a bit much for tians...”

Talking about this and that, they walked around in search of more Prism Soldiers.

Instead, they stumbled upon a strange sight.

It was a space in the forest where the trees had vanished, as though pulled out of the ground by the roots.

“Hold on... What the hell’s this?” one of them exclaimed.

“The trees are just... gone?” another said, stunned.

“Did the machines dig them up?” the third asked. “Or was it some other monster?”

“No clue. Though, looking at what’s going on, we should be careful.”

The Strong Lancer and Strong Archer stood at the opposite sides of the Bishop and watched for any threats. They were now ready for attacks from any visible direction. The Bishop also prepared to use the relevant support skills.

They were cooperating well. Any proper party with a support would've done the same, but *that was exactly what made them so easy to take advantage of.*

"*Phase one.*"

In a split-second, a creature burst out of the softened ground below and grappled the Bishop.

"...Eh?"

The creature looked like a tree, twisted into the shape of a marionette — in fact, that was exactly what it was. It used its arboreal weight to drop the Bishop to the ground and cut his throat with the knife in its hand.

"...!" The Bishop couldn't speak any of his skills now. The puppet took advantage by stabbing his crown, spine, and heart, quickly ending his life.

The immense damage to his body didn't allow for a long resurrection period, so the Bishop quickly turned into particles of light.

The marionette worked absurdly fast.

"HUH?!" yelled one of his party members.

"YOU BASTARD!"

The Strong Lancer and Strong Archer finally reacted to the marionette and quickly destroyed it, but their Bishop had already gotten the death penalty.

Both sides had only a single casualty.

However, the enemy's loss was only some strange marionette, while the heroes' loss was the lifeline of their party.

"What the hell's that thing?!"

"It's not disappearing, either! Is it from the ruins, too?"

A monster that didn't vanish upon defeat made the Strong Archer think there was a connection between it and the machines they were hunting, but his assumption was mistaken. Alas, they weren't even given the time to realize they were wrong.

"*Phase two.*"

As they were wondering about the nature of the dolls, the ground to their east and west began to bulge.

Twenty marionettes burst out through the leaf and mud covers laid around. They were all armed with Assault Rifles, often used by Gunners and Dryfean machines.

As the two Masters tried to understand what was going on, the marionettes drowned them in a full-auto crossfire, turning them into swiss cheese. Unable to put up any fight, the Strong Lancer and Strong Archer both turned into light.

A few seconds later, all that was left of the battle were a few drops and twenty marionettes with guns in hand.

"*Clear.*" A single voice resounded within the marionettes. "*That's eighteen, now.*"

That was true not only for the twenty here, but for all of the nearly-thousand marionettes swarming the mountain.

"*Hm. Been a while since I last controlled a thousand. Must've gotten rusty. It's only been two hours, and I already feel a bit drained.*"

As that voice resounded within, the marionettes that had just killed the Masters moved through and looked around the mountain in the most optimal ways.

Yes, this was true for *all* the marionettes on the mountain, not just the twenty in that area. It was the result of a single person manually moving all of them at the same time.

He saw a thousand times more than a single person, processed all the marionettes' states in real time, controlled them all simultaneously, and had them all cooperate.

They were also equipped with High-Frequency Knives or Assault Rifles, which he was having them wield the exact same way he would've wielded them himself.

This was a fully-functional, thousand-strong army, commanded by a single will.

Needless to say, this was an astonishing feat. Auto would've been one thing, but controlling such a number *manually* was downright inhuman.

Nevertheless, this man was capable of this. He was the current field marshal of the imperium, Gifted Barbaros.

His Superior Job, Zero General, was specialized in commanding unmanned weaponry... and he was the special soldier who had wielded the Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa, for the past thirty years.

That Mythical special reward had been with him for as long as he could remember. He'd begun controlling these marionettes *before he could even walk*.

He was the imperium's strongest soldier.

No — he was a one-man army.

"*I'll weaken their forces a little more.*"

He'd been a special soldier for most of his life, and nighttime ambushes were his specialty. To ensure that he would succeed in taking Acra-Vesta, this man continued his hunt for those who'd get in his way.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

So came the morning. It was so cloudy and dreary, it was hard to believe the skies had been clear yesterday.

"Such an unpleasant weather..." sighed Nemesis.

"Seriously," I agreed. It felt extra bad because I hadn't even gotten a second's worth of sleep last night. I'd been too busy keeping watch in case Dryfe made their move while it was still dark.

The guild had tried to contact the capital to ask for reinforcements, but as it turned out, long-range magic comms were currently jammed.

"How truly irksome," said Nemesis.

"Yep. Man, that guy..."

The culprit was most likely Dr. Mario. While we were exploring the ruins yesterday, he had been outside the whole time. He must've used the chance to set up jammers all over Quartierlatin, then activated them when we caused a stir by telling the guild what we found out.

Fortunately, only long-range comms were jammed. We could still communicate locally. Then again, that might've been the very reason why it had taken us so long to realize that long-range comms were busted.

We had no clue how many jammers there actually were, so going after them wasn't realistic.

A high-rank AGI-focused Master was on a guild quest to send a message to the capital, but I wasn't sure if he'd make it in time. Hell, it was entirely possible that he'd be stopped on the way.

I had a feeling that Dr. Mario was capable of that.

Remembering the way he'd evaded Azurite's attack, I was sure it was because of his *immense* fighting ability, rather than just high AGI.

Azurite had said he was a special soldier — one of Dryfe's best — and I didn't doubt that for a second.

"Ray," Nemesis said, "how powerful is he? What does your intuition tell you?"

"He's a match for some top duel rankers, *at least*," I answered.

To be more specific, I couldn't imagine Chelsea or Bishmal standing a chance against him.

Sure, this wasn't based on actual data. However, back when he'd evaded Azurite's attack, he'd been as menacing as Shu or Figaro... both Superiors. I never would have thought I'd feel something like that from a tian.

"But man, they actually didn't do anything last night," I sighed. "I should've just gone to sleep."

The fact they were jamming the comms made it pretty damn clear they wanted to settle this before word reached the capital and reinforcements came. They hadn't come at night, but they would surely act within the next few hours. We'd have to protect the ruins and Quartierlatin from Dryfe while stopping the Prism Soldier factory and securing the other weapon at the same time.

Needless to say, that wasn't going to be easy.

It would've been great to have someone from the Gideon gang, like Shu or Figaro, but sadly, I hadn't been able to get in touch with Shu since last night.

Then again, even if I *could* call for someone, they probably wouldn't be able to make it in time. Gideon and Quartierlatin were basically on the opposite sides of the country.

I hadn't been able to call B3, either. She'd probably turned off her phone because she was busy with the tea ceremony and whatnot. Shame, because I could've used her as a proxy to tell Miss Aberration about this.

There was a Master who'd made a thread about this online and asked for help, but it was doubtful that anyone would actually come.

All in all, it was best to assume we wouldn't get any reinforcements.

"Well, you certainly look serious," a voice said.

"Azurite..." I murmured, looking over. I hadn't even noticed her moving next to me.

“I brought something to keep you standing,” she said, handing me some warm tea and a sandwich.

“Thanks. These from the inn?”

“Yes. ‘Those dealing with the ruins should be well fed,’ they said.”

Well, then. Much obliged.

As Azurite handed me the food, she seemed to want to tell me something.

“Did the situation change?” I asked.

“How sharp of you... I have good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first?”

Hey, that’s that line you often hear in Western movies, I thought. *Well, Altar’s clearly Western, so I guess it fits.*

“Good news first, please,” I said.

“They found a path leading deeper into the ruins. It’s through a different hole in the mountain. Many Prism Soldiers were seen leaving through there, so that has to be the factory.”

We intended to shut it down in the morning, but that couldn’t happen if we had no idea where it was. So figuring out its location was good news, indeed.

“Tom Cat and a few dozen other Masters are already on the way,” she added.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about,” I said. Just like yesterday, Tom would easily break through the security and reach the deeper parts of the ruins. “And the bad news?”

“Nearly thirty Masters who were cleaning up the Prism Soldiers in the mountains were killed.”

I paused. “Dryfe’s doing, I assume?”

“Yes. According to a tian who was with them, they were attacked by marionettes wielding knives and guns.”

That reminded me of Veldorbell’s words. He’d mentioned that Dryfe had a tian who used a marionette special reward.

It would make sense for Dr. Mario to be that person. He was a special soldier, after all. And a really intimidating one, at that. I felt there was something more there, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“So, how many people stayed on the surface?” I asked.

“There are 200 Quartierlatin knights, but our Master count doesn’t even go above 50, even when you include the low-rank jobs. Apart from that, there are about 40-50 tians who've come to explore the ruins."

"So not even 300 in total, huh?"

That number might've been decent in some cases, but our enemy was someone who could deal with 30 Masters all by himself. Not to mention that they could always bring someone like Franklin. Things would be pretty bad if they did.

Not that I don't have anything to counter someone like that, I reflected.

I silently looked at my hands, and the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda. Then I shifted my gaze down to the Grudge-Soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise.

The townspeople had heard out about the danger of the ruins, flooding the town with negativity for my greaves to absorb, and it was bound to get worse if Dryfe attacked. The stage was being set for me to use the new ace up my sleeve.

"The skill has three conditions... okay?" I recalled what Gardranda had told me while I was out cold. "You've already cleared one... but there are two more. The one for after you use it is especially... troubling."

She hadn't been joking about that last part.

After using the skill, I'd be given one of three demerits, each with an equal chance of happening, and if I was unlucky, I'd end up with the death penalty... *or worse*.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about that.

However, if I found myself in a situation where I had no other option...

"Ray?" Azurite cut short my train of thought.

"What's wrong? What are you brooding over?" asked Nemesis.

...Hm?

"Hold on... you couldn't read my thoughts?" I asked her.

"Mm-hm," she nodded. "I'm unsure why, but I couldn't. Were you thinking something indecent?"

"Nope."

Did Gardranda do something to hide it from her? I wondered. *Guess I'd need to faint to find out, but I'm not going to start bashing my head against the wall.*

"Anyway, I get that we have a bit under 300 people on defense, but what about the positioning?" I inquired.

Azurite began explaining our defensive set-up. "Well, for now, we..."

Before she could finish, her comms device began to release static.

That thing was from the adventurers' guild, so the person on the other end had to be someone from there.

"I'm listening. What happened?" Azurite asked the item.

"Lady Azurite! We have news from the ruins!" a voice from the item cried. I recognized the voice; it was a guild worker I'd met yesterday. He seemed to be in a panic. "There's an unprecedented number of Prism Soldiers trying to escape the ruins! *There are over a thousand of them!*"

My jaw dropped.

That was shocking news.

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Thirty minutes ago, ???

[This is a directive from Zircon Leader]

[High energy mark discovered in the surrounding area]

[Threat level — A++]

[The mark resembles incarnations]

[Determined that it is pre-■■■■■■■■ — Superior class]

[Detected intention to invade this facility]

[Absolute defense initiated]

[All Prism Soldiers, prepare for battle]

[All 2065 Zircon Fire units, run in defense mode]

[All 898 Zircon Laser units, run in defense mode]

[Analyzing the current state of the anti-incarnation weapon]

[Anti-incarnation weapon no. 3, Acra-Vesta — 37% complete]

[Hull alone is 75% complete]

[Main armaments and sub armaments unimplemented]

[One analyzed weapon complete and equipped]

[Deliberating — determined to release to the front lines]

[Initiating sortie preparations]

[Time of release will be determined by Zircon Leader, standby]

[Due to release of anti-incarnation weapon, searching for cooperators]

[Requesting assistance from no. 1's and no. 2's storage bases — communication failed]

[This facility will defend against the threat independently]

[Ignore all casualties and damage to the surroundings until the threat is eliminated]

[The fate of mankind depends on this battle]

[Purge the threat of the Extra-Continental Vessel]

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

"There are that many?!" I exclaimed. *A thousand Prism Soldiers?! How?!*

The very notion filled us all with terror.

"How do they have the fuel?!" Nemesis howled the most important question here.

Prism Soldiers worked only when they had a living being as a source of energy. Due to this, the machines already deployed on the mountain should've been all they were capable of releasing. Even the factory had tons of units in stock, it wouldn't mean anything if they couldn't power them. We'd speculated that there might've been one or a few units with a reactor, but a thousand? No way!

"They say these Prism Soldiers had pipes going into their backs!" cried the guild worker through the comms device.

"Pipes? Ah!" I gasped as it all suddenly made sense. "Electric cables!"

It was probably "magic" rather than "electric" power here, but whatever. Same difference.

These units were powered not by animals, but by the ruins themselves.

Unlike the first unit I'd encountered, these probably couldn't leave the ruins, but if all they had to do was defend the place, that wouldn't be a problem.

It also wasn't a surprise that the ruins had the power to pull this off — the place had been active for two damn millennia.

"Tell them to pull out the cabl— I mean, pipes!" I shouted.

"They say they tried that, but the machine didn't stop right away and quickly reconnected itself."

Great. So they can store some charge, move briefly while unplugged, and prioritize restoring the link, I thought. *The designers thought it through, I'll give them that, but damn, that's annoying!*

“What of Tom Cat and the others?” asked Azurite.

“Half of them were taken out by the Prism army’s surprise attack and the nearby traps,” the guild worker replied gravely. “Most of those who survived can’t break through the Prism Soldiers’ defenses.”

Masters were powerful, but a thousand Demi-Dragon-tier machines with a home field advantage would be a bit too much even for them. Even if some Masters there had some devastating skills, using them wouldn’t be an option. There wasn’t enough space there to use such skills without wiping out their own allies.

However, I knew someone these circumstances wouldn’t affect.

“You said ‘most.’ Does that mean that someone made it past?” I asked.

“They say that Tom Cat carved a path through the Prism Soldiers and went deeper in.”

“Tom!” I cried. He was all right, just as I’d expected.

The odds were much worse than yesterday, but he’d still pulled through.

“Understood,” said Azurite. “We’ll focus on defense now.”

“Roger that,” replied the guild worker. “We’ll contact you again if the situation changes.”

With that, the call ended.

“This is unexpected,” Azurite sighed, comms device in hand and a grave look on her face. “It really shouldn’t be, though. We shouldn’t have underestimated the ruins’ defense system.”

“So we can only hope that Tom succeeds in shutting down the factory,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah.”

A part of me thought that might be too much for him alone, but then I remembered the way he’d fought yesterday. He might actually pull it off.

“Either way, all we can do now is destroy all the Prism Soldiers leaking out through the entrance,” I concluded.

“Indeed,” Azurite agreed.

The moment I turned to head towards the ruins, the comms device turned on again.

“What is it?” Azurite answered and asked.

“Lady Azurite, we just received more news from the ruins!” cried the guild worker, panicking even more than before. “The group fighting the Prism Soldiers was ambushed by wooden marionettes!”

"What?!" I exclaimed.

Clearly, those must be the same marionettes that had killed the thirty Masters wandering the mountain — the ones likely being controlled by Dr. Mario.

"An ambush?! *Now*, of all times?!" I cried.

"In all honesty, there's no better time than now," Azurite commented. "They can effectively team up with the Prism Soldiers to crush the kingdom's forces, then focus on carving their way through the machines."

So it was a golden opportunity to get rid of Altar's infiltrators, huh? I sighed.

"Lady Azurite, the countess claims that Quartierlatin's knights are—" the guild worker said something, only to be cut off mid-sentence.

"...?" Azurite raised an eyebrow. "Hello? What's wrong?"

All she got in response was static.

Worried that something had happened at the guild, I looked at Quartierlatin, but the town seemed untouched. That could only mean that the comms were cut.

"More jamming, obviously," I said grimly.

We already knew that Dr. Mario had jammed long-range communications. He must've switched to shut out close-range comms, too.

The reason he hadn't jammed the short-range comms until now was probably either because he'd been using them himself, or because he'd wanted us to take longer to notice that the long-range comms were jammed. Whatever the case, he apparently no longer had any reason to keep the short-range comms open.

"Anyway, let's head to the ruins," I said as I took out Silver. "Now that we know Dryfe is there, too, we should... Azurite?"

For some reason, she was staring at Quartierlatin, not moving a muscle.

No — she was staring at something *beyond the town*.

"Ray," she said, her voice in a quiver — not one of fear, but of concealed rage. "What does *that* look like to you?" She pointed at the sky above the mountain beyond Quartierlatin.

Under the clouds there, I saw...

◆◆◆

Quartierlatin, mountain

Quartierlatin was situated between two mountains: the one containing the ruins, and another, much less notable one.

On the latter, there was a man around twenty years of age. He was clad in heroic armor of blue and white, and had long, red hair trailing behind him.

He was handsome, no doubt, but many would be inclined to point out that he looked much like the protagonist of a successful RPG from two years ago.

His name was Logan Goddhart. He was a Dryfean Superior, and the owner of the Superior Job Hell General.

There was a certain degree of regularity between Superior Job names and their nature. For example, the King of Destruction and the Nobushi Princess belonged to "King" series of jobs. Their stat growth prioritized the stat most relevant to the job, and they had few skills, but the ones they had were powerful.

The Unsheath and The Earth belonged to the "The One" series. They had skills aplenty and could even customize or develop new ones from scratch.

Jobs like Over Gladiator and Giga Professor were simply direct, all-around upgrades of the high-rank jobs in their groupings. They rarely had special quirks, which made them strangely balanced compared to other SJs.

Of course, there were also Superior jobs which were difficult to classify, such as Death Shadow and Siren, but they weren't relevant here.

Now, Zero General and Hell General were in a series called, well, "General," and they had a special feature, as well.

It was the skill simply called "Army."

It could only be activated when the General's party had only himself and his minions, and what it did was *greatly increase the number of party slots*.

The minimum was a whole 1,000, and it grew with the skill's level to a maximum of 10,000. Of course, the job was considerably hard to level, so Generals who'd maxed it were few and far between. Nevertheless, the numbers were impressive even at level 1.

In a nutshell, Generals were quantity-based Superior Jobs focused on building thousand-strong parties and making the best use of party-wide buffs.

And saying that they were “building parties” was no exaggeration — they had to gather the minions themselves.

Doing this with monsters would mean carrying loads of Jewels and spending obscene amounts of time Calling them. Not to mention the costs involved. The Zero General, Field Marshal Barbaros, also needed to make his marionettes.

However, the Hell General — or, rather, the current owner of the job — was an exception.

“It’s time,” said Logan. “Let’s begin.”

Before him, lying on its belly, there was a Demi-Dragon-tier land-dragon. He’d acquired it at the Barbaros County before he headed out to Quartierlatin.

He held out his hand towards it and, in a sonorous voice, began chanting, “‘Here and now, I consign this life I have at my disposal.’”

A moment later, the Demi-Dragon roared in pain, breathed its last, and became light. He looked at the job skill window at the edge of his vision. On it, the number “1,250” suddenly appeared and lit up.

These were the points he’d gotten for the sacrifice. They were necessary if he wanted to use Hell General skills.

To Logan, the Hell General’s devil summoning was much like shopping. He sacrificed items or creatures to receive points, which he then used on his skills.

The devils he could summon differed depending on the skill, and the descriptions included brief summaries of their stats and traits.

Of course, there was a time limit on all his devils, but he had a set of skills that made him really adaptable. He was particularly fond of the skill “Call Devil Regiment.”

Call Devil Regiment: 6,000 points
Summons 100 Soldier Devils that last 30 minutes.

Soldier Devils were low-rank monsters with 100 for each stat except HP and LUC, which were 300 and 10, respectively. Needless to say, they were extremely weak.

Since the skill needed five Demi-Dragon sacrifices to be used, the payoff definitely wasn’t worth it. The devil quantity did little to make up for it. The skill's cost-performance was simply awful.

Unless you were Logan.

"Let's make those 2,000," he said as he traced his finger on the number 1,250 on his job skill window, *making it become 12,500*.

Then he did the same for the skill description for Call Devil Regiment.

Call Devil Regiment: 6,000 points
Summons 1,000 Soldier Devils that last 300 minutes.

Then he traced the Soldier Devil description, multiplying all their stats except LUC by ten.

"'Remove the lid of hell and gather, my forces,'" he intoned. "Call Devil Regiment."

At once, darkness emerged from the ground beneath. It bubbled as if boiling, and each bubble burst to produce a devil. This continued until there were 1,000 of them.

He then used the skill again, doubling that number.

These devils were not the weak imps originally described, but true, vicious devils boasting Demi-Dragon-tier stats. And there were 2,000 of them. He'd sacrificed a single Demi-Dragon to create 2,000 devils of the same tier.

The input didn't match the output in the least — the equation was far too absurd.

This was the reason why he was nicknamed "Contradictory Equation." It was the power of his Superior Embryo, who was a Type: Another Rule "False Finesse, Rumpelstiltskin."

Its constantly-active ultimate skill, "Straw-into-Gold — Rumpelstiltskin," let him *multiply up to ten numerical values on his job skill descriptions by ten.*

It was broken even among Superior Embryos, most of which were infamous for being broken. This skill was at odds with the very concept of game balance.

"With the budget they gave me, I could've easily created ten times more than this... but that won't be necessary," he grinned, as he overlooked his horde of devils.

They looked almost as if they were pledging allegiance to him.

Of course, that wasn't the case — *Infinite Dendrogram's* summoned devils lacked sufficient intelligence to have a concept of loyalty. In fact, they weren't even living beings — they were just lumps of devil flesh, temporarily put together by a skill.

They were somewhat like the monsters used by Summoners, but they had no medium, so they were always throwaways.

Their loyalty, skills, stats — everything was already within them the moment the creator spoke the skill. In a way, they were "instant devils."

It was part of the reason why preparing a large amount of high-spec devils was difficult, but again, Logan Goddhart was an exception.

His Superior Embryo made his Hell General skills so much more powerful that it was almost maddening.

"Now, let's begin," the Dryfean Superior sneered, and made his devils march.

◇◆

Thus, the three armies were gathered.

Three thousand machines.

A thousand marionettes.

And two thousand devils.

As Ray's third day in Quartierlatin began to dawn, the town began to be menaced by three immense hordes.

Conjunction: What Was Left Sleeping

It had been there for two millennia, silent and dormant.

Its years had been full of monotonous repetition, comprised of naught but slowly building its body, preparing for its grand mission.

But today was different. The commanding unit, Zircon Leader, had declared the arrival of hostiles.

Its own sensors confirmed it — its ultimate foe, and creatures much like it, were invading the structure it slumbered in.

It was incomplete, but the time had come for it to carry out its mission.

It observed all the hostile forces in the area — the Hell General, his 2,000 devils, and all the Masters in Quartierlatin — and reached a single conclusion:

The current completion level is sufficient to annihilate them all.

There were no faults in that evaluation, but it would remain on standby until the Zircon Leader ordered it to depart.

The hope left behind by the pre-ancient civilization still slept, but it was almost time for it to awaken.

To Be Continued...

Afterword

Xun: "It's afterwOrd time. I'm Xun, AKA Xunyu."

Fox: "And I'm everyone's favorite Sister Fox, Tsukuyo Fuso. Pleased to see youuu. In case you're wondering, the bear's still in jail and the kitty's outsiiide."

Xun: (That's whY we got this crack pAiring.)

Fox: "So, li'l Yu."

Xun: "'Li'l Yu!?' Is that supposed to be me?!"

Fox: "Who eeelse? So, what's the plan for this afterwoorrd?"

Xun: "We'll tAlk about the scene in the frOntispiece."

Fox: "The bathtime?"

Xun: "Yup. BUt we'll leave that to the aUthor. It's time fOr his serious commEnt!"

Dear readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

All right, so... the seeds for the bathing scene were planted in December of the year 2015, when I was uploading the web novel parts that would become the basis for volume 5. That was about when editor K came to me with an offer to novelize my work.

We met up in person and talked about various things, one of which was the color pages. That was when he mentioned how common it is for two-page color spreads to show a bathing scene. Upon hearing that, I decided that I should write a bathing scene of my own.

The rest is history — this very volume has it. It never would've been illustrated if this series had been cancelled, but thankfully, that didn't happen, and you now get to see it in its full, colored glory, just like I first intended.

Taiki's drawing is so splendid that it feels more "beautiful" than "cute" or "erotic," but that's good in its own right.

On another note, with this volume's frontispiece, cover, and text, Azurite is gaining greater amounts of HP (heroine points) than even I, the author, anticipated. How will Nemesis protect the throne of the main heroine against this mighty foe and her relentless heroine-ing?

Little would give me more joy than your excitement for volume 9 and its intense battles (both physical and the one for the aforementioned throne.)

Kaido Sakon

Fox: "...'Serious comment'? Really, now?"

Xun: "I get what yA mean. It wAsn't all that sErious."

Fox: "Is he acting weird 'cause the other two aren't here?"

Xun: "...WhatevEr. Let's just dO the announcemEnt."

Fox: "Okie."

Xun: "Volume 9 of *Infinite Dendrogram!*"

Fox: "Planned for release in February 2019!"

Fox: "So yeah, keep buying, y'all!"

Xun: "The beAr and the cat're coming bAck next time. To be hOnest, I had no idea it'd gO so well with just us twO."

Fox: "Same. We should plan out a downsizing to give ourselves more spotlight, and—"

Xun: "StOp."

A Break for the Orchestra

Paladin, Ray Starling

It was the day after we arrived at Quartierlatin.

Azurite was having a private chat with the countess, so I whiled away the time listening to Veldorbell's performance.

To say that the music was pleasant on the ears would've been a gross understatement.

"Man, this is good," I muttered.

"Mm-hm," nodded Nemesis. She even stopped eating just to listen.

The music had tons of variety. You had famous movie theme songs, foreign TV series openings, western game BGM, and even music from anime — both well-known theater classics and late-night shows.

After a few songs, they took a break. The children took the chance to go to the bathroom, grab a snack, drink some tea, or play around with Veldorbell's Embryos. Wind the cat sìth and Percussion the kobold were especially popular.

I walked over to Veldorbell. "Sir, that was just amazing."

"Why, thank you," he said. "I seldom play for audiences of mostly little ones. I won't lie, I was a bit tense."

I really doubted that, but it didn't seem like he was lying."Don't orchestras usually play classicalmusic, though?"

"Symphonies are long. You may split them into movements, yes, but a group of children would prefer a few shorter tracks, don't you think?"

Well, that makes sense. I nodded.

"You covered a wide range of genres, too," I said.

"You think so? Those tracks have something in common, though."

"They do?"

How? Movie scores and anime themes are worlds apart. What kind of link can they have?

"Do they all start with a 're' note or something?" I asked.

"That... isn't what I had in mind, but yes, they actually do. I'm impressed you could tell."

"Um, I just guessed and got lucky. Don't think too much of it." Unlike Shu, I wasn't a born musician. "And, uh... I'm drawing a blank for any other links. What’s the answer?”

“Oh, it’s nothing special,” he smiled. “They were just composed by the same person — a humble man by the name of ‘Otto Engelberg.’”

“Ah, so I shouldn’t have excluded that.”

I’d actually considered that it could be the composer, but I’d thrown it out the window because of the late-night anime themes.

So there’s actually a guy whose music can be heard in both Western flicks and Japanese anime? That’s something.

“I’ve heard enough to tell that this Otto person is great at his job,” I said. “The children like his work, too.”

“Heheh,” Veldorbell chuckled. “I’m certain he’d be overjoyed to hear that. Speaking of the children, they seem ready for more. I’ll go back to playing, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

All smiles and baton in hand, he walked to the bright-eyed children and resumed the ensemble.

The End

The Gold-Eating Bear

Duel City Gideon, knight offices, prison cells

“Unbearablllllle...”

Odd as it may have seemed, one of the cells in Gideon’s knight offices contained a bear.

At first glance, he looked like a caged zoo animal, but upon closer look, you would realize it was just a costume.

The wearer’s name was Shu Starling, the one and only King of Destruction, and he was one of the few Superiors serving Altar.

He had been locked up after defeating the Superior serial killer known as “Gerbera.” Eccentric that he was, he’d rushed to her while destroying dozens of buildings in the way.

That was obviously a heavy crime, but as the hero who had ended Gerbera’s spree, he wouldn’t serve any time. He’d be let go as soon as he paid for the damage.

Of course, the amount had to be calculated first. The officials worked fast, but it would still take a few days, and he’d have to wait behind bars during this entire time. Although his new cell was better than the one he'd been in while a suspect, a cage was still a cage, so...

"Man, I'm so beary bored..."

He could've been killing time offline, but for reasons unknown, he was choosing to stay in the boring cage.

Noticing the hero's ennui, the jailer sat down next to his cell and took something out of his inventory. "What would you say to a game of chess?" he said as he presented Shu a chessboard.

It was the foundation for one of the many tabletop games popularized centuries ago by the famous game inventor known as "Boardgame Cat" — a name which made quite a few Masters raise their eyebrows. The jailer saw it as a good way to keep Shu entertained.

Shu thought the same thing. "Chess, huh? Been a while since I've played it," he said as he got comfortable. Playing through the bars might've been weird, but it still made for a nice picture. "Ah. How 'bout we bet a little money on it? It'd make the game a bit more hairy, doncha think?"

Those born and raised in the city of duels had little to no aversion to gambling, so the jailer didn't hesitate to accept.

However, he would soon come to know that it was a grave mistake...

Come the next day, things had completely changed.

"My turn!"

"Whoa! It's Anthony! The chess champ of the Gideon Knight Order!"

"Beat him! Avenge us, Anthony!"

A crowd had formed before the cell.

"Bring it on! I'll bear it all!" Shu said proudly, chess piece in hand and a tall pile of 10,000 lir coins next to him. That was the money he'd won playing chess.

At first, the bets had all been just 100 lir coins, but after Shu's winning more and more games, more and more challengers had appeared from all over the knight offices, increasing the betting rate a hundredfold.

Also, unlike in Earth, chess matches in *Dendro* were mostly speed rounds.

This meant that mental and movement speed bonuses from AGI were an important factor, making the game double as a way to hone your battle tactics... which probably wasn't something intended by the inventor.

Because of that speed, Shu had already garnered over 200 victories in just a day.

“GHAAAAAHH!”

“ANTHONYYYYY!”

“Hyahaah! I’ll have that, thank you beary much!” Shu cheered, victorious once again.

Thus the Legend of the Gold-Eating Bear was born.

The End

Miss Marie’s Lesson for Newbies — Guns

Duel City Gideon, Sixth Arena

Rook and Marie were having their first few mock battles in a while. His trainer, Shu, had been jailed for severe property damage, so Marie acted as a temporary replacement.

As the sparring went on, Rook suddenly became curious about something. “I have a question. May I ask it?”

“Sure thing! Ask away!” she said gleefully.

“I haven’t seen many gun-users besides you. Guns in general don’t seem to be very big in this game. Are they?”

Even if he included Hugo’s Magingear, the number of gun users Rook had encountered wasn’t high.

“To be frank, I’m not sure I really count as a gun-user,” she said. Sure, her Arc-en-Ciel was gun-shaped, but it was actually an Embryo that fired bullet creatures. “But no, guns are actually pretty darn big. Just not in Altar, mostly ’cause you can’t get ’em here.”

“Because no one produces them?”

“Yeeep. There are no Gunsmith job crystals here, and you don’t have any ruins with magic-based guns lying around.”

“’Magic-based’?” Rook echoed.

“Guns come in two forms: gunpowder-based and magic-based. The former are like the ones we have in real life — substance goes boom, bullet flies. The latter, though, use the user’s magic.”

“I imagine they’re really different.”

“They are. The gunpowder guns pack the same punch no matter who uses them, while magic guns rely on the user’s stats. Because of this, most gun-users start out with gunpowder and switch to magic when they’re stronger."

Gunpowder-based guns fired bullets using chemical reactions. There was no room for stats there, so the power wasn't affected by whether the wielder was a skilled adult or a clueless child. In fact, you didn't even need a job for them. Of course, sense skills like Firing and Sniping increased accuracy, and job skills like Quick Draw helped with speed, but nothing was actually essential to use them.

On the other hand, magic-based guns were dependent on the MP the wielder used, as well as their max MP. While still guns, they had much in common with magic implements.

Also, gun jobs had magic gun-exclusive job skills which increased the projectiles' power or gave them elaborate trajectories, among other things.

"When it comes to power, gunpowder guns are pretty limited," shrugged Marie. "Unless you bring a cannon, you won't even scratch a proper END build, and AGI builds like me can just dodge it all."

Bullets would never be able to catch up to someone moving at supersonic speeds. In fact, even higher subsonic fighters would be nearly impossible to hit.

"I see," Rook nodded. "But gunpowder guns do have their positives."

"Ah. You noticed?"

"Since they're like magic implements, magic guns eat a lot of MP, don't they? In that case, gunpowder guns are better for drawn-out battles. If you have the funds and a good inventory, you can basically have an endless supply of bullets and spare parts."

Rook figured this was why Hugo's Magingear used a gunpowder gun. A mech needed a lot of MP just to move. Adding another power sink would only lower their already-short operating time.

On a related note, tank Magingears could be boarded by several people — a driver, a gunner, an operator, and a commander. This workload division allowed the gunner to focus entirely on the weapon, so these machines often used powerful magic-based cannons.

"Good observation," nodded Marie. "Magic-based guns are hard to craft, too."

"Why? Gunsmiths can't make them?"

"Hmm... it's a teeny bit complicated," she said as she took out a sketchbook and started drawing a simple diagram. "Gunsmith is a low-rank job, and it has a few high-rank jobs above it — Great Gunsmith, Cannonsmith, and the rare Magic Cannonsmith. As I'm sure you can tell, the first two are for gunpowder guns and cannons, while the third is for magic cannons."

"So... no one's found a job for magic gun-making?"

The part of the diagram where that job should be was empty.

"Yes. It's a lost job. Apparently, it was around a long time ago, and they always had fresh magic guns in the market, but now, newly-made ones might as well not exist."

There were lost jobs like those, ones that currently weren't owned by a single person. They didn't appear in the Catalog, and you couldn't know their conditions until someone chanced upon and took them.

"Some people are trying to make them without the job, but the success rate is so low that it's silly, even if you have the other jobs from the grouping. The failure rate is over 99%, and you can't even make recipes."

"Well, that's stern..."

"The materials tend to be pretty expensive, too, so the few guns that somehow get made are stupidly expensive. The chances of making one are so poor that most people just opt for searching for old ones in ruins. And that's a gamble in its own right."

"I see."

"It'd be super if someone found some gun-filled ruins nearby. But as far as I know, Altar doesn't have any ruins at all."

"Now that you mention it... no, we don't."

"It'd be extra great if the guns aren't single-fire... or are just straight-up miniguns like the bearman uses. Those are rare, hard to make, and really expensive. You could make a killing selling them. Ohh, could someone please find me some ruins?"

"The odds of that happening are negligible, if you ask me," Rook smiled wryly.

"True," Marie chuckled, ending the chat.

On a slightly related note, while they were talking, Ray was on his way to Quartierlatin. The first thing he encountered was a minigun-wielding robot that had come from the nearby ruins.

He went on to blow it up.

The End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 8
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2018 J-Novel Club LLC

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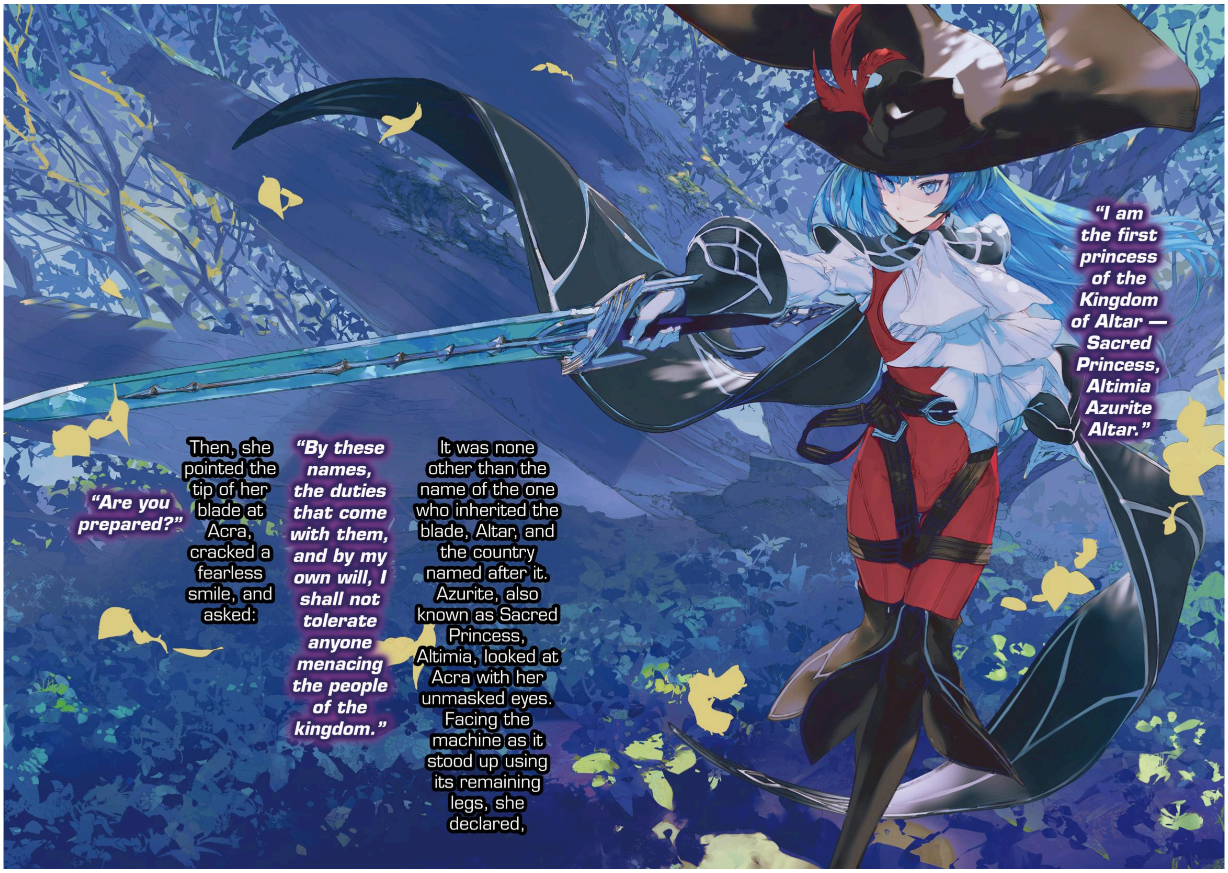


It was none other than the name of the one who inherited the blade, Altar, and the country named after it. Azurite, also known as Sacred Princess, Altimia, looked at Acra with her unmasked eyes. Facing the machine as it stood up using its remaining legs, she declared,

"I am the first princess of the Kingdom of Altar — Sacred Princess, Altimia Azurite Altar."

"By these names, the duties that come with them, and by my own will, I shall not tolerate anyone menacing the people of the kingdom."

Then, she pointed the tip of her blade at Acra, cracked a fearless smile, and asked:

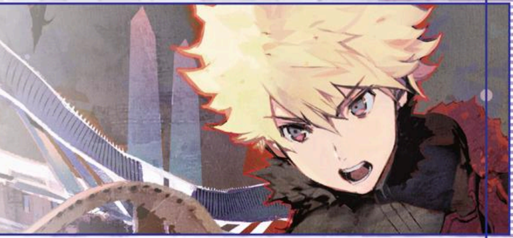
"Are you prepared?"

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

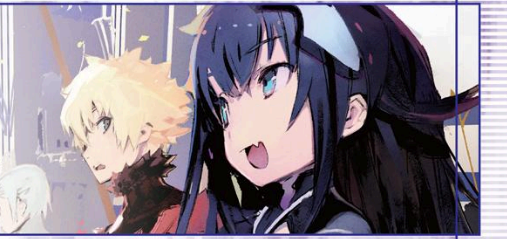
A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



Nemesis

Nemesis

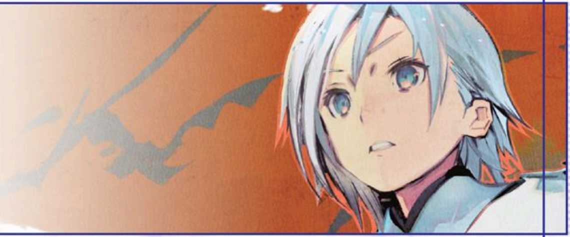
A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword or a halberd, and is equipped with skills such as Vengeance is Mine, which damages enemies for twice as much as they damage Ray.



Rook

Rook Holmes/Lucius Holmes

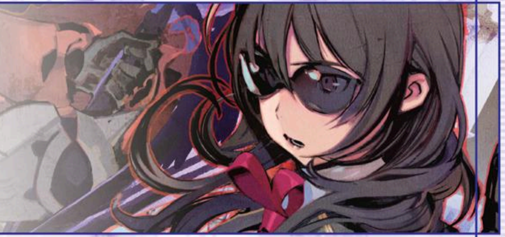
An astonishingly beautiful boy in Ray's party. His job is "Pimp" and he fights using his tamed monsters. His Embryo is the Type Guardian "Depraved Devil, Babylon."



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

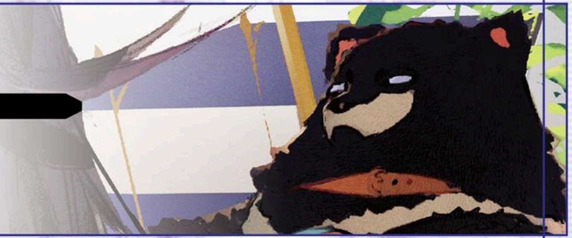
A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's brother and the one who invited him to the game. He wears a suit because, during character creaton, he accidentally made himself look just like he does in real life.



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Conjunction: The Unfinished Hope

Those who know true hope are the ones who stand on the brink of the abyss of despair.

Those who have already fallen in can never hope again, and those on the precipice are more hopeful than anyone else.

Thus, those who are cornered create things that will save them.

It might be beliefs that speak of the salvation of the soul, lives that carry their wills to the next generation... or beings that can shatter the encroaching despair.

◇◆

Long ago, in the age of what was now known as the “pre-ancient civilization,” there was a weapons plant deep within the mountains that eventually became part of the Quartierlatin County.

It had equipment for mining resources, turning them into materials, extracting energy from the earth, and producing Prism Soldiers. Everything inside was advanced enough to work without human interference.

Despite this, there were people inside.

They were in the deepest depths of the facility, developing the most important thing within.

Standing behind fortified glass, they used remote-controlled manipulators to bring it further to completion.

Suddenly, the automatic door to their workroom opened, and a man walked inside, accompanied by a small child.

“Sir?” one of the workers asked. “Why did you bring your son here?”

“We completed the core yesterday, didn’t we?” he replied. “I want to show it to him. It’s the hope that’ll save our world... and all the children of the future.”

As they had that exchange, the boy walked up to the glass wall. The thing beyond made him gasp in amazement.

"Dad, is that the thing that will protect us?"

"It is. Acra-Vesta will save everyone," his father replied.

The clockwork sphere behind the glass was the weapon's artificial intelligence block. It would eventually be shielded by a frame and hull, completing it as a weapon.

This anti-incarnation weapon, as it was labeled, had the groundbreaking ability to develop and produce its own parts, as well as the equipment that would create them.

The workers were only laying the foundation for the auto-creation process. Once this was done, Acra-Vesta would begin turning itself into a superweapon.

"Really?" the boy asked eagerly.

"Yes." His father nodded. "Acra-Vesta is our hope. It will beat the incarnations and save the world."

The word "incarnations" referred to the nightmarish beings that were attacking the pre-ancient civilization. They were the very source of their despair.

One of them was immortalized on the wall of the plant's hall, along with some writing and the name of the genius who'd designed this facility, to make sure no one ever forgot their terror.

"Wowww!" the boy became excited. Hearing that this machine here would save the world filled him with joy. "When that happens, will we get to see Mom again?"

His dad was silent. That was something that couldn't happen even if the world was saved, but the man couldn't bring himself to say it.

This era was full of such tragedies. They were building Acra-Vesta to prevent any more of them from happening.

"Sure... When the world is at peace again," he said as he patted his son's head, before taking his hand and leaving the workroom.

"Bye bye!" The boy waved his free hand to Acra-Vesta's intelligence block. "See ya!"

There was no response to those words. All you could hear from the machine were the silent sounds made by its optical sensor.

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It was a two-millennia-old superweapon created to become mankind's hope.

Ironically, its awakening in the present day was triggered by a battle between two factions of men.

Devils were attacking Quartierlatin.

Marionettes were infiltrating the ruins.

Fatally glitched Prism Soldiers were moving out.

And the people were struggling against them all.

In spite of that, Acra-Vesta didn't move.

But the incomplete superweapon knew that the time for awakening was drawing near.

Chapter One: Battle of the Fairy Tales

The Town of Quartierlatin

Hell General Logan Goddhart had unleashed two thousand devils upon Quartierlatin. Now, the Dryfean Superior continued to terrorize the town.

It was early in the morning. The alarm sounding throughout the area woke everyone up and had them scrambling for safety.

Sitting on the back of a devil different than the ones comprising the army, Logan looked down at the town like it was anthill.

“I’m attacking a town...” he muttered. “Franklin tried the same thing a month ago and failed, didn’t he?”

Gifted Barbaros had given him a quest: to derange the forces protecting Quartierlatin. In his mind, that was the same as invading the town.

Not that he was wrong. The defending force would definitely have to shift their focus to him.

However... he had no intention of limiting himself to being *just* diversion.

“Looks like there are two ways I’ll succeed where he failed: I’ll beat The Unbreakable *and* take the town.” The Hell General grinned. “Lots of trees in this town. It’ll burn real well. Fire it is.”

Thus, the two thousand devils began spewing balls of flame. They hit the houses, trees, and *the inhabitants*, setting everything on fire.

“In the war, I found out NPCs give a lot of XP,” he grinned. “I’m on a mission from Dryfe, so they won’t put me on the wanted list. I’ll gather as much as I can here.”

People were burning, screaming in pain, but the horrid sight did nothing to Logan — he cared only about the XP.

The reek of scorching death didn’t reach him; in his eyes, they were only CG characters covered in flames that were just as artificial.

To someone who had that setting on — especially for one who thought of this as nothing but a game — this was just him following his quest. Killing the NPCs for XP was just a nice bonus. It meant nothing to him. The only life he cared about here was that of his quest giver, Gifted Barbaros. It didn't go anywhere beyond that.

Despite being a Superior, one of the most prominent Masters, he still saw *Infinite Dendrogram* as nothing but a game.

"Hm?" He raised an eyebrow as he looked down at an army of about two hundred knights. "Is that the defense force?"

Those were the tian knights protecting the Quartierlatin County. They were moving out to defend the people from the vile, cruel demons burning their town and killing the townsfolk.

"Ha!" Logan laughed, ridiculing the knights' desperate, valiant resistance against the devilish horde. "They must have some bad AI. They don't have the quality or the quantity, but they're still coming at me. Idiots."

Yes, even their courage was worthless stupidity to this man.

Logan let loose ten devils for each knight.

It was far too much for a common tian, knight or otherwise, and they quickly overwhelmed them, halting their advance.

The scene felt like a replay of the war.

"They're weak, but they're still battle jobs. They give more XP than other NPCs," he said in satisfaction before moving on.

Eventually, he ran into a certain building.

"There are a lot of them in there," he said. "That makes it easier for me."

He was looking at *an orphanage*. It was full of children and workers hiding from the scary devils.

But even this was just "an easy target" for him.

Logan decided to shower the building in dozens of fireballs, simply because that was the most effective way to burn everyone inside.

"I hope I find more places like this. They'll make XP farming a real cakewalk," he muttered as he raised the greatsword in his right hand.

He was preparing to give the signal to fire and set the orphanage aflame. The idea that he was about to take the lives of many children hadn't even crossed his mind. After all — this was just a game. To him, doing this felt no different than opening a treasure chest in an RPG.

"Fi—" But his signal, the word "fire," was cut short by a sudden turn of events — the complete extermination of all the dozens of devils he'd prepared for the attack.

Some shattered into little pieces.

Some were split in two.

Some expelled all their blood and collapsed.

Some began attacking their own, as if someone had taken control over them.

The ways were different, but one thing was certain — someone had killed the devils.

"What?" Logan looked around in confusion. He was surprised that someone here could destroy his Demi-Dragon-tier creatures so easily, and he wondered who it was.

"I didn't expect to see something so disgustingly familiar on my morning walk," the answer came in the form of a man's voice — or, rather, music that sounded like it. "Apologies, but I promised the children here I would play music for them. I know I am in not in the position to talk, considering what I did in Gideon... but *I won't let you harm them.*"

The owner of the voice was standing before the orphanage.

It was an old man. He was surrounded by machines reminiscent of metal musical instruments, donning the shapes of a kobold, centaur, harpy, and cat sìth.

He was the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.

Once a Master belonging to Dryfe, now he was merely a wandering musician who played music alongside his Embryos.

"You're... King of Orchestras!" Logan exclaimed. He knew the old man's name. Franklin was a rival to him, after all, so of course he knew all the top fighters from the mad scientist's clan. "Why are you here?! Did Franklin send you to get in my way?!"

"No." The old man's music silently sung. "I've left The Triangle of Wisdom."

And I doubt Franklin cares about you enough to get in your way, the old man's tone implied, though he didn't put it in the lyrics.

"Then why are you here?" Logan demanded.

"Like I said, the orphans in here are my audience. I won't stand by and let some vile devils take them from me."

"Huh...? What are you talking about?" Logan couldn't begin to understand.

He'll play for some orphans? Is that a quest or something? he wondered. That was the only way he could process it. After all, what else could it be?

Veldorbell ignored his confusion and added, “Not to mention that a man who does nothing in a movement like this has no business writing a hero’s saga. That is what’s most important to me.”

The old man had started playing *Infinite Dendrogram* for the sole purpose of getting the inspiration he needed to write an opera depicting the life of a hero. He would attack or defend, but never stand still and do nothing. And like the free Master that he was, he was choosing to defend his audience instead of standing in line with his old faction and attacking.

“A saga?” Logan repeated. “Write about me, then.”

“Hm?” Veldorbell tilted his head in confusion.

That made Logan irritated. How could the old man not understand something so simple? “I’m the hero of this game. There’s no better person for you to write about.”

In response, Veldorbell merely chuckled, contradicting the Hell General’s claim more eloquently than any words ever could.

“You damn...” Logan instantly began boiling with anger. “You’re a support build for support builds! Do you seriously think you stand a chance against the Hell General?!”

“Who knows? What about you? Do you think a suppression type like you can do anything against an extermination type like me?”

“Stop talking! I’m the Hell General! The most numerous and the strongest Superior in Dryfe!”

“Fix your tone, brat. And you’re neither of those things.”

“Shut up!” Logan gave in to anger and mobilized his devils. A hundred or so of them charged at the elder, hungry for his head.

Their charge was menacing...

“Percussion’s music isn’t so weak as to be broken without a plan.”

...but they stood no chance against the invisible vibration waves. Those pulverized them in seconds.

Logan was shocked.

“Heart Beat Palpitation.” That was the name of the music created by Percussion, the Bremen playing the drums.

Thanks to the passive skill Veldorbell held as King of Orchestras, “Orchestral King’s Conducting,” that music had been enhanced several times over, becoming a fearsome field of vibrations so powerful they broke apart physical material.

Marie, the Superior Killer, had had to fake her own death to stand a chance against it. It was one of the most powerful defense-offense hybrid skills to come from Dryfe.

"Tch!" Logan spat.

"No point in talking anymore," Veldorbell sighed, and stood like the conductor he was, his supreme orchestra at his side. He looked at the Superior devil-commander. "Come. My divine ensemble shall crush all of your imps."

"You dare mock me...?! You senile sixth-former!"

And thus the two were matched up.

The ex-strongest fighter from Dryfe's top clan, the Triangle of Wisdom: the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.

The reigning duel champion of Dryfe and Superior — Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

This was the beginning of their battle.

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Among the tales from the Brothers Grimm, there was one called "Rumpelstiltskin."

It went something like this:

A poor miller once lied that his daughter could spin straw into gold.

It spread as a rumor, and when the king caught wind of this, he captured the daughter and locked her up, saying, "Spin all this into gold by morning. If you do that for three days in a row, I'll take you as my queen. If you don't, I'll have your head."

When the powerless girl gave up all hope, an imp-like creature appeared before her, offering to spin straw into gold in exchange for some jewelry.

This happened twice, but the third time, the feat came at the cost of her eventual firstborn, and she had no choice but to comply.

Having cleared the king's condition, the girl became the queen.

But when she had her firstborn, she begged the creature not to take him. The creature agreed on the condition that she guess its name within three days.

In the end, she discovered that the imp shared its name with the tale — Rumpelstiltskin.

Now, what kind of powers would a Superior Embryo of the same name have? What could False Finesse, Rumpelstiltskin actually do?

It was based on the "spinning straw into gold" part of the story. Job skills under its effects became significantly more powerful.

In its first form, it could only *double a single number* in job skill descriptions, but as it evolved, its multiplication grew, as well as the quantity of numbers it could influence.

At this point, the Embryo's constantly-active ultimate skill, "Straw-into-Gold, Rumpelstiltskin," could *multiply ten numbers by ten.*

That made Rumpelstiltskin the Embryo that could use job skills better than any other, uplifting them to new levels.

For this invasion, Logan had multiplied the points he'd gotten from his sacrifice. Then he'd done the same for Call Devil Regiment's summon count and time.

And unlike how it was with Summoner creatures, the devils created by his skills didn’t need any fixed catalysts. The stats were in the description, and he was free to alter them.

He’d multiplied all of them except for LUC — the multiplication didn’t have much of an effect there — by ten.

Points, summon count, summon time, and seven stats. That made ten numbers multiplied, and Logan believed this was the best way to use his Rumpelstiltskin and Hell General combo.

On the other hand, Logan rarely used skills besides his summons and army. He had party enhancement skills, but he didn’t like them much.

Upholding them required lots of MP, and the cost scaled with the power of the buffed devils. Though Logan’s Rumpelstiltskin could increase effect power, it couldn’t reduce costs. Even his summon point manipulation was no exception. He merely increased the points he had, not lowered the costs of his summons.

Additionally, though he had three stat buff skills to choose from — one for STR, one for END, and one for AGI — they only increased the stats by 20%. Multiplying that number by ten would only give him a 200% enhancement.

Logan’s ultimate skill was more effective when used on the base stats during summoning.

Basically, Logan preferred to fight by letting his Rumpelstiltskin-enhanced devils crush his enemies.

Thanks to the nature of his Embryo, he’d quickly cleared the job conditions — including “summon count” — for Hell General, and he’d reached a Superior Job without even filling up the rest of his job slots.

Despite that, his devil army was a powerful force. A horde that could be restored with a single skill was menacing indeed, and that was how Logan had won most of his victories outside of the arena.

After all, who could stand a chance against such overwhelming numbers?

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That question was answered by his battle against Veldorbell. He hadn’t expected what was happening here at all.

Reason insisted that a battle-focused Superior like Logan should absolutely dominate the support job from the conductor grouping pre-Superior that was Veldorbell.

And yet...

"Tch!" Logan clicked his tongue, his face in a grimace.

The reason for his frustration was that his devil army seemed to stand no chance against the old man's Bremen. Faced with the vibration field, the devils didn't know how to continue. Charging ahead would make them shatter, and the fire they launched disappeared like mist.

The deadly mix of defense and offense was too much even for a horde of Demi-Dragon-tier devils.

To make things worse, the attacks of the other Bremen had longer ranges. More and more devils fell to the ultrasound scalpel, the high-output low-frequency waves, and the hypnotic music.

The defense couldn't be overcome by mere numbers, and the attacks were deadly and as fast as sound.

Veldorbell's battle style was almost a perfect counter for Logan.

"Khh!" He voiced his vexation.

"I was with Dryfe. The top clan, at that. I know your fighting style well." Veldorbell's music sang in his voice. "You're the Hell General — a devil summoner. Your strength lies in your ability to quickly summon an army of devils. Your Embryo's unique skill lets you increase the cost-performance. It's perfect for you. Normally, to get an army of devils this powerful, you would have to sacrifice a whole town, if not more. I assume these are all Demi-Dragon-tier?"

He sighed as he described his opponent's strategy, proving that he did indeed know what he was facing.

Of course, that was mostly because Logan never even tried to hide his Embryo's power from anyone in Dryfe.

His ultimate skill was constantly active to begin with, so hiding it wouldn't give him anything like an element of surprise. Not to mention he wanted everyone to know why he was above everyone else.

He'd started this after the war, when Franklin had become a Superior.

Logan's sense of rivalry had driven him to flaunt it.

Of course, there was little disadvantage for him in revealing Rumpelstiltskin's powers, but it still gave people like Veldorbell a better grasp of the situation.

It wasn’t enough to be a blunder, but it was a negative nonetheless.

Side note: in the tale from the Brothers Grimm, Rumpelstiltskin’s name was revealed because the creature sang it himself, making it a fitting name for Logan’s Embryo in more ways than one.

“But there is a limit to how much you can enhance the devil army. These are all too weak to break through Percussion’s vibration field,” Veldorbell declared. “If you wanted devils that could survive Heart Beat Palpitation, even a Superior like you would need to sacrifice something major, no?”

“Well, you sure know a lot, King of Orchestras,” grumbled Logan.

“I said I did, did I not? I’m certain we can defeat any devils within your reasonable limits... up to Legendary-tier, I’m guessing. So why not get rid of little old me by sacrificing a special reward and summoning a Mythical? You know, like you did with the kingdom’s commander.”

He was referring to the Hell General’s ultimate job skill, Call Devil Zero Exceed.

Unlike how it was with the other skills, the points for it could only be gathered by using a very luxurious sacrifice.

Even for Logan, who could multiply the points gained by ten, the only items that could give him enough were special rewards.

Also, since the Mythical-tier devil’s stats weren’t in the descriptions, Rumpelstiltskin couldn’t enhance them like it could for Call Devil Regiment. Same went for the Legendary-tier devils.

But despite those many problems, it was still Logan’s trump card. It had brought him victory in all the battles he used it in. In a way, it was his ultimate skill.

However...

“You can’t do it now, can you?” Veldorbell’s song continued. “The cost is far too great. After all, *this isn’t the arena.*”

This was the reason why Logan was Dryfe’s reigning duel champion.

All items lost and consumed within arena barriers returned the moment the duel ended, and the special rewards he sacrificed were no exception.

While dueling, Logan could use his special rewards without hesitation, sometimes summoning several of the Mythical-tier devils.

No one else in the duel rankings stood a chance against that.

Another side note: Franklin had once told him, at their first meeting, “You’re only the champ ’cause Behemot doesn’t duel, though. I mean, the

King of Beasts could take care of your Mythicals in a snap."

Logan had seen both Franklin and the King of Beasts as rivals ever since.

"Well? Will you throw away a special reward and bring in the Mythical?" Veldorbell provoked him.

Veldorbell's only chance to win would be the moment Logan tried to use that skill.

As things were, he couldn't move or disable the vibration field because he was protecting the orphanage behind him. But if Logan decided to summon a Mythical-tier devil, he could switch to offense.

Summoning devils required time and rendered the summoner defenseless. During that moment, Veldorbell would disable the vibration field and attack with his ultimate skill, Beast Orchestra — Bremen.

A super-powerful vibration wave from Percussion, or Wind's song that drove enemies to suicide, would surely defeat both the devils and Logan.

Perhaps Veldorbell only had to whittle away the number of devils until Logan had to summon more. Regardless, he was biding his time.

Focused on his conducting, he observed Logan, waiting for the right moment to strike.

"Tch." Logan clicked his tongue. "You talk a lot for someone who's not even moving his mouth."

He then cracked a hideous grin. It was an expression that didn't belong on the face of the hero he'd used as reference for his avatar.

"Listen here, old fart... You've got it all wrong."

"What?"

"I don't need to sacrifice a special reward for you. I've got something way cheaper." He snapped his fingers, making one of the devils behind him show itself.

It was carrying *a person*.

"You wretch...!" Veldorbell exclaimed, this time with his own voice.

"This NPC is more than enough," Logan taunted.

It was a girl Veldorbell recognized.

She was one of the children he'd played for in the countess's mansion yesterday, and she loved his music a lot.

She had been so scared that she'd ran out of the orphanage, only to end up in the arms of a devil.

“You said something about children, didn’t you?” Logan mocked. “I thought it’d be useful, so I picked one up. And looking at that face, I can tell I was right. *This* is the item that counters you! HAHAHAHAHAHAH!” Logan laughed out loud, gleeful that he got back at Veldorbell for trying to sway him. “HAHAHAH! Here’s a little something for the concert!”

The devil threw the girl into the air ahead, straight into the destructive barrier that would reduce her to less than dust.

“Heart Beat Palpitation, cancel!” Veldorbell acted instantly.

He ordered Percussion to stop playing, canceling the field right before the girl entered, while Strings, the centaur, ran to catch her.

But that was when the greatsword Logan threw pierced Veldorbell in his torso, pinning him to the ground.

“Ghph..!”

“Pathetic! That’s what you get for getting invested in NPCs!” Logan laughed as the devils attacked Bremen.

They fought back using their skills, but losing their conductor meant a severe loss of power. They took out a few, but there were far too many.

The devils were destroying them.

Wind’s flute and Clavier’s keyboard were broken.

Strings earnestly protected the girl and carried her back to the orphanage, but that came at the cost of its instrument and one of its legs.

Pierced by the sword and unable to do anything, Veldorbell watched his Bremen. He was Bleeding, and his HP was dropping quickly, not to mention the special reward blade had some sort of curse-based debuff.

It wouldn’t be long until he got the death penalty.

Despite his state, he still looked at his Bremen, and they looked back at him. There was a fire in all their eyes.

Though hurt or broken, they could still fight.

“I guess it’s time for the finale.” Veldorbell, though fatally wounded, rose his hands to the sky. “Final Orchestra!”

It was the King of Orchestras’s ultimate job skill.

By taking an immense amount of his own health, it multiplied the effects of all musical skills by ten.

Bremen regrouped and became a single musical machine centered around Percussion, the only one whose instrument wasn’t broken.

“WHAT?!” Logan had thought that Veldorbell was as good as dead, so this turn of events shocked him.

However, it was too late for him to do anything about it. Veldorbell and Bremen were already playing.

“Beast Orchestra — Bremen: PERCUSSION!”

Thus, the final and the greatest shockwave flew towards the distant sky, crushing over a thousand devils, as well as Logan himself.

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Once the shockwave had passed, only one being was left standing in the path it’d traveled.

“You went and done it, old fart,” said Logan. “You took out over half of my army... and my Brooch.”

He bit his lip and grimaced at the shattered Lifesaving Brooch that’d fallen off of him. He couldn’t believe that he, of all people, had just essentially lost a life to a non-Superior.

However, the culprits weren’t unscathed, either.

The shockwave came at a cost, apparently, since Bremen were now just empty pieces of metal, while Veldorbell was rendered immobile and silent by the greatsword’s curse-based debuff. Within the next two minutes, he’d Bleed out what little HP he had left and receive the death penalty.

“You deserve a reward for giving me a hard time,” growled Logan, humiliated. “I don’t know or care if it’s a quest or if you just got invested, but I’ll completely destroy this damn orphanage.” Then he cracked a dark grin and pointed at the building. “I won’t burn it. My devils are gonna eat them one by one.”

It’d take longer, but his role here was to buy time anyway, so it didn’t matter where and how he attacked.

Hell, we’re at war. It doesn’t matter how hard I crush them, he thought. “Do it.”

The devils who’d survived the battle against Veldorbell amounted to fewer than five hundred. Besides them, there were about a hundred of those who were still fighting Quartierlatin’s knights. The devil army had lost a lot of its numbers.

Even so, Logan was sure this was more than enough to eat up the orphanage and crush Quartierlatin.

Veldorbell wanted to stop the devils heading for the children, but he could neither speak nor move a finger. This was the end of the aged composer's promise and the beginning of a tragedy.

However, there was someone who couldn't allow that.

"Purgatorial Flames, max power!" a man's voice rang out, and the devils were drowned in dark-red fire unlike their own.

Dozens of the ones leading the charge to the orphanage were set ablaze. They were now writhing on the road, screaming in pain.

"Who are *you*?" Logan asked, looking at the source of the fire.

With devils burning all around, a dimly-lit silhouette was walking forward.

It had a strange appearance.

The man's whole body was covered by a coat akin to darkness itself.

The armor that occasionally peeked through the coat was a menacing mix of black and crimson.

His hands were shielded by bracers depicting demonic faces, while his legs were in boots reminiscent of corpses.

Most who saw him would surely think he was wicked.

But his eyes told a different story — the devils' brutality had set them alight with a righteous fury.

"I guess you're the Hell General," he said.

Slightly taken aback by the raw emotion in his voice, Logan repeated his question. "Who are you?"

He glared directly into the Hell General's eyes before giving his name. "Ray Starling."

He was The Unbreakable — the one who'd broken Franklin's plots twice.

"Ohhh." Veldorbell finally let out a voice as he slowly became particles of light. He didn't know the reason why The Unbreakable was here. It didn't even cross his mind that Ray had come because he heard the old man's final Beast Orchestra. But Veldorbell was satisfied.

He looked at Ray's back with a fulfilled smile on his face.

After all, that back was almost exactly like the one of the hero he'd envisioned for the dream of his lifetime.

"I leave the rest... to you." Veldorbell fought through the blade's curse to speak those words.

“You can count on me,” Ray replied.

Upon hearing that, the elderly composer and his Embryos smiled before becoming bits of light and finally vanishing.

Ray stood before Logan, his heart full of anger.

It was an anger Nemesis was familiar with. She knew full well that Ray Starling... Reiji Mukudori... was a well-meaning person prone to acting on goodwill or righteous indignation. He could never ignore anything that could give him a bad aftertaste. Anyone who’d bring tragedy was a target to him, and he’d face them with a heart full of anger.

He was like this in *Infinite Dendrogram*, as well as everywhere else, and it wasn’t going to change anytime soon.

However, Nemesis knew that his anger had two forms.

The first was the rage at those who filled the future with potential tragedies — the anger he used as fuel to unlock the future he desired.

The second was the fury at the wicked malice of those who’d already created many tragedies and laughed on top of them.

Most of those he’d faced were the former. Gardranda, the RSK, Monochrome... even Franklin was one of these.

But there had been one very clear example of the latter — the Lich, Maise.

That man had been a true wretch who’d taken the lives of countless children and gone on to toy with their corpses.

Nemesis was aware that Ray’s anger back then had been different in nature, and far more than his flesh and blood could stand.

And now, just like Maise before, Logan had crossed the line.

He’d set the town on fire, attacked an orphanage, and declared he would have his devils eat the children.

It was malice wicked enough to trigger Ray’s fury.

Ray’s opponent was none other than the Hell General, Logan Goddhart — a Superior. The gap in power between the two of them was even greater than the one between Ray and Maise, not to mention that Logan had an army of Demi-Dragon-tier devils on his side.

Ray was outclassed and outnumbered, but it didn’t matter to him.

He had already decided he would face this evil.

Chapter Two: Of Demons and Devils

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Surrounded by a burning city, I faced a man.

He was the Hell General, Logan Goddhart — one of Dryfe's Superiors I'd heard about.

Apparently, he was above even Franklin in battle. Leading an army of devils, he had used them to devastate the Royal Guard, as well as take the life of Liliana and Milianne's father.

I'd suspected that he was the culprit as soon as I saw all the devils attacking Quartierlatin.

Machines, marionettes, and devils. There were three major threats here, and this guy was the biggest reason why I was here.

In the ruins, the Prism Soldiers were fighting Dr. Mario's marionettes, so they were too busy to be a danger to the town right now.

Tom was there, too, and I trusted he'd keep them inside.

But even if I hadn't had those reasons, I'd still have come here, to the Hell General and his devils setting the town ablaze.

"Ray Starling, you say?" the Hell General said as one of the devils returned the blade that'd pierced Veldorbell to him. "Ha ha ha! Your clothes have sure changed a lot over the last month. That's a real villain look. Perfect for someone about to lose to me."

I said nothing in response and examined *his* appearance.

He looked a lot like the protagonist of a game I'd played before cutting off all entertainment to study for my exams. His armor was custom-made to be just like that character's, and his face was about what I'd have expected for that face in a more realistic art style.

However, that protagonist would never have done something this vile. I couldn't even imagine him proudly saying he'd *feed children to devils*.

"This disgusting little..." I muttered in rage.

Back at the hall in the ruins, I'd remembered the Gouz-Maise gang. But the machines were only like that because of their programming.

This guy, on the other hand, was like the Lich right down to the core. Both of them hurt the weak and mocked those trying to stop them in the exact same way.

That gave me a severe heartache. My state of mind was about the same now as it had been back in that old fortress. Even I knew I was on the verge of erupting.

“Heh heh heh,” he snickered. “Ray Starling the Unbreakable! I’ve wanted to meet you.”

“You have?”

What the hell? I raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve seen you fight since the time Franklin trapped the vice commander of the Royal Guard. I saw how you beat a Demi-Drag-Worm at level 0.”

He was talking about the first thing I’d gotten involved in, here in this world.

Well, that was a Dryfean plot. No surprise he’d know about it, I thought.

“I also know he lost against you, even though he planned for it,” the Hell General grinned, clearly enjoying the fact that his ally had been defeated. “That felt great.”

Perhaps he didn’t see fellow Dryfean Superiors as his allies?

Well, you can say the same thing about our kingdom’s Figaro and Miss Eldritch, I reminded myself.

“Now you stand before me,” he continued. “You foiled two of Franklin’s plots, and now it’s time for you to lose. Defeating you is my greatest wish right now!”

“You wanna avenge him?” I asked.

“No! My goal is to prove that I’m better than him!”

I had no words.

I could barely understand him, but I could tell he was gathering his forces here. Looking around, I noticed that none of the devils were going out to destroy the town anymore. They were all standing close to the Hell General, ready to beat me.

I didn’t mind having to fight more if I kept them distracted from the rest of the town.

“I went out of my way to come to the kingdom, and found you here all by yourself,” the Hell General grinned. “How convenient. No other Superiors will get in my way as I beat you and prove that I’m better than

Franklin."

"Hm?" I had a slight sense of déjà vu. "Let me tell you one thing."

"What?"

"Just a couple days ago, there was a PK clan that said something like that. It's gone now."

Sol Crisis, the clan that had been solo killed by B3, was still fresh in my memory. The way Logan was talking was so similar to their manner that I'd just had to say that.

It was a decent way to provoke him, too.

"I'm not some lame clan!" he hollered.

Sure enough, he became more hostile, and that was fine by me.

"Me and my 2,000 devils can't lose against a low-rank like you!"

"2,000? You sure you know how to count?"

Thanks to Veldorbell's valiant fighting, the devil army here had been reduced to only about 500. Besides those, there were the ones fighting the Quartierlatin knights, but overall, their numbers had dropped by a lot.

"Damn... you...!" he said through clenched teeth. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd popped a blood vessel. Either his boiling point was either really low, or he was just really shallow.

Franklin had an air of mystery and eeriness, as well as supreme composure. Logan definitely didn't.

My heart was still full of rage, but this realization made my brain cool down.

"Very well... I'll just make you regret making a fool out of me!" he shouted as he made his devils move out.

He probably wanted to crush me with sheer numbers. The army was moving slowly — probably to instill fear — but I appreciated that. It gave me time to think.

"I have nothing against provoking him, but are you certain we can win?" asked Nemesis. "It feels as though you only brought your heart, not mind."

I'm not gonna deny that, but we do stand a chance, I thought. *We've got two ways to win.*

"Two?" she repeated.

Veldorbell broke his Brooch. It'll be over the moment we bring him down to 0 HP. We also have a way to break through this army and land a hit. We've used it before.

"That, eh? It's certainly something we can use here. What about the other?"

It's a trump card... I'll only use it if I have no other choice.

"A trump card? You mean Payback Beyond the Stars? Wouldn't it be of little use against him? He is a commander, after all."

"No, not that one," I replied as I looked at my hands — at the Miasmaflame Bracers.

These things were actually a bigger gamble to me than just jumping into the devil army.

It would be fine if I didn't have to use it, but I would if I had no other choice.

"Hmm, I have trouble reading it, but I do understand you have something in mind," said Nemesis. "I must say, though... this is a battle against an army, and your win condition is killing the leader without dying yourself. Silver might've been useful here."

"Too bad I lent him out," I agreed.

Before hearing the sound and coming here, I'd sent Azurite to head out and help the Quartierlatin knights. They were farther away, so I'd given Silver to her. She would come support me once she was done there.

"Still, it'd be better if I finished the job before she got here," I muttered.

My reason for that wasn't tian mortality, but the fact that the enemy was the Hell General.

He had killed her mentor, and I felt she would push herself too hard if she had to face him. Considering how she'd glared at the army, I was pretty confident in that assumption.

We'd only known each other for a few days, but I already knew she was gentle and wouldn't hesitate to burden herself.

"HA HA HA!" Logan guffawed. "How does it feel to be surrounded by so many devils?! Just so you know, these are all Demi-Dragon tier and above! Your little flamethrower won't be enough!"

I can tell, I thought as I looked at the devils I'd set on fire when I'd come here. They were all hurt, but could still fight. If I wanted to burn them, I would need to channel my Purgatorial Flames a bit longer.

But... I had something else in mind.

"All right," I said after I looked around and saw no people anywhere nearby. The children in the orphanage were fearfully peeking at me through the windows, but they were pretty far away, not to mention indoors.

Looks like I can use it...

"Come on! Beg for your life or something! I'll listen!" said Logan.

"Man, how can you even say all these generic bad guy lines unironically? You're a disgrace to your face and armor."

"Gh...!"

"But yeah, I've got some words you. Listen closely," I said as I covered my mouth with the edge of the Black Warcoat and raised my right arm. "*Hellish Miasma, erupt!*"

A moment later, the right bracer released a dark purple mist.

This was a fiendish skill that gave three severe debuffs: Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness.

"Huh?! You're using poison gas in a town you're supposed to protect?!" he shouted.

Well, thanks to a certain general, there was no one nearby, so why not?

Since the devils had surrounded me, it touched pretty much all of them. The Hellish Miasma quickly took effect. The devil army fell to their knees and started writhing slowly.

Logan probably hadn't lied about them being Demi-Dragon-tier. But during the battle against Gardranda, the miasma had affected even Marilyn, who was on the same tier, so there was no reason it couldn't work on these devils.

Of course, it was possible that devils had a resistance to it, but then again, it'd worked even on Gouz-Maise, an undead, so the chances of it working on these guys seemed high.

And now I would continue by doing the same thing I'd done against Gouz-Maise.

"GHAH!" I went to the nearest devil, bit off a bit of its wing, and swallowed it.

I instantly got the three status effects I'd given to it, as well as some curses for eating devil flesh.

"Form Shift — The Flag Halberd!" Nemesis wasted no time transforming into the halberd and activating Like a Flag Flying the Reversal, which reversed all the debuffs on me.

Poison now healed instead of damaging me. Intoxication now sharpened my sense of balance instead of dulling it. And Weakness now doubled my stats instead of halving them.

The curse debuffs were either negated or turned into buffs, too.

This was the strategy I'd used in my battle against the Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

Getting buffs by eating the flesh of a debuffed enemy and reversing it was a pretty unorthodox move. I'd thought I'd never use it again, but I had nothing against doing it again, in this case.

"Hgh!" I exclaimed as I kicked the pavement below and jumped into a dash through the weakened devil horde.

Cutting off a few of their heads on the way, I broke through the purple miasma to close in on the Hell General.

"Huh?!"

"FHUAH!" I exhaled as I swung my halberd's blade. Logan tried to parry it with his sword, but my halberd slid on its surface and slightly cut into his protagonist-like face.

"Damn you...!" The speed at which he tried to parry it was above mine, and I was buffed.

This was because he was a Superior Job with stats suited for one. They were high, but not high enough to make him unbeatable.

Also, his movements were kinda...

"Ray Starling... that move was vile!" said Logan. The injury enraged him. He swung his greatsword down on me.

"It's your own fault for letting me do it," I said as I evaded and attacked him myself.

"What?!"

Until now, I'd never gone out of my way to use this enemy-eating strategy, but there had been one time when I couldn't have used it, even if I'd wanted to.

It was my battle against Franklin's RSK.

He'd made the monster into almost the perfect counter to me: I couldn't give it any of the three debuffs, and the Material Barrier was too tough for me to bite it. Franklin had known this move, and fought me after making sure I couldn't use it.

But Logan wasn't like that.

He'd said he wanted to beat me, but he didn't have a single bit of the info needed, much less made sufficient preparations for it. He'd just thought he'd have an easy win here.

Franklin hated losing, had a lust for victory, and always joked around while actually being one of the most serious people you could ever meet. Logan was nothing like him.

"You're half-assing it," I said.

"Huhh?!"

This man had attacked Quartierlatin, destroyed the Royal Guard, and made the Grandrias cry, but my next words had nothing to do with my anger for the guy. They were just a small bit of truth.

The words felt so natural that they just flowed out on their own.

"*You're weaker than Franklin.*"

"Huhh?! B-B-But I... Me?! Hell General, Logan Goddhart?! Below Franklin?!"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

Franklin had some of the weakest stats of any Superior, but he made up for it with the monsters he created.

He never neglected to prepare all the necessary counters against the enemy, to ensure his own safety, and to keep a bunch of tricks up his sleeve.

The thoroughness of his approach for battle made him such a threat that his own fragility was only a minor problem.

Given all that, beating him had required the collective efforts of all the Masters in Gideon.

This guy, though, was nothing like that. He had little grasp of strategy, and his devil army composition was way too basic.

He had another major flaw, too...

"TAKE THAT BAAAAAAACK!" he roared. My words must've stung. He started swinging his sword like he was losing his mind.

Though he wasn't a vanguard fighter, he was still a Superior Job and had impressive stats. The blade swings were fast and powerful, but they were way easier to dodge than duel ranker attacks.

"Ray," Nemesis spoke up. "He..."

"You noticed, too, huh?"

We both could see his flaw.

Logan was at the top of Dryfe's duel rankings.

When you thought about it, it didn't make sense for him to be an easier enemy than the kingdom's duel rankers.

But that was the reality here. Even if you ignored the fact that I was buffed, he was below them.

The reason for that was simple.

Crossing swords with him, I re-confirmed my suspicions. “You used devils in your duels, too, didn’t you?”

“What about it?!”

This situation was a better answer than any words I could come up with.

He was used to summoning his devil army and winning the duels without doing any fighting himself.

Actually, you couldn’t lose items in duels, so maybe he just always summoned the Mythical devil that had defeated Sir Langley.

He probably used devils even when hunting monsters for XP.

And this was the result.

“You suck at swinging this,” I said, looking at his greatsword.

“WHA—?!”

He had the stats of a Superior Job, but he couldn’t use his skills well at all.

Literally everyone in the Royal Guard was above him in swordfighting, and the duel rankers had way better moves than him. They were worlds apart.

He was a Superior with a Superior Job. But he’d relied too much on his devils and Embryo.

I’d learned from Marie that his Embryo enhanced job skills. That was what made it so easy for him to create these devil hordes.

He’d crushed most his enemies with sheer numbers, leaving the strongest ones for his Mythical. That had always been enough for him, so this was what he’d become.

His own battle ability had never improved. He just kept on combining his Embryo and job skills.

Basically... he was a really bad player.

Even if he’d once been better at it, relying on his devils had made him rusty.

“That’s why you stop being a big deal the moment your devils can’t move,” I said aloud.

He was faster than me, but I could see his attacks coming.

He was stronger than me, but I could easily dodge his sword.

He was tougher than me, but I could hit him.

I had all the experience I'd gained from my mock battles against the rankers. Even the countless defeats weren't meaningless.

I could easily handle him, even if I had lower stats. I wouldn't be surprised to learn he hadn't practiced even once.

"If this stays 1v1... I'll win," I said.

"Oh, but it's 2v1," said Nemesis.

"Yeah... that's right!" I replied and attacked with even more intensity.

"No way! I won against the strongest knight in the kingdom!" he yelled back.

"By the time he got to you, Sir Langley was badly wounded. That's why he couldn't beat you before you could summon your Mythical devil."

Logan had sent his devil army at the Royal Guard. Sir Langley had fought with his men at first, but then charged through the enemy lines to get to the Hell General.

I'd trained with the Royal Guard before, and they'd told me that, during the first battle, he'd gone out ahead of everyone to protect them, taking more punishment than anyone else.

If Sir Langley had been at his best, the Hell General would've died before he could finish the summon. All Logan had done was finish off a wounded man with a Mythical devil.

"Wanna try summoning the Mythical on me?" I asked him.

"No way! I'd never waste a special reward on you!"

"And that's why you're weaker than Franklin."

That lab coat shithead would do everything to win, and wouldn't hesitate in the slightest. He'd make monsters using special rewards, even if they were throwaways. That was just how he was.

"Ghh. Nnh...!"

I continued attacking him all throughout the exchange, and he was more and more hurt by the second.

None of the wounds were even near fatal, but the damage was definitely there.

He had no Brooch anymore, either. We'd win if I just kept it up.

"Devils! What are you doing?! G-Get over here and protect me!"

The Hell General raised his voice and shouted at the devils that were suffering from the miasma. But Weakness and Intoxication made them too slow.

“Shit! If that old fart hadn’t taken so many out...! No, I should’ve made more to begin with...!”

Even as he yelled his regrets, I kept showering him in halberd attacks. One of them sliced through his left eye.

“Ghuh! AAAAHHHHHH!”

There was no pain. But losing half of his field of view made his fury even more intense.

“DAAMN YOUUUU! YOU’RE ALL USELESS!” He glared at the devils writhing in the miasma, his one eye full of rage. “Then I’ll make you useful! CONVERSION DEVIL FLARE!”

I gasped. The moment he used the skill, I felt something vanish, and my body was hit by multiple debuffs. “What...?!”

“Ray! The devils behind us vanished and became a ball of fire!” Nemesis cried, right as I began to feel intense heat from behind me.

I turned around and saw a sinister ball of fire.

“Khh!” The skill had made Logan’s entire army vanish and converted them to an offensive spell.

The devil that’d given me the debuffs had disappeared, too. Reversal couldn’t work anymore, so the debuffs once again were doing what they were intended to.

I couldn’t dodge the spell.

“Leave it to me!” Nemesis switched to The Black Shield. “Counter Absorption!”

She used one of two uses we had left. The magic was absorbed by the barrier of light.

But the damage was greater than 300,000. One Counter Absorption wasn’t enough, so Nemesis had no choice but to use the other one.

“The second... will bear it!” she declared with confidence.

That meant that the magic dealt would be over 300,000, but less than 600,000 damage.

“1,000 for each devil, maybe?” I guessed.

If so, the 500 devils had become about 500,000 worth of damage. Originally, it had probably just been 100 damage for each devil. He’d turned it into 1,000 with his Embryo.

As we blocked it, I took out an Elixir and High Holy Water I’d moved to my pouch beforehand, and drank them to get rid of my debuffs.

We successfully protected against the lethal attack and I healed myself, but...

"*Call Devil Gigaknight*," said Logan.

We'd given him the time to summon another devil.

The one that appeared now was about as tall as a human.

Standing at over two meters, it was covered in heavy armor, held a sword in its right hand, a shield in its left, and wore a helmet with a slit that had insect legs peeking out.

Compared to many monsters I'd fought so far, this devil was pretty simple.

However, it was even more menacing than Gouz-Maise.

"Ha ha ha ha! I've gotta say, I expected to end this fight with that one," said Logan. "But it's not a problem that you survived it. Now that this one's here, the fight's as good as over."

Summoning the armor devil must've relieved him. He definitely wasn't as desperate as a cornered rat anymore.

"Really, now? You realize you traded 500 devils for just one, right?" I said, but even I knew that this devil was way above the devils from before.

Hell, it was more menacing than the entire army.

"You can't tell? Gigaknight is a Legendary-tier devil!" he revealed, confirming that my senses weren't lying to me. "It costs a lot, but not a special reward. Using it on you is a waste, but think of it as my thanks for all the stuff you said. I'll kill you good..."

"W o w O w o W o..." Gigaknight made an eerie moan as its insectoid legs wriggled. The sense of intimidation grew stronger.

"Legendary, huh?" I said.

Marie had recently told me that, *"Even we battle-focused pre-Superior Masters have only a fifty percent chance of winning against Legendary UBMs. Your victory against Gardranda was a pretty unique case."*

That meant I was dealing with a monster on about the same level as Marie or Juliet.

The only Legendary I'd ever beaten was Gardranda, and that was only because I'd gotten to its weak point before it could release its true power.

Monochrome had been even higher — Ancient Legendary — but I'd only won against that because Nemesis's third form had turned out to be the perfect counter, and because I'd had B3 to help me. Not to mention it had been a strange UBM focused on some weird stuff.

Gigaknight, however, was purely a straightforward fighter. If it had been specialized in something, I could've looked for openings I could take advantage of, but it didn't look like I could expect anything like that.

I could try gathering damage to launch a Vengeance is Mine, but I'd probably die before I had enough damage. We'd already used up our precious Counter Absorptions to survive against that spell.

It was pretty obvious I was dealing with something tough and had a small chance of winning.

"What of it?" I asked.

I'd known I was dealing with something bigger than myself the moment I'd gone in to face the Hell General himself.

In fact, I'd even considered that he'd summon the Mythical. Getting *just* a Legendary instead was actually good for me.

"We still have a chance," I continued.

His greatest mistake had been attacking me with the spell he'd sacrificed his devils for. Nemesis had gathered the damage, and her counter was now on a whopping 500,000.

This battle would end the moment I passed the Gigaknight and hit him with a Vengeance.

"This makes it clear how much of a hindrance Payback's charging time is," Nemesis commented.

"Yeah. But for now... I'll just have to make do with this."

The devils had died, and the buffs were over. Still, I had my Brooch, and he didn't have his. I just needed to go at him like mad and land a Vengeance.

"Let's go, Nemesis," I sad.

"Very well!" she said as she shifted from her shield to her sword form, and I dashed towards Logan.

"Ha ha ha! You probably think you can win as long as you get close to me... but that won't work anymore," he laughed.

His Gigaknight appeared instantly before me and got in my way like some sort of brick wall.

"Huh?!"

The speed startled me. It was like nothing you'd expect from something in such heavy armor. It swung its sword at me.

"Gh!" I grunted as I stopped it with my blade, but the impact created was so powerful, I was blown away and hit a structure's wall back-first.

The hit wasn't even direct, but that brief impact took a whole fourth — almost 3,000 — of my HP.

"Ray!" Nemesis raised her voice, and I quickly moved.

But I was too slow. There was an impact on my neck, and I felt the sword sink in.

Obviously, the damage was lethal, activating my Lifesaving Brooch.

I desperately stood up, only to be greeted by the ruthless Gigaknight's downwards slash on my crown.

That was, once again, negated by the Brooch, but this time, it failed the damage check and shattered.

But I wasn't gonna stand and just take the third attack.

"Vengeance is Mine!" I roared as I did an Impact Counter, taking all the damage gathered so far, doubling it — raising it to 50,000 — and sending it back.

However...

"This goddamn...!"

...all that did was shatter some of its torso armor, take a chunk of the flesh, and make it bleed. That was it.

Gigaknight was still standing, not even flinching.

That meant only one thing: 50,000 damage wasn't enough.

"W O w o W o..."

I wasn't sure if it was because of the damage, but Gigaknight didn't swing its sword. Instead, it hit me with the back of its left hand, sending me flying a few meters.

"Khuh! Ah!"

That impact reminded me of my first enemy — the Demi-Drag-Worm. The power difference back then had been about as hopeless as it was now.

But I wasn't defeated yet.

Still flying, I aimed my right bracer at it.

"Hellish... Miasma!"

It was drowned in a purple mist.

"W o O."

But it didn't look like that was working at all. Apparently, it had better debuff resistances than the devil army.

"Damn thing has no weaknesses..." I muttered.

"Ha," Nemesis laughed. "This makes me realize we haven't had many battles against enemies who are simply strong."

Breathing raggedly, I nodded in response.

All the overwhelmingly powerful things I'd fought before had had both extreme strong points and weak points.

Gigaknight wasn't like that. It was just fast, tough, and strong. But that was enough to make it a powerful foe.

"Shame we're out of Counter Absorptions," Nemesis continued. "Taking a few of those attacks is suicidal without it."

I nodded.

The thing could probably kill me in one direct hit, and even if I parried, my HP wouldn't last more than three times.

"HA HA HA HA HA! Well?! How do you like my Legendary devil?! This is the power of Hell General, Logan Goddhart!" Logan laughed out loud. "Its AGI lets it move at almost the speed of sound! Its STR and END are over 10,000! And its HP is over 300,000! Try and beat it if you can! HAAA HA HA HA HAAA!"

Well, the name fits, at least, I thought. *That does seem like a stat distribution you'd expect from the knight grouping.*

The devil was probably weak at magic, but that didn't help me at all.

"You think we can kill it if we land 50,000 damage on whatever's inside the helmet?" I asked Nemesis.

"Aiming at its weak spots is one thing; gathering the damage without dying is another."

In terms of pure toughness, this thing was clearly one of the toughest things I'd fought. Shining Despair was only about eighty percent charged, which was a shame, since I was expecting some great firepower there.

The last option I had would basically guarantee my death penalty in my current state.

"Looks like there's only one thing I can do here," I said.

I'd get past Gigaknight and beat the Hell General himself, standing dozens of meters away.

That'd obviously be difficult...

"But not impossible," I muttered.

Nemesis shifted to her shield form.

I'd dodge its attacks or just prevent direct hits to close this distance. It was simple.

Or at least, it was simpler than beating a monster in the stratosphere.

"Let's go, Nemesis," I said.

"Very well!"

We ran towards the Hell General.

Of course, the opponent wasn't going to allow that.

"W o O o o O o O!" Gigaknight moved at nearly Mach 1 speed to appear before me and swung its sword to split my torso in two.

"Hh...!" I dodged it with a roll and held up Nemesis behind me.

Then I felt a kick-like impact on the shield. It pushed me several meters ahead.

I was hurt, but still alive.

I resumed closing the distance between me and the Hell General.

However...

"W o W O w o..."

The Gigaknight raced from behind me to right in front.

"It was just behind us!" Nemesis exclaimed. "That's too fast, even for something moving at nearly-sonic speeds!"

"W o W o w O."

No...

I heard the same voice behind me.

"No way...!"

I looked beyond the Gigaknight blocking my path, at the Hell General's face.

His grin had grown wider.

"A second one!"

"That's right!" Logan shouted in joy, and the new Gigaknight brandished its sword at me.

I still felt the other Gigaknight moving behind me.

I was standing between two Legendaries — two Gigaknights blocking the ways forward and backward. We were outside, but I felt like I was in some lion's den, completely cornered.

"Ray!" Nemesis cried a warning.

I frantically pondered how I could deal with the two Legendary devils.

The idea I'd had before wasn't an option now.

I could barely even hurt one of them. With two of them, trying to get past them and beat the Hell General was basically impossible.

"Even so...!"

I wouldn't stop moving forward.

If I gave up now, I'd never see another possibility.

No matter how difficult the path to our survival was, there was no greater obstacle than stopping.

I called out to my body to stop cowering and freezing. *Move your legs!*

I wouldn't give up, even if I was attacked by near-Mach 1 blades from both front and back.

The possibility was always there — *with your will*.

No matter how small, no matter behind how many zeros beyond the radix point it lay...

"It *always* exists!" I roared, paraphrasing Shu's words, the ones that'd taken root in my very core, and took a step forward.

The moment right before the devilish blades came to split me apart...

"I love those words, too... I guess?"

...I heard a powerful impact and a voice.

◇◆◇

A Certain Consideration

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, the power scale was based on monster strength.

The most popular was "Demi-Dragon-tier," equal to a full party of low-rank jobs.

It was followed by "Pure-Dragon-tier," equal to a high-rank party.

Admittedly, the conversion there was based on tian standards. It wasn't uncommon for a single low-rank Master to beat a Demi-Dragon-tier creature, or for a high-rank Master to beat a Pure-Dragon.

Ray, for one, had defeated a Demi-Drag-Worm at level 0, without even a low-rank job.

There was also a power scale that was used by very few people: Epic, Legendary, Ancient Legendary, Mythical, and Superior.

Those were UBM tiers, and they revealed what tier special rewards they would give upon defeat.

UBMs had appeared many times throughout the history of *Infinite Dendrogram*, and they were almost always defeated, often after many sacrifices. Due to that and other reasons, tians had created a technology that allowed one to measure UBM ranks before they were killed. Skilled Masters could gauge them just from experience.

There was a job that was more affected by this than any other — and that was Hell General.

One day, after UBM power scales were clearly settled, the Hell General of that era had looked at his job skills and realized that *the job skill text had changed.*

Text that used to say "Summons a powerful devil" was now "Summons a Legendary devil."

It was as though the job skills themselves had accepted this shift in the world's common sense.

Hell General skills began calling the devils "Legendary" or "Mythical" instead of "Powerful" or "Extremely powerful."

It was only a change in naming, but it was a change nonetheless.

Naturally, it led to a certain question.

Not "Why did the change happen?" but "Are the summoned devils really on the same level as Legendary UBMs?"

Logan had summoned his Legendary devils many times before, always gloating about their Legendary status.

It was true that he'd used the Legendary devil Gigaknight to beat an Epic UBM called "Vilestone Dragon, Woltgyzur" and receive the "Viledragon's Prideblade, Woltgyzur."

With just that, Logan had concluded that his Legendary devils were on par with Legendary UBMs.

However, a certain Superior had a different opinion.

These were some of the things he'd said about it.

"Nah, killing an Epic really doesn't prove that the thing's Legendary. It could easily be another Epic."

"Eh? You're saying that Gigaknight's stats are about the same as a Legendary's? Ha ha ha! Well, that may be true, but... it's not the stats that make the UBM, right?"

"And hell, Epics are often new UBMs, and you never know what to expect from them. Some stay there, some just keep advancing — you get the full range there. There are huge differences between different specimens, so Epics don’t really work for gauging strength. I’m not sure His Excellency the General’s (lol) Gigaknight is really Legendary, ’cause Epics just aren’t good for scaling that. It doesn’t answer the question if it’s on the same level as an actual Legendary UBM, though.”

“Most UBMs evolve beyond Epic, y’know? I’ve even heard of ancient ruin relics getting high ranks right after they come out.”

“You ever get an Epic special reward, and go, ‘Huh? It’s actually pretty damn good’? The UBMs you get those from were probably gonna go on to become way tougher and even climb up a tier or two.”

“Things that would’ve turned out strong in the future show it when they die and become special rewards. I’ve beaten a whole lot of them, and I always enjoy thinking about what would they have been. ‘What would they have been...’”

“Speaking of which, there were some interesting points in his equipment data that I got in Gideon: An original Prism Steed that’s not on the list, the MP tank boots that let him beat the RSK... and the bracers. It looks like they’re a special reward from a Legendary UBM, but...”

A pause.

“*What would it have been?*”

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The sources of the impact were the swords of the devils.

The blades were stopped by something right before they could split me.

That something was the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

The front blade was blocked with the right, while the rear blade was stopped in place by the left.

Before I knew it, they’d separated themselves from my arms.

“Huh?! What?!” exclaimed Nemesis.

She was shocked, but I quickly understood what was happening here.

There was only one entity that could do this, and this phenomenon was its — her — way of saying that it was time.

“All right! I’m entrusting this to you!” I called out.

I had to respond in kind. She was leading me to my path to survival, so, for her, I would take it all, even the risk of a death penalty or *even worse*.

I'd take it all... and beat the Hell General!

"I'M GIVING YOU ALL I'VE GOT!" I roared as I turned the grudge in my Grudge-Soaked Greaves into MP.

The negative emotions I'd gathered in the Monochrome incident and here in Quartierlatin had become 400,000 MP — nearly the same as in Franklin's Game. I redirected all this MP into the Miasmaflame Bracers.

"Set skill activation time... 400 seconds!"

The sustenance in the form of MP fed the bracers, acting as the catalyst to pave the way for *the summoning skill*.

"Come... Miasmaflame Princess: GARDRANDAAA!"

Right after I spoke the name of the Miasmaflame Bracers' third skill, they underwent an explosive change.

The dark red flame and purple miasma whirled and gathered around the Miasmaflame Bracers.

Tanned arms grew in and then out of them, creating the shoulders, torso, legs, and finally the head, which had two horns on it.

It was the same person I'd seen in that dream — the demon overflowing with vast murderous intent and fighting spirit.

"Wh-Who...?" Nemesis couldn't hide her surprise at the sudden entrance.

"Gardranda," I replied.

"Huh?!"

Indeed. She was Gardranda.

Not the incomplete UBM I'd beaten back then, but the true form that had never gotten the chance to show itself: Miasmaflame Princess, Gardranda.

Her mother’s defeat should’ve made it impossible for her to manifest like this, but the Miasmaflame Bracers’ third skill allowed it.

The skill that was named after her had the power to summon Gardranda’s true, complete form for vast amounts of MP and another certain demerit.

“What’s that?! Why does a Paladin have a summoning skill?!” Hell General was confused. He clearly hadn’t expected what was happening here.

But that was nothing compared to what was coming.

“Am I a bother... perhaps?” Gardranda tilted her head before the Gigaknight in front, and kicked the Legendary devil’s armor with her slender legs.

The Gigaknight flew almost ten meters back.

“WowOWoWO?!”

The armor didn’t shatter, but it was badly bent.

Gardranda went to the Gigaknight behind me so quickly that I couldn’t even see her — her speed was supersonic. She grabbed the devil’s legs in her arms.

She, despite being of small stature, picked it up so easily that it looked like a comedy skit, and threw it upwards. The thing seemed really confused and shocked.

Though they were devils that could move at almost the speed of sound, Gigaknights didn’t have wings. The thing couldn’t move in midair, so Gardranda took advantage of that by targeting her left hand, the left bracer, at it.

The demon on the back of the hand opened its mouth and released a red, brilliant light unlike any I’d ever seen it make.

“Purgatorial Flames: Zero,” she said, speaking the skill’s name, making the fire burst out.

Its power was completely unlike what it had been when I’d used it. It was more like the fire used by the Great Miasmic Ogre, Gardranda... No... it was far above even that.

What came to mind was one of Xun Yu’s skills — the Master Jiangshi’s ultimate job skill that created a heaven-piercing pillar of crimson.

“WoWowOoooOoOoOoo?!”

The Gigaknight had no means of dodging the flame. The crimson fire surrounded the devil, and when it connected, all the firepower gathered within the Gigaknight, and...

“Dirty... fireworks?” She tilted her head, saying a fitting word for what happened next — an explosion.

The Gigaknight was blown to smithereens and became bits of light. That single attack shaved away all of its 300,000 HP, killing it instantly.

That was the Gigaknight that had lost 50,000 HP to my Vengeance, but that fact did nothing to change the fact that the damage from that fire was insane.

“I burned it up... see?” she said as she looked at the left bracer, releasing nothing but smoke. “It won’t work for a while... I guess?”

Hell General was looking at the scene like he couldn’t believe it.

I could tell that Nemesis, still in my hand, was feeling something similar.

Well, I couldn’t blame them. A young girl had just appeared out of nowhere and killed a Legendary devil in one shot.

There was no arguing that it seemed unreasonable and strange, but I didn’t see it that way.

After all, she was Legendary, too.

Gardranda was a Legendary demon... and a UBM.

“I’m gonna have to fight the other one empty-handed... aren’t I?” she said as she took a martial artist’s posture. “320 seconds left. I’ll get this done before it ends... okay?”

Snapping her fingers, the Legendary demon began a devil hunt.

Chapter Three: Legendary

About a certain special reward...

Special rewards were items that took the main traits of a UBM and adjusted them to suit the MVP's needs.

Ray's first special reward, Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda, was no exception. The three skills it had were the UBM's traits adjusted to suit Ray.

The first two skills were obvious.

The flame and miasma abilities wielded by Gardranda had been turned into the easy-to-use skills known as "Purgatorial Flames" and "Hellish Miasma."

So this might lead you to the question of what kind of trait was adapted to create the third skill of Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda.

The hobgoblin herself had explained it, in fact: "I'm manifesting like this because I was defeated before the conditions to unleash my true power were fulfilled and I could break the shell and be born... probably?"

As a UBM, Gardranda had been originally designed to be monster with multiple stages. The death of the parent body, the Great Miasmic Hobgoblin, should have brought about the true form: the Miasmaflame Princess.

That meant that the Great Miasmic Hobgoblin's third trait was "birth."

Thus, upon its defeat, the power to summon the Miasmaflame Princess had become a skill.

Needless to say, this skill was insanely powerful, as it allowed the wielder to call forth a creature as strong as — or, in Gardranda's case, even stronger than — the original UBM. It wasn't on the level of Superior items, but it was still powerful.

Too powerful, even.

No one man could be allowed to wield such power so easily, and that was why the skill came with three major limitations.

The first was the unlock condition, which Ray had already cleared.

Just like Paladin's Grand Cross, powerful skills were often barred behind certain conditions, and for Miasmaflame Princess, that was *becoming MVP against three UBMs*.

Defeating UBMs was no easy task. Even Marie, a Superior Job who'd killed Ray once, had only beaten two, and even among Superiors, you had those who'd never won against a single one, such as "The Unknown" wannabe, Gerbera.

This skill had ended up with such a condition because it, too, was adjusted for Ray.

To the system, Ray's primary trait in the fight against Gardranda was *being a low-level entity who'd defeated a UBM and become MVP*.

Thus, that was considered during the conversion, and the condition to unlock the third skill became "becoming MVP against three UBMs."

It was set to that under the assumption that Ray could surely fulfill it. If the unlock condition had somehow ended up being different, it surely would've been just as difficult for him.

Regardless, he'd cleared this condition by defeating the Great Miasmic Hobgoblin, Gardranda; Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise; and the recent Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome.

The second limitation was the MP cost.

To manifest and fight at full power, Miasmaflame Princess, Gardranda used 1,000 MP per second.

Even high-rank magic jobs couldn't keep her up for more than 10 seconds, and even level 500 casters couldn't break through 30. That was how severe the cost was.

This wasn't adjusted to Ray or anything — it was just the natural cost of using something so powerful — but Ray was able to clear that, too.

Due to the recent Monochrome battle and the panic right here in Quartierlatin, his Grudge-Soaked Greaves had gathered enough negative energy to produce 400,000 MP — enough for the Miasmaflame Princess to be active for a whole 400 seconds.

And the third limitation, the post-use punishment, was something Ray was more than ready for.

With these conditions cleared, Gardranda was made manifest and faced Ray's foe with all her might.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

One Gigaknight exploded, and Gardranda targeted the other one.

The scene made the Hell General make a strained smile and force a laugh. “H-HA HA HA HA! I’ll praise you for one-hit-killing a hurt Gigaknight! B-But that flame has to be a one-time use skill!”

He was right.

Because she was a summon, Gardranda didn’t use a single point of minion capacity, but I still had access to her stat and detail screens. Three of the skills listed there — Purgatorial Flames, Purgatorial Fist, and Purgatorial Flames: Zero — had become unusable.

That had to be a side effect from the “Zero” skill. That made sense, as it seemed powerful enough to come with such a powerful negative. Gardranda wouldn’t be able to use the flames for the rest of the summon time.

“This goblin is the ace up your sleeve, right?!” Logan continued. “And now it’s lost its ultimate attack! That means my Gigaknight will win!”

He extended his hand to the remaining devil and named some skills.

“Boosted Devil Strength! Boosted Devil Endurance! Boosted Devil Agilityyyyy!”

Once he was done, the Gigaknight began glowing in three different colors and became way more menacing than before.

“HA! I used my Rumpelstiltskin to multiply these buffs by ten! The Gigaknight’s STR, END, and AGI are up by 200 percent! I’ll crush your goblin to dust!”

I had no words for this. Why hadn’t he used these buffs before? Was he unable to use them while he had his devil army? Was it unlocked when their numbers dropped?

“200 percent, eh?” Nemesis pondered. “That means its STR and END are over 30,000, and it can move faster than the speed of sound.”

I know what you’re getting at, I thought back. *You’re wondering if Gardranda can win. And honestly, I’m not sure...*

I switched to speaking aloud. “But you and I both know she’s not easy to beat, right?”

“...True.”

The first UBM I’d ever fought was fearsome, tough, and crazy strong.

I couldn’t even imagine how this Gardranda, who was even stronger than that one, could ever be defeated.

"By the way, Nemesis..." I began.

"Yes, I know."

It wasn't just Gardranda. We had to act, too.

But for that, we needed the Hell General to—

"HA HA HA! Gigaknight! Show this low-rank the power... of a Superior!"

"W o W o w o O o O o o o O o O O o o O o O O!"

The buffed Gigaknight followed its summoner's orders, crushing the pavement beneath as it dashed *straight towards me*.

As if completely ignoring the goblin, it raised its blade and swung it down at me.

But Gardranda stopped it with a palm strike that blasted it away.

"I knew you looked like the type to do something... like that," I said.

"W o O O o!" The attack tore open the dented armor and dug a hole in its flesh, but the Gigaknight didn't seem to care, and just roared at her while moving the insect legs peeking from its helmet. Its END was now so high that even that didn't mean much to it.

Still, since Gardranda was as relentless as her mother, the STR she'd delivered with her strike was immense enough to send it a whole eight meters back.

"If you want to beat Ray, you need to beat me... first," said Gardranda.

"She sounds like some rival character who switched sides after you beat her," commented Nemesis.

Well... that's pretty much what she is, right?

"Also, Ray, heal up... okay? As you are, you'll die even if you get the... good one."

"Yeah," I said in realization. I reached into my inventory, took out an HP Potion, and started downing it.

Gardranda moved right between me and the Gigaknight, posing in a way that basically screamed, "You're not getting past me!" Man, was she reliable.

Also... with all his antagonism towards Gardranda, I really hadn't expected Logan to launch a surprise attack on me. What a piece of work.

"Tch...!" The Hell General clicked his tongue. "All right, then I'll crush you first! It'll be easy! The Gigaknight has way better stats than you!"

"Way better stats?" Gardranda tilted her head. "*Not anymore.*"

No one else here — not even Nemesis and I — understood what she meant by that.

At least, until the Gigaknight moaned in pain and fell to its knees.

"WHA—?!" Logan exclaimed.

"It's got half of what it had before... I guess?" said Gardranda, and I finally noticed that her right hand was covered in a dark purple miasma.

It was like the legendary Chinese martial art, poison fist. She was wielding the three debuffs like a weapon on her hand.

Seeing that made me remember the concept of punching with fists imbued with Gardranda's flames or miasma. I'd done that by accident when finishing off Franklin.

I wanted to try and replicate that, but it was difficult with miasma, and it had been impossible with the flames because I'd lost my left arm.

Gardranda herself, though, was doing that as if it was natural.

Well, she does have Purgatorial Fist and Hellish Hand in her skill list, I thought.

"But Hellish Miasma didn't work on them before, did it?" Nemesis asked, and I could see where she was coming from.

We'd tried it on the first Gigaknight, and it had done nothing. The second one couldn't have weaker resistances, so there had to be some other reason.

"Umm, my miasma is stronger... and I compressed it... see?" Gardranda explained.

"Compressed? Ah..."

I was familiar with the concept of debuff compression. We'd seen Miss Eldritch do it in The Lunar Society's headquarters. But I was surprised Gardranda had been able to learn it from inside the Miasmaflame Bracers.

"So she's actually above her true power now," I said.

Kasumi had told me that summoned monsters became stronger the more you used them, but right here, we had one who had learned new things before even the first summon. That was insane.

"Hellish Miasma," she said as she released the purple mist upon the ground. It didn't rise any higher than my waist.

It was both a debilitating miasma and a smokescreen that hid her when she lowered herself.

"W o O o O O, w O o o O o O o O O!" Still afflicted by the debuffs, the

Gigaknight stood up, swung its blade, and tried to bash Gardranda away with its shield, but not a single one of its hits landed.

It wasn't because it'd lost sight of her in the miasma.

It was like my one-on-one battle against Logan. She'd predicted its attacks, evaded them, then punched back.

It wasn't like a fight between two Masters, where a single ultimate skill could end it all, but that made the gap between their abilities all the more obvious.

"This is odd," said Nemesis. "She's spread a smokescreen, yet she moves in such an erratic manner. Don't you agree?"

I did. Gardranda had created a smokescreen, but instead of using it, she was just moving around at supersonic speeds, making a mess of it and making it easy to see where she was.

What's the point...? I wondered, right before I noticed Gardranda looking at us.

It was a signal of some sort, and I understood exactly what she was getting at when she was out of Logan's sight and pointed at the smoke below.

"I see," Nemesis said. "So that's the purpose of this miasma."

"Yeah... We can actually pull it off now."

As we agreed on what we had to do, I sunk Nemesis, still in her sword form, into the miasma.

"Impossible!" Logan roared, clearly irritated by what he was seeing. "Mine's a Legendary devil! How can it lose against a low-rank goblin thing?!"

"That devil is Legendary... that's true," Gardranda nodded. "Its stats are about the same as mine... and I'm Legendary. But..." She made an extremely annoyed face. "We aren't simple enough to be measured just by rank. Your ready-made devils... don't have the 'self' to stand a chance against a real UBM... understand?"

It felt like this was a matter of pride to her.

She was original and one-of-a-kind, and thus she was confident that no mass-produced devil summoned by magic alone could match her, same tier or not.

"I was born out of a man-eating hobgoblin, and turned out as a human-goblin hybrid," she added. "That's why I can move, think, and learn like a human. Since becoming a special reward, I've watched the movements of many rankers, experienced knights... and even Superiors. By watching, I understood, and by understanding, I learned."

She wasn't lying. Some of her movements actually looked Shu's and Figaro's.

Perhaps *this* was Gardranda's true power?

"Compared to that, your devil is so weak," she said scornfully. "Its movements are patterned, and it only relies on its stats."

"W o, w O o o O O!"

The Gigaknight wasn't mad at her for insulting it — it didn't have the mind for that — but it still attacked Gardranda right at that moment with a horizontal slash.

She caught it between her elbow and knee, and then, like a master karate artist, turned the attack around and broke the blade.

"You didn't buff the weapons... huh?" she scoffed before running up her opponent's arm and launching a knee kick into the head — the Shining Wizard, as it was called. It made its helmet fly off.

Its head was repulsive. It looked like it had a human face with insect legs growing out of it.

Gardranda didn't seem to mind as she bared her fangs, sank them into its windpipe, and tore out its flesh.

"Ewwww." She voiced her displeasure. "Ray was way more... tasty."

"o, w o o o...!"

The damage to its throat made it lose its voice, but the Gigaknight still fought on, swinging its shield.

Gardranda easily evaded it and said, "32 seconds left. I'll just end this... okay?"

Missing the shield attack rendered the Gigaknight defenseless.

Gardranda raised her right leg, aimed it at its neck...

"Kodachi."

...and launched Shu's forte right into its torn windpipe.

The already-damaged neck couldn't bear Gardranda's attack, and the Gigaknight lost its head.

Then Gardranda jumped on its shoulders and sunk her hand down its neck, saying, "Hellish Miasma: Zero."

Basic Hellish Miasma was a skill that gave the Poison, Intoxication, and

Weakness debuffs. But in Gardranda's hands, it showed its true power and became something far more fearsome.

You could hear the body melt as the red of blood, the black of rotting flesh, and the white of melted bone poured out from the spaces in its armor... and quickly became bits of light.

The battle was over.

The Legendary devil, Gigaknight, had been completely powerless against the Legendary goblin UBM, Gardranda.

"N-No way..." Logan muttered in shock.

Gardranda eyed him, then looked at us.

"Time's up... I guess."

Just like the Gigaknight she'd just defeated, she herself was turning into light.

The 400 seconds — the time I'd given her with the 400,000 MP from Gouz-Maise — had expired.

But that didn't matter much, as she had done her job.

"The rest is up to you two," she tilted her head to look at us. "Do your best, Ray."

And so, she vanished, leaving behind nothing but the bracers, which made a metallic noise as they fell on the pavement.

"Gh..." I grunted. Right when she disappeared, my body became extremely heavy.

I looked at my stats and saw the three debuffs — Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness.

"Looks like I was lucky this time," I said.

Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda not only cost an immense amount of MP — it also came with a powerful post-usage side effect.

There were three possible side effects, and I was fortunate enough to have gotten the least bad of the three — *incurable debuffs that lasted three times as long as the summon did*.

If it had been one of the other two (*three times as long burning* or *three times as long loss of control over my body*), I'd have been done for.

But as things were, I could end this.

"Ha! HA HA HA HA! I'll praise you for beating two of my Gigaknights!" Logan laughed.

He already had two more Gigaknights at his side. He must've waited until Gardranda vanished to summon them.

"But unlike you and your monster, I can summon dozens more Gigaknights and thousands more Soldier Devils! You put up a fight, but you didn't change anything! You'll still lose!"

He was talking sense.

I was a low-rank, while he was a Superior.

He was several tiers above me, and I'd no doubt lose if I kept on fighting.

With the difference between us, my chances of victory were close to zero.

But... it was already over.

"Hell General, Logan Goddhart..." I called out to him. "*You're done.*"

I lifted Nemesis out of the miasma that was hiding her.

She was neither The Black Blade, nor The Flag Halberd.

She was now a spinning blade reminiscent of a five-bladed pinwheel — a windstar.

Third form β — Shooting Wheel.

It had the power to chase after the target with AGI equal to a tenth of the damage they'd inflicted upon me, then giving it back to them three-fold. It was a long-range, auto-seeking counter-attack.

It had a flaw in its charge time, but thanks to Gardranda, that was already done.

If I'd attacked Logan while she was still fighting, he'd have summoned the third and fourth Gigaknights right at that moment. And If I'd started charging the Shooting Wheel where he could see it, he'd have noticed and stopped me.

But thanks to the miasma, the smokescreen Gardranda had set upon the ground, he hadn't noticed it.

The reason why she'd made a mess of the miasma with her supersonic speeds was to hide the movements caused by the Shooting Wheel's spinning.

Nemesis and I had done the charging while Gardranda was keeping Logan distracted with her fight against the Gigaknight.

Everything was set.

I couldn't move right because of the debuffs, but that didn't get in the way of launching the next and final attack.

Logan gasped, realizing the power I was wielding, then started chanting something. "'H-Here and now, I consign this unique treasure!'" he said, making one of his items vanish.

"Payback..." I began saying the name of my own skill.

"'In exchange for its limitless value, grant me a moment of power!'"

Alas, his chant came far too late.

Perhaps it wouldn't have turned out this way if he'd chosen to do this while Gardranda and the Gigaknight were still fighting.

"...Beyond the..."

"'Come from the ancient times, O endless devil!'"

Perhaps what he was trying to summon right now was his ultimate trump card.

But, again, *it was far too late*.

"...Stars."

"C-Call Devil Ze—"

The shooting star flew.

Going at five times the speed of sound, it closed the less-than-a-hundred-meter distance between us before hitting him and unleashing the damage.

With Veldorbell having destroyed Logan's Brooch, he now had no means of resisting.

The damage exceeding 1,500,000 turned him into dust, not even giving him the chance to say his final words.

All that was left were some random drops and the shattered pieces of his custom-made armor — the proof of his death penalty.

I said nothing.

I'd just won against the Hell General, Logan Goddhart — a Superior. However, that barely made me feel anything.

Perhaps that was because he'd underestimated me and hadn't gone all-out, even for a second.

Or maybe this was just the kind of victory that just couldn't give me any joy. Perhaps all it could make me feel was just... emptiness at the fact that so many irreplaceable, priceless things had been lost to *someone like this*.

"Phew..." I tried to think of some words, but all that came out was a sigh.

I reached into my inventory, took out an HP potion, and downed it.

As the debuffs made my body feel heavy, I lay down right where I stood.

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Earth, ???

“AAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!” the person screamed, jumped out of the bed, lost himself to rage, took off the *Infinite Dendrogram* hardware, threw it into the wall, then stomped on it over and over, breaking it completely.

As if that wasn’t enough, he started kicking around everything else in the room. Magazines, cushions, his *elementary schooler backpack*, and his homework... nothing escaped his rage as he tried to let go of something whirling within.

“I... I-I lost to a... low-rank... in a fight... I even used a... special reward... WAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!”

The little boy who wasn’t even in middle school yet screamed as if that would make his defeat go away.

You’d expect someone to hear and come to check on him, but his room was specially designed to be completely soundproof “to let the boy focus on his studies,” so no one was overhearing this moment of madness.

After raging around for a while, the boy — the real identity of the Hell General, Logan Goddhart — started shouting something more coherent.

“I’m supposed to be better than everyone else! In school and *Infinite Dendrogram*! No one’s supposed to be better! I’m the best gamer! It’s not fair!”

That was when he realized his temper had led him to break his game hardware.

For a moment, a chill went down his spine, but then he remembered that it registered brain waves, so all he had to do was buy another one. It was just money.

He calmed down a bit and started muttering.

“It’s that old fart’s fault. I didn’t know he’d be there, and I wouldn’t have lost if he hadn’t been. That was a 2v1, and they used dirty tricks. Why could he even use a UBM?! That’s not fair! I’ll mail the devs and—!”

He spoke as though he’d forgotten about his army and Legendary devils, but his excuses were cut short by a message he received on his mobile device.

“Who...?” He looked at it and became petrified.

The message said, “Not so hot now are ya, Your Excellency? (GIT REKT. L M A O)”

The sender was “Mr. Franklin.”

That was the name of the Superior he was most antagonistic towards, and the message irritated him like nothing else.

He suddenly realized that Franklin must have used his monsters to observe the whole battle just now, just like he’d done during the Liliana incident.

The message also came with a URL leading to a video site, showing the entire fight between Hell General and Ray Starling.

The boy suddenly realized that his embarrassing defeat had been made available to the public. The shock caused him to throw his phone at the wall.

He then proceeded to bury his face in a cushion, wetting it with tears.

Chapter Four: Gifted Barbaros

Thirty years ago, Quartierlatin mansion.

In the Quartierlatin mansion's garden, a young married couple was sitting around a white table underneath a large tree, drinking tea and chatting.

"Oh, so you plan to take him on your next trip to Dryfe?"

"Yes. While I'm at it, I will also introduce him to the Barbaros family."

The wife was Countess Zermina Quartierlatin, the only child of the previous count.

The husband was Mark Quartierlatin, an Altarian diplomat who'd married into the family.

The two had married out of love, which was a rarity for nobles, and had been blessed with their first child just a year ago.

Their son's name was Emilio. Bathed in the sunlight leaking through the tree, he was lying asleep in a carriage next to their table.

They had a garden because of the husband's fondness of them, and the time the three of them spent here was nothing but bliss.

"He's only a year old," Zermina said, expressing her worry. "Are you sure he should go on such a long trip?"

"We're taking a dragon carriage, so we will be safe," he said soothingly. "The mission will have a Bishop from the state church, as well as many escorts, including the one and only Mr. Faldreed."

"Oh, my. The Sacred Blazer?"

"Yes. He said he also has business with the Barbaros family. Apparently, he and The Ram... Ronaldo Barbaros... are going to have a duel."

"Mark... you care more about the duel than your work, don't you?" she asked suspiciously.

"Ah... N-No, no, certainly not!" he overreacted, making it clear that she'd hit the nail on the head.

"Ugh..." she sighed. "Don't forget your work, at least."

"I would never. Far too much depends on how these discussions go."

The diplomatic mission he was entrusted with would greatly affect the futures of both Dryfe and Altar, as they would discuss the potential of a marriage between the kingdom's royalty and the imperium's bloodline.

If that happened, it would greatly strengthen their alliance and perhaps even lead to a union of the two countries.

However, all of the king's children — including the firstborn, Eldor Zeo Altar — were male. Though the imperium had a princess, her family on her mother's side was too lacking in status to marry into the kingdom.

So Mark expected the discussions to be about the potential marriage in the later generations of kings, imperators, and princesses.

The mission had a number of other goals planned, but the focus was on that subject — the talks of future decades.

As a count, he cared a lot about the future of Altar, but as a father, he was obviously concerned about the well-being of his son.

"If you're to take Emilio, maybe I should go, as well?" asked Zermina.

"Mina, you don't like using dragon carriages, do you?" he said. "Not to mention that there's count work to be done."

"That's true, but... I'll ask again. It *is* safe, right?"

"Of course. We will come back in less than a month. I imagine I'll be missing your cookies dearly at that point." The count picked up one of the cookies from a plate on the table and took a bite. They were handmade by his wife, and he always enjoyed their gentle taste.

"Ahh! Ooh..." Emilio suddenly became noisy. He was awake now and staring at the cookie with his heterochromic eyes. Those were a trait he'd inherited from his mother.

"You want a cookie?" his father asked.

You could tell that was what he wanted by the way he reached for it.

"You can't," scolded Zermina. "You're too young for cookies. You don't even have a full set of teeth yet."

"Nnh..." The boy became sulky as though he actually understood her words.

"Ha ha ha! Emilio, just wait a few months and you will have the teeth for them. Or maybe you'll be able to eat them by the time we come back from Dryfe. Who knows?"

"Oh, then I'll have to work hard and welcome you with my best cookies yet," Zermina giggled.

Her husband chuckled, and it soon spread to little Emilio.

It was peaceful quality time with the family.

A week later, the count took Emilio on his trip to Dryfe.

The lady saw them off with a smile on her face, completely unaware that *this would be the last time they ever saw each other.*

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The entire scene was drowned in flames.

The road, the trees — everything was burning to a crisp.

There were countless limbs littered in the fire, and it was easy to see that they had come from humanoid marionettes. In fact, there were no human limbs anywhere in the blaze.

Those were outside of it.

The human limbs had been torn off by the marionettes, and were now burning and collapsing. They easily surpassed one hundred in number. They'd belonged to at least fifty people.

Ignoring such statistics, they were the corpses of the Altarian mission to Dryfe.

On the road from the Quartierlatin County to Barbaros County, on the border between the countries, the party had suddenly been swarmed by a horde of marionettes.

Not even understanding what was happening, the guards assigned to the mission had still fought hard to protect it.

Alas, they were quickly outnumbered, and as their numbers dwindled, the marionettes finally reached the carriage they were tasked to protect.

The marionettes were unarmed, but they were strong enough to cling to people and tear off their limbs.

A user of search magic discovered that they were being controlled by a UBM called "Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa," with a rank of Mythical.

It was no doubt an emergency, and those who could use communication magic called for reinforcements from both Dryfe and Altar.

Unfortunately, no one came, no matter how long they waited.

After all — they were right at the border between the countries.

It wasn't easy to send an army to such a politically-important location, especially if it had to be large enough to battle a Mythical.

Then again, an army wouldn't have made it even if they'd moved out the moment they'd learned of this attack, as the mission was almost completely wiped out *in less than two hours.*

There was only one person left.

It was a young man somewhere in his twenties.

He was clad in armor as red as a blaze, and wore long, navy blue gloves.

In his hands, he held a sword with a wave-like blade — a flamberge.

Fifty-odd marionettes were charging at him. Communicating in a language unintelligible to mankind, they approached him to tear him limb from limb, but...

"Blazing Circle."

...the man swung his sword in an arc.

A flame extended from the blade, splitting all the fifty marionettes in two, then creating explosions on the cut.

They fell to the ground and began blazing, mixing with the countless other marionette remains spread out on the ground.

Counting the remains would easily give you a number surpassing one thousand, and many of them were too indistinct to count properly.

Almost all of those marionettes had been destroyed by the man.

He was the Sacred Blazer, Aslan Faldreed.

He was considered to be the strongest man in Altar currently. Anyone who witnessed this display of a would understand why — he was a one-man army.

But despite crushing his opponents so easily, he showed not a hint of joy.

After all... he'd already lost.

Even if he himself was unharmed, none of what he was supposed to protect had survived. A thousand destroyed marionettes meant nothing compared to that.

There was only one possible outcome to a fight where a solo battle type defended against a wide-scale suppression type — the solo battle type survived, while the wide-scale suppression type destroyed all that was supposed to be protected.

He didn't have the power to repel the swarming horde.

"I'm so sorry..." he muttered, but there was no one who could hear him. He was by far the strongest creature on the battlefield, but he felt nothing but powerlessness.

The marionettes had been destroyed. The only things moving now were the flames.

Aslan stood in place, listening to the fire consume the marionettes, when suddenly, he heard something different.

Not wasting a moment, he ran to the source of the sound — the collapsed dragon carriage.

He rose it up, opened it, and lost his words.

The interior was in a terrible state. A marionette had gone in and slaughtered everyone.

The officials had all died, their bodies ruthlessly torn apart, but then the marionette had been destroyed, too. Count Mark Quartierlatin, the main diplomat, had pierced the marionette's head with his blade.

The count was dead, but he had been protecting something behind him — a piece of cloth that was still moving.

Aslan gently took it in hand and unwrapped it a bit to expose the face of the count's only son... Emilio.

Aslan closed his eyes tightly and prayed.

This wasn't a miracle from God, but the mere result of a father protecting his child. Thus, he prayed for Mark to find peace.

Still holding Emilio, Aslan left the dragon carriage and heard a new sound.

Countless footsteps were marching from somewhere in the distance. They were human-like, but inhuman — akin to the uncanny valley of human footsteps. The marionette reinforcements had come, this time numbering to ten thousand.

"Marionettes..." the man muttered as he shielded the child in his left arm and opened his eyes wide. "Come, if you're willing. For the sake of this child, and for the kingdom... *I will burn you all.*"

Gripping his blade in his right hand, he stood alone and faced the encroaching horde.

But right as the strongest warrior clashed with the ten thousand marionettes...

"Distortion Pile!"

...a shockwave cut through the center of the horde.

Holes larger than the marionettes' torsos opened up in their bodies and made them fall apart.

Second and third shockwaves followed, not giving the horde a chance to do anything about it.

“Prominence Wave!”

Aslan joined the onslaught and swung his blade, creating what could only be described as a tsunami of flame.

The ten-thousand strong marionette horde lost a tenth of their numbers in just a few attacks.

The humans, however, had doubled in power.

“Yo, Aslan. I’m here to give ya a hand.” said the man now standing next to him. “Looks like I’m late, though.”

He was wearing mechanical armor, equipped with a gigantic pile bunker in its right hand.

The face cover on his helmet opened up, and he looked at the state of the mission with grief in his eyes. Though his armor looked clunky, his expression was truly refined.

He was none other than the Barbaros County’s heir apparent, and Dryfe’s strongest warrior — The Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros.

“You aren’t late. I thought I wouldn’t get reinforcements for a while still,” said Aslan.

“I know what you mean. I just went out ’cause I’d had enough of listening to the old farts in Vandelheim wasting time. Sorry, but we won’t get any real reinforcements for a while.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind” Aslan stood back-to-back to Ronaldo. They faced the nine thousand marionettes surrounding them. “I’ve already gotten the best reinforcements I could’ve asked for.”

“Heh. Guess I’ll have to live up to that, huh? Let’s do this!”

Placing their lives in the hands of each other, the two men, who trusted one another more than anyone else, clashed with the marionettes.

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“Blaze Edge!”

“Distortion Pile!”

Altar’s and Dryfe’s strongest pulverized a hundred marionettes with just a single hit.

Unbeatable, two-man army, unmatched, peerless — there were many terms to describe them.

After meeting up, the two went on to destroy over ten thousand marionettes.

Even so, the battle wasn't over, for there were still thousands more, and they only kept increasing.

This was the power of the Mythical UBM known as "Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa."

It had a skill called "Marionette Brigade Creation," and the name said everything you needed to know — it was a menacing power that created a marionette army as vast as a brigade.

It needed wood or stone for the material, but the border between Altar and Dryfe was a woodland, so there was no problem on that front.

Individual marionettes were weak — equal to just single low-rank jobs. To experienced Superior Jobs, such as Sacred Blazer and The Ram, they were like paper.

However, *there were just too many of them*.

The battle had been going on for dozens of hours now, draining them of their energy and making it harder to evade attacks.

"Feels like we haven't done shit to their numbers," said Ronaldo as he opened his face cover and wiped the sweat off his face. "The main unit's gotta be hidin' somewhere. I can just imagine its shit-eating grin."

He suddenly aimed his pile bunker behind him and fired it, piercing a marionette.

"What a goddamn monster, though. We've taken out a whole bunch of UBMs, but this one's worse than all of 'em combined," he added as he eyed his pile bunker and machine armor — both Legendary special rewards.

"Let me correct you." Aslan made a serious face. "You say you imagine the main unit grinning, but according to our search magic, it's a doll, too. Its expression doesn't change."

"Man, you never change, do ya? You said something like that when we downed that sphinx, too."

"That takes me back..." Aslan said as he looked at his long gloves — the remains of the UBM he and Ronaldo had defeated. They were an Ancient Legendary special reward, and though they gave him a great advantage against magic and its users, they were useless to him in this battle.

"You think the other marionettes're far?" asked Ronaldo. "Wanna try escapin' through where there're less of 'em?"

"A foolish question," Aslan declared. "Running away means leaving this UBM until the army comes to take care of it — who knows when that will happen — or until it starts invading Altar and Dryfe. At the rate it's making its marionettes, it could create an army of over a hundred thousand in just a few days. That would be a disaster."

"Guess we got no choice, then."

"Yes... We have to beat it here and now."

They both looked around.

The trees that'd been here before had all been used as marionette material, so they could see far into the distance.

They saw nothing but the remains covering the surface and a new marionette army coming their way, signaling yet another attack.

"By the way, let me hold the kid," Ronaldo said as he extended his left hand towards the cloth in Aslan's arm. Emilio was sound asleep.

Aslan refused. "No need."

He hadn't been able to protect the mission. Emilio was the sole survivor of the group, as well as a child that Count Quartierlatin had given his life to save.

Thus, protecting the child was his duty. He would bring the child back home, along with the inventories containing the remains of the others who'd perished at the hands of this UBM.

"Don't get stubborn with me now," his friend said. "Your right arm's broken. You can't fight with that boy in hand, can ya?"

"Yours is broken, too, you know? I can tell just by looking."

"Don't mind this. It doesn't make pile-bunkering any harder," Ronaldo laughed. "Also, that boy right there's gonna be my daughter's husband. I've gotta keep the li'l guy safe."

Aslan's eyes opened wide. "Your child's already born?"

"Nope. Not yet. But I mean, my honey's the one birthin'. I just know it's gonna be a cute girl! No! It's gonna be a cute girl 'cause I *want it to be a cute girl!*"

"You're a noble... Shouldn't you wish for an heir? Though I guess I'm in no position to talk. I was a nomad before I rose to nobility." Aslan grinned wryly and handed Emilio to Ronaldo, who took him with lots of care.

"You'd better keep him safe."

"Don't need you to tell me that." Ronaldo formed an indomitable smile. "Anyway, what now? We holdin' out until the cavalry gets here? Whenever that'd be..."

"No... we're taking out the main unit."

"You know where it is?"

"Yes. I've kept track of the variations in their reinforcement times, the percentage of stone marionettes mixing with the wooden ones, and general information about the location — particularly, the state of the woodlands. I'm seventy percent sure I know where it is."

"You know, I thought this during the Veltboule Sphinx battle, but damn, you've got what it takes to be a detective." Ronaldo grinned wryly. He still couldn't believe Aslan could say things like that and act like it was nothing.

"Anyway, are you up for this?" Aslan asked. "There's a thirty percent chance we'll go right into the enemy army and get nothing for it, and a seventy percent chance we'd be fighting Edelvalsa in tatters."

"Oh, I'm up for this. And don't worry. No matter how bad it gets, I'll protect this boy."

"I see. Shall we go, then?"

"Yeah!"

Thousands of marionettes right before them, and Edelvalsa somewhere beyond...

With a goal set, the two warriors faced and braved through the horde.

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Two days had passed since the appearance of Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa. Both Altar and Dryfe were keeping to themselves and preparing for a potential attack from the UBM.

Despite this, there was a group running through the border.

It consisted of men riding tank-type Magingears, known as Geists, and replica Prism Steeds. They were the army of the Barbaros County.

One replica rider was ahead of them all. He was the current head of the Barbaros family, and one of the generals of the Dryfean army: General Barbaros.

He was also the proud father of The Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros, the man who'd gone to aid in the fight against Edelvalsa before anyone else.

He'd wanted to rush to save the diplomats the moment they'd received their comms magic request for aid. However, the current imperator and the other higher-ups had restrained him.

"Sending an army to the border might not be wise."

"It wouldn't be good for us politically if we move an army there before they do."

"It wouldn't be good if the imperium's army is the only one to suffer casualties. In fact, we should wait until the kingdom wears the UBM down, then move out to finish it off and take the Mythical special reward for ourselves."

Calling their assertions "political" felt like an insult to politics.

General Barbaros had wanted to bellow out his disagreement towards their decision, but as an army man, he simply couldn't.

Instead he'd tried to persuade them like the general he was.

His son, however, had said, "It's fine if we don't go with an army, right?" and headed out to the border by himself.

A whole day had passed since then. General Barbaros had successfully convinced the imperator to allow an army to move to the border, but only if it was Barbaros's own and no others.

"Please, tell me I'm not too late...!"

Tortured by unease, he urged his army to move as fast as possible.

He wasn't the only one who felt that way. All of the Barbaros army men who knew Ronaldo felt the same. They all broke their speed limits and records to rush to aid him and the diplomats.

Then marionettes appeared before them, slowing them down.

"These must be Edelvalsa's!"

They made short work of them. Ironically, this encounter gave them hope.

After all, if there were marionettes, the battle wasn't over yet.

And if they hadn't invaded either country yet, it could only mean that someone was keeping them busy.

"I'm coming, son!" General Barbaros shouted as he broke through the marionettes in his way.

Crossing thousands of marionette remains, they arrived at a forest that seemed to be their source.

"RONALDO! MR. FALDREED! WE CAME TO YOUR AID! ARE YOU WELL?!" His voice, filled with the hope that it would reach his son, resounded throughout the forest.

For some reason, however, it made all the marionettes around him just... *stop*.

They now just stood in place, not doing anything.

No — they all started pointing in a single direction.

General Barbaros found it odd and suspected it was a trap, but he was confident he would make it regardless.

However, what he found upon following the marionettes' directions was far worse than a trap.

"Aahh..." Vocal despair left his mouth as he fell to his knees.

His son, Ronaldo Barbaros, was lying against a large tree, clad in only his innerwear, for his armor had vanished.

The disappearance of a special reward could only mean one thing — he was dead.

In his left arm, he held some sort of blanket, while his right hand was fixed in an odd state, like he'd just pulled a trigger. It was proof that he'd held the pile bunker, his other special reward, until his dying breath.

The death of his son made the general bawl his eyes out. "Ronaldo! Ronaldo...! I'm so sorry... If only I'd come earlier... ohh...!"

The grief from losing his son, the regret that he had been too late to save him, the guilt towards his mother and his son's wife... such feelings whirled inside him and tortured him.

"General! Look there!" One of his soldiers pointed to something surrounded by countless marionette remains.

It was the body of a man he knew well — his son's friendly rival, Aslan Faldreed.

He'd died standing. His special rewards were gone, but his hands were positioned in a way like he had stabbed someone below him.

The two soldiers had fought until the very end.

"So... you both died as you lived... Hm?"

As the father within General Barbaros lamented the loss, the soldier within him calmly began to wonder.

What became of Edelvalsa?

His son and the kingdom's people had surely died hours ago. If

Edelvalsa was still alive, it would have surely created an army and invaded one of the countries by now.

However, the number of marionettes that had appeared before him was far too lacking.

That could only mean that Edelvalsa disappeared with the deaths of these two men, but that left him with the question of why the marionettes had been able to move right before they'd arrived here.

As he searched for an answer...

"Hm?" ...he noticed the cloth held by his son's remains move slightly.

"Could it be...?" He gently reached for and took the cloth from his son's cold hands.

Inside, he found...

"A... baby?"

It was a child not much older than one, covered in high-quality baby clothing.

There was blood on its face, and it had several minor wounds, but its life wasn't in danger.

General Barbaros wondered why it was there, and quickly figured it out. "I see. So you are Count Quartierlatin's..."

He remembered that they'd had plans for a marriage between the Quartierlatin and Barbaros families, so Count Quartierlatin had been bringing his son to present him to them.

The remains of the count himself and everyone else from the Altarian mission were in Aslan's corpse inventory.

All of them were gone, except for this baby... Emilio.

General Barbaros realized that his son had given his own life to protect this child.

"You were a proud soldier until the very end..." If Ronaldo hadn't left early and gone ahead on his own, this child wouldn't have lived, and many Altarians or Dryfeans would surely have died.

Though his heart was aching, General Barbaros couldn't have been more proud of his boy.

"Young Quartierlatin... I will bring you back to your country," he promised, with respect to the life his son had protected.

But then, he noticed something odd.

"Hm? This boy's eyes..."

He wiped the blood off the child's face, and he slightly opened the baby's left eye. The color wasn't what it was supposed to be.

"I heard he had his mother's blue-green heterochromia. Why are they both blue?"

The child didn't fit the description. As he wondered whether there had been more children in the mission, he noticed that *the boy's left eye was artificial.*

Overcome by unease, he used Identification on it, but his skill level was too low to even see the name.

He called for someone with the highest Identification level and showed it to him.

The man gasped, and his voice was shivering as he said, "Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa... th-that's the name of his eye, sir."

"Wh... What?"

This couldn't be anything other than the special reward from the Mythical that had ravaged this land, Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa.

"Wh-Why is...? Don't tell me he...!" General Barbaros stopped as he thought of a possibility.

Ronaldo and Aslan might have died before Edelvalsa. The wounds from the battle had caught up to it after their deaths.

Since Emilio had been the only survivor when the MVP was being chosen, it had gone to him.

Naturally, the boy was far from the "Most Valuable Player" in this battle. However, if, for example, a single cry had attracted even a little bit of the UBM's aggro, that could have counted as a big enough contribution to the battle to make him the MVP if there had been no one else.

If that was the case, then perhaps the marionettes they'd run into on the way here had been summoned by Emilio instinctually trying to protect himself.

"G-General..." The man who identified the eye looked at General Barbaros with unease.

Instead of responding, he just looked down at the sleeping child and said, "I'm sorry..."

The apology was full of despair and guilt, for he realized that the promise he'd just made would be impossible to fulfill.

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He was right.

The imperator issued an order to tell the kingdom that the Mythical was defeated, but no one had survived.

The reason for this lie was Emilio's special reward — an immense power that only he could wield.

If he were brought back to Altar, the kingdom would surely gain more power, but if Dryfe claimed he'd died and raised him themselves, his power would be theirs.

The countries had a good relationship, but a Mythical special reward was valuable enough for them to lie to an ally.

The imperium had lost The Ram, too. He was their most powerful warrior, and they needed to fill the void.

The politicians had also argued that, "Having him with us would give us more power over the potential union with Altar."

As a Dryfean soldier, General Barbaros couldn't argue against that.

This was on a whole other level than the reinforcement matter. It was possible that the imperator wouldn't have hesitated to eliminate anyone opposing this decision. That was how powerful a Mythical was.

However, General Barbaros asked for one thing: to be allowed to raise the child.

The imperator allowed it right away.

The Barbaros family had produced excellent soldiers every generation, not to mention that General Barbaros had been the one to nurture the late Ronaldo Barbaros. The imperator was certain the child would grow to be a force to be reckoned with.

And with that, Emilio was adopted by the Barbaros family.

However, the general didn't take him with the intention of turning him into a human weapon.

"This power given to you will never let you have peace from battle," he spoke to the babe in his arms. "You will be forced to fight and train as a human weapon for the imperium... as part of the Special Mission Task Force."

Sad as it was, it was a future set in stone.

"But if possible... I want you to grow up with love."

That was the general's real desire.

"My precious boy gave his life to save you... so I want you to find happiness."

He wanted to prevent the child from becoming little more than a tool, and to protect at least a little bit of what his son had died fighting for.

"I'm an old, contradictory fool... a weak idiot who can't even return you to your mother's arms. You have every right to resent me. But..."

No one knew what he was going to say next. But whatever it was, it was cut off by Emilio giggling and extending his little arm to the general.

Upon seeing that, he could no longer speak... and only cried.

Thus, Emilio became a Barbaros and was given a new name: "Gifted."

By chance, it coincided with a word from Earth.

He'd lost his real name. He'd lost his father. He'd lost his entire life. And in compensation, he was instead *gifted* with immense power.

The life of Emilio Quartierlatin had ended, and the life of Gifted Barbaros, Dryfe's future field marshal and strongest tian, had begun.

Chapter Five: His Reason

About the imperium

Seven months ago in *Infinite Dendrogram* time, the Dryfe Imperium had waged war on the Kingdom of Altar.

There were three reasons why they had done so: one of them was “hunger,” and the other was “the risk of an invasion.”

The hunger was caused by the loss of fertile land.

A few years before Masters started growing in number, Dryfe’s cultivated territory began to wither. Being a northern country, it was never suited for farming, but things had only gotten worse since then.

The cause was unknown, and no amount of fertilizer research could reverse the problem. Eventually, about a third of Dryfe’s total area became unable to sprout even potatoes.

This famine continued to spread throughout the land, and it didn’t take long until the imperium was no longer a self-sustaining nation.

For a while, it could survive on imports from Altar and Caldina, but soon after Masters began growing in number, for reasons unknown, Caldina set a limit on their food exports to the imperium.

Many Dryfean diplomats were sent to negotiate a reversal of this policy, but Caldina wouldn’t budge, no matter what.

The desert country was well-known for being a nation that made a profit as a trade intermediary selling goods from one country to another, and yet it suddenly stopped doing that with Dryfe, taking on a “Want it? Come and get it” approach.

The imperium didn’t have the know-how needed to cross the perilous desert while transporting enough food to feed the population, so they had no choice but to give up on food from Caldina.

Some Dryfeans started dying of hunger, but the country could still survive on imports from Altar.

But then, soon after the new imperator was chosen, there was cross-national discussion in which the alliance between the two countries was canceled, ending the flow of food from the kingdom.

It was only a matter of time until the imperium had a massive famine on its hands.

The second reason, risk of an invasion, was also linked to Caldina.

The country was starting to show signs that it was preparing to attack one of its neighbors.

Following the increase in the number of Masters, Caldina began acting strange. Importing goods from the other countries while refusing to export certain things could be seen as a preparation for war.

Caldina was the richest of the seven great countries, so it could focus on imports for several decades and not endanger its financial situation one bit.

Additionally, they wanted to keep the items that would attract Masters to them.

Masters, particularly those powerful enough to cross the deserts, had a tendency to gather in Caldina because their markets had unique items from every country.

So one of the reasons why they stopped exporting such products was to keep the Masters who wanted them from leaving Caldina.

Upon realizing this, the imperium stopped exporting their machinery to them, but that didn't stop smuggling and the black markets.

Over the course of just a few years, Caldina had gathered massive amounts of goods and vast numbers of Masters. It was blatant preparation for war, and Dryfe couldn't understand why a country that had done nothing but trade until now was suddenly making such a drastic switch.

Many thought they saw the sudden increase in Masters as an opportunity, but that wasn't certain.

Whatever the case, Caldina was now the most dangerous neighbor to them, so thinking about the reasons for that was pointless.

As things were, Caldina was going to invade another country as soon as they were ready. It could be the Kingdom of Altar, Legendaria, the Huang He Empire, or the Dryfe Imperium, and Dryfean leadership guessed that it would be them.

After all, they had been the very first to have their imports from Caldina cut.

Though weakened due to the famines, the imperium still had the best technology out of all the countries, so it wasn't hard to believe Caldina would come for them to gain an advantage. Dryfe had no choice but to protect themselves.

Their first plan against that was a marriage between the next imperator and the kingdom's first princess, followed by a transformation that would turn Dryfe and Altar into a united kingdom.

It was a three-decade-old secret agreement that would both fix the imperium's famine and give them a chance against Caldina. It seemed like an action above all others.

However, as mentioned before, the cross-national talks following the new imperator's ascent had resulted in the complete opposite of a union — the end of their alliance. The imperium was left to face Caldina's incoming invasion all by themselves.

With all the Superiors and other powerful Masters that desert country had, the imperium stood no chance against them.

Thanks to the recent imperator accession civil war, Dryfe knew just how powerful Masters were — especially their own King of Beasts.

Thus, the Dryfean leadership unanimously agreed that the result of the war would be decided by the number of Masters on their side.

Although Dryfe had the KoB — the strongest in the three western countries — Caldina had the most powerful wide-scale exterminator, The Earth.

Even if you assumed they were equal, there was no chance that Dryfe's Hell General and other Masters could defeat Caldina's other Superiors. Everyone knew that war with Caldina would mean certain defeat for the imperium.

To avoid that, Dryfe had no choice but to gather enough power to make Caldina think twice before attacking them, then give them an obvious display of this power.

Basically, they had to gather war potential, show it, and fix their food shortages.

As it happened, right to the south of them, they had the perfect country for this: the Kingdom of Altar.

It was a fertile land that had recently had its forces devastated by the SUBM known as "Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria," making it a perfect target.

Also, many people in the imperium were upset at how Altar had ended the alliance and even cut off their food exports to Dryfe.

And they'd ended the alliance despite Dryfe sending out — and losing — reinforcements during the Gloria incident.

Unbeknownst to many, for details which won't be named here, the imperator was half of the reason why the alliance was broken. But with the state the imperium was in, that mattered little to the people. In fact, from Dryfe's perspective, they'd only tried to go through with what was planned long ago.

Anyway, the first war began.

Though the imperium had little food, it still had a decent amount of wealth. It spent a great amount of that to hire many country-less Masters, and went on to invade the kingdom.

It was easy for them to pick an invasion route, as one of the Altarian territories bordering Dryfe had its entire population wiped out by Gloria.

This route was picked by Field Marshal Gifted Barbaros, and his reason was, "There aren't any defenses or villages there. That makes it easy to fight."

That also meant that they wouldn't conquer any towns or villages on the way through there.

Side note: the other proposed invasion route was through the Quartierlatin County, which was the territory bordering the military base in the Barbaros County.

The battles began, the countries fought, and the first war reached its conclusion.

Altar lost major figures such as the king, the Celestial Knight, and the Arch Sage, while its knights and soldiers suffered major casualties.

Dryfe, on the other hand, conquered the unpopulated land they'd invaded through, giving them a bit of fertile land and improving their food situation.

However, not everything went as planned.

Near the end of the war, Caldina invaded Dryfe in order to divert them.

The imperium had to recall their forces, including the King of Beasts, making it impossible to complete their original plan and conquer the capital.

Caldina's intervention came at such a precise time that they delivered a critical hit to Dryfe's plans.

Naturally, Dryfe's leadership was bitter about this. The unpopulated area wasn't enough to cover the imperium's food needs, and their unfinished invasion of Altar gave them new openings for Caldina to take advantage of.

Caldina could easily approach the kingdom with an alliance offer and say, "Let us join hands and fight the imperium. You will get your lands back, while we will take Dryfe and their technology."

If this had been any other country, Altar would assume that the new, expanded Caldina would go on to invade them afterwards and strongly refuse the offer, but the kingdom was in such a dire situation that it didn't seem unlikely for them to accept.

The war that was supposed to be the key to solve all of Dryfe's problems had led to them fighting a battle on two fronts.

Though it was their decision to invade the kingdom, you could say it was Caldina that had forced them to take that action.

The one sitting at the top of their congress was often described as a "monstrous anomaly," while the Caldinian Superior, the King of Toys — named simply "Grandmaster" — had the nickname "Lord of the Boards" for a reason. It wouldn't have been strange for that Master to have predicted this future and manipulated them into doing what they did.

It was likely that Caldina would soon take advantage of the situation and, as previously mentioned, cooperate with the kingdom or use their wealth to start directly hiring Masters.

To quickly do away with these possibilities, Dryfe had no choice but to merge with the kingdom as quickly as possible.

However, their opinions clashed when it came to the method.

The prime minister faction was worried about the situation of their treasury and general logistics, so they proposed that they shouldn't move the army or negotiate with Altar, and instead did some small-scale operations that would have the same effect.

That included Franklin's Game, assassination plots, and plans to persuade certain Altarian nobles.

The field marshal faction, on the other hand, insisted they should resume the invasion to the capital from the currently occupied lands.

The main reason for this was time. It was clear that Caldina would make a move soon. The prime minister faction's proposal would take time and give too many openings for Caldina.

Therefore, the field marshal claimed it would be best to simply gather the Masters again and quickly take the capital, this time making sure to leave some Superiors at home for defense.

It would also make for a better situation further down the line, since union through the prime minister's method could split Altar into two factions: those who accepted it and those who were hostile to it. That would throw the entire area into chaos full of guerrilla warfare.

The imperator made the final call, settling this argument by saying that they would prepare for the second invasion while trying to further the prime minister faction's plots.

Dryfe had always had two routes to annex the kingdom.

And even though the prime minister faction's plot to break the kingdom's spirit had failed, the imperium's army was still preparing for the second invasion.

The ruins were found when there was only a month left until those plans were ready.

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Ruins

Shortly after the Hell General began his invasion...

While the devils were invading the town, Gifted Barbaros was halfway up the mountain with the ruins. There were no enemies nearby, and he was protected by only one marionette.

He could see all of Quartierlatin from where he was standing.

The morning sun still hadn't risen above the eastern mountain range, yet the town was bright. After all — it was burning.

Smoke rose up to the air from the chaotic townscape as the devils attacked the people.

The field marshal watched in silence. He had more or less expected this.

He'd known Logan long enough to know full well that the man didn't see tians as people. That was probably the reason why he'd told Nobrome that they only shared a method, not a faction.

While the field marshal's proposed invasion was for the sake of the imperium, Logan had only gotten in on it because it would be a chance for him to shine. No other reason.

Despite it all, the man was no doubt a valuable asset to the imperium, and besides that, he obediently completed any quests given to him.

The field marshal believed it was because of his actual age.

Though Logan had never revealed it himself, Gifted had seen enough people to make an educated guess that he was actually a young boy no older than ten.

“I expected as much...” Gifted sighed.

The Hell General was a valuable asset to the imperium, but to its enemies, such as the kingdom, he was nothing but a calamity.

Quartierlatin was burning right now. That was obviously Logan’s doing, but he wasn’t the only one at fault — the prime minister had requested it, and Gifted had approved it.

In other words, the man who had originally been a child of Quartierlatin was now a foreign soldier responsible for the town burning.

Emilio Quartierlatin knew everything about his origin. The previous head of the Barbaros family, his adoptive father, had told him about it soon after he turned ten.

It had happened on the evening before he’d gone out on his first mission.

In the end, his father had told him that, if he so wished, he could return where he belonged.

However, he had chosen to stay in Barbaros family and continue to live a soldier.

Although he’d been basically kidnapped, they’d raised him well, and perhaps he felt indebted to them. Or perhaps what kept him there was his relationship with the girl who, at least according to his family tree, would be his niece-in-law. The daughter of Ronaldo, the one who’d died saving him.

Regardless, the most important reason was surely the fact that he’d grown up surrounded by love.

Thanks to his history and power he’d ended up with, his life was full of strict training. Even so, he could tell that the love he was provided was real. Both his adoptive mother and Ronaldo’s widow treated him like their own son.

He felt like he hadn’t repaid them for that, so he chose to stay in the imperium.

Since then, he’d lived twenty years as a Dryfean soldier.

Over that time, he'd become part of the SMTF and gained a Superior Job.

He'd investigated the history of his origin, Edelvalsa, and gone on to become an archeologist.

He'd met and become friends with his adoptive sister's and the third imperial prince's child, the one who was now the imperator.

He'd married his childhood friend and become a father.

He'd fought alongside the current imperator and defeated imperial family members and nobles loyal to the old regime, drastically changing Dryfe.

After his foster father's death, he'd inherited his land and become head of the Barbaros family.

And, by the request of the current imperator, he'd become the field marshal.

He had countless bonds and responsibilities here. It was safe to say that, at this point, he was far more "Gifted Barbaros" than "Emilio Quartierlatin."

He continued to silently watch the burning town, and he would've been lying if he'd said he didn't feel any regret.

He'd only lived here as a baby, and the town had changed too much for him to recognize the townscape. Even so, sacrificing Quartierlatin made him regretful.

He'd come here of his own free will. Prime Minister Vigoma had told him about the ruins and the potential technology in Quartierlatin, and once he'd found out, he was compelled to go.

He was SMTF and a scholar. Those reasons were good enough, but in reality, something deep inside had ordered him to go.

Wanting to find reasons to prevent any sort of action on Quartierlatin, he had infiltrated the town and started investigating.

Pre-ancient civilization ruins could have superweapons such as Prism Dragons or the Imperstand, the very symbol of Dryfe. However, if there was nothing of note there, there would be no reason to attack. If there was nothing, Dryfe would have no business with Quartierlatin.

He was the only one capable of conducting such investigations and making the decision to call off the operation.

He'd spent his entire time in Quartierlatin hoping that there was no superweapon. If it had been nothing but a Prism Soldier factory, he could've found a reason to leave it alone.

Unfortunately, his investigation had made it evident that the ruins contained a weapon of the highest tier.

It was simply too powerful to ignore. Were it to end up in the kingdom's hands, the kingdom would become too powerful for Dryfe to annex it, and the imperium would soon fall to Caldina.

He couldn't accept such an outcome, no matter what.

He had to either capture or destroy the superweapon.

The field marshal had already resolved to sell his soul to the devil to prevent Dryfe's demise.

Thus, he hadn't faked the results of his investigation. And, just as planned, he'd started the mission to either capture or destroy the superweapon.

"Looks like the Countess' mansion is still unharmed..." he murmured.

Yesterday, soon after he'd resolved to start the mission, he'd gone around placing jammers. While doing so, he'd passed the Quartierlatin mansion.

It was the home of his biological parents, and he couldn't recognize any of it.

It did shake his resolve a bit... but not enough to make him reconsider.

The taste of the cookie given to him by Ray, made by his real mother, was the same in that regard. He had vague memories of it and could faintly remember wanting to try it at some point.

There was a promise somewhere in there, too.

Once he'd tasted the cookie, he'd been struck by a surge of images and inexpressible nostalgia.

Even so, he had already decided.

There was hesitation, sure. It was a heavy choice to make, and it seemed to gnaw at his heart.

Even so, he didn't change what he had to protect.

Thus, he was choosing to harm his birthplace to keep his country, family, and friends safe.

He started by having his one thousand marionettes make a move.

"Ruin invasion, phase 2: Exterminate all Altarian forces within. Additionally... prepare for phase 3. Faldreed, standby."

Following his words, the metallic marionette next to him stood up, shining with a scarlet color.

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While Ray was facing Logan Goddhart, there was a vicious three-way battle within the ruins.

The kingdom's Masters tried to stop the factory.

The Prism Soldiers tried to protect it.

And the imperium, meaning Edelvalsa's marionettes, moved to capture the superweapon.

The kingdom's Masters were at the greatest disadvantage. They had the most powerful individual units, but their position was awful. Prism Soldiers flooded from the deepest parts of the ruins, while wooden marionettes charged from the entrance.

The Prism Soldiers showered the Masters in lasers and gunfire, while the marionettes barraged them with bullets from Dryfean standard Assault Rifles.

Altar's Masters were holding them at bay with defensive magic and barricades from Embryo skills, but this wouldn't last.

"Shit! Where're the damn reinforcements?!" Having to go completely on the defensive made one of the Masters frustrated.

Suddenly, one of them who'd logged off suddenly came back. With a pale face, he said what he'd seen in real life. "It ain't good... I read online that Quartierlatin is being attacked by Hell General."

"Huh?! The Superior?!"

The comms had failed, so they hadn't known the situation on the surface. Needless to say, this news came as a shock.

"What do we do?" one of them asked frantically. "Go back?"

"I don't think we can... The marionettes have weirdly good cooperation. Making it past them won't be easy. And we'd have to turn our backs to the Prism Soldiers."

"Then everyone who's got some one-shot ultimate skills should... Wait, what's with this smoke?"

As they talked, they noticed colored smoke coming from the entrance.

Since many of them had lowered themselves to hide behind barricades, some ended up breathing it in, and those who did instantly lost consciousness.

The people in their parties looked at the stat summaries and saw the “Forced Sleep” debuff on them.

“Sleeping gas...!”

Filling a closed space with gas was an effective strategy, especially when the gas used only had an effect on the opposing side. Sleeping gas only worked on animals, so the marionettes were unaffected.

At the entrance, there was a gas cylinder about as big as a drum. It was connected to several marionettes, who were pumping their contents inside.

Just like High-Frequency Knives and Assault Rifles, this was another weapon the field marshal had brought to occupy the ruins.

Except for those whose equipment gave them resistance against Sleep or those who drank Elixirs in time, everyone fell asleep.

Those who were still awake now had to take care of those who weren’t while fending off attacks from both sides.

“Tch! We’re already low on numbers, damn it!”

“Hold on! Something smells weird!”

As the sleeping gas began to fade, another gas began being pumped inside.

Again, gas was extremely effective in closed spaces.

Especially flammable ones.

This second gas burn very easily.

As it flowed deeper inside, it was shot by a stray beam from a Zircon Laser, causing a massive explosion.

In an enclosed space like this one, there was no escape from this immense power. Compressed in a tight, tunnel-like space, the explosion became a wave that quickly flowed to and overwhelmed both sides.

It quickly wiped out all the Masters who were still breathing and pulverized the Prism Soldiers defending the factory.

The marionettes had only lost the few that were set there to keep those inside from escaping.

“Check complete. Moving on to phase 3,” the field marshal muttered. He’d watched the entire scene through the eyes of the marionettes.

With no more Altarian Masters there, he sent more reinforcements inside.

The marionette platoon ran through the hallway, rendered empty by the gas explosion.

Though most of them were wooden, the one at the front wasn't.

That one was made of a scarlet, Mythical metal called Hihi'irokane.

Just as the name "Mythical" implied, you could use these metals to create things on the same level as Mythical special rewards, except without the unique skills.

However, it was so difficult to work with that even in the country with the most advanced smithing, Tenchi, you could count those who could turn it into weapons on one hand. Additionally, it was so precious that a single kilogram could cost as much as 10,000,000 lir.

And yet here, you had a human-sized marionette made of this super tough, super luxurious Hihi'irokane.

Needless to say, that was accomplished through the field marshal's Mythical special reward of Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa.

He'd used one of its skills, Marionette Soldier Creation, to gradually forge a marionette out of Hihi'irokane.

The toughness of Edelvalsa's marionettes was based on the material used, making this one into his strongest one by far.

The scarlet marionette's name was Faldreed. This was to honor the Sacred Blazer who'd saved young Emilio alongside Ronaldo Barbaros, giving that name to his strongest marionette.

Unlike the basic, throwaway ones, this marionette was a treasure that he had on him all the time and trusted immensely.

Many Prism Soldiers stood in the marionettes' way, but no matter how much gunfire or lasers hit him, Faldreed wasn't even scratched. He went on to make short work of them with the super-tough blade fixed to his right arm.

Faldreed had similar qualities to END-focused Superior Jobs, and with the fire support from the other marionettes, these Prism Soldiers weren't even an enemy.

This was going about as the field marshal had expected. While Masters could have countless trump cards they could use to give him lots of trouble in a head-on fight — perhaps even destroying Faldreed — Prism Soldiers were limited to a standard, set power.

He was certain Faldreed wouldn't be harmed, no matter how many of them attacked him.

"So far, so good..." he murmured.

There were only three things to worry about now.

First was the defense system set in place to protect the superweapon, Acra-Vesta.

Second was the Acra-Vesta itself.

And the third was...

"There you are..." Ahead, the field marshal saw seven men.

They all had the same face. In fact, the only differences they had were the weapons they wielded.

They were all The Lynx, Tom Cat.

The ones obstructing his path were the clones Tom Cat was making using his ultimate skill.

Tom Cat was the reigning champion of the kingdom's duel rankings, so the field marshal knew his power well.

Thus, he'd expected him to notice his marionettes and turn around to fight, or leave his clones here to fight.

However, there was one thing he hadn't expected.

"Seven? Here?"

Tom Cat was Altarian, so his goal here was to stop the Prism Soldier factory and secure the superweapon. Therefore, it was logical to focus on securing the heart of the ruins.

The field marshal had only expected him to leave only about two here and take six with him. And yet, he'd gone ahead all alone, leaving the rest here.

It felt as though he was more focused on not letting anyone go after him than he was on conquering the ruins.

"Strange..." he murmured. "But his reasons are secondary now."

The seven Tom Cats were already making a move. All of them had stats equal to that of an AGI-focused Superior Jobs. They were difficult opponents even if the marionettes had the numbers.

"Looks like I have no choice."

He made his toughest, Faldreed, charge ahead, then had the hundred-plus other marionettes support him with gunfire.

The action the Tom Cats took, on the other hand, was really simple.

They just made a line. The seven Tom Cats lined up and charged into the firing line.

Naturally, the first one was turned into swiss cheese. He tried to block the bullets with his weapon, but it did little against the bulletstorm.

Still, his body became a shield that helped the others press on.

After the first reached his limit, turned into a cat, meowed, and vanished, the second one took his place.

As he began battling Faldreed, the third one broke out of the line and used his body to momentarily seal Faldreed's movements.

The third was quickly turned into swiss cheese, then cut in half by Faldreed, causing him to disappear, but the line then passed the metallic marionette.

With two meat shields gone, the rest of the four dived into the marionette army behind Faldreed.

No — not four. Before the field marshal could realize it, there were seven Tom Cats again.

"I see how you work..." Gifted quickly understood what Tom Cat was doing.

Tom Cat wasn't just charging at the marionettes as just "seven AGI-focused Superior Jobs." He was going at them head-on as inexhaustible cannon fodder.

"This is why Masters are outside common sense," he muttered.

Tom Cat's fighting style was unusual, as well. Though he didn't hesitate to let his clones die, he always kept two at a safe distance.

That allowed him to multiply again and continue fighting even if all the others were destroyed.

Tom Cat's goal was to keep the marionettes away, and he fought carefully, preventing himself from being wiped out. Gifted could easily understand that he wouldn't let them pass, and he also felt as though he knew Edelvalsa's fighting style.

The field marshal continued sending new marionettes to the scene, creating more to replace those lost. Gifted had to watch his MP, but at this rate, he could continue sending marionettes as long as there were trees on the mountain.

As though aware of that, Tom Cat fought while protecting the pace of their multiplication.

"He sure is troublesome..." Letting that bitter thought reach his marionettes, Gifted sent even more to the ruins.

Thus, the field marshal began a battle of volume against Tom Cat.

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The last of the eight Tom Cats arrived at the deepest part of the ruins.

There were no Prism Soldiers around him. All that separated him from the factory he was heading for was a single door.

Expecting more Prism Soldiers behind the door, Tom Cat chuckled, for some reason.

“I’m here, fighting Edelvalsa’s marionettes... ohhh, the twists and turns of faaate...”

That was putting into words what he felt about the battle between the seven other Tom Cats and the field marshal’s army.

Just like Gifted with his marionettes, Tom Cat was fully aware what the other Tom Cats were up to. He watched the battle through the seven’s visions.

“Man... This place is just full of stuff I have close ties to,” he whispered.

Those were words that no one but him could understand, but to him, they were just perfect.

Once he was finished voicing his thoughts, Tom Cat opened the door leading to the heart of the ruins.

Chapter Six: Infinite Multiplication

Ruins, Prism Soldier plant

Zircon Leader had been on the same mission for the past two millennia.

After being created as the commander unit for the Prism Soldiers, he never left the ruins once. (There were no genital parts on the unit; “he” was just a gender identity assigned for convenience.)

His initial mission was supervision and defense of the facility, but since it had no invaders for two millennia, all he did was supervision.

That meant he’d spent the last two thousand years merely managing the Prism Soldier factory and observing the creation of the other weapon here, Acra-Vesta.

Both processes were designed to be slow to prevent any energy signals from leaking outside. The speed at which it was happening was so lethargic that any person or animal would go insane.

However, Zircon Leader, being a machine, merely followed his program and continued to operate.

Most would find his existence saddening, but he himself had no problems with it.

Besides, he didn’t expect this mission to continue forever.

As a machine, he had no dreams of the future. However, he had programming that implied the need to fight enemies.

He knew he would eventually have to lead the Prism Soldiers into battle against one of mankind’s enemies, the Incarnation of Beasts, and protect the world.

That was his final goal, the purpose behind his creation, and he had been waiting to fulfill it for two thousand years.

The first change in two thousand years had come just a few days ago, with the mountain suddenly shaking.

It was highly localized shaking, so it didn’t damage the nearby town of Quartierlatin, but, as though it had been planned, the ground crumbled and exposed an entrance to the ruins.

Zircon Leader's AI was advanced enough to let him understand it was no accident. But, rather than investigating it, he had to prioritize hiding the facility.

Burying the entrance was top priority, but since the other Prism Soldiers had no good energy sources and thus couldn't leave the ruins, and he was equipped with a reactor just like that of the Prism Persons, he had to be the one to move out.

And so, he left the ruins.

His AI felt nothing about it, but there was something he realized when he did so.

None of what he saw outside was familiar — not a single bit of it was in the data he was provided.

The trees, terrain, and even monsters were different from the ones he knew.

And to top it all off, according to his list, *none of the humanoids he discovered were actually human*.

Zircon Leader was the commander unit of the Prism Soldiers. Although special, he didn't have the intelligence or adaptability to match that of the original Prism Persons.

To him, the tians of this era were just "human-like, non-human animals."

He also discovered information that implied the facility was in danger. There were signs of the incarnations — the pre-ancient civilization's greatest foe — all over the place. They were weak and varied in comparison, but they were incarnations nonetheless.

Thus, he prioritized investigating the outside over hiding the facility.

Zircon Leader began gathering animals and using them as fuel to build and run his Prism Soldiers.

He sent out the first of them to gather more sources of energy and investigate the outside.

Something was happening here, and he needed to know what it was in order to protect the facility.

However, right as he let the Prism Soldiers move out, the facility was infiltrated by numerous signals reminiscent of the incarnations.

Zircon Leader tried to hold them back with sentry guns and Prism Soldiers, but they didn't stop, and eventually, half of the facility was conquered.

Thankfully, it wasn't the Prism Soldier plant, but a spare material warehouse and the living space of the human engineers that'd once worked here.

Losing those places wasn't a big issue, but for Zircon Leader, who had defense as his mission, this was a major problem.

He considered initiating absolute defensive mode and making all the available Prism Soldiers protect the facility, but he decided to conserve units for the true battle against the Incarnation of Beasts.

Until this morning. This morning, he'd had no choice but to do it.

There were two reasons for this.

First, the intruders began entering a high-priority location — the plant.

Second, the sensors placed by the Prism Soldiers he'd sent out found an incarnation-like energy signature that was many times stronger than any other.

The creature was highly human-like, but the amount of energy within it was anything but. It was unmistakably an incarnation signature.

And worst of all, the entity *and its devils* were clearly invading the area.

Thus, Zircon Leader decided that *this* was the anti-incarnation battle he'd awaited for two thousand years.

He initiated absolute defense and prepared to intercept the invaders approaching the plant.

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Zircon Leader was standing in the Prism Soldier plant, the high-priority area connected to Acra-Vesta's hangar.

He was at least two times larger and significantly more colorful than the usual Prism Soldiers.

The stone he was named after could come in many colors, including red, gold, white, and more. Zircon Leader had all of them on him.

This design had been chosen by his developer, Flagman.

When he was being made, there was no time to create a new Prism Person, so Flagman had just taken an experimental, large Prism Soldier frame, equipped him with an original reactor core from Jet Chaser — a Prism Person that had already been destroyed by the incarnations — equipped him with various weapons, and left it at that.

Zircon Leader was an unplanned mess made of things Flagman already had, but the color itself had been Flagman's decision.

The multiple colors were supposed to be the colors of the Prism Soldier commander who would become their hope. In a way, it was like a rallying flag.

"Detected." Zircon Leader directed his eye-camera at the entrance to the plant.

He knew everything about what was happening in the ruins, so he knew there was an intruder in front of the door, and that seven more of the same intruder were fighting another one.

"Prepare to intercept."

His words made the 968 Prism Soldiers aim their weapons at the entrance.

If you included the makeshift units that had nothing but the base frame and weapons, their numbers would actually be more than double that.

No matter what came through the door, the barrage would turn them to dust in an instant.

The intruder opened the door to his demise...

"*Our era shall meet a shining dawn yet again.* Cease fire."

...and spoke those words in *the pre-ancient civilization's language*.

"Ceasing fire."

"Ceasing fire."

The *highest-level control code* spoken by the intruder made all the Prism Soldiers stop attacking.

Zircon Fire, Zircon Laser, and even the incomplete units were rendered immobile.

"Oh, it worked," said the intruder, The Lynx, Tom Cat. "I figured it would, considering these ruins are untouched, but I didn't expect it to be *this* effective."

The words he'd spoken were an emergency code given to just a few researchers and Zweier Imperium elites two thousand years ago.

It was something that no normal Master could know. Not even Mario AKA Gifted Barbaros knew it, and he was Dryfe's most renowned archeologist.

As he'd said, it was extremely effective against the Prism Soldiers. If he'd used it on the way here, while with other Masters, they'd have all made it here without any trouble whatsoever.

Despite that, he hadn't done that. It was as if he wished to hide the fact that he knew it.

"Well, it didn't work on all of them, though. You're the commander unit, I assume?" Tom Cat shrugged and jumped back at supersonic speeds.

A moment later, a large blade cut through where he'd just stood.

"Continuing battle."

The attacker, Zircon Leader, hadn't been affected by Tom's code. This was because he had a top-level control code that not even Tom's words could override.

With the rest, since their codes contradicted each other, all the Prism Soldiers besides Zircon Leader didn't know what to do and just stopped in place.

Meanwhile, Tom was using seven of his bodies to keep the marionettes away.

That made this a one-on-one battle.

As Tom ran and jumped from floor to ceiling and back, Zircon Leader aimed and fired at him with the Gatling guns installed on his backpack.

The bulletstorm followed Tom's trail, but the guns were too slow for a single one to hit him. So instead, Zircon Leader aimed at Tom with the laser cannon installed in his forearms.

Tom noticed and quickly spun to dodge the light-speed beam while taking out a bow from his inventory and firing an arrow.

That was when Zircon Leader also began moving at supersonic speed.

Outspeeding even wind, his large body easily dodged the arrow. Though less mobile than Tom, he could still chase after him. That was exactly what he did, and he accompanied it with laser attacks, which he periodically stopped to give them time to cool off.

"I see," Tom nodded. "I guess it makes sense to give a commander similar specs to a Prism Person's. Your gear isn't special, but you have more of it to make use of all that extra energy. Since I'm all alone, I'm at a bit of a disadvantage here..."

He was analyzing the state of the battle.

"Heyyy, uh... I'm only here for the weapon inside. Can I have a look at it? If I don't have to destroy it, I'll just leaaave." Those words went directly against the quest he'd taken. "Sure, I'll break it if I have to, but it doesn't seem like you Prism Soldiers are my targets here, so I can just leave you heeere... Whoa!”

Zircon Leader paid no mind to those words and just kept on attacking Tom.

“Yeah, I knew this wouldn’t work. You pre-ancient civ weapons are really hard-headed when it comes to this. It’s actually a bit noble. Still, I want to finish this before anyone else comes, so I’ll just destroy you.”

“Continuing battle.”

Thus, Tom decided to face Zircon Leader, a foe stronger than himself, head-on.

He couldn’t use any of his clones, which were his greatest strength, and could only rely on his powers as a Superior Job. And yet there was joy in his expression.

He moved away the bangs hiding his face. “It’s been a while since I’ve had only one life left... but that just makes it interesting.”

His exposed eyes were exactly like those of a feline.

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Monster Cat Mansion, Tom Cat

He was well-known by everyone in the kingdom, tian and Master alike.

Once the Altarian duel champion, he was now the second in the rankings.

He’d been dueling for *eight years now*.

That amount of time was notable because it was more than the amount of time that’d passed in *Infinite Dendrogram* since its release in the year 2043.

There was also the fact that he’d lost his position as champion after his defeat to Figaro over two years ago.

The time just didn’t add up.

It could only mean that Tom Cat was no normal player.

When asked, tians would describe him as a Master who’d been active before Masters started appearing en masse, leading many to believe he was a player working for the developers — an alpha tester.

When players asked him if that was true, he’d always go, “No commeeent,” and that was it.

For a while, people in online forums and the like had held heated discussions about whether it was all right for a tester to sit at the top of a duel rankings list, but that had died down when someone proposed a theory that Tom Cat's Embryo couldn't go beyond the sixth form.

He had an immensely powerful cloning ability, but his Embryo, Grimalkin, was limited to high-rank, as supported by the fact that he had been around way longer than any other player, yet he wasn't a Superior yet.

As a supposed tester, he had a head start, but that came with certain restrictions.

Besides Embryo form, there was also the fact that his level was stuck at 1,000 — 500 from standard jobs, and 500 from his SJ, The Lynx.

These limitations led many to believe he'd been placed there as an obstacle to other players.

The Lynx, Tom Cat, had sat at the top of Altar's duel rankings as a wall for those who came after, a challenge left there by the developers.

Once people began to look at it like that, those who'd complained about him were outnumbered by those who were determined to beat him.

Thus, many Masters tried to challenge and defeat Tom Cat.

This included the still-active duel rankers like the Kamen Rider, Riser, and the Raging Blaze, Bishmal.

They all grew better and struggled for this cause, and eventually one of them, Figaro, finally defeated Tom Cat, overcoming the challenge presented by the developers.

After that, instead of challenging Figaro to take his throne back, Tom just stayed where he was as a challenge to those who wanted the title of the second.

Soon after that, he stopped being relevant.

Some of the recent Altarian duel rankers, like the Black Raven, Juliet, and Vagrant Golden Sea, Chelsea, didn't even know that Tom used to be such a big deal.

The controversy regarding Tom Cat was a thing of the past.

However — *it was all true*.

Tom Cat was working with the developers, had been active as a Master since before the official release, had limits set on his Embryo and level, and had only been the duel champion to provide a challenge to those wanting to reach the top.

All of that was right.

However, the theories regarding him were lacking something important.

Something that had nothing to do with the current duel rankings.

Roughly six hundred years ago, *Infinite Dendrogram* time, there had been an all-out war between two immensely powerful tians: King of Kings and Draconic Emperor.

History spoke of a third entity who'd interfered in this clash.

His name was The Lynx, Shrödinger Cat.

He *happened* to have the same Superior Job as Tom Cat of the present, and according to all the texts, he was a Master — an extreme rarity at that point in time.

The only link people saw between the previous duel champion and the third force in the great war was the job.

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It was hard to say whether the battle between Tom Cat and Zircon Leader was equal.

Tom had more AGI, sure, but less of everything else, including firepower.

It might've been different if his level had been somewhere around 1,500, but with the limits placed on him, it wasn't even worth considering.

The same went for battle prowess. Tom was a skilled fighter with many victories under his belt, but Zircon Leader wasn't any worse than him in that regard.

This was because, between managing the Prism Soldier production and Acra-Vesta's development, his program had spent the last 2,000 years simulating battles.

Though this was his first real battle, the ones in the simulations had, over the centuries, evolved in difficulty so much that all he had to do here was act like he had in them.

Thus, neither of them had the fighting ability to overturn the difference in stats between them.

Even so, Tom hadn't suffered a single wound yet. His movements showed even more skill than in yesterday's battle in the hall or today's battle against the marionettes.

In fact, the seven clones fighting the field marshal were being a bit sloppy. It was like Tom was focusing everything he had on the one Tom that was here.

"MEOW!" Tom jumped like a cat and charged at Zircon Leader with blades in both of his hands.

He cut into his armor, leaving some marks, but not dealing enough damage to break through and damage the inner mechanisms.

"Close-Range Defensive Electromagnetic Radiation Construct." Zircon Leader countered this attack by making electrodes grow out of the spaces between his armor and releasing lightning all around.

Tom avoided its effects by jumping backwards, but he couldn't dodge the follow-up laser that scratched his left shoulder.

"Are you a bag of tricks or somethiiing?" Tom shot back.

He was rather taken aback by all the gear Zircon Leader had. He felt like he was in a fair full of pre-ancient civilization weapons.

Looking at its size, I shouldn't expect anything like an Abyss Cannon, but I'll be at a disadvantage if this battle drags on for too long, he thought as he became more alert.

However, Zircon Leader was also wary of Tom.

It wasn't because he had a dangerous power, but because he wasn't using job skills.

In fact, he hadn't used a single one since Zircon Leader had first observed him.

It went far beyond their first encounter. Tom hadn't used a single job skill during yesterday's battle in the hall, or in any of his many duels.

This weird fact had been a topic of discussion between those wanting to beat him when he was the champion, and they'd concluded that his cloning ability came at the cost of making all active job skills unusable.

Many found the idea counterproductive, considering that The Lynx was part of the "The One" series of jobs, which was focused on skills, while others speculated that it was just a job focused on passive ones.

However, Zircon Leader's issue with this was far more simple.

"A question — what are you?" the machine asked.

"Oh? You finally feel like talking? I'm The Lynx, Tom Cat, and I already told you why I'm here."

"Another question — what is 'The Lynx'?"

Tom fell silent.

Zircon Leader's battle program had asked the first question because Tom wasn't using job skills, and thus the machine couldn't know his job. Once it was revealed, however, Zircon Leader questioned the job itself.

After all...

"This alleged job *does not exist*."

"The Lynx" wasn't in the two millennia-old job list in his storage.

Jobs had all been decided long ago, and there hadn't been any new ones since. Even Prism Rider, the job linked to the use of Prism Beasts, had existed before Flagman developed the first of them.

The list that encompassed all the jobs in existence didn't have an entry for The Lynx.

What was it, then?

"Ehhh? But it's right there on my status windowww," argued Tom Cat.

"*What is a status window?*"

"...So you're a pre-update unit. Well, you weren't found until just a few days ago, so I can't say I didn't expect it," Tom sighed. "I guess I'll *have* to destroy you, after all. What about the Prism Persons already owned by people, though...? We'll probably have to ignore them... Damn it, Hatter, if you're gonna be in charge of items, at least be more thorough in destroying the ones that have their memories of what it was like before..."

A certain face came to Tom's mind, making him a bit irritated. Then he dashed towards Zircon Leader, fully intent on destroying it.

Unlike before, when he'd been fighting while keeping himself safe, he was now charging like a beast ready to take a life.

However, Zircon Leader had a counter for it.

The cover on both of its forearms dropped off and released missiles.

Tom now approached Zircon Leader while evading them, but the missiles changed trajectory to follow him and accelerated.

"Ah?!"

The missiles' speed exceeded the speed of sound several times over, quickly reaching Tom's torso *and tearing it in two*.

Lethally wounded, Tom's upper and lower bodies fell to the ground, accompanied by the sound of blood spreading around him.

His upper body was still leaking immense amounts of blood and other fluids.

“Well, I sure didn’t expect this,” Tom spoke, coughing up blood. “Jet Chaser’s Clock Killers, huh? Your arsenal’s fancier than I expected.”

He was fatally wounded, but it didn’t seem to bother him.

After all, this body was just another, easily replaceable spare to him.

“But this is kinda bad...” he muttered. “As things are, the next multiplication will happen where I left the seven... and with all the marionettes there, getting here again would be pretty hard.”

As Tom muttered that, Zircon Leader fixed his laser cannon’s sights on him. Tom was an intruder and an enemy. The machine had no reason to hesitate to fire at him.

As things were, this Tom would vanish, and an eighth would appear where the seven others were fighting.

However...

“Special paragraph no. 3 — preventing potential balance collapse by forces outside of regulations. Special paragraph no. 2 — preventing potential exposure of confidential matters.” Tom suddenly spoke in a machine-like voice, completely unlike his usual, drawn-out manner of speech. “On account of being in a situation where both apply, I request permission to use my original body.”

Half a second after these incomprehensible words...

[Original Body Use — Permission Granted]

That message reached him, and Zircon Leader’s laser made him evaporate.

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Legends

There were strange legends in this world. Or perhaps “myths” was a better word for them.

Most of them were about powerful, fearful creatures which were perhaps capable of destroying the world.

These legends described either UBMs over level 100 — SUBMs — or the so-called “Irregularities.”

Such creatures had appeared in *Infinite Dendrogram* many times throughout its history.

Once Masters began growing in number, they were the ones to take care of them, but of course, there had been beasts like those before that time as well.

Creatures strong enough to destroy the world, with no one powerful enough to face them.

And yet the world still existed, and the reason for that was that the creatures had simply vanished soon after they appeared.

They came and vanished like a storm, and, just like a clear sky that came after, they left no signs that they had ever been there.

That always made the local tians wonder what happened.

No one knew the answer.

However, every now and then, there would be people claiming to have seen what had happened, and they all said a similar thing: *that the creature was fighting something even more terrifying*.

Alas, nobody believed them. They just laughed those people's claims off, thinking that nothing could be more fearful and powerful than the creatures.

Seeing those reactions, some of the witnesses would start to believe that they'd merely been dreaming or something.

However, the few who were sure of what they'd seen would leave what they'd witnessed in writing.

This resulted in strange texts that seemed to stand at the border between factual writings and descriptions of dreams.

They came from many various eras and locations, and some spoke of the mysterious stronger entities in words like:

"An animal that looked like many other animals, but didn't seem to be any of them."

"A column so large it could perhaps grind countries and mountains into dust."

"A beautiful woman covered in a cocoon much like an eggshell."

"A horde of countless beasts."

These mysterious beings either made the world-ending creatures disappear or completely destroyed them.

No one could tell what they were, and they simply vanished right after completing their roles.

No one knew they were acting in accordance to special paragraph no. 3.

They gathered the SUBMs they could control in preparation for when the Masters came, while destroying the uncontrollable Irregularities... and nobody had a clue.

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Ruins, Prism Soldier Plant

"Ending battle," Zircon Leader declared as he let his laser cannon cool down.

He had destroyed the first intruder, but he knew that the seven exactly like him and other intruders would come here eventually.

Thus, he prepared for their arrival by reactivating the halted Prism Soldiers.

He also used the data from the previous intruder to order them to ignore any codes from entities that fit certain criteria.

Right as he finished those preparations, though... a voice resounded throughout the space.

"I have a strange connection to a lot of the things here in Quartierlatin. The most direct of them is Ray, but there are a number of bonds that are way older than that one."

Zircon Leader searched for the source, but found nothing there. The voice was coming from a place where his sensors didn't see anything.

"First is the Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa. You probably don't know, but the original Edelvalsa was an anti-Incarnation of Beasts weapon that was newer than you Prism Soldiers."

The place was exactly where Tom had just vanished, but the voice was a bit different from Tom's.

"It was a weapon that didn't need a factory, and could make moving marionettes out of just about anything. But since it was standalone and half-bioweapon, it was recognized as a UBM. It had a mind of its own and went out of control, leaving Flagman, its creator, no choice but to seal it deep underground. And that was undone thirty years ago."

This Tom-like voice spoke of things with major implications. It was nothing like what he'd said in the inn about Unguided Horde, Edelvalsa.

After all, Edelvalsa had been recognized as a UBM a whole two millennia ago.

The details Tom Cat was mentioning now were unknown even to the field marshal, who was a famous archeologist and the very owner of Unguided Gaze, Edelvalsa.

"I'm fighting the child who got Edelvalsa's power back then, in a Prism Soldier plant, of all places. That's just so ironic. After all, this plant... no... all of you..."

The owner of the voice paused and appeared out of nowhere.

It was *a cat*.

White in color and pretty generic in appearance, it wore a clerk's vest and walked on its hind legs, making it look like it'd just popped out of a children's picture book.

Most Masters knew this cat. After all, they'd met him on their visit to this world.

Indeed, this cat was well-known.

"...were... heh... made *to destroy me*."

This cat was one of the thirteen control AIs managing *Infinite Dendrogram*: control AI no. 13, Cheshire.

There probably wasn't a word to describe the torrent of information within Zircon Leader when Cheshire showed himself. It was like a mechanical version of a human's surge of emotion.

Perhaps it was best translated as simply, "This is it!"

Yes — just "this is it." This was what he was waiting for and couldn't ignore no matter what. It was very reason for Zircon Leader's and the Prism Soldiers' existence.

All the weapon sensors in the plant recognized it as such, and all the info besides visual was a perfect match.

This white cat before them was why they'd been created.

It was...

"The *Incarnation of Beasts* detected! Granting permission to fire for all Prism Soldiers!"

Zircon Leader could not deny what it had seen. This white cat was one of the beings that the pre-ancient civilization had given their all to try and defeat.

It was the Incarnation of Beasts — the one responsible for the fall of their Zweier Imperium.

"Attack!"

Zircon Leader attacked with all its available weapons, while the 968 complete Prism Soldiers drowned him in gunfire and lasers. Even the incomplete units joined the effort to turn this enemy into less than dust.

The projectiles were about to hit.

However, Cheshire once again used the same power he'd used as his avatar, Tom Cat.

"Now dance... *Octamillionchrome Cat — Grimalkin*."

The ultimate skill name was almost the same, but its effect was completely different.

In less than a blink of an eye, a wall of beasts spawned before him. The number was nowhere near the eight from before — they amounted to over a thousand.

The gunfire and lasers destroyed some of them, but more and more beasts appeared around Cheshire.

Though they were unlike lions, tigers, or leopards, they certainly looked feline, but that was just about the only thing you could say about their appearance. The focused gunfire and lasers destroyed hundreds and thousands of them, but their total number didn't drop at all — in fact, it was still growing.

The plant was wide, but not even it had enough room for this flood of beasts.

Stats, maximum number, multiplication speed... Cheshire was simply incomparable to the highly-limited Tom Cat.

He was the nightmare witnessed by the pre-ancient civilization. He was a calamity of claw and fang that could grow in number without end.

"You asked what I am, didn't you? Let me answer." Protected by a wall of beasts, Cheshire spoke to Zircon Leader. "Second in the Altarian duel rankings: The Lynx, Tom Cat."

That was the name he'd used until a few moments ago.

That was his avatar as a developer-side Master set up as a challenge to other Masters.

"I'm also The Lynx, Shrödinger Cat from six hundred years ago."

That was one of the names created to etch the existence of Masters into tian history, as well as the name of the third major force in the immense war from that era, when he'd fought to prevent a second destruction of civilization.

"Or perhaps you prefer I use my two thousand year-old name, ‘Incarnation of Beasts.’”

That was one of the incarnations from the Extra-Continental Vessel that had fought the pre-ancient civilization.

It was the arch-enemy of the Prism Soldiers, and the one who had drowned the horizon in countless beasts.

“And finally, my current name, which is control AI no. 13, Cheshire... no...”

Cheshire was the one who led countless Masters, and the odd-job AI who supported the other control AIs in their work.

However, he was actually...

“...Type Infinite Legion — *Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin*.”

That was his one true name.

He was a being that an entity long gone had led beyond Superior and into the realm of Infinite.

He was an Embryo in its ∞th form — in other words, an Infinite Embryo.

“That’s what I am. And my role here is to destroy you and the weapon inside.”

He spoke those words while commanding enough beasts to cover half of the plant’s surface.

Zircon Leader said nothing in response and merely continued attacking. However, due to the constant firing since Cheshire’s appearance, his ammo was running low.

The same applied to the other Prism Soldiers. Zircon Fires spun gatling guns that didn’t fire a single bullet, while Zircon Lasers used their lasers so much that some of them overheated and destroyed themselves.

No matter what they did, they could do nothing to Cheshire — the Incarnation of Beasts.

Ammo was always limited. Flagman knew this, and that was why he’d designed Edelvalsa, the unit after them, to create marionettes that fought empty-handed. He knew all too well that *no amount of weapons would be enough* against this incarnation.

“Continuing battle.” Despite losing firepower and performing at less than half of the full capacity, Zircon Leader didn’t back down. “For the world... for mankind’s future... we must destroy the Incarnation of Beasts.”

He stood no chance, but he didn’t have any code for fleeing. Zircon

Leader would simply complete the goal set by his creator, for it was all that he was.

He was a machine with no emotions, but there was pride in his adherence to his instructions.

"For the world and mankind's future, huh?" Cheshire looked at the proud weapon with a bit of sadness in his face. "I wonder which era's world and which mankind you're talking about."

Perhaps he felt like he was looking at a mirror?

"You really are stubborn and noble. We're similar in that regard. However, you're standing in a completely different place than us." Cheshire raised his right hand.

The beasts reacted to the motion, and their eyes glowed gold. They had been nothing but a wall of flesh until now, but now, the horde of Legendary Guardians would go on the offensive. The battle would be over the very moment these thousands of beasts began their attack.

Even so, the Prism Soldiers didn't back down. They were born to fight the Incarnation of Beasts, after all.

The environmental changes had made them act in a way that wasn't predicted.

But even so, none of them changed or went against their set natures.

"You've been waiting to fight incarnations for two thousand years. You've waited and prepared for that goal alone. We're exactly like you in that regard... so I think I will at least fulfill your wish." Cheshire, looking at the Prism Soldiers before him, threw his hand down.

"Goodbye, machine soldiers. Goodbye, remnants of the Zweier Imperium's pride."

"Continuing battle."

With that as a signal, Cheshire's beasts and Zircon Leader's Prism Soldiers clashed.

A few minutes later, none of the Prism Soldiers were left standing.

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Incarnation of Beasts detected.

With the disappearance of Zircon Leader, the commander unit, the standby order was automatically canceled.

Check sequence.

Unit α — functional.

Space Fixation — functional.

Unit β — functional.

Space Dilution — functional.

Mutual Repair — functional.

Main and sub weapons — incomplete.

Installing conventional equipment as an alternative.

The lack of a solution to the energy problem had made installing a compressed magical baryon acceleration cannon impossible.

Problems — minimal.

Determined to sortie with the current usable equipment.

Initiating sortie sequence.

Anti-incarnation weapon, Acra-Vesta.

Sortie.

Chapter Seven: The Superweapon

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

How long had it been since I'd beaten the Hell General and collapsed?

The three debuffs, combined with serious post-battle fatigue, had left me lying on the ground for what seemed like a really long time.

Looking up at the sky, I chugged down Health Potions to regain the HP I'd lost to Poison, and checked the results of the battle.

Beating Logan had raised my Prism Rider level to 21. That was actually quite a lot. It reminded me of what I'd gained from Franklin.

Just goes to show just how much level and Embryo form differences affect EXP gain, I thought.

I couldn't remember gaining any levels while fighting the devils, though. They hadn't given me any EXP at all, which was probably intentional.

"I got two skills... 'Prism Beast Enhancement' and 'Prism Authorization,' huh?" I murmured.

Both of them were at level 1. The former did exactly what it said in the name: it enhanced the abilities of all Prism Beasts, Prism Steeds included. It prioritized acceleration and improving their skills, and at level 1, the enhancement was 10 percent.

Prism Authorization, though, was a mystery to me.

The description said, "Unlocks the restricted functions of certain Prism Beasts," but there were no details at all.

I thought it had something to do with Silver's mystery skill, but I couldn't check, since I'd lent him to Azurite.

"Guess I'll just wait..." I muttered.

Right after the battle, I'd given Nemesis some healing items and told her to look around the surroundings, help anyone hurt, and evacuate the orphans.

There was no one nearby, so as soon as I stopped moving, the world felt strangely silent.

My eyelids were closing on their own.

With Poison taking away my HP, I couldn’t really let myself sleep, but Weakness made my body feel heavy, while Intoxication warped my vision and made it hard to keep my eyes open.

My eyes closed, and I spent the next few minutes floating somewhere between dreams and reality when...

“Nh...”

...I felt someone touch my body.

They put their hands on my forehead and neck, then gasped.

A moment later, I felt something tough on my lips, followed by some medicine going down my throat.

“It’s not disappearing! Why?!” The voice was Azurite’s.

So she’d finished helping the knights and came here, huh?

Guess I should get up now...

“The Elixir’s not having an effect,” she said frantically. “Is he not drinking it all...? In that case...”

I heard the sound of something being unfastened, then felt a faint warmth over my face.

It made me open my eyes.

Silence.

Her face was right in front of me, and our eyes met.

I could feel her breath on me, and we were so close, it felt like our lips were about to touch.

She wasn’t wearing her usual mask, but I could tell it was her by her eye color and face outline.

This was the first time I’d seen her face, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t beautiful.

"Ah...?!" Surprised by the eye contact, Azurite jumped backwards and gulped something down.

Based on the Elixir bottle in her hand, I could only assume that she'd first tried to cure my status effects by pouring it into my mouth, but when that hadn't worked, she assumed I hadn't drunk it properly and tried to give it to me mouth-to-mouth.

Man, she must've been worried...

"Thanks, Azurite," I said. "But don't worry. These debuffs are a side effect from a skill. Elixirs won't work on them."

"I-I see!" she exclaimed, flustered, as she put her mask back on. She must've removed it because it would've gotten in the way of the mouth-to-mouth.

Good thing I woke up before she went through with it, I thought.

It was for lifesaving, sure, but Azurite probably wasn't married yet, so she might've regretted it.

"But wait... status effects that do not go away? Isn't that serious?" she asked.

"They'll disappear with time. It's fine," I replied.

I looked at the clock at the side of the road to discovered that fifteen minutes had passed since I'd beaten Logan.

The side effect would last 1,200 seconds, so it wouldn't be long now.

Then again, since Gardranda had used the "Zero" skills, I couldn't use my Miasmaflame Bracers properly now.

This must've been the price she'd had to pay to use skills that powerful, and it'd probably take a while before I could use Purgatorial Flames and Hellish Miasma again.

Also, the clock made me realize that it was just barely six o'clock in the morning.

Sure, the battle had started at about dawn, but it was hard to believe that it was this early. The sun still hadn't finished rising over the mountains to the east.

"What about you?" I asked Azurite.

"I've helped the Quartierlatin knights," she said. "We slayed most of the devils... but the rest simply vanished."

"Good to know."

I'd already assumed that because the third and fourth Gigaknights had disappeared, but this just confirmed that summoned devils weren't an exception to the "summons die with the summoner" rule.

That had to go for me and Gardranda, too. Needed to keep that in mind.

"Since you made it in time to help, I guess I made the right choice by lending Silver to you," I said.

"About that... He was an immense help, but you *must* refrain from lending your Prism Steed to people. It's dangerous."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I'd surely do it again if the situation called for it, though.

"Where are the people?" I asked.

"They were panicking and looking for shelter when the devils were around, but now that they are gone, the townsfolk are moving to the designated facilities. I left them to the knights who are still moving."

Oh yeah, there were no enemies in town for the time being. What a load off my shoulders.

"Speaking of the devils... did they vanish because you beat the Hell General?" Azurite asked.

"Yeah."

"I see..." She closed her eyes in thought.

For a moment, I wondered if she'd wanted to beat her mentor's killer with her own hands, but that didn't seem quite right. It seemed more like she was frustrated with something.

"Azurite?"

"It's nothing. Pay me no mind."

"All right. What about the people from the mountain inn?"

"Evacuated, as well. Many were frightened, obviously, but the skilled tians and Masters there did an excellent job helping them find shelter."

"I see... What a relief."

With that, I didn't have to worry about any people dying anymore.

"I guess all that's left is to stop the Prism Soldier plant and take out the Dryfeans going after the ruins," I said.

"Are you going to still fight?" she asked. I couldn't be sure because of the mask, but it felt like she was slightly down.

"Well, the debuffs should be gone soon. I'll go to the ruins then."

"You fought the Hell General until you collapsed from exhaustion, and yet you will still fight?"

"Yeah. Logan's not the only problem here. There's gotta be more I can do."

"I see... So you will fight again." Her tone somehow seemed slightly critical.

I thought she had issues with me for a second, but that didn't seem right.

What... or who... was it directed at?

"The Hell General, the Gouz-Maise Gang, Gideon..." She trailed off. "Why do you keep fighting for others' sakes, even when it leads to such injury?"

"Azurite?"

"Yesterday, you told me you had chosen to protect Quartierlatin... and me. But this is not new to you, is it? You must have made similar choices the other times. Why do you continue to do this when it's so taxing? What drives you to sacrifice yourself over and over again?"

I said nothing and just listened to her talk.

"Is it because you're an immortal Master? Do you protect others because you cannot die and there's no need for you to consider your own well-being? But... the one who should be protecting this country's people... the one who should face the hardship is..."

"Azurite, you've got me all wrong," I interrupted.

There was a slight disturbance in her speech. If I had to guess, it was caused by some intense feelings that surfaced as she observed and talked about me. Her own words seemed to start crushing her, so I decided to point out a major misconception before it became too heavy.

"I'm not diving into all these incidents and getting hurt out of self-sacrifice or to protect anyone," I said.

"...Eh?"

Yeah. My reason was never that grand.

"I'm doing it 'cause I think it'd give me a bad aftertaste if I didn't."

That was all there was to it. I always just dived in and faced whatever would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

"Ignoring stuff like that would hurt me way more than damaging this avatar or going through something scary, so I just move in and stop it from happening. That's it. It's not self-sacrifice, and there's nothing noble about it." I wasn't some saint who put himself on the line to save someone. It just seemed that way because I was still weak and always ended up in tatters.

"I'm not the virtuous champion you think I am — I just acted on my own feelings," I said. "Fighting Logan, saving children from the Gouz-Maise Gang, picking a fight with Franklin... I did it all because I felt like it."

"That's the... 'freedom' you mentioned yesterday, yes?"

"Exactly. I told you, didn't I? I stood up for Altar and decided to support you because I'm free and selfish."

I was just a self-centered player — a Master.

"You say things one wouldn't even hear in modern plays, and yet Truth Discernment is not reacting at all... You are so simple and softhearted... heheh..."

I had no idea what she found so amusing, but she started to giggle with tears in her eyes, just like yesterday.

"But... that's exactly why..."

Azurite stopped mid-sentence. Then, after a while of silence, gathered her wits for something and took off her mask.

"Ray, there's something I want you to know," she said, looking at me with her exposed face. "I... I am actually—"

Her words were cut off by a sudden rumble that made us both gasp.

It was an earthquake quite unlike the one I'd experienced in Torne. It felt as though something large was moving and the ground was shaking in fear.

"Ray! Look!" Azurite pointed at the mountain with the ruins.

It was completely unlike what it had been the last time I'd looked at it. Despite having ruins inside, it had been a normal mountain on the outside.

Not anymore.

"It... split?" I murmured.

The peak had parted in two, exposing the ruins inside.

The earthquake was actually the vibrations caused by the mountain-ruins opening up.

It was an absurd sight, but it didn't end there.

Something was crawling out of the parted mountain.

It was as large as a fortress, had a streamlined main body with dozens of thorn-like legs poking out of it, and shone with a metallic brilliance impossible in the natural world.

"What the hell is that?!" I exclaimed.

If I had to describe it, it was like a robot that had the shape of "a whale poking into a horseshoe crab." To be more specific, it was like the prehistoric fish called pterichthyodes, but with trilobite legs.

It was a huge, weird construct, but the fact that it had appeared from the ruins was enough for us to guess what it was.

"That's the weapon that was inside the ruins!" I gasped.

I had no idea what had caused it, but it had come alive.

We'd guessed that it existed, but... man, it was way bigger than I'd expected.

"Ray! Azurite!"

"Nemesis!" I cried. She'd come back from the orphanage.

Out of breath, she stared at the weapon and said, "Ray, is that...?!"

"Yeah. It's just like Azurite said. Dr. Mario made a move because the ruins had something way worse than the Prism Soldiers."

Speaking of Azurite, she had her mask on again. I had no clue what she'd been about to say, but it seemed like she'd figured this wasn't the time for it anymore.

"What do we do?" asked Nemesis.

"We've gotta find out what kind of weapon that is."

It seemed to be a mobile unit, just like the Prism Soldiers, and nothing would be worse than it turning out to be a moving bomb. A pre-ancient civ weapon of that size would make short work of a town like Quartierlatin.

"Let's ride Silver and attack from the sky—" I began.

Suddenly, still looking at the weapon, I noticed something.

The weapon was under attack by several men who had the same face and a bunch of wooden marionettes with weapons in hand.

Eight Toms and Dr. Mario's marionettes were already fighting the weapon.

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Ruins, Prism Soldier Plant

A few minutes before the weapon left the mountain...

"There. Done."

After his beasts destroyed Zircon Leader and all active Prism Soldiers, Cheshire went to the control terminal and stopped the plant.

As Tom Cat, he'd come here on a quest to do just this, but his real reason for coming to the ruins was different.

He was here to investigate if it had any weapons that could break game balance or reveal important information. If it did, he had to destroy it all before other players got to it.

Zircon Leader had turned out to be just that. The information he had made him a threat so major that Cheshire had to destroy him even if it meant having to unseal his real body.

However, unlike Zircon Leader and the weapon deeper in, he didn’t have to destroy this plant.

Looking at the data in the terminal, he could confirm there was no classified information — all it had were mass-production programs.

All the weapons available were like the Prism Soldiers in that they wouldn’t have caused any problems to the developers, so he’d decided to keep it intact, leaving the final call to Altar.

“It’d probably improve the kingdom’s situation a bit...”

Unless things got seriously out of hand, the control AI didn’t really care about the results of wars. The only exceptions to that rule would have to be as extreme as the war six hundred years ago that had almost turned the continent into a wasteland.

Still, Cheshire’s avatar, Tom Cat, was an Altarian Master, so there was no problem with him helping out his country by completing a quest or two.

“There’s also the thing about creating more Superiorrrs. It’s better for the war to be more equal so they can all improoove. Anyway, now for the thing deeper in...”

Cheshire looked at the data from the beasts he’d sent there, then sighed.

“It’s about what I’d expect from a weapon Flagman made over two millennia. It’s a whole lot of trouble.”

The information showed a battle — if you could call it that — that was still happening further in the ruins.

Acra-Vesta’s hangar was full of beasts, a number that easily surpassed one thousand. Using their claws and fangs, all of them were attacking the superweapon as it prepared for departure.

All of the beasts were as strong as Legendary monsters such as Gigaknights.

Needless to say, it was a menacing horde. If one of them could deal 10,000 damage, then a thousand of them could deal 10,000,000.

No matter how large and powerful an entity, it stood absolutely no chance against a horde of such beasts so vast it drowned the horizon.

This was evidenced by the time Cheshire had defeated an Irregularity as large as a mountain range.

Acra-Vesta was only as big as a fortress, so you would have expected them to have crushed it by now, but...

“How does this even worrrk?”

...the beasts couldn’t even scratch it.

None of the attacks from the thousand-strong Legendary beasts did anything to it.

It wasn’t even that the hull was too strong — the attacks didn’t even reach that far.

All of them stopped at the space right before the hull.

It couldn’t have been a simple force field, since that would’ve already been broken by the beasts.

There was some strange power at work that prevented all attacks from passing.

“I guess this is another anti-me featurrre. Boy, just how much of a grudge does Flagman have against me...?”

Cheshire — also known as Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin — had passed Superior and reached his final form as an Embryo. However, that didn’t mean that he was omniscient and omnipotent. Like with all Embryos, his powers were limited to certain primary characteristics.

That was exactly why the control AIs had split their roles; they were all in charge of what their features allowed them to do best.

No matter how powerful, Embryos couldn’t escape the bane of incompatibility, and this superweapon seemed to be a hard counter to Infinite Multiplication.

Cheshire could repeatedly deal the 10,000,000 damage 1,000 times, but if, for example, the superweapon negated the 10,000 damage delivered by each beast, it would remain undamaged. And it seemed that this barrier would prevent attacks even stronger than that.

Cheshire’s infinitely multiplying army could suppress its enemies with nothing but numbers. That was simple and practical, but that was exactly what made him so open to such absurd defenses. It was one of his weaknesses.

“This defensive ability has a small range, but its nature seems like that of Red King’s,” he noted. “Is this actually...?”

The unpleasant thought made the cat grimace. He’d suspected something like this about Acra-Vesta, and it’d turned out to be right.

“Well, this sure is troublesome. My powers are really incompatible with it. Humpty, Jabberwork, and Red King could take care of it easily, but I have no time to call them. At this rate, it’s gonna go outside in just a few minutes—”

Cheshire suddenly stopped talking to himself. That was because he could hear a bunch of footsteps coming from the hallway.

He knew exactly what they were caused by — Edelvalsa’s marionettes.

They’d been fighting the seven Tom Cats until now, but when Cheshire had switched to his real body, Tom’s avatar had been put on standby.

“They must’ve had no problem getting here without me in the way. I guess time’s up.” Cheshire sent his main body back and called for his avatar as Tom Cat.

He couldn’t let anyone know who Tom Cat really was, or let them find out about Cheshire’s activities.

Killing witnesses was way too drastic, and he couldn’t do it for several reasons.

Acra-Vesta was about to go outside, anyway, so he wouldn’t have another chance to fight in his original body.

He’d already given up on destroying the superweapon by his own hands.

“Well, at least it’s not controlled by anyonnne. This isn’t all that different from a UBM rampage.”

Because of its background, Acra-Vesta wouldn’t get recognized as a UBM, but as it was now, it was truly closer to a weapon than a monster. It wasn’t captured by a country or anything, so Cheshire’s work here was as good as done.

If it rampaged like a monster, it would eventually be taken out by a compatible Superior.

“Oh... Ray beat Rumpelstiltskin’s Hell General. That leaves Quartierlatin with no Superiors. This might be the end of the town.”

Acra-Vesta still hadn’t attacked in any way, but even if you ignored Cheshire’s incompatibility with it, the fact that his beasts hadn’t damaged it at all meant that it had absurd defensive abilities — enough to put it on the same level as Ancient Legendary UBMs. And if it had more tricks up its sleeve, it could easily be a Mythical.

If the defense worked as he guessed, Tenaga Ashinaga's Master Jiangshi, Xunyu, could destroy Acra-Vesta easily.

The King of Destruction, Shu Starling, might be capable of breaking through its defense, as well.

However, they'd take a while to get here, and Acra-Vesta would cause immense damage during that time.

Altea and Gideon were far away enough for it to destroy a town before any Superior from those cities arrived here.

It was more or less certain that Quartierlatin would be reduced to ruins.

"Well," Cheshire — Tom — mouthed as he calculated the most likely future using his immense processing power, then sighed. "Tom Cat is an Altarian Master, so I'll fight for as long as this avatar holds. Now dance, Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin."

He multiplied into eight and attacked the weapon much like his beasts had, searching for flaws in this seemingly unmatched defense.

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"What is going on here?"

The field marshal was looking through the eyes of Faldreed, who was reaching the deepest part of the ruins.

The factory-like space was littered with countless Prism Soldier pieces.

There was an even larger space deeper in, where a weapon that looked like both a fish and a crustacean at the same time was preparing for something.

Besides that, his enemy from before, Tom Cat — eight of him this time — was fighting the machine.

He silently and calmly analyzed the situation.

There was no doubt that the Prism Soldiers here had been defeated by Tom Cat.

The seven he'd been fighting had suddenly vanished, and he assumed Tom had called them back to fight the Prism Soldiers.

(He wasn't wrong. The method was different than he was thinking, though.)

He figured that then, after Tom'd beaten the Prism Soldiers, he had discovered the superweapon, presumably the so-called "Acra-Vesta," as it went out of control, leaving Tom with no choice but to fight it.

"I guess I can't expect to secure it..." Gifted sighed.

The weapon was active and beyond anyone's control, making it extremely difficult to take it for Dryfe.

There was another reason why he'd given up on that. Gifted himself was outside, and could more or less see the general state of Quartierlatin. Naturally, he hadn't missed the moment of the devils vanishing.

It could only mean one thing — Logan had been defeated.

He had a strong guess about who was responsible, but decided to focus on what he had to do now.

The superweapon had gone out of control, and only one of the two of the imperium's forces were remaining, meaning that securing the weapon — the best-case scenario for the imperium — had become nigh impossible.

That left three choices for him.

One: he could destroy Tom Cat to prevent the weapon from falling into the kingdom's hands.

Two: he could assume that the weapon going out of control meant it was mission accomplished for him and just leave the battlefield.

Three: he could destroy the...

"The choice is obvious." His marionettes aimed their weapons.

They had Tom Cat in their sights.

They pulled the triggers. Their bullets went towards Tom, *passed him,* and pierced the space around Acra-Vesta.

"No perceived effect. Continue attacking."

Feeling that flow of will, Faldreed and all the other marionettes attacked the superweapon.

Indeed, this choice was obvious. By the time he'd arrived, Tom Cat was already fighting Acra-Vesta, meaning that it was clearly out of control.

If he let it be, the superweapon could potentially go to the imperium — specifically, the Barbaros territory. Even if it didn't, its rampage would definitely reach the local town of Quartierlatin.

The choice couldn't be more clear.

There was no hesitation or conflict.

He could protect everything he wanted without sacrificing anything. It was by far the easiest choice he would make that day.

Choice three was that he could destroy the out of control superweapon.

“I’m here to help. You won’t mind if I destroy it, will you?” he asked Tom.

“Think you can?! Do it, then!”

“Understood. Using all available force.”

The Lynx, Tom Cat and Zero General, Gifted Barbaros now stood on the same side and fought Acra-Vesta.

As the battle continued, the mountain — Acra-Vesta’s exit — opened up, shifting the stage to the surface.

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Acra-Vesta

Incarnation of Beasts signal lost.

As Acra-Vesta made its way to the exit, it realized that the Incarnation of Beasts had vanished.

It ran a threat search, but couldn’t find the incarnation anywhere.

Besides that, it also realized that someone had destroyed the Superior-class incarnation that was one of the reasons for its activation.

Though there were still some incarnation-like energy signals nearby, they were all so weak that they couldn’t even begin to compare.

With that in mind, if it destroyed the intruders still in the facility, there would be no need to uphold the absolute defense, but that was irrelevant to Acra-Vesta. After all...

Several Superior-class signals detected.

Acra-Vesta’s enemy-locating ability was miles above that of Prism Soldiers and many other weapons.

It was so powerful that it could locate the incarnation-like signals... the Superior Embryos... far away in the south — the cities of Altea and Gideon.

Thus, Acra-Vesta changed its priorities.

Its main mission now was to go down south and destroy all the Superior Embryos it encountered.

Of course, it wouldn’t waste time on anything or anyone else.

However, Acra-Vesta was unlike the Prism Soldiers in one important way.

Detected many signals of life.

Found humanoid animals who are not on the list.

Modifying list based on acquired information.

Recognizing humanoid animals as mankind.

Acra-Vesta's AI was more advanced than that of the Prism Soldiers, so it could see that modern tians were humanoid. They might have changed over the past two millennia, but they were human nonetheless.

Prioritize the destruction of incarnations. Ignore all potential loss of life.

Despite that, Acra-Vesta didn't hesitate to make sacrifices.

For the future of mankind.

For the world that has created us.

Annihilating all incarnations, no matter the cost.

With a will as solid as its frame, the superweapon prepared to go south — through Quartierlatin.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The superweapon, Tom, and marionettes that had to belong to Dr. Mario were all fighting on the mountain. The eight Toms and countless marionettes were cooperating to shower the weapon in attacks.

Despite belonging to opposing countries, they were actually fighting as allies.

I could think of several reasons why they might team up, but the most likely one was that they'd realized how dangerous the weapon was and decided to team up to take it out.

The weapon, however, didn't seem to care about them and just went south — to Quartierlatin.

It was attacked from all directions, but it didn't seem to care. Completely unharmed, it moved its trilobite-like feet to move onwards.

Unlike the Prism Soldiers I'd encountered, it didn't seem to be preparing any weapons for attack. It did nothing but move forward.

Their attacks didn't hurt it at all, but they didn't suffer much, either. Some marionettes had been crushed by the feet, but that was the extent of it.

It clearly had superb defense, but unlike Shu's Baldr, it didn't seem to have any close-range firearms.

"But it's heading straight for the town," I said. "We've gotta take it out before it gets here."

It had a defensive ability so great it was absurd, but Nemesis's Vengeance ignored defense.

Maybe *we* could hurt it?

The three debuffs were gone by now, so I was good to go.

I hopped on Silver and called out to them. "Nemesis, Azurite, let's go and... Hm?"

I noticed the situation had changed.

The superweapon had stopped in place.

Not on its own, though — countless marionettes had gone in to hold it back.

Besides the human-sized wooden marionettes, there were stone ones about ten times as large.

There had to be at least a thousand of them. Dr. Mario was using them to force the superweapon to stay in place.

"Well, that's a good idea," I mused.

Even if it had good defense due to its hull, skills, or whatever, it had nothing against this kind of physical binding. The fact that the weapon didn't use firearms or anything made it even easier.

This was really good for us. While it was being held back, I'd go hit myself on its legs or something to accumulate damage, healing whenever necessary, before finally ending it with a powerful enough Vengeance.

"That makes you seem like one of those people who jump in front of cars to extort money," Nemesis commented.

I thought of that, too, but did you have to say it out loud?!

It was an emergency, anyway. I couldn't pick and choose my methods.

"Let's go join them," I said.

"Mm-hm," nodded Nemesis.

"Yes," Azurite agreed.

I took Nemesis in her greatsword form with my right hand and let Azurite sit behind me on Silver, just like yesterday.

The superweapon tried to move its legs to go forward, but the marionettes did a great job of keeping it in place. Even those that were trampled were quickly replaced.

I also saw Tom use some sort of Gem. It made the superweapon sink a bit into the ground, so it was probably for some sort of magic that softened the earth.

Apparently, they were now prioritizing binding over destroying it.

That was probably the right choice. They just had to hold it long enough until someone good against tanky enemies — it didn't have to be me — came over and beat it.

Wanting to get there ASAP, I made Silver hurry.

"He seems faster than when I used him," said Azurite. "Is it because the original owner's riding him?"

Her words reminded me of the Prism Rider skills.

Silver was obviously faster because of Prism Beast Enhancement.

And then there was the other skill, Prism Authorization.

Using my right hand, still holding Nemesis, I opened the window and looked at Silver's skills. I'd be fighting the moment I got there, so this was my only real chance to check it out.

"And... no dice." I sighed.

Silver's third skill was still hidden. I had thought that Prism Authorization was the condition for unlocking it, but no.

I was getting nothing even when I tried to check its details—

"...Eh?"

When I selected it, something unexpected happened.

There was some new text underneath where the skill's description was supposed to be.

"To the inhabitant of the post-incarnation world who acquires Zephyrus Silver and the Authorization," I read. "You do not have permission to see the details of this skill at level 1. However, Zephyrus Silver is allowed limited use of this skill at his own discretion. To see all his details and unlock all his functions, acquire Prism Authorization level 3 or above. Sincerely, Zephyrus Silver's developer, Flagman."

"What...?" I raised an eyebrow. It was unlike any description or game message I'd ever seen.

It seemed... personal.

This Flagman guy had left it specifically for the one who got his hands on both Silver and the Prism Rider job — in this case, me.

I was probably the first person to ever read this text. After all, Prism

Authorization was given by Prism Rider, which had been a lost job until just a few days ago.

Were there similar messages on the other Prism Steeds? Or did Silver only have this because he was, according to Dr. Mario, a prototype or an experimental unit?

Whatever the case, it was clear that this Flagman person had tech advanced enough to let him leave such messages on skill description windows.

Also, something about this message felt off...

“I can tell you want to ponder, but now is not the time, Ray!” Nemesis exclaimed.

“Look!” Azurite joined. “The superweapon is...!”

I stopped my train of thought and looked at the superweapon.

It was still being bound by the marionettes, but I could instantly see what had caught their attention.

“The back... is splitting?”

The upper part of the weapon, the horseshoe crab’s carapace, split in two and opened upwards.

I thought that Tom and Dr. Mario had finally damaged it, but that wasn’t the case.

Rather, something was rising from the space the opening had made.

It was the superweapon’s rear — the part that looked whale-like. The head that had been kept inside the crab was rising with it.

Just like that, a thing that looked like a large, multi-finned, mechanical whale split from the crab and rose upwards.

At the same time, the crab began violently struggling to break free of the marionettes’ grip. That was enough to turn the tides in the struggle. The marionettes were the ones being overwhelmed now.

It felt like losing the whale was letting the weapon use its full power.

“Is that thing actually...?” I wondered.

My own assumption made a chill go down my spine, but alas, it was completely true.

This weapon was...

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Acra-Vesta

Pushed down by countless marionettes, Acra-Vesta gathered data from its surroundings.

The humanoids that released faint incarnation signals were launching gems to the surroundings, turning the ground into mud.

They couldn't beat it, so the marionettes were shifting all focus to binding it.

However, these enemies and their actions meant little for Acra-Vesta. What it found important was the muddied ground beneath it.

Right now, it was sinking into this ground because it was a plain surface with no ruins underneath.

It was a decent distance away from its exit, and with it, the ruins.

That was the most important factor for it.

Closing exit.

Checking the anti-explosion and anti-impact systems on the facility's high-priority blocks.

Since everyone had been so preoccupied with Acra-Vesta, no one had cared about its exit, which had closed shortly after it left.

It was the final switch.

Separation mechanism, initiate.

Unit α, Acra — opening upper hull.

Unit β, Vesta — raising altitude.

The name of the third anti-incarnation superweapon, Acra-Vesta, was from a language other than the current *Infinite Dendrogram* common — the one being auto-translated for Masters.

They were of the creator's — Flagman's — mother tongue, used in the now-gone Zweier Imperium.

In that language, "acra" meant "shell," while "vesta" was "sky."

"Acra-Vesta" was literally just "Shell and Sky." A many-legged tank and an air battleship — both formidable weapons of war.

Acra's unique skill was "Space Fixation."

It shielded from all incoming damage by fixing the space in place, and it was powerful enough to survive the relentless attacks from Tom, the marionettes, and even the beasts without as much as a scratch.

Vesta's unique skill was "Space Dilution."

What it did was...

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The air battleship, Vesta, had split from Acra and was now rising towards the sky.

Tom and the field marshal didn’t just sit by and let it happen.

Tom fired arrows and threw weapons, while Gifted’s marionettes attacked it with their guns.

They weren’t particularly serious attacks, but, much to their surprise, they actually dealt damage this time.

The hull was dented, pierced, or blown open all over. They kept attacking the legged tank, too, but it just continued being impervious to damage. The same couldn’t be said for the airship.

However...

“It’s repairing itself?”

Despite being a metallic machine, the unit was slowly regenerating. The metal on the hull and machines made waves as they closed the wounds.

The damage was greater than the repair speed, but since it kept rising up, their attack options would soon be limited, and the repairs would catch up.

“Not gonna let youuu,” said Tom. “Granting permission to use heavy weaponry. Marionette Squadron Creation.”

Tom jumped from the surface, then used other Toms as stepping stones to jump even higher and approach the airship.

Leaving one Tom on the ground for safety, he created seven of himself at the top of Vesta.

The field marshal’s marionettes went into Faldreed’s weapon inventory to take out an anti-aircraft gun they used to defend fortresses, while the squadron of the newly made flying marionettes went up to the sky.

The seven Toms tore into Vesta’s armor from above, while the massive AA gun tore holes in it from below.

As Faldreed lit the machine ablaze, the flying marionettes assaulted it with gunfire from the sides.

In but a moment, the airship became covered in holes.

“Intercepting.”

Small bits of its hull slid to the side, exposing the lenses of the laser cannons they’d seen many times in the ruins.

They shot down some of the flying marionettes around it, but the field marshal quickly replaced them.

Vesta could do little against Tom as he ran around destroying it, and the lack of laser lenses on its bottom part made it impossible for it to get rid of the AA gun right below it.

The airship was powerless to stop them.

The lasers, the sensors, the empty bridge — all of it was being destroyed.

Even the important bits, such as the large reactor and the main AI, didn't escape this fate. The airship's lifeline was cut down so easily, it felt anticlimactic.

Seasoned veteran that he was, the field marshal knew that it was destroyed.

"We did it! Ah...?!"

But then, Acra-Vesta began to fix itself like it was the most normal thing to do.

"Hey... we took out your corrre," Tom Cat objected. "Can't you just, you know, breaaak?"

Shocked that it had actually happened, the two continued attacking it, but it just kept on regenerating.

Even when you obliterated its equivalent of a human's brain, heart, and lungs, it still continued to fix itself. Needless to say, it was an eerie phenomenon.

It was caused by one of Acra-Vesta's functions, Mutual Repair.

Acra was set to repair Vesta, while Vesta was set to repair Acra. No matter how heavily damaged one of them was, the system would control the metal particles building up the unit to fix it and return it to its original form.

Of course, too much destruction would eventually cause a shortage of metal particles meant for repair.

That was considered during their design, and as a result of that, both units had inventories full of metal particles, hidden in their hardest-to-destroy areas.

The metal particles were mined, extracted, synthesized, and stored over a period of two thousand years.

There was enough of it to completely fix it three hundred times.

"What's going on?" Gifted was perplexed.

"Is it just a part of the one at the bottom?" Tom wondered. "No, that's too... Hold on, is this actually Mutual Repair?”

“The theory found in Dryfean ruins...? Wait, how do you...?”

As they began to wonder about the nature of this function and were about to reach the answer, the airship rose 1,000 metels above the surface.

Just like it had waited until there were no ruins beneath, Acra-Vesta was now waiting until one of its halves reached that height.

Space Dilution.

The airship activated its unique skill, changing the very space around it.

The skill had several effects, but each of them were felt by separate people.

“What...?” The first effect was noticed by the field marshal. He instantly lost his link to the flying squadron.

He could control marionettes from as far as 100,000 metels away. Whether they were deep underground or in some barrier, he could control them if they weren’t too distant.

However, he could tell that the reason he couldn’t control the squadron anymore was because of range.

He could see them from the surface just fine, yet the message was that they were too far.

The squadron he’d lost control over was shot down by the lasers.

Gifted then noticed something else.

The AA gun that had been damaging the airship all this time now fired shots that didn’t even reach it.

It was obviously within range, but the shots just lost all speed before reaching it and fell down to the surface like a pebble thrown by hand.

The difference between what he saw and the phenomenon that was happening around the airship made a chill go down his spine.

“...!” Tom was the one to notice the second effect.

No voice came out when he spoke, and he couldn’t even breathe anymore.

The beasts created by his true form might’ve been able to bear this, but Tom was a humanoid avatar. He wasn’t designed to survive without breathing.

Besides that, there was also the view the seven of them were seeing.

Up until a moment ago, they had been able to easily see the town of Quartierlatin below the airship. Of course they had — it was only about

1,000 metels above the surface.

Now, however, it wasn't even a speck on the horizon.

It was like they were above the clouds... no... far higher than that.

But just looking upwards made that impression flip upside-down — they were really far down, and the sky was extremely distant.

Even the light from the sun rising above the mountains to the east seemed tiny.

He felt like he was suddenly taken into a vast, otherworldly realm.

This is Space Dilution and its side effect... the vacuum! This thing actually imitated Red King's... Infinite Space's space manipulation powers...!

Cheshire realized what he was dealing with and quickly tried to stop it by destroying Vesta, but he was powerless against the repair.

After a short while, the vacuum made the seven Toms' blood vessels and eyeballs burst, quickly killing them.

The third effect was noticed by Ray's group as they approached the mountain.

They saw things falling from the sky.

The whale-like airship had several fins.

Some of them had fallen off, but...

"They're... not coming down?" He expected them to reach the ground right away, but that just wasn't happening.

They just stopped in place after removal... no... they were still dropping, but really slowly.

The fins approached the ground slower than balloons full of normal air. They seemed to be accelerating, but they were still slow. You could just picture them softly landing on the ground.

"GET AWAY OR YOU'LL DIE!" the Tom on the surface shouted in a voice you'd never expect from him.

Ray's group had no way of knowing it, but this was a voice Cheshire rarely used even as himself — a warning tone meant only for the most perilous of situations.

"Ah! Okay!" Ray shouted back as he made Silver turn around and tried to run as far away from the fins as possible.

The field marshal heard Tom, too. He created a new flying marionette squadron, jumped on their backs, and flew away.

Tom himself multiplied again and split up in all directions to increase his chances of survival.

His warning was no joke. After all, those fins... *these mere pieces of metal*... were Acra-Vesta's greatest weapon.

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Space Dilution.

Belonging to the airship, Vesta, it was a skill that expanded the space around it.

Specifically, it multiplied a radius of 1,000 metels by 300 to make it 300,000 metels.

It didn't affect the outside world in any way. It was a change exclusive to the 1,000 metel radius space around Vesta.

It was a really restrictive power in that it could only be used when there were no massive objects besides it in the 1,000 metel radius. The surface counted for this, which was why it had needed to go up that high.

Like Ray and Gifted had confirmed, Space Dilution didn't affect how the world looked to those outside of the space.

Tom was inside when it was activated, and the 1,000 metel radius space was stretched out 300 times.

That was the reason why the AA guns no longer hit. Even if it seemed like you could land a shot from the outside, it actually had to cover an area 300 times larger than what it seemed.

And though the space's volume had grown 27,000,000 times larger, the amount of air molecules had remained unchanged.

As a barrier, it didn't allow any air from the outside, either.

It was almost a vacuum. No animals could survive in those conditions, which was exactly why the seven Toms had died.

However, this atmosphere had another terrifying quality.

Normally, on planets with atmospheres, there were limits to how fast something could fall. This was caused by air resistance. Objects that entered the atmosphere from an airless space would either slow down immensely or burn up in plasma born from air pressure.

In short: the atmosphere acted as a break for anything going fast.

However...

What if there was a space with 27,000,000 times less air resistance, 300,000 metels to fall from, and normally functioning gravity?

What level of kinetic energy would the falling object have by the time it reached the surface?

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Falling through the Space Dilution field, the fin reached about seven times the speed of sound before hitting the ground.

It could only be compared to one thing: a meteor.

It created a several hundred metel-wide crater, a ground-shattering shockwave that extended several times further, and a light, glass-breaking wave that extended throughout all of Quartierlatin.

Most of the marionettes that were around the legged tank, Acra, evaporated the moment it hit. Only Faldreed survived, but the shockwave bent his limbs and blew him several hundred metels back.

Though Acra had been on ground zero, it was unscathed because of its Space Fixation. That was how Acra-Vesta had been designed to operate.

Acra couldn't break to Vesta's bombing, and even if it did, Vesta would repair it as long as it was around.

As long as one of them existed, the two space-controlling machines would continue repairing each other from total destruction.

Their Mutual Repair system would only stop functioning if both of them were destroyed at the same time.

That meant that it wasn't impossible to destroy them, but it would be no easy task.

The unbreakable Shell and the unreachable Sky had to be conquered at the same time.

It would be impossible under normal circumstances. No one could hurt either of them, leaving them to watch as Vesta's kinetic energy bombs destroyed their enemies.

Not even the Incarnation of Beasts could defeat Acra-Vesta.

In fact, that was the very first original concept behind this weapon.

Being about 37 percent complete, it didn't have a lot of its intended weaponry and counters to other incarnations, but it was no exaggeration to say it was 100% complete as an anti-Incarnation of Beasts weapon.

The pre-ancient civilization’s grand engineer Flagman poured intense murderous intent and hope for the future into this particular superweapon, and Acra-Vesta wielded it proudly.

The kinetic energy bombs born out of the ancient hatred assaulted even those who’d escaped the direct hit. Six Toms out of eight vanished in the shockwave.

“GH?! SILVEEEEEEEEERRRRR!” Ray shouted.

Ray’s group were distant to begin with, so they didn’t suffer fatal damage, but the shockwave upon them was powerful nonetheless. They bore it only by running Wind Hoof at max capacity and shielding against it with Nemesis’s third form.

As for the field marshal...

Caught up in the shockwave mid-flight, his squadron was destroyed.

Then, he himself was blown away. His bones shattered, and he fell down from several hundred metels in the air.

Chapter Eight: The Primeval Sword

The Lynx, Tom Cat

"Huff... huff... It's not quite like the original, but Flagman actually weaponized Red King's power! Just how absurd is that guy...?"

Standing in the mountains a short distance away from ground zero, I panted heavily and cursed Acra-Vesta's creator. I'd lost count of how many times his weapons had given us serious trouble.

And most of the time, I'm the one who has to take care of them. The others should run into them more often, I thought peevishly.

"This one's way more complete than the one we broke six hundred years agooo," I pondered aloud. "Self-developing weapons really are too dangerous to ignooore. If it became a UBM, Jabberwock could set some vectors on its powers, but we can't count on that happening..."

Acra-Vesta couldn't become a UBM. Though that had happened to Edelvalsa, another one of Flagman's weapons, the circumstances here were different.

Edelvalsa had been a standalone bioweapon designed to operate by itself, while Acra-Vesta was a legged tank paired with an airship. They were weapons that could be piloted, but which were operating on auto right now — as intended.

There may have been some sort of code to override it and make it obey people again, but Flagman was probably the only one who'd ever known it.

Prism People couldn't work unless owned by humans, and Acra-Vesta was the same in that regard. It was still being used by someone and thus couldn't become a UBM... or even a normal monster, for that matter.

Others' possessions couldn't be made to evolve — this was a safety that Jabberwock's Master had set on him, and there was no way to go around it.

"What do we do nowww...?" I wondered.

My base position on the situation was the same as it had been back in the ruins: we'd wait until compatible Superiors came around and destroyed it.

Just two Superiors — one to counter Space Fixation and another one for Space Dilution — would be enough... Actually, Xunyu could probably solo them both. Distance didn't matter to her, after all.

However, Acra-Vesta was on a whole different course than before. If it went southwards, bombing everything in its path, Altar's map would change drastically.

"Well, I guess I should be glad it didn't copy Red King's offensive abilities, tooo," I muttered. "Seriously, good thing it's just the defense..."

If it'd been the full package, the damage would've been a lot worse than just a changed map.

"Northern Altar would be destroyed before any Superiors came," I muttered. "And we have... only one way to prevent it..."

I knew the original behind those space manipulation powers, so I knew the counters, as well, and it just so happened that a couple of them were right here in Quartierlatin.

A couple of people in town would stand a chance against Acra-Vesta, despite not being Superiors.

The chances of them actually pulling it off were astronomically low, but they would be capable of breaking through both Acra's absolute defense and Vesta's vast vacuum, ultimately destroying them.

"Pulling it off is about as likely as tightrope walking on a cotton thread, but it's something," I pondered. "I need to let them know... but how?"

I knew both Acra-Vesta's powers and that their powers could counter it, but *I couldn't let them know that I knew.*

"It's not something I should know. It'd seem unnatural if I did," I said. "Even the warning from before was pushing it."

At the start of the bombing, I'd instantly realized that it was an attack that used Space Dilution. That was knowledge I could play off as just an assumption made from being inside the field or from my experience as a veteran duelist. However, it wouldn't be normal for me to know the details about Acra-Vesta and their... or, rather, *her*... powers.

While *his* abilities had been completely exposed by Franklin, *her* power was like a state secret — no, even more unknown than that.

"It'd be best if they figure out its powers and that they can counter it all by themselves... but I don't think that's going to happennn." I sighed.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Once the shockwave had subsided, we kept our distance from the enemy and talked about nature of that attack.

“My guess is that the whale’s power is to make the distance... or space... around it bigger than it looks,” I said.

If we approached the whale without knowing how much, though, it could drop another fin on us.

Tom had been near ground zero, while Dr. Mario had been flying through the air when the first one hit.

I was worried about them, of course, but if we didn’t figure out what that thing was and think of a way to counter it, Quartierlatin could end up a crater, which would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

I mustered whatever wisdom I had and tried to guess what the fins were all about. “Distance... and space?”

“What do you mean?” Azurite and Nemesis both asked. They didn’t seem to fully understand me.

“Why do you think that?” Azurite added.

“I have several reasons. One of them was the AA gun. Its shots stopped reaching the whale, and from what I could see, they dropped naturally. It didn’t look like they hit anything, were damaged in any way, or were influenced by some outside energy — they just didn’t reach it, leaving us with two options: either the AA gun’s range became smaller, or the whale went up too high for its shells to hit.”

It reminded me of the battle against Monochrome. Some Masters had tried attacking it from the ground, but none of their attacks had reached, just like with the AA gun.

“What else?” asked Azurite.

“The way the fin fell. It looked really slow to us, but you saw how hard it hit. Even if the fin weighed tens, hundreds of tons, at that speed, it could never have the kinetic energy to make a shockwave that powerful.”

“Could it not be full of explosives?” asked Nemesis.

“It could, but I didn’t see any fire, and it didn’t sound like an explosion. Then again, it could easily be a magic bomb that worked like that...”

I wouldn’t have been surprised if shockwave bombs existed in this world or something. This was a fantasy, after all. Earth's laws of physics didn't always apply.

"No, continue with your theory," said Azurite.

"All right. Another thing I noticed was that it didn't make any sound while falling."

"But it did. Quite a loud one, too," commented Nemesis.

"That happened when it hit the surface. I'm talking about the fall itself. It's a pretty large object, yet it fell without making any sound. You couldn't even hear it cut the air. If my guess is right, then that's because it was either going a larger distance than it looked... or passing a vacuum."

"Vacuum..." Nemesis murmured.

I nodded. And if it really was that, another thing would make sense. "A vacuum would explain why it didn't heat up as it fell."

"It should have?" Nemesis asked.

"Yeah. Objects that move through the atmosphere really fast are subjected to air friction, and there's a point at which the air molecules are compressed and become plasma. Understand?"

"Metallic monsters shine when they move at multiple times the speed of sound. Is it something like that?" asked Azurite.

"Close enough. Now, if my guess is right and it had enough distance to speed up to create an impact *that* powerful, it should've started shining because of the heat from the air friction. That didn't happen, though, so it's very likely it's surrounded by a vacuum."

"What does that change?" asked Nemesis.

"In normal free fall, the air resistance would set a limit on the object's acceleration. That limit wasn't there in a vacuum."

It reminded me of a video I'd seen in class once, showing an experiment in which they examined free fall that had gravity, but zero air resistance. They'd removed all the air from a pipe, then made an iron ball fall through. It had been faster in the vacuum than in the air.

"I have another reason for why I think it's creating a vacuum," I continued.

"What is it?"

"The lasers. That's the weapon the whale used to shoot down the marionettes. The Prism Soldiers had Gatling guns, missiles, and lots of other weapons, yet the whale only used lasers. That makes sense only if it was designed around a power that expanded space and created a vacuum."

That'd make it pointless to use any other weapons.

"After all... *lasers don't lose power over distance*," I said. That was one of the main properties of light. "Lasers only lose power if there are molecules in the way, so if they're in a vacuum, they deal the same amount of damage, no matter how many hundreds of kilometers they pass."

Monochrome's maximum range had been about 15,000 meters, but only because of the air molecules in the atmosphere. In a vacuum, its lasers could've reached anything.

"Lasers go at the speed of light, too," I said. "They can't miss their mark even with the expanded distance."

The speed of light was roughly 300,000,000 meters per second. Given that number, a distance difference of ten thousand meters was negligible.

That was what made lasers the only weapon that could be used well in pre and post-space expansion, as well as in and out of the vacuum.

The fact that the whale had only lasers and fins strongly supported my theory.

"Can you give us a summary of your theory?" asked Nemesis.

"Though you can't tell by looking, the whale created a huge vacuum around it," I said. "That's why the attacks don't reach, and that's why the things it drops gain insane amounts of kinetic energy before they hit the ground. That explains all the phenomena around it."

All in all, it was a pretty terrifying power. The whale ruled the skies in an even worse way than Monochrome.

But...

"What can we even do against such a thing?" Azurite wondered in despair.

"...I can beat it."

"Eh?" She turned away from the whale and back to me.

I nodded and raised just one finger. "I think I can beat the whale... but *only once*."

It would be a huge gamble.

I had no idea how powerful *it* would be, couldn't guarantee that I would hit the whale with it, or that I could survive until I finished the attack.

Nothing about my idea was certain, but going by the toughness of the whale, which I assumed I understood now from watching Tom and Dr.

Mario fight it, I could destroy the thing if the attack was at least half as powerful as the original.

"But once is not enough, is it?" asked Nemesis.

"Yeah."

She was right. Tom and Dr. Mario had destroyed the whale a few times, but it had restored itself every time and continued rising.

While the crab had insane defense, the whale seemed to have some sort of insanely powerful repair function. It would probably come back soon after I destroyed it.

“Oh, but it *is* enoughhh!” a voice called.

“Tom!” I cried.

Looking slightly tattered, Tom popped out of a nearby street and stood next to Silver.

“You’re okay!”

“I lost six outta eight, thouuugh. But as you can see, I’m still here and can still talk to you, so I’m just fiiine. Another one of me is still watching the thing.”

...Man, his Embryo had some impressive survivability.

We walked over closer to him and I asked, “Umm, where’s Dr. Mario?”

“Mario...? Ohh, you mean the one who used the marionettes. I’m not sure. Don’t even know if he’s alive.”

“I... I see...”

I could only hope he was. He was Dryfe’s SMTF, so he had the stats needed to survive... probably.

“What did you mean by, ‘It’s enough?’” I asked.

“That repair power is called ‘Mutual Repair.’ You find it on ruin machines sometimes.”

“What a simple name,” I commented.

“And it does exactly what it sounds like. It makes two machines fix each other. As long as one is around, it will fix the other even if the other is completely destroyed. That means they won’t be able to repair each other if you destroy them both at the same time.”

“I see...” I pondered. “Hold on.”

If that was happening between the crab and the whale...

“Doesn’t that mean they’re indestructible?”

I had a slim chance of destroying the whale, but there was no way for me to destroy the crab at the same time. I could maybe destroy the crab with a Vengeance is Mine, but then I’d be left with the whale, which I couldn’t beat from the surface. Since it wasn’t as close as it seemed, I’d spectacularly miss. Whether I went for the whale or the crab, I’d have to get close, meaning that I could only take out one of them.

“By the way, I don’t think your skills would work on the legged tank,” Tom added.

“Eh?”

“Uhh, I know about your counterattack skills from the broadcast during

Franklin's gaaame. The thing about the tank is that you can't touch it. The space right in front of it blocks anything that gets too close."

"No way..."

I already knew that Tom and Dr. Mario couldn't beat it, but if we couldn't touch it at all, me and my Vengeance would be useless against it, too.

And as long as that crab was around, the whale was indestructible.

We had no moves we could make.

"Hey, why not ask for Brother Bear or someone else's help?" asked Nemesis. "Xunyu had warp attacks! Surely she could..."

"And how do I contact them?" I demanded. "Bro didn't answer when I called him, and I don't know any way to get in touch with Xunyu. Also, they'd take too long to get here, and..."

...Quartierlatin would be gone by then.

That was the one ending I couldn't accept, no matter what.

"Do we have anything else?" Nemesis wondered. "Are any Altarian Masters still alive here capable of dealing with the crab?"

"The Masters who went with me into the ruins were all wiped out," said Tom. "And most of the others were taken out over the course of the night."

That left us with no options.

I could give my all and challenge the whale, but that wouldn't be enough. If only there were one more person... someone who held the possibility of beating the crab!

Troubled and feeling like our chances were going further and further beyond the radix point, I heard a familiar voice.

"Tom Cat. I have a question."

It belonged to Azurite.

"What is it, masked lady?" Tom asked.

"The weapon on the ground is protected by space, right?"

"Yep. But none of our attacks worked. Even the whale's bomb didn't hurt it, so I doubt any normal attacks would work on it."

"I see..." Tom's hopeless words made Azurite nod. "Then I will be the one to destroy it."

She said that as if it was no big deal.

"Huh?! Azurite! Have you gone mad?!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"I haven't. I shall destroy the weapon on the ground."

She looked straight into my eyes. I saw no hesitation in them. It felt like we both saw glimpses of each other's minds.

"Ray, you said you can destroy the flying weapon, yes?"

"Yeah... I'll do it, no matter what."

"You never lie, so I shall believe you. In exchange..." With her left hand, she grasped the azure sword fixed to her hip. "...I want you to believe me, as well. *I will cut down the weapon on the ground*."

Her eyes had a strong will, confidence, determination, and trust for my ability to beat the whale. She clearly had a way to beat the crab.

Perhaps it was as much of a gamble as my way of beating the whale, but since she sincerely believed I could pull it off, I had to respond the same way.

"Yeah... I believe you."

I felt her resolve and accepted her choice. I wouldn't stop her from going because she was a tian. I'd said I would support her, and stopping her wouldn't be it.

I would believe that she could handle the crab, and I myself would go and beat the whale. That was my current way of supporting her.

"Let's do it, Ray," she said. "Let's put an end to the foul legacy of those ruins."

She then removed her mask and smiled.

I responded with a smile of my own. "Yeah!"

Thus began the final round in the battle against the weapons reigning over both heaven and earth.

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About a certain craftsman...

Flagman.

The name that would later survive on many pre-ancient civilization relics was known all across the continent during the time when the civilization was thriving.

His knowledge and ideas were on a whole other level. It was said that the very prosperity before the arrival of the ancient civilization — the incarnations — was caused by the technological revolution brought about by Flagman.

His technology felt as if it had come from another world. Naturally, all the countries wanted it, but he never bound himself to just a single one.

He never created anything specific because he was hired or commissioned to do it; he only provided his products to those countries that gave him the funds, resources, workforce, and let him make whatever he wanted.

It wasn't uncommon for his weapons to be used against one another in battlefields.

Some considered monopolizing him, while others wanted to assassinate him before others could use his talents to make more new weapons, but those plans never came to fruition.

Instead, countries which treated him favorably, like the Zweier Imperium, began receiving products Flagman considered necessary for them. The very first non-weapon he ever made, an environment-improvement tool, went to the Zweier Imperium.

Because of that, other countries began to hide their ulterior motives, ending their efforts to make an enemy out of him.

Eventually, the continent began revolving around Flagman, and after a quarter of a century of technological prosperity, the Extra-Continental Vessel and the thirteen incarnations appeared.

The countries that first contacted those incarnations launched a preemptive strike against them with Flagman's weaponry.

However, not even their strongest weapons stood a chance.

Faced with the sudden, drastic change on the continent, Flagman resolved to design weapons stronger than any he'd ever made before, and use all the countries' powers to create them.

The danger the continent was in was one reason he did it, but he had something even more important driving him: a sense of rivalry.

He had technology surpassing all others and had spent his whole life on research, so seeing his many weapons get turned to scrap so easily made him want to challenge the forces responsible and ultimately emerge victorious.

That led to the creation of pre-ancient civilization weapons such as the Prism Dragons and the throne. They were, without a doubt, unmatched, and had they been created before the incarnations came, they would have changed the course of history.

Alas, even that was nothing before the incarnations.

The Prism Dragons fell to them, while the throne couldn't be activated because its energy lines were cut off.

Thus, the pre-ancient civilization was destroyed by the incarnations.

However, there were weapons that were being created even after the very last normal weapon was destroyed and all the countries had fallen.

They were the anti-incarnation superweapons.

The concept behind them was to analyze, recreate, and utilize the incarnations' own powers for use against them.

Flagman was involved in the creation of the foundation, but he left the rest of the creation process to the machines themselves.

He was ready to die at the hands of the incarnations, so he left behind weapons that would continue to develop without him, all for the purpose of beating the incarnations.

One of them was Superweapon No. 3, Acra-Vesta, which would end up lying dormant in a mountain that had once been Zweier Imperium territory.

Flagman provided it with the foundation, concept, half of the analysis, and the name. The still-living researchers built the facility, and the rest of it was all left to Acra-Vesta itself.

None of that was different from any other superweapon, but Acra-Vesta was unique in one way: it was created as a counter to a specific enemy — the Incarnation of Beasts.

Flagman had been a true anomaly his whole life — not just among people, but perhaps even in the world itself. Despite this, there had been one person who had treated him kindly, valued his talents more than anyone else, and treasured him like family. His name was Imperator Wolfgang, and he'd lost his life to that very incarnation.

Thus, Acra-Vesta, built in the imperium's lands, was the only superweapon that embodied not only Flagman's rivalrous spirit and hope for the future, but his personal grudge, as well.

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Having completed going down the mountain, Acra was now moving southwards at its regular speed.

Vesta, its other half, was following it from the heavens.

The airship was significantly faster than the legged tank, but their current speed was completely in sync.

The units were separate, but they operated as one, and Vesta was simply slowing down to avoid leaving Acra behind.

Some would expect Vesta to have to move three hundred times faster to make up for the three hundred times larger distance, but that wasn't the way it worked.

Space Dilution was centered around Vesta, so its speed remained the same as before.

Normally, Acra would hold on to Vesta — the opposite of what they had before the split — letting Vesta move at its own speed.

However, though weak, there were signs of incarnations nearby, so Vesta couldn't undo the Space Dilution, and they had to move in their battle formation.

Suddenly, Vesta noticed an incarnation drawing close to it. "Incarnations detected."

Vesta's search capabilities easily extended all the way to Gideon, so it could sense enemies beyond even the 300,000 metels of its realm.

Without this ability, it wouldn't be able to use its lasers to shoot down any incoming enemies, so it was crucial for its operations.

On the other hand, most of its processing power and payload was split between the laser cannons, search devices, Mutual Repair, and Space Dilution, so it couldn't have any weapons besides the lasers, nor did it have all that much defense.

The weapons meant to cover those problems were still mid-development, so it didn't have them equipped.

As a standalone airship, it would be considered a frail failure, but that wasn't a problem, for as long as Acra was around, Vesta would be indestructible.

"Target approaching at high speeds." Vesta's search systems looked for the enemy's exact position.

It was coming from...

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Ten minutes ago, Prism Rider, Ray Starling

We promised to destroy the machines — with Azurite going for the crab on the ground and me taking out the whale in the sky — and split up.

Tom would support Azurite, so now I was alone with Nemesis and Silver.

"So, Ray," Nemesis spoke up. "The method you have in mind is the Black Warcoat's skill, right?"

"Yeah." I nodded as my coat waved in the wind.

Its Light Absorption skill gathered light and stored it as energy which it would probably use for the other skill, which was most likely a giant laser beam like the one used by Monochrome the UBM.

It had to be capable of destroying the whale.

"Hmm, well, the compatibility is certainly there. You can finish charging the coat by letting it absorb the whale's lasers, and since, like you said, lasers don't lose power over distance, it doesn't matter how much the whale's expanded its surroundings."

"No. We'll have to get close," I said, correcting her misconception.

"What?"

"It expanded the distance by *a lot*. Even a slight error while targeting would make the beam fly completely off the mark, so we need to get close enough to at least see it clearly."

From what Tom told us, the area around the whale was like a different realm where both the sky and the ground seemed extremely distant.

His assumption was that the distance couldn't be any less than several hundred thousand meters.

So to make sure my laser hit it, we had to get as close to it as possible first.

"We'll counter the vacuum by preemptively compressing the air around us using Silver's Wind Hoof," I said. "There's not much MP left in Gouz-Maise, but it's enough for some decent compression."

That would be my substitute for a space suit.

"Honestly, I'm more worried about the lasers than the vacuum," I added. "I have no idea if Monochrome and The Black Shield will be enough for them."

"That's true, but I see a flaw in your idea," said Nemesis.

"Which would be?"

"You said you would compress the air around us, but it would be limited, no? We'd run out of it long before we reached the whale. Silver can't run in a vacuum, you know that from when we fought Monochrome, don't you?"

"I do. That's why we're I'm not making him run."

"Nh?" My words caused Nemesis to make a confused face.

"Listen, Nemesis, this isn't like the Monochrome battle," I said. "We aren't chasing something that can rise to the sky at supersonic speeds."

The main problem back then had been that the enemy was high up in the sky and moved higher if threatened. What about the whale, though?

"There might be a several hundred thousand meters between us, but *it's actually only about a thousand meters in the air.*"

"Several hundred thousand meters are just a thousand?" she asked.

"The distance is only messed up in the space around it. It's not affecting anything outside."

It was hard to comprehend with our standard laws, but in this case, the several hundred thousand and the thousand were actually the same distance.

That allowed us to do something that we couldn't do against Monochrome.

"What are you planning?" Nemesis asked, despite already knowing the answer. You could tell by the stiff smile on her face, to which I smiled back.

The answer was painfully simple. It would let us get to the whale faster, and without making Silver waste any air for movement.

Our method of getting to the whale...

"We just have to go above it and *fall* for hundreds of thousands of meters."

...was exactly the same as its means of attack.

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Quartierlatin, town outskirts, sky

"The enemy is *descending from straight above*." Vesta's systems and optical sensors spotted a black mass falling towards it. It was Ray and Silver.

"Intercepting."

As Ray endlessly accelerated through the vacuum around Vesta, it activated its laser cannons and began shooting him.

The sophisticated search system made it impossible for them to miss.

However, all the lasers were consumed by the darkness — the black color covering Silver.

“No effect.”

Dozens of lasers were consumed by the coat, doing no damage.

Vesta’s upper part was its blind spot. It was originally supposed to be equipped with secondary weapons meant to cover it, but unfortunately, it hadn’t had the time to develop them.

Still, even without them, the lasers should’ve been able to shoot just about anything down with a good enough barrage.

The problem here was that the lasers didn’t seem to have any effect at all.

As Vesta’s artificial intelligence began operating to find a solution to this problem...

Enemy spotted.

...Acra from down below informed it of another threat.

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“Enemy spotted.”

As Acra went to the south, it was hindered by eight people.

“Are you sure you wanna do this by yourself?” asked one of the eight men who had the same face. “And was it really okay for you to remove the mask?”

“Yes,” said the ninth person. “And you already knew my face, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeaaah... It’s Ray who’s weird for not realizing.”

“Heh heh, he really is.”

The eight were Tom, who’d already fought Acra once. They split up, leaving the only non-Tom alone.

The person had no entry in Acra’s logs.

“No sign of incarnations,” Acra said.

Indeed, the last one wasn’t an incarnation, but Acra-Vesta had been set to ignore all human casualties. Thus, it would head forward even if it had to crush someone in its way.

“Advancing while retaining speed.”

It would just keep going forward. That was Acra’s sole weapon. The absolute defense from Space Fixation made it into an object that couldn’t be destroyed, no matter what it crashed into. Nothing could surpass its toughness.

Though faced with Acra’s deadly charge, Azurite didn’t move an inch.

She just held a Job Crystal in hand...

“Job Change — ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■.”

...and shattered it.

Acra paid no heed to that and just continued speeding through the ground with its legs akin to twisted thorns.

Azurite’s slender body was about to be torn apart by the legs, but before that happened, she voiced the name of a skill.

“*Release.*”

“...?”

Now, even after Acra had passed her, Azurite was still standing.

Though she was supposed to be caught in its legs and badly wounded, if not dead, not even her silky hair was damaged.

There was only one difference about her — the azure blade in her hand was glowing.

"Repeating attack... error." Upon realizing that its attack failed, Acra tried to turn around and face Azurite again, *but it couldn't*.

As it attempted a turn, a few of its legs detached from its body and fell.

"Analyzing damage. Initiating repairs." As a machine, Acra felt nothing about its impenetrable defense being broken. It would just mechanically fix itself with mutual repair.

However, that...

"Repair... *impossible*."

...was something that could never happen again.

"That wound is *the origin*," Azurite said with her back to the machine. Acra had just lost its legs, which were under Space Fixation's absolute protection, and couldn't fix them despite its impressive repair powers. "You have not 'lost' the legs. The 'you without those legs' has *become the original you*."

Thus, the damage could never be repaired.

Acra's repair function was in Vesta, rather than itself, yet Azurite had just stated that not even that mattered to the wounds she'd given — *the origins she'd etched.*

"This blade of azure severs all," she told it. "The wounds it bestows never heal. It is the blade that etches inescapable origins."

Azurite gently swung her blade, and the empty space it passed was actually torn. This unfathomable sharpness was the true nature of her sword.

It was the kingdom's most prized treasure, an anomaly of a relic, and the legendary blade said to have been wielded by the founder and first king of Altar.

"The Primeval Sword, Altar shall cut all that you are!"

It was a sword... and an *Irregularity*.

"The Primeval Sword, Altar — matching data found. Wielder — no matching data."

Even the database that had been built in the time of the pre-ancient civilization had records of Altar. As one would expect, however, it had no info on the wielder.

Thus, Acra released a question-like tone, and Azurite was courteous enough to answer.

"I am the one who shall wield Altar as I stand alongside them as the vanguard resisting all that menace the kingdom."

The words contained her will and determination, and the words that followed were proof that she alone was capable of wielding Altar.

"I am the first princess of the Kingdom of Altar — Sacred Princess, Altimia Azurite Altar."

It was none other than the name of the one who inherited the blade, Altar, and the country named after it.

Azurite, also known as Sacred Princess, Altimia, looked at Acra with her unmasked eyes.

Facing the machine as it stood up using its remaining legs, she declared, "By these names, the duties that come with them, and by my own will, I shall not tolerate anyone menacing the people of the kingdom."

Then she pointed the tip of her blade at Acra, cracked a fearless smile, and asked:

"*Are you prepared?*"

Chapter Nine: Their Choice

About The Primeval Sword, Altar

"The Primeval Sword, Altar" was the name of a legendary azure blade that had existed *even before* the time of the pre-ancient civilization.

It was a transcendental sword of immense power that was said to be able to cut anything.

Two thousand years ago, during the final years of the pre-ancient civilization, it had disappeared from the face of history, and resurfaced only about five centuries ago.

Back then, the entire continent had been in a state of perpetual war, like the modern Tenchi.

It was the time after the time of the immensely powerful Draconic Emperor, King of Kings, and The Lynx.

The Draconic Emperor's long life expired, the King of Kings was sealed by The Earth, The Ocean, and The Atmos of that era, while The Lynx simply disappeared somewhere.

With the King of Kings's disappearance, the vast lands to the west of the continent lost their ruler, causing many to fight for control over the fertile lands near the west coast.

Some wanted as much profit as possible, some tried to replicate what the King of Kings had done, some simply wanted to defend themselves. The reasons were varied, but the west was in a state of chaos nonetheless.

The situation quickly stabilized in the southwest, under the control of the long-lived races, and in the northwest, where people were unified by their worship of the pre-ancient civilization, but the space right between them had no common banner to fly, so it ended up becoming a gathering of small countries fighting with each other for a long time.

That situation was made even worse by the appearance of The Evil.

Eventually, however, there came a man who subjugated all the countries and unified them into one.

His name was *Azurite*.

He started out as a shepherd who was grieved about the war, but it all changed when he chanced upon The Primeval Sword, Altar, buried under some dirt.

The blade chose him, and he became the Sacred King. He used the sword's immense power to fight in the wars, eventually defeated The Evil alongside his friends, and brought stability to the central west part of the continent.

He was Azurite Altar — the first king of the Kingdom of Altar.

"The blade chose him, and he became the Sacred King" meant exactly what it sounded like.

After the destruction of the pre-ancient civilization and the death of its previous owner, The Primeval Sword, Altar, spent centuries untouched and even became a UBM over the years, but that did not change its role — to determine who was suited to wield it and to give them the Special Superior Job of Sacred King, or, if the wielder was female, Sacred Princess.

The first king, Azurite, qualified for this role and became the Sacred King, letting him wield Altar.

There were two types of Superior Jobs: those who could be reached through talent and hard work, and those for which no amount of work and aptitude was enough.

Hierophant — or High Priestess if female — and The Saint were good examples of each.

They were both Superior Jobs with a heavy focus on healing magic, but there was an important difference between them.

First, the conditions for Hierophant:

One — reach level 500 with only jobs linked to the clergy, such as Priest, Temple Knight, or Monk.

Two — find 1,000 people who had maxed out the Priest job, have them nominate you for the Hierophant job, gather their signatures, and bring them to the priest grouping crystal.

Three — complete the special job change quest.

As hard as these conditions seemed, it was entirely possible to fulfill them with just hard work and talent.

The same thing couldn't be said about The Saint's conditions.

To gain that job, you had to be a woman who had the blood — the genetic information — of a certain family, and complete a special quest.

The Saint prioritized bloodline over all hard work and talent.

Basically, normal Superior Jobs could be acquired through aptitude and determination, while the Special Superior Jobs had unique conditions which excluded the vast majority of even the most talented people.

Sacred King and Sacred Princess were Special Superior Jobs that could only be acquired by people with aptitude for The Primeval Sword, Altar.

The first king had used the blade's name for his country, giving rise to the kingdom of knights.

The royal family of these lands had been inheriting the blade ever since, and because they had the blood of the first king in their veins, the children of their family inherited the first king's aptitude for Altar.

Not all of them had it, however. In fact, only one child in every few generations did; those who did were actually quite rare. Not even the previous king, Eldor Zeo Altar, had been an exception.

His daughter Altimia, however, possessed this gift.

Though born to two blonde-haired parents, she herself had azure hair. This was definitely not because of infidelity, but more like an atavism.

The first king's hair color had been azure, and every now and then, the gene resurfaced in his descendants. That detail alone was considered auspicious to the point that the azure-haired child was always given the first king's first name, Azurite, as a middle name.

However, unlike most of the previous blue-haired Altarian royals, Altimia also had Azurite's immense aptitude for Altar.

Soon after she was born, the blade, kept in the treasury, began glowing blue, and Altimia, despite being still a baby, was given the Sacred Princess job.

Needless to say, her father, Eldor, instantly knew that his first daughter was the blade's chosen one.

However, he didn't want to force her into a life of fighting just because of how she was born.

The sentiment was similar to his stance on Masters, but this surely must have been stronger than that.

He couldn't tolerate the idea that an infant, not even months old, would be forced into a life of strife just because she was chosen by an ancient power.

Thus, he kept her job, as well as Altar's sudden gleaming, hidden from the public.

Revealing it would have given him cards to use against foreign countries, and it would definitely have enlivened his people, but he still prioritized his daughter's peace.

Still, he was well aware that, as royalty and as someone calling this world her home, Altimia would not be able to live without knowing battle at all. Simply having a power like hers put her in danger, and he wanted to make sure she didn't hurt herself.

Thus, Eldor revealed the truth to and asked the help of two people: Langley, the Celestial Knight and an old friend of his, and the Arch Sage, his own teacher.

Langley taught Altimia in the ways of the sword, while the Arch Sage taught her about how the world worked. Thanks to that, the girl grew up to be someone who wouldn't misuse her power as the Sacred Princess.

However, there was one thing no one expected.

Langley had soon realized that Altimia's status as the Sacred Princess wasn't the only thing special about her — she also had a talent for swordfighting.

It was so immense, in fact, that she surpassed even Langley, and when combined with the supreme power of sword only she could wield, her talent made her the strongest swordfighter in Altar.

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Quartierlatin, town outskirts

"Hhn!" Altimia didn't even dodge Acra's charge.

With a breath, she dove right into the rows of its needle-like legs, evaded them all with supreme precision, and swung Altar's azure blade.

The sword that could cut everything tore through the fixed space around Acra, then through its own armor like it was nothing.

She found it easier to swing than a feather. Many would feel that that actually made it harder to use, but to Altimia, handling the sword came as naturally as breathing.

Another thing of note was her speed. She'd originally used the Swordmaster job to hide her identity. But when switching to Sacred Princess, she'd activated the job's passive skill, The Inheritor of the Sacred

Blade, which multiplied all her stats by ten whenever she wielded Altar.

It was one of the things that made the Special Superior Job so impressive. With her speed now exceeding 50,000, she was too fast for Acra to keep up with.

She surpassed the speed of sound five times over, and Acra, a machine which dedicated most of its Resources to Space Fixation and Mutual Repair, had no way to counter her. As powerful as Acra-Vesta's abilities were, they consumed all of its available resources.

Thus, when faced with Altar — an enemy against which its functions meant nothing — it lost all of its advantages.

"Requesting backup." Acra quickly calculated what it had to do, and decided to request that Vesta release one of its kinetic energy bombs.

Though Vesta was in a battle itself, it quickly acknowledged the request and released one of its fins right over Acra.

Tom, who was watching Vesta's surroundings, quickly called out, "Princess! The thing above just released a fin!"

Not even a Special Superior Job such as hers was sturdy enough to survive this attack. That was the very reason why Tom had been watching Vesta — to let her know when she had to back away.

But...

"Just one...? There is no need to retreat, then," she replied.

"Eh?" Tom couldn't understand what she meant.

"I shall not allow it to damage Quartierlatin any further. We are too close to the town. There might be casualties this time."

"Well, I get your point, but it's already falling down!" Tom was already making seven of himself retreat, and the fin was falling faster by the second.

Just like the first one, it was going to reach speeds of seven times greater than the speed of sound.

"If it is only a little bit faster than me... then I can match it," Altimia declared as she stood where it would fall.

Her claim was based on not just her AGI, but on her kinetic vision, as well. That was what had allowed her to keep an eye on Tom while he was moving at supersonic speeds and she herself was only half as fast.

She correctly calculated the moment the fin would reach the ground, and...

"*Cut*."

...with a skill bearing a basic name, swung her azure blade on it.

It was hard to describe what happened next.

The gigantic fin, now split in two, gently descended to the ground.

There was none of the insane speed it had gained during its free fall through the vacuum.

"What did you just do...?" Tom asked, completely dumbfounded.

"*I just cut its kinetic energy.*"

She said it like it was nothing special, but that definitely wasn't something you could cut.

However, Altar made it possible.

It was a blade that could sever matter, space, and even energy, regardless of whether the thing had a shape or not.

Tom knew that well, so the main source of his shock was the skill Altimia was demonstrating. She'd effectively cut through something that moved at seven times the speed of sound, while she herself was at five.

When fighting Ray during their first encounter, Altar had been dormant, and she'd been trying to incapacitate, rather than kill, him.

Now that she'd unleashed Altar's and the Sacred Princess's powers, she definitely had enough power to match many solo fighting-focused Superiors.

Altimia began to silently ponder that. There was no doubt that she had supreme power. Perhaps if she'd taken part in the war, she could've defeated Logan and protected her mentor, and maybe even saved her father from Franklin, too.

Even now, she was often tortured by regret at the fact that she hadn't stood at the front lines, despite being the kingdom's strongest tian.

However, what'd stopped her from taking part in the war were Eldor's own words.

One more thing, Altimia... I do not want to push people to fight just because they have the power to. And that's why, Altimia... you don't have to fight.

His words had been gentle and full of fatherly love, but as she was now, she would never nod to them. Though it was far too late, she'd developed a better answer.

"Father... you claimed that you didn't want me to fight merely because I had the power to. I am extremely grateful for your consideration, kindness, and love, but...”

She stopped to cut off more of Acra’s legs and armor and continued to talk to her late father.

“I have now decided, by myself, to join the Masters in battle.”

That was the path the current Altimia was choosing to take.

“I will not be the pacifist you wanted me to be, nor the same me who distanced Masters and tried to bear it all by myself.”

As she muttered that, the face of a certain Master came to her mind.

All Masters follow their own wills and choose how they’re gonna be. As a Master, I choose to protect you and Quartierlatin.

Those were the words Ray had told her yesterday. His choice was his and his alone, and born of nothing but his freedom.

Those words had left such an impression on her that she had gotten the urge to choose something herself.

“I shall stand with them at the front lines and resist all that menace the kingdom.”

Inspired by Ray, she took a step forward on her own path.

“Father, please watch over me from the heavens... and see where the battle I chose leads me.”

With those words, Altimia split Acra’s body in half and looked up at the sky.

The lights high above were proof that her comrade in arms was fighting, as well.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The whale’s field was a strange space.

The moment we entered, I instantly became unable to see Quartierlatin. The increase in distance made it appear far away.

I was free falling down and accelerating towards the whale below.

Since there was no air, I didn’t feel any wind — the compressed air barrier protected me from it, but I felt no resistance behind it, either — and since there was nothing but sky around me, I had completely lost my sense of distance and was now left with no idea of how fast I was going. I was just falling through the cloudless sky — and I wasn't sure if it even qualified as that, considering it was a vacuum.

This would be the fourth time I'd fallen from the sky like this.

The first time was when my sister wheedled me into going skydiving in a South American jungle, I reflected.

The second time was when I first logged in to Dendro *and Cheshire dropped me to Altea.*

The third time was just a couple days ago, when I failed to reach Monochrome and had to go back down like I was falling.

This fall, however, was way more silent than any of those had been.

This descent through a soundless space felt more like drowning in the sea.

The light coming from the sky became distant as I continued this seemingly endless fall.

But then, something entered my vision.

"Here they come again! More lasers!" Nemesis exclaimed.

From a distance at which I still couldn't properly see it, the whale attacked us with dozens of laser rays. Most were consumed by the Black Warcoat covering Silver, but some that came from a different part of the whale grazed me.

As you'd expect, the whale had powerful anti-air defense. It was probably aware that attacks from above were its weakness. After all, if you could somehow bring something heavy above it, you could do the same thing to it as it was doing with its fins.

The lasers were there to prevent that.

If those lasers changed an object's trajectory even slightly, it would become a major difference mid-fall, and it would miss the whale.

Considering that that would make the object fall near the town instead, it wasn't really an option for us. The chances of hitting it were low to begin with, anyway.

However, things were different with us being the thing that was dropping towards it. My Monochrome could absorb the lasers, and Silver could move to make up for any slight changes in our fall trajectory or the whale's position.

"Those lasers also help us know where it is," Nemesis added to my thoughts.

“Yeah.”

Lasers went straight, so the whale could only be directly where they came from, and we simply had to fall in that direction.

I was actually beginning to see an insanely small dot in the distance, and I had no doubts that it was the whale.

However, I couldn’t attack it yet. If Shining Despair did what I expected it to, firing it from the top was out of the question, as it could damage the town, too.

I had to get to where I could see the whale clearly, and fire from its side or the bottom.

“But... can we survive long enough to get there?” she wondered.

“We’ll have to.”

I used the Black Warcoat to protect Silver, as his Wind Hoof protected us from the vacuum.

Naturally, for all the Monochrome surface area I dedicated to him, I had less of it to protect myself. I could block some of it using my Black Shield, but some still grazed me, sometimes going dangerously deep.

Also, though Monochrome’s Light Absorption dealt with the light, it couldn’t absorb all of the heat. The many lasers hitting us were slowly increasing our temperatures, and my skin already had signs of Burns and Scorches on it.

But we had already fallen about a third of the distance to the whale. There was no going back now, and I, praying that they didn’t land a critical hit, had no choice but to continue.

There was just one problem. As we drew closer to the whale, the whale gained better angles to attack us from.

“Ray?! Gh... There are more and more lasers I can’t protect you against!”

I silently gasped as another laser hit me.

If this keeps up... No! Not yet!

“We’ll reach it, no matter what!” I shouted.

Azurite has to be fighting that crab right now. I have no reason to give up!

“Ah...! Ray! There’s something above us!”

“Above?! But the whale’s below us!” I looked up, and what I saw shocked me. “That’s...!”

What was falling towards us was...

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Zero General, Gifted Barbaros

"If you're to take Emilio, maybe I should go, as well?" the voice in my memory said.

"Mina, you don't like using dragon carriages, do you?" another voice responded. *"Not to mention that there's count work to be done."*

I instantly understood that my life was flashing before my eyes. When on the verge of death, the brain projected the past into the hazy consciousness.

I'd been through this a number of times before. Once when the current The Ram was young and we'd fought a powerful UBM together, once when I'd fought other SMTF members during the imperator accession civil war, and that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Looking back at it, it was strange to reflect that I'd survived to thirty-one with so many deadly battles on my record.

"That's true, but... I'll ask again. It is *safe, right?"*

"Of course. We will come back in less than a month. I imagine I'll be missing your cookies dearly at that point."

During some of these near-death experiences, I often saw visions of the past. Most of them were of my youth in the Barbaros household, but what I was seeing this time was different.

"You want a cookie?"

"You can't. You're too young for cookies. You don't even have a full set of teeth yet."

The memory was too vague for me to remember how old I was. However, I could clearly see two people in it.

"Ha ha ha! Emilio, just wait a few months and you will have the teeth for them. Or maybe you'll be able to eat them by the time we come back from Dryfe. Who knows?"

One was a man reminiscent of my image in the mirror...

"Oh, then I'll have to work hard and welcome you with my best cookies yet."

And the other was a gentle-looking lady with a right eye much like his, and a beautiful green eye...

“Emilio...”

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“...ther...” The vision I saw on the verge of death vanished along with the strange sound that left my lips.

“I... I’m still alive, I see.” I quickly checked my window to assess my state and realized I had less than a tenth of my total HP left.

I also had the Bleeding and a number of Broken Bones status effects. If I’d continued drifting in that vision for just a few minutes more, I’d have been as good as dead.

Moving my broken arm, I reached into my inventory and took out a Potion, as well as drugs that increased regeneration and sped up the process at which injury-based debuffs vanished.

My HP stopped decreasing, and then began going up instead.

Waiting until I was sufficiently healed, I stayed collapsed on the ground, pondering something.

Specifically, why was I still alive.

I’d suffered lethal damage from just the shockwave alone. The Brooch and my SJ stats had kept me from dying instantly, but considering the situation and the height from which I’d fallen, it didn’t make sense that I was still alive.

“Was it the growth here?” I wondered out loud as I realized that I was lying on some plants in some garden.

It really didn’t seem like enough to soften my fall and keep me alive, though.

Thinking there had to be something else, I looked around and saw a tree so large that it left me speechless.

Some branches of this brilliantly verdant giant were broken as if something from high up in the sky had just fallen on it.

For some reason, though, lying down and looking up at it gave me some immense déjà vu.

I actually felt like I’d done this before. A very long time ago...

“Milady! You must take shelter within the mansion’s barrier!”

“I know... but I just heard something happen at his tree. I’ll only take a look. You take shelter and treat everyone's wounds."

"...!"

As I searched my memories, those voices reached my ears.

One of them was new to me, while the other made my heart shiver, for some reason.

Hearing them also made me realize where I was.

These were the gardens of the Quartierlatin Mansion.

I'd simply happened to fall here by chance.

With that in mind, it was easy to know whose voice that was.

"Good... I can still move," I muttered.

The healing had progressed enough, so I slowly got up from the plants I was lying on. As I stood tall, I heard someone behind me, but I couldn't let myself turn around.

"You are..." a voice said.

I couldn't face her. I was the Dryfean field marshal, and I'd already rejected the option to return to my mother in Quartierlatin.

Thus, I couldn't let myself meet her.

Even if I did, she'd probably treat me like any other trespasser.

I hadn't been here since I was an infant. A whole three decades had passed since then.

The only proof that I was her family, my heterochromia, had been taken away from me by Edelvalsa.

Right now, I was nothing more than an injured man who'd fallen into her garden. The countess would probably see me as a potential threat, and meeting her face-to-face would simply burden her.

After reaching that conclusion, I began dragging my feet towards the gate...

"Emilio?"

...but that word made me freeze.

"...How?" I whispered.

There was no way she could've known. She hadn't even seen my face. My height and build were nothing like when she'd last seen me.

The "me" she'd known was a harmless infant, not this man reeking of blood and gunpowder. How, then, could she speak that name upon seeing me?

"You... You are Emilio, aren't you?"

Silence.

Unable to confirm or deny that, I just stood in place and listened to her words.

"I don't know why, but I had a feeling I would see you soon," she said. "It started yesterday, I believe... I somehow felt like I did back when you and he were still with me."

I'd definitely visited this place yesterday, but how could that have been enough for her to realize who I was?

"Perhaps it was because of the young man's words, but I don't believe it was only that."

I was silent.

"I also met him in a dream last night. 'Emilio is coming home,' he said, still using that strange manner of speech."

That sounded a lot like something I would say when acting as Mario. Why had I decided to use that manner of speech, anyway?

"The town has been in a dreadful state since early morning," she continued. "And then this tree shook at a time like this, so I came out to take a look... and found you. You could say he arranged for us to meet."

Ah, so the "he" she was talking about was my real father.

Oh, I see... so that's why the tree looks so familiar, I thought.

It was the same one that I'd slept under when I was an infant. And it'd saved my life just now. This was definitely a strange day.

Strange things happened on strange days, so perhaps it was only natural that she would realize I was Emilio.

"Emilio... can you show me your face?" she requested.

In response...

"I can't..." I shook my head.

I was now Gifted Barbaros, the Dryfean field marshal.

I hadn't chosen to live as the kingdom's Emilio Quartierlatin, so that name wasn't mine.

Not only that, but I was a man who was willing to destroy Quartierlatin for the sake of the imperium.

Could a person like me face his mother? Certainly not. At least...

"...not at this time," I murmured.

Until this incident and all other issues between the kingdom and the imperium were settled, I had no right to face my mother.

"I understand," she said, accepting my selfish reply and not pressing any further. "I can feel that you are resolved. You have a reason for that, don't you?"

"I do."

"In that case... just finding out that you are alive... is more than enough for me," my mother said in a tearful voice.

Suppressing the urge to turn around, I gave her a promise. "I will... come again... someday." My own voice made me realize I was choking up, too, but I continued regardless. "I have a wife... and a daughter. We will all come visit you someday... no matter what..."

"I'll be waiting... Emilio."

"Yes... Please be in good health... until then," I said. And then I forced myself to begin walking.

"Take care, Emilio."

"I'm off."

With that promise, I left the Quarierlatin mansion.

Albeit barely, Faldreed was still working, so I looked through his eyes and saw the battle between the legged tank... and the first princess.

"Looks like they're engaged in battle now," I muttered.

It turned out that the masked woman really was her.

The disguise was so obvious that I'd actually thought it was a bluff or something. But she could wield Altar, so there was no way she could be anyone else.

I had no orders from the imperator this time. The princess was unrelated to my current mission.

After finding out what was happening on the surface, I looked up at the sky and saw Ray Starling, the Unbreakable slowly descending towards the airship. He was being barraged by lasers, but he was blocking them somehow.

"But he won't last," I muttered. I could tell he was close to his limit.

Just like the princess with her Altar on the surface, the Unbreakable probably had a way of dealing with the airship, too, but as things were, it didn't seem like he'd succeed.

"I don't have much MP and SP left... and I can't really tell what damage the fall did to my brain..." I examined my state. "Well, it won't be a problem."

I used Marionette Squadron Creation a few times in a row.

Many of the trees in town became flying marionettes.

They used a lot of my brain's calculative power even under the best circumstances, and I was making an awful lot of them, despite my condition.

"Gh..." My head rang out in pain, and my left eye socket, where I had Edelvalsa, began to bleed, but I didn't care.

If I didn't do anything, the Unbreakable would break, and the airship's fins would destroy Quartierlatin.

That would make the promise impossible to fulfill.

"Run at maximum capacity!" I ordered. "All units, support the Unbreakable!"

Thus, the hundred flying marionettes took to the sky to protect my promise to my mother, and to protect the possibility leading to the best future.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

What I saw were wooden marionettes with their arms spread like wings.

They were all falling directly down.

"Those are Dr. Mario's!"

I knew because they looked exactly like the one he'd been riding before the kinetic explosion.

Unlike us, who were free falling, they were basically diving through the vacuum, and ended up going ahead of us.

That made the whale's lasers focus on them instead of us, but no matter how many of them were shot down, they kept going forward.

One after the other, they went ahead and took the laser fire in my stead.

"This is..." I whispered.

"Are they opening a path for us?" asked Nemesis.

A path. That had to be it.

The countless marionettes were using themselves to shield me from the lasers and to give me an opening leading to the whale.

"Dr... Mario..."

As one marionette burned to protect me, I looked at its head.

At that moment, I felt like I heard the word “Go.”

This was a vacuum, and the marionette was silent. But I had no trouble understanding that he was urging me keep going forward.

There was only one thing for me to do at this point.

“Nemesis! Silver! Let’s do this!”

“Certainly!” she called.

“Gh...!” agreed Silver.

Chapter Ten: The Warped Hope and the Shining Despair

Vesta

"Enemy count: 158," Vesta said.

Vesta's excellent enemy detection ability let it know the exact number of enemies approaching it. Then it intercepted them all with its lasers, starting from the closest one.

It also knew that there were two kinds of enemies. The majority, which were the wooden marionettes, could be shot down with just one laser, while the weak, incarnation-like entity absorbed all the lasers and continued to fall.

Still launching lasers, Vesta's artificial intelligence processed the situation.

"Moving unit to evade the attackers."

"Denied. Moving any more would negatively affect the Mutual Repairs with Acra."

The Mutual Repair system installed in Acra-Vesta was the reason why Vesta constantly floated above Acra.

Most skills had their limits, and this one was no exception; it had a maximum range of about 300,000 metels. That was almost the exact distance between Acra and Vesta with Space Dilution active.

If either of them went beyond that, the repairs wouldn't work anymore.

At this point in time, Acra had lost most of its legs, rendering it almost immobile, which, in turn, made Vesta unable to move, too.

It was also worth mentioning that Acra could no longer be fixed due to the attacks from Altar, but Vesta was the core of the matter right now.

The machine was faced with a dilemma.

It could either evade the enemies and lose its repair ability, or...

"Analyzing enemies..."

"Measuring mass..."

Vesta's sensors looked for data they hadn't looked at before and quickly concluded that the incarnation and the marionettes were far lighter than the fins Vesta was dropping.

Vesta could quickly fix the damage from the impact they would deliver, so it concluded that they would use something other than kinetic bombing.

"No explosives or explosive magic detected."

That meant that this wasn't a kamikaze attack of some sort, making it likely that it was either a hijack or simply a close-range attack. Upon reaching that conclusion...

"Enacting countermeasure."

...it went for the kill.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Using the opening created by Dr. Mario, we advanced towards the whale.

The lasers either hit the marionettes or were absorbed by Monochrome.

We single-mindedly accelerated to our target.

"It's only an estimated 40,000 metels away now!" Nemesis shouted, making it clear that we were at the home stretch now.

Silver started using the air around him to slowly break.

At the speed we were going, without breaking, we would pass the whale in the blink of an eye, not even giving me a chance to aim at it.

Monochrome's Shining Despair was fully charged, and all I had to do now was fire it. However, doing it from the top would endanger Quartierlatin, so I would have to fire at either its side or around a bottom area where there weren't many lasers.

We wouldn't have any problems reaching those spots. I'd found out just how good Silver was at descending in the Monochrome battle.

I was starting to feel pretty confident. "We're gonna make it..."

Suddenly, everything changed.

"Eh?" For a moment, I was completely lost about what just had happened.

Of course I was. After all, the whale, which had only been about as big as a pinky until now, *had suddenly become a gigantic wall right in front of* *me*.

"...!"

I quickly realized what had happened: *It had canceled the field*.

It had undone the field meant to protect it, instantly returning that vast distance between us back to normal.

The whale that had been off in the distance was now right in front of my eyes.

Though Silver had slowed us down, we were still going at the speed of sound.

In barely a moment, we would crash into the airship and quickly disintegrate.

The whale would sustain some damage, too, but it could easily fix itself.

It knew that our combined mass wasn't enough to completely destroy it, and that was why it had undone the field. That wouldn't cause much of a problem to it — it just had to activate it again after we crashed.

It had analyzed our and its own abilities and done the best possible move for the situation.

It felt like a proud demonstration of its abilities.

Time seemed to slow down as the impact was drawing closer, and we...

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19XX years ago

Deep within an underground shelter, a man silently glared at a set of blueprints.

Though now bordering on elderly, he was none other than Flagman.

The once-renowned apex of craftsmen from the era that would eventually be known as the pre-ancient civilization was now hiding within an underground shelter and designing weapons all by himself.

He'd been doing nothing but working on weapons ever since the invasion of the incarnations.

Even after all was lost, he had shut himself in a shelter specialized to be impossible to detect, eating only preserved foods of his own design and drinking only water while doing nothing but research, all day and night long, for the sole purpose of destroying the incarnations.

He'd already tried all the technology available while the pre-ancient civilization still existed. There were even some secret plants that had already begun automatically constructing the superweapons he’d designed.

However, he didn’t think it was enough, and there was no better judge of that than him.

He knew better than anyone that he needed to use newer technologies that had eluded even him so far. Otherwise, he wouldn’t stand a chance against those Infinite-class monsters.

Thus, he continued doing nothing but thinking of new weapons.

However, the look in his eyes made it clear just how drained he was.

The reason for this was his most recent failure.

Edelvalsa, the autonomous semi-bioweapon he’d created to defeat the Incarnation of Beasts, had unexpectedly fallen under the incarnations’ influence and changed completely.

Because of that, he’d had no choice but to seal Edelvalsa away and rework most of his planned weapons from the basics.

It felt like rebuilding a collapsed tower, and it was draining both mentally and physically.

It had even made him wonder if all his effort was meaningless. Remembering that made his hands shake, either due to fear or madness — it wasn’t clear.

He’d spent the last few decades doing nothing but thinking of weapons all by his lonesome. A normal person would’ve gone insane at this point, and perhaps he was already there.

“I need a change of pace...” he murmured.

Even that was something he hadn’t had in dozens of years.

He decided to design a unit as he desired. It didn’t even have to be a weapon. He simply wanted to invent something by letting his whims take charge — like he had back when he’d still had friends and companions.

That was when he discovered something in the warehouse.

“This is...”

It was a half-finished Prism Steed frame.

Having an excellent memory, Flagman instantly remembered why it wasn’t complete.

“Oh, it’s Thunder’s first frame.”

This was the original frame he’d started when he’d wanted to create a Prism Steed focused on the use of lightning.

However, during development, he'd realized that the material used for the frame was sub-optimal for the end result's planned abilities, so he'd restarted and built a new frame from a different material, eventually constructing the Prism Steed now known as Gold Thunder.

"Guess I'll try working with this," he murmured.

Leaving the base frame as it was and changing only its functions, he would let his creative freedom take charge and lead it to completion.

Thus, he began working on it.

"This material is good for wind... No, then it'd be the same as Jade Storm."

"Then I'll change my approach completely and try... this theory, maybe?"

"All I have so far is the torso... For the rest, instead of emulating some already-existing parts, I should use some new gimmicks..."

"Now this is interesting. Too bad I don't have Horse Riding or Riding. I'd need those to try it out."

While working on the frame, he made the exact same face he'd once made often — the face of a creative child proud of his work.

"All right. Done. But... what do I name it?"

Days and months passed, and Flagman eventually completed the Prism Steed. However, he couldn't find a name that would reflect its nature.

The Prism Steed that had wind as its power had been given the strong name of "Storm."

He didn't want to give that same name to a unit with different strengths and abilities, but he couldn't think of anything good.

"I'll breathe some outside air," he said one day, at last. "You come with me."

That morning, Flagman left the shelter for the first time in long while, taking the Prism Steed with him.

The atmosphere, the environment... everything was capable of sustaining human life, but the scenery had none of what he had created.

It was all nature, and no culture.

The civilization born with his intelligence as one of its pillars had crumbled and disappeared without a trace.

The genius silently looked at the scenery.

"Hm...?"

Suddenly, he felt the wind caress his side. The western wind, Zephyrus, was heading to the east.

He followed the invisible wind’s destination and saw a sunrise.

“Wind...”

Certain words came to his mind like a revelation.

“This unit is ‘Wind.’”

There was no need for exaggerated or strong names here.

“This is the wind that will, by its nature, blow towards the new dawn.”

This unit was designed in a way unlike any other, and the post-apocalyptic world reflected in his eyes was completely new to him. Thus, he decided to use a new, different naming system than he had used for any other Prism Steed.

This unit’s name was...

“Zephyrus Silver.”

Satisfied with the name, Flagman rubbed the mechanical steed’s face.

“Zephyrus Silver, I’m not giving you a mission.”

Flagman spoke to the final Prism Steed he’d ever created.

“Among all the things I have created, you’re probably the only one that’s free.”

Silver wasn’t just another weapon built to kill the incarnations — he was a manifestation of Flagman’s creative freedom, built simply because Flagman had wanted to do it.

“One day, when you get an owner... gallop through the world as you like,” he said. Surrounded by wind and nature, he pointed towards the sunrise. “Join your owner and walk through the wind as you see fit.”

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Over 1,900 years had passed since then.

The artificial intelligence installed in Silver remembered his creator’s words. And he realized... that now was the time to walk through the wind.

“■■■■■.”

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

We couldn’t comprehend what was suddenly happening.

“Wh...?!” I gasped in shock.

“What happened?” asked Nemesis.

I clearly remembered that we were about to crash into the whale and disintegrate.

However, that hadn’t happened.

In fact, we *were actually below it now*.

All the acceleration from before, the hull that was right in front of my eyes, the imminent impact — all of it was gone.

I had no idea why this was happening.

But I did know one thing: that there was no better time than now.

“NEMESIIIIIIIISSSSS!” I shouted.

“I know!” She instantly changed into her greatsword form.

I swung the black blade into the whale’s armor right above me, shouting, “VENGEANCE IS MINE!”

It doubled and sent back all the damage from the lasers — even that absorbed by Monochrome and Nemesis in shield form.

“Lower hull, lost,” Vesta reported.

The hit wasn’t enough to destroy it, but the armor’s disappearance left its mechanical insides — including the engines — exposed.

At this point, I didn’t know which part was responsible for the Mutual Repair function.

“...I see it!”

Right as the opening I’d created was beginning to repair itself, one of the engines inside lit up.

The timing of that engine’s activation gave it all away — it could only serve one purpose.

Thus, I now knew where to aim.

“MONOCHROOOOOOME!”

Following my shout, the Black Warcoat unwrapped itself from Silver and went to my left arm instead.

The material took on a pipe-like form and grew wings like the ones that had once decorated the Void of the Black Sky.

My left arm had become a jet-black, winged cannon.

This feature might perhaps have something to do with the fact that I’d gotten it when I didn’t have my left arm. And though it was my first time using it, the shape made me know exactly what I had to do.

"OAAAGHH!" I roared as I pointed the cannon at the whale right above me, then felt immense energy gather at the end of my left arm.

All the light gathered by Monochrome was becoming condensed, compressed, and turned into an extremely powerful, all-consuming light. It felt like there was a small star forming in my hand.

The overflowing light made the entire Black Warcoat gleam with blinding intensity.

"Ray! She took care of the one on the ground!"

Hearing Nemesis's voice, I glanced down and saw some blue trails tear up the mechanical crab.

I'd told Azurite that there would be an intense light right as I was about to defeat the whale, so that was surely her doing. She'd timed the defeat of the crab with the impending doom of the whale.

That meant we could destroy them both.

"Turning right. Aiming lasers." With its lower hull still broken, the whale began tilting to the side. I was in one of its blind spots, so it was probably trying to put me in range of one of its laser cannons and take me out.

However, it was too late.

Right before I fired, I silently pondered about what Dr. Mario had told me last night.

The pre-ancient civilization had fought the ancient civilization and been thoroughly defeated.

This whale had been left behind by the pre-ancient civilization.

This and the crab below... everything within the ruins had most likely been built to become someone's hope.

Someone from the dying pre-ancient civilization had created these to be the hope of future generations.

Or perhaps this was a remnant of the creator's vision that had never come true, no matter how hard he tried.

The weapon must've been intended for use in battle against enemies, fighting for the goal of protecting the people.

But now, this hope had become warped.

It was trying to destroy the descendants it was supposed to protect.

And since I couldn't tolerate that... I would launch this skill.

“SHINING...”

Oh. Now that I think about it, this name is painfully apt.

“...DESPAAAAAAAAAIIIRRRR!”

A shining despair to burn away the warped hope.

The cannon unleashed a light akin to the brilliance of a sun.

The pillar of light that’d once almost burned the entire village of Torne was now aimed for the heavens.

Releasing light and heat unmatched even by the UBM’s skill of a similar name, the pillar of light pierced through the whale’s insides, evaporating a number of engines, including the one responsible for the repairs.

Chapter Eleven: The End of a Hope

Acra-Vesta

The third anti-incarnation superweapon, Acra-Vesta, had spent 99.9 percent of its existence doing nothing but developing itself.

Following Flagman's ingenious blueprints, that development had continually imitated parts of the incarnation powers he'd analyzed.

Doing so was an extremely difficult task — even Space Fixation and Space Dilution had only been completed recently.

Like Zircon Leader, the supervisor unit of the facility, Acra-Vesta had spent most of the past two millennia doing nothing but preparing for the task.

Most of the past two millennia, but not all...

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It happened shortly after Acra-Vesta's core, the AI block, was completed.

One of the facility's founding technicians and his son, who had taken shelter with him in the living quarters, were looking at Acra-Vesta through the transparent window.

"Dad, is that the thing that will protect us?"

"It is. Acra-Vesta will save everyone."

"Really?"

"Yes. Acra-Vesta is our hope. It will beat the incarnations and save the world."

To protect humanity. To eliminate the incarnations. Acra-Vesta knew those purposes were at the core of its being. Those purposes were what made Acra-Vesta their hope.

"When that happens, will we get to see Mom again?"

"Sure... When the world is at peace again."

The technician patted the child's head, then took the boy's hand, and they left.

Acra-Vesta continued using its sensors to watch as the child used his free hand to wave at it.

The boy came to watch Acra-Vesta's creation a few more times after that. But eventually, an alarm resounded throughout the facility.

[Incarnation of beasts, approaching.]

[To ensure the secrecy of this facility, all personnel and their families must leave and go to another shelter as soon as possible.]

An incarnation had appeared.

Despite the proximity of the enemy it had been created to fight, Acra-Vesta couldn't even move. Only its AI was complete, after all, and creating the rest of itself would take entire millennia.

[Please make your way to the surface.]

[I hope you all see each other in the shelter.]

Upon hearing the message resounding through the facility, Acra-Vesta's AI began calculating the likelihood that they could cross the surface, which was still being menaced by the incarnations, and make their way to the nearest shelter.

The chances turned out to be extremely slim.

It didn't know why, but Acra-Vesta watched the evacuation through the facility's cameras.

One of them showed a familiar child hop on a vehicle alongside his father.

The boy was waving.

Perhaps it was his way of saying goodbye to his brief home, or maybe he was waving at someone the camera couldn't see.

The gesture could've been directed to anyone — even Acra-Vesta.

Whatever it was, the child left the facility... and never came back.

After that, Acra-Vesta did nothing but bring itself closer to completion.

At the present time, it was still far from complete, but it had developed itself enough to fight, which turned out to be necessary, given the reappearance of the incarnations.

Acra-Vesta prioritized the elimination of the incarnations over all else.

Of course it did; that was the very reason why Acra-Vesta had been created, and why it'd spent the past two millennia developing itself.

But why was it necessary to destroy the incarnations?

The reason for that was...

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

"It's over, huh?" I murmured.

The Shining Despair had left the whale badly damaged.

It had pierced through the middle of its frame and evaporated all the engines within.

As a result of the destruction, the tail fin started to fall to the surface.

I was scared for a moment, but then I realized that the field was no longer active. The tail fin was as large as a few trucks, but it wouldn't deal nearly as much damage as the meteor-fin had before.

That meant I only needed to worry about Azurite and Tom, who were fighting the crab on the surface right below us, but I looked and noticed that they'd already retreated.

The tail fin reached the ground in no time, and though the sound it made as it hit the remains of the crab was very loud, it definitely didn't leave a crater.

However, there was something strange.

"What's that?" I wondered.

The remains of the tail and crab released a burst of some powder. It looked either white or silver from here.

I worried that something big was happening again, but it just stopped after creating a small mountain of the stuff.

"That reminds me of the time Brother Bear broke an inventory," Nemesis commented.

Yeah, the one that was full of wheat flour, I nodded. *I guess the inventories of the whale and crab broke. I have no idea what was inside, though.*

"Ray, more importantly..." Nemesis began.

"Yeah, I know."

The crab on the surface had been sliced apart, while the whale's frame had lost most of its middle, as well as its tail fin. Despite that, it was still active.

"You don't break easily, do you?" I commented.

Above me was the front part of the whale, still floating.

In fact, it had continued floating even after Tom and Dr. Mario had damaged it way more than this. Perhaps it had been designed to continue its functions even through extreme destruction.

But... it was clearly at its limit.

The whale had lost its back half, and I couldn't see anything undamaged inside.

And most importantly, it couldn't repair itself anymore.

It was as good as dead.

"It isn't firing any lasers, either," added Nemesis, and she was right — the laser attacks had completely stopped after my firing of Shining Despair.

Did it lose its weapons system? Or does it just not have the energy to fire?

Whatever the case, the front part of the whale was nothing but a floating object now.

"Do we finish it off?" asked Nemesis.

We probably should, I thought in response.

However, Shining Despair's charge was back at 0, and we'd already spent the damage Nemesis had gathered on Vengeance.

And with the Miasmaflame Bracers being unusable, all I could really do was slash at it. It'd be great if it'd just fall down like its tail had, but...

"Can't hope for that, huh...?" I murmured.

The whale slowly began moving.

I didn't know where it was heading, but its direction was the same as before — the south.

What was different now was the fact that it had lost the crab following it below, and it couldn't use the field skill anymore.

It can't bomb Quartierlatin anymore, so... Huh?!

"Hold on!" I yelled in shock as I realized something. "It's slowly going down!"

The whale was heading to the south while lowering its altitude. It looked like a plane getting ready for an emergency landing *in the middle of Quartierlatin.*

It couldn't use its kinetic bombing anymore, but a huge whale falling into a town was bound to cause some serious damage.

"Kh!"

I made Silver move right before the whale and used what little MP I had remaining in Gouz-Maise to create a Wind Hoof barrier, but the whale broke through it like it was nothing.

"Then we have to bring it down right here!" Nemesis cried.

"We can't! It's already above inhabited areas!"

I didn't have any means of destroying it anymore, and bringing it down would cause major casualties. Which meant that...

"Ray!" she shouted.

Silver and I went below the whale and tried to push it upwards, which caused great strain on my back and Silver.

I'll keep it at least a bit higher... and make it fall outside of Quartierlatin...!

"That's ludicrous!" Nemesis yelled.

But I can't just sit by and watch!

Dr. Mario's marionettes joined me in my effort to prevent it from falling on the town, but even then, it only slowed the fall a bit.

The whale continued towards Quartierlatin, and its large frame quickly approached a building.

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Vesta

Even after suffering immense damage and losing Acra, its other half, Vesta didn't give up on eliminating the incarnations. It resumed going southward to do whatever it still could to further that cause.

However, it soon noticed the anomaly in its functions.

The propulsion engine it'd reactivated had been badly damaged, and running it for any longer would mean self-destruction.

Thus, it deactivated the engine and let inertia take over as it prepared for a landing.

It had lost a lot of important functions, but it could easily resume them after ceasing all operations and dedicating some time to repair itself.

Even without the integral Mutual Repair ability, Vesta, just like most of Flagman's weapons, could repair itself using a self-maintenance ability. The repair speed and quality would be far lower than that of Mutual Repair, but that wasn't a problem.

While Acra had no hope of recovering, Vesta could be completely restored in about a month or so.

Thus, to minimize the damage to itself, it decided to make an emergency landing in Quartierlatin.

The enemy from before was touching it, but Vesta didn't care, and simply continued going down.

After the emergency landing, it would have to prioritize repairing the lasers so that it could intercept any enemies coming near.

Admittedly the likelihood of it repairing itself completely was low, but even so, Vesta refused to give up on its base objective to eliminate the incarnations.

With a plan set, Vesta prepared for landing...

"Optical sensors captured new movement."

But then something came out from the building it was going to land on.

It was no incarnation, and its energy signals were minuscule. Even so, it was an entity that happened be caught by Vesta's optical sensors — a young child.

The child was curiously looking up at Vesta as it fell from the sky.

There were seconds until impact.

The child probably couldn't understand that he was in danger — he wasn't even crying. Instead, he just raised his hand and, as if Vesta was nothing but a big doggy to him, *waved at it*.

Upon seeing that familiar motion, Vesta's AI remembered something.

"Remaining propulsion engine, initiate at full capacity."

Vesta reactivated the engine it had stopped.

"Raising altitude."

Right as it was about to hit the ground, Vesta raised its front end and quickly regained height.

Unfortunately, making the near-broken propulsion engine work at full capacity accelerated its destruction.

"Engines disintegrating due to overload."

The destruction didn't stop at just the propulsion engine. The energy running through Vesta's circuits began burning its own insides, creating small explosions and short-outs.

"Discovered an energy counter-current. Risk of explosion."

At this rate, Vesta would be destroyed from the inside. Once that happened, there would be no room for any maintenance, and the machine would be destroyed for good.

"Continuing propulsion at full capacity."

Even so, Vesta didn't stop its engines.

"Total engine damage: 87 percent."

As it accelerated, Vesta's large frame began spewing large bursts of flame.

"Destruction: inevitable."

It was too late to stop the engines now. Vesta would break, no matter what.

"Moving away from town area. Minimizing casualties from self-destruction."

Not even that was enough to stop Vesta from running its engine and increasing altitude.

It was as if that were its very role.

"Reassessing base objectives."

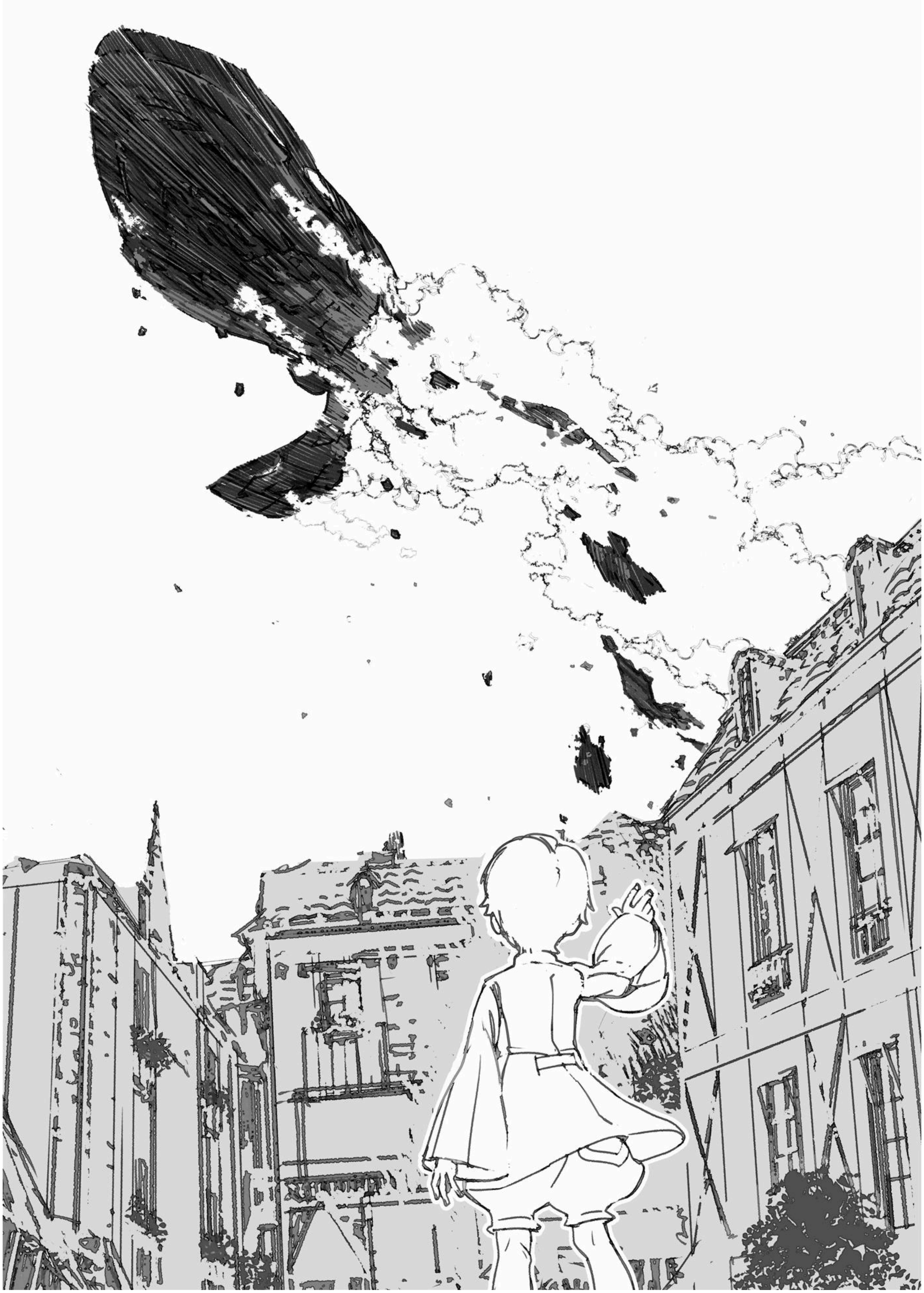
As it drew closer to the limit, Vesta began to question what it was doing. It took another look at its base objectives — the reason for its creation.

"Elimination of incarnations." That was its role as an anti-incarnation superweapon. The elimination of incarnations was the very reason Acra-Vesta had been created.

But why was it necessary to destroy the incarnations?

The reason for that was...

"To protect humani—"



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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

All of a sudden, the burden on my back became light.

I looked and noticed that the unit falling towards Quartierlatin was now rising once again.

As if mustering all of its final strength, it let out an engine sound akin to a whale’s cry and continued to move up.

It eventually left Quartierlatin and arrived at the sky above the mountain from which Logan and his devils came... *and that was where it exploded*.

The blast was strong enough to tear apart the whale’s large frame, and once it subsided, all that was left were small pieces of scrap, as well as an ash-like powder of a white or silver color.

The shockwave and the sound reached us a few seconds later.

That was the end of it.

The superweapon that had been sleeping in those ruins for two millennia had now entered eternal slumber.

It could no long respond to anything.

No one would ever know why it had gone out of control or raised its altitude at that very last moment. But...

“Ray?”

“What is it, Nemesis?”

“Why are you crying?”

Nemesis’s question made me realize that there was a tear going down my cheek.

“I’d like to know, too...” I murmured.

No one could know what its AI had been thinking.

However... I fully understood that it had spent its final moments protecting something.

Epilogue A: The Imperium

Zero General, Gifted Barbaros

“Ngh...?”

I woke up and realized that I’d lost consciousness. I couldn’t remember when, though. My memory seemed to be failing me.

Wait... My last memory before losing consciousness was the moment of the destruction of both Acra-Vesta machines, right before the moment the flying ship exploded.

That must have been the moment I’d passed out.

“Where am I?” I murmured.

At first, I thought I’d been caught by the kingdom, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

The light shaking around me made me realize that I was in a vehicle — a tank, apparently.

The continent was large, but the only country using Geists (the tank-type Magingears) was the imperium. Because of this, at first I assumed I’d been retrieved by the Barbaros tank division, but I soon realized that wasn’t the case.

The inside of this vehicle was nothing like that of the tanks I knew. It was far too large to be a Geist, so it had to be something entirely different.

If I have to guess...

“Ohh? Field Marshal. Ya up?” My thought was cut short. Someone replied to my drowsy question.

I looked and saw a man sitting at the control seat.

He was wearing an army uniform and had a cloak that made it seem like he was preparing to fight in the desert.

There was a cigarette in his mouth, and his unkempt beard seemed to purposely accentuate his jawline.

I knew this man.

“King of Chariots, Colonel Murdoch Martinez. Haven’t seen you in a month.”

“Yeh. Last time I saw ya was at the investiture.”

This was one of the Superiors newly hired by Dryfe.

During his hiring, he’d insisted that his payment would be accompanied by his receiving the rank of colonel in the imperium’s army.

Since we’d had an open seat among the military authorities, the imperator had suggested brigadier instead, but Murdoch had replied with, “Thanks, but nah, colonel’s cooler.” He was no doubt a strange man.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I’m on a mission. Not gonna hide it — I was told it didn’t look good for ya, so I got sent to pick ya up.”

“What?”

“Franklin reported that li’l Logan lost, so the imperator stepped up and gave me a direct order to pick ya up and take ya away from the heat ’cause yer important and all that. I’d say the kid didn’t wanna lose an uncle, but what do I know?”

“I see...”

That seemed possible. It was no surprise that Franklin would know what was happening in Quartierlatin, and this man here had the speed to get from Vandelheim to there in less than an hour; he had the fastest, strongest tanks in the world, after all.

I couldn’t feel it inside the vehicle, but we were probably going at breakneck speeds. We’d be Vandelheim in just a couple dozen minutes.

With a quick glance, I turned around to look behind me. I couldn’t see anything through the tank’s wall, of course, but I was sure that Quartierlatin was just behind it.

“What’s wrong? Oh yeah, I found your pricey-lookin’ doll. It’s inside.”

Oh, so he got Faldreed, too.

“Or did ya forget somethin’ else? Do I turn this thing around?”

Something I forgot? Well, I guess you could say that.

“It’s fine... I’ll go there myself eventually.”

Once it was all over, I’d visit Quartierlatin and take my family with me.

“Fine by me. Gotta say, the town’s a bit of a mess right now, but it’s a nice place. Really green. I’d love to visit it after it recovers.”

“I understand what you mean. However, you should keep in mind that they have a ban on public smoking.”

“Ha ha ha! I’ll remember that.” Murdoch’s cigarette shook as he laughed.

Imagining the moment I would return to the land where I was born, I also cracked a smile.

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Three days later, Vandelheim outskirts, Triangle of Wisdom Headquarters

Early morning of the third day after the incident in Quartierlatin, Hell General, Logan Goddhart, barged into the Triangle of Wisdom headquarters with greatsword in hand and demons at his side.

"FRANKLIN! WHERE IS HE?!"

The Hell General's face was warped in anger and hatred, and it was easy to see that he'd come here to get back at Franklin.

Needless to say, it was because the mad scientist had uploaded Logan's defeat at the hands of a low-rank to the internet.

Right now, Logan was like a gun with an itchy trigger finger on it. It wouldn't take much for him to sic the entire devil army upon the headquarters.

However, the Triangle of Wisdom members present didn't seem all that concerned about that. They only said things like, "Ah, it's His Excellency," or, "Guess his death penalty's over."

For some reason, they also looked extremely sleepy. It didn't seem like they'd just woke up; it was more like they'd been working on something all the way until dawn.

"BRING ME FRANKLIN!" Logan demanded.

"Oh, yeah... he told us to give this letter to you when you came." The tian in charge of the clan's official business handed it to him.

The letter contained only the words "I'm waiting for you here," accompanied by some coordinates.

It was basically a challenge text.

"YOU'RE ON!"

Still livid beyond words, Logan hopped on a devil's back and headed out to the given coordinates.

However, as he left, he suddenly noticed something.

What's this smell? he wondered for a second, but then shook it off, ignored the thought, and just took off to his destination: the Harshwinter Mountains.

"Hello!" called one clan member, logging in right as Logan left. "Whoa! This place is about thirty percent worse than normal!"

He saw lots of his clan members, all half dead from the all-nighter of work.

But then, it had to be noted that the clan's standards for normality were a bit warped.

"We've been doing lots of testing on this and that..."

"Ohh, you're making a new weapon? By the way, what's this weird smell? I feel like I'm net fishing near the sea."

It was a scent you wouldn't normally experience in Vandelheim, a landlocked city. It was a smell of pure sea water, and it was somehow permeating the entire Triangle of Wisdom.

One of the collapsed clan members pointed at a few large objects covered in barnacles and corals. "It's coming from that thing."

The silhouettes seemed like the limbs of a large reptile, but the azure color peeking out from beneath all the corals and barnacles made it clear that it wasn't of animal origin.

"What's that?" the clan member asked. "Where'd you get it?"

"The sea. Where else? Our leader salvaged it from the sea north of the continent."

"Eh? Didn't the imperium create a navy and start face-offs with Granvaloa...? I'm impressed he could go out into the sea."

That was month-old news in the imperium. Dryfe had started planning to expand to the sea, so they'd formed a navy and ended up sparking tensions between them and Granvaloa, who owned a lot of the world's oceans.

"It's the other way around. The leader wanted to salvage this thing, so he had the big-shots in the government create a papier-mache navy just for that."

"Eh...?"

"While Granvaloa was distracted by the navy, the leader went off with some aquatic monsters to take this thing."

"Whoaa..." The clan member was thoroughly impressed by the level and scale of this distraction. "What is that, anyway? It's all covered in barnacles and corals, so I really can’t tell...”

“A Prism Dragon.”

“...A what?” He knew the term full well. Just about anyone in the Triangle of Wisdom did.

That was the name of a weapon type that had been used by the pre-ancient civilization during their final years.

They were said to be on the same level as Mythical UBMs, and many doubted whether the things had ever actually existed.

“You know the data we found in the ruins where we got Her Highness Claudiah’s Jade Storm? There was info on the appropriate location where the pre-ancient civilization lost one of the Prism Dragons, Lapis Lazuli Decimation. The leader used that data to go and salvage it, and, well, succeeded.”

“Is this even usable?” the clan member asked.

“It was, apparently. It’s been underwater for two millennia, but it was about ninety percent functional. Well, he’s used it for parts, though, so it won’t work now.”

“Parts?”

“Yep. The limbs are all that’s left, and we can use them for research and whatever.”

Like he’d said, all that was left of Lapis Lazuli Decimation were the limbs.

It was as though everything else had been eaten...

◆◆◆

To the north of Dryfe and the rest of the continent, there was an area called “Harshwinter Mountains.”

It had a high altitude, thin air, and had awful temperatures below negative forty degrees Celsius. The area was made even more dangerous by all the monsters that lived here, many of which were stronger than the ones you’d find at the deeper levels of created dungeons.

This area didn’t belong to any country. Theoretically, you could use it to travel between the east and west, but the number of people who’d succeeded at that could be counted on both hands.

Even now, there was a violent blizzard here that seemed to reject all humanoid influence.

Standing on top of one mountain, there was a Master wearing a lab coat. He obviously had a cold resistance accessory on him, but he definitely looked unprepared for this harsh climate.

Still, this man named Franklin seemed to be in a good mood as he waited for something within the blizzard.

“Ah, my boy’s here,” he whispered as he saw countless silhouettes appear at the base of the mountain.

That was Logan and his army of devils — which had already lost some of its numbers due to the severe conditions.

Logan hollered, “Found you, Franklin! What was the meaning of that?!”

“Whatever do you mean? You’re gonna have to elaborate, Your Excellency,” Franklin responded with a slightly mocking tone.

“That video! Why’d you upload that?! Because of it, I...!”

Logan broke off, seething at the memory that the video had displayed only his battle against Ray, making it seem like he’d lost against a newbie 1v1.

None of that could have happened without Veldorbell having destroyed vast quantities of Logan’s army and breaking Logan’s Brooch, but there was no way for viewers to know that.

Because of this, most comments either praised Ray or ridiculed Logan.

Logan’s infamy as a duel champion who fought only by summoning his Mythical devil made him pretty unpopular, so he was like the heel in wrestling — someone who pleased the crowd when he lost.

Whatever the reason, Logan couldn’t handle being the subject of ridicule.

“I’ll be frank — I was just observing Ray Starling to see if I could find a weakness,” Franklin said casually. “I really didn’t expect to capture that pure, grade A goodness... Kheheheh.”

He wasn’t lying about that. Franklin had continued to observe Ray even after Logan’s defeat. He’d even recorded the fight against Acra-Vesta.

However, Franklin had only uploaded the battle with Logan, because of a purpose that would become obvious soon.

“You... damn...! You’d better be ready for this! I’m about to crush you over and over! Just like you once did to some insect!”

“Oh yeah, I did do that once,” Franklin said. “But you can’t really pull it off with me, can ya?”

“Shut up! Devils, attack!”

Upon hearing Logan’s order, the devils flew and closed in to Franklin to tear him apart.

There were even some of the Legendary-tier Gigaknights among them.

A non-combatant job like Franklin would surely die in less than a second.

“Nope. Can’t even have a proper test with these.”

However, the devils that were trying to kill Franklin all burst and died in the blink of an eye.

“...?!” Logan was speechless.

Missile-like objects had zoomed in from beyond the blizzard behind the mad scientist and blown up the devils approaching him.

Even Logan’s cherished Gigaknights had melted in a beam-like light.

“I see!” Logan shouted. “You prepared a monster here! You unfair frick!”

“Ha ha ha! I’m wondering why you didn’t expect something like this. Did ya seriously think I’d just stand here and die? That I wouldn’t place a monster or two to protect me? Please.”

There was something behind Franklin, densely veiled by the blizzard. Showing only its silhouette within the snow, the monster was making sounds that seemed to lie right between mechanical and animalistic.

“By the way, Your Excellency. About one of the reasons why I uploaded the video... Before getting yoinked outta the game, you’d already sacrificed your special reward, right?”

“What about it?!”

“You know what I’m getting at. You can summon the Mythical without sacrificing another one, right?”

That was correct. The points Logan had gotten from sacrificing a special reward were still there, even after the death penalty.

He’d failed to summon the Mythical in time against Ray, but he could do it now.

“You’re telling me to use a Mythical against *you?!*” Logan bellowed.

“Do it. Otherwise, you’ll be known as a scrublord who’s lost against both a newbie and a non-battle job. Just so you know, I’m filming this, too.”

“...! YOU’RE DEAD!!”

Logan went through the chant, ending in:

"CALL DEVIL ZERO EXCEED!"

He successfully summoned the Mythical devil. It was the strongest being under his command — the fearsome creature that had defeated the Celestial Knight, Langley, and brought him to the top of the duel rankings.

It had the appearance of a stereotypical devil — head of a goat, bat-like wings, and four thin legs. The most notable thing about its looks was its size, as it was a whole seventy metels tall.

All of its parameters greatly exceeded those of a Gigaknight, and all its stats except LUC were over 40,000.

It could even use spells that matched those of magic-based Superior Jobs, making it extremely versatile.

This was Zero Exceed, Logan's trump card.

"Boosted Devil Strength! Boosted Devil Endurance! Boosted Devil Agilityyyy!"

Logan buffed the devil even more, raising its STR, END, and AGI all to over 120,000.

"Behold! This is me at my strongest! I only lost against that weakling because I was caught off-guard! I'M STILL THE STRONGEST!"

"'Strongest'? But, dude..."

Franklin made a grin that seemed both wry and full of ridicule. His right eye shone blue as he ran his Analyzing Eye of Wisdom. He'd already finished analyzing Zero Exceed and knew its stats clearly. So he gave his extremely frank opinion.

"Those stats don't even reach Behemot's. It's weaker than the King of Beasts, kiddo."

"...KILL HIM!" The words enraged Logan, and he set his trusted Zero Exceed on Franklin.

The Mythical devil's speed was twelve times the speed of sound, and it wasn't something a non-combatant job like Franklin could keep up with.

Even if Franklin had a Brooch and could transfer his damage to his monsters using Life Link, he'd get the death penalty in the blink of an eye.

That would be the natural outcome.

However, Zero Exceed's attack charge was stopped by a different gigantic creature.

"AGI's lookin' good," Franklin commented.

“...?!”

Logan couldn’t see it in its entirety. This was because of the raging blizzard... and also because it was even larger than Zero Exceed.

What he *could* see was that the creature had a strange, lapis lazuli-colored head reminiscent of dragons.

The dinosaur... or kaiju... was a monster that seemed to be made of machinery.

“Wh-What is that...?” Logan sputtered.

There were two feelings swirling around within him: confusion because he didn’t know what it was, and fear at the fact that it could match his enhanced Mythical devil.

“This is my MGD. The Mechanic God Dylan,” Franklin replied with a smile. “He’s my masterpiece. I completed him recently. The only problem I’ve found with him so far is that he’s so perfect that it’s hard to find a good enemy to test him on.”

“...?”

“I’d originally designed him to be an anti-SUBM and anti-King of Beasts weapon, so half-assed test subjects just aren’t good enough.”

“...! Wait. You...!”

Logan finally realized why Franklin had uploaded that video, why he’d said that Logan’s ability to summon Zero Exceed was one of the reasons, and why he’d provoked him to summon it. It was all so that Franklin could use Logan’s Zero Exceed as a test subject.

“It’s a secret weapon, so I can’t use him in those duels you love so much,” Franklin said pleasantly. “Man, you lost at the perfect time. It made it easy for me to resolve to use it, y’know?”

Those words felt both needlessly provocative and completely honest.

“I’ve gotta be as sure as can be about this. Ray Starling always exceeds my expectations. To crush him for sure, I need it to be at least powerful enough to beat an enhanced Mythical devil.”

Franklin’s words made Logan lose his.

It sounded as though Logan, a Superior, was just a test for Franklin to prepare to beat a newbie.

In fact, that was exactly what the mad scientist thought, and it made Logan boil with fury unlike any he’d had before.

“Don’t look down on me, Franklin!” Logan screamed. “I’ll tear apart that pile of scrap and make you regret ever making light of me! My Zero Exceed is above that pile of crap!"

Fired up, Logan ordered Zero Exceed to destroy the MGD, making the two monsters clash.

Watching over the battle, Franklin cracked a faint smile. "Well... they *do* have similar stats."

He spoke quietly, and Logan couldn't hear him over the blizzard and sounds of battle in any case.

"But that doesn't really matter here," Franklin murmured.

Those words were the very reason why the outcome of this battle was obvious before it even began.

Thirty minutes later, a single monster went down the Harshwinter Mountains, carrying its owner.

The creature with the lapis lazuli-colored head had lost its right arm. But that was the extent of it. It hadn't taken a single fatal injury during the entire battle.

Zero Exceed, on the other hand, had become particles of light and disappeared into the Harshwinter blizzard along with its owner.

Logan had witnessed his strongest creature be crushed right before his eyes, and then received the death penalty.

The battlefield had left the scar on the land — a giant hole in the mountain. It was akin to a grave.

Despite the lost right arm, Franklin was very satisfied with the MGD's performance.

"Even the loud brat can be useful sometimes, huh?" he said fondly. "I even got to test the Decimation Cannon."

He was especially happy to know that the two-millennia-old weapon he'd taken from Lapis Lazuli Decimation worked like a charm.

"The lost arm means there's room for improvement, though. I'll have to finish it up before the war. What's important is that it can win an equal battle."

Franklin began planning modifications, picturing the enhanced MGD completely crushing Ray.

The thought brought a smile to his face.

Epilogue B: The Kingdom

About Altimia

Ever since the war, Altimia had spent her days cornering herself.

After starting to run the kingdom in her father's stead, she'd also started losing herself in her harsh training as the Sacred Princess.

Whenever there was trouble, she'd hide her identity and go solve it herself.

Perhaps it was her way of atoning.

Though her father had been partially at fault for stopping her, she — despite being the kingdom's strongest tian — hadn't joined the battle for the kingdom, and that had led to the loss of many of her people, as well as her own loved ones.

She couldn't forgive herself for that.

She believed that things might've gone differently if she'd gone against her father's wishes and headed out to battle.

Thus, she wanted to stand at the forefront next time, protecting everything she'd failed to protect last time.

Azurite wanted to safeguard the country, its people, and her loved ones.

She wished to be like the first king, Azurite, the origin of the Altar bloodline.

That was why she used that name whenever she hid her identity. It was one of her names, and it represented what she wanted to be.

About a month ago, something major had happened in Gideon.

The infamous Franklin's Game.

Gideon, the place where her sister was, had been terrorized by Franklin, the man who'd killed their father.

It had happened right when Altimia was afflicted by an Epidemic.

Upon seeing the broadcast Franklin was projecting over the capital, she had found out what awful things were happening in Gideon and that her little sister had been kidnapped.

Azurite had instantly tried to hurry over there to save Elizabeth and to fulfill her duty as one who was supposed to protect the country from those menacing it.

However, the illness had made it impossible, and the retainers surrounding her bed had urged her to reconsider, so she'd stayed.

Overcome by despair, she'd cried over and over.

"Why can't I ever be there?! Why can I only watch as I lose my loved ones? I..."

If Gideon had been destroyed, if something had happened to her sister, the despair would've surely haunted her for the rest of her life.

However, there was someone who'd shattered her despair.

A Master.

A Master challenging a monster many times more powerful than him, one that had even been designed to beat him.

All ragged and torn, he had continued fighting the seemingly hopeless battle... and actually emerged victorious.

He'd put himself forward and erased the despair that was going to overcome Gideon.

Azurite could clearly remember him raising his right arm.

That was the moment when her distrust for Masters had started to warm into an equivalent trust for them... and the moment when a certain Master had left a mark on her heart and mind.

◇◇◇

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

With the whale's explosion, all the battles in Quartierlatin ended.

Once it was all over, I realized that the only surviving Masters were me, Tom, and the few that had helped the people find safety.

Some tians had been lost. The Hell General's devils had killed both knights and civilians alike.

It was tragic, but it wasn't like we hadn't gained anything here.

I was pretty certain that all the factions involved here had lost something.

That was probably why I felt less "victorious" and more "glad that this was over."

If there was one thing I'd gained here, though...

"These, huh?"

There were ten palm-sized inventories before me. I'd picked these up in the huge load of silverish, whitish powder I'd found in the mountain where the whale had exploded.

These inventories seemed to have a lot more space than the bag-like inventory I always used.

Looking inside, I found that they were full of the powder. Checking out the powder, the window only gave me the description of "Metal Particles."

I really need to consider getting Identify...

"For now, simply take the inventories," said Nemesis. "You can ask Brother Bear, Marie, or B3 about the powder."

"Yeah."

They were knowledgeable enough to know something about it, surely.

This made me realize how clueless I was about *Dendro* compared to a good chunk of my acquaintances.

"Ray." My thought was cut short by Azurite.

After the battle, she'd gone to visit Countess Quartierlatin, and now she was back.

"How was it?" I asked.

"Well, besides the fact that Tom Cat is gone, we don't have any problems."

"Tom's gone?" I really doubted that he'd gotten the death penalty. Had he logged off for some urgent business or something?

"Both the countess and the people from the inn we stayed at are unharmed."

"They are?"

Good to know, I reflected, and then remembered somebody else.

"Wait... What about Dr. Mario?"

"I haven't seen him, either. With the troubles here over, I imagine he's returned to the imperium."

I wanted to thank him for his help fighting the whale, but it looked like I'd have to save it for later.

"By the way, Azurite, should you really be walking around with your face exposed?" I asked.

She wasn't wearing her mask right now. Azurite was talking to me, out here in public, with her beautiful face out in the open. This meant all the passersby were staring at her.

“Ray... there is something I’ve wanted to tell you,” she said.

“There is?”

Oh yeah, she’d almost said something before the whale and crab appeared. Was it that?

“Listen, Ray... My real name...” She looked at me with a serious face before gathering her resolve and continuing. “...is Altimia Azurite Altar. That is who I am.”

“Oh, so your first name’s ‘Altimia.’” This was the first time I’d heard her full name.

“...That’s it?” She looked dumbfounded.

“Well, I didn’t realize ‘Azurite’ was your middle name.”

Of course, a middle name meant that she had to be a big deal in the nobility. She had mentioned that she had Quartierlatin blood, after all.

Wait, hold on... She said her family name is “Altar...”

“Are you related to the royal family?” I asked.

Azurite stared at me with an indefinable expression. I couldn’t tell if she was surprised, angry, or just at a loss for words.

“Ray...” Nemesis joined the exchange. “Isn’t ‘Altimia’ the name of the first princess?”

“Ohh... So she has the same name as her, huh?”

“It’s not just the name. She might be the real thing, don’t you think?”

Ha ha ha! Don’t be silly, Nemesis.

“A princess would never wear that shady-looking mask,” I said. “Say whatever you want about everything else, the mask nullifies it all... Huh? Azurite? Why’re you raising the sword?”

The next moment, Azurite hit me with the dull side of the azure sword.

BHPH!

“Realize it already!” she shouted. “You were so perceptive during the exploration and battle! What happened to that?! Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to reveal this?!”

She half-cried, half-laughed as she bashed me from a fair distance away.

What did I do to deserve this?!

“It’s me! The first princess! The masked princess! The Sacred Princess! Altimia! So what if my mask makes me look shady?! I’ll say it again — I don’t want *you* to talk to *me* about fashion sense!”

That was enough for me to finally understand that she really was the first princess.

"Sorry for what I said about the mask," I said.

"You should be!"

"Can I ask one thing, though?"

"...What?" She looked at me like she was sure I was about to ask something about her mask.

That wasn't the case, though. It was much simpler than that.

"Azurite... what should I call you?"

"Eh?"

"You're the first princess, you know? Should I call you 'princess,' like I do Elizabeth, or 'Your Highness,' or something?"

After a brief moment of surprise, she sputtered a laugh. "Call me Al... no... 'Azurite' is fine. You don't have to use any titles in non-official scenarios."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Call me that."

"All right. I've got another question now."

"What is it?" She looked at me curiously.

I extended my hand to her and asked, "Azurite... Can I cooperate with you?"

"Ah..."

On the night of our first day here, I'd told her that I'd appreciate it if she'd accepted any Masters who wanted to help. This was just a repeat of that.

A Master was presenting the first princess of the kingdom with the same question as before.

So this was less of a question and more of a request for an answer.

With my hand still extended, I waited for her to make her choice.

"Back then..." She closed her eyes and seemed to be remembering something as she began talking. "When we fought the weapons that came out to the surface, I defeated the one on the ground, while you bested the one in the sky."

"Yeah."

"But I'm certain that you couldn't have beaten the one on the ground, and I couldn't have touched the one in the sky."

“That’s true.”

“I can stand on the front lines, but there are things I can’t protect by myself. However...” She smiled. “I believe there are things I can protect if I stand side-by-side with you... with Masters.”

She extended her right hand.

“I’ll be counting on you, Ray.”

“Yeah. Let’s get along, Azurite.”

We shook hands.

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A week after the incident in Quartierlatin, the first princess made a kingdom-wide announcement.

She said that was seeking the Masters’ help in the many challenges the kingdom would face, including the war with the imperium.

Some were confused about what had caused this change of policy, but in the end, both tians and Masters alike accepted it.

Though the specific measures weren’t happening yet, a gale of hope swept throughout the kingdom.

Epilogue C: The Ancient Ones

???

"Gurmalkin?"

"It's 'Grimalkin,' Master."

"Grewmalkin?"

"Grimalkin."

"It's so haaard..."

"Then call me whatever you want."

"Can I?"

"I just hatched, but I am your Embryo."

"Then... Tom!"

"...Now that one is really simple."

"I think it's cute."

"Isn't it a bit too... normal?"

"It's fine! Tom is Tom now!"

◇◆

Cheshire woke up.

"A dream, huh?"

A side effect after using his real body was a cooldown period which caused him to experience something similar to human drowsiness.

Right now, Cheshire wasn't in the dream, but in a work space that he'd grown tired of seeing a long time ago.

"It's been so long, yet I remember so clearly."

He heaved a sigh.

Cheshire had many names.

His official title was "Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin."

His name as a control AI was "Cheshire," and like the others, based on a character from *Alice in Wonderland.*

His name as the third major force that had fought to prevent the ultimate battle between the King of Kings and the Draconic Emperor two generations ago was "Schrödinger Cat."

Besides those, he also had fake names like "Stray Cat" and "Wild Cat."

However, the name "Tom" was especially important to him.

It was just an alias, but he'd received it from his Master.

Out of sentimentality, he'd chosen that name for his identity as the developer-side Master at the top of the kingdom's duel rankings.

"I'll go take a look," he murmured to himself.

He left his work space and went somewhere else.

He was currently in control AI territory... the place that the pre-ancient civilization had given the apt — but not completely right — name of "Extra-Continental Vessel."

Cheshire moved before the door leading to its deepest part and stopped.

The door before him was like a bulkhead door to a nuclear shelter, except more complex and a whole lot larger.

Though he was already in a space that only a control AI could enter, this place was even more secure than anything else here. It seemed to reflect its solemness.

It was protected by the Red King — who could control space — and the Rabbit — who could control time. With multiple Infinite Embryos guarding it, no one had any hope of going inside.

Thus, even Cheshire had to request that the supervisor let him through.

"Number 0, can you let me in for a moment?" he asked.

"Access granted." He instantly got approval. The voice was the same as the one that had responded to Cheshire's request to use his real body in the ruins.

Soon, the complex mechanisms slotted out of place as the bulkhead slid and opened up.

Cheshire slightly nodded and went inside.

He looked around silently.

It's the same, he thought. *Of course it wouldn't change.*

He was looking at a certain object.

It was a large, star-like sphere orbited by thirteen other bright, planet-like spheres.

No, that wasn't entirely right.

The central sphere was surrounded by thirteen spheres that shone, as well as one that emitted no light.

"How long will it be until that one lights up?"

His whisper was full of several complex emotions.

He'd spent too much time on this to be able to put those emotions into words.

Of course, it was absolutely certain that the time it would take for the last one to light up would be nothing compared to the time he'd spent waiting and working.

"We're at over half already... so even at the longest, it won't be more than five years."

Thinking about what he... no, they... were waiting for, he heaved another sigh.

"I hope it's someone I see as worthy... No."

He slowly shook his head and turned around.

"Maybe it will be the same, no matter who it is."

With those incomprehensible words as his last, Cheshire left the room.

Even after he left, the fourteen spheres continued to orbit the large one in the middle.

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Ruins, living quarters, great hall.

The ruins at Quartierlatin were being investigated by the kingdom and the Masters they'd hired.

However, the ruins seemed to be focused mostly on the material storage and the research and production plant. To them, the living quarters were secondary, if not tertiary.

Thus, the great hall Ray had visited on his second day in Quartierlatin was completely empty right now.

Some investigators had come here, but all they'd done was take pictures of the painting, like Ray had, and gather all the scattered Prism Soldier parts.

The piece of art on the wall had been slightly burned by the lasers used in the battle against Tom Cat.

The burns had mixed with the colors of the artwork, and it looked they had been that way from the start.

If you strained your eyes, you could see some text there.

Unlike most of the writing on the piece of art, it was written by hand, rather than burned into it, so the burns made it especially hard to notice.

It said, “With a prayer for restoration, I lay hope to sleep in this mountain.” Those words were accompanied by a name.

It was the signature of the one who’d written it, the man in charge of the facility — the great craftsman Flagman himself.

This facility had many things with his name on it, so it wasn’t special in that regard.

However, this one was a bit different than the others.

While his title on most of them was “great craftsman” or something similar, this one had his role — his job.

It wasn’t known why this artwork alone had his job on it, but Flagman’s job was considered to be one of the mysteries of the pre-ancient civilization, and it was solved right here.

The small text next to his name said just two simple words:

Arch Sage.

To Be Continued in the Next Episode

Afterword

Cat: “Time for the afterwooord! I’m the ‘Cat,’ Cheshire! I haven’t been here in a while!”

Xun: “I’m XunyU, and I’m surprisEd this guy cAn come here after *that* mAin story.”

Fox: “I was wondering how to talk with him around, but it looks like I didn’t have to worry. Oh, and I’m the ‘Fox,’ Tsukuyo Fuso.”

Bear: “Well, the af-ter-word *is* a law-less waste-land, af-ter all.”

Xun: “Hm?”

Bear: “I am the ‘Bear,’ Shu Star-ling. I have not been here fur a long time, al-so.”

Fox: “I know that, but... why are you talking all stiff?”

Cat: “Yeah, and why is your suit all metallic?”

Xun: “Yeah, you’re likE a mech rIght now. Or just an animAted hunk of scrAp, really... Wait.”

Bear: “Yes. Pre-cise-ly. I am now... an-i-ma-ted.”

Cat: “Are you about to...?”

Bear: “PREBEAR YOURSELVES, FOR THE *DENDRO* ANIME IS HEADING INTO YOUR TV SCREENS!”

Xun: “He actUally did it... He stOle the announcEment!”

Cat: “With a crappy pun and set-up, tooo.”

Fox: “He said this place is lawless, but there are limits, right?”

Bear: “Mecha suit off! Back to the one I bear-long in!”

Fox: “Oh, so it really was a suit.”

Bear: “Yep. And just so you know, that announcement was something the author’s always wanted to do.”

Xun: “It wAs?”

Bear: “There are things that can only be said once in a lifetime. It’s basically like shouting ‘WOO HOO!’ at the beary top of the mountain.”

Xun: “It doesn’t seEm like that at all...”

Cat: “Anyway, yeah, we’ll have an anime noow. You can read more about it laterrr!”

Xun: “As in... whEn?”

Cat: “Thanks to how many pages we got for this volume, we have a much bigger afterword this time. That’s why we dedicated more space for the author’s own words.”

Xun: “So that’s whAt the ‘Afterword (Characters)’ is about, hUh?”

Bear: “We got a double afterword to cele-bear-ate the anime. You just can’t beat us!”

Fox: “Is that really the right thing to dedicate more pages to?”

Cat: “Volume 9 was really looong...”

Bear: “And had more battles than any other...”

Cat: “But there will be a 180 from the other ones, since it will be pretty peaceful for Ray.”

Xun: “Really? A relaxed *Dendro* volume? That’s rare.”

Cat: “You’re getting it wronnng.”

Xun: “Hm?”

Cat: “It’s only peaceful for Ray and everyone around him.”

Xun: “...Suddenly, the volUme sounds the oppOsite of relaxed.”

Cat: “Anyway, I guess it’s time to announce it. I worked hard in the main story, and I haven’t done this in a while, so I will be the one to...”

???: “I am a bad ■■■■■. Therefore, I am stealing this announcement... Volume 10 is set to come out mid-2019!”

Cat: “Wh-What...?”

Bear: “He slipped in here fur-om the next volume!”

Fox: (This is sooo familiar.)

???: “Now, let us meet again on volume 10.”

Xun: “Huh? The afterword’s gettin’ even more characters?”

Dearest readers, thank you for purchasing my work. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

As you may already know from the cover and the earlier afterword, *Infinite Dendrogram* is getting a TV anime.

Having your work adapted into an anime is an important milestone for all light novel authors, and I couldn't be more overjoyed that *Infinite Dendrogram* and I have made it this far.

This certainly couldn't have been done without support from all of you.

When the first volumes were coming out, I was always worried about the possibility of cancellation. It's an industry with hundreds of books coming out every month, after all. Not all can survive, and it wasn't unlikely that my work wouldn't make it.

However, with all of your support, *Dendro* has made it this far, and I couldn't be more thankful for that.

Since I have about eight more pages for the afterword, and since it's a good opportunity in general, I would like to look back at and tell you more about how things were during and after publication. Consider it a post-volume mini-essay extra, of sorts.

The first volume of *Dendro* was released in the year 2016. Around the release, there was a marvelous event titled "The Great *Dendro* Festival," in which many artists made art to help spread the word and support *Dendro* (you can still find this art on the series' official website.)

As you certainly know, the one hired to work on the illustrations for these novels was Taiki, and his art is simply out of this world. Then, at the end of the Great *Dendro* Festival, it was revealed that Kami Imai himself would provide my work with the best manga adaptation imaginable.

To be honest, I was being a bit too optimistic back then. At the very least, I probably thought that stability was guaranteed. But then I looked at the sales. They weren't bad at all, but personally, I was worried if they really matched the backing it was getting.

Did my work really live up the hype?

Did my novel really match the excellent conditions it was provided?

What if I still wasn't good enough?

What if it was canceled after the first volume?

A lot was bothering me back then, but after the editor, K, told me that the second volume sold about ninety percent of what the first did, those worries slightly relaxed.

I also realized that it was better to work than worry, so I simply took to improving the light novel releases, writing the exclusive short stories, and uploading new web novel parts.

That was when I was writing the extreme, tumultuous Gloria side story. Look forward to it in volume eleven!

That reminds me... At the end of 2016, I was talking to K by phone, and he said he would go around Comiket to say hi to the illustrators.

"Will there be *Dendro* doujins or something?" I asked.

"Light novels need anime adaptations to get those," he replied.

"Ohhh, right."

"Doesn't look like *Dendro*'s getting one anytime soon."

"I know, I know..."

At this point in time, an anime was nowhere in sight.

New Year's passed, and it was now 2017.

This was a very great year for *Infinite Dendrogram.*

The sales of the currently released volumes kept steadily increasing, and then some big things happened.

First, *Dendro* won first place in BookWalker's New Light Novel Awards. Then it won third place overall, and second place for new entries in its category on the "This Light Novel is Amazing!" awards.

Thanks to these awards, *Infinite Dendrogram* became more popular than ever. The older volumes received reprints, while the newer ones were now selling enough for me to feel completely safe.

This was nothing if not fortuitous, and I am certain it couldn't have happened without support from both the readers and the publication team.

Thanks to this, at the end of this year, I was a lot more relaxed than the last.

That was when I got a call from K.

"Can you talk right now?" he asked, like he always did, before getting straight to the point and dropping this bombshell:

"We're getting an anime."

Talk about a surprise. I thought my heart was about to leap out of my chest.

Since 2017 had been such a good year for *Dendro,* I had mildly hoped that we would get one next year, and here it was coming before 2017 even ended. I felt like I'd teleported right next to it before I could even see it.

K likes such surprise attacks. He did this when he got Kami Imai on the manga, too. Heartstoppers like these can kill a man. It's in the word. If that ever happens, I hope it's after I've completed *Dendro*.

With that revelation, my relaxed end of the year became one of excitement and nervousness.

So came the year 2018.

If I had to sum it up in a couple words, it would be the "Year of Preparations."

Now, in addition to helping with the light novel, checking the manga, and putting out new web novel parts, I also had to work on the anime.

My first job was to provide name lists, character descriptions, key design features and other materials for them to work with.

My second job to check the scripts, pick and choose the most important dialogue lines, shorten the longer ones, and add any depictions I felt were necessary.

I recall being surprised by how quickly anime scripts are made. The script wasn't the only thing I was involved with — I also had a part in the art direction.

I remember looking at what they gave me and thinking things like, "So this is what noble mansions in Altea look like, huh?" It will probably influence how I depict the city in writing.

Everyone on the staff was putting a lot of effort into their work, and I really thought that *Dendro* as a whole was blessed with the best people.

Now, no anime is proper without voice actors. Since I myself am primarily an anime watcher, rather than a creator, I know next to nothing about this and just assumed that they would be picked by the experts.

That was when I got another call from K.

"We're holding auditions for the main cast. Come participate."

That was when I concluded that his calls could only ever be about two things: deadlines or bombshells. I feel like one day he'll go full zabaniyya on my heart.

And that's how I ended up being one of the judges in the auditions.

Upon seeing the list of people who'd participate, I went, "Eh?! There are so many big names...!" and my heart almost leapt out of my chest again.

There were two major auditions, and I took part in them both. In both cases, I took a bullet train to Tokyo first thing in the morning, and both auditions lasted until there were no more bullet trains to take me back. The schedule was harsh, but overall, I'm two hundred percent fulfilled and satisfied I was part of it.

I had to check live vocal performances in the auditions, then return home to re-check the voice recordings, as well as check the submissions from those who couldn't make it due to tight schedules. I was doing nothing but checking all day long, but it was a fun experience you don't get every day.

I also realized that different people read the same lines differently and with varying emotions. That is something I now consider when writing, and I appreciate that.

Also, I found out that picking the voice actors for monotone characters is actually really hard. I feel like I had the most difficulty judging auditions for Cyco (who's showing up again in the next volume, by the way).

In case you're wondering, the second in difficulty — though in a completely different way — was Babi.

The auditions passed, and at the point of writing this afterword, the main cast and Franklin have already been decided.

I am so happy with the casting that I've been excited about it nonstop since last year.

I don't know whether they're revealed yet, so I won't write them here, but I'm sure you, dear readers, will know what I mean when you see them.

By the way, one day after the auditions, K called me again.

"By the way, about the one doing the BGM..."

Yes, he attacked my heart even from that angle. That was how big of a shock it was. I feel like everything I'm writing about K has to do with surprises and my heart, but that's just how it is.

Anyway, those have been my days since the release of the first volume until now.

There are still lots of things I can't mention, but rest assured that the people involved in the anime are great. I can hardly wait for it myself.

Oh? What's this? Another call from K?

"Hey, about that deadline and the anime exclusives..."

HA HA HA. What a double punch.

Anyway, it seems like 2019 will be even busier than 2018 for me. But just like everyone involved with the anime is working so hard, I will also use my writing to make the most out of *Dendro*'s once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

I thank you all for giving me the chance to go all-out, and I intend to continue doing my best.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram.*

Sakon Kaidou

Bonus Short Stories

Covert?

WARNING: Contains spoilers. Please read after volume 9.

A certain day of a certain month, Royal Palace

A few days before the incident at Quartierlatin...

"This is a job for Azurite," declared the kingdom's first princess and acting ruler, Altimia Azurite Altar.

Those were her first words, upon hearing about the ruins that had shown up in Quartierlatin.

This was a declaration that she would hide her identity and go investigate it herself.

If she hadn't been alone in the room, the other person would surely have pointed out that using your actual first name wasn't smart if you wanted to hide your identity.

However, if she used a fake name, someone with a high level Truth Discernment skill would sense it, so just using her middle name was actually safer for covert action.

There was also the fact that Azurite was a fairly common name here in the kingdom. As the name of the first king, a man who'd risen from shepherd to sovereign, many commoners gave that name to their children in the hopes that they would be at least a bit as successful as he was.

Nobles, however, avoided using it due to respect for the royalty.

"If I take care of the necessary verdicts ahead of time, things should be able to run without me." Altimia checked all the relevant political affairs and confirmed that everything would be fine without her. "I also need some equipment."

Since she would be acting covertly, she obviously couldn't wear her regal clothing. Her best equipment, the highest quality forged dress armor, also wasn't an option. She needed something that wouldn't stand out in a city and came with decent stats, which led to her choosing light swordswoman clothing. It was a good quality product that wouldn't draw much attention to her.

However, that did nothing about her most prominent feature: her face.

Altimia believed that every single person in the kingdom would be able to recognize her by her visage.

Infinite Dendrogram was a primarily a fantasy, but it had both newspapers and cameras. There were photos of her face everywhere, and there was even a clan which doubled as her fan club.

Hiding her face was an absolute necessity.

"I guess I'll have to use this again," she muttered as she equipped a mask.

She'd prepared it for situations such as this, and it even had an anti-Reveal effect. However, the design was such that it only hid the upper half of the face, which made her look quite shady. Anyone who'd wear something like this anywhere except a masquerade would be considered suspicious.

"Perfect. No one will suspect a thing."

Sad as it was, the princess, lacking in worldly knowledge in some regards, had no clue regarding the odd nature of her appearance.

Thus, Altimia went on her covert(?) operation to investigate the ruins in Quartierlatin.

Soon afterwards, she met Ray Starling and was faced with a terrible situation where her appearance was seen as shady as his.

The End

The Lynx's Monetary Affairs

WARNING: Contains spoilers. Please read after volume 9.

A certain day of a certain month

"By the way, what do you think Tom spends his money on?" Bishmal, the seventh in the duel rankings, asked during a post-spar lunch meeting.

The other participants were Riser, the seventh in the rankings, as well

Ray and Nemesis.

It was common for duel rankers to eat something together after sparring. Others who tended to participate included Juliet, the fourth in the rankings; Chelsea, the eighth in the rankings; and even Figaro.

Ray wasn't in the rankings, but since he sparred a lot, he often ate with the rankers, too.

"Tom?" Ray repeated.

She was referring to The Lynx, Tom Cat. The ex-dueling champion who'd lost his throne to Figaro and gone on to defend the second spot with his fearsome cloning ability. He was a man of mystery.

"He's gotta have a lot of money, right?" Bishmal asked. "But I never actually see him spending it on anything."

Not only did Tom make impressive amounts of money from his dueling awards, he also ran a few revolutionary establishments in Gideon, such as the maid café. There was no doubt that he was rich, but no one ever saw him actually use his wealth.

"Munch munch... Isn't he just buying new equipment?" asked Nemesis.

"No... As far as I know, he hasn't changed his equipment even once," answered Riser, a true veteran player. "He never changes his equipment or the weapons wielded by his clones."

"You seem to know a lot about him."

"I was one of those who tried to surpass him and become the duel champion. I never won against him, though."

The top three in the rankings could only be challenged for their rank by those who were directly below them. To challenge Figaro, the current champion, you would have to defeat Tom, the second in the rankings, and take his place.

"Speaking of money, I once saw Tom enter a money exchange place," Ray said.

Everyone else was perplexed. "Money exchange?" they asked in unison.

In *Dendro*, where there was only a single currency, a money exchange business was simply a place where you would exchange your coins to make them easier to use. You could get hyper-expensive coins for big purchases, or cheaper coins for smaller ones.

They all wondered why Tom would go to such a place, finally coming to the conclusion that he must have been planning to buy something expensive.

“This is your first moneeyyy. Five silver coins worth a total of 5,000 liiir. An onigiri costs about 10 lir, by the waaayyy.”

In a study-like area, which was the character creation space, a white cat was handing a new player some money while giving him an explanation.

The white cat was Cheshire — one of the control AIs, and the true form of Tom Cat.

He was giving the new player five silver coins. It was the amount that each and every player received, and all of the money came from Cheshire’s work as Tom Cat.

It was his own earnings that he exchanged into mere silver coins.

Control AIs could simply create the money, but they preferred to reuse the money already in circulation to prevent a collapse of *Dendro’s* economy.

Speaking of control AIs and money, Mad Hatter — the item control AI — earned more than Cheshire purely due to his gacha machines, but all of that money was moved to drops and created dungeon treasure chests.

While *Dendro’s* control AIs may have been operating the most immersive and realistic VRMMO experience around, it was important to note that they also partook in simple moneymaking activities.

The End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 9
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2019

Sakon Kaidou
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Infinite Dendrogram
10. After the Storm, and Before the Storm

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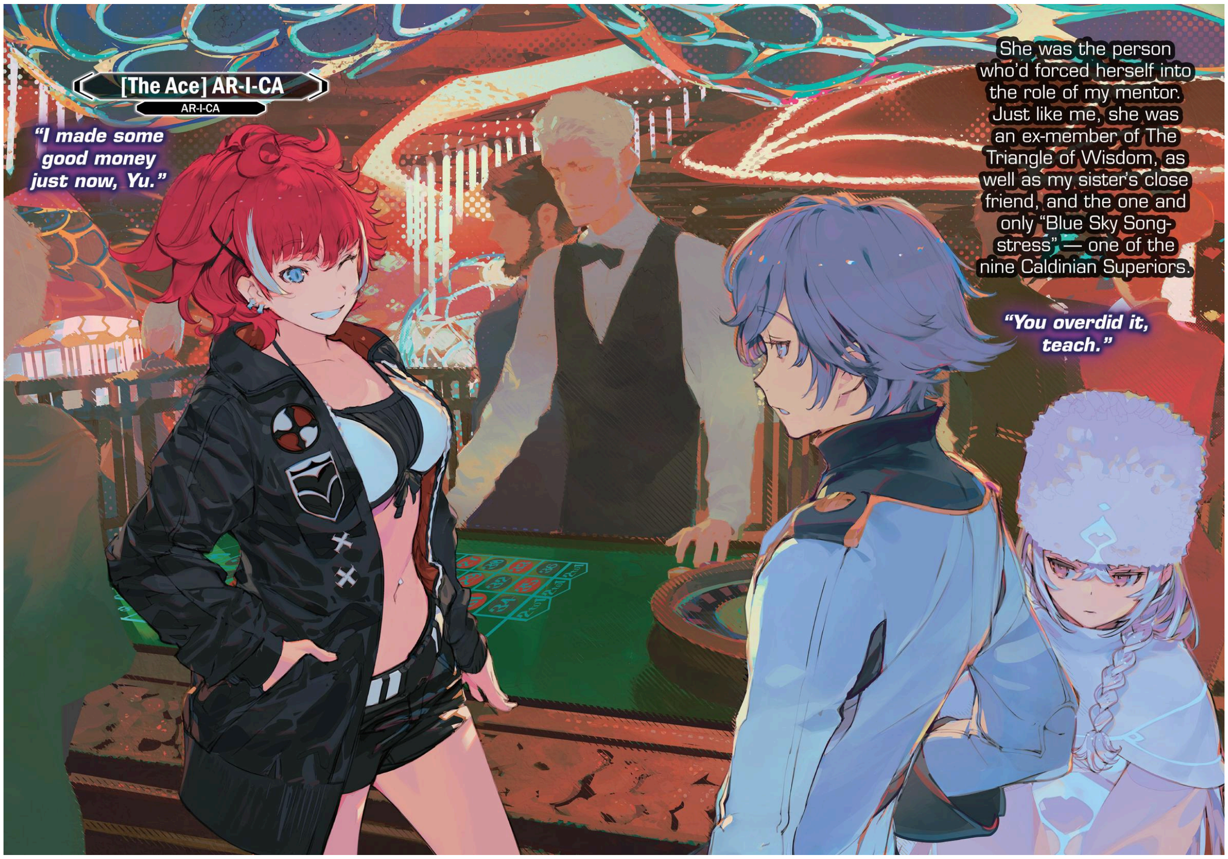
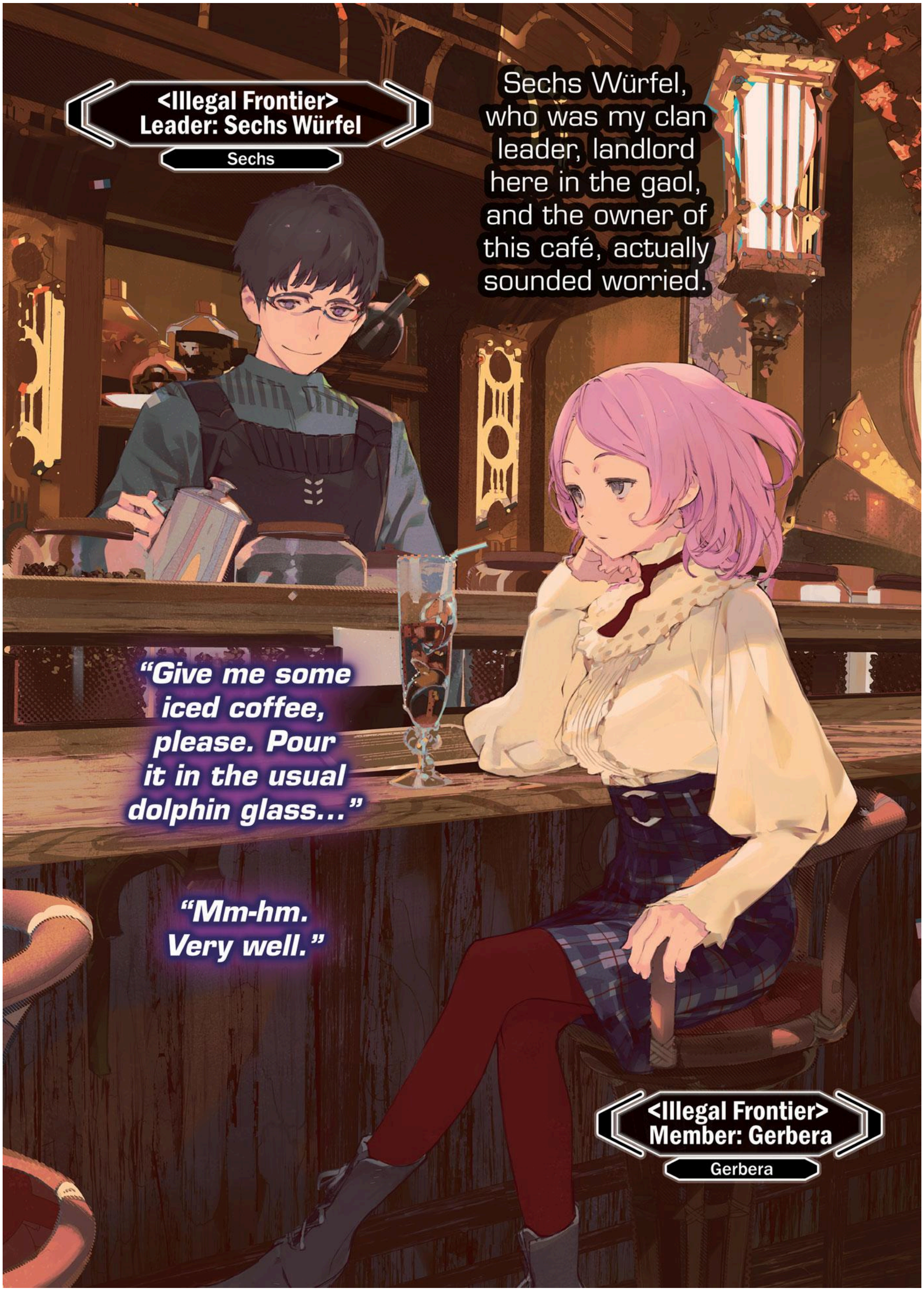

[The Ace] AR-I-CA
AR-I-CA
"I made some good money just now, Yu."
"You overdid it, teach."

She was the person who'd forced herself into the role of my mentor. Just like me, she was an ex-member of The Triangle of Wisdom, as well as my sister's close friend, and the one and only "Blue Sky Songstress"—one of the nine Caldinian Superiors.


<Illegal Frontier>
Leader: Sechs Würfel
Sechs
Sechs Würfel, who was my clan leader, landlord here in the gaol, and the owner of this café, actually sounded worried.
"Give me some iced coffee, please. Pour it in the usual dolphin glass..."
"Mm-hm. Very well."
<Illegal Frontier>
Member: Gerbera
Gerbera

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Prologue

Control AI Workspace

"Ngh... There's so much work..." A certain white cat was hard at work in a space populated by countless screens.

It was control AI no. 13, Cheshire.

Once in charge of spreading culture, he was now the odd-job AI, constantly dealing with various tasks piled up on him by the other AIs.

Now, while Cheshire was working in this space, he had clones currently leading new Masters through the tutorial, and an avatar acting as a duelist.

This ability to split himself and thus divide his processing power was what had gotten him the role of the odd-job AI.

"I'm not at my best, either," he grumbled. "Using my real body took away a whole lot of my processing power..."

Recently, in the ruins near Quartierlatin, he'd unleashed his power as Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin and crushed an army of pre-ancient weaponry.

Doing something like that wasn't without its costs, though.

Unlike how it was with controlling normal clones, using the main body to its full potential left a burden on his processing power. In other words, it made him tired.

"Nngh... But I need to clear some of this work to open up processing power for my match as Tom..."

Tired or not, he still had work to do.

All the administrative work was done by just thirteen AIs, so breaks were out of the question, especially when there were those who were even more tired than Cheshire. It was a vicious circle, like in a typical employee-exploiting business.

Then again, perhaps you couldn't expect any rest while managing *Infinite Dendrogram* — a world that was active 24/7 and constantly had several hundred thousand people connected to it.

It made sense that they would have to use so much of their processing power.

“Looking back at it, the first two thousand years here before launch were sooo easy... Even if you ignore the hell I went through because of Rockfell and Fanlong.”

Cheshire grinned wryly as he recalled the time when he was The Lynx, Schrödinger Cat. Those were the names of the King of Kings and the Draconic Emperor of that time.

It was now called “The Era of the Peerless Three,” but from Cheshire’s perspective, it was “The Era of the Peerless Two and an Extra.”

Most of his memories of that time consisted of nothing but getting into trouble made by two people who were basically walking glitches.

“Our recent incident reminds me of that time.”

Cheshire had needed to deal with the pre-ancient civilization’s weapons back then, too. Remembering how hard it all was, he felt a bit nostalgic.

“Oh, also...”

He then remembered a certain newbie Master... who probably couldn’t be considered new anymore.

Ray Starling — the man who’d taken Cheshire’s words about freedom to heart and then defeated half of Acra-Vesta, against whom Cheshire himself was hopelessly incompatible.

Cheshire wondered what the young man was up to right now.

“He’s probably having a hard time...”

The young man had been caught up in all sorts of happenings ever since he’d started.

The event in Quartierlatin had been preceded by the battle against Monochrome in Torne and the trouble with The Lunar Society.

“I can’t get a break myself, but I really hope he doesss.”

A rest without anything special happening. A silence after a typhoon.

Cheshire thought it wouldn’t hurt for Ray to have that.

Beginning Episode: Break Time

Episode One: College

April 3rd, 2045, Reiji Mukudori

On the first Monday of April, I woke up earlier than usual.

We'd gone through the enrollment guidance and procedures and introduced ourselves to our fellow freshmen on Friday, so today, we were going to start classes and our college life.

It was just a weekend, but somehow, it felt like a whole year had passed since Friday.

The weekend was just that impactful, I guess, I thought.

First I'd picked up a search quest that had culminated in the battle against Monochrome. Then I'd gone to change my job at Quartierlatin's ruins, only to end up fighting Hell General and the whale.

The weekend had been almost as packed with happenings as my first few days in *Dendro,* everything from coming online until the conclusion of Franklin's Game at Gideon. I felt like I'd done nothing but fight the whole time.

Now, though, I had to focus on my college life. My parents had told me that I could only live by myself if I made it into Tokyo University, one of the country's best universities. I'd done just that, but this would be pointless if I didn't keep up with my studies. It'd make for quite a bad joke if I went on to repeat a year because of too much *Dendro*. What would my parents think? Seriously. They already had enough to worry about with my siblings, so I didn't want to add to that.

I'd balance my real and *Dendro* lives to be a proper college student.

Speaking of my siblings, I got a call from my sister. She congratulated me for enrolling into college, which was so normal of her that it actually worried me.

She'd been traveling all over for as long as I'd known her, and she was now busy working in a different time zone, which was the reason why it had taken her so long to contact me.

Being busy with work was a good thing, though. For example, as busy as it would make them, authors who were having their work adapted into anime must surely be happy.

Not like my sister worked in that sphere, though.

We chatted and reminisced (some memories made my legs tremble) for about half an hour before she asked if I wanted anything for my enrollment party, to which I answered that I wanted some foreign sweets, preferably from famous confectioners.

That might seem inconsequential, but when it came to such things, my sister was a person you had to be specific with. If I were to just tell her 'anything's fine,' she would bring something far out of reasonable limits or something incomprehensible.

Shu had done that once, and he'd received a gift that had somehow gotten him into major, life-threatening trouble in Aokigahara. That was only a little while before the Un-kra world tournament, when he'd been shaping up to be a great martial artist, and even then, the gift had almost gotten him killed.

If I got into something like that right now, it'd make a mess of both my school and *Dendro* life, so I went and asked for something harmless.

Despite the slight bit of fear, my chat with my sister was fun, and it ended without a hitch.

Still, for some reason, I heard an explosion right before we ended the call, which made me think, *Man, she never changes, huh?*

It honestly felt like she was living in a world and genre a whole lot more dangerous than even *Dendro*.

◇

I made it to college pretty early.

It wasn't far from my apartment, so I just used my bike.

First I went to the student cafeteria and ate some breakfast while checking the syllabus on my mobile for the details on the various courses.

Unlike in high school, where all but a few classes and timetables were decided for you, in college, you have to choose your curricula and set your timetables yourself. I'd looked at it at home, but this could decide my life, so I had to be careful with it.

"For my required foreign language... I'll just take English II. I'm sure you can't go wrong with the ability to talk with those from the Anglosphere."

Although we had some really accurate translation apps these days. *Dendro*, for instance, translated everything into Japanese for me, no matter where the speaker was from.

Rook and Figaro were from the UK, Chelsea was American, Xunyu was Chinese... no, wait, Singaporean. And going by his name, Hugo was French.

You could probably find a lot more interesting nationalities if you looked hard enough.

"Gotta pick one more, right...? What should I go for?"

I was interested in Greek because of its relation to Nemesis, but I didn't have that option here.

She *was* based on Greek mythology, right? As far as I knew, "Vengeance is Mine" was a biblical quote from the New Testament.

Oh, well. Nothing could be done if Greek wasn't an option.

Still, what other language could I go for?

"Heya, Rei! How are ya?" Someone slapped my back and greeted me with a cheerful voice.

I turned around and saw someone familiar. "...Natsume."

This girl with unruly hair and a bit of face paint was a fellow freshman: Soprano Natsume. She was one of the four other freshman *Dendro* users I had met during the introductions.

Though her first name was read as "Soprano," it was actually written in Japanese kanji for "high" and "sound." Such names had once been rare, but it was at least one in five people now. It had been that way since I was in elementary school.

"That's my name!" she exclaimed. "Anyway, what're ya up to?! You okay? Wanna do some cat's cradle?" Natsume presented me a cat's cradle wrapped around her hands.

"...Why?" I asked.

"Brain exercise?"

What's with the questioning tone? You're the one who offered.

"Mukudori, Natsume, good morning," yet another person greeted us.

"Oh. Good morning, Akiyama."

"Morning, Suba!"

It was Subaru Akiyama, another fellow freshman *Dendro* user.

Unlike Natsume, Akiyama wasn't the kind of person who'd touch you upon greeting or randomly ask to play some cat's cradle. However, she was wearing a long-sleeved maid uniform.

College had no rules for clothing or hair styles, but constant cosplayers like her were few and far between.

Then again, she claimed that it wasn't cosplay. During the introductions last week, Akiyama had said she was juggling her college life and work as a maid in a certain household, and this was her uniform.

I'd asked why she didn't just change, and gotten the un-maidlike response of, "Changing a bunch of times per day is a pain."

The other two *Dendro* users I'd met were guys who were about as... interesting as these two.

I was probably the blandest among us *Dendro* freshmen.

That made me realize that the higher years had people like Miss Eldritch and Tsukikage. Tokyo U sure was full of weirdos.

"I must say, you're early," said Akiyama. "I know we agreed on something for the first period, but it's over an hour away."

"Oh, I just wanted to think about my timetable."

The thing we'd agreed on was related to classes.

We five liberal arts freshmen *Dendro* users would split up and take a look at the available courses. We'd all look at different classes and take notes and stuff to help each other decide what courses to take.

Whether someone wanted something easy, useful, or nothing at all depended on them and them alone, but it wouldn't hurt to have more info. The syllabus didn't contain everything, after all.

I could ask B3, though. Kozue Fujibayashi was a diligent girl who could teach me a lot.

There was also Miss Aberration, but... we were in different departments, and I felt like her help would cost something I could never repay. So a strong "no" from me.

"We haven't even started looking around. What're you so troubled by?" asked Natsume.

"The second foreign language. I still don't know what to pick," I answered, and both of them looked at me in confusion.

"I thought you'd just go for German."

"Yes. I think it would suit you well."

I had only one response to that strange opinion: "...Why?"

The two looked at each other, then back at me, and then said simultaneously: "Because it would fit your in-*Dendro* edgy chuuni fashion."

"All right, when we meet in *Dendro*, I'm dueling you both."

What was so chuuni or edgy about my gear? How rude.

Though, yeah, I'd just go for German. That seemed cool.

"Your newest set is just crazy," said Natsume. "Ah, in a good way, I mean."

"You even ate a devil..." muttered Akiyama.

I said nothing.

They were talking about the video uploaded shortly after my battle against Logan. I had no idea who, but someone had recorded it in its entirety.

"Hmm... But that vid looks a bit R-rated, so maybe most edgy kids can't see it?" one of them said.

"Well, it does seem inappropriate for minors."

"Don't talk about me like I produce adult content!" I exclaimed.

What do they think I am?!

"Ah. I just got mail from Draggy," Natsume said as she looked at her mobile.

"Draggy" had to be Dragon Kasugai — another fellow freshman.

Just like with Natsume's "Soprano," "Dragon" was only the reading, and it actually used Japanese kanji when written.

He had a mohawk and wore sunglasses, so he might've stood out even more than Akiyama and her maid uniform.

"He says he's tired after yesterday's mixer, so he'll take the first period off," said Natsume.

"It's the first day!" I shouted, wondering if all colleges had this level of freedom. "Is that really okay?! What about our agreement?!"

"Planning tiiime!" said Natsume, instead of responding.

"Let's ignore the classes with the lowest priority," said Akiyama.

"Wouldn't that be a bit mean to the professors?" I asked. It didn't seem good to remove those from the running without even trying.

"That's true. Then let's make it fair and roll for it," Akiyama said as she took out some dice.

"Why are you carrying those around?" asked Natsume.

I could ask the same about your cat's cradle, but I won't.

"I like gambling."

"That's not something I'd like to hear from a maid," I muttered.

Those long sleeves made her seem like a capable maid, but this and her refusal to change from her uniform made me believe that she was actually pretty slovenly.

Still, she'd made it into Tokyo U, so maybe she was a diligent student.

...One who was about to pick her classes by rolling dice.

Still, we had to remove some classes to make up for Kasugai's absence, so we had no choice.

"Oh? Lexy mailed me, too," Natsume said as she took out her mobile again.

"Lexy" was her nickname for Alex Fuyuki, the last of the freshmen *Dendro* users. Like the name implied, he was half-Japanese, and he *always* wore an overcoat — even indoors.

It was a chilly spring right now, but what would he do when it was summer?

"Oh, dear," she added.

This gave me a slight sense of déjà vu. "...What did he say?"

"He's not coming today."

"He's skipping not just the first period, but all the classes?! It's the first day!"

Isn't that, like, really dangerous?!

"Wait, he could be sick," I composed myself. "Warm clothes don't make you immune to colds, so..."

"He says he's busy with *Dendro*."

"He's not sick?!"

While I was here worrying about my life-*Dendro* balance, Fuyuki was going and tossing it aside on the first day.

Then again, maybe I wasn't in a position to say anything to him.

I could totally imagine myself skipping college if, for example, the battles surrounding the ruins were happening now.

It wasn't unlikely that I'd be in such a situation eventually.

That aside, I was kinda worried about Fuyuki's college life right now.

The guy was actually skipping the entire first day of college.

Would he be all right...?

Side Story: A Certain Arrest

April 3rd, 2045, Tenchi

The island country known as Tenchi was located to the east of the continent.

It was considered “different” even by *Dendro* country standards, but not due to its culture or appearance.

The extra-fantastical Fairyland of Legendaria or the floating country of Granvaloa beat it out in that regard.

Tenchi’s culture was a unique reflection of Azuchi-Momoyama or Edo Period Japan, but that wasn’t what made it stand out.

It was the fact that it was in a state of constant civil war.

The country had a de facto leader, the person with the job of “Conquest General,” but the feudal lords under him... the “daimyos”... constantly waged war on each other. In fact, you could say that even the Conquest General was just the daimyo with the greatest amount of land, as proven by the fact that his status could often be taken from him.

In Tenchi, conflict and death were part of daily life. The reason for the constant civil war wasn’t clear. The separate parties had their own reasons, but the conflicts kept continuing in an endless chain, and as of yet, no one had united the entire island under a single flag. Even if most of the daimyo families were destroyed, the larger ones would split, increasing their number again and continuing the conflicts.

They fought as though it was in their DNA. At this point, that was part of Tenchi’s identity as a country. Many of the Masters who learned about it would call it “the country of strife.” This aspect of the country was reflected in its people. The median level of Tenchi tian fighters was over 300. Being a country of conflict had made it a breeding ground for warriors far stronger than those from other countries. One of the reasons for this was surely the fact that tians were a better source of EXP than monsters.

It was often said that history would’ve gone completely differently if Tenchi had stopped infighting and invaded the continent. But even now, after the explosive increase in Masters, Tenchi continued to be the land of strife.

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Three shadows were moving through a mountain forest in the northern reaches of Tenchi. They all had unique appearances.

One was a blooming beauty akin to a squid. She had ten mechanical tentacles growing out of her back. She traveled by using them to reach for the ground and pull herself forward, and her speed was nothing to scoff at. The tight-fitting bodysuit she wore made her look like a sci-fi ninja.

The second was a middle-aged man wearing apparel like that of a Japanese diviner, an onmyoji. He was sitting cross-legged on an ant as large as an elephant, which was moving as fast as the tentacled woman. With a marked Fu in hand, he whispered something under his breath.

The third person was a young man in a coat that was clearly too big for him. There was a clear contrast between his apparel and his small stature. You'd expect him to have trouble walking, but that didn't matter now, as he was being carried by one of the woman's tentacles. Another thing notable about him was the Fu on his forehead, which made him look like a jiangshi from Huang He, but he was neither a jiangshi nor an undead.

"Well, Winterbaum? Is that Fu doing its job?" the man on the ant asked the youth.

"Yes. I don't feel any motion sickness. Thank you, Mr. Eashtan," replied the young man, Winterbaum.

"Kyah kyah kyah!" the man on the ant laughed. "It's just a Fu to ward against weak poison-type debuffs, but it does the job for motion sickness. You can't ride Probe's chains without it. I could let you ride my ant, but they throw off anyone they're not used to. You don't have to worry about that with her holding you, though. Right, Probe?"

The woman clearly heard him, but didn't respond. Some might think they were on bad terms, but that certainly wasn't the case. This was just how they usually were. That was proven by what happened next...

"BHOAAHHH!"

"BHAAOHHH!"

A pair of large, Demi-Dragon-tier boars jumped out on the path and attacked them. Without saying a word, Probe tore one of them apart with one of her tentacles.

"This doesn't look like pork I'd like to eat," said Eashtan as three ants appeared from out of the ground and instantly reduced the other boar to bone.

Still bound by the tentacle, Winterbaum could do nothing but watch. Unlike the other two, he was a newbie with stats that wouldn't let him last a minute against those two boars. They were on a whole other level, both literally and figuratively.

They're amazing... So this is the power of Hokugen'in's top fighters, huh? he thought, both tense and excited.

"Hokugen'in" was the name of a particularly well-known daimyo family in Tenchi. They owned lots of land in the northern reaches of Tenchi and had a lot of strong fighters at their disposal, many of which were Masters. The best of the best among them were known as "The Hokugen'in Elite Four," and they were feared and respected all across the already-dangerous country.

The two people Winterbaum was accompanying were among those four.

One was The Whip, Probe USA One the "Dismantler," while the other was Onmyou Doctor, Eashtan the "Army Ant." Both were extremely powerful pre-Superiors who'd made a name for themselves in both Tenchi's duel and kill rankings.

I'm so lucky, Winterbaum thought. Despite being just a newbie, he'd been invited to go on an official Hokugen'in quest alongside these two.

It's hard to refuse a request to party up with our top people. The reward is great, too, so it's worth skipping college for this... I'll have to apologize to them, though...

Winterbaum — otherwise known as Reiji Mukudori's fellow freshman, Alex Fuyuki — slowly nodded to himself. He did feel bad about skipping out on their agreement to scout out their course options together, but it was a sacrifice that had to be made.

I hope I can make up for it with some lunch...

"What's wrong? You look like you got something on your mind," said Eashtan, noticing the youth's expression.

Winterbaum didn't want to lie to someone he respected. "Oh, I... I'm just thinking about college. I skipped it today..."

Eashtan looked at him with worry. “Isn’t April an important time in Japanese colleges? Can you really do that?”

“It’s just the first day, so I’m sure I can get it back...”

Tokyo U was among the country’s best, but he didn’t want to believe that skipping a single day would be enough to ruin his college life.

W-Well, this week is all about examining the courses, and lots of people change theirs after the first or second lecture, so I’ll be able to make up for this... right?

His own words had made Winterbaum a bit worried, so he had to try and convince himself that it would be all right.

“Funding education. Parent burden. Idle pleasure. Not good.” Probe spoke up for the first time. Her tone was strong, and she coupled it with a few light slaps on Winterbaum’s forehead.

However, Winterbaum didn’t really understand her. Her words were too simple for him to process.

“...What?”

“‘Your parents paid for college, so you shouldn’t waste it by playing around,’” said Eashtan. “That’s how I interpret that, anyway.”

“College life. Prioritize studies,” Probe added in a huff.

“Right... I’m sorry,” Winterbaum apologized, now feeling down. “But class is about to end, anyway, so please let me keep questing.”

Probe said nothing and just gave him a glare.

“Hey, it’s fine,” Eashtan said. “It’s too late for that now. And he will be useful, right?”

“...Reluctant agreement.” Probe still didn’t seem to think it was okay, but she did seem to see that she had to accept it, so she just continued carrying Winterbaum.

“Well, just remember to prioritize your real life next time,” Eashtan said.

“Okay...” Winterbaum felt bad for worrying them, but he was also curious about something.

“Sorry to bring it up so late, but why does Probe speak in sentences of just two words?”

“I don’t know myself,” said Eashtan. “We can still communicate just fine, so I don’t mind it.”

“I see...”

I guess there really are a lot of weirdos among the top players, he thought. *It doesn't bother me, though.*

"Oh!" Winterbaum exclaimed as he opened a map. "We're close to the third village, you two!"

"Mhm," nodded Eashtan. "And what does your Horus show there?"

"I'll take a look," he said as he reached into the crest on his left hand and took out a magnifying glass. He then held it over the map. Specifically, the aforementioned village. "Uhh... There's a fight. Or more like, they're being attacked."

Instead of simply magnifying the map, the lens displayed a bird's eye view of the actual place it represented. Winterbaum's Horus was an Embryo of farsight, based on the ancient Egyptian god said to have the sun and the moon for eyes. It created livestreams of distant places when simply held over maps.

It had a flaw, it couldn't see inside buildings, but that didn't stop it from being extremely useful for reconnaissance. This was the very reason why a newbie like him was going on a quest alongside these two renowned Masters: the lens of Horus presented a clear scene of brigands attacking a village and its inhabitants struggling against them.

"I expected this," said Eashtan. "The first two villages were untouched, but this one is closer to the halfway point. Still, we're on a quest to both bring the news and enforce order, so let's hurry there."

"Pressing urgency," Probe agreed.

The two of them prepared to hurry over to the village, but then...

"Hm...? What?" Eashtan suddenly placed the Fu in his hand against his ear.

"Mr. Eashtan?" asked Winterbaum, but Eashtan just gestured for him to be quiet.

A few seconds later...

"Hmm... We don't have to hurry anymore, you two," Eashtan said as he not only slowed down, but changed direction. "Let's go to the fourth village. We'll just be late to this one."

"Demanding explanation," said Probe.

"We were too slow. *He's* already there. There's nothing for us to do there now."

"Eh?" Winterbaum looked at the village once again. The situation had completely changed, and it left him speechless and wide-eyed.

“Dear me. Didn’t we set out on this quest before him? I can see why he and Saki are considered abnormal,” Eashtan grumbled.

As for Probe...

“Mist...” She whispered her first one-word sentence and looked at the mist at the foot of a nearby mountain.

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Tenchi was a land of strife.

Because of this, it had the strongest tians on average, which in turn made it difficult for malicious Masters to commit crime. Even tians could beat them, after all.

But there were exceptions...

“TAKE IT AAAALL!” a man roared. “DON’T KILL THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN! WE’RE SELLIN’ ’EM OFF!”

A certain mountain village was under attack by bandits. It wasn’t that special of a situation, but there were two strange things about it: all the bandits had crests on their left hands, and there were nearly no young men among the defending villages. The few elders tried fending them off with spears, but the power gap was evident.

Watching his partners in crime round up the villagers, one of the bandit Masters spoke to their leader. “Big catch, huh, boss?” The boss had a large build and a fierce look about him. His apparel was as colorful as a kabuki performer’s, and on his hands, he wore gloves with the letters “B A N” engraved on them.

His name was Gigamaru Gakido. He was the King of Grind — the Superior Job from the Boxer grouping’s Pound Boxer sub-grouping — as well as the leader of the “Sixth Realm’s Chaos” bandit clan, and the tenth in the highly competitive Tenchi duel scene.

“Heh heh. Sure is,” he chuckled. “Looks like they sent all their fighters to Kurowa. Seems like they lost, too, so they ain’t comin’ back, either. Kheheheh. Perfect time to make a killin’.”

A few days ago, the local daimyo family, Kurowa, had battled one of the neighboring daimyos. They’d suffered a decisive defeat, making them lose a lot of influence and land.

This village was one of the places Kurowa had lost, but the victorious daimyo still hadn’t established his rule here. As a general rule, all daimyos in Tenchi ruled separately, and each had their own laws.

Since this was no longer Kurowa land, Kurowa laws no longer applied, but since it wasn’t officially under the wing of the victorious daimyo yet, their laws didn’t apply, either. Basically, this was now an unprotected, lawless land.

Sixth Realm Chaos had purposely attacked them at this exact time.

This wasn’t their first time attacking tians. However, since their crimes hadn’t come to light yet, they weren’t on the wanted list yet. This was a major job, even for criminals like them.

“No proper warriors guarding ’em, no laws or rights to protect ’em... We rarely get prey this good,” Gakido said, grinning. “But where’re we sellin’ ’em? Can’t do it in Tenchi, can we...?”

“That’s nothin’ to worry about. We got in contact with a good slave trader recently, didn’t we? Said he’ll buy all the slaves we catch and handle all the shit surrounding ’em.”

“Ohh? That sounds good. What was his name, again? Slipped my mind. La, Ree... Relacma?”

“La Crima. He’s the one who told us about the war and where to find these villages. Also gave us some damn good accessories as a sign of friendship. A good guy, that one.” He pointed to his earring-shaped accessory.

Gakido himself had better accessories, but these gifts were more than good enough for his underlings.

“Ha ha ha! That’s great. It costs money to grow the clan and to hire smiths to make better gear for the duels, so we can’t miss out on tasty deals like this. You know what, I’ll give ya a better share for mediating.”

“Heh heh. I knew you’d say that. You’re a nice guy, boss.”

While they were having this conversation, the rest of the clan mostly finished rounding up the villagers. They were all sitting in the center of the village, bound in chains. Five of them, however, were seated separate from the rest.

They were the prettier-looking women, girls, and boys, and they were bound in just shackles, rather than chains.

“Hmm? Does this mean what I think it means?” Gakido asked.

The clan members responded to his question with nothing but vile grins.

“I’ll have the redhead. You do whatever you want with the rest,” Gakido said.

“That’s our boss! You know what it’s all about!” Hollering, the bandits surrounded the girls and boys.

Gakido himself reached for the red-haired woman he’d picked... but then realized that something wasn’t right.

“...Mist?” he muttered. A dense mist had filled the village.

There was a well here, but the kind of river that could form such a mist was a fair distance away. As they all wondered what was happening... an unfamiliar voice reached their ears.

“Hmm... No good. No good at all,” the voice said. “The women and boys of the world have a beauty to them that changes with the passage of time. Violently tearing it while it’s still budding is truly a waste. After all... what’s a love-making without love?”

The source of the voice was on the roof of one of the buildings.

It was a muscle mountain of a man. Not in the unsightly sense, though. He was over two meters tall, and combined with the muscles, he created a very balanced-looking build.

He had hair that was long, dark, and disorderly, and a beard that grew away from his face. Additionally, he wore skins that looked like they were freshly-torn from a baboon, and had a hatchet-like blade at his side.

Judging by appearance alone, you would have assumed that he was from Gakido’s clan.

“Who the hell are you?” Gakido demanded.

The man reached for his side and took out a traditional Japanese smoking pipe before responding.

“Me? I’m Bigman.”

He then lit the pipe and began smoking it. It was a calm and casual act — which was in complete contrast to Gakido and his gang. After all, “Bigman” was a major name — a true big deal.

“King of Brigands...” one of them trembled.

“Bigman the Mountain-Splitter!”

“The Superior that’s second in the kill rankings!”

The man held the brigand grouping’s Superior Job, King of Brigands. “Mountain-Splitter” was a nickname, said to have been born when he’d cut a mountain in half. Obviously, he was a Superior.

“You can’t be serious!” one of the brigands yelped.

Tenchi had a number of Superiors. The top three in the duel rankings were among them, so Gakido — a duel ranker himself — knew their power well.

But that wasn’t all.

Bigman was...

“So you’re all informed, huh? Guess I don’t have to introduce myself now. If you know that much, then you probably also know that... I’m a guest at Hokugen’in’s,” Bigman exhaled some smoke, mixing it with the mist before continuing. “This recently became Hokugen’in turf.”

Indeed. The daimyo family that had fought Kuroha and conquered this land was the Hokugen’in. Thus, there could only be one reason why one of their Elite Four would come here.

He took out a seal case and presented it to Sixth Realm Chaos.

“Hokugen’in’s law’s in place now. In case it ain’t obvious, we can’t have our people taken into slavery.”

“Gh...!” The words made the bandit clan grind their teeth in frustration, and the villagers cheer. The item Bigman had shown was proof that he represented the Hokugen’in family.

Midorino Hokugen’in, the current head of the family, had taken the potential of such crime into consideration. Thus, he’d given his seals to some of his guest Masters and had them travel around to prevent it. Eashtan, Probe, and Bigman were among those chosen Masters.

This was no longer lawless territory. Thanks to the edict, it was now under the law of Hokugen’in.

“Blood has already been spilled,” Bigman continued. “But it’s my own fault for not making it in time. It would be wrong to judge you for simply adhering to the law of lawlessness.”

Falling silent for a moment, he looked down upon the Sixth Realm Chaos.

“But if you continue to act as criminals even after seeing this seal, you’ll all lose your heads and drop straight to the gaol.”

His status as a Superior — one of the strongest Masters — made his words feel like a menacing growl.

Looking at his awed gang, Gakido clicked his tongue.

He’s not someone we can handle.

Gakido didn’t believe that numbers gave him any sort of advantage. Battle-focused Superiors weren’t the kind of creatures that could be swarmed. Backing down was obviously the right choice here.

But before he could tell his clan to retreat...

“Ohhhh?” Bigman noticed a few of the clan members point their weapons at the bound villagers. The one he’d talked to before Bigman’s arrival was among them.

“Wh-What the hell’re you doin’?! Put your weapons away!” Gakido shouted. However, the brigands said nothing in response and just swung their weapons at the villagers.

A member with Telepathy Cuffs equipped tried to talk to him telepathically. “B-Boss! Something’s wrong! My body’s moving on its own and I can’t ta—!”

His sentence was cut short by Bigman jumping off the roof and splitting the man in half before he could harm the villagers.

“Looks like you’re all victims of possession... no... parasitism,” Bigman said. “I did hear that a worldwide criminal who has an Embryo like that had infiltrated Tenchi...”

“Huhh...?” Gakido looked and noticed that most of the members had lost the earrings they’d been wearing.

No... That wasn’t right. The earrings had crawled inside their bodies through their ear canals... like parasites.

“Wh-What the hell?” Gakido didn’t know what was happening.

However, the battle had already begun. The Sixth Realm Chaos had surrounded Bigman, weapons in hand. Albeit outnumbered, Bigman laughed.

“Fwahahahah! Sorry, but I can’t tell which of you’ve got the things in ya, so I’ll just beat ya all. This and all the other stuff they find out about ya will probably put ya on the wanted list, so you just go and have a good time in the gaol.”

“What?!” Gakido screamed.

“Well, I guess it just goes to show that crime doesn’t pay.” Bigman swung his hatchet at the Sixth Realm Chaos members.

Strange as it was, he easily chopped off the heads of those who were clearly outside of the hatchet’s reach. The sound of the blade rending the air and the spraying of blood resounded in the village.

"FUCK!" At this point, Gakido resolved to fight the Superior.

He had a chance against him. His Embryo, the gloves on his hands, had the power to defeat anyone in a single hit. It was an Embryo focused on that alone, and it would give him victory if he just landed a hit.

"I'll beat you and escape!"

Taking the peekaboo block position from boxing, Gakido ran towards Bigman.

"Grinding Shockfist!"

As he closed the distance, he used the ultimate job skill of the King of Grind.

"Pound Boxer" was a hybrid job fusing Boxer and Crasher, making it a job specialized in grinding trees and rocks with fists.

Thus, the ultimate job skill of the King of Grind, the culmination of its grouping, was focused on destruction, as well. It created a shockwave in the shape of a fist that treated its targets as if they had 0 starting defense.

It was a crushing, devastating attack that only registered defense from skills. As Gakido approached Bigman, he pulverized trees, rocks, buildings, and even his own clan members. Bigman, however, dodged it with light movements you'd never expect from someone so burly.

Gakido, surrounded by the debris caused by his ultimate job skill, used that opening to approach Bigman and prepare to use his Embryo — his true ultimate skill. But then, to his shock, there was suddenly a lot of distance between them.

"Ah...?!"

It wasn't that Bigman backed away.

He'd simply moved the tip of his pipe over his shoulder and pointed it towards Gakido.

Gakido was blown away by a smoking pipe as large as a pillar. Once airborne, he was completely at Bigman's mercy.

"Dewblade's Touch — Brocken."

Following that ultimate skill, the hatchet sliced Gakido in two, giving him the death penalty.

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After beating Gakido, Bigman went on to get rid of the rest of his clan.

"That takes care of that," he said with satisfaction. "Now we've just gotta wait for the officials to arrive."

He removed the chains from the villagers, helped them bury their dead, and took a break.

"Man, I feel like I'm dancing on someone's palm. The real big bad here's the guy with the parasite Embryo, but it doesn't look like I can trace him from here."

Since they were no longer equipped, the members of the Sixth Realm Chaos had dropped the parasite earrings. However, the earrings had quickly blown up and dissolved into light, no doubt to destroy the evidence.

"He was gathering slaves... No... That was just to bring us here so he could gauge us, clearly. It's looking like we'll end up fighting eventually. Man, the battles just don't end here. *Infinite Dendrogram* sure is a restless place... Or is it just Tenchi? Ha ha ha ha ha."

Bigman laughed and looked at where he'd just fought the Sixth Realm Chaos.

"Now, they're obviously going to the gaol. It's hard to cross the sea from Tenchi." His words reminded him of the last of The Elite Four. "I wonder if Saki did it with that shabby raft."

There was a hint of worry in his tone.

Unless you had save points in other countries, getting the death penalty in Tenchi while on the wanted list meant going straight to the gaol.

The waters in the strait between Tenchi and the mainland were known to be extremely rough and full of powerful aquatic monsters. Crossing it alone was so extremely difficult that the only ones who succeeded were people like The Unsheath, Kashimiya.

There was also the option to give up on the strait and take the long way through the ocean, but Tenchi was on bad terms with Granvaloa, who considered all the waters beyond Tenchi's territorial waters to be their domain. This lack of insurance in case they were put on the wanted list was another reason why Masters in Tenchi were reluctant to commit crimes.

"I hope Saki doesn't cause too much trouble in Caldina or Huang He. Caldina's 'Blue Sky Songstress' and Huang He's 'Fenghuang' sound like the kind of people she couldn't get along with..."

Bigman was worried that his fellow Elite Four member would pick a fight with a foreign Superior and end up on a wanted list.

"Even if that does happen, Hokugen'in has her back, so at least she wouldn't lose all her save points and go to the gaol," he thought out loud. "Speaking of that place..."

Bigman looked up at the sky and thought of the mysterious place in an unknown location.

"I wonder what kind of Superiors they have there. They must be pretty rough."

Martial artist that he was, he couldn't help imagining the place full of powerful potential foes.

It must be a war-torn hellhole that makes Tenchi pale in comparison...

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April 3rd, 2045, gaol, Bow Hunter, Gerbera

On a Monday afternoon, I logged in to the gaol and found a note on the counter.

"Miss Gerbera,

I have business to attend to in real life and won't be able to return until evening.

During my absence, the establishment will be closed, but feel free to eat whatever you find."

It said that our clan leader wasn't here right now.

"That's rare," I muttered.

He'd been online almost all the time every day since I'd come here a few days ago. I'd only ever seen him log out to eat or use the bathroom. He even went to bed here.

"Ah. So April's here even when he's gone," I added. He must've set her to stay around, even when he was offline.

You could also do this with tamed monsters, but since they could be killed or stolen while the Master was away, it was rarely used. April was once again just sitting in her chair, eyes closed. That seemed to be her default whenever not working.

“He said ‘eat whatever you find,’ but...”

There actually wasn’t that much food here.

There were some ingredients in the fridge-shaped inventory with time-stopping function, but the only things that could be eaten just like that were the bread, and the ham and veggies for sandwiches.

“Going out to eat... isn’t a good idea, either,” I murmured.

The food in the gaol honestly wasn’t very good, which was only obvious, since there were no tians here, and the Masters were all criminals.

Masters who did nothing more than run a restaurant or something wouldn’t end up in a place like this.

There were no proper cooks with the “Cooking” sense skill, so you only had back-alley cooks who tried to do what they could with their real life cooking skill.

So yeah, the gaol lacked good food.

At first, I’d thought that our leader’s café was successful because he was the King of Crime, but it turned out that his good coffee and tea-cakes played a big part in that.

He was actually good at cooking. Still, there had been a time when he was making nothing but popcorn.

“He’s not here... so I guess I’ll just have to make something myself,” I muttered.

“Eh?”

Did I just hear April make a sound I never heard from her before? I’m just imagining it, right?

Shaking my head to clear it from the distraction, I said, “I can make a berry pie out of this stuff.”

I would have liked to make something more proper, but sweets and pastries were all I could do.

“Thinking of sweets reminds me of my life in Gideon,” I added nostalgically.

They had tons of cafés and restaurants there. I’d always enjoyed lunch time back there. With all the places selling them, I hadn’t had to make any sweets myself.

I wanna eat doughnuts from White Sugar Peach again, I thought longingly.

“Anyway, it’s a pain, but I don’t wanna go through hell’s training on an empty stomach," I decided.

I prepared the cookware and ingredients, and made my first pie in a while.

I remembered how to make it, so I just moved my hands based on my memory. I could feel the "hang of it" coming back to me. It reminded me of my days helping Mother make sweets.

While I was busy, April had opened her eyes.

“What?” I asked her.

“...No-thing.” She was looking at me as though she was seeing something unbelievable.

She’s a maid robot, so... did she notice something strange about my pie? Well, whatever. I’m making this for myself. If it’s not good, then it’s my own fault.

Over two hours had passed before I was done.

It had taken longer than expected. It wasn’t my lunch anymore, but a mid-afternoon snack.

“Here goes...” I cut the freshly-baked berry pie, placed it on the plate, and began eating.

It would be good both warm or cold, but I was hungry right now, so it was best to eat while it was still hot.

Well... It was pretty good. It would’ve been better if I’d prepared for this, but it was makeshift, so this was probably the best I could have done.

“I’m back,” our leader said as he suddenly logged in.

Oh, you’re earlier than I expected.

“Welcome back,” I said.

“Oh...? What’s that?”

“I baked a berry pie. Want some?”

“...I might as well.”

I took out a new plate and dished up some of my pie for him.

Oh, I’ll also give him the candy art, I thought. *Now that I think about it, I didn’t need it or the little peacock if I’m eating by myself.*

“Here I go...” he said as he took a bite.

Ah. He fell silent, I thought. *He didn’t like it? Is it because of the slime thing? But he’s human now, right?*

“I forgot to breathe,” he finally said.

“Hm?”

Breathe? You can survive without a head. Don’t talk like that matters to you.

“Miss Gerbera, did you take Cook or Patissier jobs?” he asked.

“No I didn’t. They weren’t in the training menu, were they?”

“I see. That’s true. So this is all you. It’s like Shu...”

What’s wrong with him today? He’s not the type to get lost in thought *and mumble like that.*

"Miss Gerbera, could you please make some desserts for us to sell here?" he asked.

"Sure, but it's amateur work. Will that be fine?"

I didn't even have the Cooking skill. Could we really charge for the stuff I made? Then again, that wasn't rare here in the gaol. Not even our leader had the skill.

"...Yes, please," he said.

"Okay. I'll make some in my spare time and put them in the fridge."

And so, I now had confectioning as part of my daily routine. Yup. That was my life now. Just another peaceful day in the gaol.

Episode Two: Seniors

April 4th, 2045, Reiji Mukudori

It was the second day of college. Classes were over, and I was heading to relax in the café. Fuyuki had ended up not coming to college all of yesterday, but he'd come as normal today.

The four of us — including Kasugai, who had come during second period yesterday, as planned — all scolded Fuyuki, telling him we were worried about him, and then sharing the info we'd gotten from sitting in the classes.

Natsume also told him that he owed us lunch in the expensive cafeteria.

Anyway, I parted ways with them, and it was time for me to build my timetable for Monday and Tuesday. I'd have to consider the balance between all the days, but I knew for sure that I wanted Monday's first period open, since I'd probably spend most of my weekends logged in to *Dendro* for long periods. Quartierlatin surely wouldn't be the last clash between Altar and Dryfe, so I had to dedicate as much time for *Dendro* as possible.

...That thought made me feel like *Dendro* had become a really big part of my life, but I was fine with that. I just had to take care of any *Dendro* trouble while being careful that I didn't lose control of my life in reality. Of course, it would be best if there was no trouble at all.

Specifically, I would have liked to avoid any more Superior-related trouble, but that seemed unlikely. Anyway, I'd save the thinking about *Dendro* trouble for when I came online. For now, I was just going to think about my real life, drink this fancy tea, and—

"Heyoo! Hi, Ray! How're ya?!" a voice came from behind me.

It was akin to the insane ramblings of a cosmic horror, and it was coupled with a slap on my shoulder. It clearly wanted my attention, but I didn't want to turn around, because I knew exactly what it was.

"Ah. Those cream puffs look great. Don't mind if I doooo!" The creature reached forward and took one of the 300 yen chou à la crèmes I had.

The slender, beautiful fingers made me picture the tentacles of indescribable eldritch horrors lurking inside the deepest, darkest trenches of the ocean.

"So what kinda tea's that?" the person went on.

...No good. If I continued to ignore her, she'd probably take more of my snacks.

"...Fuso," I said as I turned around. "You're not supposed to take people's food without permission. What are you, Nemesis?"

"Those words make me wonder about li'l Nemesis's role," said the cosmic aberration, AKA the Superior and my upperclassman, Tsukuyo Fuso.

Not even real life could save me from encountering *this* Superior...

"Hmm? Why're ya lookin' at me like I'm a monster?" she asked.

You're not a monster, but a yokai, I thought, not daring to say it. *The Chou à la Crème Kitsune.*

"Oh dear, you look upset," she said. "Sorry 'bout the cream puff. It looked so good that my hand moved on its own. I skipped lunch, so I'm hungry, too. Will you forgive me if I buy you somethin'? I can even get you somethin' more expensive. A sponge cake? Parfait?"

"Just get me a new chou à la crème," I said.

"'Kaaay... Didn't take you for the type who'd be picky about food names."

"I'm just calling it by its name on the menu."

She went on to order some tea and snacks, and sat down on the chair in front of me.

Ah! Damn it! We ended up sitting at the same table!

"Boy, is it hard to meet when we're in different departments," she said, flopping back across from me.

"Yeah..."

"We had a good time chattin' in the club room last time, didn't we?"

"That's not how I remember it!"

You dragged me in and held me down!

"Details, details... How're you doing these days?"

"Fine, I guess," I shrugged. "College is different than high school, so I'm still adjusting to the system. I'm making a timetable right n—"

"I don't wanna hear that boring stuff," she cut me off.

She just called everything I was up to "boring"...

"I meant in *Dendro*," the aberration continued. "What kinda deadly fights are ya gettin' into recently?"

"Why are you making it sound like I'm always on the verge of dying?" I demanded, looking back at the dangers I'd faced in Quartierlatin and being unable to deny her implication. "Well, I did go through some stuff after leaving Torne..."

"Ah. Were you caught up in the trouble at Quartierlatin?" she asked, making it clear that unlike Natsume and Akiyama, she hadn't seen the video.

"No comment..."

"Ahaha! 'No comment,' he says!" I had no idea what was so funny, but she burst out laughing and started poking me in the cheek.

Her nails weren't sharp — probably because she was a medical student — but it kinda annoyed me.

"Tell me if the trouble ends up hurtin' ya. I'll treat ya for a special price," Miss Aberration said.

"...How much are we talking?" I asked.

"One heal and you join the club."

I could consider that much...

"Two heals and you join The Lunar Society."

"Not happening!"

I was against getting a death penalty just to fix a bad injury-type status effect, but I sure as hell wouldn't pick anything worse!

"Oh, that's sooo mean."

"At least I'm not going around a university campus inviting people to my cult," I shot back.

Isn't that forbidden? I fumed silently.

"Hey, don't be like that," Miss Eldritch said. "That was just a joke. Look, the snacks are here, so let's just have some tea. I need a break right now."

"Did something happen?" I asked slowly.

"I had to hand in some reports. Today was the deadline, but... stuff happened on Saturday, so I had to get 'em done yesterday."

Reports? I thought. *So even she can be a proper student, huh?*

She was a Superior in *Dendro* and the top of a cult both here and there, but now she seemed like a normal university girl. The “stuff on Saturday” must’ve been related to Mr. Shijima.

...Fine. I have her to thank for fixing my arm, so I could at least have some tea with her.

“This all looks sooo good. Wanna feed me? Here! Ahhhh,” she said as she opened her mouth.

This woman...

“Nope,” I replied. “Also, isn’t that something you should ask your boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?”

“Isn’t that what Tsukikage basically is?”

She blinked a few times, then laughed out loud. “No no no no! We’re not like that.”

“You aren’t?”

“We’re childhood friends. Kage’s from the family that’s been serving mine for generations. He’s now my secretary and caretaker.”

“I see.”

So that kind of thing actually exists...

“So there,” she added. “He’s not my boyfriend. I left my parents’ place in Kyoto and moved here for college, and he’s been a big help.”

“In what way?”

“He makes my breakfast and dinner. Sometimes even gives me some packed lunch.”

“Mm-hm...”

“He does the cleanin’ and laundry, too. Thanks to him, I don’t need a cleaning robot, no matter how much of a mess I make.”

“...Hm?”

“Whenever I almost sleep in, he takes me to college in his bike’s sidecar, he translates all the foreign papers I need for reports, and he always looks through The Lunar Society’s register and other documents.”

I had no words. Wasn’t the guy working too hard? And why did it seem like Miss Eldritch did absolutely nothing?

“I asked him to get material for yesterday’s report, too, but... for some reason, he’s not getting up from bed.”

“Overwork! That’s your reason!” I shouted.

Tsukikage! You’re pampering this cosmic horror too much!

“Seriously, don’t you think you’re working him too hard...?” I added.

“But I’m working, too. I wrote the report myself, and handed it in before the deadline,” she said with a smile, and puffed up her chest.

“So this is where you were, president,” a familiar voice came from behind. It was Kozue Fujibayashi, AKA B3.

“O-Ohh... B? Wh-What’s up...?” asked Miss Aberration. Her smile was looking a bit stiff.

“Your mobile is off, so I went looking for you. Associate Professor Miyano left us a message in the club room.”

“No! I don’t wanna hear it!” the aberration wailed as she closed her ears and shook her head.

B3 ignored this and delivered the death sentence. “‘You need to fix the report. The deadline is 9PM today.’”

The aberration made Tsukikage work so hard, and yet couldn’t even handle the report? I feel for the guy...

“Nooo...! I don’t wanna go through that again! B! Do it for me!”

“Who do you think you’re asking? We’re in different years and departments. Give up and go back to editing the report. And turn your mobile back on.”

She clearly turned it off because she knew this would happen, I thought.

“Nooo...! Help me, Kage!”

You mean the person who collapsed because of you?

Miss Aberration continued to whine for a few moments before finishing her tea and snacks and returning to the club room to fix the report. She’d always been just this indefinable, morally-grey cosmic horror to me, but now I knew that she could be a normal college student, too.

“So... She has bad grades?” I asked B3.

“Not bad or good. They’re normal. It’s just that she is juggling her studies and being the leader of The Lunar Society, so all the lacking bits really stand out.”

That makes Tsukikage seem... really amazing.

“Anyway,” said B3 as she took Miss Aberration’s seat. “Haven’t seen you in four days. In reality, anyway.”

Chasing after Miss Eldritch had worn her out, so she was sitting down to take a breather, and I’d be damned if she didn’t deserve it.

“That’s true. We just met on Friday,” I said. But on the other side, she’d been with me all the way through the events at Torne until returning to the capital. “Still, you get a few more days if you add the time in *Infinite Dendrogram*.”

“True,” she agreed.

The tripled time never ceased to weird me out.

“How was it at your parents’ place? Did it all work out?” I asked.

“Yes. The tea ceremony went by without a problem.”

Her family back in Kyoto were practitioners of the Way of Tea, and when everyone there had caught a cold, she was called to fill in.

I was glad to hear it had gone well.

“I returned here yesterday, after cleaning up and catching up with my family,” she said. “You seemed to have a hard time, though... I saw the video.”

“Ohh...” So Fujibayashi was more informed than Miss Aberration.

“You really like going head-first into trouble, don’t you?” she commented.

“I’d say that trouble likes coming to *me,*” I replied. Then again, I’d gone there to get the Prism Rider job. No one had forced me. So maybe you *could* say I’d jumped into trouble on my own.

“Sorry I couldn’t help you,” Fujibayashi went on. “Are you still in Quartierlatin?”

“Yes. I still have something to do there.”

Quartierlatin now had many quests related to the town’s restoration and the ruins. I was fine with returning to Gideon next weekend, so I’d decided to hang around Quartierlatin for now. Besides, Azurite had said she’d stay there until Thursday, Earth time.

“Then I will go there tomorrow,” Fujibayashi said. “I can’t come online today because I’m also busy with reports for college.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.”

We chatted about recent happenings and enjoyed some tea for awhile.

“By the way, this is unrelated, but...” Fujibayashi seemed to have remembered something. “I have something to tell you about Hell General.”

“What about him?” I asked as I remembered the devil-wielder.

“Tonight... or more like tomorrow... he’s going to have a duel for his throne.”

“Well, he is the first in the imperium’s duel rankings. It seems a bit sudden, though.”

“I’m sure he knows the general opinion about him and wants to fix it as soon as possible. Thus, the duel.”

Basically, he’d found out about the video and wanted to restore his reputation where he had the home field advantage — the duel arena.

Since the arenas returned all the items you used, he was absolutely free to summon the Mythical devil he hadn’t been able to summon against me. It was definitely the best place for him to show his power.

“Though, I can’t be sure if he will win this one,” Fujibayashi said after a sip of her tea.

“Why?”

Mythicals were two tiers above the Legendary Gigaknights I’d faced. If he was free to summon them, I was guessing he’d have the win in the bag.

Fujibayashi answered briefly, but told me everything I needed to know in a few simple words: “Because he’s up against another Superior.”

Side Story: Crime and Invitation

April 5th, 2045, Imperial Capital, Vandelheim, Noble District.

The countries on the continent all had capitals with a similar design.

They all had a central building, such as a royal castle. It was surrounded by the noble district, which was surrounded by commoner houses and stores. Vandelheim was basically that, too — it was built around the Imperstand.

The only notable difference was that its outskirts had military bases, and research facilities like The Triangle of Wisdom's headquarters.

The noble district of the city had recently begun housing people other than nobles... specifically, Superiors and Masters important to the imperium.

But those who used them well were few. Franklin had a residence, but it was unused because he always slept at The Triangle of Wisdom's headquarters. The King of Beasts had one, too, but due to that Master's long absences, the only people living there were some servants who regularly cleaned the place.

Out of the two new Superiors, one had simply refused the residence by saying, "Unneeded."

However, the other newcomer, the King of Chariots, Murdoch Martinez, now made good use of his, going as far as to use the attached garage for his hobby of tank maintenance. He also occasionally went to the outskirts to have some fun with his subordinates and Embryo in some tank battles using mock shells, so he really seemed to enjoy his new life here in the imperium.

Now, Dryfe had one more Superior. It was the Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

As a veteran Dryfean Superior right behind the King of Beasts, he obviously had his own noble residence and generally lived there. He had a large number of servants, and it was safe to say that he was the Master who led the most noble-like life in the noble district.

However, he was now curled up in his own bed. "Nhh! Nngh!" he cried into the pillow he was holding tightly. It didn't suit the beautiful young man represented by his avatar, but it was something you might expect from his real self — a boy in elementary school.

The reason for his crying was simple — *he'd lost again*. First, he'd lost in Quartierlatin, against the newbie, Ray Starling. Then, he'd lost against Franklin, who'd recorded his fight against Ray and uploaded it to the Internet. And now, he'd lost his third fight... along with his throne at the top of the duel rankings.

"Damn it... Damn it...!" he sobbed.

The first loss could be portrayed as an accident, and the second loss could be seen as the result of a trap, but the third loss, which had happened in his own domain on the arena, left him completely devastated.

The person he'd just lost against was someone who'd climbed up to the second place in the duel rankings at an amazing speed.

She was the King of Thieves, Zeta — one of the two new Superiors in the imperium. She was originally from Granvaloa, but something had led to her being put on the seafaring country's wanted list.

After many twists and turns, she'd ended up signing a contract with the imperator and becoming part of the imperium. Then she'd risen up the duel rankings at an incredible speed, and then finally faced Logan.

It had been, for all intents and purposes, a Clash of the Superiors for the champion's throne.

Logan definitely hadn't been holding back in that battle. In fact, he'd felt he had to win it at all costs, so he'd faced the challenger without any conceit. And yet, he'd ended up losing without as much as scratching her.

"What the hell was *that*?!" he screamed, remembering it.

Right after the start of the duel, Logan had started to summon Zero Exceed. However, for some reason, he hadn't been able to say a single word needed for the summoning of the devil.

Then his vision had drowned in red.

Whatever she'd done, blood had started flowing out of his eyes and nostrils, while the blood still inside started to boil.

He'd tried to counter it, but Zeta had closed the distance between them at supersonic speeds, and then, without even scratching his skin or armor, she'd *stolen his heart* in the most literal sense. Logan had watched, utterly baffled, as she'd casually crushed it in her hand.

All he understood was that the final attack was the ultimate job skill of the King of Thieves.

The inability to speak, the bleeding, and the blood boiling were all a complete mystery to him. He'd never experienced such a fight while rising up the imperium's duel rankings.

Surely the only one there who had understood everything, audience included, was Zeta herself. All everyone knew now was that Logan was no longer Dryfe's duel champion.

Once that realization had spread, the arena had drowned in cheering, and Logan had fled back to his residence, as if to escape them.

"Those fricks...!" he cursed.

The passion from the audience made it seem as though they'd wanted him to lose, and that was nothing but the truth.

Logan had only been the duel champion because of his ability to crush all his duel opponents by summoning Mythical devils for literally no expense whatsoever.

His battles were always the same: summon Mythical devil and win. Even if he was up against someone stronger, he'd just summon more and maybe sprinkle some Legendaries here and there. All of his battles had been won the same way.

The only Dryfean Master capable of facing multiple enhanced Mythical devils was the King of Beasts. However, the imperium's strongest didn't participate in duels, so Logan's matches had always ended up becoming nothing but Logan's summoning shows.

Watching something like that was more like a chore than a duel.

The audience hadn't been pleased, and the duel rankers had lost a lot of their motivation.

All of that was more than enough reason to cheer for Logan's defeat.

"Gh..." Logan moaned. He felt completely crushed to have lost at something he'd thought he couldn't lose, and that no one had wanted him to win. After burying his face in the pillow for a good few hours, Logan whispered, "Maybe I should quit *Dendro*..."

He'd become a Superior, the duel champion, and had held some of the greatest war potential in Dryfe. He'd believed he was at the top of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Little boy that he was, he had little life experience, and thought he was better than everyone. This game had affirmed his delusion and satisfied his pride.

But now, after three defeats and the loss of his position, the pain and embarrassment made him want to quit, which, again, was very much like the little boy that he was.

Without Logan, the imperium would become a far weaker foe in the war. However, since he was about to quit, Logan didn't care about what would happen in this game. He activated the logout timer and prepared to leave *Infinite Dendrogram* for good.

"Restraint. I am stopping your escape." A certain person placed a hand on his shoulder, stopping the logout process.

"Eh...? You...?!" Logan jumped away and brandished the Viledragon's Prideblade, Woltgyzur.

His weapon was aimed at a strange person fully covered in bandages.

It was none other than the one who'd defeated him and became the new duel champion: the King of Thieves, Zeta.

"No one let you in here!" he yelled. "What do you want?!"

His tone as he said that wasn't that of the "Logan" avatar he played, but the little boy he was in real life. However, neither he nor Zeta seemed to care.

"Response. I have an offer for you," she simply answered his question.

Her manner of speech was strange, but Logan could understand it. "Offer...?"

"Addendum. Before I speak of it, allow me to say that I heard you mumble about retiring. That would be inconvenient, so I am stopping you."

Logan said nothing. He realized that she hadn't just appeared out of nowhere; she'd been hiding in this room, watching him.

He wanted to sue her for violation of privacy, but crimes between Masters couldn't be taken to the court of law, so that wasn't something he could do.

Of course, since Logan was underage, he had special restrictions and protections put on him. If Zeta had done something inappropriate, she'd have received a penalty, but Logan didn't realize that.

"I'm not talking to someone who sneaks into people's rooms! Get out!" he shouted.

"Appeasement," Zeta replied. "Please do not be upset. I apologize for sneaking in, but the offer I have is one you will like."

"I will?"

"Affirmative. Specifically, I can provide you with a plan to make you a lot stronger than you are now."

"Ah...!" That was something that he, defeated three times in a row now, couldn't ignore.

He really wanted to become stronger and show all those who'd wished for his defeat who was boss.

However, since the person making the offer was the one responsible for the third defeat, Logan wasn't sure about this.

"Can you even do that...?" he ventured.

"Affirmative. We have a unique compiled database, using which we can give you several sub-job plans that suit you. Additionally..." She fell silent before continuing. "We can provide info about a maximum of eighteen undefeated UBMs."

Surprise filled Logan's face.

"I can even give you one right now." Zeta took out some sort of orb.

Logan looked at it. He didn't know what it was, but he could tell that it was related to UBMs.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Answer. A Treasurebeast orb. It is not an item, though."

"Hm?"

"Treasure. A national treasure from the eastern empire of Huang He."

"National treasure?"

Zeta nodded and said, "Beast. It has a UBM sealed inside."

Those words surprised Logan.

"Statement. You can have this one... and I will give you info about all the UBMs whose locations I know."

"...!" Logan wanted that so badly, he almost jumped on it.

Logan's trump card, Call Devil Exceed, required MVP special rewards to work.

He'd originally had three of them, but he'd used one up in his battle against the Celestial Knight, then another against Ray — which he ended up using against Franklin — and now, he only had the Viledragon's Prideblade.

MVP rewards could be great sacrifices and gear, and Logan desperately needed UBMs that could drop them for him.

"If I had that..." he began.

...I could play Dendro *again,* he finished silently.

However, he was also suspicious. He could understand if she just wanted to give him a job plan to make him stronger, but UBM locations and UBMs themselves were just too great of a treasure. Defeating them gave amazing prizes, so you'd expect any capable Masters to go after them themselves.

And there was no way that Zeta, who'd mysteriously, yet easily, defeated Logan, wasn't capable.

Why would she just give such valuable information to Logan?

What did she want in return?

His suspicion was about as great as his desire.

"...What do you expect to gain by making me stronger?"

"Sound. I am here to sound you out about something," Zeta said, then looked at Logan with her eyes peeking through the bandages on her face before continuing. "Invitation. I invite you to join our clan, Illegal Frontier."

Illegal Frontier, otherwise known as "I.F." It was the most infamous clan, led by the King of Crime, Sechs Würfel, and made up exclusively of Superiors on wanted lists all over.

Zeta was part of it, and she was inviting Logan.

"I.F...? *That* I.F?" he asked.

"Affirmative," Zeta nodded. "With the Quartierlatin incident, you are officially on the kingdom's wanted list. That gives you the qualifications."

Logan's actions in the war hadn't been considered a crime because they'd happened in wartime. However, the incident at Quartierlatin had been clearly outside of it, and Logan was now among the kingdom's wanted.

That made him a Superior on a wanted list.

"But what are you guys even planning?" he asked.

That question was only natural. I.F. was infamous for being a clan made up of only wanted Superiors. Other than that, their nature and goals were a mystery.

No matter how great the rewards were for joining, Logan couldn't bring himself to accept without knowing that much.

Zeta understood that, and so... "Explanation. We aim to..."

...she began telling him about their goal.

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“That sounds great!” was the first thing Logan said ten minutes later.

And for the first time in a while, he was genuinely excited.

“Question. Do you like our goal?” asked Zeta.

“Yeah. I want in on that, too. And if I’m also getting UBM info, then I have no complaints. Though, hold on a second...”

Zeta tilted her head, wondering what he’d say.

“This country has another Superior who’s on a wanted list.”

Needless to say, that was Franklin. If the mad scientist would also be invited to Illegal Frontier, Logan couldn’t join it.

However, Zeta shook her head. “Denied. We will not invite Mr. Franklin.”

“Why? I know I shouldn’t say this, but...” Logan couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence with, “He’s stronger than me now.”

“Unfit. The person in question could not exhibit his true power with I.F. And more importantly, he is not in gear with us.”

“Hm...?” Logan couldn’t understand what Zeta meant, but he did understand that Franklin wouldn’t be invited by I.F.

That left him with no reason to hesitate.

“All right,” he said. “Then I’ll gladly join the clan... and take the payment, of course.”

“Reception. Welcome, new member.” They exchanged a handshake.

“So, when should I leave Dryfe?” Logan asked.

“Hold. Stay with the country for now. I will contact you when the time is right.”

“All right... I can’t wait.”

“Training. Until then, I will provide you with a plan to make you stronger.”

“All right. I’ll play along. Uhh... Don’t disappoint me.”

“Certainly. You will have clear results.”

And so, Logan and Zeta were now on the same side.

This was the moment when a third faction began tangling itself in the intrigue of the Altarian-Dryfean war.

Episode Three: Sister

April 4th, 2045, Reiji Mukudori

I returned home from college to find something in the mail: the foreign sweets I'd asked my sister to send me.

It was pretty fast, considering she'd just called two days ago. It was also delivered by a company I never heard of, but that wasn't that strange — my sister had connections.

Just to be safe, I looked up the confectioner and product online, and sure enough, got a decent number of search results. After confirming it wasn't weird in some way, I threw one in my mouth, and it was a proper, delicious sweet.

Nothing weird happened even after a few minutes post-eating, so I was now completely sure it was safe. A part of me thought I was being too wary of my own sister, but this was necessary. She was the one who'd casually asked me if I wanted to go to the jungle, and then *actually taken me there* when I'd said yes.

I still wondered how she'd taken me to South America when I hadn't even had a passport. Honestly, it felt like I'd just... suddenly found myself flying over a jungle in a small plane, and then...

"Gh... Thinking about it makes my head hurt."

The point was that I'd learned to exercise an appropriate amount of caution when dealing with her. However, I didn't think that she bore any ill will. Whatever she did with me, she did out of kindness.

Even that traumatizing trip had probably been nothing more than her taking advantage of her work trip to South America to show her little brother what jungles were like. She certainly hadn't intended to endanger my life and chastity.

I still didn't really know why I had been chased around by Amazons or why the jungle had ended up on fire.

It was probably a rude thing to think... but my sister was quite abnormal as a living being. That probably affected her standard for me. There was also the fact that her first little brother, Shu, was also quite the superhuman.

Compared to them, I was pretty normal, so I knew I always had to be cautious with her. I felt that it was an inviolable rule necessary to my survival.

Still, I wouldn't forget to send a "thank you" email to her. She scared me like hell, but she was a dear part of my family and not a bad person.

"I've gotta say, these are pretty good," I muttered. Since they looked really safe so far, I began trying out the sweets for real.

I'd just had some chou à la crèmes at the college's café, but these were simple chocolates, so I still had plenty of room for them. College had exhausted my brain more than I'd expected, so my body needed the sugar, too.

I also hadn't rested at all in the café because of Miss Eldritch.

"Speaking of chocolate... there's Valentine's Day in *Dendro*, right?" I murmured.

Special as it was with its full-dive capabilities, *Infinite Dendrogram* had planned events, just like any common MMO. Most were based on real seasonal events, such as Christmas or Valentine's Day. I'd started in the latter half of March, though, so I'd missed both Valentine's and White Day.

I had yet to experience any seasonal event, actually. There had been two Valentine's Day events so far, and I had no idea what they were like.

"Did Shu and the others participate?" I wondered.

Shu, Figaro, and Miss Eldritch had been playing since launch, so they must've seen a whole bunch of events.

"I wonder what Valentine's was like... I'll have to ask them."

Valentine's Day was associated with love, so it must've been a peaceful, sweet time.

Side Story: Valentine's Day of 2044

February 14, 2044

Figaro logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram* and was welcomed by his friend saying:

"Figgy, let's hop off and hunt for chocolate."

His friend was none other than Shu Starling, wearing a two meter-tall animal costume.

The clumsy inclusion of "hop" was him making a pun, for he was wearing the "Hyper Costume Series, Cyclone Pocket" — a costume he'd gained from an UBM that looked much like a kangaroo.

He also emphasized his "roo"s and even added them where they didn't belong.

Figaro silently looked at him, remembering some of Shu's previous costumes. *He made bear puns when wearing the bear costume, but when wearing the wolf costume, he just threw in the occasional "woof." How does he decide between puns and animal sounds?* he wondered.

He chose not to ask, though, for there was something more important.

"'Hunt' for chocolate? Not receive it?" Even Figaro understood where this talk about chocolate came from.

In the real world, it was Valentine's Day — a special occasion in both Christian and non-religious places. Figaro had already received chocolates in real life.

Though his inborn heart disease had him bound to his house for medical reasons, he had still received chocolates from his mother, the maids working at his house, and his little brother Keith, for some reason.

Figaro was sickly, and one of the symptoms of his disease was the spasms that happened every time his heart rate rose above a certain point. Because of it, he couldn't exercise to lose calories, and the increase in heart rate from overeating could kill him, so he could only enjoy the chocolate he was gifted in small bites.

Even so, he really appreciated the love they had put into them.

“Yeah. We’re v-roo-ming through the Valentine’s Event!” Shu shouted.

“Oh... That’s a thing...?”

At first, women handing men chocolate on Valentine’s Day had been a Japan-only thing. A certain confectioner had created the practice in the twentieth century.

In the West, the go-to gifts were flowers and sweets of any kind, and the gender of the giving party was never a question.

However, by the fourth decade of the twenty-first century, the constant flow of culture had led to the Japanese practice spreading to the West, and being a worldwide VRMMO, *Infinite Dendrogram* reflected this.

There were also events for the more local occasions, such as the Japanese Setsubun.

“This one’s like Halloween and Setsubun,” Shu explained. “Monsters that drop chocolate spawn on the map. You’re supposed to stuff your pouch full of them and exchange them for prizes.”

“Ah. So it’s not the chocolate that’s the prize?”

“Yep. You’ve gotta exchange it. Though I hear it’s so tasty, it makes you d-roo-l.”

“Oh? So you have people who try to eat an exchange item, huh?”

The event had begun twelve hours ago in real-life time. The seasonal events generally began when the real-life holiday began in the time zone furthest ahead, and ended when it ended in the time zone furthest behind, making it last a total of 48 real life hours.

That translated to six days in *Dendro*, which was a standard amount of time for an event.

Side note: the number of people online had dropped during the Christmas event.

Those who were online, however, were extremely passionate about it... but it was best to not ask for the reason.

“I get that it’s a hunt, but why are you asking me?” asked Figaro.

You know I can’t handle myself properly when I’m not solo, he added silently, knowing that Shu would understand.

“That’s ’cause this event’s special.”

“It is?”

Shu nodded and said, “Only couples can kill the monsters for this event. I’m roo-seless alone.”

“Hm...?”

According to Shu, this was an event where you had to make parties of two and kill the monsters the devs spawned.

Those monsters couldn’t be harmed and couldn’t harm you if you weren’t in a party of two.

This was surely done out of consideration for non-participants, tians, and monster ecosystems. The devs tended to think such things through.

What made this a Valentine’s Day event was that a party of two was a couple swearing their love for each other. The devs were fine with homosexuality, so the gender composition of the party didn’t matter at all.

They didn’t allow pairing up with monsters, though — both party members had to be humanoid creatures.

“I haven’t found anyone else to pair with me, so I’m asking roo,” said Shu. “I’ll do all the fighting, and we can split the rewards evenly.”

“I don’t mind. I didn’t have anything planned besides a trip down the Tomb Labyrinth,” Figaro replied. “But I find it odd that you didn’t find anyone to pair with yet.”

Shu was an eccentric weirdo who constantly wore animal costumes, but he was pretty popular, so Figaro would have guessed he’d have no trouble finding someone to pair with.

“Lei-Lei’s busy in real life, Darshan’s got the restaurant to take care of, and everyone else already has a pair. And those roo don’t, well...”

“Well...?”

“I quote... ‘it’d give me pain to be treated as a couple with a guy in an animal costume,’ ‘I’d feel like a lonely office lady who went to Disneyland,’ and, ‘Take it off. Please, take it off.’”

“‘Take it off’? Now that’s asking for too much of you.”

“Hell, this is all because of... Forget it, I won’t go too deep into it.”

“Hm?”

The actual reasons why the girls had refused had nothing to do with Shu’s costume and everything to do with their relationship situations in real life, but since Figaro had no love experience whatsoever, he wouldn’t understand that.

He understood affection between family members, but he knew absolutely nothing about the more passionate kind of love. If he had been just a bit more sensitive to subtleties of that kind, this incident might’ve gone differently.

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Regardless, Figaro agreed to form a party with Shu and participate in the event, even if as just an observer.

“Let’s v-roo-m off northwest!” Shu shouted.

There were event monsters spawning around the capital, too, but Shu didn’t hunt there, since their strength and the value of chocolate dropped was adjusted to fit the local level ranges.

Also, since they’d been part of the first wave of players, they were already in their fifth forms, and it would be immature for veterans like them to steal kills from the newbies.

Thus, they were now riding Shu’s Baldr’s fourth form, the tank, northwest of the capital, where he could find monsters of his level.

“Not using the battleship?” asked Figaro.

“Not for simple traveling. Roo have no idea how much it stands out.”

Baldr’s fifth form was a land battleship only as big as a light cruiser.

“Also, the ammo costs are roodiculous,” he added, sighing at just how expensive his Embryo had become. “I’ll use the fourth and my fists this time.”

Standing on the tank’s cupola, he did a check on his weapons and items. In its tank form, Baldr could be remote-controlled or put on autopilot. He could use it as one of the self-driving vehicles that had become popular in real life and make it drive him to his destination without him lifting a finger.

Baldr would automatically attack the occasional monsters popping up on the way, and all their drops would go to Shu’s Cyclone Pocket’s “pouch.” This was the item’s unique skill, High-Speed Auto-Retrieve, which, true to its name, automatically retrieved all items he had a right to.

While a UBM, “Whirlwind Beast of Ill-Omen, Cyclone Pocket” had been a frustrating monster that automatically retrieved the items people held in their hands and even projectiles flying at it, so you could say that the MVP special reward skill was a big downgrade.

As for how Shu had beaten it... he’d simply made Baldr go into fifth form and fire its proximity shells at it. Cyclone Pocket had absorbed them all, and the explosions right before they were stored away had made short work of its HP.

It was probably the easiest UBM kill Shu'd had so far. The proximity shells had cost a lot, though, so getting back the money lost had taken some effort.

"By the way, what kind of monsters do we have this time?" Figaro asked.

Events generally had monsters related to the events.

Setsubun had featured oni and bean bag monsters, while New Year's had featured rat monsters, since that was the Chinese zodiac for the year.

Because of this, Figaro thought Valentine's Day monsters would be chocolate monsters, but...

"Girls," Shu said.

"...Huh?"

"Pretty girl monsters. Crooture type: devil."

Figaro had no words.

Though he was a musclehead battle junkie, he was still Christian, so he wondered why a celebration of love involved devils or why there'd even be an event focused on stealing chocolate from girls.

Then he realized that he was about to watch a kangaroo riding a tank massacre girls for their chocolate.

Instead of questioning any of it, he just said one thing. "What are the devs thinking?"

"I'm pretty sure the control AI in charge of events doesn't actually know what Valentine's Day is," said Shu. "Those devils also throw chocolate and absorb three times the damage they deal."

That's not what it means to return it three-fold!

A few hours later, the two arrived at their destination.

With monsters of level 51 and above lurking about, it was the perfect hunting ground for a high-rank like Shu.

He'd intended to start hunting the event monsters right away, but...

"That's not an event monster, is it?" Figaro asked.

"I don't see a name above it," Shu agreed.

In the area, they were facing a strange entity.

It wasn't an event monster, nor a Master hunting them.

It looked like two towering, metal legs that skipped around with lightness you wouldn't expect from their size and earthquake-causing weight.

Additionally, there were Master-like people where it was heading, and you could see them being crushed and turned to light.

The most bizarre thing about this place, however...

"AHAHAHAHHA! CRUSH! I'LL CRUSH YOU ALL! IT'S WHAT ALL BOYFRIENDS AND HOMEWRECKERS DESERVE!"

...was the feminine roar echoing from the top of the legs.

The two watched the scene, not saying a word. They were skilled Masters who'd already faced many foes, so they were able to make a quick, calm analysis of the situation.

The shouting woman was a Master.

The large metal legs were her Embryo.

The fact that she was crushing Masters in this high-level area meant that she was really strong.

Her legs were making them scatter with next to no effort on her part.

However, anything that came from such analysis meant nothing compared to the searing hatred in her voice.

Shu instantly understood that, *She's the type you shouldn't get involved with.*

Figaro, on the other hand, thought, *She looks strong. I wanna fight her.*

That might've been the reason why there was such a gap in the amount of danger they felt. Figaro knew nothing of love, so he couldn't understand just how deadly the grudge in that voice really was.

"We're hoppin' away from that," said Shu as he turned Baldr 180 degrees, determined to leave as soon as possible.

"Eh...? Ah. Okay," Figaro replied, slightly disappointed. But then... the hellish voice rang out above them.

"IS THAAAT A COUPLE I SEEEEE?!"

They looked up and saw the metallic legs. Not saying a word, the two silently analyzed the situation again. The scariest thing about this was that neither of them had noticed her come close.

They both had exceptional intuition, of course. Therefore, this had to be teleportation or something similar.

She'd also come to them after killing every single Master on the map, making it even clearer that she'd be a tough foe to fight. While Shu thought that they were in for some trouble, Figaro was excited.

Shu started out by trying to communicate, “Uhh... We’re just—”

“Eh? What?” She unexpectedly cut him off. “There’s a guy in that costume?”

You could tell by her voice that she was surprised by something. A few seconds later, she asked, “Are you a gay couple?”

“No,” Shu and Figaro replied in perfect unison.

“Then all’s goooood... Hold on a second.”

Suddenly, the hellish thundering subsided, the towering metal “legs” vanished, and a woman descended from the sky.

It was worth noting that it was over 100 meters worth of free fall, and she went down with great energy and splendor.

The woman was in her mid-twenties, and looked reasonably beautiful. However, her beauty didn’t seem to extend beyond her appearance.

“My name is Hannya,” she said. “Sorry if I surprised you.”

Her voice was nice to listen to — nothing like the curses she’d spewed while PKing.

That just makes her even scarier, Shu thought.

And why the hell would you name yourself after a Noh mask, of all things?

“I’m Shu,” he greeted her, cautiously, for he was experienced enough to know just how scary and complex women could be.

“And I’m Figaro. Nice to meet you,” said Figaro, as casually as ever, for he knew absolutely nothing about such things.

Shu appreciated that he was acting natural, but was also worried that he could step on a landmine.

“Oh, yeah. You say hi, too, Sandalphon,” said the woman.

“Yes. Right away.” Following the voice from her crest, it began to glow and released her Embryo.

And what a strange Embryo it was.

It looked human. That alone wasn’t strange. Both Shu and Figaro had seen human-like Guardians and girl-Embryos — the Maidens.

But this Embryo was different.

Unlike human-like Guardians, it didn’t have any inhuman parts, such as a tail or horns, but unlike Maidens, it wasn’t a girl... but a boy.

Not an androgynous girl, but very clearly a boy. Shu could tell.

It was their first time seeing an Embryo that looked like a human boy.

"My name is Sandalphon," he said. "My Type is Apostle-Angel Gear."

Neither Figaro or Shu had ever heard of "Apostle" or "Angel Gear" Types. Though they had a guess that the latter was a category unique to him, developed from either Arms or Chariot.

Regardless of what he was, his power was immense.

The ground Sandalphon had tread on looked completely ravaged.

The event monsters were fine, though, since they could only be harmed by couples.

"There weren't any tians here, were there?" muttered Shu. "This'd be a real calamity if there were."

"Don't worry," said the woman with a mild smile. "He has the ability to differentiate NPCs and Masters, so there aren't any dead NPCs here. I don't have any grudge against them, so I don't want to kill them."

So what you're saying is that you have a grudge against Masters and want to kill them, Shu thought, sweating inside his costume.

"Why're roo going around cursing and PKing?" he asked Hannya.

"Because couples are the enemy."

"And you didn't attack us because...?"

"You're not a couple."

Ah. We've got a walking pile of complications here. Best not pry deeper, Shu thought, setting his mind on changing the subject.

He was so careful with her that he even decided to refrain from using his puns.

However, that went to waste when Figaro asked, "Why are couples the enemy?"

"FIGGYYYYYYY!" Shu groaned.

The peaceful meathead at his side clearly didn't notice the darkness surrounding her love life.

Hannya began answering Figaro's question. "It happened 52 days ago... or about five months ago here."

"...Ah," Shu said as he realized what day that meant. Like Valentine's, that was also a day tightly linked to love.

"Yes, it was Christmas," she continued. "Back then, I had a boyfriend I was dating with the intention to marry him."

Her eyes were calm and her tone was nostalgic, but Shu knew that this was basically like the peace you felt while going up a tall roller coaster.

Her emotional state would soon go downhill. Figaro, of course, was clueless, and just listened to her story.

"I knitted a sweater, scarf, and gloves for him, and made a full course Christmas dinner for both of us. I even baked a three-layered cake. I even had a marriage registration and betrothal money. I was fully prepared for him to propose to me."

Damn, you're overbearing, Shu thought, and praised himself for not saying it.

Figaro, on the other hand, simply thought, *That's impressive.*

"But he didn't come to my room at the time we agreed on..." Hannya continued.

"Here it comes..." Shu murmured.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Figaro asked.

You wouldn't understand... Shu thought.

"I called and messaged him over and over and got no response until, about an hour later, he just wrote, 'Let's break up.'"

Shu said nothing.

"Why?" Figaro asked her.

Hannya opened her eyes wide, cracked a joyless smile and said, "'I found someone I like more in *Infinite Dendrogram,* and we're now going out in real life. Sorry.' Ahahahah..."

It was definitely a sad thing, in at least one way, if not a few.

Shu dedicated a moment to think about it. Real love born through MMO relationships and online game marriages had existed for almost half a century now.

And this was *Infinite Dendrogram*. A world as real and realistic as this gave plenty of room for love to blossom. Epic fights against powerful monsters could also produce a good suspension bridge effect.

Over half a year had passed since release, and you had more and more Masters marrying other Masters or even tians. There was even a term for it now: *Dendromony*.

However...

"WHY. WAS I LEFT. BECAUSE OF A DAMN GAAAAAAME?!" the woman screamed.

Yes, whether someone who was left for such a reason could accept it was an entirely different matter.

Shu knew that everyone loved differently, and that all loves had different origins. However, he wished that people would at least give their loves a clean conclusion. Otherwise, you could create people like Hannya — desperate and hurt creatures who went around causing trouble for others.

"Ah," Figaro said, seeming to realize something. "Are you in *Dendro* to...?"

"TO CRUSH MY EX AND THAT THIEVING HOMEWRECKEEEERRRR!" she screamed her desire, crying profusely.

Sandalphon went to pat her on the back. He looked used to it, so this must've been common.

I'd like it if you didn't bring real-life drama here, Shu thought with a sigh.

"Hoo, hoo... Sorry. This happens whenever I remember it... Sorry." The scream worked as an outlet for her emotions, letting her calm down a bit.

Just a bit, though.

"Can't you settle this in real life?" Shu asked. "Take him to court and make him pay for the emotional damage or something?"

"I've already been filed with a restraining order. That got me a criminal record, and I was fired for it, but I can still get my revenge on him here."

"You got physical with him before trying to solve it lawfully?" Shu mumbled.

She didn't hear him and just began reciting what she'd gone through so far. "Once I got on *Dendro* to get my revenge, I started in Caldina, since it's in the middle of the continent and I thought I'd quickly find him there. No luck, though. I then went to the west, since he likes Europe more than Asia. The time we went on a trip to Italy on my money, he—"

"Yeah, uhh... I get it," said Shu. "And why did you go around crushing all the couples here?"

"Because they all seemed like him and the homewrecker to me. I mean, I don't know what they look like here, and I don't even know the thief's name. That's why I'll treat all couples as them and C R U S H. T H E M. A L L."

Damn it, woman, you're one big step into insanity, Shu thought before saying, "You said you don't know their faces or her name. Do you know the guy's name?"

“Yes. He had a blog called ‘RockPanther’s Dendro Tour,’ so it has to be ‘RockPanther.’ But the blog didn’t get a lot of clicks, and he shut it down after I flamed it.”

“Flamed... Uh huh, okay. ‘RockPanther,’ right? Gimme a moment.”

“For what?”

“I think I might be able to find the guy...”

“Really?” Hannya asked while looking at Shu with eyes bordering on demonic.

There was no room for lies or jokes here.

Shu refrained from emphasizing the “might” and just said that he’d ask an informant he knew.

Then Shu walked away from Hannya and took something out of his inventory.

It was a luxury item imbued with communication magic, given only to the best customers of a certain information broker: the DIN.

You could only use it to communicate with DIN workers who had the receiver, but unlike most comms magic devices, you could use it just about anywhere.

“Uhh... Hey, it’s me,” Shu began talking to the informant. “I need you to find someone...”

She’ll probably attack us if they don’t find him, Shu added silently.

While he was busy with that, Figaro was talking to Hannya.

“By the way, you look pretty strong. What’s your job and Embryo form?” he asked.

She could absolutely crush skilled players who were hunting in this high-level area, so there was no doubt she was powerful.

Figaro, the battle-junkie that he was, also wondered if she would be up for a duel.

“Job... What was mine, again?” Hannya asked a seemingly impossible question. It wasn’t a joke or anything like that, though — she had actually forgotten her job.

Her revenge on her ex occupied such a large part of her that she couldn’t care about anything else.

“You are now the King of Berserk, Lady Hannya,” Sandalphon helped her.

“Oh yeah, that’s it,” Hannya nodded.

"...A Superior Job," Figaro muttered in amazement.

Indeed — the King of Berserk was the Superior Job from the berserker grouping.

If she was telling the truth, she'd earned it within just fifty days since starting *Dendro*, which was simply staggering, even when you took into account the tripled time.

Even Figaro was still just aiming for the gladiator grouping's Superior Job.

Granted, the only reason why he didn't have it yet was simply that one of the conditions was to be first in the duel rankings. He'd already cleared the other two.

Figaro was currently second, and he was preparing to beat the first — Tom Cat.

By the way, while Hannya didn't remember any of the conditions, and Sandalphon was too ashamed to say it, one of the King of Berserk's conditions was basically unclearable.

It was: "To kill 444 humans within 10 seconds of seeing them."

Berserking at its finest.

No sane person would even attempt it, and even if they would, they probably couldn't do it. Unless you'd preemptively decided to kill everyone, you could never decide whether to kill someone and then do it within ten seconds.

In the time when there were only tians, you'd be hunted down and punished as a murderer. Those who'd tried it were many, but none had succeeded, making the King of Berserk into a true lost job.

Masters would've probably attempted it with other Masters, but as mentioned above, this condition had been completely buried by the time *Dendro* was released.

There were probably berserker grouping Masters doing this and that, trying to figure out how to get the Superior Job, completely unaware that it had already been taken.

Now, though this condition was something you normally couldn't and wouldn't clear, the fact that she was the King of Berserk was all the proof you needed that she could and had done it.

This was due to Sandalphon's skill that allowed him to differentiate Masters from tians, and due to Hannya being a dangerous person who instantly killed any Master couple she saw.

As a result of her shenanigans, she had inadvertently cleared the long-buried condition for the King of Berserk, and taken the job.

“And my current form is six,” Sandalphon continued.

“Six... Amazing,” Figaro said.

Neither Shu nor Figaro were there yet. He did feel like his evolution was close, but it was still five.

“He’s an ‘Apostle,’ right? Maybe they evolve quickly,” Figaro guessed.

“Maybe,” said Hannya. “I only know Sandalphon, though, so I can’t be sure...”

“I barely see my own kind,” said Sandalphon. “I wonder why?”

There was a time when a thing called “category-based personality analysis” had enjoyed decent popularity. It was simply personality guessing based on people’s Embryo’s base categories, so Figaro wondered what kind of personality the super-rare Apostle represented.

Then, he noticed Hannya looking at him weirdly.

“What?” he asked.

“Well... I just felt like it’s been so long since I’ve had a proper conversation. I don’t think I’ve talked to anyone since my ex left me. Except Sandalphon, I guess.”

“Indeed,” the Apostle said. “As far as I can remember, this is the first time.”

Of course it was.

She was a PKer who went on a rampage the moment she saw a Master couple, and the onlookers would see her as a rabid dog, if not worse. She herself knew that she was weird, but that awareness wasn’t enough to hold back her emotions.

Even Shu couldn’t help but be a bit freaked out by her.

“Umm... are you sure you want to talk to me? I’m weird, aren’t I?” she asked.

“How?” Figaro asked, puzzled.

The only ones who could look at her without any sort of lens... were those who couldn’t even understand what was weird about her.

As a sickly person all his life, Figaro had limited experience in everything, so he assumed that even Hannya’s eccentricity and rampages were nothing special.

There was also the fact that his first friend had been a man in an animal costume. It was like he didn't even have a compass for the very concept of weirdness.

Hannya looked at him in silence. Figaro had just honestly asked her what was so weird about her, and since she didn't know that there was something wrong with him, it had made her heart skip a beat.

"Can we meet again once I'm done with my revenge?" she asked.

"Hm...? Sure," Figaro replied. "I'd like to see you again, too. Want to exchange emails to stay in touch?"

He only wanted to see her again for a duel, and was completely unaware of the romantic potential of his words.

"Yes! Of course!"

And so, the clueless, meatheaded son of a wealthy family exchanged addresses with a yandere King of Berserk.

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"All right, thanks... I know where RockPanther is," Shu ended the call and said as the two were talking.

Hannya turned to him so fast you could hear it and said, "Really?"

"There's this large group of info brokers called 'the DIN.' They have a list, and he was on it. He's a Legendarian right now. You'll get the details if you go to a DIN office and tell them the number on this paper."

"Ohh..." Hannya was so moved that her eyes filled with tears and she joined her hands. "I'm so glad I came to this country... to this area... and I met someone... and got a hint to help with my revenge... Oh, dear... Are you an angel?"

Shu wanted to say that her Embryo was the angel here, but didn't.

She looked calm right now, but there was no telling what could set her off. However...

"Ahahah. Your Sandalphon is the angel here, isn't he?" Figaro asked.

His friend didn't seem to care about such dangers.

He's got the wrong job, Shu thought. *He ain't a Gladiator... he's a goddamn Hero!*

Thankfully, it turned out that it wasn't a dangerous thing to say, and Hannya just giggled and said, "You're right."

Shu felt that she was being strangely nice to Figaro, but again, he didn't say anything.

"Then I'll be going to Legendaria," said Hannya. "It's to the south of here, right?"

"Yeah. Just go straight south. You can't miss it," said Shu.

"Thanks again. Let me help *you* out with something after I'm done with my revenge."

"No need. Really."

Seriously, don't, he added silently.

"Goodbye, Shu. And... Figaro!" She walked up to the Gladiator and handed him something

"What is this?"

"I just got them. It's Valentine's Day, right?"

It was the chocolate dropped by the event monsters.

"I'll send emails," he said. "Let's meet again!"

"Yeah. See you," she said as she waved, made Sandalphon transform back to the towering, metallic legs, hopped on and ran off into the horizon.

She was heading to Legendaria, and it was guaranteed that she'd make a scene.

Man, I'm glad her boyfriend isn't in Altar, Shu thought. *I do feel bad for Legendaria, though.*

"Let them handle the rest themselves, I say," Shu whispered.

If she was to be believed, her ex was at fault, so he believed — or, rather, chose to believe — that this was the right decision.

Shu ended up not hunting any event monsters.

The encounter with Hannya was so emotionally and mentally draining that he lost all motivation.

He and Figaro were now riding Shu's Baldr back to the capital.

On the way, Figaro decided to ask Shu the question he had about Hannya and Sandalphon.

"Category-based personality analysis?" Shu raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," Figaro nodded. "What would Apostles represent?"

"Hm..."

"Proactive people?" Figaro asked.

"I'm pretty sure there'd be more if that was the case."

"Ah. True."

Shu was genuinely impressed that Figaro could look at *that* woman and see proactiveness, of all things, as the defining feature.

"Well, I can't make any conclusions with just a single sample, but I have a guess," he said.

"Which is...?"

Shu's guess was based on two factors — Hannya's words and actions, and the extreme rarity of Apostles.

It was...

"They hate *Infinite Dendrogram*."

...a real contradiction of an answer.

“I see. So that’s why there are almost none of them.”

Most people started *Infinite Dendrogram* because they were interested in it — they liked what it supposedly had to offer.

Sure, there were those who experienced something as they played and began to hate it, but those who hated it right from the start — before their Embryos hatched — were practically nonexistent.

Unless, of course, it was a woman who’d started *Infinite Dendrogram* to get revenge on an ex she’d lost to this game, and the homewrecker who’d taken him from her.

“Now that I think about it, Sandalphon’s quick evolution wasn’t caused by some Apostle quality, but by her obsession,” Figaro added.

“Well... Maybe, maybe not,” Shu answered.

In Shu’s mind, Apostle Masters were contradictions right from the moment they started.

Masters who hate Infinite Dendrogram, *yet still start it, must be a really troublesome bunch,* he thought. *Imagine the sense of duty they’d need to dive in here...*

“She’s also the second person I’ve seen who’s ahead of me, the first being Tom,” Figaro said. “I need to work harder.”

“Yeah, do your best, Figgy. I’m cheering ya on. You’ll hop up to the top in no time.”

Though things hadn’t gone as planned, seeing his friend become all fired up made Shu satisfied. All that was left now was to ride Baldr back to the capital.

“Hm?” Shu raised an eyebrow as he noticed Figaro eating something.

It was the chocolate Hannya had just given him. He probably didn’t want to exchange a gift, so he was deciding to eat it himself.

Shu silently thought about them both. He was perceptive enough to understand that Hannya’d had feelings for Figaro from the moment she’d handed him the chocolate.

Hannya was currently a mix of love and hate.

While her hate was directed at RockPanther, her love had ended up targeting Figaro — the man who was almost completely dense about matters of love.

Shu felt that Hannya would eventually cause even more love-related trouble, but this time related to Figaro.

Honestly, I think that would be good for Figgy, he thought.

Even if there was some sort of misunderstanding that led to PvP between them, Figaro would probably welcome it with open arms.

"Hell, you really need a lesson in just how complex and scary women can be," Shu added.

"Hm?"

Figaro tilted his head, not really understanding what his friend meant, as he bit into the chocolate.

"Ah," he added, suddenly realized something. "If only couples can kill the event monsters, how did Hannya end up having this?"

"Who knows?" Shu shrugged, feigning ignorance.

He knew full well that it had been dropped not by the event monsters, but by one of the couples Hannya had killed.

You could very well call it "murder chocolate."

Shu knew that Figaro probably wouldn't care, but he also saw no need to tell his friend that the chocolate he was eating had a bloody history.

And so, with the evening sun on them, they rode the tank back to civilization.

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Following this encounter, Hannya changed her country to Legendaria and used the DIN's info to start searching for her targets more seriously.

Thus, on the final day of the Valentine's event, she found both RockPanther and his new lover, and got her revenge on them, making a huge mess of the town they were in.

But then, a tian Special Superior Job and a group of ten Legendarian rankers defeated her, and she was sent to the gaol due to the severe property damage and tian injuries she'd caused.

However, by some miracle, no one had died, so it didn't count as murder, and she would get to leave the gaol in only three or four years, *Dendro*time.

After getting locked up, Hannya, feeling completely refreshed, began to get her real life in order and fix all the problems that had arisen while she'd been focused on revenge.

She also occasionally logged in to *Dendro*. Whether to get rid of stress or to prepare for when she was released, she trained in the gaol by trampling all over the other Masters locked up in there.

She also promised to meet Figaro again, and they regularly exchanged emails.

Now, to evaluate the Valentine's Day of 2044.

Shu didn't get to hunt.

The Masters in the area were unjustly PKed.

The destructive drama was nothing but a disaster to the Legendarians who were caught up in it.

And finally, RockPanther — who could be considered the root cause of this — had ended up breaking up with his new girlfriend. Admittedly, she'd had problems with him to begin with, so you could say it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Most of those involved in this incident had gotten nothing good out of it.

The only exceptions were Hannya and Figaro.

After settling the score, Hannya began a new life and got a new love, while Figaro believed he had found a new duel buddy.

That was all he thought of it.

In his emails to her, he wrote things like, "I want to see you." *(So we can duel.)* "I hope you're released soon," conveniently forgetting to type out the bracketed part, as if it were obvious, and letting Hannya interpret it in a completely different way.

Hannya's love for Figaro grew larger by the day, but Figaro, who'd never loved before, had no means of noticing it. This severe failure in communication continued for over a year in real life and over three years in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

It eventually led to a certain incident, but that was a story for another time.

Episode Four: Consultation

April 4th, 2045, Prism Rider, Ray Starling

I looked through my mail, had a meal, and logged in to *Dendro*.

Even though it was night in real life, the sun was still high up in the sky here.

"You're back." Nemesis popped out of the crest and welcomed me.

"Well, I have college tomorrow, so I can't stay online for more than a day here," I said. "There's no helping it. Life on the other side is important, too."

Now if that ain't something Fuyuki should hear, I thought, rolling my eyes. *Still can't believe that guy skipped the first day of college.*

"Also, it's not like we have any major trouble here right now," Nemesis added.

"True." I nodded.

We'd had problem after problem for the first few days after coming here, but things had calmed down after that.

There was no sign that anything was about to happen now, and the local quests reflected that — there were only tame ones like ruin investigation and town restoration.

"We'll hang around and do a bunch of those before returning to Gideon," I said.

"It feels like it's been so long since you were kidnapped by that fox," Nemesis commented.

Well, it's been an impressive journey, I thought. *We went all the way from Gideon in the south to Quartierlatin in the north.*

"I actually miss Gideon quite a bit," said Nemesis. "I'd love to be back soon."

"Same here," I said. "It's pretty far, though. Even getting to the capital takes a while. We'll go back to Altea on Thursday the 6th, then go to Gideon over Friday and Saturday."

We'd have to talk it out with Azurite, though. She was still working here in Quartierlatin.

“Wouldn’t we return faster by riding Silver through the sky?” Nemesis asked.

“The skies above the capital have the occasional Pure-Dragon flying around,” I replied.

“Now that... is troubling.”

If there was one thing we’d learned from Gigaknight, it was that we were weak against enemies who didn’t rely on any gimmicks, but were simply *strong*.

We were bound to fare badly against flying dragons who would fight from outside my range and use various breaths.

Sure, I’d beaten a Pure-Dragon-tier worm near Gideon before, but it wasn’t a good comparison to the sky beasts above Altea.

“Riser told me that you could even come across UBMs there,” I added.

“Mm-hm... Let’s avoid needless deadly battles. You’ve had too many of those recently.”

“Seriously.” I wanted some peace and quiet right now.

I’d probably get more than enough of that if I just didn’t log in, but that would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

“Anyway, we’ll think about the way back later,” I said. “For now, let’s just take care of our business for today.”

“You’re planning on going to a craftsman, right?”

“Yeah. They offered, so I might as well.” A local craftsman had offered to make something out of the metal powder I’d acquired from the whale. The place wasn’t far from the local save point, so we went there right away.

It was a mix of workshop and store. It specialized in equipment, and there were two counters: one for buying ready-made equipment, and one for ordering custom-mades.

“Now that I think about it, all the equipment you’ve ever had has been either monster loot, ready-mades, or gifts,” Nemesis commented.

“True.”

All I’d ever gotten in the past was either store-bought gear, MVP special rewards, gacha pulls, or gifts from B3.

“A custom-made certainly won’t hurt,” said Nemesis.

“I *do* have the money and mats for it,” I nodded. “It’ll be my first one.”

Speaking of order-made gear, I knew someone who knew a lot about that: Juliet.

Her gothic dress-armor and many other things she wore were order-mades.

We'd even talked about the subject once...

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A few days before Miss Eldritch kidnapped me from Gideon, Juliet and I had a mock battle.

If you ignored Figaro, a Superior, and Marie, who primarily used ranged attacks, Juliet was the sparring partner I had the most trouble with.

This was due to her build being extremely balanced. She could move at the speed of sound, fly, had powerful physical *and* magical attacks, intense debuffs through her curses, and a knight grouping Superior Job, Fallen Knight, which gave her great defense.

Sure, I could turn her debuffs into buffs by using the second form's Reversal, but that barred me from using Vengeance, which overall just made it worse for me.

On top of that, I didn't have my left arm, so I couldn't use Purgatorial Flames. And Nemesis was in her second form, as I wouldn't get Monochrome until I went to Torne later.

I lost the overwhelming majority of my mock battles against the rankers, but Juliet was easily the one who beat me the most times.

This was simply due to the fact that we were often online at the same time, and thus sparred the most.

Apparently, she was a middle-schooler who also lived in Japan. We were in the same time zone, and just as I'd started *Dendro* on my pre-college holiday, she'd started her spring break right after Franklin's Game, so our online times coincided a lot, and we had many mock battles because of it.

Well... my online times coincided even more with Shu's and Marie's, who were not only living in Japan, but were also unemployed, but we didn't spar a lot because Shu was busy with his popcorn stand, while Marie had an important job as a mediator between Count Gideon and the ninjas now working there, among other things.

Well, back to the main matter. While Juliet beat me more than anyone else, I was also learning a lot from her.

Though I still wasn't perfect at it, she was the one I had to thank for teaching me how to counter those moving at supersonic speed, and since my battle style incorporated rare things such as Counter Absorption, Vengeance, Silver, and MVP special rewards, she also ended up learning a thing or two.

That was what she said, anyway. My guess was that she was preparing to fight someone who used unique battle styles and special rewards.

At first I'd assumed it was Figaro, but by now, my guess was that it was Rosa, who was just below Juliet in the rankings. That was probably the reason why she'd shown me her most secret move a whole bunch of times now. It was like she was testing it on me.

Now, since Juliet and I sparred a lot, we tended to have many post-spar chats over lunches or tea. On this particular day, we talked about fashion.

The reason for that was the fact that, just a few days ago, I'd pulled the BR Armor from the gacha. The once-cursed, spiky armor that had melted in the battle against Monochrome had really intrigued her.

"Although no longer bound by the abyssal shell of malediction, it continues to shine an obsidian black," Juliet said.

That roughly translated to: "That spiky armor looks cool even without the curse!"

I liked it myself. It was better than glasses, animal ears, or crossdressing, anyway.

"Is this truly a praisable design?" asked Nemesis, clearly not sharing our sentiment.

Looking back at it, Nemesis had been very critical of my fashion even before we'd met Azurite.

"Goblin bracers, corpse greaves, an iron prosthetic arm, spiky curse armor... where are you even going with this?" she muttered.

"'Tis naught but the wondrous and mysterious hand of fate," Juliet said with shining eyes.

Nemesis sighed in response, but I couldn't tell if it was because she didn't have anything to say or didn't understand Juliet's words, which, by the way, meant: "You got this design set from MVP rewards and the gacha! You didn't even try for it! It's gotta be fate! Wow!"

She then added, "If you wish to resist fate and reveal yourself to the world in a new form, you must resolve to sacrifice material wealth in exchange."

"Hm?" Nemesis raised an eyebrow.

"She's saying that if you want something with a specific design, get it custom-made," I translated.

According to Juliet, though it was based on their stats and skill levels, craftsmen could slightly alter the designs of the gear they were making.

From what I'd been told, before people like those in The Triangle of Wisdom — that lab coat lunatic's clan — had come along and made things like humanoid robots, most items crafted by Masters had been exactly that: just slightly-altered non-originals.

Still, the increase in Masters that could create new things hadn't decreased the demand for design changes, and even now, you had many Masters who came to craftsmen to forge their own unique look.

Juliet was one of them. She regularly used the money she won in duels and materials she got from kills to order various new gear from her favorite craftsmen. She probably liked trying out new clothes. You could even see her walk around the normal clothing shops.

Not too long ago, I'd seen her in front of some shop's show window, talking to Chelsea and some other girl I didn't recognize. They must have been having a hearty chat about fashion, like the girls they were.

"My false eye itself was wrought by the hands of those with art and ability," Juliet said as she reached for her right eye and *removed its surface*.

It was a contact lens.

I'd always thought that both her eyes were red, but the one under the lens was blue.

"You can even have custom-made colored contacts?" I asked.

"Certainly. This one bears the powers of Identification and Reveal."

That reminded me of when I'd met Franklin for the first time. He'd been wearing a penguin costume and mentioned that you could get glasses with skills on them.

I guess contact lenses are the same, I thought. *Do they count as accessories?*

"The truly exceptional false eyes have the power to throw your foe's condition into disharmony," Juliet added.

Oh? There are contact lenses that give debuffs by just looking? That's pretty strong, I thought. *Still, you can probably negate them with the right* *level and resistances.*

"Why is that one colored?" I asked.

"I began having eyes of a different hue, bewitching in purity, but it came to be known that the foes see such a quality as an ill omen," she explained.

"...I see."

So at first, she'd used transparent contact lenses, but since her avatar had heterochromia, her enemies would be wary of something in her eyes despite the transparency, so she'd switched to one colored contact and one transparent one, to make her eyes appear the same color.

Every now and then, you would see manga with characters who hid their heterochromia — and with it, some sort of power — behind contacts, but in Juliet's case, the contact *was* the power, while her avatar's heterochromia was just a bit of fashion.

But now, you couldn't even tell that she had heterochromia, so the fashion factor was gone.

I was guessing that this had caused an inner conflict between her as a fashion-loving middle schooler, and her as a high-ranking duelist.

"Did you just imply that heterochromia is merely a bit of middle schooler-like fashion?" Nemesis asked telepathically.

What else? I replied.

"This false eye also demands the remains of a crystalline Pure-Dragon, bestowing upon it an immense value," Juliet added.

"You need materials for custom-made items?" I asked.

"If you seek apparel that reaches supreme heights in its splendor, you must be willing to part with elements common folk cannot procure, some so precious that not even the weavers of finest cloth have them in store."

She had basically just said, "Craftsmen sometimes don't have the material for high-level gear," which was completely right. Most Pure-Dragon-tier material couldn't be found on the market, and if it somehow got there, it'd be really expensive.

It didn't mean much to me, though. I couldn't equip any of that fancy gear at my level, so there was no point in gunning for it, even if I had the money.

If there was one thing to take from this, it was that it was standard to bring your own material when ordering a custom-made item.

Side note: UBM MVP special rewards were sometimes materials which had to be used by craftsmen to become something useful.

“How troubling it is that you are aesthetically complete,” said Juliet.

“Ray,” said Nemesis, “what did she just say?”

“‘Your set is so perfect that there’s really no point in ordering any custom-made items...’”

“*THIS* is your idea of perfection?!”

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Yeah, that was the conversation Juliet and I’d had.

Since then, I’d lost the spiky gear and instead gotten a black coat and armor of fire and darkness, so I was beginning to feel like my personal fashion was converging on the darker side.

“...Really? ‘On the darker side’? Is that the extent of what you think of the disaster that is your equipment?” asked Nemesis.

“I see your point. This gear would let me be the star of a dark overlord fashion show,” I said.

Deafening. Silence.

“I’m cracking a joke here. How about a reaction? At least boo me if it’s that bad.”

“You said nothing but the truth. I had no comment whatsoever.”

Anyway, this “dark overlord” gear of mine couldn’t really be replaced.

The three MVP special rewards were closely linked to my fighting style, while the VDA I had as my upper body armor was both really good *and* a gift from B3. Therefore, the only open slots I had were lower body armor, headgear, and accessories.

I noticed that Nemesis looked somewhat pensive.

“What now?” I asked.

“...Nothing,” she replied.

“Hm?”

Oh well, I thought as I went back to considering my gear.

In my hand, I held the shining material — the metal particles — I’d gotten from the whale.

I could get some lower body armor, but the result would be plate mail, and thus would probably make it harder to move around. Besides that, I had headgear and accessories... but then I decided to just ask the craftsman about my options.

In the store, I met the same person who'd recommended I have something crafted using the powder, and he gave me a list of items they could craft from it. Apparently, Countess Quartierlatin had given him some of it, too, and they were in the process of investigating its properties and uses.

The powder turned out to be really easy to work with, and it could be used to make various pieces of high-quality equipment. It must've been one of the reasons why the whale regenerated so quickly.

As I looked through the relatively small list, I saw an "Anti-Poison Oxygen Mask."

"This one's good," I said.

It counted as an accessory, and once equipped, it provided a flow of clean air.

I really needed something like it for whenever I used Hellish Miasma or flew around on Silver.

Besides, its name was "Storm Visage," which sounded crazy cool to me.

I'd clearly found what I was looking for, so I wrote it down on the order form.

There was a section for the design, too, but since the designs I thought were good didn't sit right with Nemesis, I decided to respect her and not think about it myself.

Instead, I just wrote down, "Please make it match my current set."

This was the kind of thing best left to the pros! Nemesis would surely be glad I took this route.

"Hey," Nemesis spoke up. "A chill just went down my spine. Did you write something strange on that form?"

"Hey, it's all good," I said. "It's nothing for you to worry about."

"I certainly hope so..."

Anyway, that ended my first order of a custom-made item.

I can't wait until it's done!

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After ordering the Storm Visage, I went to the adventurer's guild to pick up a quest.

Quartierlatin's adventurers' guild was away from both the ruins and the town center that Logan targeted, so it hadn't suffered any damage in the attacks, and was functioning as normal.

Scratch that — it wasn't normal, since you had way more Masters and tians looking for quests through the catalogs than usual.

It looked like many people had rushed over to Quartierlatin to help.

Azurite had told me that at first, she'd banned the adventurers' guilds from spreading any info about the ruins, in order to keep the Masters away. Because of this, the only ones who'd come were those who'd gotten the info some other way, like I had through the DIN.

But the ban was now lifted, so you now had people from all across the kingdom coming here on or for quests.

"All right, let's see what quests we have today," I said as we sat down at a table that'd just opened up.

However, there was someone else who sat down at it.

"Hm?"

"Oh?"

Well, it's crowded, anyway. Might as well share, I thought as I looked at his face.

"...Hm?" I said.

He looked familiar.

It was a guy with a bandana on his head. Where had I seen it before?

"Y-You're Ray Starling the Unbreakable!" he suddenly raised his voice.

Oh, so we did meet before, I thought. *Wait, no. I'm weirdly famous, so I can't be sure about that. Back in Torne, some PK clan even tried to beat me to make a name for themselves and—*

"AH!"

It came back to me! This bandana guy is...!

"The leader of Sol Crisis!" I shouted as I stood up from my chair.

"Shh! Shh! Don't mention that clan!" he put his finger in front of his mouth and signed for me to be quiet, then looked around in a panic. The guild was so crowded and noisy that no one noticed what was going on here.

"Are you still after Ray?" asked Nemesis menacingly.

Last time, B3 had handled Sol Crisis because they were using her name, but honestly, if there were PKers going after me, it was only fair that I would be the one to take them on.

“No no no no! I’m not plannin’ on messin’ with ya anymore!” He lightly waved his hands in front of him and asked me to calm down.

“Why would a PK clan come here, then?” I asked. “Are you plotting something? Like you did in Torne?”

“I’m not! I’m just here to quest, man! And I’m not in a PK clan anymore. Not Sol Crisis.”

“Hm?”

As I wondered what he meant, he became dispirited and slumped down in his chair. He looked really down, and his shabby gear didn’t help at all.

Even I, an ex-enemy, was kinda worried about him.

“...What happened?” I asked.

He hesitated for a moment, then began talking, saying, “The clan collapsed after the real deal kicked our asses back in Torne.”

I said nothing, but I could see why that had happened.

The clan had gathered members by stealing the authority of a major player killer: B3, AKA Barbaroy Bad Burn.

It was only natural that they’d get many quitters after they learned that their Barbaroy was a fake and the real one had come in to beat them up.

They’d probably also thought that she’d come after them again if they stayed.

“The guys also put us to sleep and used Steal and Plunder to take all of our stuff...” he added.

“Ouch...” Nemesis and I said in unison.

So that was why his gear is different than it was in Torne, I thought.

“Vermin... the guy who faked Barbaroy and the other founding member besides us... ran away before that happened to him. Blue and I stayed and tried to get the clan back up, but the aggro of the guys we tricked went all on us...”

I didn’t know what to say to that. It was their own fault for faking B3, but I also felt kinda bad for him.

“We couldn’t use ‘Sol Crisis’ anymore, so we changed it to ‘Rising Sun,’” he continued. “It’s just me and Blue, though, so it’s barely even a clan, really.”

So that was what he’d meant by, “Not Sol Crisis.”

“And ‘Blue’ is...?” I asked.

“Blue Screen. The guy who shut down your Prism Steed replica back in Torne.”

Oh, him, I thought. *Silver’s not a replica, though.*

“Sorry ’bout that, by the way,” he added as he suddenly bowed to me. “I was in a PK clan, so I’m not gonna say sorry for trying to PK ya, but now I think we should’ve picked a better time for that. You beat the UBM, didn’t ya?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. The Black Warcoat I was wearing was all the proof I needed to show that I’d killed the UBM that’d attacked Torne — Void of the Black Sky, Monochrome.

“I didn’t think anyone could do that, and went after ya ’cause it seemed like the perfect chance... but you actually did it. In the end, we just got in your way and got flattened by Barbaroy. So damn stupid.”

Once again, I had no words. Unlike Azurite, I didn’t have the Truth Discernment skill, but the self-derisive, sad-looking smile seemed pretty genuine to me.

Maybe he’s not a bad guy at heart, I thought.

“So why did you come here, anyway?” asked Nemesis.

“I’m just looking for jobs. We’ve got no gear, gold, or people besides me and Blue, so we need ways to get money that don’t ask for much.”

Well, there are tons of quests in Quartierlatin, so you can make some decent money here, I thought.

“But if *you’re* here, then we’ll just go somewhere else. You probably couldn’t relax with us here,” he said as he stood up and prepared to leave the guild. “I’m out.”

I stopped him by saying, “You don’t need to be considerate of me.”

“What?”

“You apologized, and honestly, that’s enough for me.”

“...You sure?”

“Yeah. You’ve already had it pretty rough, and it’s not like your getting in my way back in Torne resulted in something that couldn’t be undone.”

I’d made it in time to save Louie, and we hadn’t gotten any major increases in casualties, so with the apology, it was all water under the bridge.

“...Thanks.” Dum-Dum, the ex-leader of Sol Crisis and current leader of Rising Sun, bowed to me once again.

"Still, I don't know what B3 will think, so you should talk to her," I added. "I'll say something to her, too."

"Yeah. Thanks again. You tell me if Vermin or someone else starts bothering you again."

"Sure. I hope that doesn't happen, though."

And just like that, the minor conflict between us, born back in Torne, reached a peaceful conclusion.

Shortly after that, Dum-Dum found a quest that suited him and accepted it.

After he left, Nemesis and I looked through the quest list for any good ones, but then one of the guild's workers called us. She said that someone important was calling me and asked me to come to a certain room here in the guild. I could only think of two "important" people that could call me in this town, and sure enough, I came into the room to find one of them — a familiar masked lady.

It was none other than the first princess of Altar, Altimia Azurite Altar.

"Still wearing that mask?" I asked.

"Many outsiders gather in this facility, after all. And why does it feel as though you always talk about my mask before you even greet me?" she replied, slightly annoyed.

"I heard you needed me?"

"Yes. To be specific, I need your connections."

Connections?

"I assume you heard that the kingdom resumed the investigations into the ruins after the chaos surrounding them died down?" she asked.

"Of course."

The quests in Quartierlatin that had appeared after the incident could be put into three groups: material gathering for rebuilding, monster hunting until the local knight order recovered and could take it over again, and ruin investigation.

They were all backed by Countess Quartierlatin and the kingdom itself, so the rewards were generally higher than usual. However, the ruin investigation quests had ended yesterday, and I hadn't seen a single one of them today.

"Aren't you done with ruins investigation?" asked Nemesis.

"We have finished exploring the interior, at least," Azurite replied.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Simply put, we are done exploring it as a standard dungeon, but the investigations are going nowhere.”

According to her, they’d shifted from mere exploration to trying to figure out what they could do with the technology.

“But as things are now, Altar does not have any people capable of that.”

“I see.”

For that, you needed people with jobs and skills related to machines, but due to the inherent nature of the countries, most of them were in either Dryfe or Granvaloa — certainly not Altar.

Some had taken the machine-related jobs available at the crystal in the ruins here, but their level was still low, so they couldn’t be useful for this.

“We could hire outsiders, but that would be careless,” added Azurite.

Of course it would be, I thought.

The ruins were a classified matter — one serious enough to cause Dryfe to get involved. Altar clearly couldn’t just hire anyone who didn’t serve the country’s interests.

“I can only entrust this matter to someone who is both trustworthy and has knowledge of machines, or someone who is vouched for by someone I trust,” she said.

“And so you’re asking if I know someone like that?”

“Yes. Does anyone come to mind?”

“Hm...”

There was one person who came to mind before anyone else. However, he wasn’t here, couldn’t come here, and I couldn’t let him take this.

The second person who came to mind was Shu, but while his Embryo, Baldr, was very mechanical, it didn’t mean that he was fit for the job. In fact, I could totally imagine him somehow destroying the ruins.

The third person who came to mind was B3. She was well-informed and surely knew more people than me. I felt like she could find the perfect solution to this problem.

“I know someone who’s very knowledgeable,” I said. “I’ll ask her.”

“I see. Is she trustworthy?” Azurite asked.

“Of course.”

She’d easily make the top five people I trusted the most.

“She said she’s coming here tomorro— I mean, in three days. You can talk to her yourself.”

“Good idea. I will still be here in Quartierlatin, so I’ll meet her.”

Thus, I arranged a meeting between B3 and Azurite.

“Is it really a good idea to let them meet?” asked Nemesis telepathically.

Huh? They’re both the diligent type, so I’m sure they’ll get along, I replied. *They both have a thing for hiding their faces, too.*

“You are no different, no?”

Having just ordered the Storm Visage, I really couldn’t deny that.

Once Azurite and I were done talking, I picked up a quest, left the guild, and walked through Quartierlatin.

The restoration efforts were going well, but many buildings were still damaged, and the trees and flowers that distinguished this town from the rest were still a huge mess.

Those were the scars of the recent incident, and they reminded me of how Gideon had looked after Franklin’s Game.

“Hm...” I murmured.

Remembering that made me think of a certain someone. He was a friend I’d faced twice — once at the gate, and again atop Franklin’s Embryo.

“Someone trustworthy who knows a lot about machines, huh...?” I added to myself.

It was the first person who’d come to mind when Azurite asked me.

“What’s Hugo up to these days?” I wondered. I hadn’t seen him since our final clash in Gideon. Over a month had passed since, so I couldn’t help but wonder what he was doing now...

Pallid Pages Part One: Spin the Roulette Wheel

Late March 2045, City-State Union of Caldina, Hermine the City of Gambling

It was late March, about a week after the incident in Gideon.

The location was Caldina, the country almost completely covered in desert and dry wasteland.

The dry areas of old had become deserts, while the dry areas that had become deserts just a few centuries ago were now wastelands.

The few areas that were neither were either oases or fertile lands surrounding the rivers flowing from the Harshwinter Mountains to the north, and most Caldinian cities were built around these.

Hermine the City of Gambling was one of them. It was built around an oasis. Like its title implied, it had an entire district focused on the gambling industry.

Masters often compared it to the likes of Las Vegas.

One notable thing about the casinos and other gambling houses here was that they all differed depending on which organization was funding them.

Caldina was a place where merchants and organizations from all the other countries gathered to do business, and the casinos funded by them often had an air similar to their homelands.

The more elegant-looking casinos were often funded by Altarian merchants, while the ones that had a heavy focus on entertainment value were built by Legendarian design.

Then you had the ones that those from Earth would call “Asian-looking.” The serpentine dragons on them clearly showed that they were built with Huang He in mind.

On one of them, there was a sign which translated to something along the lines of “Mirage.”

That was the name of an organization from Huang He, but they were by no means mere merchants — it was a Huang Hean mafia.

It had roots in the underside of the empire's society and worked with an iron fist to incite people's greed and gather money. One of its sub-groups ran a casino here in Caldina.

This wasn't unique. There were also casinos funded by the likes of the Great Pirate Fleet of Granvaloa — the most infamous of the Four Great Fleets — as well as the vampire clans of Legendaria.

Hermine's casinos weren't even the only places that had monetary support from foreign underground societies.

In fact, the Caldinian authorities saw them as venerable guests and good sources of money.

As long as they could tax them, Caldina didn't care who ran the establishments or what they did there — they even appreciated when other countries made certain businesses illegal, for it increased the number of shops moving here and, subsequently, their tax income.

Of course, there were those who refused to pay the taxes, but they were not an issue, since they would just die while wandering the deserts between the cities and perish before bringing their money back to their countries.

They would either die because they couldn't get a guide, walk into monster habitats because they were given false maps, or simply get taken out by certain professionals.

There were some guides who claimed to be non-official and agreed to escort those who refused to pay their taxes through the desert, but they sometimes turned out to be Caldinian assassins who led them into Pure-Dragon worm lairs, or worse.

Regardless of how, the non-paying would regularly lose their lives and money, which would then be picked up by Caldina.

If you wanted to avoid such consequences, you had to abide by the rules, pay the taxes, and get the official guides.

That was the kind of country Caldina was — everything was allowed if you paid money, and everything was lost to you if you didn't.

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Back to the topic of Mirage's casino...

The establishment had Huang He-like — or China-like, for those from

Earth — decorations, both inside and out. Despite that, the gambling going on within the premises was more on the Western side. You had roulette, poker, baccarat... most of the games Masters knew well.

Servers clad in Huang Hean dresses that emphasized their legs, similar to qipaos from China, walked around the casino, plates in hand, and handed out alcoholic drinks to the gambling customers. Beauty must've been one of the job criteria, for they were all either beautiful girls or boys that looked the part.

Some of the customers were simply enjoying the sight of the servers at work. Many would gather here not to gamble, but to relax after a long day at work while having a meal and drink at the designated eating space. Watching the gamblers and the servers was a strange kind of spice to them.

Among those eating, there was an individual wearing strange clothes. That strangeness made him attract lots of attention. Perhaps his apparel wouldn't appear strange in some places, but they certainly didn't suit this casino. It looked like a mix of a military uniform and pilot suit, and neither Caldina nor Huang He had anything like it.

Another notable thing about him was his face. He was a handsome man, but for some reason, there was sadness in his expression. That well-defined face combined with grief made for a combo that moved the hearts of many women here, young and old. However, more perceptive folk would notice that his mannerisms were sometimes too feminine for a man.

The third notable thing about him was the snow-white girl at his side, who was silently eating almond jelly.

They were Hugo Lesseps and Cyco — ex-member of The Triangle of Wisdom and his Embryo, and together, they really stood out in this casino.

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High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

"Haaah..." I sighed, wondering how I'd ended up in a place like this.

I'd left Dryfe and headed out towards Tenchi, on the other side of the continent, in order to broaden my horizons, so it wasn't strange for me to be here in Caldina, which was on the way there. But I didn't know why I was in a casino, of all places.

Why was I being forced to wait here?

“I’m underage,” I muttered.

In reality, I was a girl who’d just turned fifteen, so this shady place was just a bit much for me.

I felt like I was about to cry.

Being here was actually harder on my mind than attacking the Gouz-Maise Gang’s hideout.

But “I”... which was to say, Hugo Lesseps... did my best to not cry, and just look sad instead. Crying in a place like this would just make me stand out more.

“You’re such a crybaby,” Cyco commented. “And FYI, you’re so handsome that even making a sad face makes you stand out.”

Shut up, Cyco. Just eat your almond jelly, I shot back.

“Okay, okay. Ah, also, if you don’t wanna stand out, why not just change your clothes?” Cyco asked as she pointed at my Triangle of Wisdom-made pilot suit.

You know I can’t, I responded silently. *I don’t have any other clothes besides a few sets of these.*

I’d only realized that after entering the desert, and I hadn’t had a chance to buy anything new since then.

I’d also spent most of my money on repairs, and ToW-quality parts that’d made it to Caldina were more expensive than I’d thought.

With the money I have left, I can’t get any pilot suits that don’t stand out and have good stats.

“You can just stop caring about stats,” said Cyco.

Shut up and just get more almond jelly.

“Who do you think I am? Nemesis?” she retorted. “One portion is enough for me.”

I said nothing in response. That name made me remember a familiar face — Ray.

We’d been enemies at our last meeting, but I still wondered how he was doing right now.

I’d cut off his right arm, and he’d lost his left against Francesca... Had he gotten them back yet?

I’d love to meet and talk to him again, I thought. *Probably not to apologize, though.*

“Oh yeah,” said Cyco. “When you’re down like this, you should act all smug, like you did when Ray was around."

To be honest, keeping up that act has become really hard lately.

One of the reasons was probably the fact that I'd lost all reservations I'd had for Francesca, but anyway, the Hugo Lesseps character wasn't as big of a part of me anymore.

If I remember correctly, even my thoughts were more "Hugo-like" before, I thought.

"Oh, I get it," said Cyco. "You turned fifteen on the other side, so that cured your chuuni... your self-conscious fourteen year-old syndrome."

"No. I am not in a phase," I retorted.

"Ehh? You're a handsome, pompous gentleman who likes saying hot one-liners."

"No. Hugo Lesseps is not a product of adolescent self-consciousness."

"'Lady, we shall stop your tears. I promise that you will greet tomorrow's morning with a smile on your face,'" Cyco quoted me.

"You even stopped speaking in monotone to say that! Can you *not*?!"

And that wasn't a weird thing to say, right?! I know I'm the one who said it, but that's a good line!

"Ugh... I didn't expect the very basis of who I am to be put into question at this point," I complained.

"Did that help?" Cyco asked with a smile.

"...Eh? Ah..." That made me realize that I was feeling a lot more comfortable than I had been a few minutes ago.

So my verbally abusive, monotone Embryo had said that to take my mind away from the pressure of being in a place like this.

"Thanks, Cyc—"

"Anyway, I'm gonna write a report about what's not right about you and hand it over later."

"You've ruined it in more ways than one," I muttered.

Anyway, though she had hurt me a bit in the process, Cyco really was helping me deal with being in this place.

Feeling a bit better, I continued to wait for the person I was here with.

"What's going on there, anyway?" I said as I looked into one part of the gambling area — the roulette space.

Just like in reality, the roulettes had all the numbers from 0 to 36, red or black colors on them, and green on 0. They were European-style roulettes.

Yes — they were almost no different from the ones in reality.

"That reminds me..." I murmured.

Francesca believed that the developers had made the tians accustomed to these games ahead of time.

She theorized that *Infinite Dendrogram* was the result of someone creating a cutting-edge virtual space from scratch, then using it to simulate an ecosystem of virtual life.

I wondered if creating a civilization this complex was possible without it taking really long. Even on Earth, this would've taken hundreds of years. However, Francesca had said it was possible due to several factors, including the *function they used for the war*.

"Also, doncha think that creating an entire world *this* detailed in no time and from nothing would be way more insane?" she'd added, and I was inclined to agree.

Back to the matter of games...

Roulette, card games, and even the board games popular outside of casinos all had their equivalents here in *Dendro*.

You could say the same about food and drink, too. The almond jelly Cyco was eating, for one thing, was basically the almond jelly you could get on Earth.

Francesca thought that this had all been done by the developers' design to get this world used to Earthly breakthroughs of this kind ahead of time and keep Masters from being the ones to bring them.

It was to prevent them from using real-world games or food to either make some serious money or impact the cultures here.

Francesca said that if the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* had lacked popular entertainment or good cuisine, you would've had many Masters bringing such things from reality and acting as if they were their original ideas.

And if anyone had been successful, it would create many copycats who'd attempt the same thing.

"The devs were probably worried that it'd divert *Infinite Dendrogram* from its main point," she'd gone on.

I recalled asking, "But isn't *Infinite Dendrogram* supposed to be all about freedom?"

She'd grinned and said, "Sure. At least, as long as it doesn't stray from the main point — Embryo development."

According to her, the devs wanted Masters to evolve their Embryos.

"They've gotta have a goal like that. This game's just too extraordinary for it to be just for profit. Ha ha! I mean, come on, you don't need something of this level just to make some money."

Then she'd given me her theory.

"If it's about something other than profit, it's gotta be something that distinguishes *Infinite Dendrogram* from the other games. That would be our Embryos. They're something the devs force upon us, and something no other game has. That made me conclude that *Infinite Dendrogram* was made so we Masters, as a group, could nurture all kinds of Embryos. Eh? You think it's this realistic world that makes it stand out? I don't think so. I have a basis for that belief, but it's long, so I won't say it now. Anyway, I'm pretty damn sure the devs made the game so they could have us grow some Embryos... specifically, Superior Embryos such as my Pandemonium, or maybe something beyond that... not that it matters right now. Eh? You wonder how this relates to entertainment and all that? Isn't it obvious? If the meta was all about trying to make money by introducing the real world's features to *Dendro*, it'd be nothing but a glorified business simulator. You can't develop a good Embryo under those conditions, right? They set up the entertainment culture to prevent Masters from converging on doing nothing but looking for success through easy breakthroughs."

Francesca's rapid-fire theorizing had been just that — theorizing.

However, she probably had good reasons for believing what she did.

Anyway, Francesca's point was that the devs were making sure that Masters couldn't just introduce easy breakthroughs, but it felt weird to hear it from her because *she herself had actually done something like that*.

She'd brought humanoid robots — a fictional thing from the real world — into *Infinite Dendrogram*

The developers probably hadn't anticipated anyone using the technological architecture here to pioneer humanoid mecha, or they simply hadn't thought that anyone could do it.

As a result, Francesca was now living proof that you *could* bring something revolutionary here and turn it into a business.

While remembering that, I looked at the roulette table in the gambling area. It was surrounded by an air of expectation... or perhaps fear.

"I... I shall throw it, then," said the dealer with a tense voice.

Something was strange, though.

Not about the dealer, but the roulette's betting table.

There was only one token on it, specifically, the red 1 to 1. It was the cheapest, too, worth a mere 100 lir.

Despite there being many people around the table, that was the only bet on it.

Rules were rules, though, and since someone had made a bet, the roulette had to be spun.

But after the dealer threw the ball on the roulette...

"Ten million lir on 21."

...someone made an additional bet and placed ten of the most expensive tokens on top of the 21.

"Me too, me too!"

"Same here!"

More additional bets followed as those surrounding the table also bet on the 21.

The dealer became pale, the roulette gradually stopped spinning, and the ball... ended up on the 21.

“T-Twenty-one...” he stammered.

The table was drowned in raging cheering.

The person who’d bet first — and the most — was given 36 times the original bet, which amounted to 360,000,000 lir’s worth of tokens.

That was equivalent to 30,000,000 Euros in real life, and it was enough to buy a whole twelve Marshall II’s with add-ons... with ToW member prices, at least.

“Isn’t that too much?” I muttered.

I didn’t know whether I was heard or not, but the person took the tokens and left the table.

The surrounding gamblers looked blatantly disappointed that they could no longer win by simply copying her bets.

“Ah.” The woman realized something and stopped before pointing at the table, looking at the absentminded dealer, and saying, “This is two hundred lir short.”

Those were the winnings from the first token she’d bet on the red 1 on 1.

That was the straw that broke the camel’s back and made the dealer cry. Even so, he forced himself to give her the tokens.

Not only had she won an immense amount of money — she had even broken the dealer’s spirit.

This person’s appearance was best described as “red and white.”

Her hair was red with a few streaks of silver.

Wearing only hot pants, a bikini-like top on her chest, and a flight jacket, she was brazenly showing off her nice figure. However, the most notable thing about her were her eyes. Each of them had a different color. The left eye was red, the right one silver.

A closer look into her right eye would reveal that its iris had the pattern of a detailed kaleidoscope, and that it as a whole was artificial.

I knew that that was her Embryo.

She casually walked over to the eating space, approached our table, and said, “I made some good money just now, Yu.”

“You overdid it, teach,” I said.

She was the person who’d forced herself into the role of my mentor.

Just like me, she was an ex-member of The Triangle of Wisdom, as well as my sister's close friend, and the one and only "Blue Sky Songstress" — one of the nine Caldinian Superiors.

She was The Ace, AR-I-CA.

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I'd met her about three weeks ago in *Dendro* time.

After the incident in Gideon, I left The Triangle of Wisdom and tried crossing the Caldinian deserts to go to Tenchi.

Using the sea route was the better option, but ever since Dryfe had created a navy and tried to expand into the ocean, the country's relationship with Granvaloa had become sour. We'd even started stopping Granvaloan merchant fleet ships, so I really couldn't go to Tenchi by sea.

I even considered using Altarian ships, but I wasn't brazen enough to just pass by through the country after causing all that trouble in Gideon.

That left only one route — the desert in the middle of the continent. There were also the Harshwinter Mountains to the north, but that was no place for people, passing or otherwise.

The person who'd passed the place most recently was a Huang Hean Superior and his flying fortress, which said everything about how inhospitable the land was and how much you'd need to pass it. That was why I'd chosen the desert, but since it'd be a long journey and I would have to log out, I wouldn't be able to ride alongside merchant dragon carriages.

Xunyu the Yinglong had arrived at Altar using a dragon carriage that functioned as a mobile save point, but unfortunately, that was among the best magic items you could get, and I didn't have anything that luxurious.

Still, even without anything that fancy, I had ways of traveling long distances.

Caldina had these so-called "sandships," and since ships counted as half-buildings, I could travel by setting the ship's inside coordinates and my logout location. When looking it up on the internet, I'd thought that was the way to go, but then I'd realized that the diplomatic relations between Dryfe and Caldina were so bad that you had no civilian sandships going between the countries.

I decided I had to give up and go by myself using my Magingear, but then I quickly realized that was impossible.

There was no denying it: I was naïve.

Piloting Magingears used MP, even when you weren't fighting, and the desert was such an unwelcoming place that even the simplest movements drained a lot. It didn't help that I was using the unit Francesca had gifted me. It was a custom-made heavy-type machine focused on output, so it drained a lot more MP for less movement than standard ones.

To avoid being wasteful, I stored the Magingear and tried walking through the desert alongside Cyco... but it almost killed me. My job was High Pilot, and my sub-jobs were Pilot and Mechanic, so I didn't have the stats needed to survive crossing a desert. My END was especially low.

That was when we were attacked by a large number of desert-dwelling worms that saw us as food. I tried fighting back with my Magingear, but while the unit was in good shape, I myself wasn't — traveling through the desert had left me drained — so we'd ended up in a dire situation.

The worms didn't seem to be cannibalistic, so La Porte de l'Enfer didn't have any effect on them, either. But right before things became really bad, I heard a song-like sound coming from the sky. Wondering what it was, I looked up and saw a Magingear. It was my first time seeing one speeding through the skies.

The flying Magingear made a song-like sound as it fired shells at the heads of all the worms leaping from the sand, quickly exterminating them. It was so precise that it felt like the pilot *knew* where they would leap from — none of its movements or ammo were wasted. It fought with a brilliant beauty, and all the worms were dead in less than two minutes.

Once done with the battle — if you could call it that — the Magingear landed in front of me. The pilot left the unit, and looked at me with eyes of different colors: red and white.

"That's Fran's unit, right?" she asked. "Wow, you don't see a lotta human-shaped Magingears here to begin with, but I didn't think that Fran made any other full custom units besides my Opera... Huh? Now that I think about it, it's rare for her to go that far for someone. She's sociable, sure, but a bit... messed up."

The pilot spoke without even stopping to wait and give me a chance to respond. Her voice was blatantly full of curiosity, wonder... and nostalgia. She clearly knew the person who'd made this unit — Francesca.

That was why I asked, “You know my sister?”

A moment later, I realized my mistake.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, Francesca was a man named “Mr. Franklin.”

Even those who knew “him” wouldn’t make the connection between “him” and the word “sister.” Some would even use it to assume that Mr. Franklin was actually a woman.

I panicked and was about to say that I’d stuttered, but the pilot then said, “You know Fran’s gender and call her sister...? Oh! I get it! You’re her little sister, Yu!”

“Eh...?” I was really surprised that Francesca had told this person about her real self.

People she opened up to were rare. Even in the ToW, it didn’t go beyond me and the sub-leader.

“Huh? But Yu’s a sister, and you’re a man... Are you a crossdresser?” she asked.

“N-No. My avatar is a man, but I’m a girl in real life,” I answered.

“I see! Just like Fran! You’re so alike!” she said as she gave me a thumbs-up, for some reason.

The strange vibe about her was nothing like Francesca’s, but it was still a bit overwhelming.

Still, I brought myself to ask, “Umm... who are you?”

She clapped her hands before answering, “I’m The Ace, AR-I-CA! I used to be a part of the ToW, but now I’m with Sefirot! And I’m a close friend of Fran’s!”

That made me gasp.

The Ace, AR-I-CA — Francesca had told me about her.

She’d started out as one of the ToW’s first test pilots, then left to become one of Caldina’s Superiors.

Her nickname was “Blue Sky Songstress,” and I’d heard that she was combat-capable, even for someone from Sefirot.

The fact that such a person was before me surprised me, and as I tried to figure out what to say...

“By the way, what’s with the outdated red and white two-tone color look?” asked Cyco. “It’s excessive and cringy.”

The sudden insult to the Superior’s appearance made me feel like the air had frozen, and I wasn’t even using La Porte de l’Enfer.

I was a bit conflicted. I wondered why Cyco always verbally abused anyone we met — she'd even done it to Ray and Nemesis — while at the same time slightly agreeing that the red and white hair and clothing combo was a bit... much.

"Yes! Red and white are the colors of the coolest legendary pilot! The excessiveness makes it good," The Ace said as she gave a thumbs up with a full smile.

She didn't look the least bit upset. It was like she didn't even understand that she was just insulted.

"Hugo. No good. My insults don't work on her," Cyco complained.

"Can you just... not insult her?" I asked.

Insults make things awkward, I added in thought. *Let's just stop badmouthing people's fashion, okay?*

But now that I thought about it... Francesca was a full mad scientist, the King of Destruction was a half-naked bear, and Figaro and Xunyu were weird in their own ways. Maybe it was a rule for Superiors to have a weird fashion sense.

"By the way," AR-I-CA said. "It looked like you weren't having a good time here. You okay?"

"Yes. Somehow... Ah!" I realized that I hadn't thanked her yet and said, "Thank you for helping me."

"Don't mention it. Anyway, you're not used to the desert, huh?"

"I... Yes."

Those worms had almost gotten me, and going through this desert any further would be difficult. I'd probably need to switch to accompanying a merchant group or something, but then how would I handle logging out?

"All right, leave it all to me," said AR-I-CA.

"Eh?"

"I'll become your mentor."

"Ehhh...?"

"From crossing the desert to the ABCs of Magingears — I'll drill it all into your head! Call me 'teach' from now on."

And so, with a forcefulness I'd never experienced before, I gained a mentor.

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That was how The Ace had become my mentor and forced me to call her "teach."

Her constant forcefulness was a bit problematic, but I could tolerate it just fine.

There were two much bigger problems.

First was the fact that her training was actually hellish. She'd started out by making me level up by throwing me into a lair of worms similar to the ones that'd attacked me, putting my unit in danger of destruction.

Then, she made me do "mock battles" (read: one-sided beatings) with her. She'd evaded my La Porte de l'Enfer despite not knowing anything about it, which was completely ridiculous. She'd even made me pay ten million lir to repair my unit, and I was really glad the broken parts weren't custom-made.

Her vibrant appearance was hiding a darkness that came out whenever she was acting as my mentor. It was hard to complain, though, since I actually was getting stronger.

Not only was I gaining more levels, I was actually becoming a better pilot beyond just my Piloting sense skill level. This positive canceled out the negatives of the first problem, so I could accept it.

But then there was the second problem...

She was likely the apex of all Magingear pilots, and had a wealth of knowledge about machines in general and Caldina in particular, which made her a mentor deserving of respect.

However, as a person, she had a disposition that made me uncomfortable.

"You're looking for prey even in a place like this?" I asked.

"Yep," she replied as she looked around the establishment and drank a non-alcoholic cocktail, clearly satisfied with all the tokens she'd won.

She was looking not at objects, but people such as the attractive servers or the young, rich ladies who'd come here to gamble.

"And who do you have in mind?" Cyco asked her.

"Either that Chinese-looking pretty boy with long hair, that lady with a 90cm bust, or that fiery-looking girl!"

"You really don't have any limits for this, huh? I hope you die," Cyco put in.

"And you're as sulky as always, Cy. It's soooo cute!"

“Don’t hug me. It makes me feel like I’m in danger.”

Yes, that was the problem with my teach’s personality — she hit on anybody she thought looked good.

It also didn’t matter to her whether they were men or women.

In fact, it seemed like she hit on women more often than men.

She’d only have tea with some of them, while taking it far beyond that with others. Still, it was something that a fifteen-year-old like me couldn’t quite grasp.

“If you’re feeling lonely, why not get a lover?” I asked. “You’re in a clan. Don’t you have someone you like in there?”

“Nope. I asked our leader, but he awkwardly refused. I don’t know what Carl’s like on the inside, Albert’s a hardcore, iron-faced terminator, Fatoum is handsome, but married, and the old man and lady are... well... old. There are no good love interests in the clan.”

“Doesn’t Sefirot have three more people?”

“They’re not even worth considering,” she said, strongly implying that she was averse to the very idea of loving them.

Looks like even the strongest clan in the world has some internal issues, I thought.

“Also, getting a long-time lover is fine and all, but one-night stands are great, too,” she said. “Both sides fall in love, are drawn to each other, have a tryst of a lifetime, and part ways with only the sweet memories to show for it. You see that kinda thing a lot in movies from my homeland of Italy. That’s why I’m more about hitting on and picking up than keeping.”

“But... three days ago, you said something about getting a real beauty to sleep with you for a million lir,” I said.

“I did,” she replied as if it was nothing.

“Does that really count as ‘hitting on’ or ‘picking up’...?”

“Looks, words, wealth... I’ll use everything I can to charm them! I’m The Ace of love!”

“...Eh?”

“Though, my Superior Job has nothing to do with my sexuality.”

“Now that’s a relief. For a moment, I wondered if that was one of the conditions for The Ace.”

“Ahahahah! If one of the conditions was to make a number of people fall for me, I’d have gotten it three months earlier than I did!”

She laughed, but it was hard to see it as a joke, considering how she behaved.

"Annnyway," she continued. "I've got a good idea of who I wanna pick up, but when I think about what's about to happen, I probably shouldn't do it here... Ah!" She looked at me and Cyco as if she just had a brilliant idea. "Hey, Yu."

"...What is it?" I asked.

"Let's have some *fun* later, shall we?"

So she finally bares her fangs at me, I thought.

"My avatar is a man, but I'm a girl on the inside... an underage one, at that... so I thoroughly refuse."

"Eeehh? But the three of us could have so much fun, right, Cy?"

"Not in a million years."

"Oh my, what a shame."

I really appreciated that she never actually forced anyone to go with her, so all you had to do was refuse.

She'd also told me that she backed down if she found out that her targets weren't single.

That made it sound like she had limits, but it had to be emphasized that she went for *every* good-looking person besides those in relationships.

"No chance, huh?" my teach continued. "Fran rejected me, too, so now I've been given the cold shoulder by both of you sisters. Oh, woe is mee."

She went for Francesca, too?

"Aren't you and my sister friends?" I asked.

"Yeah. That's why I hit on her with the intention of marriage. She rejected me, but she's still my best friend!"

...She'd wanted to marry her best friend?

I really didn't understand her outlook on love. It made me want to turn my brain off.

"So what are you into, anyway? Men or women?" asked Cyco.

"Both, obviously," my teach replied without even thinking. "I specialize in taking the lead with other girls, though."

"Is your gender different on the other side? Like Hugo?"

"No way. I'm a woman all the way through."

Her indifference for what she was saying made me heave a long sigh.

"Aren't you a better fit for Legendaria than Dryfe or Caldina?" I asked.

"Ahahah! Don't be stupid," she laughed before making the most serious face I'd ever seen her make. "*My sexuality has nothing on the perverts there.*"

The words by themselves were like a joke, but it certainly didn't feel like she was fooling around.

Hearing that made me promise myself that I'd never, ever go to Legendaria.

Following the silly exchange about my teach's sexuality, I lowered my voice and began talking about something more serious.

"About the roulette game... are you sure you didn't win too much?"

"It's fine," my teach replied. "It was obvious they were gonna cheat if the bets were too high, so I bet when the hole the ball was going into became obvious and threw a wrench in their plan."

I was silent. Knowing where the ball was going to seemed impossible... for anyone except her, anyway.

"I don't use my eye unless they're cheating," she went on. "It wouldn't be fair if I was the only one doing it."

"But isn't this place owned by Huang Hean mafia? If you bet and win in ways that stand out... you'll catch their attention, right?"

"That's the plan. I'd seriously appreciate it if they picked a fight with me."

"Eh?"

"If you wanna fight tians who aren't criminals, you need them to attack you first. Otherwise you're going to the gaol. Ha ha!" she laughed before adding, "As long as they pay their share, even mafia don't count as criminals here in Caldina."

This was the first time I'd heard that she'd come to this place to fight the Huang Hean mafia backing it.

Shaken by the revelation, but hiding it well, I said, "Before we came here, you said that there was something you were supposed to get here. I thought you just meant some money for the journey."

"Ah ha ha! Please. I'm not poor enough to need to gamble to get through the day. I'm a Superior, and the money I already have is on a whole different level than what I won today."

Right... Superiors like her and Francesca were basically people who made astronomical amounts of money with little effort and wasted it just as easily.

I’d heard that there was a broke Superior who was making money selling popcorn, but that had to be an urban legend.

“The thing we’re here for is basically a stolen article,” my teach said.

“Stolen?”

“Yeah, I’m doing this at the request of the good old company leader... Well, the main source of it is someone even bigger. I’ve gotta retrieve or destroy the thing that was stolen.”

Retrieving something stolen seemed like a good enough reason to infiltrate a place owned by the Huang He mafia, but I didn’t understand the rest of it.

“What’s the point of destroying it?” I asked.

“Sorry, I said it wrong. We’re supposed to break what’s inside it, not the thing itself. But that’s only if it comes out.”

That made it sound like the item was some sort of container.

But in that case, shouldn’t she have said that the stolen thing was the content of the container?

“What is it, anyway...?” I asked.

“Something that was stored away in Huang He’s treasury. Not too long ago, when Canglong the third prince was leaving for Altar, they decided to give a couple of these to him, and when they took them out and got busy deciding which ones to pick, someone came in and stole it.”

“You mean it’s a national treasure?!”

Not a Caldinian one, either — it was from Huang He in the east. Something that important had made it to the hands of a criminal organization here in Caldina.

Though, since it was in the possession of a Huang Hean mafia, it had probably gotten here through Huang He’s criminal channels.

Regardless, this was big enough to become an international problem.

“It’s exactly that,” my teach said. “We’re bound to get a lot from Huang He if we bring it back to them, and if whatever’s inside comes out, we’ll have to break it... and if it comes down to that, it might as well be us. That’s why I was chosen for the job. We don’t have a lot of members who can fight while being careful not to break something. The old lady’s all about one-on-one fights, while Carl’s unbeatable, but a bit dull, if you know what I mean. I’m the least worst choice among us.”

She'd mentioned breaking the contents of the object again.

It was a foreign national treasure, yet she was speaking as if breaking it was inevitable.

"...Teach," I said.

"What?" she asked.

"Can you describe the stolen object in detail?"

"Ohh, it's a—"

Before she could finish, the casino became astir.

Suddenly, dozens of people in black suits ran out through the staff doors, and half of them gathered in the eating space — around our table, specifically.

This is...

"Hahahah!" my teach exulted. "See, Yu? I knew that talking about something that big was gonna make them pick a fight with us!"

"You could've told me about this..."

"Well, you can look at it as just some observation and perception training!"

Those two words almost made me remember the silver-haired boy I hated, but I did see her point.

The black-suited men who weren't surrounding us were kicking out the customers, who were complaining, but had no choice in the matter.

"Whoa, now, if you mistreat your customers, you're gonna lose business," my teach said cheerfully, not bothered by the situation one bit. "Though... *that only matters if this place is still standing by tomorrow.*"

She was ready to fight them.

With her hand in her jacket's left pocket, she was moving something that made a clicking sound.

I'd better prepare, too, I thought.

"Anyway, I'm sure you heard what I said," my teach said as she looked up at the suited men. "Can you give me the UBM... the Treasurebeast Orb that was stolen from the inner treasury?"

The moment she said that, the air around the suited men changed.

"Do that, and we can forget about the 360,000,000 you lost—"

And we were both assaulted by a barrage of combat magic.

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The story of certain treasures

Huang He had a Special Superior Job called “Draconic Emperor.”

It occasionally manifested in the imperial family, which, due to the ancient dragon blood flowing in their veins, were oftentimes called “gulong ren” — ancient dragon kin.

A Draconic Emperor was a living deity closely tied to the very history of Huang He.

While all of them were revered, the manifestation of the Draconic Emperor before the previous one was considered to have been the strongest of them all.

His level had surpassed 2,000, and he’d defeated countless UBMs.

This was due to a mix of his supreme stats, unique skills such as Draconic Inheritance and Gulong Ren Cells, the various techniques he crafted through harsh training, and the many special rewards — Mythical included — he gained from killing many UBMs all by himself.

It was fair to call him a beast among beasts.

His era was one in which Masters almost didn’t exist, so he was easily among the strongest the world had to offer. It was believed that if King of Kings and The Lynx hadn’t existed at the same time as him, he would’ve unified the entire continent under the flag of Huang He.

As he fought off UBMs to protect Huang He, this Draconic Emperor realized that expanding his own strength any further would not help Huang He in any way, and that instead he needed to increase the number of people who wielded immense power.

Thus, he began research into a technique that would allow him to seal away powerful monsters. Of course, they already had monster storage in the form of Jewels, but they could not store UBMs — those weren’t even tameable to begin with. However, the Draconic Emperor didn’t give up trying to wield their powers, and eventually, he created the so-called “Treasurebeast Orbs.”

These weren’t items, but a type of barrier that materialized and acted as live storage for treasurebeasts — in other words, UBMs. The orbs made it possible for anyone to draw out and wield the powers of the UBMs inside. Since such powers were usually reserved to those who had contributed the most in the UBM’s defeat, this was simply astonishing.

Being the only one capable of using this technique to trap UBMs, that

Draconic Emperor had done it many times throughout his long life. He’d sealed away tigers, dragons, and monsters unlike any you’d ever see. The trapped beasts’ tiers reached as high as Mythical, and their number amounted to almost a hundred.

When that Draconic Emperor was on his deathbed, he left the young, normal emperor with the words, “I shall die soon. But worry not, for I left you many means to make up for my absence. Use them to protect yourself, bring security to this land, and make the country prosper. This is goodbye, young one. Also... I have been feared my whole life. Everyone besides the King of Kings and The Lynx were afraid of me. You are no exception, but I’ve always found it endearing how you faced me despite your fears.”

And so, the long-lived Draconic Emperor had breathed his last.

Sadly, history hadn’t played out as he’d desired.

The young emperor he’d entrusted the future to died to a disease only a few years later.

That sparked a civil war between his brother and his unborn child... or rather, those who supported his unborn child’s rights to the imperial throne.

Not only did it cause many deaths, but it ended with the child being born as the next Draconic Emperor, while being a person who had no right to inherit the political throne.

It had been a time of meaningless bloodshed, and perhaps the most embarrassing stain in Huang He’s long history.

But if there was one good thing to say about it, it was that neither side had used the Treasurebeast Orbs even once.

That was because both sides had greatly respected the previous Draconic Emperor, not wanting to trample upon his will... and because they simply couldn’t even use them.

The inner treasury, where the Treasurebeast Orbs were kept, could only be unlocked by the emperor or the Draconic Emperor.

No one else could open it, and according to the late Draconic Emperor, if someone tried to enter without using the proper means, they would vanish from this world, alongside the treasury.

There was no emperor or Draconic Emperor during the civil war, so no one could open it to use it in the conflict.

Both the younger brother, who went on to become the emperor, as well as the child who became Draconic Emperor, thought that this was good, and greatly appreciated the late Dragon Emperor's work on this front.

The Treasurebeast Orbs went unused even after that.

The only exception happened post-civil war, when the emperor gave a tiger orb to a group of people who'd decided to travel to the west.

This was what the emperor said concerning the use of Treasurebeast Orbs:

"These are powerful indeed. However, we must not wage war or quarrel merely because we have them. Instead, we should let them lie dormant until we truly need them."

Perhaps that wasn't what the late Draconic Emperor had intended.

However, the people of Huang He, weary from the civil war, readily accepted his words, and the nearly one hundred UBMs sealed within the Treasurebeast Orbs were left to lay dormant without even using their power.

That ended once the treasury was opened a few centuries later, when the third prince of Huang He was heading out to the kingdom in the west... and someone used it as an opportunity to steal some of the orbs.

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Hermine the City of Gambling, Mirage

"Mr. Zhang, we've disposed of the rats," an employee reported.

"Well done." In the gambling den's manager's office, the man in charge of the place, and all of Mirage's operations in Caldina, sighed in relief and sat down on his chair.

His name was Zhang, and there was a Treasurebeast Orb in his hand.

He was looking at a crystal giving a live video feed of the gambling den's hall, where he saw nothing but smoke caused by several dozen combat magic attacks.

"Phew..."

Needless to say, his relief was due to the death of the Masters he'd ordered to have killed... or at least one of them.

As one who worked here in Caldina, Zhang obviously knew about AR-I-CA.

She'd come here to take the orb in his hand.

She was a Superior operating as part of the strongest clan, Sefirot.

Her nickname was "Blue Sky Songstress," and she was one of the strongest people in the country. However, that was only when she was riding her Magingear.

That was why he'd given out the order for her death while she was still bare.

In a way, Zhang was lucky. If she'd been replaced by Carl Lourlou the Multifariously Invincible, this attack wouldn't have done anything to him. He was the ultimate endurance fighter, known for, among other things, his fight against a UBM in boiling magma, and also the destruction of a spellcaster association that'd tried to defeat him with thousands of combat spells at once.

Surprise attacks wouldn't have scratched him, and they'd have been defeated before the battle even began. However, if the man had demanded the orb, they would've still had to fight despite the overwhelming odds.

That was just how important the orb was to them.

They'd received it from Mirage's headquarters in Huang He about a week ago. All Zhang knew was that it was a bargaining chip in negotiations with a certain clan present here in Caldina. Since Zhang was in charge of Mirage's operations here, he was in charge of this task.

Once the appointed time came, he would go to a designated spot, present the password, and complete the negotiation. It seemed like a basic trade, but the object in question was extraordinary.

The orb was a national treasure that everyone from Huang He had heard about in stories from their childhood days. He also knew that this would be less of a trade, and more of a creation of a bond with a certain organization. Zhang had been surprised by that and asked the one who'd presented it, "What kind of bond could be worth something like this?"

He hadn't gotten the answer from him, so Zhang had used comms magic to contact Mirage's main branch. They'd responded with nothing but the name of the organization, but that was more than enough.

Zhang understood the gravity of this exchange, and that his head was on the line here, along with those of every Mirage member here in Caldina. Thus, even if the one who'd caught wind of it and come here for it was a Superior, he had no choice but to shoot.

"This orb... that clan... Are the main branch planning a coup d'etat?" Zhang murmured.

He knew what they wanted to do, but he couldn't understand what they were thinking. Even so, he knew he would all be over if he went against the order.

He would be crushed by either the main branch, or that organization. Regardless, his future was so bleak that making an enemy out of the Blue Sky Songstress seemed like the better idea.

“She’ll come back in three days, but the exchange will be done in two,” he muttered.

Unlike tians, Masters were immortal. Zhang knew full well that he had only bought himself three days worth of time. However, that was all he wanted.

That was enough for him and his group to go through the exchange and leave Hermine.

Having made an enemy out of a Caldinian Superior, he had no choice but to abandon this business. That was why he could act without caring about its reputation among the customers or any damage dealt.

Otherwise, he would’ve never used explosive magic indoors. Zhang looked inside the crystal again — at the scene where a Superior had just died.

“...Isn’t this smoke lasting a bit too long?”

The smoke rising from the spot where the two Masters had stood showed no sign of going away.

Is it burning that hard? Zhang wondered, and a chill went down his spine. Zhang was a battle-focused Mirage operative that’d lived through many fights, and the chill was his experience speaking to him.

“Ventilation magic. Use vent magic to spread the smoke away!” he shouted.

“But if it’s a fire, that might make the flames stronger...”

“Doesn’t matter! Do it!”

The member followed Zhang’s order and used a vent magic, Fu, to disperse the smoke.

It exposed a cylindrical object that was continuously releasing smoke. Those with Identification saw that it had the name “Smoke Discharger.”

But there was something that attracted even more attention.

“Is that... scrap metal?”

At the ground zero of the combat magic attack, there was a large pile of scrap metal... or maybe remains.

The wall was covered in various kinds of mechanical junk, including weapons and armor. They had no idea that before the attack had hit, a certain someone had *released the scrap from her inventory into the magic's trajectory*.

Needless to say, the person who'd done it was...

"Ohh, you noticed?" a voice rang out from behind the wall. "Too late, though. It's showtime!"

The wall of scrap suddenly collapsed.

As though its role was over, it fell as if calculated for performance value, and revealed a blue, human-shaped machine.

It was a humanoid Magingear, but those who only knew the Marshall II wouldn't believe that. This unit was impossibly slender. It almost felt like it was but a chassis without its armor. The design made it look like a slightly bigger, more beautiful version of the power armor Magingears that had once been the norm. The only thing that made it clear that it was bigger than it first appeared was the device equipped on its back.

The unit's name was MGFX-001 Blue Opera. It was the first unit of the MGFX series. That was the title for custom units that Franklin, the father of all mech-type Magingears, created without paying any heed to the cost.

This particular unit was all blue in color, and so slender and streamlined that it didn't even feel like a Magingear.

"Sing... Opera!" Blue Opera absorbed the pilot's MP and activated its engine.

An air-shaking song started to stream through the air. It was merely the sound of the machinery inside Blue Opera, but it was comparable to the voices of proficient soprano singers in its elegant beauty.

The melody wasn't made by a human voice, but the beauty made it more than worthy of the title "songstress." The audience here wasn't moved, however, for they realized that this songstress might be the siren bringing them their doom.

"I'm ready, too, teach," a new voice rang out as someone behind the blue songstress stood up.

This Magingear was larger than the songstress, and a whole lot bulkier, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

It was a heavy unit with layers upon layers of armor. It was as though they were petals.

While the former was a songstress, this was a blooming flower.

Its name was MGFX-002 White Rose. It was the second MGFX unit, and Franklin's birthday-farewell gift to his little sister. All white in color, it was no doubt the most solid Magingear of all.

"You hopped in yours too, huh?" AR-I-CA asked.

"Yes," Hugo nodded. "But next time, please inform me that we are going to fight before we enter the establishment."

"You've gotta learn to sense that by yourself. It's part of your training!"

"Do you think that *anything* can count as training?"

"N-Nooooo..."

"You're stuttering."

The pilots of the blue and white units were chatting in the same way they had around the table before it was blown up. The Mirage members facing them couldn't feel so carefree, however.

Someone among them gulped.

These machines were enemies they had to defeat, and it seemed like there was no better time to strike than now, while they were chatting.

However, they felt like everything would end the moment they attacked.

All of them thought that this would be where they died.

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High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

"Eh? You actually keep your Magingear in a Garage?" my teach had said three hours before we'd entered the gambling den. "Well, they're good for their automatic light maintenance and gun loading, but if you need to use it in an emergency, you should keep it in an inventory with Instant Release on it. There's no point in using Garages when your mech's a hundred percent battle-ready."

Then she'd given me a spare inventory, which I'd moved my Rose into.

That should've been enough for me to realize that I would be involved in some battle soon.

At least this experience had made me understand just how useful Instant Release inventories were for spontaneous battles.

It was the first time I'd heard of such a technique, but that was probably because we ToW pilots were mostly focused on tests and didn't use

Magingears this way.

This had to be something my teach had thought of in her battles after leaving Dryfe.

“Is it just me, or did that scrap wall almost break?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. It was right in the trajectory, and it... *was* tough enough.”

“Why the pause and why the ‘was’?”

“Hmm... Well, this is all scrap from the machine I broke. Maybe it wouldn’t have lasted if I’d used just a little bit less...”

I said nothing and just thought, *So she’s basically saying that if the scrap had been only a little more weathered, we wouldn’t have made it.*

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I can just dodge it,” she said.

“But... then I would be dead, right?”

“...That’s part of traini—”

“Stop that.”

As we continued the nonsensical analysis of the situation, I noticed something at the edge of my monitor.

It was one of the Huang Heian mafia members. He was preparing to fire more combat magic at Blue Opera.

The unit was lightly-armored, so he probably thought that it could be disabled with a well-aimed surprise attack. He launched his spell before I could say anything...

“And just so you know, apparently, Embryos grow-up more powerful if you die a couple times.”

...while my teach just continued her speech.

His spell headed straight for her back, but my teach avoided it by simply tilting her unit. It didn’t even affect the flow of conversation.

“Eh?” the mafia member said.

He probably didn’t understand what had just happened. It was as if my teach had eyes on her back... or some other mysterious sense.

She was capable of that.

I was pretty sure that no one could land a surprise attack on her. Before her Superior Embryo, traps, sneak attacks, gambling cheats... all dangers were rendered powerless.

“Teach...” I began.

“Yeah. I guess we should start the battle. We don’t want the one with the orb to escape.”

As she spoke, she materialized two rifles in midair — probably using Instant Release — then grabbed them with her Blue Opera.

"...! Fire!" a mafia member shouted.

They all began attacking us all at once.

A rain of combat magic fell on both Opera and Rose, but it didn't have the effect the casters were intending.

My teach's Opera repeated the previous feat and dodged every single one of the spells.

Her Magingear was on the smaller side, but still much larger than a human, and yet it didn't even get scratched.

My Rose, on the other hand, couldn't dodge at all, so every single attack heading my way landed.

Still, the petal-like layers of armor created a white light that blocked off all combat magic.

It seemed like we were demonstrating the difference and viability of AGI and END-focused builds.

If not that, then we were showing them the power of the most expensive and strongest Magingears built by Dryfe's largest clan.

Of course, it was worth noting that while my teach was dodging using her skill, I was surviving using nothing but the power of my unit's gear.

"You're bad at dodging," said Cyco. "Your sister probably knew that."

Probably, I thought.

If you looked at this and one other feature it had, you would truly understand that Rose really had been made for me.

It seemed like proof that Francesca knew me well.

I should write to her soon, I thought. *I'll mention that I met my teach, too.*

My thoughts were cut off by my teach saying, "Hmm... What to dooo?"

"Teach?"

"Hey, I'd like to go look for the orb. Can I leave these to you?"

"Hm..." I closed my eyes and thought.

Not so long ago, I'd exterminated almost every member of the Gouz-Maise Gang.

That was enough to believe that I could do it.

But was it something I was okay with doing? I'd absolutely had to get rid of the Gouz-Maise Gang, but what about this mafia...?

"Just so you know, I looked Mirage up, and their Caldinian branch engages in murder, burglary, gang violence, drug trade, kidnapping, and slave trade. Though the latter half is legal if you've got the money!"

"...It's like you read my mind," I muttered.

Like a certain silverhead...

Anyway, I now understood how it was and was ready to do it.

"Let me handle this by myself," I told her.

"Sure thing," my teach replied. "I'll go look for the orb."

She moved her Opera and activated the ancient legendary MVP special reward on its back: Skycontrol Wings, Aircluster.

A moment later, Opera vanished, leaving behind no trace of it besides the echo of a thunderous, destructive sound.

I looked at the wall and saw a hole large enough for Blue Opera to fly through. I could've sworn it hadn't been there before.

So the one with the orb is already outside, I reflected. "Anyway..."

With Opera gone, all the attacks were now focused on Rose.

Even so, they couldn't even scratch its white armor.

The mafia members were looking at my unit with pure fear in their eyes.

They must've thought that it was indestructible.

I, on the other hand, didn't feel the least bit safe or secure.

"It's a real MP hog," I muttered. "I won't last more than five minutes like this."

"Yeah," Cyco agreed.

Rose's multi-layered armor, Fleur d'Hiver, was designed with the Shield Giant's Thousand Shutter skill in mind, and it created a barrier that blocked off a certain amount of damage.

It could deal with combat magic from low-rank tians with no Embryo stat growth bonuses without me having to lift a finger, but keeping it up cost a lot of MP.

And that was only when I wasn't doing anything else. If I started using other skills or engaging in complex maneuvers, my MP would downright melt.

MP Potions couldn't keep up with me, either, so I had to make sure this battle didn't drag on.

"What's the count on them, Cyco?" I asked.

"Twenty on average."

Our main weapon, La Porte de l'Enfer, was based on the number of creatures of their own type the enemies had killed.

Twenty wasn't a good number for it to be effective.

The battle would surely last long if we relied on it, so we wouldn't use it this time.

"What about Deuxième?" I asked.

"That should work, I think."

Then let's use it.

"Okay, time for high-rank Cocytus to make her debut!" Cyco declared.

"Indeed. Let us decorate this sand-covered oasis with the flower of abyssal ice."

"Oh? I guess your edgy phase didn't go anywhere, huh?"

"...Shut up."

Blushing due to the words that'd escaped my lips, I prepared to fight.

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Hermine the City of Gambling, outskirts

The leader of Mirage's Caldina branch, Zhang, was standing on the sand all by himself.

Hermine had been built around an Oasis, but everything outside it was just desert. Once the blue and white units had appeared in the gambling den, he'd left and run all the way here. He wasn't just making off with the orb, however.

"There she is!" He looked up at the sky and saw one of the units, Blue Opera, descending nearby with a high-pitched song. "That hunk of metal sure is loud. Doesn't she know that it's night?"

The Magingear descended, but didn't attack. The pilot seemed to be worried that she would break the Treasurebeast Orb.

AR-I-CA's goal was to retrieve the orb, and killing the UBM inside was merely a relief measure in case it broke.

That was why AR-I-CA tried talking to Zhang first.

"Evening! I'm guessing you're the Mirage member with the orb."

"Indeed I am," Zhang said. "I'm impressed you found me."

"I've got this radar here. It's a special reward, and I just followed the person with the highest level."

"I see," he sighed as he realized that escape wasn't an option.

"Anyway, you didn't give me the orb or run any farther, and instead you just stopped here in the middle of nowhere. Does that mean what I think it does?"

"Yes," Zhang said as he turned his hands around, revealing dozens of Fu talismans. "I realized that battle with you was inevitable and prepared myself for it. That's why I changed location." Indeed. He hadn't gone to the desert to escape; he'd been waiting for AR-I-CA so that he could face her.

"If I went all out in there, I'd end up killing my subordinates!" he shouted as he spread his arms.

A moment later, five pillars of sand rose behind him, revealing five long silhouettes.

The things that popped out appeared much like the local worms, but there was something different about them.

"I'm the head of Mirage's Caldina branch, Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi! My nickname is 'Wuxing Jilong,' and I will use the five great jiangshis that gave me this name to destroy you!"

"Wuxing Jilong" translated to "Penta-Ravenous Dragon," and that was exactly what these creatures were.

Their eyes were completely lifeless, and each of them had a Fu on their face.

They were simultaneously Dragons and Jiangshi, and for some reason, they were covered in lightning.

"Oh? So you have a Superior Job. Great Soul Daoshi is basically Huang He's King of Tartarus, right?" AR-I-CA asked. "You're not exactly that similar, though."

The soul daoshi grouping was the Eastern equivalent of the West's necromancer grouping. Thus, the Jiangshis they were dealing with counted as undead.

Still, they were creatures controlled by Fu, and despite the similarities, they weren't much like the Jiangshi job.

"You took some upper-level Pure-Dragons, enhanced them by turning them into Jiangshi, and now you're enhancing them with the orb, too, huh...? Now, that is strong."

AR-I-CA already understood the details and extent of his power, and even though she saw him as strong, she remained cheerful.

“But I guess this is better than hunting down each member one by one.”

In fact, she was downright ecstatic.

“I mean, what’s the point of a mech fight if you’re not up against someone strong?!”

Yes, the battle she was about to have was already making her genuinely happy.

“Anyway, thanks for the answer! A thumbs-up to your courage!”

AR-I-CA raised Opera’s right thumb in the same way she always raised her own.

Then she turned the hand, making the thumb face down.

It was a sign of killing intent.

“...And goodbye.”

“Prepare yourself!” Zhang shouted.

With the great desert of Caldina as the stage, the battle between the Blue Sky Songstress and Wuxing Jilong began.

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High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

“We’re done,” I said as I confirmed that the members of Mirage here were defeated.

We had done it in less than two minutes. The casters were all partially or completely Frozen.

“Great, huh?” Cyco spoke up. “That was so super easy, huh? Boring, huh?”

“Could you at least not call it ‘boring’?” I couldn’t deny that it had been super easy, though.

I’d taken all of them out with a single skill.

“At least we now know that La Porte de l’Enfer Deuxième works in battle,” I said.

That was the skill Cyco had gained upon advancing to her fourth form.

Like the name implied, it was an upgrade... or more like a sidegrade... to La Porte de l’Enfer.

Its effects were exactly the same as that of the first, but the formula was different.

The original La Porte de l’Enfer gave an X% chance to Freeze X% of the selected target's body every 13 seconds, where X was the number on the target's kill counter for the same creature type as the target.

La Porte de l'Enfer Deuxième, on the other hand, simply Froze X% of my targets' bodies, where X had the formula of "Damage received from target (includes negated damage) × amount of own creature type killed ÷ HP of the in-range target."

Basically, it meant that someone who'd dealt 1,000 damage to my Magingear, killed 20 people, and had 1,000 HP would have 1,000 × 20 ÷ 1,000 = 20 percent of their body frozen.

With 2,000 damage, that would be 40 percent.

It could only work if I received damage from my target, but it was much less picky than the original La Porte de l'Enfer. There was no luck factor, either.

The evolution had happened after Francesca's gift of the Rose, and that was probably why it was so endurance-focused.

Besides that, this skill...

"It's so obviously made with Nemesis' Vengeance in mind," said Cyco.

"...Yeah," I nodded.

I couldn't say whether it was the moment he'd defeated me in Gideon or just the way he acted in general, but Ray had clearly influenced me and the way my Embryo had evolved. Deuxième was an actual counter skill.

"Anyway, my work here is done," I said.

Considering the noise we'd made, the Caldinian military police would come soon. The mafia members couldn't move, so I could just leave them here and go to my teach. After making Cyco cancel the merge with Rose, I returned the equipment I'd used.

"I've gotta say," said Cyco.

"What?"

"Battle Mode II didn't get to do a lot, huh?"

"It eats a lot of MP, so I don't wanna use it too much."

I was done with my role for now. The rest was up to my teach, but she probably wouldn't have any problems.

In fact, I didn't know anyone who would be a worse opponent to have than her.

I could confidently say that *not even the King of Destruction could beat her*.

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Hermine the City of Gambling, outskirts, sky

Lightning cracked the darkness above the desert.

Normally, these cloudless, dry, barren lands were no place for such phenomena, but at this moment, the skies above were decorated by five lightning-clad, serpentine Dragons — specifically, High Dragon Jiangshi.

They twisted and twirled in a seemingly random but definitely organized manner, chasing after the shadow of the slender unit, AR-I-CA's Blue Opera.

The five corpse-dragons spewed fire, ice, wind, petrification, and curse breaths, but the unit dodged them all.

"You're from a country that has these dragons as a symbol, aren't ya?" AR-I-CA asked. "Pretty messed to make them into Jiangshi, doncha think?"

"Perhaps that is the reason why I was tasked to work in Caldina," her opponent replied.

"Good point."

The one commanding the five lightning-clad dragons was Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi.

He was riding one of them, but the lightning wasn't shocking him, nor was it burning the Fu on the High Dragon Jiangshi's forehead.

Despite that, the electricity surrounding them burned and melted all the shells fired by Blue Opera.

This was done by the Treasurebeast Orb in Zhang's hand. It sealed the UBM called "Thundershield Beast, Dangai," which was said to fight using lightning armor. Despite centuries of imprisonment, its power hadn't faded.

"Wow, that's just unfair," said AR-I-CA. "That's some broken loot."

"Be silent. You're in no position to call anyone unfair."

Despite the immense power he wielded, Zhang didn't feel like he had the upper hand. While the lightning rejected all the attacks heading his way, none of his dragons' attacks were landing on Blue Opera.

Even when he calculated its trajectory and fired where it would be a moment later, it kept dodging in a 90 degree angle, seemingly ignoring aerodynamics and the law of inertia.

This was due to the special reward on Blue Opera's back: Skycontrol Wings, Aircluster.

It was the remains of an UBM that had appeared here in Caldina, often described as an "unidentified flying object." The item came with the item skills "Inertia Control" and "Air Canopy." The former did exactly what it said in the name, while the latter allowed manipulation of air resistance. Combined, they let Blue Opera fly in trajectories that ought to be impossible.

"It seems like we're on equal footing," said Zhang.

Both he and AR-I-CA only had one UBM power they could use in this battle. AR-I-CA had her radar, too, but it was useless to her right now.

Though Zhang's UBM power was leaning towards endurance and AR-I-CA's was focused on speed, they were more or less evenly matched. Zhang's attacks couldn't hit Opera, while AR-I-CA's shells couldn't break through the lightning barrier.

If I hadn't had Dangai, this battle might've been over already, Zhang thought, impressed by just how accurate AR-I-CA's shells were.

Nevertheless, as things were, he was right that they were on equal footing. It was a stalemate neither of them could easily break.

Thus, Zhang predicted three outcomes to this: it could either become a struggle for who would run out of MP first, AR-I-CA could use some sure-kill attack that could break through the lightning barrier, or Zhang's attacks could somehow hit Opera.

He obviously wanted it to be the third one.

"I'm not losing sight of her, anyway," he muttered to himself.

Blue Opera's dark colors melted into the night sky as it moved quickly and erratically, yet Zhang always knew exactly where it was.

It wasn't his own ability, but a certain feature on the unit — specifically, its engine sound.

The high, song-like roars filled the entire battlefield, making it easy to tell exactly where it was.

It could go to Zhang's side or behind him, but he would track it down like a cat with a bell on its neck.

At first, Zhang believed that the sound would be used for some kind of bluffing tactic, but he now realized that that wasn't the case.

This unit would make this sound whether AR-I-CA wanted it to or not.

The engine sound was a flaw Blue Opera had had since its creation.

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Blue Opera was a defective unit.

Specifically, there was an issue with its core magic-exchange engine.

Most Dryfean machines operated by transforming the user’s MP into power.

Therefore, one of the most desirable features on them were engines that could transform MP to power with great efficiency and not take too much space on the unit.

Blue Opera’s engine was perfect in that regard.

It had efficiency incomparable to other Magingear engines and was small enough to install on a motorbike.

Its creation was accidental, so it was difficult to recreate it, but it was still perfect for its intended purpose.

At least, if you ignored the extremely loud sound it made while active.

It was so loud, in fact, that it couldn’t be used in normal battles, let alone covert operations.

Once active, it would give away the unit’s location to even the farthest enemies, leaving it open to ranged attacks and skills of all kinds.

Naturally, Franklin, its creator, tried to solve this problem using silencers and many other things, but strangely enough, the more of these he installed, the less effective the engine became.

It was as though it itself *wanted* to be loud — to sing to the world.

“I’m not dealin’ with a Tenchi-esque karakuri or a Legendarian spirit doll here...” he muttered. “Why’s this engine such a weirdo?”

Eventually, Franklin just gave up on it.

There was no way you could make a decent Magingear with an engine like this. It would stand out so much that it would be shot down immediately.

Thus, Franklin considered sealing it away in the warehouse until he had the technology to properly analyze it, but AR-I-CA, who watched him work, said, “Who cares if it stands out? Just don’t get hit!”

His friend’s words made Franklin’s eyes widen. Then he smiled and thought, *Yeah, you could pull that off.*

Though the focus on speed contradicted its immense presence, Franklin felt that it suited AR-I-CA well, so he took to creating the first MGFX — a unit he spared no expense on.

Thus, MGFX-001 was born. Combined with AR-I-CA's piloting skill, it became the only Magingear that could move on the surface faster than the speed of sound.

And the Aircluster it had now made it even more mobile than ever. Blue Opera was the fastest, loudest unit, entrusted to AR-I-CA by her dear friend.

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Blue Opera flew through the night sky, singing all the way through.

The five corpse dragons attacked it over and other, but none of their breaths even touched it.

It danced in the air as if playing with them like a sylph.

Why can't I hit her? Zhang wondered.

As far as he knew, no matter how well-equipped, Magingears could never go beyond Pure-Dragon-tier.

Of course, this one was piloted by The Ace, who surely had the maximum level in Piloting, making it twice as powerful as usual, if not even more than that.

However, Zhang's five High Dragon Jiangshi were all upper-Pure-Dragons enhanced even further.

There should've been no difference between each of them and AR-I-CA's Blue Opera, and it was 5v1, at that.

Even so, they were on equal footing.

It should be equal... wait, no! Zhang realized.

The Ace and the Great Soul Daoshi.

Air Cluster and Dangai.

Blue Opera and five High Dragon Jiangshi.

Those factors alone made them seem equal, but there was one factor that couldn't be ignored.

While Zhang matched her on those fronts, he couldn't forget that this was a battle between a Superior Master and a tian.

"Gh...!" Zhang used all five of his dragons, enhanced himself with Fu, and launched a perfect surprise attack on AR-I-CA.

Even so, she evaded it.

He couldn't believe that he had failed to even scratch it.

Zhang knew full well that The Ace, AR-I-CA was the greatest pilot in the world, and that her Magingear was the only one that could move faster than the speed of sound.

However, skill and speed alone couldn't explain this result. There had to be something more to AR-I-CA.

"It can't be..." Zhang muttered as a thought came to mind.

He quickly used one of the aces up his sleeve.

Following Opera's sound, he made the High Dragon Jiangshi closest to her prepare to fire its breath, saying, "Death Tornado."

That activated the Fu inside the dragon, making its stomach area release a powerful magic attack. It was a surprise attack that was coming from a place that normally wouldn't be used for attacks.

No one could expect it, and normally, it couldn't miss.

However...

"Whoa!" The Ace evaded it with little effort, and just like the others, it ended up not even scratching her before it faded.

Zhang didn't say a word as the corpse dragon's stomach burst and it fell to the ground, paying the price for its attack.

One of his namesakes had just died a useless death, but Zhang couldn't even care about that.

All that was on his mind was the answer to the phenomenon that'd just happened: the reason behind her ability to dodge a complete surprise attack.

The nature of AR-I-CA's power was...

"She can see the future?"

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Some jobs had the skill called "Prophecy," which let the user give vague predictions for the distant future.

There were sense skills that could sharpen people's senses for incoming dangers, such as Killing Intent Perception, which informed the user of nearby hostiles, and Danger Sense, which did the same for danger in general.

However, there were no skills that gave you a detailed understanding of the future, and the same applied to Embryo skills.

In fact, though they gave Masters access to powers far outside the norm, when you looked at it as an MMORPG, *Infinite Dendrogram* had some abilities that were thought to be impossible even for Embryos.

One of them was time stopping. Since the world of *Dendro* hosted so many people at the same time, stopping time for all of them at once was considered too great of a feat for a single person. The closest you could get to time-stopping was raising your AGI so high that it looked like other people weren't even moving.

Besides that, there was Master mind control. While this didn't apply to tians, players' minds were immune to all kinds of control. It *was* possible to control their bodies, though, and it was thought that the mind immunity was due to the player protection system.

Then there was future-sight. It was also considered impossible for one reason: Masters.

A certain ludo Master once said, "When you look at *Infinite Dendrogram* as an MMORPG, everything can be predicted because everything acts based on programming. However, players aren't programs. You don't know what's on their mind and how they'll act, and that creates a map with countless possible futures. That's why it's impossible to see which one of them is right."

This Master wasn't wrong about how the future could easily be changed by the will of the people. It wasn't something that could be calculated.

But there was an exception to this, and that was an Embryo that saw the future by looking into the hearts of people, Masters included.

Whether it was to protect their privacy, or just a functional limitation, this Embryo wasn't actually able to tell its Master what others were thinking.

However, it calculated everything.

It turned others' thoughts into masked data and calculated every relevant factor, inside or out.

Temperature, wind speed, geothermal heat, gravitational pull, all the artificial physical states... nothing wasn't considered.

Not even the thoughts of those nearby escaped it.

It calculated everything and delivered it to its Master as "danger," letting her see what would imperil her a few seconds ahead and evade it easily.

That was The Ace, AR-I-CA's Superior Embryo: Transcendental Calculator, Cassandra.

It was currently the only Superior Embryo that could see the future.

It took the shape of AR-I-CA's artificial eye, and its unique skill, Calamity Princess's Prophecy, was basically in the same vein as Killing Intent Perception and Danger Sense.

However, it was on a whole 'nother level.

Cassandra not only knew there was danger — it saw what it was.

It saw the trajectories of all the attacks that could touch Opera's frame, the air movements the attacks would make, the scattered rocks that would fly in their path when a stray shot hit the ground... Cassandra saw all the dangers several seconds before they happened.

It could be a skill like La Porte de l'Enfer, which was sure to kill anyone who didn't know about it, or a surprise attack that wasn't telegraphed at all... nothing could escape its gaze.

And Cassandra's Master wielded this power well.

Back when AR-I-CA was riding Geists or slow Marshall IIs, the machines couldn't keep up with Cassandra's predictions. But all of that changed once AR-I-CA got the supersonic unit that was Blue Opera.

She saw all and dodged all — the power of absolute evasion.

That was *half* of the reason why she was a renowned battle-focused Master.

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"Prescience..." muttered Zhang. "I guess I should assume that you can read all my moves."

Zhang had lots of battle experience, but someone with such a power was new even to him.

"But that's it — I simply didn't know something like this."

Not having experienced something before wasn't enough for him to deny it when it was happening before his very eyes. That was the right thing to think.

He also pondered, *How far can she see?*

If AR-I-CA could see everything to the end of this battle, Zhang had no chance.

But he knew that that wasn't the case.

If she could see that much, she could've handled this a lot better.

For example, she could've captured the person who'd delivered the orb to Zhang before it reached him, or handled herself better at the gambling den.

Because of that, he believed that she could only see a few seconds ahead. If she could see further ahead, this battle would be over already.

He was right about that, too.

That means I must lead her into a situation where she can't evade my attack, even if she had a few seconds to do it, Zhang reflected. He had an ace up his sleeve that could do that.

Not saying a word, Zhang looked at all his dragons — even the one that was lying on the ground.

This is your final mission... Go.

Following Zhang's will, the three airborne corpse dragons created space between them and began flying about as though to surround Blue Opera.

However, the space between them was so great that none of their breaths could reach her.

"Hmm...? Ohh, I get it," AR-I-CA said, and suddenly, something changed.

First, the corpse dragon that had fallen to the ground exploded, releasing countless Fu.

The three surrounding AR-I-CA did exactly the same, multiplying the amount of Fu several times.

The Fu began whirling, creating a cage around Blue Opera... or a hurricane with it as the eye.

The spaces between the Fu were wide, but still too small for the Magingear to pass.

The Fu gradually closed the distance, creating a giant, orb-shaped cage around Blue Opera.

Each Fu had enough power to keep Blue Opera inside the cage, effectively making that cage into a coffin.

It was the sign that the Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi, was about to release his strongest magic.

It was called...

"Zhenwo Zhendao, Xuanlongba!"

The skill translated to “True Vortex True Blade, Whirling Dragon Dominance,” and it punished its targets using all the powerful wind-blades inside.

It cost all the Fu flying around, and it was equal in tier to the Baolongba that the famous Xunyu had used in The Clash of the Superiors.

He had to sacrifice all four of the corpse dragons he had left.

And Blue Opera was definitely within its range...

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The battle’s outcome was decided the moment Blue Opera was caught in Xuanlongba.

It was an immensely powerful skill which had more than enough power to quickly reduce the unit to scrap.

Even if AR-I-CA currently had a Lifesaving Brooch, her Magingear wouldn’t survive the continuous onslaught.

AR-I-CA’s defeat would be certain.

The battle would soon end.

The present painted an image of a future where Zhang won...

“The Calamity Princess Closes Her Eyes — Cassandra!”

...only to take it away the very next moment.

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Zhang didn’t understand.

Experienced as he was, Zhang had been able to expose the nature of many of AR-I-CA’s abilities.

However, he couldn’t even begin to understand what was happening before him right now.

Blue Opera had left the deadly storm as if it was nothing, then fired off shells that easily broke through the lightning barrier and pierced the forehead and Fu of the corpse dragon Zhang was riding.

The Fu was the thing supporting its fleeting life, and without it, it ceased all function and began falling to the ground.

The shells then blew off Zhang’s right arm, which Blue Opera then reached for to retrieve the orb it was holding.

The unit then showered the falling dragon in countless metal cans — Grenade Bombs.

Flames soon engulfed both the half-dead Zhang and his last dragon.

Unable to understand what had led to his defeat, Zhang fell to the sand below, concluding the battle in the desert.

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High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

It was the day after the incident with Mirage.

After logging out and taking a nap, I returned to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Normally, I would just sleep in here, but I couldn't have done that after what'd happened yesterday.

There might have been Mirage remnants who'd assassinate me or steal my inventory and unit, and that wouldn't have been funny.

Anyway, as strange as that seemed, Hermine looked exactly the same as it had yesterday.

One of the underground organizations that had made a nest in the city was gone, but things were continuing on, as always.

Perhaps events like yesterday's aren't uncommon here, I thought.

As a result of the chaos, all members of Mirage's Caldina branch had been arrested.

Like my teach had said, they'd accumulated many sins to their name, but I wasn't sure if they would really be punished, since I'd heard that Caldina would forgive anything as long as you had the money.

But my teach had said that they couldn't pay their sins off in this case.

"Sure, money can bend the law in Caldina. That's why people trade illegal goods all the time here. But listen here, Yu: the sin of endangering or taking the life of another person isn't cheap. You can try to pay it off by working your ass off your whole life, but even that wouldn't be enough."

That was her reason for thinking that Mirage would be properly punished.

"Of course, two of the three worst people I know are dumbasses who go against that, too," she'd added.

Anyway, I was glad to find out that even this "money is everything" country had some level of morality.

Also, Zhang, the head of Mirage's Caldinian branch, was considered missing.

My teach had said, "I'm totally sure I beat him, but I don't know what's become of him. I'd say that there's a 70 percent chance that he's alive."

I was guessing that, in my teach's mind, the battle had ended the moment he was defeated and she'd taken the orb from him.

Pushing yesterday's events aside... I was now waiting to meet up with my teach. We'd agreed to rendezvous in the hotel's lobby at nine in the morning.

It was ten now.

"She's a whole hour late," I mumbled.

"She should have more respect for time," Cyco commented.

She tends to be late, and is generally carefree. Is that due to her being an Italian? I wondered. *But now that I think about it, neither Francesca nor I act very... French. I guess stereotypes have nothing against the individual.*

"Ah. She's here," said Cyco.

"Finally... Wait, ehhh?"

My teach was showing up an hour and ten minutes past the time we'd agreed on.

Not only was she awfully late, she was accompanied by a vaguely familiar woman.

My teach had her hand around her waist, and she even kissed her as they parted.

"Last night was amazing..." said the girl.

"It really was. I'll never forget it for as long as I live. Your cuteness will stay with me forever."

With that, the two split apart.

I suddenly remembered that the woman was the lady my teach had been eyeing back in the gambling den. Apparently, she'd gone on to court her and do the you-know-what.

I'm not sure I know "what," I added silently. *I'm only fifteen.*

"Kept ya waitin', huh?" my teach said, coming over. "Nice morning we're having. I'm still a bit sleepy, though."

"I'm not gonna say anything about your way of life, but can you at least come on time?" I asked.

"Sorry 'bout that. I got a little carried away last night. Oh, I just remembered the innocence on her face... She was the best!”

Really, now?

“I hope you die,” Cyco and I said in unison.

“You’re gonna be in sync for *that*?!”

According to my teach, the orb had been given to a transporter before the end of yesterday.

Since it was a barrier-like thing that couldn’t be placed in inventories, I’d wondered how they’d handle transportation, so I was glad to hear that.

I also asked about something that had me curious.

“We crushed Mirage’s Caldinian branch. Won’t that make us a target of the entire organization?”

It was a famous underground entity, after all, and I didn’t want to have to worry about them all the time.

Some people could easily handle being their targets, but we were Pilots, which meant that we were fragile without our Magingears.

“I don’t think you’ve gotta worry about them,” my teach said.

“Why not?”

“You’ll know when you read today’s evening newspaper.”

“Hm?”

Had something article-worthy happened?

Well, no matter what, we’d finished retrieving the orb here in Hermine. Even though I hadn’t even known my teach was doing something like this.

I’d been thrown into an international problem concerning a national treasure without any warning, and that was... draining, to put it lightly.

Honestly, I wouldn’t want to take part in something like this even if I was fully-informed.

“I’m glad we were able to get the orb without too much trouble,” I said.

“Yep! Time to get back to training as we go for the next one!”

Training... I wonder what she’ll make me do now, I thought. *I’ve almost maxed out High Pilot, so it’s almost time to change... jobs... Hm?*

“Next one?” I asked.

“Yeah. Didn’t I tell you?” she said as she raised seven fingers. “There’s a whole seven of these stolen Huang He orbs.”

Seven, huh? I see. I see...

“We’ll have to do this six more times?!” I shouted.

“Yeah! Let’s do our best, Yu!”

I could hear my body turn limp.

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Hello, Francesca.

I hope you are well.

I went through some things that made me feel like I'm about to die inside.

It looks like I won't be making it to Tenchi for a long time.

I'm broadening my horizons, but maybe not in ways I ever wanted.

Why am I getting involved in Huang He and Caldina's national problems right after leaving Dryfe? Was this how you felt when you were traveling across the Earth?

I feel like I just heard you say, "No way, damn it!"

It must've been my imagination.

I'm pretty tired, so I'm leaving it at that for now.

I'll write again if something happens.

Also, let's talk a lot when I return to Dryfe someday.

I hope my journey is one that gives me more good stories to tell than complaints.

Until next time,

Yuri Gautier

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Huang He, a certain place in the draconic capital, underground

The space was under a building of a company that was large even by the draconic capital's standards.

It was a place of proper business, too, but its — Mirage's — true nature was in its underground.

In the space, there was a U-shaped table, surrounded by eight men and women of various ages.

"And everything is going as planned, I presume?" one woman asked.

"Yes. Of course, milady."

One was the head of the Huang He branch.

One was the contraband supervisor.

One was the slave trade supervisor.

One was the intelligence supervisor.

And finally, there was The Fang, the SJ working as the assassin supervisor.

They were all part of Mirage, and they all had an extremely important role in the organization.

At the end of the U-shaped table, there was a platform with a chair placed as high as a person.

On it, there was a young girl who was looking down at the rest. She was clad in robes you'd expect to see on Huang He's imperial family.

The girl wasn't there by mistake.

"Excellent. Once the clan in question begins cooperating with us, Huang He will return to me — its rightful ruler," she said.

Her name was Hualong.

She was the current head of Mirage, and had only risen to the role about a month ago.

She was the only gulong ren besides the current imperial family.

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Gulong ren — ancient dragon kin — were the descendants of half-breeds born between ancient dragons and mankind.

They ruled Huang He as the imperial family, looking after its people as themselves, emperors, or the famed Draconic Emperors.

However, there was one time when the gulong ren had fought amongst themselves.

It was the civil war that had come after the Draconic Emperor before the previous one and the emperor had both died within a span of just a few years.

The gulong ren had been split in two groups, fighting a battle which would only end when the child of the late emperor — which one side claimed had the right to the imperial throne — was born as the Draconic Emperor, who couldn't simultaneously be both.

However, there was one problem: the gulong ren faction that had supported the child then attempted to assassinate the emperor.

The child they'd pushed had no right to the throne, but they believed their faction could still win if they got rid of the emperor.

With that foolish thought, they tried to kill the new ruler.

But their plot was exposed before it could happen.

The one who revealed it wasn't anyone from the new emperor's faction, but someone who didn't even belong to Huang He: it was The Lynx.

No one knew what the rival of the late Draconic Emperor was thinking when he did this, but the result was clear — the assassination didn't happen, and all those who were planning it were executed.

However, there was one person who'd avoided death.

It was a young girl — the person the assassins had wanted to make the empress.

She was little, so people assumed that she'd known nothing of the plot, and thus she was the only one of the faction who avoided execution.

Or perhaps the emperor simply hadn't wanted to kill a child.

Regardless, someone related to the assassination plot had no place in the imperial court. Because of that, the child was merely banished.

Some worried that she could spread gulong ren blood to the outside and that killing her was the better option, while others believed that the optimal course of action was locking her up until she died, but the emperor rejected those ideas and simply banished her.

Respecting a child's life was obviously the kind choice, but it became a source of woe for Huang He.

Over the years thereafter, the girl became a prominent figure in Huang He's underground society.

She was a gulong ren, after all. You couldn't judge her capabilities by human standards.

Thus, it was clear that she would become a skilled fighter. That might have even been the reason why the emperor had exiled her — he'd known she could make it on her own. Still, he probably hadn't expected her to join the underground society.

Anyway, by the time she was an adult, she had great wealth, many subordinates, and something you could call an organization.

Its name was "Mirage."

Indeed, at the center of the infamous Huang Heian mafia, there was an exiled gulong ren.

The name of the mafia was actually the name for her hideout, a reference to it being an illusion compared to the palace she rightfully belonged in.

We won't get there in my generation, she would think as she watched Mirage's progress.

"There" referred to the imperial throne.

Indeed... she was living on while carrying on the will of the would-be assassins from her younger years.

She planned to exterminate the current imperial family and rise to the top.

It wasn't that she hadn't known anything — people had simply thought she hadn't.

And she was still thinking of killing the emperor and becoming the empress herself.

"It will take us a few generations to grow large enough," she murmured with dissatisfaction.

No matter how quickly Mirage expanded, it would never be able to fight Huang He in her generation.

Thus, she entrusted the plot to her descendants, essentially turning Mirage into a mafia.

Several centuries had passed since then.

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"Everyone, the time has come." Seated in her throne-like chair, the current head of Mirage, Hualong, spoke to her people.

Another thing of note about her was her name. The "long" in it, which meant dragon, was actually only allowed on men born into the imperial family, so her having it was just another show of defiance towards the current rulers. All the heads of Mirage had done this.

"Recently, the inner treasury, which had been sealed for centuries, was opened, and one of the orbs ended up in our hands. With it, we were able to secure the strongest reinforcements. The heavens themselves are telling us that now is the time to act."

Many would consider that to be a mere coincidence, but the girl was certain that this was their greatest opportunity yet. Her family had been waiting to take the throne for centuries.

“The battle to decide the true emperor draws near!” she declared. “That is when the Mirage will become the reality!”

Thus, she was drawing a picture of the future she desired. The moment that her family would have their revenge for the pain they’d experienced... which was arguably well-deserved.

They would start a coup d’état and take the imperial throne for themselves.

It wouldn’t be legitimate, of course.

The people had no issues with the current imperial family, and their chances of success were low.

However, Hualong thought she could keep them under control if she simply had the power to do so.

At the moment, half of Huang He’s Superiors were outside the country. Thus, if the clan she had in mind, which was said to be one of the best, came here and helped, they should be able to overthrow this country.

At least, that was what Hualong believed.

It was easy to call her idea foolish. In fact, one might even ask her how she’d come to that conclusion. However, she’d ascended to Mirage’s throne while she was still young. Her predecessor had died prematurely and left her without the knowledge necessary to lead this organization.

She’d also been taught about her family’s history and the power of Mirage for as long as she could remember, so her conclusion was the only one she deemed possible.

“Heh heh heh,” she snickered. “I can’t wait.”

The responses of Mirage’s leadership were varied.

“I guess we’ll soon be ministers.”

“I would be fine with just handling money.”

“So, who do I gotta kill?”

Some were thinking the exact same thing as Hualong.

Some were certain of her failure and were thinking about how to survive.

Some were simply trying to do their roles regardless of Hualong’s ideals.

With even her most trusted people being this divided, it was natural to expect infighting, too. However, compared to the chaos that would befall the people soon, any infighting was nothing. They were about to repeat the civil war from three centuries ago — the greatest conflict in Huang He.

As they pictured the upcoming battle, a voice that didn't fit the scene reached their ears.

"Hello and good evening to all of you, my dear fooools!"

Hualong and her underlings looked at its source — the only entrance to this place.

A woman was standing there.

She was unbelievably beautiful.

If human beauty was like a work of art, hers would be a treasure that would be talked about for centuries, if not millennia. It was the golden ratio of beauty, pushing the very limits of human attractiveness. Her voice, too, was as pleasant as a feather tickling the earlobes. While beauty was in the eye of the beholder, hers would surely be considered perfect by many.

The people of Mirage were no strangers to beauty and pleasure, but even they were overwhelmed by her beauty.

However, those who kept their sanity felt something completely different.

"Fenghuang... Phoenix!"

"Dancing Princess, Huili!"

The experienced fighters on the scene shouted her name, bringing the ones bewitched by her beauty back to reality.

That was just how big of a deal her identity was.

"That's meee!" the woman called. "I'm Huili, the leader of Huili's Army of Fools!"

Huili Yuminjun or Huili's Army of Fools was the clan at the top of Huang He's clan rankings, anomalous in that every member there was a devotee of Huili, the Superior at the top.

No clan in Huang He matched their numbers or quality.

Hualong raised her voice from atop her false throne. "What do you want, Superior?!"

Huili wasn't shaken by her demeanor at all. "Oh my. Are you Mirage's young leader? Aren't you just the cutest little cutie pie. You're not as pretty as me, though."

"You wretch!" Hualong became angry at her behavior.

"Hey, hey, hey, by the way, listen up. You aren't gonna believe this, but..." Huili said, making Hualong even more angry. "The emperor requested that I come here and destroy Mirage!"

Those words made Hualong's anger instantly fade as she squeezed out a "Wh-What...?" "So yeah, here's how it is. Until now, he thought that Mirage was such a big deal that destroying it would be even worse than just leaving it, but with the whole orb thing, them getting outside the country, and that little coup you're planning, he decided that he couldn't ignore you anymore. The bad from leaving you is worse than the bad from destroying you."

She spoke like a little girl with limited intelligence, but her words had endless importance to Mirage, for they implied that Huang He knew about them having an orb, using it in a trade, and their coup.

All of these were top secret matters. The only ones who were supposed to know them were the high-ranking Mirage officials here. Not even the leader of the Caldinian branch had been told about it.

In fact, he hadn't even been told of the organization's ultimate goal. He was far too normal — unfit to take part in their ambition.

Regardless, the Mirage leaders present were now suspiciously eyeing each other. They wondered which one of them had leaked the information, but none of them seemed to have a clue.

There was no lie there; none of them had told anyone about this. Even those who'd considered betraying Mirage hadn't made a move yet.

"By the way, we got this info from the DIN," added Huili.

"Those damn paper salesmen!"

The DIN was an information organization with no borders. Mirage certainly hadn't anticipated them having and selling info about the plot of Huang He's most secretive group.

"Aaanywayyy, His Majesty's also giving us a good reward, so it's bye bye to Mirage!" All smiles, Huili eyed Hualong and her people. Her smile bewitched some of them, while terrorizing the rest.

They all understood that that smile meant nothing pleasant. It carried in it the will that could tear them apart.

"Ah. I'm sure you fighting types probably realized it already, but..."

Huili took out one of the two fans on her waist and used it to point at the ceiling.

"*...there's no one alive upstairs.*"

Mirage had had a total of over two hundred fighters on the surface and on the path leading here, and Huili was saying that they had all been dealt with.

One of the battle-focused Mirage officials and The Fang, who was in charge of security, already knew they were dead due to no one having come here to deal with Huili.

“Just how many did you bring?” Hualong demanded.

“No one. It’s just little darling me. You’d see me coming if I brought an army, and I made my Five Generals go crush all the other Mirage branches in Huang He.”

“What?!”

The Five Generals were the strongest members of Huili’s Army of Fools, which put them among the country’s strongest Masters, as evidenced by them taking ranks three to seven on Huang He’s duel rankings.

There were two reasons why the leaders here were shocked.

First was the fact that such powerful people had gone to crush the branches they were supposed to be in charge of, and the second was that Huili was capable of silently killing a whole two hundred of their fighters without her generals at her side.

“And that’s why Mirage is over,” Huili went on as she equipped two fans.

It was her Superior special reward of “Phoenix Wings, Suling Er.”

At that moment, one of the officials made a move. It was The Fang, who had a Superior Job focused on dagger use.

He had an AGI build, so he was able to move behind Huili at a supersonic speed and use the fang-like dagger in his hand to attack her neck...

...only to lose his head and both of his arms.

“Don’t touch my hands, okaaay?” the woman sang.

“...Eh?” Hualong voiced her confusion at The Fang’s vanished head and arms.

She knew him very well. He was her bodyguard and an assassin who’d sent many of her enemies to their graves.

She trusted him more than anyone else here, and he was now lying in a pool of his own blood, leaking from the places where his head and arms were supposed to start.

“Oh dear, I’m gonna get blood all over me. Maybe the head was enough?" Huili said as she made a troubled face.

In her hands, she held two bloody fans, making it obvious what happened — she'd killed The Fang using those as her weapon.

"I-It can't be..." Hualong panicked. "The Fang... He was our strongest..."

Her subordinates were shocked, too.

"N-No way... wait... but the Dancing Princess wasn't a vanguard..."

"She was *this* powerful? She wasn't at the top just because of her looks...?"

No one could blame them for being surprised.

As famous as Huili was, she wasn't known for her battle prowess.

It was widely believed that she was at the top of her clan only due to her supreme beauty, and that she only had a Superior special reward because her clan had played a big part in the battle against the SUBM.

That was the consensus among Huang He's tians. The fact that Dancing Princess was neither a vanguard nor a rear guard job played a part in that perception, too.

The belief about the Superior special reward was ridiculous, though, for the MVP had to be someone who'd contributed to the UBM battle directly, not through someone else.

But even then, no one could blame them, for it was hard to believe that someone this beautiful could be such a monster.

"The Fang, huh?" Huili muttered as she looked down at The Fang's corpse. "Hmm... do we have anyone who could take that job among my fools? It's a 'The One' job, though, so it'll probably be hard. Will I free up any more Superior Jobs after I take care of you all?"

She looked at the remaining officers as if evaluating them.

◆

On this day, Huili's Army of Fools and Huang He's military focused on completely destroying Mirage.

The info provided by the DIN was very clear, so they were able to eliminate all the Mirage bases in Huang He and the people working there.

They were all either killed or arrested.

The same applied to those in the main branch.

The two hundred fighters were either killed or captured, while out of the eight officials that'd gathered, three died, two committed suicide, and three gave themselves in.

And most importantly, Hualong was arrested.

After losing everything her family had worked for in but a blink of an eye, the girl looked as though all emotion had left her.

Thus, centuries of a grudge that had almost sparked a new civil war was cleaned up like the most insignificant triviality.

Then again, compared to what would eventually happen on this continent, it really *was* a triviality.

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A certain clan's info transmission

Time: March 28th, 6:32AM (Global Standard Time)

Notification: From Zeta to all I.F. members.

Report: Failed to retrieve Treasurebeast Orb containing Thundershield Beast, Dangai.

Reason: Destruction of the other party, Mirage.

Details:

The Caldinian branch was suppressed by The Ace and one other (no details available).

The main branch in Huang He was destroyed by Dancing Princess.

The other branches there were destroyed by Huili's Army of Fools and the military.

Addendum:

Dancing Princess isn't the only one making notable moves in Huang He. The emperor found out that other orbs had leaked to Caldina and ordered the Commander-in-Chief to go retrieve them.

Powerful people from Legendaria and Tenchi are moving towards Caldina, too.

It is unknown whether that is related to the current main subject, but the possibility cannot be ignored.

It appears that Caldina will soon host battles over the orbs.

It is unlikely that any faction will cooperate with any other.

Conclusion:

Just as planned. By giving six of the seven orbs I'd stolen to tian organizations which then took them from Huang He to Caldina, I successfully achieved the intended goal.

The info reached many people, making widespread chaos inevitable.

Next up:

We will focus on analyzing all the forces taking part in the battles for the orbs, starting with Caldina and Huang He.

I will also report this to our leader in the gaol.

Just as scheduled, I will play a role in the upcoming war between two countries on the west side of the continent.

The orb I have with me will be a good bargaining chip when trying to persuade someone to join us.

If possible, I will also try meeting the newbie infiltrating Gideon: Gerbera.

It appears that she is planning to do something we haven't accounted for, so I intend to question her.

Human affairs:

I entrust our Caldina operations to those who aren't wanted there.

Revision:

All of us are.

Designation:

I entrust it to Murder Princess, Emily.

Remarks:

I request that The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx support her.

Additionally, I have found someone of value in the desert. Entrusting him to my successor.

Caution:

Emily, keep your kill count for this case within three digits.

Episode Five: Predicament

April 5th, 2045, Prism Rider, Ray Starling

It was Wednesday. I was in a certain room in the Quartierlatin palace.

Two girls were facing each other, surrounded by crushing silence.

One was Azurite. She was staring — or more like glaring — at the other girl.

The other was B3, who was sweating profusely as she meekly sat on the floor.

These acquaintances of mine clearly weren't enjoying each other's presence.

It wasn't a nice comparison, considering the fact that they were girls, but it felt like I was watching a snake ready to swallow a frog.

Why is this happening? I wondered.

"You putting them in the same room is one of the reasons, I assume," Nemesis said telepathically.

I couldn't deny that at all.

I was partially responsible for this.

It had all begun an hour... or perhaps over a month... ago.

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After coming back from college, I logged in to *Dendro* and, just like yesterday, paid a visit to the adventurers' guild.

It was packed again, but Rising Sun secured a table and invited us over.

It was my first time talking to Blue Screen, and he apologized for shutting down Silver back in Torne.

"Sorry 'bout that," he said. "Gremlin's effects should be temporary, though. Did it work fine after that?"

"Yeah. It didn't change one bit," I told him. Silver had flown around during the Quartierlatin incident without a hitch.

Though he had done something weird when we'd fought the whale.

“Good thing it didn’t put you on another wanted list, eh, Blue?” Dum-Dum commented. “Dryfe’s is more than enough.”

“Never again on that crap,” Blue Screen replied.

He’s on Dryfe’s wanted list...? I thought.

“Umm... Can you expand on that...?” I asked.

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” said Blue Screen.

“I do,” grinned Dum-Dum. “Blue started out in Dryfe, and it happened sometime before the war, right about when his Gremlin got its ult. You know, the skill that fried your Prism Steed.”

Oh, that.

“He was in town, and he decided to try it out on one of his magic machines, but he didn’t know how to control it, and it had such a large AOE that it caused an electricity... magic(?)... whatever, *power* outage in the entire area. It even fried a bunch of state-owned machines. No one died, but he still got on the wanted list for terrorism.”

“Ohh...” I nodded in understanding.

“That does sound like something that can happen,” Nemesis commented.

Looking back at it, my Miasmaflame Bracer and Wind Hoof tests went pretty badly, too, I reflected. *I’ll make sure to do my other tests in safe environments.*

As we continued to chat...

“Ray, Nemesis... Sorry for the wait.”

“Hm? Well, if it isn’t B3,” said Nemesis.

“Eh? She’s here?” I said as I turned around and saw her.

She had told me that she would be heading to Quartierlatin, but man, was she fast.

“Egh?! Barbaroy...”

“Whoa!”

The two Rising Sun members — especially Blue Screen — seemed to be afraid of her.

“Oh? Well, if it isn’t the leader of Sol Crisis and the High Engineer I crushed first,” B3 said. “Why are you with Ray?”

Oh, so Blue Screen was the first Sol Crisis guy she killed? I can see why he’s afraid.

B3 started equipping a shield like it was no big deal. She was fully ready to crush them again.

To avoid standing out too much, she wasn't wearing her Magnum Colossus right now, but she wouldn't hesitate to use Instant Wear if it came down to it.

Blue Screen looked at me as if to say, "Dude, you said you'll back us, right?! C'mon!"

"I ran into them here in Quartierlatin," I said. "They apologized and we made up."

"I see," said B3. "It's all fine, then. I have nothing against that."

She quickly accepted the situation and put her shield away, and thus any unnecessary bloodshed was prevented.

B3 then told them she forgave them for using her name. According to her, she didn't mind that part at all, but as the ex-leader of Mad Castle, she couldn't stand the fact that the faker hadn't been at the top of Sol Crisis.

That clan had disbanded, and they were now Rising Sun, so B3 no longer had anything against forgiving them.

The two then went out on quests, leaving just B3, Nemesis, and me.

"You sure got here fast," I said. "I don't remember Altea being *this* close."

"My afternoon lectures for today were canceled," B3 replied. "And I had a good ride."

"You did?"

"Remember the car Embryo that Kashimiya and Rosa rode after Rosa attacked us while we were on our way to Torne? Its Master had nothing better to do, so she drove me here."

Oh, yeah, there was that armored car Embryo, I remembered. *If I recall correctly, its Master was "Tomika," similar to the line of toy cars. How fitting.*

"I had to pay her like she was some sort of taxi service. So I just took some from the money Rosa gave me," B3 added.

"I see."

Apparently, as self-punishment for what Rosa had done while Kashimiya was away, K&R wouldn't be doing any PKing for a while.

"Anyway, who did you want to introduce me to?" B3 asked.

"Oh, yeah." I'd already mentioned that there was someone I wanted her to meet. "Looking at the time... she should be in the Quartierlatin mansion."

“The mansion?” B3 asked. “Is it the countess?”

“You’ll know when you see her.”

B3 tilted her head in curiosity, but didn’t have anything against coming along.

So the three of us went to the countess’s mansion, creating the strange kind of hell before me.

◇

The silence continued to be crushing.

Once we’d entered the office Azurite was borrowing, I had introduced them to one another.

A moment after I’d given their names, B3 had sat on the floor, with Azurite glaring at her.

...Seriously, what’s going on here?

“Ray...” they said as they looked at me in unison.

“Why did you bring this person here?” Azurite demanded.

“What kind of place did you drag me to?” B3 finished.

“Umm... did I do something bad?” I asked hesitantly.

They looked at me with eyes that asked, “He doesn’t know?”

Well, I knew that Azurite didn’t get along with Miss Eldritch, but B3 should’ve been fine... right? They were in the same club, but B3 was nothing compared to the aberration.

As I wondered what was going on here, Nemesis said, “Hey, I just realized something.”

“...What is it?”

“Something you could’ve realized before you even brought B3 here. Unfortunately, you’re only sharp when it matters the most...”

Come on, don’t stall like that! Just answer, please!

“Last month. PKers. Newbie hunt. Capital blockade.”

“...Ah.” That was enough for me to connect the dots and understand the situation.

B3 was a PKer.

That wasn’t a problem, since issues between Masters were outside of the law here.

The only crimes that could have you sent to the infamous “gaol” were those that involved tian victims.

However, that was exactly it — one time, B3 *had* indirectly harmed tians.

It had been during the blockade at the capital... the time Marie had given me my first death penalty.

Though it had been primarily a PK incident with the only cases of tian assaults happening in the west of Altea, the act of terrorism had made it hard for tians to travel to and from the city.

Many of them had been merchants, and the blocking of the southern trade route leading to Gideon — Altar’s second largest city — had caused great damage to the economy.

The biggest problem here was the fact that the ones in charge of that side had been Mad Castle... Barbaroy Bad Burn’s clan.

Thus, to Azurite, the acting ruler of Altar, B3 was someone who had caused great losses for her, while to B3, Azurite was someone she had deeply troubled.

Thus, B3's sitting position and Azurite's glare.

"So you finally figured it out," Azurite snapped.

"Ray," B3 looked back at me.

Uh huh. Yeah. I know how I messed up now, I thought.

"Umm... I didn't bring her here as a criminal. And it's not like she caused any loss of life or property," I argued.

"That is true," said Azurite. "All the damage she caused was indirect. Though I can still put her on the wanted list for this."

"Eh?" I asked.

Azurite elaborated that B3 could be judged for forcible obstruction of business and that, as royalty, she had the power to put her on the wanted list.

That was probably the reason for B3's meekness.

An awkward silence filled the room.

Azurite suddenly reached into her inventory and took out a bunch of papers.

"Umm... Azurite? What's that?" I asked.

"I carry copies of my documents in case I need to work away from the capital. These contain the economic data for the month the blockade took place."

Those words made B3 twitch.

"The blockade lasted for four days, didn't it? There was a loss of several hundred million lir's worth of distribution flow per day... and there's also been an increase in people leaving... though that might have been due to Noz Forest burning to the ground."

Now it was my turn to twitch.

That fire had been caused by none other than my own brother.

Looking back at it now, things were really bad for Azurite... no, the whole kingdom.

B3 and Marie had joined the likes of Rosa in creating a blockade around Altea. Shu had gone and burned down Noz Forest, an important source of wood. And Franklin and Hugo had terrorized Gideon.

The kingdom was in such a bad state that I could totally understand why Azurite didn't trust us Masters.

"And many of those causing trouble are your acquaintances," added Nemesis telepathically.

Damn, I feel so bad now!

“...Ngh.” The next moment, I found myself sitting next to B3.

Gouz-Maise’s spikes were poking my thighs, and that wasn’t pleasant, but...

Azurite spent a few moments looking down on us before heaving a deep sigh and saying, “I’ll ignore it for now.”

“...Really?” I asked hopefully.

“It’s the sage’s pilgrimage... or a ‘twist of fate,’ as you Masters would say it. There might be a better future that can only be reached *because* the blockade incident took place,” she said as she stared at us. “There is no lawful basis for binding you to any role, but if you feel bad about what happened, I want you to help me. I will be relying on Masters’ powers and knowledge more and more in the future.”

“Okay,” B3 said, still tense.

“No need to worry,” Azurite answered. “I shall not have you work to make up for the economic losses. You will even be rewarded, just like with normal quests.”

Those words made B3 relax a bit, and then she looked like she was pondering whether she should refuse the reward.

“Let us start right away,” Azurite continued. “I have a question for you.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“Are you familiar with any Masters knowledgeable in machines?”

That was the question she’d given me yesterday.

“Could you elaborate?” B3 asked.

“We don’t have anyone who can operate the computers in the plant within the ruins here. I was told they are protected by security that none of the kingdom’s current technicians can break.”

A whole three days had passed here, but it looked like they still hadn’t found or grown a person fit for the job.

Hm...? Hold on a second, I thought as a certain someone flashed to mind.

“There could be a decent few Masters who can operate them here in the kingdom, but some could very well be Dryfean spies,” Azurite went on. “That is why I was hoping that you would introduce me to someone trustworthy.”

B3 pondered. “I would like to consult Ray about this...”

“Very well.” Azurite nodded.

So B3 had thought of him, too.

It was the ex-Dryfean Master we’d just met — Rising Sun’s Blue Screen.

B3 and I left the room and talked about getting him this job, while Nemesis stayed behind to talk to Azurite about something.

“What do you think?” B3 asked.

“Well...” I said.

He was an ex-PKer, but the fact that he was wanted in Dryfe made him an even safer choice than most.

From the little I’d talked to him, he did seem trustworthy enough to at least give a chance.

“I think he’ll do all right,” I said at last. “You?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so when they were still Sol Crisis, but Rising Sun is just him and the leader. They desperately need sponsors and funds, so if they make it a Contract-bound quest, I’m sure there won’t be any problems.”

“True.” I nodded.

“There’s also the fact that Blue Screen might be able to easily take care of any other incidents in the ruins. He was able to stop Silver — an original Prism Steed — so he would surely be able to deactivate any machines causing trouble there. In a way, he might be the best man for the job.”

“Good point.”

He was more than qualified on that front.

It made me wonder why a guy from Dryfe had ended up being a machine-killer.

Anyway, with that decided, we returned to Azurite’s office.

“We know someone fit for the job in the ruins,” said B3.

And so, we told her about Rising Sun and Blue Screen.

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We then went on to find the two questing out nearby and introduced them to Countess Quartierlatin.

It was her rather than Azurite because the countess would be the one in charge of the operations here once Azurite returned to Altea, and the first princess's visit here wasn't official.

The two gladly accepted the high-reward, continuous quest, and thanked us for mediating.

It was a win for everyone: the kingdom, Rising Sun, and B3, who had now somewhat made up for what she'd done a month ago.

"I thought I was about to be sent to the gaol," B3 sighed as we headed out on our own quest.

Her voice made it clear just how hard the encounter had been on her mind.

"Sorry, B3," I apologized.

"No need for that. Despite all I said, I'm aware that I brought this upon myself with what I did back then. Also, thanks to you mediating, it's now less likely that I'll get put on the wanted list in the future."

Oh, that's one way to look at it, I thought.

"I'll also have to be careful to not get on her bad side from now on," Nemesis put in. "She was in a pretty foul mood during the consultation."

"Hm...?"

She was? Why? I wondered.

"By the way, Nemesis, what did you talk to her about?" I asked.

"Ray, it's rude to pry into secret chats between women."

So that's the kind of chat it was, huh? You two seem to be on a similar wavelength, so I imagine you have lots to talk about.

"Well, we mostly chatted about your fashion sense and human relations," Nemesis went on.

"Hm?"

You're saying there's a lot to talk about there? I thought, puzzled.

"You ordered something dreadful recently, didn't you?" Nemesis asked darkly.

"You mean Storm Visage?" I'd picked up the completed accessory before entering the adventurers' guild today.

The stats and abilities were exactly as advertised, and the design matched my gear perfectly — a pro's work if I'd ever seen one.

"Why would you make them create something so terrifying?!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Hey, we needed it for what it does, right?" I argued. "The dark-ish design is pretty damn cool, too, isn't it?"

“Is that all you think of it?! Seeing you wear it gave me chills! What kind of cursed set have you developed?! I’m supposed to be a part of *that*?!”

“Well... yeah. My gear isn’t complete without you.”

“...Ugh! Why are you so...?!”

Why are your cheeks all red, and why are you hitting me? Why is B3 looking at me like I’m complicated? Did I do something wrong?

“You might go to the gaol for illegal levels of all-nizing,” B3 put in.

“That’s not a crime that exists.”

Silence.

“...Is it?”

It’d be pretty damn scary if she wasn’t kidding.

I didn’t doubt that there were crimes that were unknown to me, but getting a criminal record for “all-nizing” would be a whole new level of absurd.

Wait... Gaol... Unknown... That reminds me of something. But what? Pretty sure it’s something Shu told me about...

I couldn’t quite seem to remember.

Side Story: Nightmare at the Gaol

April 6th, 2045, Bow Hunter, Gerbera

Hello, I'm Gerbera! My real name is Kikuko Belmont, and I'm a seventeen-year-old domestic helper so charming, I put flowers to shame!

"Gerbera" is a very clever name that comes from my real one — "kiku" is how they call the flower in my dad's country!

Right now, I'm here in Dendro, *having a very good time—*

"...Like hell I am. Screw it. It's not working," I sighed as I rested my head on the counter of the café on the first floor of my gaol residence.

I'd tried to distract myself from the heavy mood by starting a cheery monologue, but it was just making me feel worse.

"You've just logged in, and you're already so down... What's wrong?" asked Sechs Würfel, who was my clan leader, landlord here in the gaol, and the owner of this café. He actually sounded worried.

No matter how many times I interacted with him, he seemed like a really good guy. How had *he*, of all people, ended up as the King of Crime?

"Give me some iced coffee, please," I said. "Pour it in the usual dolphin glass."

"Mm-hm. Very well," he replied before preparing my drink like a true professional.

I watched as the black liquid filled every part of the intricate dolphin-shaped glass. It was my favorite among the many interesting glasses we had in this café.

Even the customers knew that by now. Recently I'd overheard a conversation that went:

"That dolphin glass is Lady Gerbera's favorite."

"Guess we can't use it, then."

"...Isn't that all the more reason to pick it and lick it?"

The Legendarian-sounding perv had received a taste of my Alhazred's attacks.

"Here you go," said the leader as he gave me my coffee, bringing me back to the present.

“Thank you,” I replied as I took a sip. It was as good as ever.

The CLOSED sign was up on the door, so there were no customers inside, which made the place very quiet.

April the Prism Person — the only employee besides our leader — was just sitting on a chair with her eyes closed.

What’s she doing, anyway? Why is a robot sleeping? I wondered. *Well, whatever. Let her rest while the café’s closed.* I relaxed and took another sip. *Ahhh, it’s so refreshing.*

Noticing that I was feeling a bit better, the leader asked again, “So, what’s wrong?”

It made me remember the reason why I’d been in a bad mood in the first place.

“My death penalty just ended,” I revealed.

“Ohh, now that you mentioned it, I haven’t seen you recently,” the leader said. “So who got you this time?”

“I... think it was the ‘Fu’uta’ guy. I entered the dungeon that I think was his territory, my vision started to glitch, and I died before I could even make sense of what was going on.”

“Ohh... Well, that certainly sounds like a battle against him,” he said, implying that he knew what the deal was with Fu’uta’s Embryo.

Personally, I still couldn’t make any sense of what he’d done to me.

“So now you’ve fought all the Superiors here in the gaol, haven’t you?” our leader asked.

“Yeah... but it wasn’t even a fight against half of them,” I whined. “I’m probably one of the weakest gaol Masters...”

A whole three weeks of *Dendro* time had passed since my arrival here.

It didn’t seem like a lot, but it had dramatically changed my mentality.

The Chinese saying “The frog in the well knows not the sea” seemed to describe me perfectly.

I was a sheltered little froggy before, but now I’m out in the salty sea, and it’s basically killing me...

I was training to regain confidence that I was the strongest, but the more I trained, the more distant that goal seemed to become.

I did think that the leader’s guidance had made me stronger, but it felt like I had no chance against the other Superiors.

The leader never died even if he was killed, while Hannya had just completely curbstomped me.

That had already been a heavy blow to my confidence, so I'd decided to check on how strong the other two Superiors were, and now I regretted that immensely.

Jumping into a battle between Candy and one of the gaol's UBMs, I'd just crumbled to bits, and I still didn't have the slightest clue what had happened when I'd tried to go against that "Fu'uta" guy.

I'd just walked into the dungeon he was rumored to stay in, and the next thing I knew, my vision and stats had started to glitch and I'd just died.

So now I'd lost a whole four times in a row. Thankfully, I'd only gotten the death penalty the latter two times — when I'd fought Superiors of my own accord — but losing still kinda hurt.

Honestly, it felt like nothing I did by myself ever came out right.

Back in Caldina, when I'd tried to use Alhazred to steal a national treasure, I'd been found out almost instantly, put on the wanted list, and even dropped the item.

Back in Gideon, when I'd tried to win against the King of Destruction, he'd sent me here to the gaol, and that had been in addition to Rook destroying my mentality.

Nothing ever seemed to go my way.

I want to believe that my Alhazred and I were the strongest, but the world, and especially this gaol, was full of weirdos that felt like they existed to deny that.

"Is the gaol just a hive of people with broken Embryos?" I muttered.

"I believe many would call yours broken, as well," the leader commented. "And you should bear in mind that the three besides me are focused on wide-scale attacks... or conditional indiscriminate attacks... so you have bad compatibility with them."

"I guess you're right..."

Hannya was someone you couldn't let have the high ground.

Candy was someone you shouldn't — or couldn't — come close to.

And Fu'uta... I just didn't know what to think of his powers.

"You're usually a solo battle-type, aren't you?" I asked him. "Have they ever killed you?"

"No. So far, Shu is the only one who's ever given me a death penalty."

...How many times?

And how the hell had the KoD pulled it off? The leader was basically immortal.

"Ohh... the days when I can once again call myself the strongest feel sooo distant..." I moaned.

"You may start getting to them by maxing-out your new jobs."

"Mgrr..."

One of the first things the leader had made me do as part of my training was to remove my old jobs — including Dead Hand — and take new ones.

I'd whined about how much time I'd spent leveling them, to which he'd replied, "They have next to no synergy with your Alhazred, so there's no point in keeping them."

That actually kinda hurt.

Anyway, back to the present...

"Your Alhazred is a Guardian, so it's not hard for you to level, is it?" he asked. "The created dungeon here in gaol has good XP efficiency."

"Yes, but... straightforward work is so hard. Why can't there just be a way to grab a Superior Job like it's nothing?"

Right now, I was leveling jobs from the hunter grouping.

I had started with Hunter, then the low-rank offshoots of Trap Hunter and Poison Hunter, and now I was working on Bow Hunter.

Once I was done with this, I'd go for the high-rank Great Hunter.

Good thing that the gaol had job crystals from all the countries.

But as far as I knew, all the hunter grouping SJs, offshoots included, were already taken.

The fact that I couldn't get one no matter how hard I worked was a real downer.

"Even a Master with a Superior Job can be a third-rate if he isn't thorough," said our leader. "Even I supplement my build with sub-jobs."

Oh, yeah. I always thought that you just had to get a Superior Job and just level that, but I guess that's not how it works... !?

"Speaking of which, what are your most-used sub-jobs?" I asked him.

"Recently, I've been using Glass Meister a lot."

"How does that supplement your build?!"

There's no way it could be useful in battle! He just has it as a hobby!

"It's very dear to me," he continued. "The café's glasses are all made by yours truly."

"You made *this*?!" I shouted as I looked at the dolphin glass in shock.

It was very impressive, even if you took the effects of the job into consideration.

"Upon coming here, I realized that I like making glasses... or more like, pouring coffee into them."

"That's a weird thing to like," I told him.

"I hear that a lot. But... you know how it fills every edge, no matter how complicated the glass is? I'm fond of watching that happen."

"Hmm..." I half-understood what he meant, half didn't.

But I did know that he had many complicated-looking glasses here, and I'd always wondered if it was hard to clean them.

(It turned out he used The Saint's purification magic.)

"I believe I like it because it feels... familiar," he added.

"...Familiar?" What, exactly, could coffee poured into a glass remind him of?

Also, it hit me that this was the first time he'd said that he liked something.

"Would you like some more coffee?" he asked.

"Yes, please. And be generous with the milk."

As he began pouring the coffee, I asked him something that had been bothering me for a while.

"Why did you become the King of Crime?"

He really wasn't the type of person to act like a criminal.

Honestly, it never even seemed to me like he had any desires that would motivate him to commit crime.

He had a gentle demeanor, and I hadn't heard him say that he liked anything until just a moment ago.

That was why I kept wondering why such a person would become the King of Crimes, much less the leader of Illegal Frontier.

"Well... I can't say I have any reason worth naming," he replied.

"Eeehh? I don't believe you. I mean, King of Crime is a high-risk job that could have you sent to the gaol... and actually did!"

As far as I knew, that was the reason why, despite not being a lost job, it was a job that no one before him had ever managed to take.

If they'd tried, they'd been captured by Masters or killed by tians during the process.

"You misunderstand. Becoming the King of Crime was merely a side effect," he explained. "I committed crimes day in and day out, and one day, I got a message saying that I'd unlocked a job change quest."

"You weren't going for it?" I asked.

"Yes. It happened by chance."

Now I was even more confused about his reasons for committing crimes.

"By the way, which control AI were you handled by when you started out?" he asked.

"Two children," I said. "Twins. You can get different ones?"

"Yes. I got a cat."

Ohh? That's nice. I like cats. They're as cute as me.

"During the introduction, I asked him, 'What should I do?'" he asked.

"Eh?" *You were starting a game so... just game, right?*

"As embarrassing as this might seem, I started this game because I had nothing to do on the other side, but because I was like that, there was nothing I really wanted to do here, either. That was why I asked the cat to help me with that."

He'd had nothing to do on the other side?

That reminded me that he was online more often than me, and I was a NEE— uhh... a domestic helper.

Did he have no job?

"He answered my question by saying, 'You can become a hero or the demon king, a king or a slave, a good person or an evil person. You can do something, or you can do nothing. It's all up to you.'"

"Interesting..." It was kinda fun to imagine a cat saying something like that.

The twins had said something similar to me, actually.

"And that is why I am the King of Crime, Sechs Würfel."

"Umm... I'm not sure I get it." Had I blacked out and missed part of the conversation?

"It's nothing complicated. He gave me six options: hero, demon king, king, slave, good person, evil person," he said as he took something from the counter.

It was a die, just like the ones decorating this café.

"I assigned the six options on each of the sides and rolled to decide which one I would be."

"...Eh?"

He rolled the die on the counter. Unlike the one out on front, it had normal values instead of all sixes, but he still rolled a six.

That wasn't important right now, though.

What *was* important was the fact that...

"...You decided by rolling a die?!"

"The room was a bit disorderly, and there were things such as chess boards and dice, so I borrowed a die, rolled a six, and decided to become an evil person."

So he had... *rolled* to become a criminal?

"Is... Is that it?" I asked.

"Yes. There's nothing more to it. That's why I am Sechs Würfel — I rolled a six on a die," he said as if it was nothing, then picked up the die and rolled it in his hand.

"...Ahaha." I laughed with no energy or glee.

I was pretty sure that if he'd rolled a five, he would've been a really good person who went around helping people.

And if it was a four, he would've willingly become a slave.

He'd be completely faithful to those roles, just as he was faithful to being evil now.

I'd known him for almost a month now, so I knew him well enough to know that that was just how he was.

I'd even known him when he was The Saint, when he'd truly behaved like and had an aura of a perfect holy maiden.

Ohh... I suddenly understood what he found so familiar about coffee being poured into a glass.

He himself is exactly like that.

No matter how complex the role — the container — he could change himself accordingly and fit it perfectly.

I'd fought all the Superiors here, and they all had powers that were scary in their own ways, but no one... *no one* had a mind as terrifying as this Master here.

"But I guess you need someone like that to take charge of a criminal clan," I thought out loud.

The two sub-leaders had probably thought the same thing — that no one was more fitting to lead us than this person here, who changed himself in order to fit the mold.

No one could do a better job at being the king of us criminals.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked.

“Nothing at all. By the way, about today’s training—”

I was about to ask him what we’d do today—

“KING OF CRIME! I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE! COME OUT, DAMN IT!” A thick voice resounded from the outside.

What’s this about? I wondered.

◆◆◆

April 4th, 2045, gaol

“Shit!” Upon logging in and realizing that they were in the gaol, Gakido and his Sixth Realm Chaos couldn’t hide their frustration.

Gakido had climbed up to the tenth in Tenchi’s duel rankings and fifteenth in their clan rankings, but now that they were here in the gaol, it was completely meaningless.

“It’s all *their* fault!” he cursed.

There were two people Gakido blamed and hated for this.

First was, of course, the person who had directly sent them to the gaol: the King of Brigands, Bigman.

And the second was the slave dealer who’d caused them to attack that village: La Crima.

During their death penalty period, they’d gotten online and discovered that La Crima was actually a very infamous character known for pulling such schemes.

He specialized in modifying tians using his parasitic Embryo and selling them on the black market as either battle or pleasure slaves, which led to him developing vast amounts of wealth.

His deeds had earned him lots of enemies, and back in Caldina, he had even been targeted by two Superiors: the King of Termination and the King of Revelry.

The enigmatic man had somehow survived the encounter and soon gone on to Caldina.

"That goddamn parasite fucking used us to test the strength of Hokugen'in forces!" I shouted.

And even if Hokugen'in hadn't interfered with Gakido's work, La Crima would've just gotten some new slaves, meaning that he hadn't stood to lose anything in this debacle.

"That goddamn slaver asshole played us like a fuckin' fiddle!" I screamed.

"Yeah!" another member of his clan agreed vehemently.

They had cooperated with La Crima on their own free will, but they conveniently forgot that part.

As a side note, the member who'd negotiated with La Crima wasn't online. He probably felt he couldn't show his face after what he'd led them into. No doubt he was afraid of being the target of the clan's ire.

"What now, boss?" asked one of the members.

"Looks like there're dungeons and shops here in the gaol, too," added another.

They were worried about what would become of their *Dendro* life, now that they were here.

Gakido, however, just grinned like a ravenous beast and said, "We'll start by settlin' the score."

"Eh? But they're outside..."

"No... we're puttin' the blame on La Crima's boss."

"Boss...?! Y-You mean, the King of Crimes... Sechs Würfel?!"

From their investigations, they'd found out that La Crima was in a clan called "Illegal Frontier," which was led by the King of Crimes, who was now in the gaol.

Someone had bought this info from the DIN and spread it everywhere as a way of getting back at the clan.

Despite that, there was only info on four of the members: La Crima, Emily, Rascal — whose activities really stood out — and Sechs, their leader.

There was nothing on Zeta, who always disappeared from her crime scenes before getting spotted, or Gerbera, who was new to the clan and had gone to the gaol before doing anything significant.

"You lost against a Superior, and you're gonna pick a fight with another?" asked one of Gakido's boys. "That's a bit..."

“Think about it — even if he’s a Superior, he’s a loser just by bein’ here in the fuckin’ gaol. There’s no way he’s as much of a beast as Bigman.”

Any Master who’d been here long enough would call Gakido an idiot for thinking that, but unfortunately, the only ones on the scene were the members of Sixth Realm Chaos.

Most Masters from the three western countries would’ve said the same, but this clan was from the far-east land of Tenchi, and didn’t know much about the King of Crime beyond the name of his job.

“We’ll kick his ass and take his wealth as reparations,” Gakido said confidently. “I mean, he has a clan, sure, but he’s all alone here. I heard that even Al Capone was really pathetic after they locked him up.”

A cool-headed Master would’ve pointed out that Al Capone hadn’t had an Embryo, but everyone in Sixth Realm chaos was too angry to think that much.

“Let’s start by gatherin’ info,” said Gakido. “We’ll find out what he does, where he hangs, and attack him when there’s no one to get in the way.”

“Hell yeah!”

They went around the gaol and found out lots of things about him.

Strange as it was, all the prisoners talked about Sechs like he was above them, but no one said that he was strong.

They mentioned that he was a model prisoner, had a café, enjoyed reading, made good coffee, that he had a soft demeanor, had nice glasses, and cute employees, making the Sixth Realm Chaos members conclude that he was absolutely harmless.

“Kheheheh. That dumbass,” Gakido spat and grinned. “This is gonna be so easy. It hasn’t even happened, and I’m already cheering up.”

After finding out all they needed, they decided to attack him in two days, when the café would be closed and there would be no customer Masters to get in the way.

Imagining the attack and their victory, they began the preparations for the assault.

However, none of them had noticed the soft, sympathetic gazes the other Masters were giving them.

They were looking at the clan like they were just another in a long line of poor sacrifices, but none of the clan members were in the state of mind to realize it.

And they hadn't noticed that each and every single fellow prisoner hadn't said a single word about how dangerous the KoC really was.

Thus, two real life days passed, and Sixth Realm Chaos attacked the café, Dice.

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April 6th, 2045, Bow Hunter, Gerbera

"COME OUT OR WE'RE BURNING YOU DOWN WITH YOUR CAFÉ!"

The suicidal idiots barking outside were a bunch of filthy-looking men in clothes that made them look like stereotypical criminals.

The one at the front was extra weird. He wore animal skins and flashy clothing that looked kinda like the "kabuki" style from my dad's country, while at the same time not even close to it.

The cherry on the cake was the cringy gloves, though.

His clothing aside... what was up with that face? He could choose anything he wanted during character creation, and he'd gone with something that brutish?

...Speaking of which, I was beautiful in real life, too.

Yeah, I had spent some time making my character, but the overall beauty rating was the same.

That reminds me that I forgot to change my breast size, I thought. *I hope the leader doesn't realize that I have pads on...*

"Yes, yes, who is it?" the leader asked as he opened the door with a face like he was being visited by children selling cookies.

Does he ever feel any danger? I thought one moment before he bent his upper half forward, probably due to a punch in his stomach.

The people passing by instantly ran away, because of course they would.

"YOU TOOK TOO FUCKIN' LONG!" the boss-looking guy shouted.

"My apologies. So, who might you be?" said our leader, clearly not caring about the stomach blow.

Why would he?

After all... physical attacks did nothing to his HP.

"I'm the King of Grind, Gigamaru Gakido! I'm the man who was tenth on Tenchi's duel rankings!"

Gigamaru Gakido... what a weird name. Also, this was the first time I'd ever seen someone from Tenchi.

Our clan didn't have a single member from there, come to think of it. I wouldn't mind if some cool-looking samurai guy joined. I'd talk to the leader about that later.

For now, the main matter was Gakido, and uhhh...

"Tenth? Isn't that kinda lame?" I asked.

I lived in Gideon, the Mecca of duels, but even I knew only the first eight. Wait, no. I'd forgotten the seventh... what was his name, again? It was the burning, smothering guy, right?

B... B... Bijmal?

"What the hell'd you just say?!" Gakido snapped.

"Oh no no, Miss Gerbera," said the leader. "That's certainly not true. Tenchi's dueling scene is particularly strong. It has about twice as many participants as the others, so the tenth there is about as strong as the kingdom's fifth."

I nodded in understanding. *Well, I did hear that Tenchi was "the land of strife" or something.*

"And, uh... the King of Grind?" I asked. That job name seemed to have a familiar aura...

"The King of Grind is more or less the Eastern version of King of Destruction," the leader explained. "Both jobs excel at object destruction. But while the KoD is focused on STR, the King of Grind is more balanced and thus is easier to use in combat."

"You really know everything, don't you?" I commented.

Anyway, if going by job alone, this weirdo here was on the same level as the King of Destruction.

...It really didn't feel that way, though.

"Ohh, 'Gakido'?" the leader said casually. "Now I remember. You lead a bandit clan called 'Sixth Realm Chaos,' which was destroyed by the King of Brigands, Bigman the Mountain-Splitter, about five days ago. So that sent you here to the gaol. From what I recall, your crimes are burglary, murder, and sexual assault, among many others. Oh yes, that is certainly enough to put you on the wanted list."

It felt like our dear Sechs Würfel was a bit *too* knowledgeable. At least, for someone stuck in the gaol.

Wait. It suddenly hit me that one of our people, La Crima, was currently operating in Tenchi, so he'd probably gotten that info from him.

"Well, you sure know a damn lot about us," sneered Gakido. "Then I guess you know why we're here, don't ya?"

"I cannot even begin to imagine," our leader replied. "Coffee, perhaps?"

"NO! YOU'RE LA CRIMA'S BOSS! SO WE'LL KILL YOU AND TAKE YOUR SHIT AS REPARATIONS!"

"Is that it?"

"LIKE HELL! WEAK-ASS OR NOT, KILLING A SUPERIOR WILL MAKE US FAMOUS! IT'LL SEND A MESSAGE TO THE ENTIRE GAOL, AND WE'LL SOON BE THE TOP OF THIS SHITTY PLACE!"

Hearing his words made me choke.

I had no idea why, but it felt like my old wounds were opening up — like I was watching a detailed replay of a very dark, very cringy period in my life.

"But there is no rule that says that defeating me would make you the top of the gaol," the leader said calmly.

"But tons of prisoners treat you like you're above them, don't they? If I beat you, that means I'm above you *and* them!"

I choked again. Oh, how I wished for him to stop talking. He sounded exactly like I had when I was going after the KoD. It was making me cringe.

Gakido, please. I really don't want or need this kind of familiarity. Shut up, or I'll kill you.

"Oh... very well," said the leader. "Are we having a duel?"

"Nope. It's already over. Look at your stomach," said Gakido.

From where I was, I could only see the leader's back, so I made Alhazred move in front of him and checked.

On his stomach, there was a circle-stamp with a large "B A N" written on it.

"What would this be?" he asked.

"That's a seal made by my Embryo, Banten'in. Better not touch it, my guy. You'll be torn to shreds."

I looked and noticed that the same stamp was on the knuckle parts of Gakido's gloves.

That is so lame.

"I see," said the leader. "So it's an Embryo that inserts a bomb through touch... or more like, changes the parts of the body touched into bombs."

"You got that right! And just so you know, no one who's had it on them has ever come out alive!"

Oh, so that was the purpose of the stomach blow from before.

Would our leader actually die from being torn to shreds, though?

He probably wouldn't...

"If you admit defeat, I wouldn't mind removi—"

"Excuse me for a moment," the leader said, cutting off Gakido and then walking past him to stand in the middle of the street.

"Where the hell do you think you're goin—"

"Like this?"

Before anyone could stop him, Sechs Würfel touched the seal on his stomach and, like advertised, exploded into little bits.

Dark red pieces of flesh and blood rained down on the surroundings, dirtying the unpaved road and Gakido's clan.

Ew.

"Whoa?!" Gakido shouted.

"H-He went and killed himself...!" cried a man behind him.

The leader had probably gone away from the café to avoid making a mess inside.

I really didn't see why he'd bothered. He could easily use The Saint's purification magic to clean up.

"Wh-Whatever," said Gakido. "This still counts as a win against him. It just ended in one hit."

"Oh, yeah. Suuure," I said with all the sarcasm in the world.

They finally noticed my presence, and Gakido asked, "Who the hell are *you*?"

"A freeloader."

"Oh, I get it. You're the KoC's bitch."

"...Huh?"

I feel like he just said something staggering.

"You have a good face, but your tits look fake as hell. Man, the guy has shit taste in women."

"Huhhhhh?" I yelled. "Who the hell are you calling fake? You better not mess with me!”

Did this idiot actually just call me flat— I mean, the KoC’s bitch? What is he, a porn-crazed brat from a 2000s MMO? This is the first time anyone in Dendro*’s talked to me with the lower half of their body!*

Wait, there was also La Crima... but the circumstances and implications there were different.

I considered just beating them right here and now. Alhazred was outside with them, and none of them had a clue.

That made me think it was possible, but Gakido had a Superior Job, and I didn’t have a good track record with them here in the gaol. What to do, what to do...?

“Argh, forget this fake-ass hoe,” said Gakido. “Let’s just take everything in the café. Get to it, boys!”

“Roger!” his bootlickers replied almost mechanically.

You could tell they were used to this and that it was no surprise that they’d gotten on a wanted list.

As they tried to enter the café, something called out to them and stopped them.

“Please-wait-a-mo-ment.”

“Wh-What? Who’s talkin’... Huh?” Gakido’s people looked around and quickly found the source of the voice.

The entity was sitting on a chair, looking at them with inorganic eyes that had been closed until just a moment ago.

It was none other than the Prism Person, April.

She hadn’t moved an inch even when her owner had blown up, but now... she stood up.

“Are-you-en-ter-ing-this-es-tab-lish-ment-with-the-in-ten-tion-to-rob-it?” She hadn’t participated in the conversation at all, but she seemed to have listened.

“What’s this? It’s like a human, but it’s got spherical joints. Is it a Marionetter’s doll?”

“Well, damn,” Gakido grinned. “Score. It looks like it costs a whole lot. Let’s take it, and—”

Gakido entered the café with the intention to take April, but the moment one of them stepped in...

“Rec-og-nized-as-a-threat. Initiating battle mode — eliminating.”

April stopped speaking in monotone. Words just flowed out of her mouth...

"Eh?"

"Eh?"

And the man who tried to touch her was split in half, making him speak through two mouths.

Before either of his halves could even fall to the ground, he was cut into little pieces and became bits of light before a single drop of blood touched the floor.

"Ah?!"

"H-He had a Brooch, right?! How did he die in one hit?!"

A Brooch, eh?

April attacked with both hands, so it had broken with the first, I'd guess.

I mean, they were all really susceptible to damage right now.

"Starting elimination of enemies within the café's perimeter," she said smoothly before stepping outside.

I'd thought this back during training, but it was staggering how well-spoken April was in battle compared to how she was usually. Did the café employee work she was assigned to put some sort of load on her AI?

"Tch...! Don't let her scare you! There's just one of her!"

"It's just a robot! We took out dozens of guard robots in ruins back in Tenchi!"

Ruins, huh? I'd never been to one.

Even so, I was pretty sure that there wasn't a single robot stronger than April.

...Oh?

Some guy who was probably in the nobushi grouping came out of his hiding spot and attacked April from behind. "Got you now...! Huh?"

His aim was true, and his spear was heading straight into her. But...

"I-It's not piercing?! How?! Why isn't my surprise attack working?!"

The nobushi grouping was focused on surprise attacks, but this one couldn't even break through April's clothes.

"Eliminating," April said as she responded with a swing of her arms.

Her arms didn't reach the guy due to the spear's range, but that didn't matter.

"GHUAH?!"

The man was decapitated, exposing the flesh and bone of his neck.

Gross.

"W-Wires?!" The onlooking bandits finally realized what her weapon was — they were metal wires extending from inside April's wrists.

They were thicker than the steel threads used by some assassins — enough to be called wires.

It didn't seem like they were strong enough to cut people apart, but that was exactly what they did.

"Khh...! Protect your weak spots! Those wires won't do shit if they don't touch your body!" Gakido screamed.

He wasn't wrong. There was nothing to those wires besides their toughness.

But I would really recommend against focusing on defense.

"GHUAH?!" a man in heavy armor screamed as he was torn into shreds and became bits of light.

"Th-The armor's in pieces...?!" someone shouted.

"What?! What's going on?!"

Looking at them reminded me of tofu, a food my dad liked. Tofu could be cut using threads, and these wires broke their bodies apart just as easily.

There was no point in just watching out for them, though.

The reason why they were so easy to tear apart... was the fact that they were simply really fragile right now.

"Huhh?!"

"Wh-What's wrong?!"

"M-My END's supposed to be 4,050... b-but it's 50 now!"

"Just minus 4,000?" I commented. "That's... pretty tame, April."

"There are no endurance-type Superior Jobs or Guardians," she said. "This is more than enough."

Oh, so she's just conserving energy, I thought.

"A... a skill that lowers defense!" one of them screamed.

"Heh! Then I'll just run circles around it with my speed and—GHAAHH?!"

An AGI build did nothing more than stomp on the ground, but that was enough to give him a compound fracture.

Actually, it seemed like the leg was just gone.

It was the expected result, though.

His END was probably so low now that it was actually in the negatives.

So yeah. April the Prism Person had the ability to reduce the toughness of surrounding material.

It was extra lethal on AGI builds, which had low END to begin with. Just like now, it could easily bring that stat to below zero.

Simply running too hard could make an AGI build's bones shatter and flesh crumble, while an END build's toughness would do as much good as a sheet of paper.

AGI builds would be driven to self-destruction, END builds would lose their one selling point, and all would be slain.

That was the power of the Diamond Slayer's transformation weapon, Material Slider.

When I'd first heard about it, I had reflected that the one who'd made it didn't care one bit about game balance.

Though, honestly, that kinda applied to *Dendro* as a whole.

"U-Use ranged attacks! Beat it from a distance!"

"I-It's not working! Arrows and bullets don't do anything!"

April's Material Slider not only lowered the toughness of surrounding material — it could also raise her own.

Their attacks were all negated by a defense which, from what I could tell, easily exceeded 100,000.

"April's easily Superior-level," I commented to myself. I hadn't won against her once during training.

I just made myself sad again...

"Shit! I beat *the* King of Crime, and now I've gotta deal with this fuckin' monster?! Outta my way, boys! No matter how tough, my Banten'in's gonna turn it into scrap!" Gakido clenched his fists, covered in Banten'in, and struck a boxing pose.

Well, if Banten'in could blow up any material it placed a seal on, then maybe it had a chance against April.

However, to pull it off, Gakido would have to get close to April while being conscious of his severely lowered defense, which didn't even allow him to run as fast as he wanted.

It was a battle that would be over in one hit from either side, but due to her range, April had the upper hand.

However, before such a battle could begin, April tilted her head at

Gakido's words. "Did you just say that you defeated my owner?"

"Heh! Hell yeah! My Banten'in made short work of your master, the King of Crime, Sechs Würfel!" Gakido claimed proudly.

"But he is right there." April pointed behind Gakido.

"Huh?!" He turned around so fast you could hear it, but all he saw was three of his clan members. "You little...!"

For a moment, he seemed to think that April was just toying with him, but the robot just continued pointing in the same direction.

Gakido turned around again and saw only two of his clan members.

"...Huh?"

Oh, so he'd realized that one had just gotten the death penalty.

"Hey! You two! What happened to Fapel? He was there just a second ago!"

The other two didn't say a word in response — they just eerily stood in place with faces full of suffering and fear.

They didn't even make a sound, as if their throats... bodies... were full of something.

Their bodies then began to change.

Their eyes popped out, blood poured out of their mouths, and their bodies throbbed like hoses about to release large amounts of water.

But before anything like that could happen, their bodies suddenly vanished and became bits of light.

They must've used the suicide function to save themselves from the extended suffering of suffocation.

When they vanished, they left only their drops... *and a red liquid*.

"...Ah?" Gakido said dumbly.

It was the same liquid as the one that was scattered all over the surroundings.

The same liquid that had gotten on all of Gakido's clan members, all of whom were now dead.

It was the blood and flesh of Sechs Würfel.

Gakido could've noticed this earlier, but I was guessing that he'd achieved his goal so easily that he couldn't even think properly.

And so, he hadn't realized that *our leader's flesh and blood hadn't become bits of light*.

"This is as grotesque as it always is..." I sighed.

The flesh and blood scattered all over began to crawl and gather where the two had used the suicide function.

Once a giant pool of blood and bits was formed, larger than the volume of one person, it began to rise up.

The fluid extended, was compressed to the size of a single person, and began to receive form like heated glass being expertly shaped into a human.

Eventually, even the clothes were given shape, and finally came the color.

The result? Sechs Würfel was now standing there as if he'd never exploded.

"Hello, Mr. Gakido," he said. "I haven't seen you in six minutes and twenty-seven seconds."

"Huh? A-Aaahh...?!" Gakido was naturally surprised.

Blood and flesh had suddenly become human again right before his very eyes.

That wasn't strange in our leader's case, though. Being blown up into bits and fluids, only to return to human, meant absolutely nothing to him.

You could cut his head off, pierce his heart, crush him with a giant leg, and he would simply shrug it off.

To him... all of those states were just one of his shapes.

That was the kind of body he had... the kind of *monster* he was.

Sechs Würfel was the only Master who'd replaced every last part of his body with slime.

◆

Body replacement type, otherwise known as Type Body.

It was an ultra rare Embryo category separate from the usual Arms, Guardian, Chariot, Castle, Territory, and even the rarer ones like Maiden and Apostle.

I didn't know the details of it, but I was told that it was completely different from the Type Arms that replaced only certain parts of the body, like hands or eyes.

Type Body Embryos were actually the rarest of all, and examples of them were few.

Even our leader only knew a single one besides himself — Caldina's

King of Termination, who'd replaced his whole body with machinery.

There was a reason for their rarity, of course.

Embryos hatched and evolved based on their Master's personalities.

Embryos were always influenced by who or what their Masters were, though it happened to different extents.

That left us with a question: what kind of personality would a person who would replace his entire body with slime have?

Personally, I couldn't begin to understand it.

I couldn't even comprehend why he had this kind of Embryo or how he saw the world.

He could become a slimy monster, be split into little pieces, mimic another person's body, yet accept it all as if it were him.

I didn't want to imagine the mentality of a person like that. I felt like it was off-limits for someone like me.

Today, I'd found out and understood that he was the type to fulfill the role he was given, but even so, I knew that I didn't even come close to truly understanding him.

After all... Type Body could only be given to people who could turn themselves into something entirely different and see absolutely nothing wrong with it.

◆

"K-King of Crime?! Shit!" Gakido looked shocked by the sight of the person he'd just blown up standing before him completely unscathed.

Of course he was shocked.

If Banten'in couldn't kill the man, it meant that Gakido had no means to do it.

"The King of Grind doesn't have the Right of Destruction skill, after all," said our leader. "You can only turn me into little pieces, *nothing more*."

See what I mean? He was completely blown up and says that, I thought.

Then again, that mentality of his was surely part of the reason why he was the way he was. To him, there was probably no difference between taking the shape of a human and taking the shape of a slime.

He acted differently whenever he switched from the King of Crime to The Saint, so maybe becoming a slime and acting the part came naturally to him, too?

Also, he was extremely good at changing shape, even by slime standards. Whenever he was in his default form or the form of The Saint he used very often, all the cells in his body were exactly like those of a normal human. But he went back to being slime whenever his shape was broken.

Also, according to him, the DNA of his The Saint form was exactly the same as that of the original person.

I'd asked him how he knew that when there was, as far as I knew, no way to check DNA in *Dendro*, and he'd said, "I became The Saint by fooling the The Saint's crystal, which judges viability of job inheritance by checking DNA."

I was still curious about how he'd ended up replacing the woman who had been meant to become The Saint.

Also, his Superior Embryo's name was "Primordial Shifting, Nu."

I didn't know what that was based on, so it was probably really minor. Was it an urban legend or something? It'd be pretty embarrassing if it was actually famous, but I was just thinking this, so I was safe.

Anyway, in conclusion...

"Our leader is... unbeatable," I said.

He was a full slime, so even if you cut his head off, pulled his heart out, or reduced him to bits, he'd just come back to normal like it was no big deal.

Blunt, slashing, explosive — all physical attacks were useless against him.

As for magic... I wasn't so sure, either.

He had a bunch of special rewards inside him at all times.

There were skills to consider, too, so I felt that he could even handle fire, even though it was supposed to be a slime's weakness.

He also had the KoC's passive skill, which made him have really high stats.

And finally, he had the ultimate skill which was probably the worst thing you could ever encounter.

Seriously, how did the KoD send this guy to the gaol...?

"You seem to be the only one left, Mr. Gakido," the leader said. "Would you like to fight me now?"

"Ngh... ghh..." He said nothing in response.

Gakido understood that he had no chance against him. He probably wanted to just run away.

Feeling like a mere onlooker, I watched the scene until our leader called out to me.

“Miss Gerbera!”

“What?” I asked, jumping.

“You were worried that you might be among the weaker people here in the gaol, weren’t you? Care to test just how much you’ve changed?”

“...What do you mean?” Unable to understand what he was getting at, I tilted my head and imagined a question mark popping up above my head.

He looked away from me and talked to Gakido. “Mr. Gakido, you may choose to fight Gerbera instead of me.”

“What?”

“Win against either of us, and I will let you off the hook *and* give you this café.”

“...Ehhhh?!” His words shocked me so much that I let out a weird sound.

Huh?! We’ll lose this café if I lose?! But it’s my home here!

“Hah! You’re damn right I’m choosin’ this woman here,” Gakido said as he looked at me, all smiles.

Oh man, that relieved look really pisses me off.

“Very well,” said the leader. “Are you okay with this, as well, miss?”

I wasn’t!

I really wasn’t, but... ah, no dice.

His eyes looked exactly the same as whenever he made me go through his hellish training. He wouldn’t take “no” for an answer.

I had to prepare myself.

And so, I reluctantly agreed to do what he wanted me to. “Fine... I’ll do it.”

I’d be up against a Superior Job in the same vein as the KoD. What if I lost?

Well... I’ll just move in with the leader again and continue living as a freeloader.

◆

We left the street we were in and arrived at a wasteland outside of the gaol's town.

This was Gakido's idea. He couldn't go all-out with the constant risk of damaging the prize: the café.

The leader told me, "Though the King of Grind doesn't have Right of Destruction, his ultimate job skill is Grinding Shockfist, which is a wide-scale area attack. He wouldn't be able to fight as he wished if we were near the prize café."

"Tch! Well, you sure know a lot," Gakido clicked his tongue.

"Yes... In a certain place, I found a list of jobs," the leader said as he looked in the café's direction.

"Oh?" I asked.

Was it in the café's safe or something? I'd constantly worry about something that important getting stolen. Though, with April there, we probably didn't have anything to worry about.

"So, are you two ready?" the leader said as he stood right between us like a referee.

We'd already signed a Contract, so if I lost this, Gakido would really get the café. There was also an extra rule preventing the use of Brooches.

Oh, dear, I sighed. *I'll be a little tricky...*

"You're damn right I'm ready!" Gakido roared.

"I guess you can start," I said.

Just a little bit more...

"Ah, Miss Gerbera, please don't back away any more," said the leader.

Tch. He'd noticed.

I would've liked for there to be more distance between us when the battle began.

"It seems like you both are ready, so... begin."

"Ooaagh!" Gakido charged at me like a boxer, just like when he'd faced April.

His body swayed as he rushed at me, quickly closing the distance between us.

I couldn't read the movements of his upper body.

He was preparing a decent feint — one that I probably couldn't deal with.

However, feints I saw coming were pointless against me.

"Agh?!" Gakido suddenly fell to the ground.

Why? Because I'd made Alhazred, whom he couldn't see, trip him up.

Still, due to the shin guards on his legs, it wasn't enough to cut off his leg.

Those are pretty tough, I thought. *Is this the rumored Tenchi craftsmanship?*

I didn't really mind that I couldn't sever his leg. It wasn't damage I needed right now.

I just needed enough time to activate my ultimate skill.

"I am Unknown... Total Eclipse of the Flesh — Alhazred."

It was best to activate it before a battle even began, but if that wasn't an option, it was important to buy enough time to do it.

"She... disappeared?!" Gakido yelled.

Following the activation, I merged with Alhazred and became imperceivable to everyone in the world.

"What's going on here?!" Gakido exclaimed.

"Well, considering that Miss Gerbera already knows about your Embryo, I think it would only be fair if I told you about hers," the leader said calmly. "She has an Embryo that's imperceptible to everyone but her."

Our leader had just gone and told him about Alhazred.

You're not helping, damn it!

"So she's still around, huh?" Gakido asked.

"Yes. Not even I know where, though."

"Then I'll end it with this one." Gakido cracked a grin, raised both his fists to the air, and threw them to the ground, shouting, "Mark of Cataclysm — Banten'in!"

That created a seal that seemed as large as one hundred meters, which then went on to cause an explosion several times larger.

◆◆◆

Gaol, outskirts of the residential area

"Mark of Cataclysm — Banten'in" was the ultimate skill of Gigamaru Gakido's Embryo: Marked Murderfists, Banten'in.

Banten'in's special characteristic was marking things and making them explode, and this ultimate skill represented it perfectly by creating a mark far bigger than the usual ones and making it cause incomparable destruction.

It allowed him to pulverize people without even marking them directly — the giant mark on the ground did the job most of the time.

It was the pre-Superior Gakido's trump card.

"Kheheheh. Thanks for choosin' this as the battleground, losers!"

Gakido himself came out of the destruction relatively unscathed. He did this by canceling out the explosion near him using a Grinding Shockfist.

Of course Sechs survived, too, but the destruction had sent him flying all over the place.

"That woman's gotta be gone for real now, heh heh. Just look at all this shit!" Gakido said as he looked around with pride.

It seemed as though everything within a diameter of one kilometel had been turned upside-down.

Gakido was confident that only a slime could survive this unscathed.

He also thought that the robot that had killed his clan, April, would've easily made it through this, but she wasn't on the scene.

"Well, with that done, I'll just wait for the KoC to fix his body and make him give me my café," Gakido smirked.

He'd already lost sight of his initial goal of beating the King of Crimes and becoming the top of the gaol.

Or more like, that was just what he was choosing to believe.

A large part of him just really didn't want to face the undefinable, immortal King of Crime.

In a way, he was much like his ex-opponent, Gerbera.

No... she wasn't an "ex-opponent."

The fight was still going on.

"Hey! KoC! Where the hell are ya?!" he called out to the broken wasteland, started walking and then just... tripped. "...Huh? Now that's weird. There're no rocks here or anything."

He tried to get up, but his legs didn't seem to listen.

"Is it a debuff?"

He looked at his status summary, but didn't see any detrimental effects or HP loss.

"Huhhh? Then why am I...?" He lay there, confused, for about ten-odd seconds. And then suddenly...

"...Huh?"

He had no idea when it had happened, but there were ten-odd bowgun arrows in the back of his knees.

It seemed as though the shooter was avoiding the shin guards and going for the unprotected area.

It was barely even a knee at this point — it was just a tendon linking the thigh and the shin.

“Ah. Eh? Aaahh?”

His stats now showed that yes, he’d suffered damage.

In addition, there was the Bleeding debuff, as well as a Knee Joint Destruction injury-based status effect for both of his knees.

“H-Healing! Gotta heal...!”

He tried to take out his inventory and heal himself using the medicine inside.

But for whatever reason, his fingers didn’t seem to even touch his inventory.

Ten-odd seconds passed.

“AAAHHH?!”

All he had in his hands was a destroyed inventory. The contents were scattered all around him.

“What the hell... WHAT THE HEEELL?!” Gakido was shaken up by the incomprehensible situation.

There was someone looking down at him.

But he couldn’t feel it — couldn’t perceive it.

It was none other than Gerbera. Merged with Alhazred, she observed him.

Though merged with her Embryo, she wasn’t limited to using Alhazred’s scythe-arms. She could use her own, too, and she was holding bowguns with an Auto-Loading Function in each.

She was the one who’d destroyed Gakido’s knees and inventory.

Gerbera had survived the cataclysm he’d caused.

The reason for that was simple: she’d been trained to distance herself the moment she saw that the enemy was about to use their ultimate skill.

Anyone would be wary if their opponent vanished before their very eyes, and many who were capable of it would launch a wide-scale attack.

No amount of hiding could help against that, so Gerbera needed to distance herself until the enemy calmed down.

During its ultimate skill, Alhazred's attacks were completely imperceptible, and they had the greatest effect when the enemy was calm.

No matter how wary they were... *they just couldn't see them coming*.

"Poison... Paralysis... and Intoxication?!" Gakido shrieked.

He had no idea when he'd received them, but his status summary was displaying a whole bunch of status effects.

His movements were so sluggish that he couldn't even see to hold and use his medicine.

The status effects were there because ten-odd seconds ago, Gerbera had used her Poison Hunter skills.

"My arm... MY AAAARM!"

He had no idea when it had happened, but his left hand was gone from the wrist down.

Only now did he realize that he'd lost an important part of his body.

This had happened ten-odd seconds ago, when he'd crawled over to his medicine, only to touch a mine placed there by Gerbera's Trap Hunter skill.

He'd missed each and every single attack.

He didn't perceive anything.

He couldn't perceive anything.

Everything that Gerbera did while merged with Alhazred using its ultimate skill could never be noticed the moment she did it.

The very fact that you had been attacked would reach you a whole ten-odd seconds late.

"G-Grinding Shockfist! Grinding Shockfist!"

Using his remaining hand, Gakido frenziedly used his ultimate job skill to attack his surroundings, but alas, Gerbera wasn't close enough for it to reach.

She stood at a distance, bowgun in hand, watching and waiting for her prey to grow weaker.

Once he raised his upper body, she silently shot his left eye.

He lost half of his vision instantly. It scared him, but he had no idea that it was caused by an arrow piercing his head.

He reached for the area and unknowingly touched the arrow, making the wound worse.

Gakido was already as good as dead.

Three of his limbs were gone, his HP was almost non-existent, and the many debuffs were weighing down on him.

Even so, Gerbera didn't come close to him.

She simply waited.

Not saying a word, she waited until the very last moment.

As she was now, she wouldn't make her presence known until the very last moment.

That was her greatest change since entering the gaol.

She would keep a cool head and relentlessly chip away at her opponent's life until they died.

She wouldn't let her guard down or allow anyone to perceive her.

She had become perhaps the most haunting hunter of all.

Once Gakido stopped moving, Gerbera, while keeping her distance, finished him off with a fire magic gem. Flames embraced him, but Gakido didn't even realize it until his death penalty came. However, before he went, he was able to whisper a short sentence.

"It's a nightmare..."

◆◆◆

Bow Hunter, Gerbera

After the incident with Gakido and his merry crew, we returned to the café, and I was now having some of our leader's coffee along with a simple cake.

This was nice and all, but I was still in a bad mood.

"Hey," I called out to our leader.

"Yes?"

"You called that a test, but... wasn't he just really weak? I don't feel like it was even a fight."

Gakido had been about as easy as Rook from when I'd fought him back before I was sent to the gaol.

He was nothing compared to the KoD, Hannya, Candy, and Fu'uta.

He must've been one of those third-rates who focused too much on their SJ!

"Perhaps," said the leader.

Ah. I knew it.

So basically, I was still one of the weaker people here in the gaol.

"Ugh... This is hopeless... I'm pretty sure I'm the weakest Superior..." I lay face-first on the table, as dejected as I had been when I'd first logged in today.

I had no idea why, but the leader was making a slightly different smile.

What's so funny?

"By the way, about your nickname..." he began.

"I can't call myself 'The Unknown' yet."

I had to win against the KoD first.

Hold on. If even our immortal King of Crime had lost against him, what chance did I have? What a downer of a thought...

"Perhaps, but Gakido gave you a very good one, didn't he?" the leader asked.

"Eh?"

He had? D-Did he mean "Fake-Breasts?!" If that became my nickname, I'd have to quit *Dendro* for good!

"The name he gave you is... Albtraum."

”Albtraum”? Umm... that means “Nightmare” in German, right? Better than what I expected, but... “Nightmare”...?

“Isn’t that common?” I asked. I felt like there’d be at least a few “Nightmares” in every country.

“I would say it’s a good start.”

Hmm... it wasn’t weird or anything, so I didn’t really mind it.

“Then I guess I’ll be Gerbera the Nightmare for now,” I said.

“Excellent. I will tell that to our regular customers.”

“That’s kinda embarrassing. Please don’t.”

“Well, these names only gain meaning when others give them to you and start using them regularly.”

I cringed.

That hurt the side of me that desperately wanted to be called “Unknown.”

I’ll just change the subject.

“By the way, do *you* have a nickname?” I asked him.

“I’m confident I had one... but haven’t heard it used for so long that I’ve forgotten it. If only it was as easy as Miss Hannya’s, it would never have left my memory.”

Oh yeah, hers was just “Hannya.”

Thinking of her reminded me of the time the leader and I had gone shopping and she’d mistaken us for a couple.

She’d just popped out and attacked, screaming, “COUPLES IN THE GAOL?! I CAN’T EVEN *SEE* MY GUY!”

It had been crazy scary. I’d used my ultimate skill, but even it had done nothing against her trampling. I’d even had pain on because of training, so it had hurt a lot, too...

If the leader hadn’t been there to become The Saint and heal me, I would’ve gotten the death penalty on the spot.

“Speaking of Hannya, I haven’t seen her in a while,” I went on.

Besides the leader, she was the Superior I met most often. Was she busy in real life or something?

“Ohh, you didn’t know?” the leader asked.

“Eh?”

“She was released yesterday. She gave us this cake as a parting gift. She made it herself, apparently.”

“Oh, I see.”

The cake was good, but I couldn’t tell that it was homemade. This reminded me that as long as she didn’t snap, Hannya was actually a very feminine lady.

Also, I’d heard of it happening, but I still had a hard time believing that anyone could be released.

Of course, we did plan to escape.

“...Hm?” I murmured.

Hannya... had been released?

Hannya, the woman who went on a murdering spree whenever she as much as saw a couple, had been released?

Hannya, the woman who’d destroyed more buildings here than any other Superior, had been released?

Hannya, the woman who was known for her low boiling point even among all the low-lives here, had been released?

“...She’ll be back in no time, won’t she?” I asked.

In response to my words, the leader broke his usual smile and cracked a wry grin — a rarity for him.

Epilogue: After the Storm, and Before the Storm

April 6th, 2045, Quartierlatin Country, ruins

“Ughh...” Rising Sun’s Blue Screen was moaning in front of the plant’s console.

He was doing official work investigating the ruins.

Thanks to Ray and Barbaroy’s help, he’d received a very lucrative quest. He was very thankful for that.

For a clan as insignificant as theirs, this was a true stroke of luck that he probably hadn’t deserved, what with the bad karma on him from the incident at Torne.

Regardless, it was a very good quest, and he’d feel indebted to Ray and Barbaroy for a while.

The only problem was that he was the only Master who’d received this quest.

There were other people who wanted it. Some had gone through introductions that didn’t involve Ray and Barbaroy.

The reward was very good, so of course there were many who would have liked to work alongside him.

However, the quest had the condition of having high-level engineer or mechanic grouping jobs, and those were rare even among Masters who’d moved from Dryfe to Altar.

No one else fit the conditions as well as Blue Screen did.

As a result, he was facing the ruins’ computers all on his own.

“Shit... I’m playing *Dendro*, but it feels like I’m working IRL,” he grumbled as he typed away on the console.

Despite his complaining, he did excellent work, easily unlocking many systems that had left tian scholars stumped.

“Ohh, another cyclic code security program. Dream of Electric Sheep — Gremlin.”

He used his Embryo to dull certain functions of the systems while scanning the data for anything significant.

"Heeey, how's work?! I got ya somethin' to eat!" Dum-Dum entered the plant and called out to Blue Screen. "Makin' any progress?"

"I'd say so. But man, is it just me, or is what we're doing right now *really* far from what a usual PK clan does?"

"Well, we lost Vermin, so now we're a clan of just us two. We don't have a lot of options, so we should be thankful for good jobs like this."

"True," Blue Screen nodded as he ate some of what Dum-Dum had brought. "Any changes in town?"

"Nope, wouldn't say so. You've still got tons of repair and search quests. Lookin' for lost items is basically all I'm doin' right now. Speakin' of which, I found a small engine in one of the hidden rooms in here."

Dum-Dum's Embryo, Mary, was specialized in tracking, and with it, looking for lost items or people.

This side of his Embryo didn't see much use back in Torne, but it was actually the Embryo's main feature.

He led a PK clan, but many would say that he was better suited for something else.

"An engine, eh...? What's the name?" Blue Screen asked.

"Identification wasn't enough for it, so all I got was 'Reactor.' I handed it over to the Altarian research group stationed here in town. We'll see what they find out. Oh! By the way! This old man in the plaza had this fancy-lookin' orchestra. They were playin' Engelberg's music, and they were so goddamn good!"

"Oh, that's the composer you like, right?"

"Hell yeah. He's not releasing anything new at the moment, though. Well, he's old, so maybe he retired?"

Blue Screen continued working even as he chatted with Dum-Dum.

"Hm?" he said suddenly, coming across an interesting set of data.

It was design data that had to be inputted into the plant's production line, and the monitor displayed some sort machine's blueprint along with the corrupted name, "Crystal ■■■■■."

"The data's corrupt?" Blue Screen muttered. "Now that's something not even Gremlin can... Wait, there's something more."

There was more data. The folder had another, completely undamaged machine blueprint.

It displayed what clearly looked like a mechanical horse and had the name "Mass-Production Prism Steed, Second Model."

It was a gift from the past.

The ruins containing a warped hope were now showing a light of hope untainted.

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April 6th, 2045, Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Thursday.

My few, yet long, days in Quartierlatin had come to an end, and it was time for us to leave.

Azurite was going back to the capital, and we were accompanying her.

We were planning to go all the way to Altea today, then make our way back to Gideon.

It was basically my *Dendro* hometown, and it felt like I hadn't been there in ages.

The entrance to Quartierlatin was growing ever more distant, and I saw all the people seeing us off.

Azurite was here unofficially, so the only ones there were the people we'd met here.

There was Shirley and all the other people from the inn we stayed in, Countess Quartierlatin, and Veldorbell.

Tom had already returned to Gideon. Veldorbell had stayed behind, but I hadn't gotten to see him much, due to differences in online times.

Still, every now and then, I could hear Veldorbell's music echoing through the town.

He claimed he would stay here a bit longer, saying that, "I have something I wish to do, but the people of this town need the consolation my music provides."

I'd also met the two Rising Sun guys here, but they hadn't been able to see us off because of all the work they had going on in the ruins.

Apparently, they'd found a way to mass-produce Prism Steed replicas and were now extremely busy producing and deploying units to the knights.

For a moment, I worried that I'd accidentally pushed too much work on them, but B3 said, “They’re getting something from this, so don’t worry about it too much.”

Anyway, with that warm goodbye, we left the town, but the inside of our carriage, drawn by Silver, was so cold that I could feel it here on the coachman’s seat.

We were in B3’s extremely luxurious, comfy carriage, and that seemed to have upset Azurite a bit.

It seemed to bother her that B3 was riding something this fancy after doing significant damage to the kingdom, and B3 seemed to be worried that Azurite would take it away as compensation.

“And I was pretty sure they’d hit it off,” I sighed.

“Their personalities may be a match, but human relations aren’t so simple,” Nemesis commented.

“That’s true...”

That also meant that there wasn’t any fundamental incompatibilities between them, so I could still hope that they’d eventually get along.

“Phew...”

Anyway, if you ignored the confrontation at the end, my time here after the incident at the ruins had been very peaceful.

I’d felt the same after Franklin’s Game. The contrast between the chaos during major incidents and the peace after them was really staggering.

I really hope we don’t get anything that could cost irreversible losses anytime soon, I thought.

“I’m not certain if you can hope for that,” said Nemesis. “The problems between Altar and Dryfe are still unsolved, and let’s not forget that this is *Infinite Dendrogram*. Even if nothing happens here, there could be major incidents happening in a distant land right this very moment. This world is vast, after all.”

“True...”

In that way, it was just like in real life. Something was always happening in a place you couldn’t see or reach.

“And that is why you cannot stop yourself from reaching out and preventing any tragedies you encounter, no?” Nemesis said.

“Maybe,” I admitted.

I just disliked things that could leave a bad taste in my mouth, but it felt like I’d been constantly running into such events ever since I’d started

Dendro.

Perhaps that was what made these peaceful, uneventful days so dear and precious, like the clear sky after a violent storm.

Even if another storm was inevitable, the fact that none of them continued forever was what allowed human hearts and minds to carry on without breaking.

“After the storm, and before the storm” seemed like the best way to describe these past few days.

To be Continued in the Next Episode

Afterword

Cat: “And here we are! The tenth volume! Double digits! I’m the usual afterword cat, Cheshiiire!”
Six: “I invaded the afterword last time, but now I’m here from the start. I’m Six, Sechs Würfel.”
Cat: “Oh... the number?”
Six: “I considered using ‘Evil,’ since I’m a bad slime, but I ultimately decided to go with this.”
Cat: “If it hadn’t been for Xunyu and her ‘Xun,’ we’d all have a nice animal theme going on here, and now we have another mold-breakeerrr.”
Six: “I would’ve used ‘Slime,’ but I feel like that takes too much space. Shu’s ‘Bear’ is already pushing it.”
Cat: “What would you pick if you could use an abbreviation?”
Six: “BoM. (Blob of Malice.)”
Cat: “Wow... That sounds like the nickname of a portly Mafia boss who kills anyone who says it. It suits you well, King of Criiime.”
Six: “Anyway, I’ve introduced myself, so let’s move on to the comment from the author himself.”

Dear readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Kaido Sakon.

After announcing the anime recently, I’ve received lots of words of encouragement from people hopeful for the production. Director Tomoki Kobayashi and everyone else on the team are working very diligently, and I believe the end result will answer your expectations.

Also, I can’t reveal who they are yet, but the people working on the music are brilliant, as well! I am certain they will be revealed by the time volume 11 is released, so please wait for that, too.

Speaking of releases, the spin-off manga where Juliet is the main character should have begun serialization in *Monthly Comic Alive.* Please enjoy Juliet and company's adventures drawn in La-na's beautiful, cute, and cool art style!

I am the one writing it, by the way, and as I mention in the cover comment, this has increased my workload yet again. It's a happy kind of hardship, but I won't deny that it can be painful sometimes... I'll persevere, though.

My series is making new leaps and bounds this year, but don't forget that Kami Imai's manga adaptation of the original story is still going strong! The climax to the second volume is very fiery!

Now, let's talk about the upcoming volume 11.

It's planned to be the last volume to release before the anime starts airing, and the timing makes me feel like the hand of fate is at work here.

Ray and company will soon start their adventure once again in the anime, and the volume coming out right before the airing begins happens to be a prequel about an event that happened sometime before Ray first set foot in Altar — an attack on the country by an unfathomably dangerous creature.

It involves a face-off between the strongest monster and the kingdom's strongest Masters. It's a story from before the time when Ray and his gang had their humble beginnings.

Please look forward to one of the highest-class battles in the history of *Infinite Dendrogram.*

Six: "Volume 11, *The Glory Selector,* is coming out in October 2019. Please look forward to it... Oh? We're not emphasizing the announcement with spacing this time?"
Cat: "The amount of space we can dedicate to the afterword changes sometimes, and we got only three pages for this onnne. Your proper introduction to this corner and the author's comment took up most of iiit."
Six: (I see. I guess that is also why it's just the two of us this time.)
Cat: "Anyway, it's goodbye for now. Please continue supporting this seriiies."

Six: “May we meet again. I appear in the next volume, as well, by the way.”

Bonus Short Stories

Embryo Motifs

A certain place in Tenchi

On his first day of college, Winterbaum, AKA Alex Fuyuki, stayed home to go on a quest in *Dendro*. He traveled alongside two of Hokugen'in's Elite Four, checking up on a number of villages and talking about various things.

"Tenchi's Embryos are relatively simple in that they often focus on pure power," Eashtan commented.

"Really?" asked Winterbaum.

"You could say it's due to the nature of the people who pick this country. Bigman's Brocken is especially simple — it just enlarges his items. It's literally based on the childish idea that size is equal to power, but childish or not, there is truth in that."

He was describing the fellow member of the Elite Four who had just soloed Gakido and his group.

"I suppose it's based on the Brocken specter phenomenon," said Winterbaum.

"Brocken specter" was a name for the shadows dispersed and enlarged by mists or clouds. Their otherworldly appearance earned them a place in folklore all across the world.

"Speaking of Embryos and their motifs, what are your Embryos called?" Winterbaum asked. They went out on the same quest, yet he still didn't know that much.

"Try guessing," said Eashtan.

"Umm... your Embryo spawns ants, so... Myrmecoleon? Myrmidon, maybe?"

Those were the only two ant-related myths that Winterbaum could think of.

"You were close with the second one," said Eashtan. "My Embryo is 'Zeus.'"

The unexpectedly major name caught Winterbaum off-guard. “Ehhh? Oh, wait... Zeus was the one who made the Myrmidons.”

Greek myth had several theories for their origin, and one of them was that they were a warrior tribe created when Zeus transformed some ants into humans.

“That’s a very famous name,” he added.

“Your Horus is impressive, as well,” Eashtan replied. “Hm... you should keep in mind that famous motifs with many legends to their name can be used on multiple Embryos.”

“Oh, so the names aren’t exclusive?”

“Embryos are unlimited, while motifs aren’t. My Zeus is based on a smaller myth, but of course there are Zeuses that are all about just throwing lightning.”

“...I wonder if there are Zeuses with no control over their private parts,” Winterbaum said wryly.

Zeus was mainly associated with lightning or his strangely vast number of children. Even the Myrmidon myth had a version where he transformed into an ant and had many offspring.

“Perhaps there are,” said Eashtan. “Even Horus has many other forms. It’s just how it is.”

I wonder if I’ll ever meet another Horus user, Winterbaum thought before continuing the conversation. “By the way, what’s Probe’s Embryo?”

“I don’t know,” Eashtan replied without hesitation.

“Eh?” Winterbaum was confused that Eashtan wouldn’t know something so fundamental about his long-time companion.

“Think about it. Do you really believe she would say it in a way we can understand?”

“Corporate secret. Firm refusal. No questioning.” Probe made it very clear that she would not talk. You could see it as a sign that she was a careful woman who wouldn’t reveal her hand, but...

Well, I think I know what Mr. Eashtan means, Winterbaum thought.

Probe spoke in sentences of just two words, so if her Embryo’s name was one or more than two words long, she couldn’t say it even if she wasn’t secretive about it. It made him realize just how many Embryo motifs and weirdo Masters *Dendro* had to offer.

The End

The Triangle of Bygone Days

A certain day of a certain month

This happened back when Triangle of Wisdom was just another crafting clan among many others in Dryfe. Franklin, a Master with an Embryo in its fourth form, was sitting in a wooden shack attached to a shabby warehouse incomparable to the headquarters he would eventually have. The leader and originator of this clan, which he had started with the idea to create a humanoid robot, was silently facing the documents on his desk and reading them with a bitter expression.

"Fran, ya heeeere?" AR-I-CA, the clan member who had been with Franklin since the start, opened the creaking door and went inside... but as she did so, the door came off the hinges and became nothing more than a board with handles on it. "Whoops. Sorry."

"It's okay. You can expect that sort of thing from this cheap shack," Franklin replied. He didn't sound like the mad scientist most people knew him as — he was actually being "herself." The reason for this was because "she" was alone with AR-I-CA, one of the few people she could be completely honest with.

"Why not make this place a bit better?" AR-I-CA asked.

This place had been built by the ToW's clan members, but the material was some of the cheapest possible. There was no security here to speak of; instead, any valuables were in their inventories at all times and the clan barely had anything worth stealing, anyway, so this shack was only used for office work.

"If I had funds I could spare for our living environment, I'd fund our prototypes instead. That's what Holheim would want, too," said Franklin.

"Ahahah. Yeah, he really would." AR-I-CA laughed as she remembered the exhausted face of the clan's sub-leader who doubled as the accountant. It always made him look like an overworked-yet-skilled secretary.

Franklin cracked a wry grin, too.

"So, what's that?" AR-I-CA asked as she pointed at the documents Franklin was holding.

"Most of these are logs concerning the prototype we lost yesterday," Franklin replied with a bitter expression.

"Ohhh..."

"Prototype" could only refer to the humanoid Magingear their clan was trying to create. It didn't have a proper name yet — it wasn't even complete.

"That's a whole fifty we've lost..." Franklin sighed.

Thanks to the existence of crafting skills, creating parts and building the robots didn't take a lot of time. Even so, designing and creating fifty robots was time-consuming, and they hadn't had a single success yet.

"It's a nice number, but it looks like there're still lots of problems," said AR-I-CA.

"In the real world, the main problem behind building humanoid robots is power," Franklin explained. "Here, though, that's solved by the mystery voodoo we call 'magic,' which can be converted into all sorts of energy. But using it complicates the way the energy flows, which causes all these self-destructions."

They were using the already-existing powered suit Magingears as a reference to create prototypes that were basically bigger versions of those, but that almost always caused some circuits to overflow or become underpowered, making it impossible for the mech to even move.

"Maybe I should refer to the tanks instead?" Franklin added. "I'd whip up a simple mechanism where you just make the wheels spin and... but that would come at the cost of combat ability..."

"Hey, don't worry about it alone, okay?" AR-I-CA said as she hugged Franklin's head from behind.

"...What are you doing?"

"Breast cushion. Happy?"

"No. How many times do I have to tell you that I'm a woman in real life?"

In fact, your size kinda irritates me, Franklin added in thought.

"Oh. Well, it calmed you down, didn't it?"

"Well... I guess."

The warmth of another human being did have a calming effect.

"Aroused?"

"No."

"Oh, okay. Anyway, this clan's got lots of smarties, so I'm sure you'll solve the problem if you just talk to them!”

“That’s not a good idea.”

There was the saying “Two heads are better than one,” and this clan was built with the idea of research and development using the combined knowledge and brainpower of many individuals. However, Franklin was controlling and directing the development to prevent a “Too many cooks spoil the broth” situation. With so many hobbyists here, it was obvious that letting everyone do what they wanted would make the project lose structure and make completion that much more distant.

“There’s the risk of others trying to take charge or having disputes over minor things. I really can’t ask for their opinions,” Franklin explained.

Another problem with being a group of hobbyists was that people were likely to become upset or try to take matters into their own hands when their ideas went unused. Franklin wanted to provide them with an environment where everyone could develop what they wanted, but for that, they had to complete the very first unit, and that problem troubled him to no end.

“I get it now,” said AR-I-CA. “By the way, you said that ‘most of these’ are logs. What else is there?”

Franklin still had a wry grin on his face, but a select few would be able to tell that the question made him a bit depressed. “Letters of resignation...”

“Ohh? Again?”

“Blitz and Waterloo left. That’s another two of our fighters gone. They even called me a parasite here. Not that I can argue. I’ve wasted a lot of our money.”

It was impossible to make something from nothing. You always needed money to create something, and building robots was a costly task even here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

The ToW raised funds by either selling products crafted by Holheim and the other crafters, or by trading in quest rewards or monster loot gathered by the fighters. Both sides played a part, but there was a big difference in the way they saw things. The fighters could only participate in mech development by being test pilots or mock battle targets, but the development hadn’t even progressed to that point yet. There were even cases of test pilots getting the death penalty due to the robots exploding. From the fighters’ perspective, the crafters were just burning the money they gathered, which was leading many to quit. Some crafters also left due to the lack of prospects.

Franklin silently pondered just how bleak the outlook was. Holheim was doing his best, but despite his efforts, people were leaving, and their funds were dwindling. Whether they would even achieve their goal was an open question, and it worried Franklin to no end.

She hid it with the personality she played, but her thoughts were always on the negative side.

“It’s fine! Don’t worry, Fran!” said AR-I-CA, puffing her chest.

“I can *see* it! It’ll go great!” she continued as she pointed at her artificial eye, which was her Embryo.

“Your Embryo can’t see that far, can it?” Franklin retorted.

AR-I-CA’s Cassandra could see the future, but it was limited to near-immediate events, and only to dangers directed at her, so there was no way she could see their clan succeeding in what they were trying to do.

“Yep! That’s why I’m seeing it with my normal eyes! I believe in you and everyone else in the clan! I can see our bright future!”

“I’m... not sure if I appreciate those words.”

Baseless confidence and optimistic observations were an enemy to all tech developers. Still...

“But if you trust me that much... it makes me want to meet your expectations,” Franklin said at last.

She felt like she could keep on trying. AR-I-CA was the only person she could show weakness to, and the only person who brought her back on her feet when she was close to breaking. With AR-I-CA supporting her mental state and Holheim supporting her environment, she was a balanced triangle. Because of this, she felt like could keep on trying — keep moving forward.

“All right. I guess I’ll go, then. Getting it all back on track once this is done is gonna be a pain in the ass, though.” Franklin stood up, log in hand, to go consult the other members about the problems with the prototype and take their ideas for the development direction.

AR-I-CA watched her best friend off with a smile on her face.

◇◆

A month of such difficult days later, the Triangle of Wisdom completed the first Marshall II.

A while after that, AR-I-CA left the clan.

Her reason for doing that was a mystery to all but Franklin and AR-I-CA herself, but the influence it had on Franklin must've been immense.

The End

The Relationship Between AAA and BBB

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

"I must say, the way you change is quite something," Azurite commented. "The impression you give off is like night and day."

"'Change'?" B3 repeated. "Whatever do you mean?"

We were on the way back to Altea. Sitting in the coachman's seat, Azurite and B3 were talking about something. Knowing the peculiar relationship between them, I was kinda worried.

"I am impressed that *that* armor could contract this much. Does it use an anthropomorphization spell?" asked Azurite.

"Let me to inform you that *this* is my default apparel. Not the armor," B3 replied.

"That was a joke. I understand that much."

So Azurite was just messing with her.

"Also, I can't say I expected you to know how I appear in my armor," B3 added.

"Oh, I do. I was investigating you to decide whether I should put you on the wanted list, after all," Azurite explained. "Honestly, though, my impression of you has changed. You are far more refined than I thought."

"Well, thank you very much, but... did you think I was brutish or something?" B3 spoke as if to argue against that point.

Azurite looked at her in confusion. "Aren't you the one who harassed a low-level Master? Does the sentence 'Kyah ha ha! Come on! Damage me for at least 1 HP and I'll let ya go!' ring a bell?"

Oh, I'm pretty sure I saw that, too, I thought. *Marie showed it to me. There was no sound in what she showed me, though. Man, that's a villain-y phrase.*

"Cough...!" B3 made a sound like she choked on her own blood. "H-How do you know that...?"

"I just said I investigated you. That includes getting testimonies from your victims."

This was probably like having someone else bring up something cringy you did in high school.

"I guess you could say that hiding my face makes my mind excited," B3 admitted, looking embarrassed.

B3 had mentioned something about having to be "turned on" in some way to switch. So it was all about hiding her face, huh? Going by how she'd sounded back in Torne, the helmet even had some sort of voice-modifying device to fit the change.

"I see. I wear a mask myself, so I do understand you a bit," said Azurite.

"Well, but... isn't it the other way around for you?"

"What do you mean?" Azurite asked.

B3 paused for a second before saying, "Without a mask on, sword in hand, you struck a pose and said, 'Are you prepared?'"

"Cough...!" Now I heard Azurite choke.

Oh, that's from the battle against the crab. I saw a recording of it online, and I guess B3 did, too.

"How do you know that...? An impressive counterattack, though, I will give you that much," Azurite admitted.

"I didn't intend it that way."

"My Truth Discernment just flared up a bit. But... very well. Let us not have conversations in this vein again."

"Understood."

Due to her prior offense, Azurite was treating B3 with a bit of harshness and a lot of sarcasm, while B3, though generally on the receiving end, occasionally went in for counterattacks.

Why do they insist on repeating these self-destructive exchanges? I wondered.

"I have a feeling that you are an indirect cause," said Nemesis telepathically.

Why?

"Well, it is nothing I should say. More importantly, you should stop letting them distract you and return to your coachman duties."

Nemesis had a point, so I focused on Silver's reins.

The two ladies inside continued their exchanges until we arrived at Altea.

The End

Sisters

Bow Hunter, Gerbera

A depressing rain was falling upon the gaol.

Our clan leader, Sechs, had left to get coffee beans for the café, leaving me alone with April.

To absolutely no one's surprise, you had to get coffee beans even here.

The gaol had no proper restaurants or vendor tians, but there were some vending machine-like shops. Was that where he was going?

The alternative was that he would farm coffee beans in a dungeon, but I found it hard to believe that.

Oh, speaking of dungeons...

"Hey, April, can I ask you something?" I called out to the robot.

"What-is-it?" she replied in monotone.

"The leader picked you up in a dungeon, right?" I asked, remembering him saying something about a treasure chest.

"Af-fir-ma-tive. This-u-nit-was-dis-a-bled-du-ring-a-bat-tle-at-the-end-of-the-pre-an-cient-civ-i-li-za-tion. The-ow-ner-ship-in-for-ma-tion-was-re-set, as-well. Af-ter-re-ac-ti-va-ting, I-re-gis-tered-the-cur-rent-own-er-as-my-ow-ner."

That sounded like some a baby bird's filial imprinting. But looking at how much she knew, it wasn't like she'd lost her memories, right? I didn't get it at all.

"So... do you remember what you did before you starting serving our leader?" I asked.

"I-used-to-pri-mar-i-ly-pro-tect-V-I-Ps."

"Ohh, that sounds like a perfect job for you."

She was the world's toughest bodyguard, after all. Of course, she'd have to make sure her Material Slider didn't harm those she wanted to protect.

"Af-fir-ma-tive. I-am-the-Prism-Per-son-fo-cused-on-en-dur-ance. It-is-a-good-ap-pli-ca-tion-of-my-a-bi-li-ties."

"So you're saying there are other Prism People as powerful as you?"

"Af-fir-ma-tive. There-were-a-to-tal-of-five-of-us-made. I-am-u-nit-two. Every-one-be-sides-u-nit-one, who-may-be-called-my-el-der-sister, had-ex-cep-tio-nal-bat-tle-ca-pa-bi-li-ties."

So she's one of five sisters, huh...? Wait, there are four... no, three robots... as strong as her?

"Can I ask what the strong sisters were like?" I asked.

"U-nit-three, Jet-Cha-ser, was-fo-cused-on-speed. She-was-e-quipped-with-a-mo-di-fi-ca-tion-wea-pon-that-made-her-the-fast-est-in-all-cir-cum-stan-ces."

"That's just broken."

"U-nit-four, Gar-net-De-stro-yer, was-fo-cused-on-fire-pow-er. She-was-e-quipped-with-ma-ny-tac-ti-cal-wea-pons."

"Was she the same size as you? You're sure she wasn't a giant robot?"

Also, the name reminded me of a certain bear, and remembering that bear made me kinda depressed.

"U-nit-five, Pearl-Sa-vior, was-fo-cused-on-hea-ling. She-was-e-quipped-with-me-di-cal-na-no-ma-chines-and-dil-i-gent-ly-served-hea-ling-the-hea-vi-ly-in-jured-and-se-rious-ly-sick."

"That's a bit sci-fi, but really peaceful compared to the others. I think healing magic does the job just fine, though."

Wait, from what I could recall, healing magic was weak against diseases that required surgery...

"But wait, the fifth isn't exactly a battle robot, right?" I asked.

"She-also-ex-celled-in-sen-ding-na-no-ma-chines-in-to-the-bo-dy-and-as-sas-si-na-ting-the-tar-get-from-with-in."

"I take it back..."

What a dangerous bunch of sisters. Whoever'd made them must have been a real mad scientist. The pre-ancient civilization sounded like an era of insane robots.

"Will your sisters pop out of some chest, too?" I asked.

"That-is-im-pos-si-ble." After saying nothing but "af-fir-ma-tive" to all I'd asked, she was finally denied something.

"Why?"

"The-three-are-ei-ther-de-stroyed-or-miss-ing."

"...Sorry."

I knew I was in a game, and that she was a robot, but I still felt like I asked something I shouldn't have.

April, however, didn't change her expression and said without pause, "No-need-to-a-po-lo-gize. It-is-the-past-and-no-thing-but-a-re-cord-of-the-truth."

It was as if she felt nothing about her sisters "dying."

"Don't you feel that it's... a sad memory?" I asked slowly.

"If-there-is-some-thing-I-'feel,'" April said as she looked at the devices in the café, "it-would-be-the-fact-that-I-was-far-more-for-tu-nate-than-my-sis-ters."

I looked at her in silence. She had basically just said that she was fortunate to still exist, and that that was what separated her from her sisters. It felt less robotic and more like something a philosophical person would think.

"Want some of the cake I made?" I asked at last.

I didn't know whether I wanted to thank her for telling me about her past or make it up to her for being insensitive, but I took out the cake from my inventory and handed it to her. She didn't need to eat, but she could still enjoy the taste.

"Thank-you."

She accepted my offer, and we both ate cake together.

We were the only ones here, and neither of us said a word. All we could hear was the sound of the rain outside.

"Unit five..." Suddenly, April stopped moving her fork and spoke up with vocal smoothness not present before. "She was good at making sweets. The other battle-focused units, myself included, weren't fit for such precise work."

"...I see."

April then returned to eating the cake.

Why did she say that, though?

When I'd asked whether losing her sisters was a sad memory to her, she'd said that all she'd felt was that she was more fortunate than her sisters just by the virtue of still existing, but then, after a strangely long pause, she had indirectly implied having fun memories with her sisters... which implied that she felt something for them, too.

I was dumb, though, so I wasn't sure if my interpretation was any good.

After we silently finished the cake, I began to wonder if she would ever fondly look back at the days she spent with us.

It wasn't a very "me" thought. The weather must've made me sentimental.

"I wonder when the leader's coming back," I pondered. After eating something sweet, I was up for some good coffee to help me change my mood.

I looked at the rain outside and waited for Sechs.

April joined me, and together, we both simply watched the time pass by.

The End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 10
by Sakon Kaidou

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2019

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Infinite Dendrogram
11. The Glory Selecter

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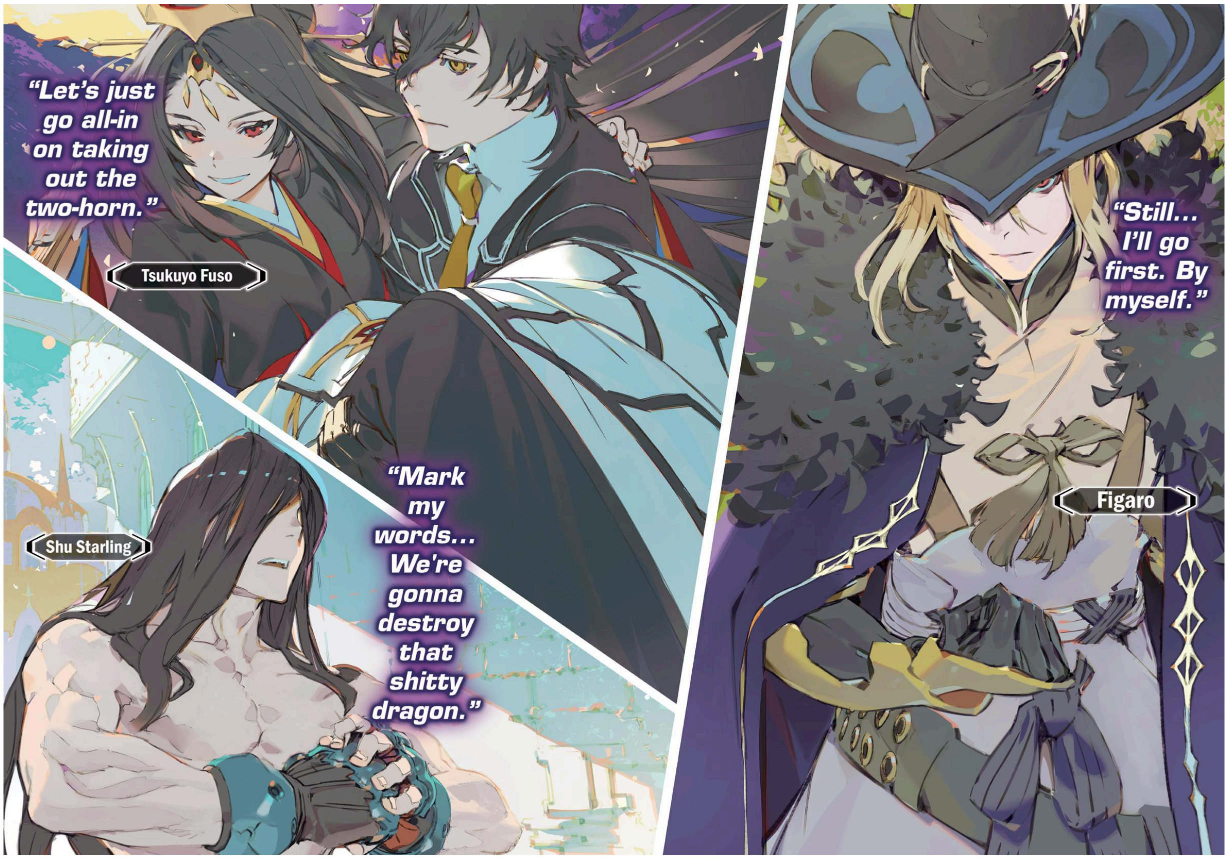
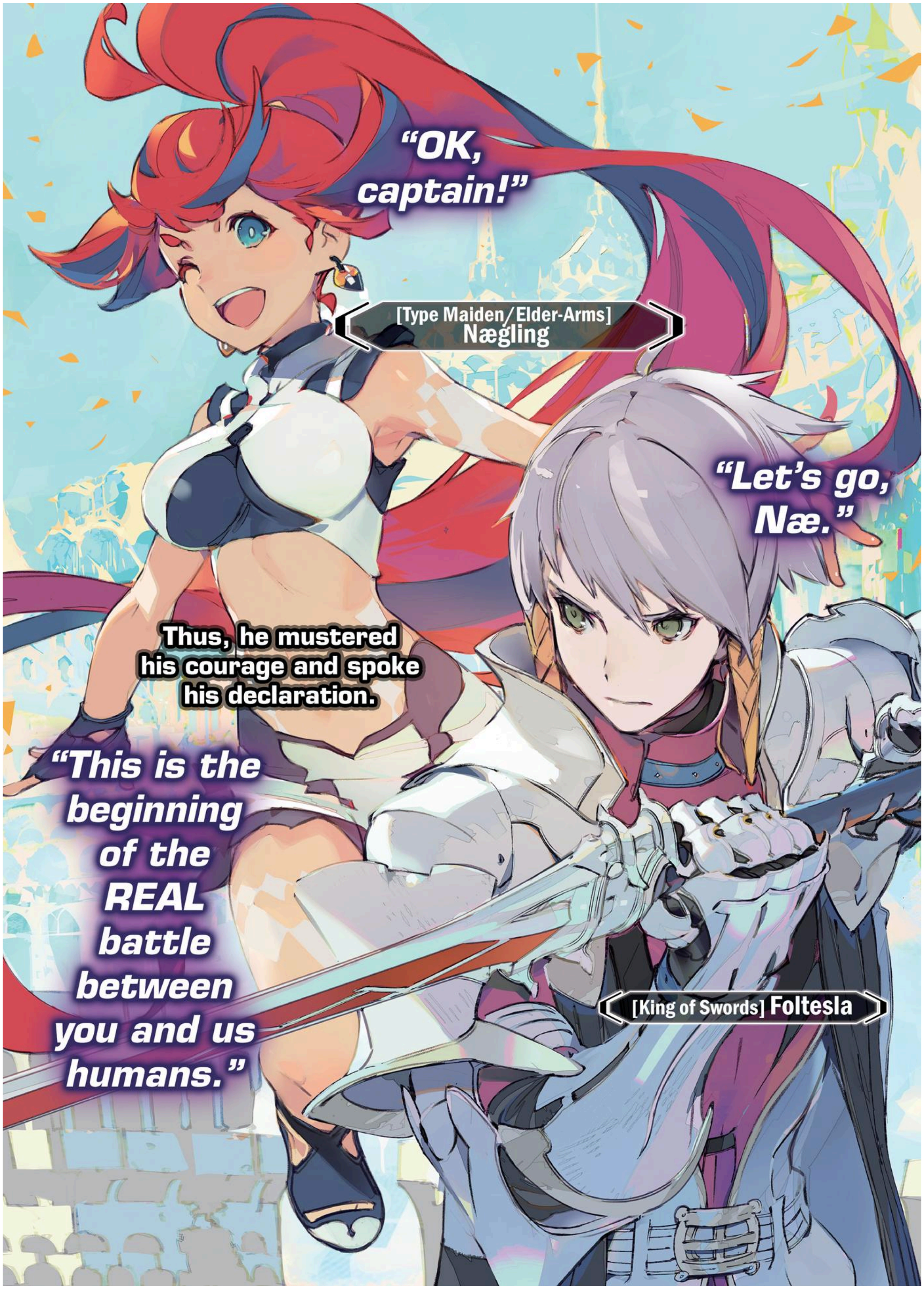

"Let's just go all-in on taking out the two-horn."
Tsukuyo Fuso
"Still... I'll go first. By myself."
Figaro
"Mark my words... We're gonna destroy that shitty dragon."
Shu Starling

"OK, captain!"
[Type Maiden/Elder-Arms] Nægling
"Let's go, Næ."
Thus, he mustered his courage and spoke his declaration.
"This is the beginning of the REAL battle between you and us humans."
[King of Swords] Foltesla

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Opening: The Observer Thought About Days Gone By

2045, April. The Control AI's Workspace — "The Cistern"

The space was akin to a snow dome: a transparent, ever-expanding seabed filled with a slightly blue-tinted fluid. There was not a speck of filth, a flaw, or a sign of life anywhere. Within it, small orbs appeared only to vanish moments later. None of them were any different from each other, *and all of them were Embryos*. Specifically, Embryos in their zeroth form — yet to be implanted, yet to read the host's heart and mind, and yet to be born.

They held endless possibilities, but right now, they were nothing. All they did was rise from the seabed, only to vanish halfway up. The scene was the very definition of transience. They were like shadows, or bubbles, or anything else that had an impending end, no matter how distant. Perhaps *Infinite Dendrogram*, too, was no different at its core. However, the vanishing Embryos were no dreams or illusions. These zeroth forms were being gathered from The Cistern to be implanted into Masters. The Embryo "eggs" were surfacing into the world, carrying their endless possibilities with them. They would meet their Masters, get to know who and what they were, and descend upon the world as their shadows, reflections, or *other halves*. These were shadows and bubbles carrying possibilities too many to count, and it would be no mistake to say that this was a sight of Infinite Transience.

At the very least, that was what the manager of The Cistern believed, and it also happened to be one of "her" names. She was watching the sight right then, not saying a word. A thin, elliptical membrane surrounded her. Though transparent and seemingly weak, the membrane wasn't crushed and did not lose its shape under the weight of all the fluid pressing down upon the seabed. She was within the "egg," and she looked much like a human girl. Some would compare her to an aristocrat hiding herself behind a facade of fine fabric, while others might see her as a bride beneath a veil. She was control AI no. 2, Humpty Dumpty, and her role among the thirteen AIs was to manage the Embryos.

However, that didn't mean that she would interfere with them in any way. Unlike Alice, who was in charge of avatars, or Caterpillar, who managed the environment, Humpty didn't interact with what she "managed." She had only two roles. First was to oversee The Cistern. She would secure the unborn Embryos in their purest form and send them to control AIs who were welcoming newly-arrived Masters. She would also protect the pure zeroth form Embryos from outside influence until the moment they were to be implanted. Though, considering the importance of this act to Embryos, some might say that there was no role more significant.

"...No problems here," Humpty said after checking the state of the seabed and protective fluid, then left The Cistern as though vanishing into thin air.

She had moved to a space akin to a study. It looked much like the one control AI 13 — Cheshire — used, but there were more bookshelves here. Every shelf was full of records. Humpty's study contained data on all the Embryos that had existed from the time *Infinite Dendrogram* began up to the current moment. Managing such data was her second role. She took out a particular book with a spine that read "Superiors." It contained the ordered names of Embryos that had reached their seventh form, such as Apocalypse or Grail. She silently leafed through the pages, only to stop on one of them.

It bore the Embryo name of "War God Ship, Baldr," as well as the name of its Master. "...Shu," she muttered his first name.

She had been there to greet Shu Starling when *Infinite Dendrogram* launched — when her job had required little processing power. Humpty had been observing him ever since. She saw him and Figaro defeat two UBMs when they had just started out. She saw his first meeting with Sechs Würfel, and their many clashes and joint struggles. She saw his encounter with Caldina's Magical Apex, as well as Tenchi's Technical Apex. She saw him become involved with the incident of the Corpse Fortress in Granvaloa's southern seas. She saw his actions during the fall of a flying fortress in the Harshwinter Mountains in the north of the continent. Humpty had been there to see him get caught up in various events — or even lead him to them — ever since he'd started. She remembered them all very well, but there was one among them that truly stood out. “Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria...”

One of her group’s goals was to create a hundred Superior Embryos. This drove them to try out various ways to spur Embryo evolution. The most notable of them, no doubt, was the deployment of the calamities known as “SUBMs.” After all, even supreme sacrifice and suffering could produce Superiors. “Heheh,” she giggled, recalling the third of these calamities — the most destructive of them all so far.

However, she wasn’t laughing at the sacrifices. “‘You aren’t gettin’ any new...’” she mouthed the first part of what Shu said as he challenged the golden calamity, but the rest was drowned out by her giggling.

Thus, the observer reminisced about days gone by.

Act One: The Golden Calamity

2044, November, Control AI No. 4's Workspace
[Selecting target from vault no. 4.]
[Initializing the time stopping cancellation process... completed.]
[Ready for activation.]
[Setting deployment area to the border of the Kingdom of Altar.]
[Set to the northern area of the Kingdom of Altar, Lightning Dragon Mountains.]
[Executing deployment.]
[Initializing the third intervention for the purpose of creating more Superiors.]

◇◆◇

An Area Near The Border Between The Kingdom and The Imperium

Altar and Dryfe. There was lots of traffic between these countries, but there were only two reasonable paths a human could take to cross the border. One was in the plains spreading out between Quartierlatin County to the kingdom's northeast and Barbaros County to the imperium's southeast. The other was the mountain pass linking Lunnings Duchy to the kingdom's northwest and Eldona March to the imperium's southwest. Between these countries, there was a steep mountain range called simply the "Border Mountain Belt," and crossing it on foot was no small task, to put it lightly. However, the true problem in crossing it wasn't the steep slopes, but the dragons inhabiting the mountains.

It was said that in the heart of the Border Mountain Belt, at the peak of the highest mountain, Mount Skycrown, lived the strongest of the skydragons — Skydragon King, Drag-Heaven — while the surrounding mountains were occupied by other kings of the skydragon kind. Mount Skycrown stood alongside Landdragon King's Harshwinter Mountains and the Outer Sea circled by the Seadragon King as a place densely populated by fearsome dragons that no sane tian ever approached. The occasional foolishly-confident martial artist or adventurous Master might actually enter the area, but with the sky dominated by Pure-Dragons, most of them were extinguished before reaching the Skydragon King; even those who made it that far were reduced to dust in a mere moment.

The Border Mountain Belt was a place that no uninvited guests could leave alive. However, if you ignored the skydragons' harshness to intruders, they were actually a very magnanimous kind. They rarely left their territory to hunt other animals, and never attacked the people traveling to the east or west of their mountains. As long as their borders were respected, they were actually a surprisingly safe neighbor to both the kingdom and the imperium. That was what separated them from the landdragons of the Harshwinter Mountains. Due to a shortage of food and an environment so harsh they'd named the whole area after it, the landdragons frequently left their mountains to hunt. That was an underlying cause of the ancient rivalry between landdragons and roc birds. Regardless, thanks to the orderly skydragons, exchanges between the two countries were going swimmingly.

"Hmm... There is more human movement than usual. Is this a sign of another major event in the world of men? Is one of the countries changing rulers? Is it the north or the south?"

Seated at the top of the Lightning Dragon Mountain to the west of the belt, a large dragon was looking down at the people passing by. Overall, he was slender, but his wingspan was vast and his horns imposing. It wasn't just for show, either — there were pale sparks running through both the wings and horns, making it obvious that he channeled immense amounts of electricity. His name was Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt. He was the third child of the Skydragon King, and the head of the Lightning Dragon kind living around this mountain of the same name, which was particularly close to the border between the human countries. "There is also the harvest festival. Perhaps I should use Anthropomorphization and go see the town when the day comes."

He enjoyed observing the world of men, and it wasn't unusual for him to transform into a human and go look around their settlements during special occasions.

Drag-Volt even called Duke Lunnings himself a friend. The man knew what he really was, but hid it from everyone else; they even enjoyed festivities together. The majestic dragon truly enjoyed the world of men. “I would have to have one of my younger brothers take my place, so... Hm?” Drag-Volt suddenly felt the presence of an approaching dragon over ten kilometels away. “...This one does not belong here. Does he intend to harm mankind?”

Controlling dragons that would bring harm to the area and mankind was one of his roles. Every dragon that perpetrated malicious attacks on humans increased the chances of sparking war between mankind and dragonkind. The Skydragon King and his family kept control over the local dragons in order to prevent that. And even if it hadn’t been his duty, Drag-Volt himself couldn’t tolerate any kin who would harm the world of man. “I suppose this is just another rebel from some mountain... Hm?”

At first, he guessed that it was just a dragon who had gained power at some mountain or other and let it go to his head. However, the presence he felt as the creature drew closer confirmed that this was not the case. And upon seeing the being’s body, he realized that it was not one of his kind.

“You... You are no skydragon.” Though still a dragon, this one looked wrong. Dragons usually had but one head, but this one had three, each of which sported a different number of horns. Things might’ve been different among seadragons and landdragons, but the orderly skydragons would’ve culled this creature, for it was known that malformed skydragons would not mature properly and were often malicious.

In the many years of his life, Drag-Volt had never seen a malformed dragon grow as large as this three-head, and that alone was proof that it was not from these mountains.

“Answer me! Where did you come from!?” Drag-Volt spoke in Draconic. However, the response he got...
“ShEaAwOooOooOAAAaaaHHH!” ...was just a roar — a primal scream unleashed with a force that surpassed any ability to describe its insanity.
“Mad-dragon! You know not even words!?” At that moment, Drag-Volt realized that this three-headed dragon must be annihilated, and thus released the strongest attack ability he had — a skill unique to him.

The electricity in his back and horns grew in intensity before gathering in his maw... “Lightning Vortex!” ...And released as a giant, whirling lightning storm that reached several kilometels away. That was the fastest, most powerful attack of Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt — a Mythical

UBM. It was literally lightning-fast and carried the energy of several nuclear warheads, burning anything in its wake. The force of the impact was such that it even melted the mountains surrounding the three-headed dragon. There was little doubt that it would boil every fluid in a living creature's body before vaporizing them entirely, granting them a swift death. "Foolish, maddened dragon," Drag-Volt said. "Why do you think me and my brother were stationed on the east and west of this border? An overconfident whelp is nothing to us."

He was in the west, while the younger of his elder brothers — Winddragon King — was in the east. If you ignored the Skydragon King, seated at The Skycrown, and his firstborn — his most trusted confidant — the strongest of the skydragon kind were placed at the mountains near the border. This was so they could easily take out any dragons as insolent as this one. The Lightning Dragon King had purged many such dragons over the five centuries since he set to this task. Thus, he didn't doubt his victory this time, either. However... *the same could be said about his foe*.

"SHuOoaAahHhH!" With another roar, the dragon emerged from the vaporized mountain... completely unharmed.

"...Impossible."

This can't be happening. Drag-Volt could not shake the thought.

He could perhaps understand if the creature barely survived his strongest attack, and could even accept it sustaining merely light damage. However, it was *impossible* for it to be completely unharmed. After all, even his father couldn't accomplish that — the Skydragon King himself. That would mean that this dragon here was actually superior to his immensely powerful father. "...No," Drag-Volt denied the comparison, but not due to any sentiment as his father's son, but because of his experience as a dragon with many battles to his name.

"It must have something that shields it from harm." A skill unknown to Drag-Volt protected it from his Lightning Vortex, and he believed that there was no point in attacking it again until he knew what it was.

Thus, he gathered his resolve. "...FATHER! BROTHERS! DO YOU SEE ME!?" he roared to the heavens.

Of course, The Skycrown where the firstborn lived was too far away to see. However, Drag-Volt was confident that they heard him and were watching this battle. "I WILL NOW GIVE MY ALL TO EXPOSE THIS

WRETCH!” he roared again, gathering power in his limbs. “AFTER I PERISH, DESTROY IT!”

The Lightning Dragon King was already prepared to die. Drag-Volt didn’t think that the creature before him was superior to the Skydragon King, but he knew for a fact that it was most certainly stronger than himself.

“COME, YOU MADDENED DRAGON! I SHALL GIVE MY LIFE TO EXPOSE THE SECRET... OF YOUR DEFENSE!” Thus, Drag-Volt dove towards the dragon...

“SHAhAHahHAhaH!”

His death was unceremonious, punctuated only by the beast’s cackling roar.

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Kingdom of Altar, Lunnings Duchy

Lunnings Duchy, situated in the kingdom’s northwest, was a welcoming land with a temperate climate. It was one of the country’s grain-producing regions, and it was harvest season. Looking over the fields of wheat that spread all the way to the base of the mountains, Duke Lunnings, who was here for an inspection, nodded in satisfaction. “Mhm... I see that this year’s harvest is especially abundant.”

The chief of the local village smiled as he said, “Truly. We had a fair bit of help from Masters this year. Both the amount and food value are greater than last year, and the soil is still fertile enough for more.”

“I see, I see,” nodded the duke. “I must admit, I was quite worried by the sudden growth in Master numbers three years ago, and though I’m aware there are folk as troublesome as Sechs Würfel among their number, I see that their arrival was a boon to my lands. Most excellent, indeed. Hahahah!” he laughed heartily. “This year’s festival is sure to be grand.”

Lord Drag-Volt will certainly enjoy it, he thought to himself, not saying a word — for that was a secret not even his family could know, let alone the chief.

“Mhm... With such a harvest, it will not pain me too much to not send out the gift,” the duke continued.

“Gift?” the chief asked.

“Mhm. As you know, this duchy shares a border with Dryfe, and we are on very good terms with our foreign neighbors in the Eldona March. Thus, during their auspicious events, we must send a gift separate from the one sent by the kingdom itself.”

“There’s an auspicious event in Dryfe?”

“Mhm. They have stopped mourning the imperator they lost last month, and his successor has been chosen. I’m not certain who it is, but I would guess it’s either the last imperator’s firstborn, Prince Gustav, or Gustav’s son, Hallon. The imperator’s wife and mother of Gustav is from the Eldona family, so it’s likely that it will soon be even more prosperous than before.”

And that was exactly why Duke Lunnings wanted to strengthen the ties between the two lands. He had considered funding the gift by emptying his family’s coffers, but with a harvest so great, the damage to his finances would be minimized. This greatly relieved him. Recently, Altar had been on good terms with both Dryfe to the north and Legendaria to the south. Duke Lunnings felt as though this harvest was a sign of peace and prosperity for all three western countries.

However... fate had other plans.

“...Hm?” The duke looked ahead into the distance. The color of the mountain beyond the wheat fields — the mountain whose pass linked Altar and Dryfe — had changed. It had been covered in green plant life, but now, mysteriously, the peak grew brown with decay. It didn’t stop there, either. Little by little, as though descending from the peak to the plains, the decay encroached on the wheat fields. “What is that? Poison? Is there a poisonous monster there?” The kingdom was no stranger to poisonous monsters, but those that could stain a whole mountain were few and far between.

“Don’t tell me it’s a King Basilisk! They’re some of the worst Pure-Dragons you can encounter!” Duke Lunnings named a creature so dangerous that there was a perpetual bounty on them, even though they weren’t UBMs. Even the kingdom recognized them as especially dangerous. If a monster like that reached the fields or the town, the damage would be immense. Naturally, Duke Lunnings decided they were in danger. The chief, on the other hand, was rather calm.

“A King Basilisk, eh?” he said. “Then I’m sure all will be well.”

“Why are you so confident!?” asked the duke.

“We have Masters staying in this village. We’ve been attacked by several Pure-Dragons since the crops became ripe, but they've always defeated them. Look."

The chief pointed at a party of five, speeding towards the decaying mountain. Duke Lunnings' Reveal skill told him that they were all above level 300, and he saw that one of them was riding a landdragon Pure-Dragon. "Ohh! They should have no trouble at all!" he exclaimed in relief.

"Indeed. They will surely slay the King Basilisk," nodded the chief. The Masters were probably stronger than even the duchy's knights. The chief had full confidence that they would be victorious, and Duke Lunnings expected good things as well. Alas, the party of Masters became orbs of light the moment they approached the rotting greenery.

"...What?" A group of Masters over level 300 and an earth-type Pure-Dragon vanished in but an instant. *This can't be the poison of a mere King Basilisk... there's something even worse in those woods!* the duke thought, now absolutely certain.

"C-Could it be... a Mythical UBM? Like Edelvalsa!?" The first thing that came to the duke's mind was Unguided Army, Edelvalsa — the Mythical UBM that had appeared at the border of the Quartierlatin County in the northeast of the kingdom nearly thirty years ago.

Back then, the disaster had felt like somebody else's problem. Mythicals were astronomically rare, and the Border Mountain Belt was occupied by the orderly skydragons who never harmed humans outside of their territory. "Is it an evil dragon from the mountains?" the duke wondered. "But then Lord Drag-Volt should've put it in its place... Ohh, what is going on?"

He closed his eyes, not certain how to feel about this sudden incident. "Still, we must act right away! First, we evacuate our people! Then I will return to the town — no, I will use the communication magic devices here in this village to contact the capital!" The duke quickly put together a plan. He wanted to contact the capital or the adventurer's guild to call forth high-ranking Masters that could take care of this emergency. The wheat fields might be left in ruins, but the duke believed that as long as the people were alive, they would eventually recover. There were no holes in his plan, except perhaps his lack of awareness of just how menacing this monster was. The strongest monsters that had ever appeared in the kingdom were Mythical UBMs. With such a limited scale, it was impossible to gauge the power of this being.

“D-Duke... DUKE LUNNINGS!” The chief had recovered from the shock of seeing the party of Masters in which he’d placed such confidence vanish in an instant, and now was staring at something with his eyes wide.

“What!?” the duke exclaimed in frustration, before noticing what the chief was looking at and muttering a meek “...What?”

They were staring in the direction of the decayed woods, but not into them. The cause of the decay and the monster that destroyed the Masters wasn’t something that could hide behind a few trees. *It was still behind the mountain.* Slowly, as though walking, it showed itself from behind the mountain. The thing they saw first was a head. A golden head with three horns slowly crossed the ridge and showed itself. Then, the duke saw a single-horned head show up from the left, and a two-horned head from the right. All three heads had long necks, covered in the same golden scales as the head. Finally, once it placed its front claw on the mountain top, the duke realized what he was looking at. “A golden... three-headed... dragon...” A monster as large as half the mountain — at least two hundred metels in height. Perhaps it was just a hundred, but even so, it was far larger than any monster the duke had ever seen. More importantly, his instincts told him that he could not stand in this thing’s way and that he should abandon all and run for his life.

“Th-That’s...!” Despite being struck by terror, the duke somehow noticed that one head — the two-horned one — was biting into something.

“L-Lord Drag-Volt...!?” Indeed, those were the remains of the Lightning Dragon King. Though, for all the duke knew, he wasn’t dead yet. There were no scratches on the lifeless body. It was in oddly pristine condition, and hadn’t vanished because the resurrection period hadn’t yet expired. Sadly, that didn’t mean that there was hope.

“SHyeAhwOWahwOWHahWoO!” With a feral scream akin to a human cackle, the two-horned head crunched its fangs into Drag-Volt’s neck, transforming his corpse into particles of light. “Th-This is... This can’t be happening...” As the count’s mind failed to process the sudden trauma of losing his dragon friend, the three-headed nightmare crossed the peak, revealing its full, terrifying glory.

“SHEeEAHHhwOooOoO!” Then, the two-horned head let out a cry akin to a whistle. There was a giant oblong eye buried in the center of its face, and it was shedding a purplish, hazy light.

It filled the duke with immense fear. He didn't know why. He didn't know what made him believe what he did. But he somehow understood that that single eye was the cause of the decay and the thing that killed the Master party... as well as Drag-Volt.

"...EVACUATE! GET AS FAR AWAY FROM THAT DRAGON AS POSSIBLE! IT WILL KILL YOU!" The duke used the voice amplification item he'd brought to address his people to order them to run for their lives. The awestruck, dazed crowd was jolted back to their senses, screamed in panic, and ran as fast as their legs allowed. The duke jumped on his horse and fled along with them. Well-trained as it was, the horse stayed calm and obeyed its owner well despite the situation.

The chief also began running. "Hoo... hoo..." His breathing ragged from the fear and tension overwhelming his heart, the duke spurred his horse into the fastest gallop it could manage. After a minute of this, he turned around to see the three-headed dragon still clinging to the peak. It walked slowly, and though its area of decay now reached the wheat fields, the villagers were only running faster. *It's too large to move any faster...!* the duke thought in relief. It was surely a sentiment shared among all the people fleeing from it. Thus, only a few of them realized that the dragon was *spreading its wings*.

In fact, if they hadn't been panicking, they would've realized the obvious detail they'd all missed: The fact that dragons could *fly*.

The three-headed abomination spread out its wings, which were each as large as its torso, and took its massive body to the sky. It flew at a leisurely pace, ending the lives of all living creatures it drew close to. The duke, the chief, the thousand or so villagers, the non-humanoids, and monsters... Their lives were taken from them in the blink of an eye. They fell to the ground like lifeless dolls.

Thus came the end of the northwest region of the kingdom... The Lightning Dragon Mountain and the Lunnings Duchy.

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"And so, the SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, has been successfully deployed in the northwest of the kingdom. It looks like the Lightning Dragon King died, though. What a shame. He was quite promising."

“Nooo helping it, is theeere? Aaaanywaaay, if aaall goes accooording to hoow we set it, it should slooowly moooove to the sooouteeeaast, and the Fatal Field’s effects will reeeeach the capital in a weeeek!”

“All that’s left for us is to watch. Let us hope that this will be a good test for the kingdom’s Masters, and that the one to conquer her will be a new Superior.

“...”

“You look like you want to say something, Cheshire. Is it because the kingdom is your homeground?”

“We’re releasing a powerful enemy that can’t be defeated in normal ways... an SUBM. This will spur those slacking Masters into action and maybe even force an evolution. I understand that much, and I know it went well last time, but there’s still something I feel I must say.”

“What is it?”

“Gloria is... too strong. She’s above both Greatest One and Twin Moby Dick. She’s extremely complete as a monster, even when compared to the many other SUBMs we’ve retrieved and contained. Honestly, I think she should’ve been released at a later time.”

“That’s exactly why we’re doing it now.”

“...What?”

“Humpty has high hopes for King of Destruction, Mad Hatter has his eyes set on the Over Gladiator, Alice is fond of the High Priestess, and you give lots of your attention to the King of Crimes. A standard SUBM would not have much of an effect on a country with so many outstanding individuals.”

“...”

“Do not forget, Cheshire. This is all in the hope that the kingdom’s Masters will shatter their limits and emerge victorious. It’s for that reason that we’ve crafted the most perfect monster of all.”

Act Two: Claymill Absolute Defense Line

Days since Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria's Emergence Event: Four.

The Lunnings Duchy had been destroyed, and the head of the Lightning Dragon Mountain — Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt — was dead.

News of these events were both sudden and devastating to the kingdom as a whole. Those with far-sight magic confirmed that the one responsible for all of this was a creature known only as "Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria."

However, the name wasn't the only thing they'd found out about it.

First, they'd confirmed that it was the first SUBM — a rank of UBM above even Mythical — that had ever appeared in the Kingdom of Altar.

Second, they'd found out that all living beings that entered a radius of one kilometel around it instantly died.

The approach of a creature with such an ability promised a swift, inescapable death to all in its path.

The revelation of its approach struck fear into the hearts of the people, and those who lived in its predicted path had immediately begun to evacuate.

However, there were some who welcomed its appearance.

Most of them were Masters... particularly, the rankers. Their feelings could be summed up by one word — "finally."

To them, UBMs were nothing more than special monsters that dropped unique items upon defeat.

The stronger they were, the more reason the Masters had to battle them. And with SUBMs being the pinnacle of UBMs, one could only imagine what incredible loot it would drop. Many of the craftier individuals were already scheming to become MVPs, no matter the cost.

This wouldn't be the first time an SUBM was defeated. The one that'd appeared before Gloria, "Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick," had been conquered by the entire Granvaloan navy, along with the Great

Admiral Antimicrobic Soy Sauce, the “Human Bomb”, and King of Thieves Zeta, the “Fatal Seal of the Four Seas.”

The two Superiors had been picked as the MVPs and received items that were above Mythical tier.

That knowledge was one of the reasons why many were enthusiastic about facing Gloria, but there was something besides the special reward that greatly attracted them — *glory*.

Many ludo Masters thought of SUBM fights as a major facet of *Infinite Dendrogram’s* late-game content. The name of an MVP in an SUBM fight would become well-known across the whole game. The *glory* earned from this was particularly attractive to the stronger kill rankers. They and the high-ranking clans instantly mobilized to defeat Gloria. The first to act focused more on speed than preparation.

There were a few reasons for this.

One was that if they wasted too much time, the kingdom might hatch a countermeasure of their own; if not that, the Skydragon King might leave The Skycrown to avenge his third child.

The kingdom’s Masters couldn’t have been the only ones attracted by Gloria’s promises, either. There might’ve been Dryfean or Legendarian Masters traveling there right that very moment for the sole purpose of slaying the dragon.

But perhaps the greatest threat to them were the four Superiors of their own country — King of Destruction, Over Gladiator, High Priestess, and King of Crime. If any of them were to act first, the high-ranking Masters would have no hope of becoming MVPs.

With that in mind, many rankers and clans quickly gathered to face Gloria... *only for most of them to suffer the death penalty on the fourth day of Gloria’s appearance*.

The famed rankers and clans were crushed like pebbles on the road, like something out of a bad slapstick routine.

More than half of them died the moment they approached the dragon, while those that somehow made it to Gloria itself were instantly pulverized by its immense stats that surpassed even Mythical tier.

The only valuable result of their hasty actions was two pieces of vague information picked up by DIN agents watching from a distance: “some didn’t die instantly” and “it’s likely that Gloria has some sort of defensive ability."

Perhaps the rankers that had survived the encounter long enough to actually fight Gloria itself had more information, but they all kept that to themselves. As Masters, they could challenge the dragon again after their death penalty timer expired, so it was only natural to guard and treasure whatever valuable information they had. Though, it was questionable if a rematch would've been enough for any of them to best a creature this powerful.

While Masters experienced defeat after defeat, the Kingdom's tians crafted an anti-Gloria plan of their own.

Specifically, they would shower it with an obscene amount of long-range attacks.

Its insta-death field was fatal, but nothing prevented you from attacking it from outside its range.

They would simultaneously attack it with a coordinated magic attack from Arch Sage's apprentices and a rite of divine punishment from Cardinal Fau Verdin — the current head of the national church — and his many adherents.

They also borrowed some special support from a particular ally.

The kingdom finished its preparations, established a defensive formation at the fortress city of Claymill, and prepared to greet the dragon.

And, as though in perfect sync with the kingdom, a certain group of more cautious Masters also prepared to act.

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Kingdom of Altar, Claymill the Fortress City

The fortress city of Claymill was located right between the capital and the Altar-Dryfe border in the country's northwest. It had started out as a fortress for war between neighboring countries —though, in this case, that referred to neither Dryfe nor Legendaria.

The foundations for this city had been laid several centuries ago, back when the land that would become Altar was split into many smaller, warring countries. The city sported a defensive barrier that entirely covered it and even extended to some land outside of it; at the time, it was perhaps the strongest fortress in the middle-west.

However, Azurite, first of his name — Sacred King who would go on to found the Kingdom of Altar — charged the fortress all by himself, shattered the barrier, and quickly defeated the city's leader. In the world of *Infinite Dendrogram,* it wasn't exactly unusual for a single person of immense ability to bring down a powerful fortress all on their own... and that was exactly what Claymill was.

Since it was far from Altar's current borders, it had little value as a strategic point. Now, it was more of a tourist destination, due to its involvement in the legend of the Sacred King and the founding of Altar. However, the city's defensive functions were still active. Even now, it could create a defensive barrier around it that provided absolute protection from even high-rank ultimate job skills. And despite it being such a strong defense, the barrier didn't hinder attacks from inside it whatsoever.

It may be obvious why Claymill was chosen as the location for the kingdom's plans to defeat Gloria.

Currently, in the outskirts of the city, there were four different groups preparing to fight Gloria.

The first of them was the smallest in number. Clad in deep blue robes, they were the Arch Sage's apprentices. There were fewer than thirty of them, but not a single one was below level 400, and every one of their number was one of the most distinguished tian Sages.

They were led by the eldest among them — Sage, Frigelt.

"A monster that requires us to all join forces... It speaks volumes to the gravity of the situation."

"If only our Arch Sage was here, too."

"Our teacher stands at the last line of defense, along with Sir Grandria and his Royal Guard. He stands near the capital to stop the creature from entering, in case it takes an alternate route and doesn't pass through here."

The Arch Sage was their teacher and the pride of their country, and he was powerful enough to cast spells as strong as their unison magic all on his own. It would have been encouraging to have him here, but many of the apprentices thought that this was an excellent chance to go all-out with the magic they'd learned from him.

"Like Mr. Frigelt suggested, we will use unison binding magic, aspected to the element of earth."

"Not offensive magic?"

"With Magic Range Extension using so much of our MP, offensive magic would be less effective. There's also the rite of divine punishment from the church, as well as our other weapon. We are to focus on trapping it in place."

"I see. So we will be the 'unsung heroes.'"

"...The what?"

"It's a term I heard from a Master. It describes someone who is vital to success, but does not stand out."

"'Unsung heroes,' huh? Well, let's just keep in mind that what we do is important and give it our all."

"Of course!" Thus, the apprentices prepared, determined to use their magic to carve a path to victory.

The second group was made up of people clad in white. Unlike the Arch Sage's apprentices, they were numerous — over six hundred strong. They were diverse in jobs, with Priests, Temple Knights, Monks, and others among them, but they had one factor in common — they were all people of the cloth. Their great number served a purpose, too, for the rite of divine punishment's power increased the more people who performed it.

This was a mobilization of all the volunteers still undergoing their training as holy acolytes. They were willing participants here, but as the hour of battle drew close, some became afraid.

"...We'll die if it gets too close, right?"

"Yeah. They say that it's a dragon embodying a curse of death. That sure is scary..."

As the still-young priests talked among themselves... "And that is why it's our turn to act." ...A man in the prime of his life called out to them.

"Cardinal Verdin?!"

"Why are you here?!"

Indeed, it was Cardinal Fau Verdin.

With Tsukuyo Fuso taking the High Priestess job, the male version of it — Hierophant — was unavailable, and without a proper Hierophant, he had become the functional leader of Altar's church. His status was equivalent to that of a cardinal, but his job was actually Bishop, because a "Cardinal" job didn't exist.

"I can understand why you would be worried. However, those who have no means of fighting the approaching death curse are far more worried than you could ever be," he said, giving a strong yet peaceful smile and placing his hands on their shoulders. "We have the power to repel this death curse. Thus, you must believe that the powers granted to us by the heavens and the crystals will banish this approaching evil."

"W-We will!"

"We'll do our best!" The two regained their morale. Cardinal Verdin smiled and nodded in satisfaction before moving on to other priests who were still nervous.

The third group was stationed some distance away from the other two, and they were clad in dark green army uniforms.

They spread silver sheets over the plain and did something to make them — the Garages — open up, revealing many heavily armored, tracked Magingears known as "Geists."

They were the imperium's second armored battalion... reinforcements from Dryfe Imperium to the north.

When Gloria had appeared, they happened to be here for joint military exercises.

Of course, they could've just returned to their country, but by the will of First Prince Gustav — the one rumored to be chosen as the next imperator — they would help the kingdom defeat Gloria.

Like unison magic and the rite of divine punishment, Geists excelled at dealing damage at long range, so they were certainly capable of lending aid to this defense.

And tanks weren't the only things they had up their sleeve. While coming to Altar for joint exercises, they'd brought over a powerful secret weapon as a bargaining chip. This weapon was now being assembled by Mechanics using parts from Garages and their own inventories, and it looked like a cannon with a barrel as large as a smokestack.

However, the strangest group of all was the fourth one.

Unlike the other three, they all wore different clothing. They all dressed as they pleased, but their gear was, on average, far more rare and powerful than the robes or uniforms of the other three groups.

Some of them even had MVP special rewards — a rarity among tians — that they seemed to wear and wield like it was no big deal.

They were Masters, but not just any Masters. They were the Babylonian Battlegroup — the second in the kingdom's clan rankings.

They stood ready on the plain outside of Claymill's defense barrier.

"Leader, 256 of the 287 members were able to log in today," the clan's sub-leader, Over Enchanter, Shulka, reported to the leader. They both stood in a tent erected on the plains.

"I see," the leader said. "It's great that so many could make it."

"It's a very important quest, after all. You have a lot of people calling in sick and skipping work or school just for this, especially here in our clan."

"Heh. You've got a point." The leader's name was King of Swords, Foltesla. He was third in the kingdom's duel rankings, and many saw him as the current champion's — Over Gladiator, Figaro's — friendly rival.

While Figaro was often compared to a lion or a tiger, Foltesla had the air of a snow leopard about him.

"Also, this is not *just* an ordinary fight," Shulka added. "Our hometown is in danger. There's no better time to go all-out than right now."

"...Yeah." Babylonian Battlegroup was based in Claymill. The city was a major part of their lives, and they'd made many memories here. Thus, they had to protect it at all costs.

"Leader... What about your wife?" Shulka asked worriedly.

"I asked her to evacuate three times now. She said 'I work with medicine. I have to stay for the sake of those who can't leave.'"

Foltesla was one of the few Masters who'd married in *Infinite Dendrogram*. His wife was a tian working in a hospital in Claymill. Thus, he wanted to protect this city more than anyone else. It was the reason his expression was even more serious than that of the other Masters.

"...We can't lose this," he said. A moment later, the crest on his left hand shone and...

"We'll win for sure, captain!" ...and a girl appeared. She had red hair and seemed to be in her late teens, but she moved around with so much energy that it made her look younger.

Her name was Næġling. She was Foltesla's Embryo of the Type Maiden/Elder-Arms.

"We'll win no matter what, take its special reward as a souvenir, and return to Erica! I won't accept anything else!"

"Yeah... Of course... Næ," said Foltesla, patting her head with a smile.

"Leader, I just got some info via comms magic," said Shulka. "There are other clans and parties besides us in the surroundings."

"They probably think they can become MVPs by finishing Gloria off after we and the kingdom weaken it," said Foltesla. "Reaping the benefits of our hard work." He also assumed that some of them were those who'd fought Gloria earlier and had just returned from their death penalty.

"...Should we remove them beforehand?"

"Leave them. We won't be cooperating, but they will add to our overall power. Honestly, I have no idea how much of it we need."

The strongest UBM that Foltesla had beaten so far was Ancient Legendary. Gloria was two tiers above that, and he couldn't even imagine how dangerous it was.

"Power, eh...? If only we had The Lunar Society or the likes of Figaro and Tom Cat with us." Shulka named the country's top clan and the two duel rankers who were above Foltesla.

"It is what it is. The cult is negotiating with the kingdom, while Tom Cat is probably a dev plant, so he won't do anything about this. As for Figaro..."

"Leader?"

"Oh, it's nothing..." As his longtime rival, Foltesla knew Figaro's weakness.

Specifically, he knew that Figaro could only really fight alone. Participating in a large-scale cooperative battle such as this one would've been quite the challenge for him.

Despite that, Foltesla clearly recalled him saying "Foltesla... Should I participate, too?"

Figaro'd offered this because he knew that Gloria was approaching Claymill, which Foltesla held dear as his and his wife's home.

Foltesla had replied by saying, "No need, Figaro. You just sit tight on your throne. I'll be coming to take it after I beat Gloria."

He'd rejected Figaro's offer, because he didn't want to expose his weakness to the many others gathered there and didn't want Figaro to be aware of his own weakness either — and, as his rival, he wanted Figaro to be the best he could be.

"Do you think I did the wrong thing, Næ?" he asked Næ telepathically.

"No. I'm sure this is good! I want the lion to stay strong, too! It's one of the reasons why I wanna beat him!"

"...I know what you mean." A moment later, a Babylonian Battlegroup member opened the entrance to the tent and said, "Leader! I have a message from the scouts observing Gloria! We have only two hours left until the target arrives!"

"I see," said Foltesla. "Then we'll follow our plan and attack it outside the barrier."

"Understood!" said the member before running out and informing the start of the operation.

"It'll go well, yes?" Shulka asked, clearly worried.

"We have to make sure that it does. Right?" Foltesla responded.

Unlike the clans and rankers who'd rushed in, the Babylonian Battlegroup was cooperating with the kingdom, and was integral to their plan.

This was how it would go...

First, the Babylonian Battlegroup's ranged squad would attack Gloria from a distance. While Gloria was distracted by them, the Arch Sage's apprentices and the holy acolytes of the Altarian church would launch the large-scale magic known as the rite of divine punishment. And while the consecutive attacks kept it distracted, the imperium would use that ultimate weapon they'd brought.

If all went well, that would be the end of it.

"If Dryfe's weapon isn't enough..." Shulka mused.

"Then we will have to charge in ourselves." Their info was vague, but according to DIN, there were cases when merely drawing close to Gloria didn't result in instant death.

In the worst case scenario, the King of Swords, Foltesla, and the finest of his Babylonian Battlegroup would have to face Gloria by themselves.

Foltesla thought that that would be all they had left... and had a feeling — a certainty — that it would indeed come to that.

◇◆

The fifty-eight Geists of the imperium’s second armored battalion were stationed outside the barrier, away from the Arch Sage’s apprentices and the followers of the church.

Unlike unison magic and the rite of divine punishment, artillery was limited by firing location and trajectory, so the distance was necessary to make sure none of the other groups were caught in the bombardment. Even if none of the shells did any direct damage to their allies, anyone too close to a tank would be risking their eardrums. These Geists were loaded with powerful long-range ordnance, so they posed an even greater danger.

After Gloria’s approach was announced, the commander of the battalion and his soldiers assumed their positions and waited, but the dragon was nowhere in sight even after nearly two hours had passed.

“...Is it really on its way here?” a Geist driver asked.

“If it doesn’t change course, yeah,” said the commander, seated in the vehicle cockpit. “But we’re dealing with a living being here. There’s no telling what kind of urges it’ll get... In the worst-case scenario, it might come at us from behind.”

By that, he meant the city of Claymill.

“What would we do then?”

“We’ll do what we can to ensure the people are safe, then attack. We got permission to use the strong stuff inside the kingdom, but I’d prefer not to harm Claymill or its people.”

Though, by the time that thing was there, the death field would’ve killed every single inhabitant already, the commander added mentally, but not out loud.

“I must say... I really didn’t expect to see a real battle here in the kingdom. And against a so-called ‘SUBM,’ at that... Why must we fight a monster above even Mythical for the sake of...?”

The young driver was frightened and slightly upset by the fact that he would be risking his life outside of the imperium, but the commander offered another perspective.

“Don’t think of it like that,” he said. “In the long run, defending this country is defending Dryfe, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s little more than a rumor, but... there’re plans to unite our next crown prince and the kingdom’s first princess in marriage.”

This was a rumor that sometimes spread among the imperium's elite. The idea had been considered for decades now, but due to clashes in circumstance, it had been postponed until the next generation.

But now, Prince Gustav, the prime candidate for imperator (merely "candidate" because the previous one hadn't officially named a successor) had a firstborn named Hallon, who would presumably become crown prince the moment Gustav took the throne. There was also the possibility of Gustav being passed over and Hallon becoming imperator, but that didn't matter much in this context — a crown prince and an imperator were both worthy of a first princess' hand in marriage.

"So you are saying that this land would be Dryfe, too, sir?" asked the driver.

"Or Dryfe would become Altar," nodded the commander. "I don't mind either way. The kingdom is rich in farmland. If we merge, Dryfe's food shortages would be a thing of the past."

"Well, I do hear that there have been more and more people dying of hunger in the colder regions..." Due to poor harvests with unknown causes, the imperium's self-sufficiency was dropping dramatically. They could still survive with imports from foreign lands, but Dryfe's future was looking quite bleak.

"Yeah. That's why we have to protect this country. For the sake of our future."

"Sir, yes, sir!" Keeping their morale high, they continued to wait.

Fifteen more minutes had passed when...

"WE SEE GLORIA ON THE HORIZON! IT'S APPROACHING!"

...The comms blared a message from the scouts.

"And there it is... all vehicles, prepare to fire."

"All vehicles, prepare to fire!"

"Understood! All vehicles, prepare to fire!" The commander's order spread through his battalion, and the fifty-eight Geists moved and fine-tuned the angle of their turrets...

"Begin charging the Supergravity Shell." ...And prepared to use the ultimate weapon they'd brought all this way.

◇◆

Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, appeared on the distant horizon. It walked upon the surface, its three heads swaying with every step.

The one-horned head on the right had three eyes which moved separately and with no clear pattern, as though it were scanning its surroundings randomly.

The single eye of two-horned head on the left shone brightly as it glared down towards the surface below.

However, the three-horned head in the middle had its two eyes closed, as though it was fast asleep.

Its body, completely covered in golden scales, moved its four limbs along the ground, leaving behind clawprints as it approached Claymill.

The flourishing plants around it withered and died the moment its aura touched them.

If it drew too close to a lake, the aquatic monsters there perished instantly and floated up to the surface, becoming particles of light once the resurrection period expired and leaving behind only the meat they dropped. The aquatic plants died, as well, and in such numbers that the lake changed color.

“SHuEwOoOAAagHh!” The light of the single eye on the two-horned head grew in intensity, as if this creature could not tolerate the existence of any life around it.

Gloria strode through the withered, dead land as though surveying its conquered kingdom.

“...?” Suddenly, the three disorderly eyes of the one-horned head all focused upon a single point.

A moment later, countless arrows and blades of ice rained down on Gloria.

These were the result of skills used by Masters from the Babylonian Battlegroup. These long-ranged attacks were even mixed with ultimate Embryo skills, and they all barraged the dragon.

“Aim for the eyes! Don’t think you can take it down like this! Focus on distracting it!” Listening to their leader, Foltesla, the clan continued their onslaught.

This was such an intense assault that it would make short work of the average Master’s — maybe even a standard UBM’s — HP.

However, the max-level Reveal skill possessed by one of the high-rank jobs present told a different story.

"Leader!" he cried, in a panic. "Gloria's HP isn't going down at all!" It was the truth — Gloria hadn't lost even a fraction of its HP. In fact, direct hits to its eyes — presumed weak spots — didn't even make it flinch.

"So it really does have some sort of defense skill," said Foltesla. "But it can't be all powerful."

He was certain that no creature could be invincible to all attacks. There had to be something, such as a specific level of power or a certain element, which could break through it.

And if the problem was indeed that their attacks lacked power...

"Leader! The kingdom has contacted us! They're commencing their attack!"

"All right! Back away, but don't stop attacking! And make sure you aren't caught up in the crossfire!"

...The joint attacks from Altar and Dryfe would surely make up the difference.

"Mr. Frigelt! The twenty-six apprentices are ready to cast the spell!"

"Excellent! I will take the lead! Match my chant and casting!" the aged, long-bearded Sage, Frigelt, called to the younger of the Arch Sage's apprentices.

They were preparing to use unison magic. This was a technique that increased the potency of spells by combining the magic power of casters who possessed the unison magic skill and simultaneously cast a spell using a specific chant. The need for extremely strict timing and precise control of magic power made it poorly suited for Masters, and most believed that only highly trained tians were capable of it.

And when it came to unison magic, the Arch Sage's apprentices were thought to be among the best.

"Let us join our wills as one," said Frigelt.

"LET US JOIN OUR WILLS AS ONE," the others echoed.

"We call to the earth. Spread our magic like you spread the violent rain and morning dew."

"WE CALL TO THE EARTH! SPREAD OUR MAGIC LIKE YOU SPREAD THE VIOLENT RAIN AND MORNING DEW!"

"We the students of the Arch Sage now weave our rite."

"WE THE STUDENTS OF THE ARCH SAGE NOW WEAVE OUR

RITE!” The simultaneous chanting enhanced their magic powers and merged them into one... “UNISON MAGIC — GRAND HOLDER!” ...And they spoke the magic words.

A moment later, seven stone arms over a hundred metels in size manifested around Gloria. They grasped the dragon in the blink of an eye, preventing it from moving any further.

The toughness and precise movements of those arms spoke volumes of the unison magic’s perfect execution.

“Hhaah... hhaah... NOW! HOLY MEN OF THE KINGDOM!” Breathing raggedly after such a taxing spell, Frigelt used voice amplification magic to signal that it was now the church’s turn.

By the time the voice reached them, they were already doing what they had to do.

“O, heavens. O, incarnation of divine punishment, judge of all living things.” Cardinal Verdin closed his eyes and joined his hands together. This was no chant for a magic spell, but a prayer for a ritual — one that they had been doing for nearly an hour now.

All for this very moment.

“Before us looms a wicked dragon. If it is indeed truly evil, may it suffer unrelenting retribution.” The prayer reached its peak, and white light — orbs of their HP, MP, and SP — began leaving the bodies of the assembled priests. That was the crystallization of their collective power, and upon losing that light, they Fainted, one after another.

The lights then began to merge into one in midair.

Finally, even Cardinal Verdin’s body released its white light, and the amalgam of all these shining orbs from all these holy men flew above Gloria’s head.

Then, the gathered white light itself spoke the final line of the rite of divine punishment.

“Come, Judgement Pillar!” The rite of divine punishment was a technique that drained all power from the participants and unleashed purifying holy magic upon whoever the majority of them had deemed an enemy.

Gloria was their only enemy here, and thus, a pillar of obscenely hot light engulfed the dragon and the arms binding it.

The golden body was blasted by immense heat and the stone arms around it melted, becoming magma that buried Gloria alive.

You would expect any creature to burn, boil, or suffocate to death when exposed to this, but nothing was certain with Gloria.

Thus, the imperium's second armored battalion moved in to finish it off with their strongest weapon.

"Commander! Gloria is completely bound!"

"All right... Supergravity Shell... prepare to fire!" At his command, the battery constructed in their formation by their Mechanics began to hum.

The battery — or, to be specific, the shell it would fire — was the strongest weapon in this battle.

It was a "Supergravity Shell" — one of the so-called "Four Forbidden Shells," a quartet of immensely powerful shell types meant to be fired by the symbol of Dryfe: Throne of the Imperium, Dryfe Imperstand.

What they had here was one single warhead and a replica turret designed to fire it.

Current technology wasn't able to properly replicate the Imperstand's parts. The replica's range was only one hundredth of the original's, and it was guaranteed to break after firing just once.

But even though the cannon was merely a replica, the shell was the real thing — a devastating weapon that compressed and crushed anything within a one kilometel radius, until everything was annihilated.

The unison magic and the rite of divine punishment was only meant to hold Gloria in place. This Supergravity Shell was the two countries' trump card.

"This hasn't been used in an actual battle in about a century, has it?"

"Well, we don't have many of them." The Imperstand's Four Forbidden Shells had been created during the time of the pre-ancient civilization, and no one had been able to replicate the feat since. Even counting all the types together, there were scarcely ten shells in existence.

Because of this, the imperium was extremely apprehensive about using them. They had never been used in a war — in fact, aside from the time they had to get rid of a Mythical UBM raging in their lands, they had never been used at all.

Of course, they saw enough of a reward for using a Supergravity Shell in this battle: the very defeat of Gloria itself.

The kingdom had set the stage, and the imperium would now deal the final blow. It was unknown whether it would be the commander giving the orders or the gunner manning the cannon, but either way, the imperium would receive an SUBM's special reward.

Altar would minimize the damage to their lands, while Dryfe would acquire an immensely powerful item; both sides benefited from this arrangement.

"The turret is at 80% energy!" said the Engineer managing the weapon.

"You only have one shot. Don't miss," the commander said.

"Sir, yes, sir! I'll stake my life on it!" While they talked, there was some kind of change in Gloria.

"...So it seriously didn't die, huh?" the commander gasped. The hardened magma moved, and three heads broke free of it.

Neither the searing rite of divine punishment nor being buried alive under magma seemed to threaten its life. The dragon's survivability was so great that the commander now knew for sure that only the Supergravity Shell could stop it.

He looked at Gloria with determination when the Engineer declared that the preparations were complete.

"Energy is at 120%."

"All right! Fire the Supergravity Shell!"

"Firing the Supergravity Shell!" At those words, the replica turret released a pitch-black orb.

The power of the release shattered the gun, but the black orb flew towards Gloria at full speed for a direct hit.

A moment later, the space around the dragon distorted.

Heaven and earth alike tore apart, converged on a single point, and vanished. Not even light could escape; the onlookers could only see a black, spherical space.

This was absolute destruction at the hands of extreme gravity for everything within a radius of one kilometel. All within was compressed and annihilated. Gloria, too, was caught up in this gravitational hell, unable to let out even a single roar.

Finally, after a time that felt both too short and far too long, the black sphere vanished.

Gloria was nowhere to be seen.

There seemed to be no doubt that the Supergravity Shell had destroyed it.

"We did it..."

"Yes! We won, commander!" The commander was relieved to see that the superweapon that had sat idle for a century was just as powerful as they said, while the young driver couldn't contain his pure joy.

Similar reactions could be heard from the others in this Geist, as well as those in the other Geists.

The apprentices of the Arch Sage were overjoyed, as well. The holy men of Altar were unconscious, but their expressions were peaceful, as if they had been certain of their victory and were dreaming of it now.

"Heheh... We can relax now." The more fearsome the creature, the greater the joy and relief of beating it.

Certain of their victory, of good diplomatic relations between the two countries, and the salvation of Dryfe's future, the commander smiled in satisfaction.

"This means that you should receive a Superior special reward, doesn't it?!" asked the young driver in excitement. The commander nodded, but then raised an eyebrow. "Hm...? But if you did get a special reward, you would know that right away."

He figured it would go to the one manning the weapon, and that disappointed him somewhat. Despite that, he didn't care about it *too* much. To him, successfully finishing this mission was the greatest reward.

...A reward he had yet to earn.

"C-Commander..." the driver, who'd been cheerful moments ago, now spoke with fear.

"What is it?" the commander asked.

"..." The young one was struck speechless, so instead he simply pointed outside the front window. Feeling a sense of foreboding, the commander opened the Geist's hatch and looked at what was happening outside.

Then, using a pair of binoculars, he scanned the large crater opened up by the extreme compression.

He stared into the hole that was supposed to have been Gloria's grave... *and found the eyes of its three heads staring back at him.*

"How...?" The binoculars fell from his hands. He couldn't believe the sight — or didn't want to believe it.

"Supergravity Shells compress and annihilate everything...! It couldn't possibly have survived that!" Alas, his words meant little in the face of reality: *Gloria was completely unharmed*.

It lifted itself into the air on its wings, which had not a single scratch on them, and rose out of the kilometel-deep hole left when the ground had vanished.

After all this, Gloria still walked the continent. The disappearance of the space around it had merely dropped it down a kilometel.

And now, it rose out of the crater as if the unbridled annihilation around it was nothing.

"Th-That was the imperium's strongest weapon! How is it unharmed?!"

"A-Aaahh..." The superweapon of legend, said to have felled even a Mythical-tier monster, did absolutely nothing against Gloria, and this fact left the second armored battalion absolutely shaken.

The Supergravity Shell was so powerful that it was hard to even imagine anything that could survive it. It was undoubtedly a formidable weapon.

However, it didn't work on Gloria whatsoever.

Even ignoring that, the combined power of the unison magic and the rite of divine punishment was also immense — but that, too, did nothing.

This was because they didn't even clear the first step in fighting Gloria.

"...All vehicles, attack! We'll destroy it using standard firepower!" The commander realized that Gloria's survival had left his battalion completely shocked.

"The Supergravity Shell damaged it internally. Our normal attacks will work now!"

That was why he voiced an optimistic assumption that even he didn't believe, just to keep his squad from collapsing.

"S-Sir, yes, sir!"

"Understood!" Following the commander's orders, they began firing at Gloria.

At the same time, the Babylonian Battlegroup resumed their ranged attacks, and the Arch Sage's apprentices joined in as well, resulting in a barrage about twice as powerful as the first one.

But then... the commander realized something he was better off not realizing.

"Do you hear it?" he asked.

"H-Hear what?!" The driver was shaking, clearly too frightened to know what the commander had in mind.

“The sounds of our shells hitting Gloria...”

“I don’t hear them, sir!” Normally, it was impossible to make out something like that out of the mess of sounds made by the explosions, but the commander had a high level in his hearing sense skill and thus perceived much more.

“Yeah! I don’t hear it, either! It’s like not a single one of our shots are landing!”

The sound of the explosions simply wasn’t there.

He heard the impact of their high-explosive projectiles, as well as bursts of magic, but never the sound of armor-piercing bullets hitting it.

That was actually a major hint towards uncovering the secret of Gloria’s defense.

However, such an observation was unnecessary now.

After all, having received all that punishment... “There’s a change in the target’s head!” ...Gloria was now switching to offensive mode.

“Is it the death field we heard about in rumors?! Check our distance from it!”

“It’s still 3,800 metels away! That’s 3.8 times farther than the range of the field, sir!”

“What...?” It had been proven that the area of the death curse didn’t extend past one kilometel.

Thus, it had no means of attacking anything outside of it.

At the very least, it hadn’t used anything like that so far. However...

“It’s not the two-horned head that’s doing something! It’s the one-horn!”

“What?!” Following the report from a different vehicle, the commander used his binoculars to look at the one-horned head to the left.

It had indeed begun to change.

All of its three eyes were now covered by a mobile shell. The horn on its head was shining bright, and it slowly began to open its maw.

It was clearly about to do something.

“...Fire into the one-horned’s mouth!” The chill that went down his spine spurred the commander to shout that order.

Dozens of shells and offensive spells from the other groups hit the head directly. Some caused immense explosions right inside its mouth.

But even that wasn’t enough to faze Gloria.

"F f r R r R r r r R r R r r R r R r r R..."

Eventually, the one-horned head began growling...

"R r r R r r S s s S s s H h E E E E e E w w W w w W w!"

...And spewed out a vast light.

"...?!" The light was enough to make the commander prepare himself for an immense amount of casualties, as well as his own death.

"Hm...?"

However, nothing happened.

There was no change in anything showered by the one-horned head's light. Nothing died, and nothing was burned. It seemed like little more than a flashlight.

"Wh-What? What's happening?" Confused, the commander pondered what to do, and quickly decided to...

"...Leave the light!"

"Eh?"

He immediately ordered the driver and other vehicles to move away.

"We're dealing with a creature that kills all living things just by walking past them! There's no way this is safe!"

"S-Sir, yes, sir!" The driver leaped into action, and the other vehicles followed. They all tried to escape the light as quickly as they could. The light that flooded the area made it hard to tell where it began and ended, but they all relied on each other's silhouettes to try and find their way out.

Eventually, they were free of the light.

"W-We made it!"

"All right! Keep making distan... Hm?" Upon leaving the light, the commander noticed something.

It was a change in the head of Gloria responsible for the light.

The single horn on its head had begun to change color.

"What? What's about to happen?" The pale horn on the dragon's head was turning redder.

And when it became completely red...

"O v E r d R i v E!"

...The thirty-seven Geists that were still within the light *evaporated*.

In the blink of an eye, both the metal vehicles and the people inside became smoke and scattered, leaving nothing behind.

It was an awfully silent extermination.

The scariest thing about it was that those outside didn't feel the heat at all. It released a level of heat that instantly turned metal into gas, while maintaining complete control over the energy involved that kept the heat contained within the light.

"Th-This is just... you monster!" The commander grieved the loss of the majority of his battalion, but that wasn't even the end of it. Something even more terrible was happening.

"S h A a A a a a A I i i n N E e E!" Gloria roared and began slowly moving the torrent of light.

It swung its all-evaporating heat with the ease of someone directing a flashlight.

Pandemonium.

The surviving battalion as well as the Arch Sage's apprentices were now screaming in terror.

Claymill's barrier did nothing.

Wherever the light passed or touched, it left behind nothing but a brief vapor.

Tanks were consumed mid-retreat. Apprentices vanished while hiding at the edge of their posts, in the middle of their prayers.

There were those who were caught halfway in the light, leaving their other half to crawl around in confusion, dying moments later.

All the holy men were consumed by the light before their consciousness even returned.

As this hell continued, the light approached the commander's vehicle.

"Commander! Commander! Where?! Where do we—?!"

"You can't escape light, damn it..." The driver was panicking, looking for a way out, while the commander had already given up.

He would not survive this, and had no motivation to try.

He had no family, and besides those in this vehicle, the subordinates he'd raised had been taken by the light.

He now had nothing.

Not saying a word, his only worry was that their demise would have a negative, lasting effect on the relationship between Altar and Dryfe.

"Please... at least let both countries survi—" Before he could finish his prayer-like words, the commander evaporated and dissipated into the air.

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Out of the four groups, the only one that had avoided direct contact with the light was the Babylonian Battlegroup. It was fair to say that they were the only Altarians still standing.

"Captain! This is dangerous! We need to retreat!" insisted one of the members.

Foltesla, however, shook his head, "Retreat where?"

"Where the light won't reach, of course! Oh yeah! We should log out...!"

"Well, that's definitely something we can do. But right over there, in Claymill — our home — you have lots of tians who can't."

There were still many people within the city. The light had washed away the three groups in and out of the barrier outside the city walls, but it hadn't yet reached the city itself. However, if things kept going like this, Claymill would surely fall. The fate of all its inhabitants would be sealed the moment they — the last line of defense — vanished.

Foltesla couldn't tolerate that.

"...Everyone max level or above, come with me," he said. "We'll defeat it at close range."

"But... the field...!"

"I have an idea... And I'll test it by myself."

"C-Captain!" Vanguard that he was, Foltesla charged towards Gloria at supersonic speeds.

It only took him a few seconds to reach the outside of the death barrier, marked by withered plants.

"Let's go, Næ."

"OK, captain!" Næġling instantly became a longsword. Holding her in hand, Foltesla took a step into the deathly field.

If it killed him, too, it would activate the Brooch, and he would instantly leap away.

He clearly pictured how he would have to move to accomplish that, but *stepping inside did nothing to him*.

"Just as I thought." He took a couple more steps forward, and it didn't look like he was about to die.

Thus, he raised his voice.

"Listen up! This death field works based on level! If yours is high, you won't die!" That was a conclusion based on the info he'd gotten from DIN. Those who were level 500, or Superior Jobs such as himself, hadn't died upon closing in on Gloria.

On the other hand, those who had great stats due to Embryo stat growth bonuses, had died regardless. It had even killed a Mythical UBM.

This insta-death field wasn't based on pure power or lack of it — it only judged whether you were the right level or not.

"Those whose Brooches activate inside the field, back out! The rest of you, come challenge it!" Watching his clan jump into the barrier, Foltesla rushed right next to Gloria.

And, as he passed it by at supersonic speeds... "Thunder Slash!" ...He cut its hind leg with an offensive skill from the swordsman grouping.

To Foltesla, it was a tense few seconds, but time eventually caught up to him, and he saw a line-like cut in the scales that soon began to bleed.

That was the first injury that Gloria had suffered in this battle.

"...I thought that's what it was." Gloria was unharmed even when exposed to crushing compression via supergravity, which meant that this defensive ability wasn't something that could be overcome by pure damage.

At the same time, all the many and varied attacks rained down on it hadn't scratched it either, which meant that this wasn't a type of defense that was keyed to some element or other.

And if it wasn't pure defensive ability or elemental shielding, Foltesla guessed that there had to be some sort of other rule to it.

This rule had defended against all the overwhelming attacks raining down upon it during this battle, and now Foltesla knew that it could only be... "This thing can only be damaged by attacks from *within* its insta-death field." It rejected the attacks of anyone outside its barrier — the weaklings and cowards who couldn't survive its onslaught. Only those with the power — the level — to survive the insta-death field were granted the chance to enter it and do harm to Gloria.

The role of the barrier was to select those who were worthy of fighting it.

"I know your trick now." More Babylonian Battlegroup members were entering the barrier and attacking Gloria.

As that happened, Foltesla pointed Nægling at Gloria's head — the one-horn that'd evaporated so many people — and declared, "This is the beginning of the *real* battle between you and us humans.”

Act Three: The Selection of Despair

Some time ago:

Foltesla the Surpassing Blade. The duel ranker who would earn that nickname had started playing *Infinite Dendrogram* shortly after its release.

He didn't have any special reason for starting the game. He'd only picked it up because it was a hot topic in the media, and he suddenly had a lot of free time after quitting his job recently.

Upon logging in for the first time, all five of his senses were absolutely overwhelmed.

"Realistic" doesn't even begin to describe it, he thought.

Right after arriving at the royal capital of Altea and before his Embryo hatched, he went wherever his legs took him and headed towards the north.

As Foltesla was taking a casual stroll through Noz Forest, he suddenly heard a scream.

By conditioned reflex, he ran straight to the source of the sound, where he found a young lady clutching a basket of herbs and a wolf about to attack her. The "Teal Wolf," as it was called, bared its fangs at the girl and leaped towards her.

"...!" All of a sudden, the only thing between the wolf's fangs and the girl's flesh was Foltesla's sword.

She's in terrible danger, he thought, as his body moved on its own.

The very idea that this was a game — not reality — had completely vanished from his mind. There was only his fear that this girl may die, and his actions were simply a response to that.

After that, Foltesla went on to slay the Teal Wolf, badly injuring himself in the process.

Though these wolves were among the weakest monsters one could encounter, just a single one of them was stronger than level 0, jobless Foltesla. He'd have been lucky just to chase it away.

As Foltesla, tired from the fight, sat down on the ground, the girl asked, worried, "A-Are you okay?"

“Yeah. What about—?”

Mid-sentence, Foltesla finally remembered that he was in *Infinite Dendrogram* — a game.

For a moment, he reminded himself that she was just an NPC...

“A-Are you okay?! I-I’ll make some medicine right now!” ...But as he watched the worry in her eyes upon seeing his wounds and the care she put into making his medicine, Foltesla simply couldn’t keep thinking of her as nothing but a character in a game.

“This might sting a bit, but it should work right away...!” she said, wrapping the medicine-soaked bandage tightly around Foltesla’s wounds.

He’d disabled the pain settings, so it didn’t sting at all, but he could feel the smell pierce his nose, and pick up the flowery scent wafting off the girl.

As she covered him in medicine and bandages, the two talked.

“I’m sorry,” the girl said. “I’m new to this, so I still can’t make medicine that would heal you right away...”

“It’s okay. Thank you.” Foltesla checked his status summary, then showed it to her.

Relieved that he was healed, she noticed the name on the summary.

“What a relief... Umm... Is your name ‘Foltesla’?”

“...? Oh. Yes.” He wasn’t used to his player name yet, so it took him a moment to remember it.

“Umm... Thank you for saving me!”

“Thank *you* for the medicine, uhh...” He wanted to thank her, but then he realized that he didn’t know her name.

She realized that, too, and quickly corrected the problem. “I-I’m sorry! My name is Erica. Erica Lansley. I’m a Medicine Worker.”

“I see. Thanks, Erica. I’m Sfor—... I mean, Foltesla,” he re-introduced himself, nearly saying his real name.

That was their beginning: the beginning for a Master and tian who would become husband and wife.

◇◆◇

Claymill the Fortress City, outskirts

Gloria had been completely unharmed by the ultimate attack of a Mythical UBM and countless full-power attacks from tians. Foltesla, however, had figured out the secret behind its apparent immortality and quickly rallied his Babylonian Battlegroup against it, sparking a battle that was intense from the moment it began.

“Shulka! Hold it in place!” Foltesla roared.

“Got it!” the Over Enchanter responded. “Come, Lahmu!”

Shulka’s crest glowed before a vast amount of mud spewed out of it. The overflowing mud quickly became a fifty meter tall, human-shaped giant that stood before Gloria.

Its name was “Guardian Mire, Lahmu,” and it was the Embryo of the Over Enchanter, Shulka — the sub-leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup and sixth in the kingdom’s kill rankings.

“BO-BO-BO.” Large as it was, it was still less than half the size of Gloria, but it charged forward regardless.

Gloria couldn’t miss the mud behemoth approaching it and quickly swung its tail, bristling with four spikes, to slice Lahmu in half diagonally.

“BO.” However, Lahmu was merely a flowing mass of mud, and because of its Physical Attack Negation, the tail had no effect.

Gloria might’ve been a fearsome monster superior even to Mythicals, but nothing could deal physical damage to a creature that negated it. Its Fatal Field wouldn’t work on non-animals, either.

That meant that there was only one thing Gloria had that could make Lahmu vanish.

That thing was the breath of ultimate light... The weapon that had slaughtered all the tians guarding Claymill.

However, Lahmu had been summoned precisely to prevent that.

“BO-BO-BO!” Upon approaching Gloria, Lahmu transformed its body back into mud and crawled up the dragon’s head: specifically, the one-horned one that fired the deadly light. Lahmu quickly wrapped itself around the head... “Great Guardian of Firmness — Lahmu!” ...And, with Shulka’s ultimate skill declaration, compressed and hardened itself.

Lahmu’s ultimate skill turned it into a material harder than even Mythical metal. Normally, it only hardened a part of its mud for use as a weapon, but this time, every last bit of it was instantly petrified.

“...!” Lahmu now acted as something like a dog muzzle or a prisoner’s mask. Gloria’s one-horned head could neither open its jaws or emit its deadly light. It tried to break the restraint with its immense STR ranking in the tens of thousands, but even that couldn’t easily destroy a creature that was as hard as Mythical metal.

It came at the cost of all the power of a sixth-form Embryo, but the light of the zenith was now completely sealed.

“You’ve got it!” Foltesla cried.

“Yes,” nodded Shulka. “But it seems that anything that went inside its mouth evaporated, so I can’t finish it off.”

The closed maw kept the heat inside, preventing Lahmu from going in and killing it from within.

“That’s all right. Focus on keeping it bound.”

“Very well. I’ll focus the single-target buffs on Lahmu, then cast the area buffs in order.”

The Over Enchanter’s passive skill, “One and All Enchanting,” let Shulka simultaneously use single-target and area buffs at the same time. Thus, it was possible for him to put the single-target END buffs on Lahmu to keep the binding strong, while at the same time using area stat buffs to increase the abilities of his clan members.

“All right...” Foltesla said before charging Gloria again, now buffed.

His attacks were powerful now, and not just because of Shulka’s buffs. It was also due to Næġling’s self-enhancement.

The skill that Næġling had possessed from the very beginning was called “Over Chaser,” which increased Foltesla’s stats by (skill level x 10%), provided the corresponding stat was higher on the enemy he was fighting.

In her sixth form, Næġling’s skill level was 6, which meant that all of Foltesla’s stats except AGI — in which he was already above Gloria — were increased by an impressive 60%.

The two enhancements added up, giving him impressive stats even for a Superior Job, and supreme offensive ability against Gloria.

“It has some strong defenses... But it’s nothing an active skill can’t break,” Foltesla muttered as he cut into Gloria’s tough scales.

He wasn’t the only one fighting, though. All of the Babylonian Battlegroup’s elite, also buffed by Shulka, were attacking Gloria now as well.

“We can do it... We’re damaging it!”

“Watch out for the tail! It deals more damage than its legs!”

“We know that, Riser!” There were even rankers among the Masters, and they fought against the dragon without showing the slightest intention to retreat. They were daring and resolute indeed, and little by little their damage began to add up.

However... the dragon’s HP was going down too slowly.

“We lack the numbers, don’t we?” Still fighting, Foltesla looked over the clan members within the barrier. Even with himself and Shulka included, their number didn’t exceed twelve. Two parties — only about 5% — of all the members present were even able to participate.

The players here were all level 500 or above, and Foltesla already knew that was what allowed them to stand in the field.

Attaining level 500 was actually very difficult for Masters. Besides Superior Jobs, the only ones that could reach it were those who’d maxed out all their low and high-rank jobs. However, it was extremely common for people who’d hit max level to be unsatisfied with their builds and reset unneeded jobs to get new ones. It was also a way of experimenting, in the hopes that they would discover the conditions for unlocking Superior Jobs.

This was especially true in the Babylonian Battlegroup, which was the second strongest clan in the kingdom and was fully focused on battle. Most were in the middle of leveling new jobs, and thus only the aforementioned twelve qualified to enter the field.

In addition to that, the party compositions weren’t all that good, either. There wasn’t a single person who focused on a job in the priest grouping. One might say that the only reason they were able to put up such a good fight was that Shulka — a Superior Job from the support-focused enchanter grouping — was a central figure among them.

To fully prepare to fight Gloria, you needed at least a few dozen max-level Masters. That was the reason why the rushing rankers had been defeated. And if not that, you needed people who were above maxed-out — Superior Jobs.

I see... Foltesla thought. *So this is what this thing is all about.*

As he fought, he finally figured out the concept behind Gloria.

As a storied fighter and leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup, Foltesla had fought many UBMs, and by now, he knew that the majority of them had some sort of theme behind them.

Some would regenerate endlessly until you dealt with their weak spot.

Some would absorb the life force of nearby animals to grow stronger.

Some would nest in an advantageous spot and simply attack from there.

Design concepts like that applied to most UBMs.

And just now, Foltesla had figured out Gloria's concept.

This thing specializes in "selection," he concluded. You could see it in the many powers it'd used so far.

The Fatal Field selected those who were of high enough level.

The negation of all damage from outside the field prevented people of lower level from joining the battle at all.

The light breath selected those who could escape before it became deadly... Basically, anyone fast and decisive enough.

All of them were powers that selected the powerful and filtered out the weak.

...It does make sense for what it is, though, Foltesla thought. If you looked at Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, as an endgame raid boss from a traditional MMORPG, it made a lot of sense. You had to fight it over and over so you could figure out its special qualities, weaknesses, and action patterns before you could fully prepare yourself and beat it to receive an immense reward.

In a way, it was a very "complete" boss monster.

"But... there's no time for repeat runs!" A vast number of tians had already died, and they would never come back.

If they lost to it over and over, the kingdom would fall, even if the Masters themselves didn't.

And considering the fact that the Babylonian Battlegroup was the last barrier standing between Gloria and their hometown of Claymill, they couldn't afford to lose even once.

"We'll finish it, here and now!" Foltesla shouted.

"YEAH!" the others cheered.

"We have a chance." To Masters that could enter the Fatal Field, the only dangerous things were Gloria's stats and light breath, but the latter had been sealed by Lahmu.

And though its stats, such as the STR that could kill in one hit, were intimidating... "We can just dodge all the attacks!" Foltesla was third in the duel rankings, and the other Masters had plenty of fights under their belts, as well. With their AGI buffed by Shulka, they used their stats and experience to avoid the storm of claws and tail.

"Gloria's STR and END are great, but its AGI isn't even supersonic," Foltesla said. "As long as we watch out for its tail and claws, it won't be hard to avoid its attacks."

A single mistake meant certain doom here, but as the rival of the Over Gladiator, he was familiar with these kinds of situations. It was dangerous, but as of yet, not a single one of the twelve Babylonian Battlegroup members had died. In fact, they were starting to gain the upper hand.

Their MP and SP was limited, of course, but the members outside the barrier could keep them charged using their support skills. They would fight with all their might, run out of MP or SP, rush to the edge of the field to fill up, rinse and repeat.

If things continued like this, victory was in their grasp. The moment they felt certain of that...

"Ah...!"

...Gloria was attacked from an unexpected direction.

It dealt damage, so it was clearly from inside the monster's field, but the ones responsible weren't part of the Babylonian Battlegroup.

"Captain! It's those parties and clans that were watching from a distance! They—"

"Found out how to beat it and decided to take advantage of our fight, huh?" It was actually a number of parties and clans, and all maxed-out, skilled players who jumped in to attack Gloria.

Some attacked Gloria with AoE attacks, not caring if they damaged other Masters. There were also some who targeted Masters specifically.

The Babylonian Battlegroup members outside the field had tried to stop them, but they were caught off-guard and did not manage to succeed.

"Build up your damage! We gotta be the MVP!"

"Crush the others, too! Keep those AoEs coming!" Their actions were, in some ways, reasonable. Everyone gathered here was after a Superior special reward. By default, it was "every team for itself" — or perhaps even "every man for himself."

"Can't expect any cooperation here," Foltesla scowled and rang out as he cut down one of his attackers.

At first glance, it looked like they now had more people on their side, but everyone was trampling over each other in their rush for the merit needed to become MVPs.

To the Babylonian Battlegroup, who fought cooperatively, this clearly made the fight more difficult.

"...Rabe, Hanzaki, tank for Shulka," said Foltesla. "If he dies, Lahmu will disappear."

"Got it!" the two responded and went to defend the key individual here.

If Shulka vanished, the one-horn would wipe out all the Masters here with its light breath.

"At least the amount of incoming damage increased," Foltesla muttered. Gloria was clearly taking more damage than it had been when only his clan were fighting it.

As things were, chances were high that it would lose all its life in this hectic battle.

"Hm...?" However, Foltesla noticed something.

It wasn't the sealed-off one-horn, or the barrier-holding two-horn.

The central head that had been dormant until now was now beginning to open its eyes.

"Ah...!" At that moment, a strange feeling ran down his spine. It was impossible to tell whether it was due to his vast experience as a fighter or his nature as a Maiden's Master who saw this world as real, but it was most definitely *an ice-cold chill.*

It was a sign that something terrible was about to happen.

"...Næ," he said.

"I know, captain," his blade replied, feeling what he did. "That needs to be dealt with right away."

A prolonged battle certainly wasn't the way to go with this creature.

Gloria was a being that forced its opponents to be strong through selection. There was no way that extended battle and attrition would work on it... *that approach was too focused on quantity, rather than quality*.

There had to be something. This monster had to have something that would render any attempts at prolonged battle useless.

Foltesla believed that they had to beat it before it could activate whatever that was.

"...We'll use the ultimate."

"Okay! I'll go all-out!"

"Yeah. I'm counting on you." Næġling in hand, Foltesla dashed forward.

Ignoring the many attacks the Masters were launching at Gloria, he closed in on it once again.

However, he was caught up in the smoke from an explosion spell. Gloria growled and swung its four-spiked tail, aiming it directly at Foltesla.

He avoided it with a quick leap, but Næġling was still within its trajectory. The tail was Gloria's greatest means of attack now that its breath had been sealed, and it could easily break an Embryo in its sixth form.

Thus, on the moment of contact, Næġling shattered.

"That's what...!"

"We've been waiting for!" Foltesla grinned like a war-demon, and Næġling giggled before...

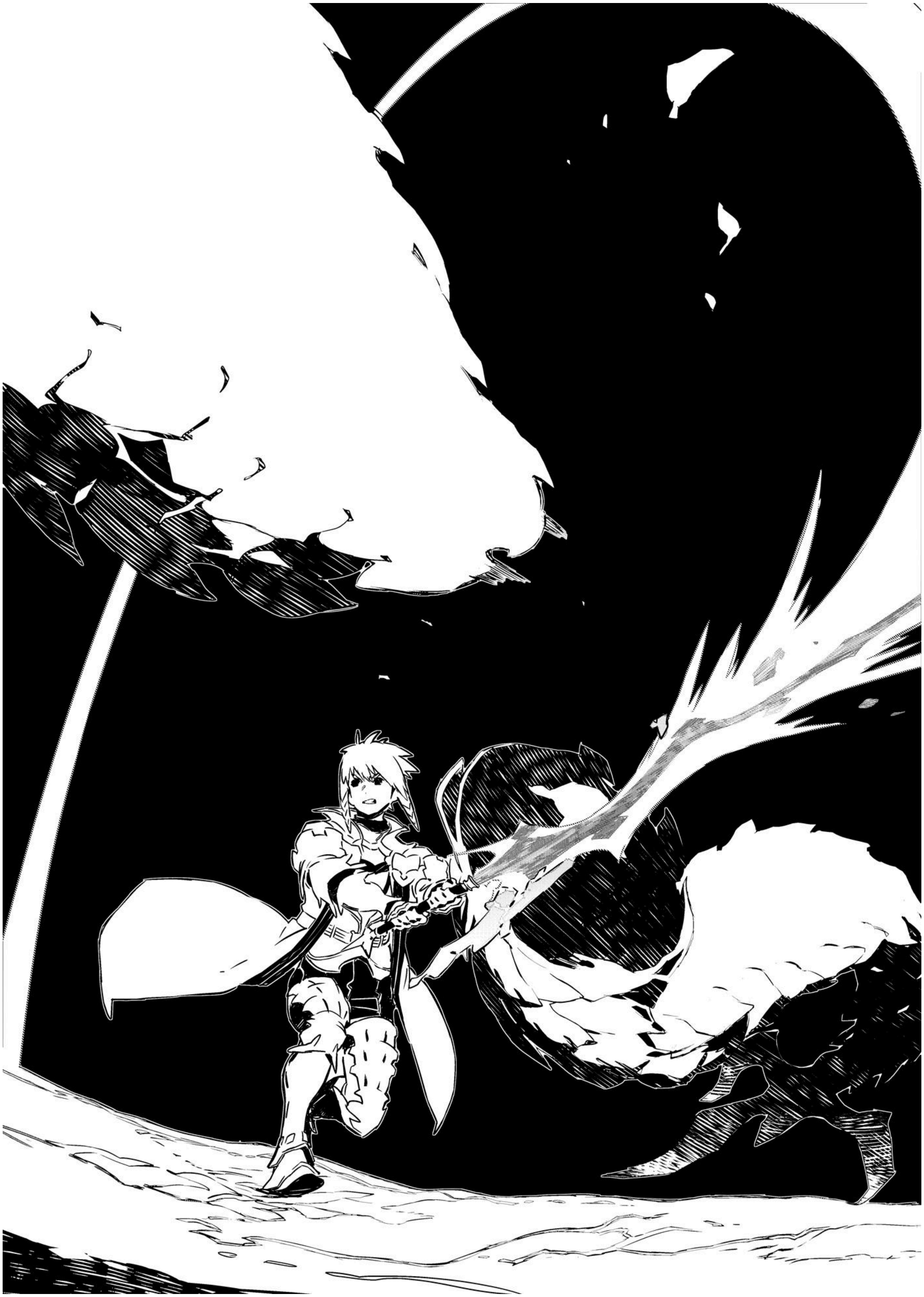
"The One Who Overcomes — Næġling!" ...They spoke the name of the skill.

The next moment, a dazzling light extended from the broken sword, recreating the shattered blade with pure light.

He aimed the blade at Gloria's tail and activated a skill, "Over Edge!"

The next moment, the size of Næġling's light grew, becoming longer than the diameter of the dragon's giant tail.

Foltesla then matched its movements, set the blade against it... and *sliced through it as easily as a knife through butter.*



"...!?" Gloria's defense required the use of active skills to break through it.

What made it so easy for Næġling to overcome was her ultimate skill.

The One Who Overcomes — Næġling.

It was an ultimate skill that activated upon her destruction.

First, it would recreate the blade out of light for ten minutes.

At the same time, it added the destroyer's defense to Foltesla's attack, offense to his defense, and AGI to his AGI — a retaliatory ultimate skill.

That meant as long as the skill was active, Foltesla had an attack power that could always break through the opponent's defense, defensive power that they could never overcome, and speed that was always greater than theirs.

The skill's duration was limited, but in a one-on-one, this would always place Foltesla above his opponent.

"ShoUOooOoOEeeEAaAaaAAAAaaAHHhHh!?" The shock of losing its tail caused Gloria to roar in pain for the first time.

However, Foltesla didn't stop there.

Gripping the blade that had now returned to its original size, he ran up Gloria's back and, once at the base of its wings, unleashed the ultimate job skill of the King of Swords.

"Sword Avalanche!" It was a barrier of blades — a sword-storm slashing all around him at twice the speed of sound.

A weaker blade would have definitely shattered from the force of this relentless attack. However, as she was now, Næġling could bear it.

Thus, the sword avalanche cut down the two wings growing out of Gloria's back before tearing open a giant hole in its body, dealing immense damage.

It had destroyed Gloria's heart *through* its back.

"..."

Losing a critical organ made Gloria's balance waver. Neither the Babylonian Battlegroup nor any duel rankers missed this brief flash of weakness. At this moment, they would unleash everything they had.

"Disintegrating Bow of Divine Lightning — INDRAAAAA!"

"Thousand-Arm Earth-Shaking Fist — Avalokiteśvara."

"Storm-Man Who Blows Away All Evil — Hermod... RISER KIIIIIIIIIIICK!" An arrow of compressed thunderclouds, continuous blows from fists that seemed to number in the thousands, and a supersonic spinning kick all struck Gloria.

Seeing the opportunity, the surrounding Masters also focused their attacks on the dragon.

In that moment, firepower that surpassed even the rite of divine punishment overwhelmed Gloria's body.

Foltesla leapt off Gloria's back to avoid being caught up in it. And even if he wasn't forced back, using Sword Avalanche had rendered him unable to move his arm for a minute, so he couldn't keep attacking anyway.

"Captain! Are you okay!?" asked a Babylonian Battlegroup member who ran up to him.

"I'm fine," Foltesla responded. "I'll attack it again the second the side-effect wears off."

"...So it still isn't over yet?"

"Yeah. I destroyed its heart, but that just slowed it down. It's probably a core-type, and the core is probably in one of the heads, or in all three of them."

Normally, destroying the heart was enough to kill most creatures. But if the creature had a core that ruled over the other organs, the heart was little more than a piece of flesh.

And Foltesla guessed that Gloria had three cores — one for each head.

"...The side-effect's gone now," he said. "I'll go get its head."

"Be careful. Hm...?"

The clan member that was seeing him off was blinking rapidly.

It was because a light was shining into his eyes.

After a moment that was like staring at dawn or directly into a flashlight... *his head vanished*.

"Huh...!?" After seeing that, Foltesla looked up at Gloria. What he saw reminded him of the disco balls from the nightclubs of a few decades ago.

Gloria was releasing light from its entire body.

There was no telling when this began, but it seemed like the wounds the Masters had dealt to Gloria had transformed into toothless mouths, all of which were releasing light. The one-horn was still bound by Lahmu, but the horn peeking out was shining red, *just like when it had evaporated the tians*.

"...! This has gotta be it!" Foltesla became certain that this was the source of his fears.

Gloria, now covered in wounds-turned-mouths, was twisting its body, sweeping up the surrounding Masters. The range of the blasts from the wounds was shorter than the ones from the main mouth, but that didn't mean much to the Masters it caught.

They survived for a moment thanks to their Brooches before expiring in the light.

It felt like a bad joke — the Masters that were dominating the fight were now being simply swept away.

That included the non-maxed-out Babylonian Battlegroup Masters who were providing support from outside the field.

Foltesla himself was able to avoid the light with his skillful movements, but...

"Ah...! SHULKA!"

"Captain, I'm sor—" The light show evaporated Shulka, the sub-leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup and the Master of Lahmu.

"BO..." A moment later, Lahmu vanished, freeing the one-horn and unleashing the first and strongest source of deadly light.

The source that, unlike the wounds, could fire all the way to Claymill.

Most of the surrounding Masters were gone, so Gloria stopped releasing light from its entire body.

Instead, the one-horned head opened its maw and aimed straight at Claymill.

"Not yet...!" The very next moment, Foltesla charged towards the head at supersonic speeds.

He got on it right before it fired and... "Over Edge! Sword Avalanche!" ...ran in to destroy the one-horned head using his ultimate job skill, right after expanding the size of his blade.

True to its name, the attack was like an unrelenting avalanche. It shattered the face cover on its head, split the right eyelid, cut the eye, and nearly reached within the skull when *Næġling's blade of light shattered.*

Foltesla gasped. "H-How? This just...!" Neither he nor Næġling could believe it.

After all, there was only one opponent who could withstand Foltesla's blade after he had used his ultimate skill.

Regardless, the reality was that the blade had broken upon reaching the bone.

This couldn't be right. His offense should've been above Gloria's defense.

There was only one reasonable explanation for this...

"Its stats increased...!" Foltesla now knew.

While Næġling's ultimate skill was active, there were only two ways the target opponent could have a defense greater than her offense. Either it was some special defensive ability that had nothing to do with stats, or the target's stats had increased after the ultimate skill was executed and copied the stats onto Foltesla.

Foltesla had fought Figaro many times, and he knew that he could lose even with his ultimate skill active due to the lion's ability to grow stronger as the battle progressed.

He suddenly felt a gaze on him. He turned and wondered how long it had been *like this*.

The third head, the one that had been dormant since the start, now had its eyes completely open.

Seemingly bored, the three-horned head stared at Foltesla, who was still on top of the one-horn.

If Gloria was indeed specialized in selection...

The barrier selected the powerful, while the breath of radiant death selected the quick and decisive...

So wouldn't it make sense for it to have a power that would allow it to select the strongest among the strong?

"Not yet...!" Foltesla stood up and brandished his sword. Even if his Næġling had broken and the opponent had become stronger, Foltesla wouldn't stop fighting.

Maybe he wasn't a man of true strength who could make it past Gloria's third selection. But even so, he had something he wanted to protect with his blade.

Gloria would soon fire its breath of light.

If that happened, Claymill would be done for.

Erica — Foltesla's wife — would die.

As a Maiden's Master, he couldn't tolerate that. This world was real, after all. She was real.

"N-NO! I WON'T LET YOU DO THIS!" Næġling had shattered and vanished, so he used Instant Equip to take out and brandish his spare weapon — a greatsword forged from a Mythical metal.

He struck Gloria again and again, even if it meant breaking his blade. He had to shatter the core at all costs. His grip on the handle was so tight his palms began to bleed. He didn't even stop attacking when the bones in his wrist began to crack.

Gloria didn't stop, either.

The horn soon began to shine, and its mouth began to overflow with light. The all-extinguishing radiance shambled towards Claymill.

"No...! ERI—!" Suddenly, the wound Foltesla had made on the head became another mouth.

And he, too, was engulfed by the torrent of light.

Nothing could withstand that. Even the Mythical greatsword melted to liquid, dripping down on Gloria as Foltesla and all he'd tried to protect vanished within the light.

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After the battle, there was neither a fortress nor a city. The only things left were Gloria's own severed wings.

The city had evaporated, leaving only the foundations. The people had evaporated as well.

Claymill the Fortress City had fallen. There were no survivors.

The battle had simply ended in a bitter flash of light...

Interlude: At the Royal Castle

Royal Capital, Altea

Three days had passed since Claymill's destruction.

News had spread across the continent that the Arch Sage's apprentices, the holy men of Altar's church, the imperium's second armored battalion, and the Babylonian Battlegroup had all suffered a staggering defeat against Gloria.

With Claymill the Fortress City gone, nothing now stood in Gloria's way.

The evacuation of the capital's inhabitants had accelerated, the price of food and clothing skyrocketed, conflict increased, medical facilities suffered a shortage of healers due to the lack of holy men... it was equivalent to a full-scale war. Gloria itself was far from the only thing the capital's knights had to deal with.

All this chaos demanded leadership for the knights, but their commander, Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria, was simply floating above the royal castle.

He was sitting on Gold Thunder — the national treasure loaned to him — and looking not at the town below the castle, but towards the northwest... the direction Gloria was approaching from.

Gloria itself was still nowhere in sight.

Three days after Claymill's destruction meant that it was now a week after Gloria's initial appearance at Lightning Dragon Mountain.

It ought to have arrived at the capital by now.

The only reason it hadn't was all the damage inflicted by the Babylonian Battlegroup, the other Masters on the scene, and King of Swords, Foltesla.

Though Gloria wasn't killed and could still fight just as well, all the damage it sustained, especially the lost heart, forced it to spend a whole day fixing its wounds. It had also lost its wings, which didn't regenerate, so it was now a day behind schedule.

Even so, Gloria would arrive at the capital tomorrow and engulf it in its

Fatal Field.

"...I must face it," Langley muttered. It had since been revealed that Fatal Field wasn't fatal to everyone. Those of level 500 and above could survive it and fight the dragon.

It was also known that Gloria couldn't be harmed by anyone outside the field. That was information that the members of the Babylonian Battlegroup fervently spread throughout *Infinite Dendrogram* and even outside of it. The conditions for fighting it were now known, and, for better or worse, Langley met them. He had the power to fight for and protect his kingdom.

"Let us move, Thunder."

He steeled his resolve and prepared himself to ride Gold Thunder towards the northwest, into the Nowest Canyon where Gloria could be found, but stopped when someone grabbed his shoulder and said, "Wait, Sir Grandria. There is no need to rush."

This rather surprised him, seeing as he was high up in the air, and he quickly turned to see a man standing in midair using his absurdly precise control of wind magic. There was only one person capable of that: one of Altar's Superior Jobs, which Langley named with his next words. "Mr. Arch Sage..."

He'd served the kingdom for over a century, but no one even knew his name. He only went by "Arch Sage," and that was what people called him. The old man's origins were a mystery, but he had been an Altarian court magician for generations, and always used the wisdom he'd gathered to advise and tutor its leaders, which had made him a highly trusted figure here.

"There are a few things I would like to say, but first and foremost, you will not solve the problem if you go alone. It would only waste our battle potential too early, and you could not do much besides buy a little time. If I were the one heading out, it would be exactly the same."

"Not even you can best it?"

"Oh yes. And if I summoned a meteor within the field, I would endanger myself, as well."

In an off-hand manner, the Arch Sage brought up his most powerful spell — a meteorite summon. However, he immediately changed his tone.

"It would be different if I still had my apprentices... What a grave loss."

"Mr. Arch Sage..." All of his apprentices had died in the battle at

Claymill. The Arch Sage's expression was that of a teacher who had lost all his students, and Langley felt sympathy for him.

However, his feelings were a bit misplaced.

The Arch Sage did feel that their deaths were a loss... *but he didn't regret them for a moment.*

"That Gloria creature, though..." said the old man. "Thanks to the sacrifices that were made, we now know how it functions, and it is indeed a fearsome monster... I wonder how the remaining forces of the kingdom can even fight it."

The kingdom had already deployed and lost nearly as much as it could afford to give.

There were still the knights, but the only ones among them who could survive Gloria's Fatal Field were Langley and the vice-commander of the Royal Guard. Even with the Arch Sage joining them, it wouldn't be enough.

Besides them, the kingdom had another tian who could be an immensely powerful addition to the group, but sadly, that tian was not yet level 500.

"It is futile. At the very least, tians alone cannot win this," said the Arch Sage.

"So not even you know a way to defeat it?" Langley asked. The question made the Arch Sage fall silent.

Finding that strange, Langley called out to him, "Mr. Arch Sage?"

"...Oh, my apologies. I was simply racking this old brain to remember something, but came up with nothing. How embarrassing. And here I am, supposedly this great fountain of wisdom," he said as he returned from his trip through his own thoughts with a wry grin, then took out a pocket watch. "More importantly... Sir Grandria, it's almost time for the negotiations. Knowing who we are dealing with, I humbly believe it is best if you participate as well."

In less than an hour, the king would be negotiating with a certain someone. Langley hadn't planned to attend, but the Arch Sage was right about the other party. *I should be ready to protect Eldor,* he thought, before saying, "Very well. I will go and guard him. What of you?"

"I will stay here in the wind's embrace and lose myself in thought. Perhaps I shall happen upon a solution. Oh, but do not worry. I will be there for the negotiations."

After seeing off Langley, the Arch Sage looked to the northwest again.

His train of thought went as follows...

Would Superweapon No. 3... Would Acra-Vasta be able to handle it? No... it should not be complete yet. However, the base functions should be ready to go. Perhaps Acra would survive it...? No. No it would not. The monster breathes light. The distance created by Space Dilution means nothing against that, and Vasta's Mutual Repair would be quickly exhausted. And since attacks from outside the set range do nothing, their kinetic energy bombs would be useless, as well.

He was thinking about Langley's question — the means of defeating Gloria. However, there was a major problem with that.

It was the name "Acra-Vasta" itself

Acra-Vasta was a superweapon being secretly constructed within some uncovered pre-ancient civilization ruins. Even the Arch Sage shouldn't have been able to discover anything about it.

No. 5... Beldrion would have had a better chance against it, but it was destroyed by the King of Kings and The Lynx over six hundred years ago. Using No. 1 is not an option, while No. 2 and 4... are no longer under my control.

The man calling himself Arch Sage sighed, then looked up at the sky.

No matter. Gloria is just another pawn of the incarnations... Between this and the recent increase in Masters... inferior incarnations... it appears that now, after two millennia, they are approaching their endgame.

That thought made him change his expression.

This new expression was ugly, and seemed to contain both pure hatred towards a sworn enemy and the sheer joy of eventually bringing him down.

Worse comes to worst, this body of mine might wither; I will simply focus on gathering more data. It is of no consequence. We still have a spare... The "we" of the next generation... already exists.

Thinking that, the man who'd hid his name from the world and went by only his job returned to the castle he'd been nesting in for over a century.

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Royal Capital, Altea, Royal Audience Hall

As Gloria's arrival came ever closer, certain negotiations were reaching their end. The parties involved were the king, Eldor Zeo Altar, and... "Okiedokie. My darlings and I will fight Gloria, too."

...the leader of The Lunar Society, High Priestess, Fuso Tsukuyo.

"So The Lunar Society will help in the fight against Gloria? How reassuring," said the king.

"Yes indeed," Tsukuyo nodded. "We got lots of people who can survive Gloria's field, so you can be sure we'll be useful."

Her response calmed Eldor's nerves.

Thus far, negotiations with The Lunar Society hadn't gone well, mostly because he couldn't contact Tsukuyo. Now that he finally had, it seemed to be going smoothly.

With Gloria only one day away, they couldn't manage without the help of The Lunar Society — the kingdom's largest and strongest clan.

"Thank you," said the king. "I am in your de—"

"But only if all the royalty sign this Contract." However, it would come at a price.

"This is...? Ah...!" Tsukuyo presented him a Contract of the highest quality — the kind that instantly granted death to anyone who violated it. Knowing that full well, she had still demanded the entire royal family sign it. Eldor went on to read the conditions of the contract and...

"'A prohibition on all use of the kingdom's authority to suppress the actions of the Lunar Society?'" he read aloud.

"It's basically a written guarantee — an agreement to never suppress or harm The Lunar Society no matter how big we get."

Essentially, she wanted him to grant them complete freedom as a religious group. The Lunar Society was currently growing at staggering rates. It was far above a thousand strong, and that included both believers from reality as well as tians.

The speed of their growth would be menacing to any politician.

Even if everything seemed fine now, there was a chance that it may grow into a terrible cancer upon the kingdom. The chances of the kingdom dismantling the clan were low, but it was entirely possible that they would've begun to limit it, and Tsukuyo brought out this Contract to prevent that.

"Oh, it also says that the Contract would be null and void if The Lunar Society committed acts of terror or got involved in criminal activity. Otherwise, we would be able to do whatever we wanted. Though, in exchange for that, we will also be given the freedom to accept or refuse any other requests from the country."

"But that means that..." ...It would become impossible for the kingdom to bind this dangerously powerful entity in any way. Signing this basically meant trading the elimination of a current threat for a dangerous future.

"You wouldn't interfere with our religious activities and wouldn't force us to do something we don't want as long as we don't engage in criminal activity. That's all. Nothing big, right?"

Tsukuyo Fuso, sly fox that she was, demanded this despite knowing all of that full well.

The king wouldn't have to give anything. As long as the contract was unbroken, no one would be harmed. It came at no immediate cost, but it would enable them to deal with the imminent threat.

The conditions seemed truly fair, but it made the king feel as though his head was caught between the jaws of a fox.

"And what if we try to force you to act before signing this contract?" asked the Arch Sage.

"We'll respond with terrorism," Tsukuyo instantly replied.

The words made the audience restless, with some of them beginning to berate her.

"Before the contract is signed, we can go ahead and engage in religious terrorism if we want... *And we are well prepared for that.*"

Those words made everyone fall silent.

"Wh-What are you saying?" asked the king.

"Right now, I have Kage's special forces hiding within every major city in Altar." Special forces led by King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.

Their specializations and goals were obvious.

"Besides that, I could cover the capital in my night, then have Kage follow it up with Erlkönig... You know what would happen, don't you?" Everyone present knew the powers of Tsukuyo Fuso and her most trusted aide.

Tsukikage was a limited wide-scale extermination specialist, while Tsukuyo was a wide-scale suppression type who greatly expanded those limits. It was easy to see that the capital would fall if they unleashed their combined power upon it.

"Please don't...!" the king pleaded.

"You don't have to ask. I'd only have them act if the kingdom tried to force us to cooperate. That's why you have three options," Tsukuyo said as she raised up three fingers. "You either sign the Contract and get our cooperation, don't sign the Contract and try to take care of it some other way, or try to force us to do what you want and face utter destruction."

After naming the three things, Tsukuyo smiled proudly and waited for an answer.

"...You are a monster," said one of the nobles in the audience. "Control yourself!" said another.

However, none of this had fouled Tsukuyo's mood whatsoever. In fact, her smile actually widened to an inhuman degree; she tilted her head slightly and said "You're asking for my help exactly *because* I am as dangerous as a monster, no? Anyway, what do you say, Your Majesty? Will you sign it? Or not?"

Eldor hesitated for a good moment before deciding to sign it.

Thus, the *peaceful negotiations* ended, and it was decided that the kingdom's largest clan would participate in the fight against Gloria.

Act Four: Figaro’s Choice

Gideon the Duel City, Central Arena

The Central Arena. A lone man sat on top of the building that looked much like the Roman Colosseum.

Not saying a word, he — the kingdom’s duel champion, Over Gladiator, Figaro — was looking towards the northwest. Caressed by the wind, he wore a sorrowful expression — one unlike those he usually displayed.

In his mind, he held the image of the powerful monster beyond the horizon, which would soon attack the capital.

But at the same time, he was looking back at the past — specifically, a certain meeting that had occurred over three years ago.

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The real Figaro... Vincent Myers... was born with a rare, unusual, and painful heart condition. Its most obvious symptoms were the life-threatening spasms that occurred whenever his heart rate climbed too high.

He was born to a wealthy household and received the best treatment possible from infancy onward, but the disease stayed with him all the way to adulthood. Not even a heart transplant could relieve the symptoms of his condition.

But although he was born into an unfortunate body, he was blessed with a wonderful family.

“Live your life to the fullest,” his father said once. “We’ll do whatever we can to help you with that.”

“We’re your parents, after all,” his mother added. “We love you, Vince.”

It had been years since he heard those words, but he could still remember them clearly.

His younger brother, Keith, was supportive as well. “I’ll do my best in your stead,” he resolutely said once.

Vincent appreciated his wonderful family. But at the same time, he couldn’t help but feel that he wasn’t truly happy.

He could never feel the rush of running through open fields. Excessive activity put a strain on his heart, limiting his movement to short walks. The simple act of running was life-threatening to him.

His heart would never race in satisfaction. An accelerated heartbeat could be deadly to him, so he couldn’t even allow himself to be moved.

He once couldn’t even finish watching an opera he attended with his family, as he was overcome by a sudden spasm.

Despite this, his life was comfortable. He was provided for, but had no real reason to hope for the future, either. For as long as he could remember, he would only read relaxing books, watch the scenery, eat, think, sleep, and just... coast through life.

His life was more like a plant’s than a human, and he had never truly felt the vitality within him. He never had the opportunity to go all-out. He never felt the flame of excitement or the lively throbbing of his heart.

Vincent Myers’ life was gentle, but extremely isolated.

All that changed when Keith gifted him *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“This is a VRMMO! The real deal!” he said, handing the hardware to Vincent. Keith explained that it transported the mind to the virtual world, leaving the flesh unaffected, which meant that Vincent wouldn’t have to worry about heart spasms due to over-excitement.

At first, Vincent doubted that such a thing could really exist. It seemed like something straight out of science fiction. He also thought that even if the game’s promises were true, it was still a game — even if he could move around freely, it would all be fake.

“Hm...” But even if it was all just a game, he believed that it might be better than the reality with his limited body. With that in mind, he began *Infinite Dendrogram* and found a realm that was as close to real as you could get.

It wasn’t just an extremely realistic game, but a world where he could actually live his life to the fullest. It was here that he could experience excitement for the first time in his life.

After naming himself “Figaro” — from the opera he couldn’t finish watching with his family — he descended upon *Infinite Dendrogram* and quickly discovered how he would spend his life in it.

What enchanted him the most were the duels.

In reality, his disease made him unable to even watch sports; but as an avatar, he had no issue with it.

The first duel he saw was shortly after *Infinite Dendrogram's* release, so there were no Master participants, but the scene of tian gladiators fighting still moved him greatly. The all-out clash between lives thrilled his virtual heart far beyond the capacity of his real one. He was looking at something that he couldn't even hope to have in the real world. Following the duel, he quickly went through the process to become a Gladiator.

Thus, Figaro the Gladiator was born.

His first month within *Infinite Dendrogram* was certainly an eventful one.

He'd encountered Shu, fought his first UBM, switched his country from Legendaria to Altar, and arrived at Gideon's Central Arena for the first time.

It was there that he was first able to participate in duels.

Maxing out Gladiator — a low-rank job — put him at level 50, giving him the right to become a duelist, and he quickly went to the Central Arena's reception to register.

The fact that he'd finally be able to actually participate in the duels that had so moved him when he'd first entered this world was immensely exciting to him. So much, in fact, that he signed up for a match on the very same day.

His goal was to join the top 30 duel rankers, among all the thousands of combatants. Figaro clenched his fist in anticipation for the many days of dueling to come.

At that moment, he noticed that the person next to him was making a similar motion.

The two looked at each other. The other person was a Swordsman with a red-haired girl at his side.

Figaro looked at the papers the receptionist was handling and realized that he, too, had just signed up. They both just went to their own waiting rooms without saying a word to each other.

But when it was their turn to go to the stage, they both realized that they would be facing the man they had just run into at reception. This wasn't quite as much of a coincidence as it seemed. They both had just registered, they both wanted their first duel, and their level was about the same. In fact, since matchmaking preferred opponents of the same level, this was an obvious outcome.

"Fight!" Following the call, their duel commenced.

Compared to duels between top rankers, theirs was surely unimpressive. Both were low level and their Embryos were still low-rank, so there was no way their duel would ever be one for the history books.

However, they both fought with intense zeal. During the entire duel, it was never once clear which one would win and how. Both of them were giving it their all and using whatever they had to achieve victory over their opponent.

But in the end, they were both scarred all over, and it still wasn't clear which one of them had emerged victorious.

However, they both felt that this had been the most fun duel they ever had.

"I'm Foltesla, and this is Næġling," the opponent introduced himself right after, extending his right hand.

"I'm Figaro... That was a good match, wasn't it?" Figaro said as he took the hand.

"Let's fight again!" they both insisted simultaneously.

It was obvious that this match made them both feel the exact same way.

Thus, the two became the closest of friends... and rivals.

Their first duel against one another was far from the last. They continued rising up the ranks, piling wins and losses against each other, and their rivalry continued after both entered the top 30 rankers.

Eventually, Figaro defeated Tom Cat — the wall to every Altarian duelist — and became the best out of thousands of duel participants... the duel champion.

Even so, he didn't believe that this was the end of his and Foltesla's rivalry.

The top three could only be fought in order, so Foltesla couldn't face Figaro in a ranked match until he defeated Tom.

However, Figaro believed that Foltesla would do it someday, and they would face each other in the arena again.

He was completely certain that the rematch was close.

But now, Figaro could no longer tell just how imminent — or distant — it really was.

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“Yoo. You don’t look too good todaay.”

The voice he heard cut off Figaro’s reminiscence.

“...Tom.” It was a fellow duel ranker: specifically, the previous champion and the current second in the rankings — The Lynx, Tom Cat.

“What’s wroong...? Wait, don’t tell mee. It’s obviouus...” Figaro didn’t say a word in return.

Not minding it, Tom continued, “Gloria, riight? You’re wondering how to fight it, aren’t youu?”

“...That’s not it,” said Figaro. “And... I can’t fight it even if I wanted to.”

“Hm?” Tom tilted his head.

He thought about it for a second, then found an answer by simply remembering Figaro’s nature.

It wasn’t clear whether Figaro realized this or not, but he continued. “Gloria is... very strong. I know that better than ever now that I’ve looked at the data leaked by the Babylonian Battlegroup.”

After their defeat at Claymill, the Babylonian Battlegroup revealed all that they’d learned about Gloria on their website. The members who couldn’t participate in the battle went online the very same day and gave the info to informants like DIN and other media companies. This, of course, was met with a lot of anger from the rankers who were hiding such information. The Babylonian Battlegroup could have also kept it to themselves and gone for a rematch with a greater chance of emerging victorious and becoming MVPs. However, instead, they spread the info as far as possible with the hopes that someone would defeat Gloria as quickly as possible... that might’ve been their leader’s last wish.

“No offense to you, Tom, but Gloria is immeasurably stronger than anything or anyone I’ve fought so far.”

“Hey, you’re not wrong. I know way too well that I have no chance against it as I am now. That monster is probably meant to be fought by several Superiors at once. If you wanna beat it, you need to team up with other Superiors... or people like Foltesla.”

“But...”

“Yep. That’s impossible for you.”

Figaro nodded in response.

This was another face of the disease he had been born with.

Because of his illness, he'd spent his entire life doing nothing, *and with nobody*. This left him without the most basic of social skills.

He had never played with other children when he was young, nor had he ever teamed up with someone for a sport in class. Until he'd entered *Infinite Dendrogram*, he'd never actually done anything significant with someone else.

He knew what cooperation *was*, but that was the extent of it.

When it came to actually cooperating with someone — to fighting as a party — his brain would instantly shut down because he was so unused to the experience. His reactions would become considerably worse, and he even once failed a quest because of it.

Figaro himself knew this too well.

He didn't have the fundamental skills necessary to actually cooperate with anyone. The nearly twenty years of stagnant, solitary life he'd lived had become shackles that bound his movements. Removing them would take a long time. Not even the few years he'd spent in *Infinite Dendrogram* were quite enough yet.

That was the reason why he explored the Tomb Labyrinth solo.

"Fighting alongside others makes you useless. If a Superior like yourself was defeated, the frontline would be likely to collapse, and that's probably why Foltesla refused your help. Is that what's troubling you?"

"It's not about my inability to cooperate..."

"Really? What's bothering you, then?"

Figaro fell silent for a good moment before slowly speaking up, "Foltesla... sent me a message."

"...He did, huh?" As rivals and friends, the two were in contact in real life, as well.

However, they rarely communicated in that world. Anything they wanted to say, they'd say here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

But he couldn't do that this time, because Foltesla hadn't come back even after his death penalty expired.

The reason was laid out in the message he'd sent to Figaro.

"I'm not coming back," he wrote. "I don't want to see it with my own eyes. I don't want confirmation that Erica is gone... It's all my fault." His wife and everyone else in the city had vanished without a trace.

There wasn't even the faintest hope that they had escaped the calamity.

People with jobs specialized in investigation had tried to find survivors, only to conclude that everyone in the city was dead. They had all been evaporated by the breath of light.

Foltesla learned this during his death penalty. The cruel reality broke him to the point that he wasn't even able to log in and face it.

That was just how important Erica was to him.

In the message he received, Figaro couldn't find even a hint of his rival, the seasoned duel ranker and clan leader.

And one part at the end hit him harder than anything else.

"'I can't keep my promise. I'm sorry, Figaro,'" Figaro quoted it to Tom.

Those words clearly meant that he would never see his rival and friend again.

The man who claimed that he'd defeat Gloria and take Figaro's throne was now forever lost to this world. He just wasn't coming back.

Figaro had the toughest heart in all of Infinite Dendrogram, but this truth was so heavy that even that had begun to ache.

"I... I want to keep our promise," muttered Figaro, voice faltering ever so slightly. Their promised duel could simply never happen now. It was impossible to keep it, but Figaro didn't want to abandon it entirely, even if the other party was no longer in this world.

But there was one way that didn't require Foltesla's presence. "Maybe I could fulfill this promise by fighting Gloria," said Figaro.

"...A time attack, huh?" Tom nodded. A time attack was a type of duel where the duelists fought the same kind of monster, and victory was decided based on how fast they defeated theirs, or how much damage they dealt to it. Besides their standard duels, Figaro and Foltesla engaged in these, as well.

In a way, fighting Gloria, whom Foltesla couldn't beat, could be considered their last duel.

Whether he won, joined Foltesla in defeat, or even reached a stalemate, this would be Figaro's last duel against Foltesla. The promise between them would be fulfilled, and that was ultimately why Figaro wanted to fight.

"But... I can't." Gloria had to be defeated using all the kingdom's remaining power. If Figaro wanted to have his duel and fulfill the promise, he had to go to the battlefield ahead of anyone else and fight it alone.

However, Gloria had already been revealed to be a creature without compare, and it was likely that it was still hiding something. It was fair to assume that it would cause some sort of unexpected disaster during the next battle.

It had unleashed new powers at Claymill, and it was possible that another battle would uncover yet more calamities hiding within the dragon.

It would be too much for an exclusively solo player like Figaro. While a well-coordinated group could perhaps handle it, a lone player likely had no chance. And then the newly-empowered Gloria could become an immeasurably powerful threat to those who would face it next, potentially making it impossible to avenge those Foltesla and his Babylonian Battlegroup tried to protect.

“And if that would make it impossible to put their suffering to rest, then I should just...” Figaro voiced his worries and explained why he tried to keep his desire hidden.

In response... “Hahahah. I see, I see.” ...Tom laughed and slapped Figaro’s shoulder before continuing. “Don’t be stupid, Altar’s strongest. I mean...” He rejected Figaro’s words...

“...YOU’RE NOT THE KIND OF GUY WHO FIGHTS WHILE THINKING ABOUT NONSENSE LIKE THAT!” ...Then topped it off with an all-out punch to the face.

“...Tom?” Figaro mouthed, feeling pain on his cheek and looking back at the ex-champion.

There was anger on his face, along with some other intense emotion.

“You’re the one who beat me,” Tom said. “You’re the one who beat Tom Cat, the biggest barrier the kingdom’s Masters had to overcome. And you did it before you were a Superior, or called the Over Gladiator! *You* are one who exceeded our expectations!”

Figaro couldn’t tell just how much emotion he was putting into those words, but he could feel the passion behind them.

“And now you’re even stronger than you were back then! Why would you even say something so... weak?! Act like yourself! You’re a meathead berserker! Don’t think, and just go fight the damn thing! Fight it alone and maybe even die, but lop off one of its heads on your way out! Go at it solo and destroy the head that beat your rival! Don’t just give up on that duel! On your promise!” He then fell silent for a moment before continuing.

"Does that promise mean so little to you that you're gonna give up on it after just a little bit of *thinking*?!" Those were the most important words Tom wanted to say.

Figaro opened his eyes wide, as though he was done hesitating, and found his answer.

"...Thanks, Tom," he said as he looked up. "I'll go and fulfill our promise."

The very next moment, Figaro vanished. Tom Cat shifted his gaze and saw him rush towards the capital at supersonic speeds.

"Go get 'em, champion." Tom watched him disappear in satisfaction.

And now that he was all alone, he muttered something to himself.

"Jabberwock, Mad Hatter... This will probably undermine your plans, but I choose to respect their freedom... And their feelings. To me, that's more important than creating more Superior Embryos."

He cracked a smile... "That's the kind of person my Master was, after all." ...And spoke those words with nothing but nostalgia and heart.

Act Five: The Departure of the Two Kings

The Skycrown

In the Border Mountain Belt, there was a mountain where no human was allowed to tread.

The entire belt was a skydragon hive, but there were only two dragons atop the Skycrown itself, for the other skydragons never ventured near the area.

Despite being home to only two dragons, for hundreds of years the western tians had made a point of avoiding the area. The Kingdom of Altar even passed a law that made entry into The Skycrown a capital offense.

The reason for this was clear — the dragons nesting atop this mountain were more frightening than any ordinary monsters.

One of them was the Skydragon King, Drag-Heaven. He was the strongest of the skydragon kind, having existed since before the time of the pre-ancient civilization: living, dying, and being reborn over and over. No records of this remained in the current era, but he had annihilated countless countries in his time before coming face-to-face with the so-called “incarnations,” dying, then coming back to life in this manner.

The Skydragon King was a fearsome entity that had surpassed life and death, making him superior to countless other beings, living or dead.

“...I have recalled something,” he said, perched atop his throne on the mountain, the majesty of his pale, gargantuan frame plain to see.

Besides him stood two humanoid figures.

“What did you recall, father?” one of them asked. Though his form was human, he certainly wasn’t of mankind. He was an Anthropomorphized skydragon — and one of the greatest among them, at that.

His name was Shinedragon King, Drag-Flare, and he was Drag-Heaven’s firstborn, as well as the second strongest after him. He was only in human form because his dragon form would make the throne area a bit crowded.

“Gloria. I have witnessed it before,” Drag-Heaven said.

“Are you certain?”

“Indeed I am. It is the offspring of Deathdragon King and Lightdragon King. They were a couple that existed long before you were born. I murdered them when they tried to leave the mountain belt.”

“Why...? Oh. I see.”

“Indeed. As you saw, their child was an abomination, and it seems they tried to let it escape before it was culled. Heheheh. Three heads, golden scales... there is no mistaking it. Apparently, their struggle allowed their offspring to escape, but I never thought I would lay eyes on it again... Oh, I see...”

Drag-Heaven realized something and paused before continuing.

“This must be the work of the incarnations. I was wondering why it seems to have powers beyond those of its parents, but if they are involved, then it makes sense. It must have been sealed away until now in exchange for this power. And it is approaching the cities of men instead of The Skycrown... Heheheh... This all must be a result of some sort of contract between it and the incarnations.”

Drag-Flare silently listened to his father, but didn’t understand all of his words.

As a creature that had existed since before the time of the pre-ancient civilization, Drag-Heaven knew far more than any dragon, or any other living being for that matter, and he hadn’t passed on most of his knowledge to his children.

From another point of view, one could say that Drag-Heaven was about the only creature that could still be alive despite his immense knowledge. Most anyone who knew too much was neutralized by the incarnations, but since neither death nor binding had any power over the indestructible Drag-Heaven, he was simply left alone according to a deal they struck.

“Hmm... but this is quite troublesome,” Drag-Heaven said. “I am bound by my contract with the incarnations, so I cannot leave The Skycrown unless the conditions are fulfilled. I heard Arcal’s dying wish clearly, but unfortunately, I cannot move from my place.”

“Arcal” was the Lightning Dragon King’s original name. When dragon kings became UBMs, their names would assume the model of “X Dragon

King, Drag-Y," where X and Y referred to their nature, but intelligent dragons would oftentimes call each other by their original names.

"Father, I will go slay the dragon in your stead," said Drag-Flare.

"You will fail," said Drag-Heaven without a moment of hesitation. "Its field will not kill level 100s such as yourself. However, you have not *exceeded* the level 100 barrier. Gloria *has*, and furthermore, it has acquired Arcal's Resources as a UBM, making it a foe beyond your ability."

UBMs were treated differently when they were defeated by other UBMs. Instead of becoming special rewards, like they did with people, they became pure energy that empowered the victor. In game terms, they basically became enormous amounts of EXP. Defeating UBMs greater than yourself also came with an added bonus of increasing your level cap, but that didn't matter to an SUBM like Gloria. There were also a number of individuals who mimicked the MVP special reward function by taking in the powers of those they defeated, but this too was not relevant in this case.

What did matter was that Gloria — an SUBM to begin with — had become even stronger by defeating Drag-Volt, an upper-Mythical UBM.

"Even if I could face it myself, the battle would never end," added Drag-Heaven. "My offense is incompatible with Gloria's, and it cannot defeat me, for I am immortal. Even if one of us did eventually best the other, the continent would be a very silent place by then. It would be true foolishness."

Imagining the outcome, the Skydragon King chuckled.

"Or perhaps the incarnations would come out to settle the matter? That could be entertaining in its own right, but escalating things so far would make the end rather anticlimactic... Heheheh... What a shame. Truly."

Drag-Flare said nothing in response. To his father, the fate of the continent was nothing more than part of an entertaining board game or a theater performance.

Or, more accurately, he enjoyed watching the rise and fall of all kinds of life, his own included. No one could comprehend the scale of the thoughts of the most transcendental being on the continent — not even his own son.

"But I also cannot merely play the spectator. I still have to fulfill Arcal's dying wish."

The Lightning Dragon King had asked his family to defeat Gloria in order to protect the Border Mountain Range they inhabited, as well as the world of men. The Skydragon King loved his third child enough to honor this wish.

"I cannot leave, and my son cannot best it. That means that I must rely on a third party."

"I see." The second humanoid creature there finally broke his silence. "You wish to give me a request to defeat Gloria, yes?"

His name was the King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

He was a Superior from Altar, and a criminal wanted by not just the Kingdom, but every other country as well. Besides that, he was one of the few who knew The Skydragon King personally.

The reason behind their acquaintance was simple — it was the fact that entering The Skycrown was a crime so grave it was punishable by death. Sechs' only goal was to sin and become an evil-doer. In Altar, invading The Skycrown was a crime matched by few others, and that alone was a good enough reason for him to do just that.

Thus, he went to The Skycrown all on his own and fought Drag-Flare when he came out to defend it.

The Skydragon King's firstborn was troubled by the amount of invaders they had these past few years — especially the kind they called "Masters." He was fed up with the people flooding in hoping to defeat him or his father for their MVP special rewards, and worked hard to defeat them all.

Sechs, however, was greater than any that had come before. He was already a Superior, and his power matched that of Drag-Flare — a Mythical UBM.

Because Sechs excelled at defense and Drag-Flare was focused on offense, they were more or less evenly matched, and it seemed as though their battle would go on forever.

It only ended once Drag-Heaven, who had been simply enjoying their battle, called out, "By the way, why did you come here in the first place?"

Initially, both The Skydragon King and his son thought that he was here for the same reason as the others — to acquire glory and a Mythical MVP special reward. However, Sechs' eyes as he fought Drag-Flare were strangely pure. They held no greed, nor any hunger for glory.

Sechs' reply to the dragon's question was simple: "Because invading The Skycrown is a great offense here in the kingdom."

"I see," Drag-Heaven nodded. "That is indeed a sin, but there is no crime in defeating us."

"Then I will stop," Sechs said, assuming a neutral stance.

The battle ended in a way that left Sechs' opponent, Drag-Flare, completely speechless. Drag-Heaven, however, laughed out loud and immediately took a liking to Sechs.

Ever since then, he had regularly invited the criminal to The Skycrown.

The kingdom didn't know the circumstances surrounding his visits and assumed Sechs was merely committing that grave crime over and over again, piling sin upon sin. Sechs never turned down the invitations and gladly visited Drag-Heaven. "What a nice place. I'm committing a crime just by coming here," he'd once mused.

At first, Drag-Flare wasn't sure if this was acceptable, but he acquiesced to his father's will, and soon, he and Sechs even became friends. He might've been yearning for a conversation partner besides his father.

And now, a week after Gloria's appearance, Drag-Heaven had summoned Sechs again.

"I promise to reward you if you agree to slay Gloria. I have not yet decided what it shall be, but as The Skydragon King, I assure that it will be worth your while."

"It's been a long time since I received a quest," said Sechs.

"...You told me once that even criminal organizations want nothing to do with you."

"Sad as it seems, yes." Just as there were official adventurer's guilds, there were also organizations that gave out quests for outlaws. However, as a Superior criminal, Sechs was feared even by the outlaw guilds. After finding out about them, Sechs had excitedly made his way to them, only to find out that they had caught wind of his coming and fled the kingdom practically overnight.

"Also, if the kingdom fell, it would be bad for you as well," Drag-Heaven continued.

"What do you mean by that?"

"If Altar perished, all the sins you had committed against the country would be null and void. That would be troubling for you, no?"

"...It would," Sechs said, his expression serious. Most criminals would be glad about that, but to this man, committing crime and being evil *was* the end goal. Thus, being pardoned was a negative to him.

“But father, Sechs is my equal. If I am unable to defeat it, would he not fail against it, as well?”

“Perhaps. However, there is a Gloria that you cannot best, but Sechs can.”

“Hm...?” Drag-Flare made a confused expression.

Drag-Heaven had just implied that there was more than one Gloria.

However, Sechs seemed to understand. “I see,” he said. “So that’s how it is.”

“Heheh. You understand, then?”

“Yes. I also saw the video of the Babylonian Battlegroup’s fight and read the papers that accompanied the photos.”

Drag-Flare didn’t know what his father saw and didn’t read any newspapers from the world of man, but he could tell that there was something they both knew that he did not. His father and friend were both extremely enigmatic, and he was fully aware that he had to ignore certain things about them to hold a proper conversation.

“Then I will go search for it,” said Sechs. “You can’t see it, can you?”

“In a way, that tells us exactly where it is,” said Drag-Heaven.

“Indeed. Anyway, time is short, so I’ll be heading out immediately.”

“Very well... But before that, I have some encouraging words for you.”

“Hm?”

“Gloria was sent by the entities managing this world for the purpose of creating new Superiors. Therefore...” Drag-Heaven cracked a grin before continuing. “...Defeating it before any new Superiors are born might be considered a truly mortal sin — an offense against the heavens themselves.”

“Ohh... that is indeed motivating.” The relentless sinner broke into a wide smile before leaving The Skycrown.

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“Now, what should I reward him with? A daughter’s hand in marriage, perhaps?”

“Father, none of my sisters are fit to marry. The eldest fell at the hand of King of Kings, Rockfell and was sealed alongside him; the older of my younger sisters now serves the Master known as Catherine Kongou. The youngest is still far too young.”

“Heheheh. That is true.” After Sechs left, Drag-Heaven and his son engaged in idle chatter. At the same time, the skydragon king eagerly awaited the final act of the battle against Gloria.

“I must say, the world of man is certainly exciting these days. Things grew a bit dull after the eras of Rockfell and Azurite ended... Events like this are what make life worth living.”

“Father...”

“Heheheh. You will come to understand as you grow older.” He spoke with a slightly disinterested look in his eyes. “However, I imagine that even a mere few hundred years won’t be enough for you... or for Arcal.”

“...Father?”

Drag-Heaven then got up before saying, “Now, then... I guess I should bring him back.”

He followed this statement with a wave of incomprehensible words.

This was not the humanoid language, non-humanoid language, dragon language, or the ancient civilization’s language. He was speaking words from a past long forgotten, before he finished the chant with the perfectly understandable phrase “Heaven’s Resurrection.”

Suddenly, his body released a massive torrent of energy and a pillar of light.

The energy gathered before him and assumed a form. It had four limbs, a long neck, a tail, and a pair of giant wings — it was a dragon.

Clad in lightning running along its scales, it was none other than the Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt... *the very same who had fallen at Gloria’s hands*.

“Huh?! Arcal?! How?! He’s dead...!” The sight of his revived little brother astounded Drag-Flare. This was far outside the limits of the resurrection timer. Drag-Volt had dissolved into specks of light days ago, and a long distance away from here, too — but now, he had been brought back to life right before his brother’s eyes. It was resurrection from nothing — something that would be impossible even for the greatest Necromancers.

Only two beings in the entire world were capable of this, and one of them was Drag-Heaven.

“Oh. I just realized I’d never showed you this before,” he said. “Heheheh. Well, I have not used it for at least a millennium... And it still seems to come at a cost.”

The resurrection was impressive, but the Lightning Dragon King wasn't the same as before. His body had shrunk by about two or three times, and the lightning he released seemed far weaker. The most notable change, however, was the fact that the name above his head was no longer "Lightning Dragon King, Drag-Volt," but "High-End Lightning Dragon" — a kind of pure-dragon.

"Wh-What? Have I not died...?" The dragon regained consciousness and spoke those words in his confusion.

"You were lucky, Arcal. If you had been defeated by mankind, your soul and concept would have been transformed into a piece of equipment. I was able to bring you back because only your Resources were gone."

"Father..." Arcal said, realizing that his father was the one who had resurrected him.

"However, you have lost your title of Lightning Dragon King, and the vast Resources supporting you have been taken by Gloria. You are also weakened as a result of your return. You are now merely a skydragon. You will have to train and work diligently to regain your former power."

"...I will, father. But... what became of the mad-dragon that killed me?!"

"It still lives. It destroyed the duchy, erased the ancient fortress, and will soon arrive at the capital."

"Gh...!" Arcal's eyes were full of rage. He couldn't stomach the idea that Gloria had taken the life of his friend. Power gathered in his newly-revived limbs, but...

"Do not."

...His father stopped him with those few words and a serious gaze. "As you are now, you cannot even stand upon the same stage." Arcal clenched his teeth. He knew what his father meant better than anyone. He could feel how meager his power was, compared to what it had once been.

"Father... I...! I curse my weakness...!" Arcal lamented his lack of power. If only he'd been stronger, he might've prevented this tragedy.

"Khahahah. Yes. Lament. Your lamentations will fuel your training. I have lost count of how many times I have been defeated, lamented, died, returned, and grew ever stronger."

"Father..."

"But you will have to entrust the mad-dragon's... Gloria's demise to the hands of men." The Skydragon king looked into the distance... at the three-headed dragon ravaging the kingdom's lands and the people preparing to fight it.

"Let us watch the battle that will decide the fate of the kingdom... and the world of man."

His smile grew wider...

"And let us not ignore the skirmish that shall precede the upcoming fight." ...And he muttered this with excitement.

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Royal Capital, Altea, deep inside the royal castle

While most of the attention in the castle was directed at the negotiations between the kingdom and its begrudgingly welcome guest, a particular girl was sitting on a bed closer to the heart of the castle.

Her name was Theresia C. Altar. She was the third princess of the kingdom of Altar who, owing to her sickly constitution, lived within a room surrounded by a field of sterilization and healing. Unlike her eldest sister, who'd been chosen by The Primeval Blade itself, or the second oldest, who was almost *too* energetic and naïve, Theresia spent most of her time in her room.

Even while the whole castle was buzzing over the deadly Contract Tsukuyo Fuso had presented during the negotiations, she was just sitting in her room. Though, that was also due to the fact that she and the younger of her sisters weren't required to sign the Contract.

Theresia absentmindedly stared at a point in the air before shifting her gaze to the door.

"I haven't seen you in a while, Mr. Costume," she said.

"...Yeah," replied the man in a *raccoon costume*.

"Not a chameleon today?"

"This one has the Presence Block skill. It's not as good as the Optical Camouflage from the chameleon suit, but the security isn't as tight as usual, so I just came wearing this."

The man wearing the Ultimate Costume Series, Orphan Roa was none other than one of Altar's Superiors: King of Destruction, Shu Starling. He stepped closer to her and stopped at a distance where conversation was easy.

Theresia sniffed the air a few times, catching some sort of scent.

"I don't know this smell," she said. "Did you go really far away?"

"All the way to Caldina. Fought a magic dumbass who likes playing in the sand too much," Shu said before putting on a regretful air. "...It took me a whole week to come back here."

A week was exactly the amount of days that Gloria had spent terrorizing the kingdom. The moment he heard about the dragon, Shu had immediately prepared to return, but the road was long, and even a Superior like him needed some time to cross the Caldinian desert.

"I don't think you should let it bother you," said Theresia. She wasn't even consoling him — she merely stated the truth.

"It's not like you *have* to beat Gloria. Masters are free. That's how it is, right?"

"...Yeah. But from what I heard from DIN and on the other side, the situation is about as bad as it could be, right?"

"They say that Altea might be destroyed. The maids were talking about it."

"But it didn't look like the staff had decreased any."

"Everyone working here is loyal to a fault. I think they should all just run away, though." Theresia was young, and her manner of speech reflected that, but the topics she discussed were disconcertingly mature. She wasn't even elementary school age by Earth standards, so this would normally be a very strange sight.

However, very few had ever heard her speak this way. Three, to be exact — two people and an animal. The animal was the gigantic hamster she kept as a pet, while the people were Shu and the irredeemable criminal who had once kidnapped her. The kidnapping was actually what had led to Shu's regular visits, but that was a story for another time.

"...What would you do if everyone ran away?"

"Nothing. My condition... I mean, *it* is stable here inside the barrier around the castle, so I'd just end up waiting for Gloria here."

She would wait for a creature with a passive field skill that caused death to all those below level 100. That obviously meant certain death for her, but she didn't seem to care and simply continued speaking.

"I would love to take it out with me... Ohh, but Altea would be completely useless at that point. Though, I guess that's better than letting the damage spread all over the kingdom."

"...Where's your pet? Where's Dormouse?"

"Dor isn't here. He's probably busy with work. He said something about the deployment being too early. Maybe something didn't go as planned?"

In response to her words, Shu began to think to himself, but then she continued.

"You should probably hurry up and get ready, Mr. Costume. No matter what you choose."

Theresia meant that he should hurry up and pick an option, regardless of whether it was fighting, running, or something else. However, she didn't urge him towards any one option.

"...Theresia," Shu said as he removed the head of the raccoon costume and looked directly into her eyes with his own. "Are you really okay with all of this?"

That wasn't enough to make her waver, though.

"Altimia bears the burden of the power she was born with and her responsibilities as the first princess. I'm just here resting, bearing only one burden. It would be unfair if I didn't try to balance that out." Theresia then smiled like the child she was. "And I want Elizabeth to live freely, without any responsibility at all. That's why I'll use the power laid on my shoulders to protect my dear family."

These weren't words of reassurance, and she wasn't talking childish nonsense — she was merely prioritizing what was important to her. They were the words of a girl who'd chosen her beloved family over her own life.

In response, Shu was silent for a good few moments before putting the costume head on again, turning around, and saying, "...I remembered some business I gotta take care of."

"Oh? What is it?"

"A walk." Just like that, the man in the raccoon costume left Theresia's room.

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After sneaking out of the castle using Presence Block, Shu went out to the capital's noble district and arrived at a back-alley. The main street was full of evacuees, but the back-alleys were surprisingly empty.

As he walked down the alley, he suddenly spoke to himself. “She... didn’t once ask me to fight.”

If Shu fought and emerged victorious, he would prevent Gloria’s arrival at the capital. That would save Altea’s tians, and Theresia wouldn’t have to die.

Despite that, and despite knowing Shu’s identity as the King of Destruction, she never once asked him to fight.

The current situation was one of the worst possible scenarios, but still she thought of nothing but her duty and those she wanted to protect.

It was as though she believed that her entire life’s purpose was that single moment.

“That kind of thinking... she’s too young for it.” Letting his irritation take over, he punched the brick wall of a nearby abandoned building, collapsing it instantly. Since there was no one around to see it, this didn’t cause any commotion.

The hand of the special reward costume he was wearing couldn’t take the force and shattered into tiny pieces. Paying it no mind, Shu tried to walk away, but...

“You seem quite frustrated, Shu.”

...Someone called out to him from behind.

“...I’ve felt like I was being watched since I was in Caldina,” Shu said. “I knew it had to be you, Humpty.”

He turned around and saw a bizarre entity in the middle of the back-alley.

It was a creature wrapped within an oval, egg-like cocoon.

She was the control AI no. 2, tasked with managing Embryos. Her name was Humpty Dumpty.

She had also been in charge of handling Shu's arrival and character creation, and she was an entity he had met many times since then.

"Yeah... 'since I was in Caldina,'" Shu repeated himself. "...You're not about to tell me that you timed that shitty dragon's release with me being outta the country, are ya?"

"I won't deny that," Humpty replied. "I mean, unlike the Over Gladiator, High Priestess, or King of Crime, you would actively try to solve the problem, right? I mean, you're a very good boy at heart."

She didn't seem to feel the least bit guilty about it. In fact, she was smiling.

"Even if you couldn't defeat it alone, with a Master of your caliber fighting against it, all of Gloria's skills would be exposed in no time. That would make it easy for Altar to come up with countermeasures, and impossible for us to gauge the limits of the other Masters... *making it harder to create new Superiors*."

With a full smile on her face, Humpty revealed their goal. "We had hopes for the King of Swords, but they're gone now. He's broken. Oh, but he might've become a Superior if his Embryo didn't shatter. Maidens' ■■■ is easier to initiate in desperate situ—"

"I'll tell you one thing," Shu cut her off. Humpty was talking about who had the greatest chance of becoming a Superior, but Shu didn't care one bit about all of that. In fact, if that was what this girl before him hoped to gain from this calamity, he was completely against it.

"You aren't gettin' any new Superiors outta any battle against that shitty dragon." He dismissed her goal, determined to prevent it. Thus, all that was left...

"We will *destroy* Gloria."

...Was to make a final declaration as the King of Destruction.

His words — no, the will behind them — left Humpty speechless.

Shu turned around and resumed walking, heading towards the Nowest Canyon in the northwest of the capital, where he would find the dragon terrorizing the country.

With Shu gone, Humpty was left all alone.

There was not a single person or creature in sight. In fact, it was very strange that no guards arrived after the abandoned building collapsed. The back-alley was only empty because Humpty had some sort of ability that made it so.

However, that wasn't important to her now.

"Heheheh, ahahahahahahah!" she burst out. The girl-like control AI shielded by a thin veil — a transparent shell — was actually laughing out loud. She wasn't laughing because the Master she'd favored was turning out exactly like she wanted him to be, but because the will he'd displayed was far stronger than she'd ever imagined.

"Shu, this is why I like you. Back when I was alive, there were no synchronizers... Masters as engaging to watch as you."

Thus, Humpty, the Infinite Embryo of the Type Infinite Body, imagined what would happen next and laughed with supreme joy.

Act Six: The Lion and the Dragon

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“The kingdom’s Superiors are approaching Gloria.”

“Weeell, it ceeertainly toook them a whiiiile.”

“I have no intention of stopping her, but if she really does reach the capital, we shall have to rethink our schedules going forward. Though, I imagine that the disappearance of a whole country would act as a powerful dose of smelling salts.”

“So you don’t care either way, Jabberwock?”

“Indeed I don’t, No. 3... Queen... whichever you prefer. Though, I would be troubled if we don’t produce a single new Superior.”

“‘Troubled,’ huh? Hmph. I’d say that whether or not it happens is up to the Superiors. Let’s observe the true power of the ones they favor.”

“Very well.”

“Though, no matter how strong they are, Gloria... ‘The Glory SelectE.R.’ cannot be stopped.”

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Kingdom of Altar, Nowest Canyon

The Nowest Canyon to the northwest of the royal capital was a place where few dared to tread. Even those who traveled from the now-destroyed city of Claymill to the capital would detour directly south to reach the Wez Sea Route and follow it eastwards.

The reason for taking this roundabout path was simple: the Nowest Canyon was a land of giant fissures as wide as one kilometel, as long as several kilometels, and as deep as several hundred metels.

It was said that this place was unnatural. Many believed that these cracks were the scars of a fierce battle that happened at the sunset of the pre-ancient civilization. Regardless of its origins, though, Nowest Canyon was an unwelcoming landscape rife with creatures of a higher level than the surrounding areas, making it difficult to traverse and even more difficult to build on. That made it a roadless, empty land inhabited only by monsters.

Of course, there were beings that had no trouble passing through the scarred terrain.

After destroying Claymill, Gloria headed for the capital directly through the Nowest Canyon.

The dragon was moving through a fissure large enough to hide its gargantuan frame. Its steps were confident and full of vigor — it had closed its wounds and restored its heart during the day it had dedicated to healing itself. Its wings and tail were still gone, but that didn't affect its walking speed or the lethality of its Fatal Field, which killed all the creatures around it.

Gloria had surpassed the limits of the animal kingdom, and neither the land itself nor the other monsters could stop it now. Any creature that could stand up to it would have to have similarly transcended those limits.

"...It's here," he — Over Gladiator, Figaro — said, sensing Gloria's oppressively majestic approach. "Yeah... It looks really strong."

As someone who regularly raided the Tomb Labyrinth solo, Figaro had reached its lower levels many times and encountered a decent number of UBMs there. He'd even come across and defeated several Mythicals, including the most powerful foe he had faced so far — the creature that erratically wandered the dragon area: Extinction Dragon King, Drag-Fin.

Figaro was no doubt accustomed to powerful UBMs, but the pressure emitted by the SUBM approaching him was in a class of its own.

Drag-Fin had been a massive creature fully worthy of the title "enemy of all life," but it paled in comparison to this ominous golden dragon. The videos didn't do it justice. Now, seeing it with his own eyes, he understood just how immense it was.

The gap in their power was obvious. Even a berserker like Figaro knew that facing it alone would be sheer stupidity.

Despite that...

"Still... I'll go first. By myself."

...He'd resolved to fight on his own. His fatal flaw was one of the reasons for this, but even without that, he would've made the same decision.

Figaro had also sealed away one of his specialties.

Dance of Anima — one of the skills of his Superior Embryo — improved his equipment the longer the fight dragged on. Because of this, he had the option of engaging in a warm-up battle to power up and close the gap between them before fighting Gloria head-on.

However, he didn’t want to do that. So, he chose not to. He would fight alone, without any head start.

After all — to him, this was a duel against Foltesla.

Figaro and Foltesla had begun dueling and rising up through the rankings at the same time. They’d piled on victories and losses, coming out ahead or falling behind each other like the rivals they truly were.

They’d become good friends through their dueling. Theirs was the kind of friendship that could only exist between equal, competing rivals, and it was quite unlike what Figaro had with Shu.

But when Figaro defeated the previous champion, Tom Cat, Foltesla became unable to challenge him in a ranked duel. Only the second-ranked duelist could challenge the duel champion, and Foltesla couldn’t get the position due to his incompatibility with Tom Cat.

Despite that, Figaro was sure that Foltesla would eventually take his position.

Many believed that the gap between them had become insurmountable the moment Figaro evolved into a Superior, but Figaro himself didn’t believe that to be the case.

He continued to view Foltesla as an equal.

Figaro believed that while he kept his title and improved himself, Foltesla would also experience immense growth.

His rival would eventually surpass Tom Cat and fight Figaro for the title of champion. Figaro believed that with complete confidence, and the two even swore that they would one day face each other in that battle.

However, now it was clear that the day of their showdown would never come, for everything that Foltesla held dear to his heart had vanished along with the fortress city.

Figaro was sure that his rival would never return to this world. Thus, he knew that this would be their final battle.

“Let’s do it, Foltesla,” he said, as Gloria came into view.

Despite its powerful presence, Figaro actually didn’t see Gloria as his true foe. To him, it was just a target... a tool in his duel with Foltesla. The dragon was nothing but a means through which he would battle his rival in a time attack.

“Let’s begin. You were defeated, so you have no time attack record. Your notable acts include taking its wings, tail, heart, and right eye. To win against you, *I will go beyond that*.”

Time attacks tracked how well the duelists did against a monster of the same type, and they received a score even if they were defeated. To surpass Foltesla, who went as far as destroying a heart, Figaro had only one possible target.

“...I’ll take a core,” he declared, deciding that he would aim for the part that gave the most points on monsters that possessed it.

And Figaro already had his eyes set on a single head out of the three.

He’d chosen the one-horn. It released the devastating breath of light that had destroyed all those defending Claymill, clearly making it the head with the greatest offensive power. As long as that head existed, Gloria would have the ability to instantly kill anything in the path of its light breath, and every wound dealt to it would potentially be fatal to its attackers.

Logically speaking, if you wanted to defeat this dragon, the one-horn had to go first.

However, Figaro’s reasons for targeting the one-horn weren’t strategic. He was looking directly at the head’s right eye.

There was a deep wound there, along with a scab-like covering of mythical metal — the molten remains of a greatsword. It was all the proof Figaro needed that this was the head Foltesla had fought until the bitter end.

It was the head the King of Swords had tried to conquer, and the head that had finally defeated him.

That was the only reason Figaro needed to target it, and the reason he would give everything he had to tear it off.

“Let’s do this,” the champion said as he brandished a spear in his right hand.

“FfrRrrRrrrRrRrrRr,” Gloria rumbled, acknowledging its enemy and rearing up on its hind legs.

“Fight.” Figaro declared the start of the duel.

“FRHSssSSsSsHeeEAAHhhHH!” The dragon unleashed its breath of light as the champion charged towards it.

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Gloria’s breath melted a part of the canyon, causing a cliff to crumble. The sound of it could be heard even outside of the Nowest Canyon.

“...It’s started,” said the man standing atop a giant battleship — King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

He had it parked outside the canyon and waited in it, silently.

“Sure ya shouldn’t help the prince?” There were 34 people gathered around Baldr. They were all members of the kingdom’s top clan, The Lunar Society. All the clan-cult’s level 500s and above had gathered to fight and defeat Gloria. Naturally, the leader and sub-leader — Fuso Tsukuyo and Eishiro Tsukikage — were among them.

“I’m pawsitive. In fact, I don’t want you getting anywhere near them until his battle ends,” said Shu.

“But going against it alone is suicide. Solo-only players are so annoying.”

Shu, Tsukuyo, and Figaro. Albeit for different reasons, the three top rankers of the kingdom had all gathered in a single place.

Figaro had been the first to arrive, and he’d immediately jumped into a crack in the canyon to face Gloria alone.

Shu was close behind him. As Figaro’s good friend, he had an idea why the champion would challenge and fight the dragon alone, so he knew it was best not get in his way.

Tsukuyo and her clan were the last to arrive, and Shu also took it upon himself to keep them from interfering with Figaro’s fight. They had no real reason to listen to him, so at first they had tried to follow Figaro, but Shu struck a deal with them to keep them out.

“So, trash panda, we can go right after that sickly noble takes out the one-horn, right?”

“Fur sure.” Indeed — they’d agreed on an order. Thanks to the data gathered by the Babylonian Battlegroup, they had a fairly good grasp of Gloria’s nature. The one-horned head released an evaporating breath, the two-horn spread out a deadly field, and the three-horn increased its stats as its HP went down.

The one-horn had to go first, as it made Gloria more dangerous the more wounds it received.

The second one that had to be destroyed was obviously the three-horn, as it increased the dragon’s power as it came closer to death. There was no good reason to leave it until the end and allow Gloria to become as powerful as possible.

Finally, with the one-horn and three-horn gone, only the two-horn would be left, and that had no effect on those who were max level or above. Without the one-horn and three-horn, the two-horn would be easy pickings, for without the head that enhanced its power, Gloria could only become weaker.

Also, it was likely that Gloria had a core in each head, and with standard UBMs, the core’s destruction was a major factor in MVP selection. After the recent incident with Twin Moby Dick in Granvaloa, it had become widely known that SUBMs gave out several MVP special rewards. Gloria was presumed to have a core for each head, meaning it may give a special reward for each core.

That meant that you could become MVP multiple times. This was just a theory based on very few examples in the past, but even the chance of it being true convinced Tsukuyo to aim for the destruction of both the two-horned and three-horned heads.

However, the one-horn stood in the way of that goal. Its deadly breath of light made fighting it extremely risky, especially for group fighters like The Lunar Society.

Because of this, Shu and Tsukuyo had agreed that after the one-horn fell, he would let The Lunar Society take both the two-horn and the three-horn.

If Figaro was defeated after taking out the one-horn, Tsukuyo would go next.

If Figaro failed, Shu would give his all to finish off the one-horn, then leave the rest to Tsukuyo.

Thinking that two battle-focused Superiors had a good chance of taking out a single head, she had gladly accepted this deal.

“But what if Prince Meathead attacks one of the other heads?” Tsukuyo asked.

“Ain’t happening. He’ll fight the one-horn,” Shu replied.

As his friend, Shu knew Figaro well; he was fully aware of Figaro’s relationship with Foltesla. Thus, he didn’t doubt his own judgment here one bit.

“Hell, you should be worried about him taking out all three of the heads.”

“There’s no waaay. That’d be inhuman.”

“It would be, fur sure. But...” Shu acknowledged Tsukuyo’s words before continuing. “...You know he’s the kingdom’s strongest, right?”

His words were brimming with confidence in his friend’s ability.

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The battle between Figaro and Gloria began with the dragon instantly releasing its breath of light.

The monster’s Fatal Field came with the ability to gauge the levels of its targets, which told it that Figaro was the most powerful creature it had encountered thus far. In addition to that, it could feel the immense Resources he carried in the form of MVP special rewards — the remains of other UBMs.

Gloria had no reason to hold back against a foe like that.

“OVERDRIVE!” Its single horn glowed red as the head beneath it released the breath that had extinguished the tian elite and the entire city of Claymill.

The neck danced, and the fatal light moved along with it.

“I know this,” Figaro said, narrowly evading the lightshow of certain death as he closed in on Gloria at beyond supersonic speed.

Figaro’s thoughts — no, his *battle instinct* — told him that, while the breath moved at the speed of light and was thus undodgeable, the head releasing moved far slower than the speed of sound. As long as he watched the creature’s movements and kept running at supersonic speeds, the head would never hit him. He simply had to focus on taking advantage of the slowing of experienced time caused by supersonic movement to avoid the subsonic beam of light moving towards him.

The slightest touch and it would be all over for him. But by putting that thought out of his mind, he was able to approach Gloria without any hesitation.

It was a manifestation of the battle sense and instinct that he was born with, but could never use in his real life.

“I’ll start with this. ■■■■, ■■ ■■■■ — ■■■ ■■■■■■!”

Figaro muttered something and threw the spear in his hand at Gloria.

It was a Legendary item with fantastic stats, but it didn't scare Gloria in the slightest. No matter what skills it had, the dragon knew that something like that would never kill it.

It wasn't an incorrect assumption. Dragonhowl Spear, Drag-Song had the ability to destroy matter using shockwaves, but it wasn't powerful enough to be effective against Gloria.

The one-horn head was so confident that it almost smiled as the spear approached its long neck... and it took a moment for it to realize that the spear had *torn a good half of the flesh away from its neck*.

"Ggha... ah...?" With half of its mass gone, the neck folded forward so far it nearly crashed into the ground.

But when the one-horn's third eye noticed Figaro's approach, it quickly recovered, supported its head, and released its breath on him.

Figaro evaded the attack before using Instant Wield to equip a new weapon — an Epic throwing ax called "Whirlwind Ax, Fulgore."

As he avoided the storms of light, he swung and threw it, just like he'd done with the previous weapon. It spun at immense speeds as it flew towards Gloria's neck, drawing an elliptical trajectory and gathering wind that soon became a storm.

This also didn't seem capable of dealing any significant damage to the dragon, but the one-horn had learned the hard way that appearances could be misleading.

"FRHhSshhEeeEAAhHhhhHHhh!" The one-horn showered the ax in light, evaporating it and instantly eliminating it from the world. However, before it vanished, it created a disturbance in the air strong enough to shake even Gloria's massive body.

It forced the dragon to totter straight towards...

"Gouging Draconic Spinfang: Drag-Spiral."

...Figaro himself, who'd used Gloria's momentary focus on his ax to close in on the dragon.

He shoved the lance in his hand into the dragon's left heel.

The name of this weapon was "Drilldragon Lance, Drag-Spiral," and it was an MVP special reward he'd gotten from an Ancient Legendary "Drilldragon King" of the same name.

"Gouging Draconic Spinfang: Drag-Spiral" was its only skill, and all it did was penetrate matter. The drill-like tip easily pierced Gloria's tough scales and spun around rapidly, scattering flesh, shattering bone, and rupturing the entire hindlimb.

"FHRrruuUUuAaaAAaaAArRrgGHHHhhHhH!" The sudden, unexpected loss of an entire limb made Gloria collapse.

If it was capable of words, the only thing that would've gone through its mind would be "Impossible!"

Knowledge of UBMs and special rewards had been etched into its instincts. Therefore, considering the ranks of the UBMs that had become the rewards, there was no way they could have done this much damage to it, even when used by someone as powerful as this particular wielder. This could only mean that he had some mysterious other ability that was capable of closing the gap.

Its instincts were exactly correct.

Figaro had already used an ace up his sleeve that brought him closer to Gloria's level — an ability that was a double-edged sword.

As it collapsed, Gloria noticed that the lance that had destroyed its limb had shattered. As an SUBM, Gloria understood what the lance was, and concluded that it was looking at *an empty shell*.

The concept, the soul, the Resources that made up every special reward — none of it was there anymore.

The remains of the lance left no hope for its recovery.

It was as though *the entire special reward had been used up for one single attack*.

"Gh..." Figaro staggered in pain right where he stood.

"It... It really does hurt." Gloria hadn't actually hit him once so far. Despite that, his body was criss-crossed with wounds, as though it had been burned all over.

Gloria's breath of light didn't allow any heat to escape, making this kind of burning impossible; upon closer inspection, one might notice that he had no external wounds at all.

All these burns had been caused by something within him. It was as though the blood running through his veins had become pure fire.

This was the price he paid for the ace up his sleeve — lost special rewards and countless burns.

"The thirty seconds are up. Judging by my max HP... I have two more uses."

Figaro had pain set to on, so to him, he really was being burned alive from the inside.

Even so, he showed no fear. Bearing the injuries, fighting the pain, and losing his weapons, Figaro glared at the one-horn with fighting spirit in his eyes.

"This is the second one." He wielded his double-edged sword once more, speaking the name of his life in this world...

"Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis!"

...And the name of the Superior Embryo based on the star known as "the heart of the lion."

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Sometime In the Past

On a particular day a few weeks after defeating Tom Cat and becoming the duel champion, Figaro woke up in *Infinite Dendrogram*, as usual, and noticed he had changed.

The body he woke up with was completely unlike the body he'd gone to sleep with.

He realized that the difference was in the blood running through his veins.

His avatar's heart was his Embryo, Cor Leonis, so any change to his Embryo changed his blood, as well.

Figaro checked the relevant windows and realized that Cor Leonis had reached its seventh form... that it evolved into a Superior Embryo.

He also noticed that it gained a third skill — the ultimate one, to be exact. Upon reading its details, Figaro instantly understood why it was the way it was.

"Considering my personality and what I've been through, it makes sense that it'd come out like this."

Embryos evolved based on what their Masters were like and their experiences. Thus, even if some of their abilities seemed dangerous to others, the Masters themselves generally found them fitting.

Figaro's "Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis" was in this vein. It was so powerful that his previous self paled in comparison, and it was extremely compatible with duels. He couldn't ask for a better ace up his sleeve.

"...I know when I'll use it in duels, then," Figaro said, deciding that he would only unleash it when Foltesla became second in the duel rankings and challenged him for the throne.

He hoped that he could release his full potential — his entire soul — against his good friend and rival.

He was certain that Foltesla would eventually challenge him, so he never used it in any of his other duels. Even when fighting monsters, he only used it once — during his battle against Drag-Fin.

Figaro waited for Foltesla, ready to give his all and then some. But the arrival of Gloria meant that their promised duel would never happen.

Thus... he used it now.

This was the moment... the duel that would unlock his full potential.

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Kingdom of Altar, Nowest Canyon

"Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis!" The skill turned his heart searing hot, as though it smouldered like its namesake star in the Leo constellation. It burned his flesh, made his blood boil, and lowered his HP; it scorched his Max HP away as well. Through his torn skin rose a smoke that seemed to be a mix of white steam and blood.

Figaro always had his pain settings turned on, so he felt the full intensity of the agony, but even that wasn't enough to stop his power.

Intent on making every moment of the thirty second effective time count, he swung into action immediately.

"FNGH!" First, Figaro used Instant Wield to equip a shadow-colored Legendary rapier called "Shadowbind Pin, Bolbara." He thrust it into the shadow of the dragon, still collapsed to the ground. Then, he used Bolbara's skill, Anchoring Shadowpin, which applied Bind to the target whose shadow it pierced.

For a UBM skill, it wasn't too special — you could even find some like it among skills of certain jobs.

Standard shadow-based bindings could be easily undone, and even those from special rewards could be overwhelmed and broken by sheer force.

However, this one actually pinned this immense dragon in place.

Gloria was actually held fast by an impossibly powerful shadow-based binding — but in exchange, Bolbara shattered.

This was the ultimate skill of Cor Leonis.

By burning Figaro's flesh and blood, it lowered his max HP by 1% every second, and this damage could not be restored until he received a death penalty. Additionally, using the active skills of any items during this time destroyed them beyond repair. In exchange for these two heavy drawbacks, it empowered those skills beyond all limits.

"Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis" burned up the life of Figaro and his equipment, making them shine as bright as possible before they fell dark.

That was the shape of life lived by the sickly youth known as Vincent Myers.

His entire life, the 28 special rewards he'd acquired, and the very soul challenging the foe before him were all focused into a single instant, going up in flames like a firework. It was a manifestation of the way he lived, and it was so intense that even an SUBM like Gloria couldn't brush it off.

"FhuUuRRrraaAAAaAaaAaAAaHhhHhH" Upon realizing that this foe had the power to defeat it, Gloria focused all its power into the one-horn. It tried to release light from its wounds, but Figaro was expecting this, for it was the ability that devastated the Babylonian Battlegroup and many other Masters.

It was the reason that trying to overwhelm it with numbers or attacking it without careful consideration was a fatal mistake.

Accounting for this, Figaro had picked his targets carefully, focusing on only certain parts to limit the area its light could cover.

The first wound had been dealt to the throat of the one-horn that breathed light. Extra light coming from this area changed little.

The second wound went to one of the hindlegs. Since it had lost its wings, they had become important in supporting its immense weight.

Both of these were places that made it hard for Gloria to effectively utilize its ability to overwhelm the enemy by turning its own wounds into fountains of killing light.

Figaro was able to evade the light coming from there almost instinctively.

Gloria's abilities were already known, so it couldn't outwit the very best of Figaro's instincts.

At the very least, the breath of light as it was now couldn't defeat Figaro on its own.

"■■!"

With Gloria out of moves to make, Figaro moved to put it in check.

He activated Physical Berserk and equipped a gauntlet on his left and a short spear in his right before charging at the still-bound one-horn head.

A Bind that lasted several dozen seconds. One-shot attacks, each one potentially fatal. The 23 special rewards Figaro still had left. Combined, that was more than enough to take out the one-horn. In fact, even the other two were in danger.

At this moment, Gloria acknowledged that the tables had turned — that it was likely that the battle would end in its defeat.

At that moment, certain shackles within the dragon shattered.

Gloria did away with one of the limits put on it by the control AIs *and unleashed a power that it had kept hidden, even from them*.

"RRrrRrruaAaAaaaAaAggGhHhHhhHHhhhHH!" The one-horn let out a roar beyond any that had come before, and suddenly all the golden scales covering its body began to shine.

"Ah...!" Figaro instantly took evasive action.

It wasn't exactly that he'd sacrificed his perfect moment to land the killing blow in favor of saving himself. It was more that his instincts told him that if he kept going, he was the only one who would die.

The next moment, Gloria's shining claw cut through the air just behind him at supersonic speeds. The speed was incomparably faster than it had been earlier.

This meant that it had broken the speed limits set on it by the control AIs. And more importantly, the shining scales released the same light as its breath, making it menacing beyond measure.

"So that's the ace up your sleeve..." Indeed — this was the ultimate weapon of Gloria's first head.

Its name was "Zenith Dragon's Shining Field: Fang of Gloria." It was unbreakable armor that protected it utterly, as well as a blade that extinguished all.

"I knew that its breath didn't work on itself... but I didn't think it could use it this way." During the battle at Claymill, Gloria had showered itself in its light many times, but it had never damaged itself in the slightest.

Most people, Figaro included, assumed that it was because the golden scales covering its body had full resistance to the breath, but that wasn't entirely correct.

In fact, Gloria's scales were the best conductor for its breath of light. It channeled light through them like they were optical fiber.

"FruUooOooaAAaaAagHHhhHhhH!" This full-body radiance was Gloria's ultimate offensive *and* defensive ability. Not even the control AI were aware of it.

Gloria was wielding a power that made its defeat virtually impossible, and it had broken the limitations placed on it, bringing its stats back up to their previous Mythical-tier.

Thanks to it spending a day to heal itself, the wounds left by the loss of its wings and tail were also closed over with scales.

The damage Figaro had inflicted on it was also still releasing its deadly breath. It had even closed all its eyes to reduce the amount of weak points and chased after its enemy using only the senses given to it by the Fatal Field.

Thus, there was no opening.

Gloria as it was now was no doubt the strongest it could possibly be. The result was so powerful that even the control AIs would have hesitated to release it if they'd known of this ability.

Faced with such a creature, Figaro...

"Its body isn't touching the ground. It can float a bit even without its wings?"

...Just calmly analyzed it.

He avoided the supersonic claws, all the while observing the monster and looking for his chance to conquer it. Even though the already-insurmountable gap between them became even wider, Figaro's eyes showed no fear, and his heart was nowhere near broken. A normal person would've given up already, but he continued to calmly ponder how he could still win this.

He was certain that he could still defeat this dragon.

Figaro had seen the reason for his confidence the moment Gloria began to move.

Until its body began gleaming and it attacked Figaro, Gloria had clearly been Bound. The Anchoring Shadowpin had been undone merely because the dragon became a source of light that banished the shadow binding it. It wasn't because it had powered up, or because it ignored some special reward's effect.

It broke out in a way that still conformed to cause and effect, which was proof that Gloria was still bound by the laws of this world.

It was an unreasonably powerful monster, but not an unbeatable one. And that was why Figaro knew he could defeat it.

I... don't have a special reward that can break through the light and damage it. This would be a lot easier if I had something that could warp through space and attack its inside directly, he thought.

He had already removed most of his equipment, even the Lifesaving Brooch. It did little against Gloria and the light radiating from it. He'd focused on improving his evasion by channeling the power of his Arms Selector — the skill that made his equipment more powerful the less he had on — to improve the items that passively enhanced his AGI. Additionally, a few minutes of actual — not experienced — time had passed, improving the effect of his Dance of Anima.

Even though Gloria now moved at supersonic speeds, Figaro was still faster.

My ultimate skill expired, and I can only use it once more. Looking at how much HP I have left, I'll get the death penalty before it ends... I guess I should be glad that the light doesn't heat up its surroundings.

Gloria's light could only heat up things it shone directly on. If that hadn't been the case, Figaro would have already died due to the damage from the residual heat.

But even if he never once touched the light, the price for his ultimate skill was significant.

In addition to the 60% of his HP he'd lost due to its direct effects, the injury-type status effects caused by the wounds the skill inflicted were eating away at his remaining life. Normally, he'd wear accessories that healed him and gave him resistance to such debuffs, but he had to focus only on his stats now.

It was clear that Figaro's death penalty was only a matter of time, and he didn't have many chances left.

I need to take out the one-horn in the next few moves, he thought. That would have been possible in the absence of the Fang of Gloria, but now, its defense was unbreakable.

There wasn't a single opening on the dragon, it seemed...

"Ah..."

...Until he noticed one.

It was just a single point, but it was still a crack in the impenetrable, deadly armor of light.

"Foltesla..." he spoke his friends name before gathering the resolve for one final attack and fixing his eyes on the point.

"FRuuoooOoAAaaAggGhhhHHhhHH!" Gloria roared, as though sensing Figaro's determination through its fatal field. Both of them already knew that the next supersonic exchange would be the end of the battle between lion and dragon.

As the struggle reached its peak... "Let's go." ...Figaro equipped a new item — a blue cloak.

Its name was "Rendshield Cloak, Closer," and it was the first UBM special reward he'd ever acquired. Its defense was impenetrable, but he hadn't taken it out to protect himself against the light.

He had no intention of using it to protect himself at all.

What he'd chosen for this battle was...

"Liferend Shield Formation."

...Another form of the skill that created an impenetrable space.

It was an offensive ability that attacked using countless floating barriers as weapons. But instead of using them for offense, Figaro turned them into stepping stones for him to run on top of.

The next moment, Figaro dashed along the path of blades, speeding straight down it as though that was the only way he would ever reach the head of the monster bathed in light. The speed at which he approached it, defying the laws of gravity, was so great that even Gloria at its most powerful couldn't follow his movement.

However, it did know that the enemy was getting closer.

"...GHHaaaAAaAaAaAAAAggGhHHhhhhhHHH!" Its response was quick — at supersonic speeds, it focused the one-horn's power to strengthen the light its body emitted to its utmost maximum, becoming a luminous storm that evaporated the shield-blades it touched.

"FRUuuSsssSsSHheEeEEEAAAAaaaAarRrRgGggGHHHH!" If Gloria's thoughts were human, they might have looked like this: *He runs,* *but has no destination. My body has no weak points, and no one can break through my defense, so if I continue destroying his path, he will eventually lose his way down and fall to my breath.*

This conclusion was not a wrong one. Gloria knew its own powers and already had a grasp of what the enemy could do.

From its perspective, there was no flaw in this assessment. There was simply no opening for the enemy to take advantage of.

Figaro had no chance of emerging victorious here.

However, that was only true if Gloria and Figaro were the only ones fighting.

"Now," Figaro said as he leaped towards Gloria's shining form like a moth seeking a flame.

His evaporation was unavoidable.

The battle's end approached... *and Figaro landed on the one-horn's head.*

"...?" Gloria couldn't understand.

It simply couldn't comprehend why this was happening. After all, all three of its heads had their eyes closed, so it couldn't see or understand that there was in fact a single opening in the Fang of Gloria — a part of the head that wasn't covered in the conducting scales.

The place where Figaro was standing had no scales to release the light.

It was a place where the one-horn's right eye used to be.

The part that Foltesla had given his all to attack, and the part where his melted Hihi'irokane greatsword had landed.

Even Gloria's breath wasn't enough to evaporate the Mythical metal — it had only melted it. The metal had already cooled, hardened, and closed the wound, forming a scab that made it impossible for the scales to regenerate.

Hot as it was, Gloria's light didn't let heat leak out. Because of this, it couldn't melt the scab, for its light couldn't touch it.

Indeed — the proof that Foltesla had been fighting to protect what was dear to him until the bitter end was the one opening in this armor of deadly light.

If it was truly one against one, Gloria would have won the day — but it was never like that from the start. This was a duel between Figaro and Foltesla.

“Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis!” For the third and final time, Figaro activated his ultimate skill.

He followed it with Instant Wield, which he used to equip the Ancient Legendary gauntlet called “Seismic Fist, Bull-Lament” on his left hand, and the Mythical short spear as dark as the void called “Extinction Dragon Spear, Drag-Fin” in his right.

Figaro had equipped the strongest weapons he had.

“FHR—” Gloria tried to throw him off, but it was already too late.

“Lament Crash!” Figaro let out a cry as he pulverized the Mythical metal below him and the head along with it using the hyper-vibrating fist.

The Mythical metal shattered, and the head and most of the upper jaw were blown away.

Despite that, the one-horn was still alive, and its entire body was still clad in light.

“Tears of the End: Drag-Fin.”

Figaro wasted no time, didn’t hold back, and didn’t hesitate to sacrifice his Mythical weapon.

The Extinction Dragon Spear went straight into the one-horn's forcefully-opened throat, *infecting all of the one-horn's cells*.

The concept of Drag-Fin's power was forcefully initiating apoptosis — the self-destruction of cells. In exchange for the spear's obliteration, the power of this skill was amplified such that it spread faster than you could blink.

"GHH." The three-horn was quick to act.

It went and tore off the one-horned head before the infection spread any further.

All things considered, it was too late to save that head, anyway.

It crumbled, turned into light, and vanished, not leaving a single word or sound behind.

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This was the conclusion to the battle with the one-horned head. Gloria had lost one of its heads, as well as its greatest weapons — Overdrive and Fang of Gloria.

However, Figaro was fading fast because of his own ability, too.

The one-horn and Figaro had effectively defeated each other.

"Foltesla..." he muttered. This was also the conclusion to their duel. However...

"...Which one of us won?"

Figaro was the one who'd defeated the one-horn. However, Foltesla had given him the necessary data, as well as his final chance at victory. That meant that this time attack was invalid.

"I can't say that I won this on my own..."

And...

"Let's... Let's have another duel." ...Figaro was certain that this wasn't their promised fight, after all.

"One day... when you return to this world... let's have a *real* duel." As he hoped for the day to come sooner than later, Figaro's body dissolved into particles of light.

The ultimate skill had burned off all of his HP. All that was left was for him to vanish, and as he did, he looked out of the canyon — at the person who was watching over his duel.

“This is it for me. I leave the rest to you, Shu.”

Entrusting the battle to his other good friend, the Over Gladiator, Figaro, took his leave from the battle against the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

Act Seven: The Gaze of the Moon and the Evil Eye

Kingdom of Altar, Nowest Canyon

"Looks like it's over," said Tsukuyo. The roar of the battle between Figaro and Gloria faded, and there had been nothing but silence for a whole three minutes now.

"Kage, check things out for me," she continued.

"I have," Eishiro replied. "The battle is indeed over. Figaro received the death penalty, and Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria is missing the one-horned head."

"Wow, he works fast. And it went about as we thought it would."

The most troublesome head had vanished, and Figaro — a man they couldn't hope to compete with for the MVP title — had gotten the death penalty.

They'd also signed a contract with Shu, so there was no chance that he would interfere.

Tsukuyo concluded that now was the time to charge.

"We're up next, darlings. My ultimate skill won't work on this one, so let's take it down with our numbers. Are we ready?"

That wasn't even a question to them. The group who bore the mark of the crescent moon and closed eye had been waiting for this.

All told, the Lunar Society had gathered thirty-four max level Masters here.

One might expect them to be in five parties of six and one party of four; they were actually in seventeen parties of two, which was slightly unorthodox.

Fifteen of the parties were pairs of casters and speed-based vanguards. One of the two remaining parties consisted of the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso and King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.

The last one was made up of a member who would buff everyone alongside Tsukuyo, and...

“It’s been a while, Shijima. Think you’re good to go?” Tsukuyo asked.

“Of course,” replied the other half of the final party — Myth Rider, Ichiro Shijima.

He was the ex-captain of the battle corps and effectively The Lunar Society’s third in command. In his hands he held a spear and an elliptical shield: both of them were halves of his Embryo, Juno of the Type Maiden/Elder-Arms.

He was also mounted, but not on his trusted Aries Leo. Instead he was riding a replica Prism Steed.

“Where’s your sheep-lion?” asked Tsukuyo. “You work best with him, no?”

“I gave Gringham to my wife,” Ichiro replied. “This foe is unlike any other. I’m afraid it would harm him even beyond the Jewel’s auto-retrieve safety mechanism. Also, Gringham simply cannot enter the dreaded field.”

Monsters below level 100 were instantly killed by the Fatal Field. No one who knew that would consider bringing their tamed monsters to this fight.

“Most importantly, my son would be upset if Gringham died. It’s best to let him protect my family.”

“Hmm. You’re such a dad,” Tsukuyo said, noting that he seemed to be enjoying his life in this world.

She then faced her group and said, “We’re all level 500s or Superior Jobs. Gloria’s field won’t affect us, and that meathead took out the annoying head that spat light everywhere.”

All it had left was the ability to enhance its stats. This meant that its lethal abilities were now completely nullified.

“All we have left to beat is a big lizard with nothing left but sheer strength. We should take it easy,” Tsukuyo said, as she headed towards the Nowest Canyon followed by her thirty-three adherents. As she did, she looked at the nearby battleship — Shu’s Embryo, Baldr.

“Just like we agreed, don’t step in until we’re done with it,” Tsukuyo said.

“Yeah, yeah. Are you sure, though?” Shu asked.

“You won’t even get a turn. Just sit there and wait until we get both special rewards,” she asserted with the look of a smug, crafty fox before her expression changed. “Also... I don’t think that bag of trouble is out of tricks. If we both go and get wiped out by some new, ridiculous power, it’d all be over.”

Shu listened silently as Tsukuyo continued.

“I do wanna get something for myself out of this, but... if we don’t beat it, everything we’ve built here in this kingdom would come to nothing.”

“Should I go first?”

“I don’t need your consideration. But yeah, I’m counting on you if something happens.”

“...I’ll clean up your mess.”

“We won’t leave one.” Grinning like a malicious spirit, Tsukuyo leaped into the fray.

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Following its battle against Figaro and the loss of its one-horned head, Gloria was lying at the bottom of the canyon.

One of its most important body parts was now gone. The loss of its head presented a far greater problem than the recent loss of its heart. That organ regenerated in a day, but the head showed absolutely no sign of returning; it seemed like it had lost the title of “three-headed dragon” forever.

However, all of its other injuries had already started regenerating, and its skeletal frame was reshaping itself to maintain a balanced structure.

The three-horn silently examined the place where the one-horn used to be.

The wound was now completely shut.

After the restructuring of its skeleton, Gloria looked like it had always been a two-headed dragon.

It had lost a part of itself — both a function and a sibling that had been with it for over a millennium — but the three-horn’s eyes held not even a hint of sadness.

“Ghroah...” Gloria let out a growl which, if translated into a human tongue, may have been something like “Go and wait for us.”

Gloria then stood up. Its left hindleg had regenerated enough to support its immense weight once again.

Despite all the regeneration and the reshaping of its skeleton, its HP hadn’t returned — both because it was simply how Gloria functioned, and because this was advantageous for it.

The name of the three-horn’s skill was “Resurgence,” and it empowered the dragon as its HP went down. Losing a third of itself had damaged it immensely, making the skill significantly more powerful than it had been when it fought Figaro.

Suddenly, Gloria felt the presence of someone entering its Fatal Field, announcing that the next enemy had arrived.

A moment later, countless offensive spells rained down on it from every direction.

All of them were of the lightning element, which was notable for its ability to ignore physical defenses.

This was a choice based on Gloria’s high END, and the ones responsible for it were none other than The Lunar Society.

“SHHeEEeeEAAAaaAaaArRghhhHh!” the two-horn — the one responsible for the Fatal Field — roared as it sensed all thirty-four of its enemies surrounding it.

When Gloria’s one-horned head was alive, the most difficult thing to do was fight it with a large group. Now that it was gone, all that had been reversed. — the dragon could be easily overwhelmed.

It no longer possessed the breath that could evaporate countless people at once. Its wounds no longer released light and the Fatal Field had no effect on levels 500 and above, meaning that the dragon had to lower the numbers using its claws.

As it was now, Gloria had incredible stats, but no special means of attack. Its stats still grew as its HP decreased, but its offense remained lacking in variety. UBMs were often defined by their unique abilities, so it could be said that Gloria as it was now — with nothing but pure power — was at its weakest point.

Still, its stats were no laughing matter. Though they outnumbered it, Gloria’s attackers right now were far weaker than the dragon. Its current attack power was more than enough to tear through even metal armor like paper and kill the wearer easily.

Thanks to its Fatal Field, Gloria already knew where its enemies were and what they were doing, as well.

With the sole exception of the King of Assassins, they all moved at subsonic speeds — so Gloria, which could now break the sound barrier, could easily catch up to them and kill them.

As it prepared to do just that...

“Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light.”

...The day transformed into a night with a cloudy sky, and a single ray of moonlight peeking through those clouds shone down on Gloria.

Suddenly, the dragon felt its body become as heavy as lead.

“SHhEWhrRoAahh...!” Its supersonic speed had dropped to subsonic level.

“Well, what a relief. It actually works,” Tsukuyo said.

This was a variation of Kaguya’s Lunar Divider Field. It focused the moonlight through a hole in the clouds, narrowing its targets and effect.

Normally, Lunar Divider Field divided any numerical statistics hostile to Tsukuyo by six, but Faint Light focused the effect on just one. In exchange, the effect became extremely hard to resist the effect with levels, stats, or skills. The result was so difficult that not even an SUBM like Gloria could resist it.

The number Tsukuyo focused on this time was the enemy’s AGI.

During the battle with Figaro, Gloria had broken its shackles and reached supersonic speeds, but Faint Light reduced it back to subsonic. Gloria’s stats were still powerful, and a single one of its attacks was equal to a high-rank Embryo’s ultimate skill, but that meant little if it couldn’t land a single hit.

“Keep those spells coming, casters. Vanguards, do as we planned and carry the casters while attacking it with Gems.”

The group of thirty followed Tsukuyo’s orders. They were still in the same caster and speed-focused vanguard pairs as before, with the latter carrying the former at subsonic speeds. Gloria now was no faster than them, and the casters attacked it with lightning magic, which was relatively unaffected by defense. The vanguards assisted them with magic Gems containing spells which dealt fixed damage — 800, to be exact.

That may have seemed like an absurdly small amount in a high-level battle such as this, but with Gloria’s high defense and The Lunar Society’s immense numbers, it had quite a noticeable effect.

They were rather expensive, however. During their preparation, Tsukuyo had gathered every Gem she could find and made non-max level adherents who could create them produce as many as they could. As a result, each of the vanguard fighters in the battle had 1,000 Gems each.

However, little strokes fell great oaks. The combined lightning attacks from the casters and vanguards' Gem spells slowly but surely whittled away Gloria's HP.

It was approximately 70,000,000 at the start, but now Figaro and The Lunar Society had dropped it below 50,000,000. It would take over 60,000 Gems or spells dealing 800 damage each to defeat it now — but to achieve that, each of the thirty members would have to have 2,000 Gems.

The number might be lowered by the additional power of lightning spells, but the casters were limited by their MP, and there was always the risk that some of them would fail to dodge and suffer the death penalty.

However, all that mattered right now was bringing down Gloria's HP below half.

The Lunar Society already knew that Gloria was only as strong as it was because of the three-horn's skill, so if they were to get rid of that head, its defense should return to its original state, when even the Babylonian Battlegroup could hurt it with no trouble.

At that point, Gloria would be completely out of special abilities, making it a relatively easy kill.

"ShOoooOaArRghh..." Gloria let out a roar that seemed full of irritation. It was under attack by near-constant flashes of magic, unable to catch up to any of the insects swarming it. This was surely the most humiliating thing it had ever experienced. It was made even worse by the single human that, instead of using any magic, was just lunging in close and poking it with the butt end of his spear. The bald man switched between doing that and bashing the canyon or the ground with the shield in his other hand.

That served to make Gloria even more irritated.

Tsukuyo, their leader, was being carried by Tsukikage, grinning as she said, "We've got the pattern down." If Gloria could see her, its anger would reach even greater heights.

"It sure got a lot faster, though," she added. Kaguya's Faint Light was still actively dividing Gloria's speed, but as its HP decreased, its stats increased. It wasn't out of the question that it would break the sound barrier once it reached 60% HP.

"Bind it for me, will you?" Tsukuyo said.

“As you command,” Eishiro replied. As before, the crux of the offensive here was the spells and fixed damage Gems from the thirty casters and vanguards. This strategy relied on Gloria being unable to hit them, and that was why Tsukuyo had reduced Gloria’s AGI to a sixth of its maximum.

However, she wasn’t the only one meant to keep the dragon from reaching supersonic speeds again.

“The Shades and Death, They Beckon — Erlkönig.” The shadows created by the Lunar Divider Field’s night became countless hands that wrapped around Gloria. They both hampered its movements and sunk through its scales, damaging it from underneath them. If the one-horned head was still present, shadows that wounded the dragon’s entire body would have been completely off the table, but the power of the light was lost to Gloria forever.

It didn’t end at just the shadows, however.

The same bald man that had been poking Gloria’s scales from the back of a replica Prism Steed — Myth Rider, Ichiro Shijima — unleashed his ultimate skill.

“Binding Vows, Sought and Linked — Juno!” A moment later, seals manifested all over Gloria — specifically, the parts Ichiro had poked with the butt-end of his spear.

Simultaneously, similar seals appeared on the various points of the canyon that he’d touched with his shield.

Suddenly, Gloria completely stopped in place, as though it was being dragged by something from every direction.

These were attracting seals — the power of Ichiro’s Embryo, Juno.

The seals created by the butt-end of the spear were “male,” while the ones made by the shield were “female.” Upon activating the skill, a powerful attractive force would be created between them.

Though a single pair of seals could be shaken off with just 2,000 STR, Ichiro could produce many pairs, limited only by his SP, and by binding the target from many directions he could significantly increase the bind’s power. Eventually, it would become so strong that the target would become unable to move an inch. Applying seals was particularly easy against larger enemies, and with enough of them, even UBMs would be rendered completely immobile.

He rode around and planted seals to bind the enemy in place, making it an easy target for the rest of the group.

This was the fighting style of the ex-captain of The Lunar Society's battle corps, Ichiro Shijima.

"Sh-ShrRooOaaArghHhhHh!" The two-horn roared as Gloria tried to move, but it couldn't shake off the force of the attraction. The number of seals set on the dragon easily exceeded a hundred, and even this super-Mythical creature had trouble escaping the binding.

Due to the SP cost, Ichiro could never place this many seals by himself, but the group buffer riding the Prism Steed with him was also using items to restore his SP, and this allowed him to create far more seals than he usually could.

Once Gloria stopped, the remaining members became even more aggressive.

Eishiro's shadow hands burned and strangled the three-horn as Ichiro placed more and more seals. Gloria's STR grew as its HP decreased, so the extra seals were necessary to keep it bound. Additionally, Tsukuyo had switched the target of her division from AGI to STR.

The dragon couldn't move an inch, and The Lunar Society had taken complete control of the situation.

This could never have happened if the one-horn was still alive, but... there was no point in imagining such a scenario now.

Gloria was completely cornered.

A few minutes passed after this battle had become completely one-sided.

"Its HP is about to fall below 50%," said Eishiro, using his Reveal skill.

"Really? Wow, we're fast," replied Tsukuyo.

So far, Gloria had been unable to fight back directly, and even most of the rocks it was somehow able to shatter and scatter were blocked by Eishiro's shadows. Any injured party members were quickly healed by Tsukuyo.

Gloria's stats continued to grow, but the situation didn't change. If this continued, Gloria would surely fall.

The moment Eishiro thought that, Gloria's HP finally fell below 50%... *and all the members besides Tsukuyo and Tsukikage instantly died*.

The level 500 elites suddenly and unexpectedly became bits of light.

"Hm...? Faint Light," said Tsukuyo, as she recovered from her moment of shock and instantly switched the target of her division skill from STR back to AGI.

That was exactly the right move, as proven by the slowed, but still-subsonic claw that cut the air right where Eishiro had just been.

“...Is this a joke?” Tsukuyo said, as she was carried around by Eishiro to re-evaluate the situation.

The fifteen offensive pairs were all dead.

The one extra support-buffer was dead.

Ichiro had also died, undoing all his attraction seals.

The situation they had constructed had been completely undone.

“We lost thirty-two, and the only survivors are Kage and I... the Superior Jobs.” She re-examined the situation. “A barrier that kills everyone based on level... and enhancement based on lost HP...” Then she re-examined Gloria’s powers. “...That’s just not faaiir.” This information was enough for Tsukuyo to fully understand what the dragon had done.

Basically...

“Enhancing the stats is fine and all, but you just can’t do that with the death field...” Tsukuyo now knew that Gloria had an ace up its sleeve far worse than she could ever imagine.

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The dragon that went on to become the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria was a true rarity, in that it was a child of two UBMs and inherited powers from both.

However, neither of its parents possessed powers even close to Gloria’s.

Its father, Lightdragon King, Drag-Shine could only breathe light from his mouth, while its mother, Deathdragon King, Drag-Death could only instakill people up to level 250 and monsters up to level 50, and there was a limit to how well she could negate damage coming from outside the field.

There were two reasons why Gloria had become a true monstrosity with similar, but far more fearsome, powers.

The first was bodily modification by an external agent.

The enhancement of its Overdrive and Fatal Field, as well as Resurgence and ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■ didn’t come from within — they were all part of the UBM control AI’s, Jabberwock’s, design.

Jabberwock designed UBMs and used ■■■■■ to transform standard monsters into them... but on rare occasions, he used ■■■■■ on a single monster several times.

Theoretically, each use of ■■■■■ could empower an UBM more and more, but this came with disadvantages.

For example, too many uses could cause a data collapse and subsequent destruction, even in monsters with great potential.

In fact, a monster could only become a designer UBM after it was of an appropriate level to survive a single one, and the ones that followed were harder and harder to survive.

Jabberwock generally avoided doing this, since he didn't want to risk losing a perfectly good UBM.

He had attempted this less than a hundred times during the past two millennia, and his successes didn't even add up to ten, even if you included the irregular future case where he would give one for both a mother and her fetus.

However, Gloria was a special case.

It had survived not one, not two, but several uses of ■■■■■. It had the makings of a creature that could prevail against fatal odds and defeat countless monsters and UBMs to finally become an SUBM.

That was all according to Jabberwock's predictions. However, there was one factor that he hadn't accounted for.

The second reason why Gloria had ended up this way was its ability to create skills.

Such an ability wasn't unique in this world. Certain high-rank and Superior Jobs — most notably the "The One" series — could create their own skills, as well. Even standard UBMs could develop new abilities as their powers grew.

Gloria had simply done the same thing.

The skill it'd used against Figaro — Zenith Dragon's Shining Field: Fang of Gloria — was one of them. Ever since creating it, the dragon had kept this ability a secret from even Jabberwock, the one who'd given it power.

However, there was another skill it had woven, and it was one it simply couldn't hide.

This was a skill that applied its stat enhancement to the Fatal Field, raising the level bar that had to be surpassed. Its name was simply “True Fatal Field.”

It was a truly fearsome ability, born from mixing the powers inherited from its parents and the ones given to it by Jabberwock.

Over a thousand years ago, before Jabberwock retrieved Gloria, it had fought an Irregularity, was badly hurt, and used it.

The True Fatal Field instantly killed the Irregularity, and the Resources it had received let it break past level 100.

Jabberwock had been observing this battle and learned of this ability, but as fearsome as it was, he found it appropriate. This was one of the reasons why he’d considered Gloria to be the most complete boss monster, and he’d thought that it was a fitting power for a creature with that title to have.

Allowed to retain this ability, Gloria waited for over a millennium for its deployment, and had now once more used the fearsome True Fatal Field that had extinguished even an Irregularity.

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Kingdom of Altar, Nowest Canyon

The single eye of the two-horn released a sinister shine as it spread the True Fatal Field. Looking up at the evil eye, Tsukuyo muttered, “Ohh, it’s *so* over...”

Still carried by Eishiro at supersonic speeds, she let out a sigh.

Gloria now had stats that surpassed Mythical-level, nearly all of her group was dead, her plan had collapsed, and there was an overwhelming gap between the dragon and the two survivors. Though Eishiro was a battle-focused Superior Job, he didn’t have much offensive ability, and his job skills were focused on fights against other players, while his Embryo was anti-group, making it inefficient against powerful single enemies such as Gloria.

With Tsukuyo, the reasons were even more obvious. Her job was focused on healing and support, while her Embryo was all about debuffs. Also, Kaguya’s ultimate skill could only be used against Masters, which rendered it completely useless against the dragon.

To make matters worse, even if they somehow fought and damaged Gloria, they would only increase the limit of the Fatal Field, and it would eventually catch up even to Superior Jobs such as them.

“I dunno the max level limit on it, but I guess we can’t leave the two-horn be...” If it was left alive, in the worst case scenario it could develop a Fatal Field that killed all those below level 1,000 or even 2,000, and negated all damage coming to it from anywhere outside the field, becoming effectively immortal.

A Gloria like that would become a deadly calamity in its purest sense.

The two-horn had to die. Like with the one-horn, letting it live could potentially erase all chances of ever killing it. However, doing so would leave the three-horn, and it was easy to imagine how high its stats would grow.

Needless to say, it would be too much for just the two of them.

“Yep. This is all we’ve got. We can’t beat the three-head, and the plan we had is in shambles now” Tsukuyo shook her head, as though giving up. “*So let’s just go all-in on taking out the two-horn*.”

With a wicked smile, she declared that she would end the head with the most fearsome skill.

She’d only given up on getting both of the remaining special rewards — but not on victory.

“We’ll retreat once the two-horn’s gone. Then, we’ll just leave the rest to the trash panda. I’ve got no clue how a STR idiot like him will even fight it once it moves several times faster than the speed of sound, though.”

Tsukuyo had handed the conclusion of the battle over to Shu, but that also meant that she’d decided that taking out the two-horn was her role in all of this.

“Kage, I’m using *that*. Be a dear and buy me about three minutes. Oh, and get ready to help me with rehab after we’re back.”

“As you command, Lady Tsukuyo,” Eishiro nodded before activating a skill. “Shadow Cradle.”

He then sank her into his own shadow.

Eishiro’s shadow was a separate realm that he often used for movement or covert operations. However, the shadow he’d sunk Tsukuyo into was different from his usual shadows, in that it was meant chiefly to protect the one inside. It was a shadow shelter he couldn’t use on himself, or on any unwilling target.

No external forces could affect it as long as Eishiro was alive and the one inside it didn't wish to leave. This made the shadow the safest place against Gloria — the menace before them.

Alas, it would only last until Gloria killed him.

"Three minutes," he said to himself. "Heheh, Lady Tsukuyo's requests are as absurd as ever."

With Tsukuyo in hiding, Kaguya's Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light was undone, and Gloria could now move at several times the speed of sound.

It was now even faster than Eishiro — a speed-focused Superior Job.

In fact, one of Gloria's claws was approaching him at immense speeds right this very moment.

"But fulfilling her absurd requests is my duty," he sighed, as he took control of his shadows to create a brief wall, then took evasive action.

This let him avoid a direct hit from the claw, but *the shockwave alone blew away his left arm*.

Paying it no mind, he used his legs and shadows to evade the attacks that followed.

In a supersonic battle, one's experienced time was drawn-out, so three minutes was actually a long time for Eishiro. Regardless, he would fulfill his mistress' request.

"If I am unable to buy a mere three minutes... I am unworthy of standing at her side."

His leg was blown away, and he simply replaced it with a leg of shadow.

His arteries were torn, and he wrapped them up in shadows to stop the bleeding.

Replacing more and more of his body with shadow, he kept moving, buying the time he needed.

"If the lady ordered it, even seven days and nights would be nothing to me." The King of Assassins who served the High Priestess continued to buy time with his unyielding will.

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Within the world of shadow, a poem-like voice rang out.

The holy one walks the endless path. The path of the seeker and the path of the savior. The path on which she seeks her conviction. And at the end of the path, she will grant salvation.

Tsukuyo was reciting something in a language completely unlike her native tongue. It was a chant, but it was fundamentally different from the common magic skill.

The users were free to pick the words used in standard Chants. All that mattered was that they said something out loud and expended MP.

This moment is the end of life. This moment is the end of the path. The conclusion of the holy one's journey. The point from which the holy one shall return.

However, the chant Tsukuyo now spoke was quite different.

It was one of the world's few Ancient Spells — a kind of magic that had their own specific chants.

As she spoke it, light appeared from within her and gathered into an orb in her palm.

It was the same kind of light as the one created by the church's holy men at Claymill — same as the rite of divine punishment, Judgement Pillar.

The holy one now lays down her burden. She puts away that which she had sought. And, she embraces instead a new desire.

But as the chant continued, the ball's light changed in nature.

While Judgement Pillar's light was Sun-like, this one was dimmer... like the light of a full moon in the night sky.

All that she gained in her life. All that she gained on her path. All this shall be sacrificed for this single light she so desires. This light carries her wish for the salvation of others. Otherwise, it cannot be released.

She finally concluded the chant...

"The Return of the Holy One: Ulfaria Eltram."

...And spoke the name of a miracle older than even the pre-ancient civilization — the name of the ultimate job skill of the entire priest grouping.

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Three minutes. The short time that felt far too long was finally over, and a particular part of the shadow rose up to reveal Tsukuyo, carrying an orb of what seemed like pure moonlight.

She solemnly glanced at it once before looking up to see a shadow standing before her.

"..." It was a man who'd lost all his limbs, replaced them with shadow, and whose torso bore several fatal wounds.

For a hefty price, Eishiro Tsukikage had bought the three minutes.

"Good work, Kage," said Tsukuyo. Not saying a word back — he couldn't, due to the hole in his throat — he gave her a faint smile... and dissolved into bits of light.

Tsukuyo saw her confidant off with a smile of her own.

"Anyway, two-horn, our turn is almost done." A moment later, the orb of light in her hands pulsated as though it had found its target.

Gloria didn't just sit and watch, however.

The dragon moved *and split Tsukuyo in half with a horizontal claw strike*.

Indeed, it was more like it obliterated her entire lower half.

The wound was obviously fatal. As the High Priestess, Tsukuyo had the potential to quickly patch herself up using Mercy of the Holy, but Gloria would crush her head before she could.

Though... Tsukuyo herself would soon be unable to use that skill.

"SHUuuOoOeEeeeAaaAAaRrGhhHhh! Nh...?" Before Gloria finished Tsukuyo off, the two-horn's single eye noticed the orb of light approaching it.

Slowly but surely, it floated towards the two-horn.

Gloria's instincts took over, urging it to avoid the tiny orb. It could feel it was dangerous and distanced itself from it at the speed of sound.

However, the orb of light *moved along with it*, catching up to the dragon and continuing its steady approach.

Never letting Gloria gain any distance on it, the orb of light came closer and closer to it.

"This is my first time using it... so that's what it's like." Tsukuyo grinned, lying on the ground as nothing but a severed top half.

That light was Ulfaria Eltram — the double-edged sword wielded by Hierophants and High Priestesses that poured everything they'd built and, indeed, their entire lives into a single attack.

An ultimate spell that came at the cost of all the user's job levels.

Even to the immortal Masters, this was the equivalent of sacrificing a huge part of your own life and time. The reward for this was an inescapable spell that dealt a fixed amount of damage.

It would land no matter how fast the target was, and though the idea of fixed damage might recall the Gems employed earlier, this was quite different in that it dealt quite a bit more damage — 3,000 for every level sacrificed.

With Tsukuyo's total level being 1,026... it would deal an astounding 3,000,000 damage.

"SHheEeeEEAaAaaAAaaaRrgGhhHHhhH!" Gloria also realized how potent and abnormal the orb was, but it was unable to do anything about it.

Even killing Tsukuyo herself couldn't stop it now, for it had already been released.

However, Tsukuyo's death penalty was already set in stone.

The moment Ulfaria Eltram reached its target, Tsukuyo's level would drop to 0.

She'd become susceptible to the Fatal Field again, and even if that didn't kill her, the resulting HP drop and her fatal injury would.

Tsukuyo's death was certain, but the fate of Gloria's two-horned head still hung in the balance.

"...It won't be enough, will it?" she mused. Though Ulfaria Eltram dealt immense damage, Gloria's HP was simply on a different level. Fighting Figaro and The Lunar Society took it below half, but it was still about 35,000,000.

This meant that this spell would be far from fatal. "Well, then, you know what to do."

"Indeed we do. Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light."

Of course, neither Tsukuyo nor her Embryo, Kaguya, would allow her spell to fail.

The Maiden cast Faint Light one last time, *switching from AGI to HP*.

Indeed — not even HP was immune to Faint Light.

Tsukuyo avoided using this while the entire group was still around to prevent Gloria becoming too powerful; she didn't use it after they died because dividing AGI was the only way she could stay alive, and because enhancing the Fatal Field too much could kill her.

However, speed didn't matter to Ulfaria Eltram, and there was no point in worrying about the limits of the Fatal Field after she'd cast a spell that already made her as good as dead.

Gloria's HP had been reduced from 35,000,000 to a little under 6,000,000.

"You measured human life by level, killed thousands by level..."

Ulfaria Eltram landed, dealing 3,000,000 damage — half of Gloria's remaining HP.

"...So it's only right that you die by level."

Needless to say, the two-horned head vanished without a trace.

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The two-horn vanished, and the True Fatal Field was undone.

At the same time, Tsukuyo, who was now level 0, was fading due to her now-meager HP. Her body was quickly turning into bits of light, but she displayed no concern as she checked her status windows.

"Ah. I'm level 0, but I've still got my jobs," she said. "I thought I'd have to get them all again. This means that the only rehab I'll need will be powerleveling."

Tsukuyo grinned, highly satisfied with the outcome.

She'd expected to have to get the High Priestess job again. Though, that wouldn't have been difficult, considering that most of the country's holy men died at Claymill and she was the only viable candidate in the entire kingdom.

"My work here is done. I'm leaving the rest to the trash panda!" Entrusting the fight against the three-horn at its most troublesome to Shu, she vanished in satisfaction.

But right before she did...

"...You better protect the capital. I'll be really mad if you don't clean up my mess."

Saying that with a hint of prayer in her voice, Tsukuyo Fuso returned to reality.

Act Eight: Unmatched God of War — Baldr

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“Twin Quintuple Cannons linked to ammo storage. Loading all gunports with DD Shells. Equipping Stardust Genocider with F Warheads. Firing preparations complete.”

“Fire while it’s still recovering.”

“Roger. War God Ship, Baldr is engaging the enemy.”

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Kingdom of Altar, Nowest Canyon

After Tsukuyo took out the two-horn head, Gloria collapsed and fell motionless.

It was taking time to restore the part of its body that Ulfaria Eltram had blown away along with its head, as well as to process what had just happened. In silence, Gloria pondered the fact that it had lost both the one-horned and the two-horned heads, leaving only the three-horn.

This was the first time in its long life that it had felt true solitude.

Its senses had been greatly affected, as well. With the loss of the two-horn came the loss of its passive Fatal Field, along with its abilities to sense things within that field and to block attacks coming from outside it.

The millennia-old SUBM had never felt like this, and it was greatly perplexed.

That was why he saw this moment as his opportunity.

Cutting the air, countless missiles flew towards Gloria — but alas, they were too slow.

The dragon had about 17,000,000 HP left, which was less than a fourth of its maximum, but in exchange its stats had grown over four-fold. Its STR, for example, was over 160,000, and its other stats were just as ludicrously high. Its AGI let it move at four times the speed of sound, so the incoming missiles were far too slow to be a threat. And even if they did hit it, its END, which exceeded 120,000, would not let any damage pass.

Knowing that, Gloria casually brushed the missiles aside, *only for them to burst and release a light that blinded it*.

The missiles weren't standard high-explosives, but F Warheads — flash bombs which exploded in a light so intense it could permanently destroy a human being's eyesight. As a creature that breathed light, Gloria had high resistance to the element; it was caught off-guard, however, so its eyes were still burned. It shut its eyelids as quickly as it could, but the flash bombs continued to rain down with only brief pauses in between volleys. Every time Gloria tried to open its eyes, all it could see was white.

This was a clear opening in its defenses, and it wasn't missed — a rain of shells fell on Gloria, actually breaking through its 120,000 END and damaging its HP.

The DD Shells, as they were called, had all been created by a single skill, and their effect was the same as that of the magic Gems used by The Lunar Society — they inflicted *direct damage*.

Its HP, already low after two taxing battles, was now falling even lower.

"GrrRoOoOaaAaARrRgHHhhH!" Fast as it now was, Gloria could've easily avoided all the shells... but it was now blinded. If it opened its eyes, it saw nothing but the white of the F Warheads. Up until recently, attacks from outside a certain range were useless against it, but with the loss of the two-horn, Gloria had lost its Fatal Field — its deadly ability that doubled as an impenetrable defense.

It had no choice but to bear the rain of shells.

Losing its field had also made it woefully incapable of assessing its surroundings and sensing the presence of enemies, and Gloria fully understood that its opponent was attacking now precisely because he was aware of that exact fact.

"Ghoarrh..." It could easily escape the shells. Gloria could cover a whole kilometel in a single second. It had the potential to escape the enemy's effective range, but it just *couldn't do it*.

Though Gloria could evade attacks, it wasn't allowed to flee from battle. It had to obey the orders of "Head straight for the royal capital" and "Fight every enemy you encounter."

These commands were etched into Gloria's existence as part of a contract with Jabberwock — the being that had saved it from the Skydragon King's servants and had given it power as a UBM.

The dragon was fundamentally incapable of running away merely for survival, but even without its orders, Gloria would have never chosen to do so. It prided itself on being the most powerful creature in existence — more powerful than either of its parents and even the Skydragon King who'd murdered them. It was convinced that it could defeat and surpass any creature that stood before it, and disregarded any other options.

Though, perhaps it would've been different if the other heads were still alive. The one-horn wanted to eradicate everyone with its light, while the two-horn was a coward who killed other creatures to protect itself.

The three-horn, however, wanted nothing but to increase its own power, exercise that power, and prove that nothing could stand in its way.

Thus, Gloria would never choose to retreat with only its three-horn head left. Without a sound, the dragon chose to just let the shells hit it.

The DD Shells raining down on it were powerful — a hundred of them were enough to reduce its HP to 15,000,000.

"...GHhHAaaAAaaAArRrrrGhhH!" In exchange for taking damage, Gloria was able to determine the direction the shells were coming from.

Still blinded, it sped towards the attacker, ignoring all the shells still falling on it.

Having lost two heads and most of its HP, Gloria had become an incarnation of pure power. Now, it charged towards its enemy.

Each step made the earth quake, and the walls of the canyon didn't even slow it down. No matter what stood in its way, it would arrive at its target in a mere handful of seconds, extinguish the annoyance, and continue on its path towards the capital.

With its stats grown so high, even Superior Jobs paled in comparison. As it was, nothing could stop Gloria.

At least... *Not yet*.

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Meanwhile, the attacker — King of Destruction, Shu Starling — sensed Gloria's approach. "Guess it's on its way, huh?"

“Hostile target, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, is approaching this location. Calculating time until arrival based on speed and obstacles... Roughly 32 seconds until contact.”

“That’s faster than expected... I guess its stats went up by that much, huh?”

Re-evaluating his opponent, Shu removed his raccoon costume, leaving him in only his innerwear; now clearly visible was a handsome man with long hair and a well-proportioned body of toned, tough muscle.

“We got any more DD Shells?” Shu asked.

“Fifteen DD Shells remaining,” Baldr replied.

“I’m pretty sure those are the only shells that’ll do anything to it at this point. Damn thing is probably tougher than Fatoum’s Mountain Puppet and Ultrahard Regalia.”

Baldr could produce its own ammo, and though the materials required could be costly, the destructive potential was immense. Despite that, the only ones that were of any use against Gloria’s current form were the blinding F Warheads and the fixed damage DD Shells. Incendiary? Armor-piercing? Those weren’t even worth bothering with.

And if shells weren’t an option...

“I guess we’ll have to *duke it out*.”

...He had to rely on his other weapon — the greatest STR of any master.

Though, at the moment his base STR was 80,000, and even with the 100,000 he could achieve with equipment bonuses, it wouldn’t be enough to even harm the dragon. He also had no means of actually damaging a being that was several times faster than the speed of sound.

Gloria, on the other hand, could turn him to dust with a single attack.

And this was why Shu removed his costume — he would now equip his *ultimate gear*, which would solve all three of those problems.

“Baldr, we’re using *that*.”

“Full Offense Mode can currently be activated for 60 continuous minutes.”

“That’s more than enough.” A grin spread across his face...

“Unmatched God of War — Baldr!”

...As he spoke the name of his Embryo.

◇◆

As Gloria ran, through its closed eyes it realized that the blinding light had ceased.

It then opened its eyes to see that its vision was recovering — and that it was already facing its enemy.

The silhouette before Gloria was immense. It was a battleship — or a giant tank — that had quintuple cannons lining both sides, as well as countless missile launchers on its deck.

This vessel that could rule over both land and sea was already launching an attack upon Gloria, but there was no longer even the slightest chance that any of the shells would hit.

With its vision returned, Gloria could use its supersonic movement to easily evade them all.

Then, it charged at the battleship.

“GHrRrrROoooOAAaaaAaRRGggHHHH!” It swung its right claw towards the bridge, fully intent on ending it with a single hit.

As it came closer, Gloria pictured the pulverized bridge in its mind’s eye...

“...?”

...But that was a far cry from what actually happened.

Gloria’s claw fell, but the bridge was still very much intact.

In fact, the claw that was meant to destroy it *had been caught.* Gloria couldn’t comprehend this.

The fact that its arm had been caught — something that had never happened before — left it bewildered; the fact that there was a being even capable of that left it shocked.

It wondered what this being could possibly be.

Looking at its claw, it saw five steel-blue fingers.

The Quintuple Cannon barrels bent like a hand and grabbed Gloria’s arm.

“...!?” As the dragon was overcome with surprise, the metal battleship *stood up*.

The front part of the hull became legs... The Quintuple Cannon turrets on both sides became arms... A face appeared from inside the bridge... And ultimately, a humanoid figure was created.

It was like a man... or perhaps a god.

The latter comparison was not unwarranted.

In Norse mythology, some stories of Baldr told that he owned Hringhorni — the greatest of all ships — and possessed the strongest body of all, unsurpassed and undying.

"War God Ship, Full Offense Mode transformation complete," coldly spoke Baldr — the Type Guardian/Fortress/Gear/Weapon Embryo. It was a quadruple hybrid — an utter rarity — and this was its true form.

There were many words one might use to describe this mighty entity.

A walking idol. Deus ex machina. The ultimate weapon of fantasy.

Every person would have their own term for Baldr as it was now.

"Ghrr, OoOagh..." Gloria, however, couldn't even begin to describe it. Thus, the thought it had given to Baldr, when translated to human tongue, was simply "Unknown."

Amusingly, it fit perfectly, for that was his — Shu Starling's — nickname.

"That was a close call. A moment slower, and my head would've been crushed."

"Denying that notion," said Baldr. "With the *current toughness*, a single hit wouldn't have been a problem."

"Really? Well, I'm not gonna run any endurance tests," Shu replied. "...I *am* gonna test the speed, though."

The moment Gloria snapped out of it, it instantly attacked with its left claw... only for Baldr to dodge it at *supersonic speeds*.

Once again the dragon was left stupefied. It watched as the hundred metel-tall machine-god moved at speeds equal to its own, if not greater...

"Kodachi."

...Before it spun around and launched a roundhouse kick — its Master's specialty — towards the head of the strongest dragon in existence.

"...Ghrh?!" The hit made Gloria stagger, which was all the proof needed to know that Baldr's — Shu's —attack worked.

This was the Unmatched God of War — Baldr. It was an ultimate skill that turned Baldr into *armor* that greatly increased HP, STR, END, and AGI based on Shu's already immense STR.

And like any armor, this machine god was worn by and moved with none other than Shu himself.

"Hoo...!" From within Baldr — from the bridge that had become a cockpit — you could hear Shu stabilize his breathing.

As he fixed his posture, Baldr moved along with him at essentially the same speed. The hundred metel-tall machine god perfectly replicated its Master's martial movements.

This was all exactly as expected. Baldr was Shu's Embryo, and there were few greater unions of man and machine than this.

Gloria silently watched its opponent and soon became certain that this one was unlike any it had ever faced. He wasn't like the weaklings it had crushed earlier, those who'd tried to swarm it, the UBMs that had challenged it with their unique powers, or the man who'd taken its heart, wings, and the right eye of the one-horn.

Even those who'd actually removed its two other heads were far below it, overall — they'd only achieved what they had because they excelled in a few very specific things. However, this one was unlike them — *for he was its equal*.

This was an entity that could fight it head-on, now that it had lost its offensive and defensive skills and had nothing but pure physical ability.

Gloria had never encountered an opponent or a battle quite like this.

"GhAhhHAhAhHAH...!" The thought actually made the dragon laugh. Feeling the joy of true conflict, it laughed as though to express that *it had never had this much fun*.

"Hahah...!" Shu laughed along with it. He was fully aware that this was a battle he couldn't lose, and that his defeat would mean the end of the kingdom.

But even so, he found it a bit... exciting.

It reminded him of his school days as a martial artist.

"GHhAHhaHhAhaAhhaaHHaAHHahaHAHAhAh!"

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!" Laughing uproariously, the two rivals rushed to face each other.

The King of Destruction, Shu Starling, Full Offense Mode.

The Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, Max Battle Mode.

The greatest STR among mankind versus the greatest STR among monsterkind.

They laughed for a good while before going for each other's heads, fully intending to pulverize them.

Overwhelming their surroundings with crushing shockwaves, the machine god and the strongest dragon clashed, sounding the gong for the true start of the final battle between Superior and SUBM... power against power.

Interlude: The Worst and the Worst

???

This space existed in a place unreachable from the Nowest Canyon where that fierce battle was raging... or any other place on the continent.

Several people were gathered in this separate dimension-like place, in an area that looked much like a spaceship.

Though, perhaps “people” wasn’t an apt term, for some among them looked truly inhuman. However, their appearance mattered little compared to features they *did* share.

They were all control AIs, otherwise known as Infinite Embryos.

They were the observers of the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Not all of them were here, but those who were gazed at a screen hanging in the air, showing the clash between the machine god and the most powerful dragon.

“Strangely enough, it turned out exactly like you expected, Jabberwock,” said the entity that looked like a carnivorous beastwoman. She was control AI no. 3 — otherwise known as simply “Queen.” Her voice made it clear that she was truly enjoying the battle.

“What do you mean, No. 3?” Jabberwock asked, with curiosity in his expression.

“Ha! Isn’t it obvious? You said that nothing would happen if we released a standard SUBM into a country with so many outstanding individuals. And it looks like not even unleashing Gloria changed that. They sure are something,” Queen said before pausing for a moment. “We didn’t get any new Superiors or Superior Embryos, but hey, it happens. Also, a country with this much potential is bound to produce a few more Superiors with or without SUBMs. Don’t let this failure get to you.”

She spoke as if to cheer up her colleague.

“Indeed. I failed *this time*,” Jabberwock nodded in response...

“*The next Gloria* will do better.”

...before saying something that would make any man despair, or at least tilt their head in confusion.

"...The next Gloria?" Queen asked, clearly puzzled. "You say that like you actually managed to mass-produce this monster that's almost as powerful as us."

"Oh, nothing of the sort. Gloria is a once-in-a-millennium miracle. Even creating new Superiors is easier than mass-producing this dragon," he shook his head in denial before clearing up the misunderstanding. "I'm simply saying that Gloria will *fully regenerate* from its backup."

The words made Queen gasp. "...Fully regenerate? With the cores and all?"

"Of course," said Jabberwock. "As long as the backup is safe, it will begin regenerating once any of the cores are destroyed, eventually becoming whole again. It isn't exactly flawless, though. I thought that this function could be used to create more Glorias, but it turned out that the cores couldn't be duplicated as long as the original still existed. Apparently, none of the cores can be multiplied as long as any of the three cores of the original are still active. Since the abilities themselves can only be restored to the backup the moment the corresponding cores are destroyed, there's a bit of a lag until full regene—"

"Wait... Wait just a second!" Queen cut off Jabberwock's excessively long explanation of Gloria's functions.

From her perspective, there was a fundamental issue more important than any detail he could discuss.

"You mean to tell me that the head the Over Gladiator sacrificed a Mythical special reward to beat and the head the High Priestess gave all her levels to destroy... will just keep coming back?"

"Indeed."

"Jabberwock... I didn't hear anything about this."

"Because I didn't tell you. Well, don't worry. Gloria will come back and test the Masters over and over... *until we have all the Superiors*."

Jabberwock's plainly-spoken words made a chill go down Queen's spine.

She realized that his stance regarding Gloria's deployment was unlike any other control AI's. While they approved the release of such a powerful SUBM because the kingdom was full of outstanding individuals, Jabberwock intended to continue using Gloria to test the Masters in perpetuity.

"...Is there a way to stop it?" she asked.

"Of course," Jabberwock replied. "I have the exclusive right to stop the backup's functions at any time. The backup can be destroyed by standard means, too."

"What is this 'backup' you're talking about, anyway?"

"This." Jabberwock changed what the screen displayed.

It now showed a dark cave.

It was clearly created naturally. You couldn't tell it from just looking at it, but the data displayed on the screen said that it was at an extreme depth of 3,000 metels. The cave was over a hundred metels tall and extended for several kilometels in each direction. Needless to say, it was gigantic.

In the center of it, there was a giant object.

"Is that... its tail?" It was a long tail with four protrusions and golden scales — the same one that Foltesla had cut off during the battle at Claymill.

"To be more precise, it's Gloria's fourth head... If we go by the naming scheme Altar's Masters gave it, it's the *'four-horn.'*"

Gloria's tail... the four-horn... had seemed to vanish after the battle at Claymill. Some had wondered why the tail disappeared while the wings stayed behind, but they simply concluded that it had merely been lost during the chaotic battle.

However, it had actually moved on its own and hid within a nearby lake, and from there it had dug down to hide in this cave.

"Hm. We're just in time. The four-horn's *Revitalization* is about to begin."

The moment Jabberwock said that, the severed end of the tail began to grow into two heads.

There were short horns on them — one had one, while the other had two — and they were obviously the heads Gloria had lost.

The tail now looked something like a two-headed snake, slithering on the surface of the cave.

"They regenerated already...?" Queen asked.

"Not yet," said Jabberwock. "It might look like they have, but there's no core inside them. Like I said before, the cores will come back once the main Gloria is defeated. For now, it will just reconstruct the body alone.

Assuming the main Gloria fell right at this moment, it would completely regenerate by... tomorrow, I'd say."

Queen was speechless. That was far too fast. Even if Shu defeated the three-horn, the kingdom wouldn't even have time to celebrate their victory and its survival.

As long as the backup was alive, Gloria's march wouldn't stop.

"'The Glory SelectE.R... Endless Routine.'" Jabberwock spoke the codename he'd given to Gloria.

"Gloria is a creature that will *sort and select Masters without end*, spurring Superior Embryo evolution. If it can be stopped, that will only happen once there are enough Superiors to actually accomplish it."

"...Won't the kingdom fall?"

"If it falls, it falls. Perhaps the destruction of a country is what we need to speed up the process. I'm even thinking of having Gloria attack the whole continent until we have the hundred Superiors we need."

That would be a true calamity — a catastrophe that wouldn't end until all the Superiors had gathered. It would obviously throw the balance they had set up completely out of order.

The other control AIs listening in on this exchange were already wondering if they should go destroy the four-horn before it regenerated. However, they knew that Jabberwock would stop them if they tried. That meant having to fight one of the strongest control AIs — a match even for no. 10, Bandersnatch, who was in charge of security.

In fact, in the worst case scenario, Bandersnatch would also try to prevent Gloria's defeat. It was a simple machine that didn't even have the thought patterns necessary to limit itself when trying to achieve objectives, so it was likely to side with Jabberwock.

As they racked their brains about what to do next...

"Jabberwock..."

...Cheshire, control AI no. 13 and the one in charge of miscellaneous jobs, called out to him.

Upon hearing his voice, the other control AIs thought that he was about to try to bargain with Jabberwock and try to get him to use his exclusive right to stop the backup.

However, they were all wrong.

"Let me give you a warniing."

He only wanted to impart a small piece of advice.

"I interact with Masters a lot more than youu. With that in mind, let me tell you something I know from experience."

"What is it?"

In response, Cheshire put on a feline grin and said, "They're completely free, so very few of them act exactly as we want them tooo."

A moment later...

"A Master is approaching Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria's backup."

...A voice informed of a change in the situation.

"A Master? All the way down there? Who?" asked Jabberwock.

In response, the voice...

"King of Crime, Sechs Würfel."

...Spoke the name of *the offender*.

◆◆◆

Kingdom of Altar, underground cavern

Several minutes ago...

There was a gigantic tail.

It was the same one that Foltesla had severed during the battle at Claymill.

It had four protrusions — horns — and it was fair to call it Gloria's four-horned head. Some would argue against that, though, for it didn't even have a face, let alone a mouth.

But that soon changed as a pair of vocal entities peeked out from its wound.

"FFfrrRRsSsHhhh..."

"ShhoOoAarrrghh..." They were the one-horn and the two-horn — the heads destroyed by Figaro and Tsukuyo Fuso.

The tail now looked like a two-headed snake, or the letter Y. Though, compared to the original one-horn and two-horn, these were more like the heads of lizard hatchlings, and their powers matched their relatively pitiful appearance.

However, they kept growing larger and tougher, and it wasn't hard to imagine that they would eventually become what they once were.

This was the power of the four-horn — Revitalization.

It had the ability to, if necessary, separate itself from Gloria. Even if Foltesla hadn't cut it off, it would've detached itself if the dragon encountered a powerful foe. It would then hide, ready to regenerate in case the original was destroyed.

Gloria would never die as long as the four-horn wasn't found and defeated. It would be reborn again and again, and wage an endless battle.

That was the final trick Gloria — the most perfect monster — had up its sleeve.

It was an SUBM that would never stop executing the unworthy and selecting the few who exceeded its exacting standards, making it perhaps the most dangerous creature imaginable.

As it was now, the four-horn was far from active. Currently the original, having become immensely powerful, was fighting a battle which could be its last. The four-horn didn't know how the battle would end, but if the original managed to survive, it would simply continue sleeping until it died, in which case it would finish its regeneration. That was all there was to it.

However, the regenerated Gloria would be weaker than the Gloria currently fighting on the surface, because tail-Gloria had stopped gaining battle experience the moment it had been severed. This regenerative ability it had actually gave it the option of shedding its tail and hiding before it even entered battle, but it had decided not to so that the four-horn could gain experience as well.

In simple terms, this was like saving game progress on an external memory drive. The Gloria that would revive here would have the experience of killing Drag-Volt and the kingdom's tians, but it wouldn't know about anything after it had been severed — specifically, the battles against the Masters. In both level and battle technique, it would be far weaker than the original Gloria fighting on the surface.

But that was no problem for Gloria. It could easily gather the experience again. Regardless, it would regenerate, and the second Gloria that would come after the first would destroy the kingd—

"Would you look at that! It really is here." Mixing with the echoes of water droplets trickling down, a man's voice resounded throughout the cave.

The darkness was complete, but thanks to the regenerated two-horn and its Fatal Field, the four-horn could sense the presence and realized that the source of the voice was the liquid dripping down from a crack above.

It soon gathered in a single place and formed a humanoid figure — a plain-looking man with black-rimmed glasses as his only notable feature.

Despite appearances, the four-horn instantly understood that this being was as fearsome as those who'd felled the original's heads... if not more.

"I see that the one-horn and two-horn are on the verge of coming back," he — King of Crime, Sechs Würfel — said in understanding, adjusting the glasses made out of his own flesh. "So you truly *do* have regenerative powers."

Sechs had known of this function the moment Drag-Heaven had given him the request. There were three reasons for this.

First was the discrepancy in the battle logs and results. In the battle at Claymill, Foltesla had cut off Gloria's wings and tail, yet only the wings remained.

Secondly, he compared it to himself. Being a slime, Sechs had the ability to fully regenerate himself from any remains of sufficient size, and if a slime was capable of that, there was no reason to believe that an SUBM couldn't do the same with the tail it had lost.

The third reason was Drag-Heaven's implications to that effect. The Skydragon King released undead parts of himself — spiritual dragons — all over the continent and used their eyes as his own. A creature with so much information at his disposal had implied that there were multiple Glorias, which was as good as outright stating that as fact.

Having become certain of the tail-Gloria's existence, Sechs went on to look for it in places where Drag-Heaven's eyes couldn't reach — the caverns, rivers, and lakes around Claymill.

And now, he'd found it.

"Here it is," he muttered to no one in sight.

"Heheheh... Just as I thought," Drag-Heaven replied.

Of course, the Skydragon King himself was nowhere near, but Sechs had one of his scales in hand.

This, too, was an undead created by Drag-Heaven's unique ability to split his soul. It was what he usually used to invite Sechs to The Skycrown, and as an undead, the scale was immune to the effects of Fatal Field.

"As expected, it was underground. Flare definitely couldn't fight here," said Sechs.

“Indeed,” replied Drag-Heaven. “In the worst case scenario, he would melt the very crust beneath the kingdom. And even that might not be enough to kill it. This is certainly no laughing matter. Khehehehehehe.”

“But you *are* laughing.” Shinedragon King, Drag-Flare wielded heat that reached tens of thousands of degrees and was even nicknamed “Stardragon.” If he were to fight in a place like this, it would no doubt change the very ground beneath Altar.

Sechs, on the other hand, was capable of *adjusting his power* with great precision, and that was exactly why Drag-Heaven had given him this request.

“It seems it only has the one-horned and the two-horned heads. Only the ones that were defeated, yes?”

“It appears so.” Through Drag-Heaven, Sechs was already aware that Gloria’s one-horned and two-horned heads were gone.

“It would be very troubling if I didn’t defeat it before Shu was done,” said Sechs as he cracked a smile. “So let’s begin our deadly battle in the dark, shall we?”

A moment later, he approached the four-horn at supersonic speeds.

“Shapeshift: Schwert.” Sechs turned his right hand into a sword as hard as Mythical metal before transforming his upper arm back into slime and swinging it like a bladed whip.

There was no hesitation in his attack. He moved as though the pitch-black darkness didn’t impede his sight at all.

Sechs’ attack easily broke through the 30,000 or so END’s worth of defense on the four-horn’s scales and damaged it.

“...!” The fact that it was injured naturally made it panic. With the three-horn still with the original, the four-horn didn’t have Resurgence or its boon of increasing stats with the decrease of HP. Additionally, the lack of a core in either of the two heads it had made it incapable of transforming its wounds into weapons or using the True Fatal Field.

What it could do, however...

“OoOoVveEeRrrDdrrRriiiiIiIiVeeEEeE!”

...Was release an Overdrive as powerful as the original’s through its regenerated one-horn.

Sechs instantly evaded it, and the light shining where he’d just stood brought daylight to the cave and melted the very bedrock.

"Now *this* is terrifying," he said with a composed expression before attacking again.

The four-horn continued using the one-horn's breath, but it simply couldn't hit him.

Though the light's power was the same, it covered a far smaller area than the original, making it harder to damage its enemy.

And although Sechs couldn't have known this, the Fatal Field had become weaker, as well — it could only instakill people below level 250, and only within a range of 100 metels. Since their UBM cores had yet to be restored, both the one-horn and the two-horn were now only as powerful as their parents.

Despite that, the four-horn was still a Mythical-tier creature that had the powers of two Ancient Legendaries. And yet, it couldn't hurt Sechs at all. In fact, he was actually thinking that he must be having the easiest time out of all of them.

He had it easier than Figaro, who'd faced Gloria's supreme battle potential; Tsukuyo, who'd fought Gloria's perfected power of certain death; and Shu, who was currently fighting the Gloria that had become an incarnation of pure power.

Thus, he knew that he couldn't lose.

"Shapeshift: Maschinen Kanone." Sechs transformed his left hand into a gatling gun.

Though there were limiting conditions, Sechs could transform himself even into complex objects such as machines.

The bullets he fired didn't have as much power as the sword and were repelled by the scales. They couldn't break through the four-horn's defenses, but that didn't matter.

"...!?" The four-horn noticed that something strange was happening on its body.

The bullets it was supposed to have repelled had clung to it instead, slowly damaging the scales.

They had transformed into a black liquid — a slime.

Sechs' gatling gun was made out of his own flesh, and the same applied to the bullets.

They turned back to slime mid-flight and clung to the four-horn, continually damaging it.

“...!” The mouthless four-horn writhed as the two regenerated heads screeched in pain.

Sechs used this as an opening to approach Gloria, coming close enough to use something other than the whip-sword.

“Shapeshift: Richtig Arm of the King of Destruction.” With the third Shapeshift, Sechs right arm became someone else’s.

It was far more muscly than his own, and he used it to punch Gloria’s body.

A moment later, Gloria bent as it received the greatest damage yet... while Sechs’ right arm simply burst.

“Shu has so much STR that even my weak copy is enough to take out my arm when I use it,” he said calmly, retrieving his splattered arm and restoring it to its full state.

Sword, gatling gun, and Shu Starling’s right arm.

These were all created by a single skill — Shapeshift.

It was an active skill of his Superior Embryo, Nu.

With Shapeshift, the passive skill of “Liquid Lifeform,” the ultimate skill, and one other, Nu only had four skills.

As its name suggested, Shapeshift let him transform his body. He mostly used it to alter his appearance, like he usually did with his human form, but its true power was far beyond that. It allowed him to gain the powers of people and even Embryos he’d transformed into.

Currently, Sechs’ left arm was assuming the shape of Shu Starling’s Embryo in its second form. Actual equipment and skills that came with them were off-limits for Shapeshift, but he could copy equipment-like Embryos.

“...!” Gloria attacked Sechs with a sideways sweep. Sechs countered it using the King of Destruction’s right arm again, only for the dragon’s attack to hit and shatter him whole.

However, he instantly reformed and became whole again.

This was the effect of the Liquid Lifeform passive skill, which granted him unparalleled powers of regeneration and almost totally negated physical attacks.

Shapeshift allowed him to freely transform and gain new abilities, Liquid Lifeform gave him supreme regeneration and physical attack negation, and then there was the King of Crime’s ultimate — and only —

job skill, World Record.

These three abilities combined gave him supreme defense as well as offense.

This was his basic fighting style.

As well-rounded as it was, however, Nu didn't come without disadvantages. It had a total of three.

The first was that Shapeshift's precision was connected to the level of whatever he was transforming into. He could only mimic something of the same level at about half the original's power; to make a perfect copy, he had to have at least double the target's level. The same was true with Embryos. He could only create perfect copies of Embryos in forms half as great as seven — forms three and below.

The second was that he couldn't use skills he didn't know the details of, even if he transformed. He simply could not incorporate those functions without the corresponding knowledge.

The third was *the lack of Resources*.

Both the well-rounded Shapeshift as well as the potent defensive ability that was Liquid Lifeform were powerful enough to be the sole abilities of an Embryo.

Thus, as an Embryo that had both, Nu was far weaker than other Embryos in a different way — the stat growth bonus it gave to its Master.

Nu was a true rarity in that it was an Embryo that actually gave *a negative growth bonus*, halving all of Sechs' stats.

Since Shapeshift cost SP, this also effectively limited how long he could transform.

In exchange for being able to become anyone, Sechs Würfel had received a great handicap in the form of a limit on his basic stats.

Though one of the reasons why the King of Crime was so feared was that *he'd already solved those three problems*.

"Kheheheh," Drag-Heaven chuckled.

"Oh? I heard laughter just now. What's so amusing?" Sechs asked.

"Oh, I am merely delighted by your friend's battle. I have not seen a fight like this since the time of the King of Kings and that era's Draconic Emperor."

"That makes me want to see it as well. Hm...?"

The battle against the reviving Gloria was still easy enough for Sechs to have a conversation with The Skydragon King, but then his expression changed.

Suddenly, *he split his body into little pieces*, and a moment later, countless threads of light filled the cave.

The limited-area Overdrive that had been released by the one-horn here was now split into hundreds of thin rays of light that danced throughout the cave.

The power and killing potential hadn't dropped one bit, but the number became greater than ever as it now melted everything in sight.

"This is..." Gloria was a monster capable of creating new skills, and that applied to the reviving four-horn, as well.

Faced with the powerful opponent that was Sechs, it created a skill that split its already smaller breath of light into smaller rays, greatly increasing its coverage.

It would be fitting to call it an "Area Overdrive," and it lapped at every corner of the cave, evaporating one-fifth of the scattered pieces of Sechs.

He lost HP and body mass, but once the Area Overdrive stopped, he gathered himself up into one place and restored himself before turning his arm into a gatling gun again and firing bits of himself at Gloria.

However, none of them reached it this time.

The pieces became particles of light that vanished before they could touch it.

This was due to the field around it, which was so dense you could actually *see* it.

It was the very same Fatal Field it had since the start, but it had been *compressed to a radius of merely 50 centimetels*.

Unlike its earlier form, this wasn't a power that could exterminate all life in a vast area, but a power that protected it by killing all creatures that came close.

This "Compressed Fatal Field" could easily kill even people above level 1,000, which was proven true by the fact that Sechs' bullets — parts of himself — could no longer reach it.

Additionally, the compression had made its defensive ability impenetrable. The standard Fatal Field couldn't have been compressed like this. Gloria's weakness during its revival process had made it possible.

Area Overdrive and Compressed Fatal Field.

It was safe to say that this Gloria had, in an amazingly brief time, developed skills that matched the ultimate abilities of the original one-horn and two-horn.

Normally, this would've been impossible, but there was a reason why it had happened.

The situation *was just that dire for Gloria*.

The cores of the three heads had yet to reform, and compared to what it could be, it was in a truly pitiful state. Additionally, it was facing the enigmatic and immeasurable King of Crime, with full understanding that it was merely backup and its destruction would be its ultimate end.

It had never experienced adversity like this, and in response to the threat against its life, Gloria's survival instincts had woven these two skills.

This version of Gloria had the weakest power output of all, but it excelled in innovation and had created a new fighting style.

"I can only assume you spread out the already-thin light into even thinner rays and expanded the range of creatures the field kills by lowering its area of effect." Sechs adjusted his glasses as instantly figured out and described Gloria's abilities.

This was an exceedingly bad situation for Sechs.

He had no means of fighting that didn't involve his own body, so the Compressed Fatal Field was his natural enemy, while the Area Overdrive would eventually evaporate his entire volume.

"I see. You certainly thought this through. Creativity and imagination truly are wonderful things. I'm particularly impressed with the change in the field — it's akin to an imposing fortress that few can bring down."

Sechs spoke as though impressed, seemingly not bothered that the tides had turned.

A smile then crossed his face...

"I can only assume that you want me to *destroy* you along with the field itself."

...And asked that out loud, as if to get a confirmation.

"If that is the case, I'm happy to oblige. A friend of mine specializes in that style of fighting, you see."

"...!?" The four-horn writhed, sensing an air of intimidation it couldn't fully understand.

Sechs was certainly impressed and surprised by its new abilities, but he didn’t see them as any kind of a threat. It was as if he already had a way to counter it.

“Do you hear me, Sechs?” asked Drag-Heaven through the scale.

“Oh? Yes. What is it?” he asked in response.

“The conclusion to the battle is near.”

“I see. That is a problem,” said Sechs, fully confident that Shu was the one who would emerge victorious.

That was how much he trusted Shu’s power.

And once the original Gloria fell, this Gloria would grow the three-horn head, completing it and granting it the ability to grow stronger as its HP fell.

Thus, Sechs couldn’t let this battle drag on any longer.

“Well, I have a means of dealing with the field, so I will end this with *that* me. Let me borrow a couple things from you, Shu.”

Sechs’ presence underwent another drastic change.

The four-horn felt as though the incomprehensible being before it was being replaced by something entirely different, without shedding its fearsome aura.

It was a presence of overwhelming power... comparable to an inland sea becoming as vast as an ocean.

“Heheheh...” Sechs lost his human form and returned to liquid.

Then, he grew in volume to the point that even this cave, which was over a hundred metels tall, seemed cramped.

Gloria continued to attack him with its Area Overdrive, but the speed at which he grew exceeded the speed at which it evaporated him, like he was transforming into something with immense amounts of HP.

Growing larger, Sechs changed not only his appearance, but also what he was on the inside...

“I Take Countless Forms — Nu: ■■■■■■■ ■■■■■.”

...And the dark liquid took on a very particular shape.

Act Nine: Power and Power

Kingdom of Altar, Nowest Canyon

Everything, eventually, must end.

The battle between Gloria and the people of the kingdom was no exception.

Whether that end would come in the far future or in mere moments depended upon two particular kings.

While Sechs was beneath the kingdom, fighting to stop Gloria's revival loop before it even began, Shu was giving his all battling the original Gloria here in this very canyon.

The battle had begun at the edge of the canyon, but it had now migrated closer to the center. This was because Shu, who was currently controlling machine god Baldr, wanted to hinder Gloria's supersonic approach towards the capital. Thus, just as with Figaro and Tsukuyo, the battle between the kingdom's Superiors and Gloria was still confined to that canyon.

But if anyone was watching this battle, they would all certainly think that by the time it ended, Nowest Canyon would be no more.

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"Hyper Blow, set," Baldr's inhuman voice announced as the machine god prepared to swing his right arm.

In response to this blatant preparation for an attack, Gloria went on the offensive with both of its front limbs.

However, Shu controlled Baldr as if it was his own body, turning the dragon's strikes aside and directing the attack harmlessly away.

Gloria's forelimbs slammed directly into the canyon's cliff face, leaving a crater with a radius of over a hundred metels and collapsing the canyon's wall.

The miss left Gloria wide open, so Baldr...

"Battering Ram!"

...Launched an active skill from the Crasher grouping straight into the monster's side.

Battering Ram required a charge time, but in return it multiplied blunt damage by six. The immense amount of damage dealt knocked the giant dragon to the opposite cliff face.

The impact caused even more damage to their surroundings.

Despite receiving nearly one million HP's worth of damage, however, Gloria recovered immediately, broke out of the rubble, and sped towards Baldr.

"Tch!" The machine god sidestepped the charge and as Gloria passed him, the fingers of his left hand — all gunports — fired his few remaining DD Shells into the dragon.

At the same time, he began charging a skill attack with his right leg.

Most of the active skills from the Crasher grouping, like Battering Ram, had to be charged, and this one was no exception. This made them impossible to use consecutively, and often left the user wide open in battle. That was one of the reasons why the Crasher grouping was thought to be an anti-object job series, unsuitable for fighting.

However, Shu — and thus Baldr — was capable of controlling the flow of battle in a way that let him avoid enemy attacks and buy himself the necessary time for these skills.

"Crag Scraper... SHINEN!" Using a skill that increased both standard and penetrative power, the machine god launched his left ankle into Gloria's neck.

His strike broke through scales, tore through flesh, and shattered bone. Gloria staggered so much it seemed like it might collapse, and — in a show of relentlessness — Shu then began charging yet another skill.

"GHOoOoAaaAAaRrghHH!" But before Shu could do that, Gloria jumped using one hind limb to launch into a charge that combined its weight and physical power. It was so fast that the machine god wasn't able to react in time, and the force even he couldn't withstand opened a large crack in his armor.

"I knew it... Its highest stat is its attack," Shu said. "It's sped up, too... But it looks like the thing's stats are too much even for it to deal with."

Despite the desperate situation, he calmly analyzed his opponent. He had been making optimal moves thus far, but that would soon stop being an option.

Under normal circumstances, he would've prioritized the faster, weaker normal attacks over the slow but powerful skill attacks. For this battle, however, he abandoned that strategy shortly after the battle began and now focused solely on avoiding Gloria's attacks, retaliating only with skills.

The reason for this was simple — Gloria's END had already surpassed the machine god's STR by a whole 30,000.

Only his skills could deal any kind of damage to it.

This outcome was inevitable. While Baldr's stats were at their maximum the moment the battle began, Gloria was still growing stronger. As its HP dropped, its Resurgence skill increased its stats, meaning that its limit wasn't in the past or present, but in the future.

Thus, it was only a matter of time until Baldr's attacks would no longer work on it at all.

Even Gloria's speed, which was equal to the machine god's at first, had now increased to the point that it was nearly twice as fast. Considering that, the actual outstanding thing here was Shu's battle prowess, which let him fight it as an equal despite the widening gap.

That, however, would not last.

This latest exchange of blows had already exposed Baldr's... the *machine's* weakness.

Machines couldn't recover HP via magic or items. That was the common flaw of Dryfe's Magingears, and it applied to this weapon-like Embryo as well. Thus, Shu had no means of fixing Baldr's armor or preventing the deterioration of the engines mid-battle.

Gloria's HP didn't return, either, of course, but its wounds had all been closed. Even its destroyed neck had completely regrown.

"Hah. Man, this regeneration is broken," said Shu. "Though, I guess it's allowed because the HP itself doesn't come back. It's basically just for structural integrity."

The ultimate dragon was always at its best and only became better, while the machine god had nowhere to go but down.

The gap would only grow wider as the battle went on.

Despite that, Shu's eyes held not a hint of despair as he took up a stance within Baldr's head.

"...Grrh," Gloria growled, glaring at Baldr with eyes that said, "You've still got an ace up your sleeve, don't you?"

In a canyon that hardly deserved the name anymore, the machine god and the greatest of dragons faced one another. They both understood that their next exchange of blows would decide the course of this battle.

"Baldr, how many shells we got in the cannons?"

"Three in the right, zero in the left."

"Connect the left one to the ammo storage."

"Roger." As he gave the order to Baldr, Shu took up his stance.

It was strange — he was pulling both his arms back in such a way that both his elbows ended up at his sides.

With both him and Baldr in that position, he wouldn't be able to reliably block any enemy attacks, nor put enough torque into his own. It was a highly unreasonable stance for a martial artist to take.

However, Gloria knew nothing of martial arts, so it was only able to sense that *it was a sign of something terrifying*.

It knew that its enemy's most powerful attack yet would be launched from that stance.

At the same time, it could see exactly how the attack would go. Even if it was in the path of that assault, it could easily avoid it.

Shu himself was aware of that, as well.

And for that exact reason...

"Stardust Genocider... Fire!"

"Roger." The armor on the machine god's shoulders slid open and launched countless missiles.

Gloria was so close that even Baldr was affected by them. However, these weren't damaging missiles, but the F Warheads employed earlier — the blinding flash bombs.

A moment later, their surroundings were drowned in light, and Gloria couldn't see anything — including the machine god that was ready to launch his final attack.

It was clear that he was intending to finish Gloria off while it was blinded.

"Ghrrhh..." the dragon growled in disappointment, as if saying, "How foolish."

After all, Gloria had already closed its eyes and dashed behind the machine god.

The dragon had expected this from the moment the missiles were launched. Thus, Shu's final attack would miss, and Gloria would finish him off.

Certain of that outcome, it swung its front claws at the machine.

"...GHHR!?" But then, although unable to see, Gloria nonetheless sensed that the machine god had turned around and was now facing it.

Shu had expected that the dragon would move behind him if it was blinded.

"Final Blow..." He undid the seal on this skill.

The King of Destruction had no equal when it came to sheer destructive force, and this was the ultimate attack that could only be used by a few of those who'd acquired the job.

It was a supreme power that could only be achieved by KoDs that had 70,000 or more STR.

Bear witness to the strike that shatters realms.

"World Breaker."

He punched with both arms simultaneously, aiming straight for Gloria's abdomen, and when the pure carnage of both punches met, a calamity was born.

The machine god's fists *broke space itself*.

The Right of Destruction skill, which allowed him to destroy indestructible targets with endurance lower than his attack power, wasn't limited to solid targets with resistances and damage negation — it also worked on liquids, gasses, and even barrier abilities.

Combined with World Breaker, it allowed the King of Destruction to destroy even the very *space* supporting this world.

However, it didn't stop there. To fill the void created when the very universe was broken along with Gloria's body, the surrounding space began to contort.

The distortions caused by the world trying to patch up the hole in itself tore any object to shreds, regardless of how tough they were.

Gloria — the living being with the greatest END of all — was no exception.

Even the machine god that had initiated this distortion was being broken apart by it.

It was a "final" blow, after all — it was only natural that it would destroy the user, as well.

The other Kings of Destruction who had used it in the past had all died from it, after all.

Space bent as it healed itself, tearing up the strongest dragon and the machine god alike.

And by the time space had completely restored itself, only one of the two was left standing...

“Ghr, oargh...”

...And it was Gloria.

There was a large hole in its torso, cracks all over its body, and its HP had fallen below a measly 100,000.

Even so, it was alive, while the machine god was gone.

The machine god had seemingly shattered and vanished without a trace in the wake of its spatial destruction. But even though it came at the cost of its own annihilation, the machine god’s final attack wasn’t enough to defeat Gloria.

“...” Even if it was able to speak, Gloria wouldn’t know what to say. It had realized that a single mistake, or just one more attack, would now be enough to banish it from the earth.

This was a pyrrhic victory, and the end of a battle it would never be able to forget.

Even this memory would eventually vanish once it died. Gloria’s backup would not possess the memories of the battles this Gloria had experienced today.

The dragon also realized that it wouldn’t last long as it was.

It had taken too much damage. Even a large group using fixed damage attacks would be able to overwhelm it now.

“Ghroaahh...” But... there was still something it had to do.

It had to obey the two missions carved into its very being and destroy the royal capital.

Now that it was so close to death, Gloria’s stats had grown so much that it was foolish to even measure them.

In less than a minute, it could reach the capital and level it to the ground with a single blow.

Once that was done, it would be free.

The first thing it would do then was go to The Skycrown and destroy

The Skydragon King.

Letting its wounds close, Gloria imagined that future, when suddenly...

“Bit too early to start fantasizing about retirement, ya overgrown lizard.”

...It heard a voice that shook it to the core.

It could recognize that voice anywhere by now. This was the same voice it had heard from the machine god — the voice of King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

However, the machine god was nowhere in sight, so where could it be coming fr—?

“...!” Gloria suddenly made a profound realization. It began to come to a realization that it would have rather not ever contemplated.

The enemy was...

“No matter how damn fast you are... There’s no way in hell I can miss you from *here*.”

...Inside the wound that had just closed.

Gloria didn’t know when, exactly, he had been able to get there.

It couldn’t know that it had been right after he’d used World Breaker.

It couldn’t know that right after using it, he’d left the cockpit, used the ammo storage to enter an empty cannon barrel — or rather, finger — on the left arm, and gotten inside the dragon using that.

And it couldn’t possibly know that he’d acted as he did because he’d anticipated that everything would play out exactly like this before he had even activated World Breaker.

“Cough...” Of course, Shu wasn’t exactly unscathed. Passing through the shattering space left him covered in heavy wounds.

Despite that, he had arrived at his destination — the inside of the dragon. And though the machine god had vanished, his Embryo hadn’t — it had become a cannon fixed on his left arm.

That was the first form of the War God Ship, Baldr, and the only weapon that could defeat Gloria as it was now.

Baldr was an Embryo that had “power” and “weapons” as its core characteristics, and the power of its first form was simply called “Strength Cannon.”

It was a deadly, once-a-day ability that released a destructive ball of light which dealt multiples of Shu’s STR’s worth in damage.

Specifically, it multiplied his STR by 5... back when it had first hatched, anyway.

Now that it was a Superior Embryo, it actually did *35 times* Shu's STR's worth of damage, and his STR was currently over 100,000.

An attack that dealt an obscene 3,500,000 damage was too much even for Gloria's current END.

There was a reason why Shu hadn't used a skill this powerful right away — *it was simply far too slow*.

So slow, in fact, that even someone moving at subsonic speeds could easily avoid it. It could never hit a being that had surpassed the speed of sound several times over.

However, the current circumstances made that impossible, for nothing could evade an attack from within.

Baldr was covered in cracks — the effects of the damage it had sustained as the machine god — but it was still able to launch this one final attack.

It would end this once and for all.

"GyYyYYGhHhhhHAAaAAAaaARrgghHHhh!" Feeling the waves of power gathering within its body, Gloria swung its claw towards itself to crush Shu... *only to stop midway*.

The reason why should be obvious.

Gloria's HP was so low it was truly on the verge of death, so *attacking Shu within itself would be fatal*.

Shu had anticipated what would happen if World Breaker wasn't enough to defeat Gloria. He knew how high its stats would climb and just how much the gap between his offense and Gloria's defense would widen.

Gloria could recover from any injury, but that only applied to its physical form. Its lifeforce — its HP — stayed low, and it was still technically on the verge of death. Gloria was now so fragile that its own power, having grown as it had, could easily kill it. And if it wanted to kill Shu, Gloria had to attack with enough force to break through its own defense. It had to somehow shatter its own defense and kill Shu without accidentally killing itself, and Shu knew that it had grown far too powerful in far too short a time to have the precision necessary.

Basically... Gloria had become *too strong, too quickly*. That was why Shu chose to end their battle like this — by either his Strength Cannon, or Gloria's own hand.

Regardless of which it would be, Gloria was done for.

If you were to identify the one factor that had most influenced this outcome, it would have to have been Gloria's awareness of this turn of events — or lack of it.

The dragon had only realized its predicament moments before ending itself.

Knowing that its fate was sealed, it wanted to at least take Shu with it, but its brief pause had already made that impossible.

"Let's... end this." A split-second before the claw crushed Shu, he fired the ball of light.

The deadly orb hit its target the moment it was fired, and instantly wiped out Gloria’s remaining HP.

The three-horned head, the upper body it was connected to... its entire structure vanished as if it was never there.

The claw that was about to crush Shu was gone, as well.

A moment after the dragon vanished, the particles of light left behind almost seemed to be a giant pillar reaching towards the sky.

Thus concluded the sequence of battles against a living calamity... and the demise of the SUBM known as “Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.”

Interlude: The Past Becomes the Present Becomes the Future

Remnants of Nowest Canyon

[SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, has been defeated.]

[Selecting MVPs...]

[Figaro, Tsukuyo Fuso, Shu Starling...]

The message rang out immediately when Shu defeated Gloria, but those who actually heard it were few, for it was exclusive to those MVP candidates and their party members.

Figaro and Tsukuyo were already gone. Shu, meanwhile...

“...” He had Fainted and was now falling from the sky.

There was nothing surprising about him being unconscious. In fact, it was incredible that he had stayed awake for as long as he had. Fighting against a dragon with such absurd stats was draining both physically and mentally. Furthermore, he’d been badly damaged while running through the space-destruction near the end of the battle.

He might have had the will to stay awake, but his body was inflicted with Unconscious due to Blood Loss and other injuries.

The moment Gloria vanished, Shu’s body began to fall through the air.

Injured as he was and unable to make a proper landing, he was in danger of actually dying upon hitting the ground.

However, that did not occur.

A moment before impact, Shu’s body began to slow and landed softly on the ground, as if it was a bed.

The person — no, *being* — responsible for this silently looked down on Shu. This entity had the appearance of a woman covered by a thin, egg-like shell.

It was none other than control AI no. 2, Humpty Dumpty.

She examined Shu’s face with an expression that was impossible to read.

“This makes us even after purposely leaving you out earlier.”

She was referring to the fact that they'd specifically chosen to deploy Gloria while Shu was away from the kingdom. Shu himself had pointed this out, and Humpty did feel that it was a little unfair. Thus, she had chosen to make things even by saving Shu from a death penalty. She knew that she would be the only one aware of this gesture, but that didn't bother her much.

"...Oh?" she said, noticing something nearby. "You came, too, Dormouse?"

A giant hamster was lumbering towards her with its eyes closed. This was Dor, the third princess' — Theresia's — pet. Though, his status as Theresia's pet was more like a disguise than anything else.

He was actually control AI no. 8.

"Theresia ordered me to," Dor replied to Humpty in a deep voice you'd never expect from a creature who looked like he did. "If Shu is alive and unable to move, I'm to bring him to the castle before anyone else finds him."

"That has nothing to do with what you're in charge of, does it?"

"Hey now — as avatars, Alice and just about everyone else more or less does whatever they want. I'm merely enjoying the simple life of a pet, myself. It's a kind of freedom. Though, I don't think I like what Rabbit does."

"What can you do? He has an awful personality. You might as well think of him as no different than that ill-natured Jabberwock or that unsociable Bandersnatch."

"Hahahah. You're one to talk, you big meanie. I've always thought that you were like a little girl who bullies the boy she lik—"

"I will *crush* you," Humpty cut Dor off, glaring at him.

"Sorry, sorry. Please spare me," the hamster apologized with a wry grin on his face.

"...All right," Humpty calmed down. "So I can leave him to you?"

"Mhm. You can. I'm actually used to carrying people around."

"It really does look like you're enjoying your life as a pet." Humpty appreciated this. The kingdom and its Masters should've realized that the battle was over, so they would soon be heading here to investigate. Humpty had been wondering what to do with Shu when that happened, so this was actually a great help to her.

“Do what you have to, then,” she said.

“Mhm,” Dor nodded before putting Shu on his back and running off.

After watching him disappear in the distance, Humpty vanished.

With that, the shattered canyon was left absolutely vacant — to the immense confusion of those who came to investigate.

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For a brief while, the question of who, exactly, had defeated Gloria dominated people’s minds, but all that ended once Figaro and Tsukuyo returned from their death penalties with special rewards bearing the dragon’s name.

They testified that the King of Destruction had been on the battlefield, as well, making it well known that Gloria had been slain by Altar’s three Superiors.

Since then, as the three top ranking players and the ones who’d conquered the three heads of Gloria, they became known as “Altar’s Big Three.”

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Kingdom of Altar, underground cave

[SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, has been defeated.]

[Selecting MVPs...]

[Figaro, Tsukuyo Fuso, Shu Starling, Sechs Würfel have been selected as MVPs.]

[Sechs Würfel is presented with “Organ of Rebirth, Gloria δ.”

“...Oh, it looks like Shu also won,” Sechs spoke, his voice echoing throughout the cave. He had just finished his fight against the four-horn, which was now completely gone from this place.

However, Sechs wasn’t anywhere in sight, either.

He could be heard, but his preferred shape was nowhere to be seen, nor was any of his slime.

“Even I was in extreme danger of dying, yet Shu was able to defeat the third head with all its amazing stats. I would expect no less of you, Shu.”

A gigantic, black humanoid figure stood in the underground cavern.

The entity seemed entirely made of some dark metal and, as though just now realizing that the battle was over, it began to shrink until it once again took on the appearance of a plain young man — Sechs.

"So, Skydragon King... I completed the task," he said.

"Kheheheh. Well done, Sechs," said Drag-Heaven. "I will prepare your reward. Is there anything you want? If it is the head of a dragon king that you wish, I can find one for you among those serving me."

"No. I'll leave the decision up to you. There's nothing I really want right now."

"I see. Then I shall think of something myself."

"Oh, and this has nothing to do with the reward, but may I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Did Shu get the death penalty after defeating Gloria?"

"No. He survived. However, he seems to have Fainted."

"I see. Thank you."

"Oh, I should be the one thanking you. It was quite a spectacle to behold."

"I can imagine."

"Looking forward to your reward." Thus, The Skydragon King cut off their conversation through the undead scale.

Left alone, Sechs considered what he just learned.

"Perhaps Shu doesn't know that I helped defeat Gloria. And if he stays Unconscious long enough for the message log to vanish... Oh, speaking of which, what kind of reward did I get?"

Sechs finally decided to take a look at his Gloria δ. It was an egg-shaped accessory, and its effect...

"Hm? But... What am I supposed to do with this?"

...Was something that left Sechs perplexed, which was quite a rare occurrence.

"What it does is wonderful, yes, but it doesn't mean much to me... I'll have to discuss it with Rascal."

Puzzled by the treasure's effect, Sechs decided he ought to talk it over with a fellow wanted Superior: The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx. Known as the "Ruin-Killer," Rascal had a wealth of knowledge about many kinds of items and could likely think of a way to use this special reward.

“Time to flee the scene,” Sechs said, returning Gloria δ to his inventory and transforming back into a slime. He then entered a crack in the cave and made his way to the surface.

Nothing was left in this cavern underneath the Kingdom of Altar. Few would ever know that Gloria had a backup, or that the new menace had been consigned to the darkness by an even greater menace.

It would take more than a year for the world to learn that this battle even happened. Around that time, the world would also finally learn just how terrible Sechs Würfel’s reward truly was.

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Gideon the City of Duels, Central Arena

The location was on the Central Arena — a building that looked much like the Colosseum in Rome.

Few people could even access this place. Figaro, having returned from his death penalty, was lying there and looking up at the sky. There were a few clouds above, and he followed them with his eyes as though searching for something.

“Yo, Figaro. You’re here agaaiin?”

Just like he did on that day some time ago, Tom Cat called out to him. With his Embryo, Grimalkin, sitting on his head, Tom crouched down and looked into Figaro’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Tom asked. “It looks like something’s troubling you again.”

“Shulka came by,” Figaro replied.

“Shulka... Oh, the guy from the Babylonian Battlegroup.”

“He said he’s giving up being the sub-leader and going on a journey.” Shulka, the sub-leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup, had come to Gideon to thank Figaro for defeating Gloria and say his goodbyes.

According to him, the Babylonian Battlegroup would cease their activities. With the leader — Foltesla — having retired, and Claymill — their hometown — in ruins, the clan was having a hard time carrying on as normal.

“He said he wouldn’t be a good leader, and that it was hard for him to even stay in the Babylonian Battlegroup. That’s why he left the sub-leader’s seat up to the other members, so they could at least keep the clan alive."

Shulka himself had decided to leave the kingdom and go visit the other countries. He'd told Figaro that he simply had too many memories here. It was up to the other members to make sure the clan continued to exist, and the main man behind that was Masked Riser — a fellow ranker.

Riser insisted that he would only be holding down the fort and waiting for Foltesla and Shulka's return, all the while protecting Gideon the way he couldn't protect Claymill.

Upon hearing all that, Figaro asked Shulka, "If Foltesla returns someday, will you come back, too?"

To which Figaro had replied, "I hope that happens."

"Oh, so thaat's the reason..." Tom said. "I was wondering why a bunch of other rankers from the Babylonian Battlegroup were gone... It's gonna be lonelyy."

"Yeah." They looked at the ranking board in front of the arena and thought about the ones who were now gone. Because he hadn't officially withdrawn, Foltesla's name was still there, but it would soon disappear from the rankings as he kept failing to appear and forfeited all his duels.

"But I'll stay. Always," Figaro spoke what he'd decided. "I'll remain champion until the day Foltesla returns."

"Yeah. I think that's what you should do, too."

The champion and the second in the ranks didn't say anything more. Under the flowing, amorphous clouds, Figaro looked at the names on the ranking and resolved to wait.

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Tomb Labyrinth

"I thought leveling would be easier, but it's unexpectedly haaaard."

High Priestess... no... the mere Priest, Tsukuyo Fuso was leveling alongside her secretary, Eishiro.

They'd chosen the Tomb Labyrinth because regaining the sheer number of levels — over a thousand — that Tsukuyo had lost required killing so many monsters that it would affect the ecosystem. Tsukuyo's Kaguya and Eishiro's Erlkönig were a combo that made the hunt easy, but doing it outside could potentially lead to several extinctions.

That problem didn't exist inside created dungeons like the Tomb Labyrinth, since there was no ecosystem and the monsters simply respawned.

There were, however, other problems.

"And using Kaguya's skills takes so much of my MP and SP. I can't keep them uuup."

Tsukuyo's level was low, and so were her stats.

As an Embryo, Kaguya was both a Maiden and a Type Invasion World from the Territory series. Unlike Guardians and the like, Kaguya used Tsukuyo's MP and SP for skills. Of course, being a Maiden, Kaguya also had her own stats, but her low MP only allowed her to use skills briefly — as she had demonstrated in the final battle against the two-horn.

And with Tsukuyo's current stats, she could barely use any of her Superior Embryo's skills right now.

If she could use her Lunar Divider Field and have Tsukikage finish them off, she would receive huge amounts of XP from her contributions to the battle, but even that was difficult right now.

"At this rate, it might take me more than a year to level back up," Tsukuyo sighed.

She didn't regret using the skill, but she wasn't prepared for the rehabilitation to be this long. "If only *this* could also be used on monsters..." she said, taking out a wand decorated with an eye.

It was the Superior special reward from the two-horn: Fatal Eye, Gloria β.

"It only works on humanoids level 100 and below... That's super weak compared to Gloria's head... But at least it completely protects me from attacks outside the field." It was worth noting that if the wand worked on monsters, she could use it in conjunction with Faint Light to instakill even UBMs. "What a hard nerf," she complained.

It was also possible that, due to the power limits of the special reward, its Resources went into recreating the defense effect first, and the instakill effect with whatever was left.

"Ah. But with this, I'm really safe now. You're unbeatable at mid-range, so no one gets close when you're protecting me; between Kaguya's night and Erlkönig's shadows, my defense is now perfect."

"Indeed," Eishiro agreed. "You are safe as long as no one faster than me closes in on you and uses something like... I don't know, maybe a breath of light that banishes all night and shadow, or something like that."

"That example is disturbingly specific..." Chatting about this and that, the two continued Tsukuyo's rehabilitative grinding for quite a while.

Side note: a little over a year later, Tsukuyo Fuso would be defeated by Figaro in the exact same manner Eishiro described.

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The outskirts of the imperial capital, Triangle of Wisdom headquarters

"Yeah, you can't read its stats at all. I really hate that all the scout monsters I sent out died within one kilometel of it. And even if you ignore that..."

In the headquarters of Dryfe Imperium's largest clan — Triangle of Wisdom — the leader, Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, was watching recordings and pondering.

The recordings were of the battle against Gloria at Claymill.

"I had some scout monsters accompany the armored battalion to figure out how powerful the kingdom was, and I did get *some* data out of it, but it's, well..." Most of the recordings were cut off after a wave of white light. The monsters, just like the battalion, were evaporated by Gloria's Overdrive.

The other recordings were those taken by the Babylonian Battlegroup and presented to DIN to ensure their spread and assist anyone trying to defeat Gloria.

"Hmm... Well, there's still a few things I managed to deduce from those recordings." Tapping his notes and desk with the pen in his hand, Franklin continued talking to himself as if to properly arrange his analysis.

"That thing doesn't have high base stats. I think even His Excellency's unbuffed Zero Exceed has higher everything, except HP. What makes it such a problem is all the powerful skills it has, one of which *does* increase its stats."

Writing something down, he continued to consider the dragon.

"Looking at how much the abilities vary and how great their output is, I'm guessing it has several sources of power as a UBM. I haven't seen one like it myself, but there's records of such a UBM appearing in The Era of the Peerless Three, so it shouldn't be impossible."

Six hundred years ago in *Infinite Dendrogram* time was The Era of the Peerless Three, when King of Kings, Draconic Emperor, and The Lynx battled for dominance. Records spoke of an absurdly powerful UBM with various abilities appearing in this era, and Franklin believed it to be the same kind of creature as Gloria.

"Could... Could I do something similar? Maybe not something quite that insane, but as I add more and more parts... I could give it as much as possible... In that case, I should give up on using a pure animal base and instead make a hybrid with machine attachments and the like right from the start... Yeah, that sounds good. Let's go with this plan. For that, I'm going to need..."

Muttering to himself, Franklin left a memo on his note.

Suddenly...

"Heya Fran, whacha doin'? Rubby-rub!."

"Hyahn?!"

...Someone called out to him and began fondling his chest, making him yelp.

Of course, Franklin's avatar was male, so there wasn't much to fondle.

"AR-I-CA..." Franklin wrung out each syllable as he glared at the person responsible.

It was a woman with heterochromia... specifically, one artificial eye... Ace, AR-I-CA. She was a member of The Triangle of Wisdom and a good friend of Franklin.

"I did knock, y'know?" she said. "You didn't reply and just kept muttering to yourself, so I just up and did that!"

"You don't just just 'up and do' that! Ugh..." Now that he was alone with a close friend, Franklin's tone changed. He was talking more like his player, Francesca.

"So, whuzzat? Somethin' to do with the unit for the singing engine ya made?"

"It's something different. The unit will be done in about a month."

"Oh, okay. I guess I'll save it for after I see it."

"Hm?" Franklin tilted his head. He didn't understand what AR-I-CA meant by that.

"So, what idea're ya writing down now?" she asked.

Leaving his own question aside, he just answered, “That over there is a recording of the SUBM that attacked the kingdom. I was wondering if I could use it as a reference for my own monsters.”

“Oh yeah. Your Embryo feels like it comes from a different game.”

“...I can’t deny that. And yeah, I might have to use Pandemonium for this. But...”

“But what?”

“It probably doesn’t have enough output yet. I can’t get the abilities I want while it’s still in its sixth form.”

At this point in time, Franklin’s Embryo was still just a high-rank. A non-Superior Embryo was unlikely to create a monster that would meet his standards.

“Then why not just make it once you’re a Superior?”

“You say it like that’s *easy*... But yeah, I suppose I don’t have a choice.”

“For now, just put it on your list of monsters you’ll make someday and think of a name for it.”

“A name, huh? It would involve machines... Add a powerful-sounding word to that... Yeah, and also...” Franklin spent a few moments thinking before saying, “How about... ‘Mechanical God Dylan?’” It was a mix of term for its main trait, a word for the extent of its power, and the name of a pet Francesca had once had.

“That’s cool! By the way, Fran — you’re from France, aren’t you? Why do you always make English names?”

“...Because you said that you don’t understand them at all when I make them French.”

“Ahahah? I did?” AR-I-CA laughed awkwardly as Franklin stared at her. His eyes were annoyed, but his mouth was curled into a smile.

This all happened half a year before the war between Altar and Dryfe, and a little while before AR-I-CA left Franklin’s side.

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Royal Capital, Altea, noble district

An old residence stood in Altea’s noble district.

An ordinary passerby would only see a building that could be perhaps centuries old, but those skilled in magic would notice that it was covered by layer upon layer of spells that prevented any intrusion.

It was the residence of perhaps the kingdom's most distinguished person, the Arch Sage.

At the moment, the place was completely sealed. The windows were shut tight and covered by thick curtains. Once the matter of Gloria was solved, the Arch Sage vowed that he would mourn his lost apprentices and locked himself in his residence. He'd stopped visiting the castle, but those who knew the circumstances figured that even the Archsage had to rest sometimes and thought little of it.

However, right now the Arch Sage was neither mourning nor resting. In fact, he was probably working harder than he had in a long while.

"Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria... It was a terrifying creature, but to the incarnations, it was nothing but another pawn. Those monsters..."

In the basement of his manor, the Arch Sage muttered this to himself before resuming his work.

One might think that, as a powerful caster, he was working on something magical, but that assumption would be wrong. He was actually working on machines — something that was more typical of the neighboring country's engineers. Even though he was doing something that didn't suit the image of "Arch Sage" whatsoever, he did it with a proficiency that rivaled even the greatest masters of the craft.

"There's also the few Superiors who slew the dragon," he spoke to himself again. "Superiors and incarnations... not even a fully complete No. 1 could win if it had to fight them all."

He input some data into a device, which went through the process of sending it off somewhere.

"...But thanks to this incident, I discovered that, even though the incarnations observe the Superiors, they don't control them." Masters were free to do what they wanted, and not even the incarnations — control AIs — that the Arch Sage viewed as his enemies could restrain them.

"Things would be different if I could get a Superior on my side," he muttered. "I wonder if there are any skilled Superiors who are hostile to the incarnations..."

After thinking on it for a moment, the Arch Sage chuckled wryly.

"...Heh. As if things would ever be that convenient."

Resigned, he resumed his work. The device he was working on displayed the code “Anti-Incarnation Superweapon, Argus Magna.”

“No matter. I will achieve my goal... Fulfill my dying wish.”

His words were wrung out through his teeth, carried with the heat of boiling blood.

“We... The Arch Sage... We, the Flagman, will surely... destroy the incarnations and those who side with them.” The man who’d built the prosperous pre-ancient civilization, destroyed by the incarnations two millennia ago, voiced his resolve once more.

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Gaol

News of Gloria’s defeat became a hot topic even in the gaol.

Though they were stuck in their cells, many were curious about what was going on outside. It was especially hard to miss these news due to the fact that the local celebrity, King of Berserk, Hannya, was walking around all smiles and broadcasting the involvement of her beloved Figaro to all who heard.

“But man, that’s huge. I wonder what kinda rewards The Big Three got.”

“Aw, man... I was from the kingdom, too. If I was still outside, I could’ve become an MVP...”

“...You’re barely over level 200. You couldn’t have done shit.”

The gaol’s Masters chatted as they watched a recording of the battle against Gloria. It was something like watching a fire on a far-off island, and they were treating it as a kind of festive occasion.

The mood was upbeat, but then...

“Help! Help...!”

...A Master ran down the main road, shouting.

Those around him understood the problem the moment they saw him.

They couldn’t see his right arm.

Infinite Dendrogram players could choose between realistic, CG, and anime graphics; all three options always worked perfectly in all circumstances.

However, the man’s right arm looked like sequenced ones and zeroes mixed with static. It wasn’t limited to his arm, either. The noise was spreading further, breaking up his avatar as it did.

Upon seeing that, the other Masters instantly understood what happened.

"Help! What the hell's this?! My avatar and stats are a mess! Even my name looks wrong!" the man panicked

"You're new here, right?" an onlooker asked. "Didn't anyone tell ya not to go to *that dungeon* when ya first came here?"

"I-I thought they were hiding some juicy XP fodder..."

"You dumbass. 'Don't enter that dungeon,' 'don't talk shit about Figaro,' and 'don't flirt in public' are actual warnings ya gotta listen to!"

"H-How was I supposed to...?! C-Can anyone do something about this?" the man cried, displaying his deteriorating right arm.

The one he was talking to shook his head, "Give up. You get hit by his skill, you're basically done for. Hell, you should go try and get the death penalty *before it's too late*."

"Eh? What do you—?" A moment later, someone behind the man cut off his head, killing him instantly. The Master responsible didn't do it just for enjoyment. In fact, he felt like he had helped or even saved his target.

"...Did I make it in time?"

"It'll be fine. The area isn't glitching yet, so it probably wasn't bad enough to leave any *after-effects*. The newcomer's level and Embryo's form must've been pretty high."

"Last time, we managed 'cause Hannya crushed the whole block along with the guy, but that can be pretty hard without her around."

"If we don't get more Superiors like Hannya, who are reasonable at least most of the time, we might be unable to hold them back."

"...Fu'uta, huh? How can a Master like that even exist...?"

The gathered Masters frowned bitterly and looked outside the residential area... in the direction of a certain dungeon.

Or, to be more precise, to the direction of a Master who was simply a walking disaster.

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Currently, there were two Superiors in the gaol.

One was King of Berserk, Hannya. As long as you adhered to certain taboos, she was a reasonable person, and most of the gaol's inhabitants liked her a lot.

The other Superior was always in a certain dungeon.

At the moment, two people were standing next to each other.

One was a young boy, approximately ten years of age. He was wearing ragged *starting equipment* and sitting on the cave floor with his head resting on his knees.

The other person, standing next to the boy, was a man wearing a hood and a completely featureless mask, lacking even eye holes. He was standing there as though protecting the boy, not saying a single word.

“Another player arrived...” The boy silently muttered while remembering what just happened. “He was smiling, enjoying himself as he walked...” As he thought of that, he bit his lip so hard he drew blood.

“What the hell is so fun to him...?!” Unable to hold himself back, the boy punched a wall.

His frail arm did nothing besides shake off some dust.

But then, the wall changed. Ones and zeroes danced across it and static spread through the stone; finally, it transformed into a monster that was essentially nothing more than a wall with eyes and a mouth.

It was a strange monster, though. Its graphics were quite crude, didn’t really fit in with the appearance of *Infinite Dendrogram’s* creatures. Perhaps it was a strange thing to think about something within this world, but it looked like a monster *out of a game*.

“I’ll break this game, no matter what...” Not minding the fact that his attack had turned the wall into a monster, the boy continued spitting out his curses.

“I’ll destroy this world if it’s the last thing I do...” With all the hatred he could muster, he spoke to the empty space... to the very world itself.

“No matter what...” There was murderous intent in his eyes.

He glared at the world with the kind of hatred one might normally reserve for the man who murdered one’s parents.

He was Fu’uta, the Astray Glitch.

At the edge of the gaol, the *level 0 Superior* without a single job, continued to sharpen his fangs. His Apostle Embryo — The Encroaching Demise, Apocalypse — stood by his side.

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Control AI no. 4's workspace, vault no. 4

Jabberwock wordlessly walked through a hallway of a strange material.

This was vault no. 4 — the UBM storage vault managed by control AI no. 4, Jabberwock.

Just recently, he'd watched the demise of Gloria — which was perhaps his greatest masterpiece. The original had achieved the highest recorded stats, while its vessel for rebirth had almost opened up entirely new horizons. And yet, they had both been defeated by Superiors.

At that moment, the control AIs felt nothing but relief.

Queen did give Jabberwock a considerate look, but he didn't seem to pay attention to it. He'd released Gloria with the goal of creating more Superiors, and the fact that it had been defeated before it could do that even once meant several things to him. First, that the current Superiors were more powerful than he had expected, and second, that he had effectively wasted his trump card, and what was more, he'd lost his *teaching material*.

Considering the various drawbacks, Jabberwock continued to walk through the vault.

On each side of the hallway, there were several giant objects that looked much like battleship docks. They were labeled in various ways, but with one key similarity.

Tetra-Beast of Creation, Suling.

Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru.

Hexa-Portal Unsealed, Gate of Six.

Seven-Star Command, Elemental Order.

They were the SUBMs that would eventually descend upon the continent and cause immense destruction.

Jabberwock, however, didn't stop in front of any of them. He only kept moving forward until he came to a particularly well-sealed... coffin.

"Gloria lost." Jabberwock's words made the coffin slightly shake.

Suddenly, a part of it — the window through which one might see the deceased's face — opened up to reveal a giant eye looking down at Jabberwock.

"What a shame," Jabberwock continued. "If the timing was right, this all would've ended with Gloria."

In response to those words, the eye frantically darted to and fro. It was hard to tell what that meant. It could be interpreted as an expression of surprise, sadness, anger, or maybe nothing at all.

"The kingdom's... no... *Planet Earth's* Masters are truly exceptional. I guess I shouldn't have expected any less of them. Limited progress on the plan notwithstanding, I'm actually somewhat *enjoying* this."

The word "enjoying" made the eye glare at Jabberwock in clear protest.

"Don't be upset. This also means that there's still a window of opportunity to strive for even greater heights. Be glad... *my other half.*"

Calling the thing inside the coffin a part of him, Jabberwock smiled.

"For now, just wait. Eventually, there will be a chance to become stronger than even *before the reset*. Your time isn't far off. It won't be more than ten years, I'm sure — which is nothing compared to how long you've already waited."

Jabberwock closed his eyes, as if to remember something.

He might've been looking back at the staggering amount of years that had led to this.

"..."

"In the worst case scenario, we can undergo an enhancement using the data of another Infinite. Though, our enhancement is mostly orthogonal to the overall plan — the crux of the matter is something else. It's okay. This was a painful failure, but not a real setback. We will gather them all, no matter what."

Jabberwock opened his eyes.

"I'll get back to work, then. You keep sleeping for now... Evolution."

He then turned around and walked away from the coffin. The creature within... Evolution... saw him leave, then closed its eye.

The coffin's window followed suit, and the entity inside went back to sleep.

Infinite Progression, Evolution.

This was Jabberwock's other half, and the original UBM.

And at least for now, it silently slumbered...

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Royal Capital, Altea, deep inside the castle

"I'm... here?" Shu opened his eyes to see a familiar ceiling.

It was the room of the third princess — the place he'd visited just before fighting Gloria.

He quickly understood that he was lying on the bed.

After Fainting, he wasn't able to discern what was happening, because while Unconscious, Masters had their minds locked into an empty space and couldn't even log out. If he absolutely *had* to return to reality, he would've been forced to use the Suicide system. However, since Shu hadn't died or received a message that would make it necessary for him to log out, he simply waited it out.

Though, the fact that he found himself in the third princess' room puzzled even him.

He looked around and saw the little owner of this room using Dormouse as a makeshift bed. The hamster had natural fur all over, and his body was as warm as a hot water bottle, making him a truly pleasant surface to lay on.

Dor himself was awake, though, and he was looking right at Shu.

"Hm?" Shu suddenly felt strange and looked down to find out why.

While he'd been unconscious, someone put an animal costume on him. It was the bear costume sold at the capital — the same one he'd bought right after starting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Shu didn't know whether they'd prepared it ahead of time or if Dor acquired it while carrying him back to the castle, but he was wearing it right now.

This reminds me that, for a bunch of reasons, I was also in a bear costume back when I first met Theresia, Shu thought.

As he pondered whether that might've been the very reason they'd put this particular outfit on him, Dor shook Theresia awake.

Shu and the girl stared at each other for a good few moments before he broke the silence. "I won."

"I know," she replied. What a simple exchange.

"The castle is so loud and lively right now," Theresia continued. "Father and Altimia must be really busy."

"I see." With that, Shu understood why there were no other people in the room.

"Did you get Dor to look fur me and bring me all the way back here?"

"Yeah." Theresia understood that Shu would go to face Gloria the moment he walked out of her room, so when Dor returned, she asked him to bring Shu back after his victory so that his identity was not revealed.

"Thanks to you, we're not over yet — not me, and not what I'm harboring... Though, I'm not sure if that's a good thing."

"...Did you want to be over?"

"Who knows?" Theresia tilted her head in curiosity, as if she herself didn't know the answer to that question.

"But... well..." She remembered something and strung a sentence together. "Up until a few moments ago, Altimia was protecting us." The eldest sister, Altimia, was with Theresia and Elizabeth, protecting them both.

Though, perhaps she was merely preparing to help her sisters escape in case the capital was in imminent danger. Altimia herself was strong, but she was powerless against Gloria's Fatal Field. Gloria was channeling it passively, so even The Primeval Sword could only split it open for a single moment. Even if Altimia did intend to let her sisters escape, Theresia couldn't leave this castle.

That was why she was wondering what her sister was planning to do when push came to shove.

Had Altimia been considering ways to let Theresia escape, or had she intended to stay by her side and fight with her blade until the bitter end?

Given that Altimia had entrusted Elizabeth to her childhood friend, Liliana, it might've been the latter.

"And when she found out that Altea was safe, Altimia actually hugged me." When it had become clear that the menace of Gloria was no more, the first princess embraced Theresia, wept , and said, "I'm so glad you're safe now."

As for what Theresia felt within her sister's warmth...

"I did think that it was nice that I wasn't over."

"All's well, then."

Then we really did seize the opportunity, Shu thought.

He was certain that he couldn't have reached this point on his own, even if he had given it his all.

Foltesla and his Babylonian Battlegroup had exposed Gloria's powers, Figaro had defeated the all-destroying one-horned head, and Tsukuyo Fuso had finally destroyed the annihilating two-horned head.

All of this was why Shu had been able to emerge victorious in the final battle. If even one element had been missing, he would never have won.

For all he knew, there might have also been those who played a part in achieving this outcome in ways he couldn't see.

This moment was only possible because everyone had given their all to seize this opportunity. They had all contributed to this moment, where this girl was able to say she was glad it didn't have to be over.

"You're thirsty, right?" Theresia asked. "I'll make some tea. The castle's water is very good."

With small hands, but plenty of skill, the girl began handling the tea set.

"Fur sure it is," said Shu. "Yeah, I'll have some."

Shu got out of bed, sat in a chair and waited for Theresia to finish.

Dor also lumbered into a chair and waited for the tea.

While waiting, these two... the Superior and the control AI began to talk.

"Dormouse. The kingdom won't be getting any more SUBMs, right?" Shu asked.

"If the general rule still applies, yes," the hamster replied. "But thanks to this incident, I discovered that Jabberwock is truly ruthless. If he thinks it's necessary, he might do something excessive."

"Can't you control your colleagues?"

"Hm... We're programmed in a way that makes us unable to say much about what the others are doing with their areas of influence. We can give advice or argue, but in the end, they themselves have the final say. Though it's a little different when we have some overlap between us. Cheshire is a good example. He's in charge of miscellaneous jobs, so he's involved in a great many areas."

"You sound like you're all arranged like a government office."

"That's more or less how it was originally. Though, even aside from that, the kingdom has a lot of problems piling up. The issues Gloria caused will greatly affect the fate of Altar. There are a lot of incidents on the horizon. And that's just with the actions of tians and Masters... Without us doing anything at all."

"...That so?" That meant that there would be events... tragedies, rather, that could potentially decide the fate of the kingdom. Shu pondered what he would do then and considered his little brother, who would join him in *Infinite Dendrogram* in a year here... or four months in reality.

"I wonder what he would do." Shu got lost in thought...

Knowing how he is, I'm sure he won't be able to ignore all the suffering.

That's why, if I told him all that I know, I would basically be like making him run a mile after piling a heavy weight on his shoulders, and one that he can't put down.

That's why, when he comes here, I won't tell him anything that I'm privy to.

I'll let him start out free and choose what to feel, think, and do all by himself.

I'm sure that that's the only way he can find the possibility he's supposed to seize.

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"Oh my. It's like a page out of a picture book." Theresia returned with a pot of black tea to a fairytale-like scene, where a bear and a giant hamster sat politely at a table, waiting to be served.

It made her giggle.

"Ohh, I'm pawsitively parched. Theresia, give me teaaa," Shu playfully requested.

"Just a second," she kept giggling as she filled his cup.

"Thank you very much." Even if what had just happened was an event that would change everything for the kingdom and the continent, this moment was nothing if not peaceful.

Thus, Shu decided to sit back, smile, and enjoy a nice cup of tea.

Episode Gloria: End

Afterword

Dearest readers,

Thank you very much for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Due to the composition of this volume, I only have one page allotted for the afterword, so I have to refrain from incorporating the usual gimmick.

Those of you who are disappointed by the lack of Cheshire and friends, please take a look at the currently-running “The What and Why of Dendrogram” YouTube series. They’re similar to the usual afterwords in tone, and they’re also fully voiced!

Though, I believe Cheshire and the rest will return here with volume 12, set for Japanese release in February 2020.

Besides that, I would greatly appreciate it if you considered checking out the manga adaptation by Kami Imai, as well as volume 1 of the Crow Record side story by La-na, both of which are already out in Japan.

January marks the start of Infinite Dendrogram’s anime adaptation. It has been about a year since the announcement, and I thank you all for your patience. I give my sincerest gratitude to the staff, cast, and everyone else involved in its production, as well as all of you who support my work.

Please look forward to more Infinite Dendrogram!

—Sakon Kaidou

Bonus Short Stories

Powerleveling

December, 2044

A few days had passed since the battle against the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

"Leveling is soo boring..." grumbled Tsukuyo Fuso, one of the kingdom's Superiors and the leader of its largest clan, The Lunar Society.

She was currently wand-bashing monsters in the Tomb Labyrinth.

Her secretary both in game and out, King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage, was binding said monsters with his shadows. He would prevent them from moving, and she would beat them — a highly orthodox way to raise a newbie's level.

The reason why she, who was far from a newbie, was doing something like this was because her level had been reset as a result of using a potent skill that had that as the price. She was now working to recover her lost levels.

Some would question why she was bashing them instead of using skills, and the answer to that was because she'd ran out of MP and SP needed for spells and the like. She'd drunk so many MP and SP potions that they barely had an effect anymore, so she had to resort to this newbie-like method of leveling.

Being a Superior Embryo, Tsukuyo's Kaguya was very demanding in terms of MP and SP, and at her now-low level, she didn't have nearly enough of either, so she ended up doing this quite often. Any new levels gained did little to fix the problem.

"They say time is money, and I'm here doing this..."

As contradictory as that may have seemed, she thought about how effectively she could've leveled up before her level was reset.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, there were two basic ways of leveling up —

killing other creatures or completing job quests. Both methods provided the person with shapeless data energy called simply “Resources,” and crossing a certain threshold of it gave them a level.

Levels gained through fighting were easy to understand for all those familiar with video games — you received Resources from enemies in the form of XP. Some of the loser’s Resources went to the victor, and some returned back to nature. With monsters, Resources could also become items. This was especially obvious with UBMs.

The distribution of XP in group battles was directly related to performance. Attacking, defending, supporting... everything you did in battle influenced the amount of XP you would receive. This distribution was why Eishiro was only doing the binding and Tsukuyo was doing the attacking. Though, whenever Tsukuyo had the MP and SP for it, she would contribute to the battles by debuffing or supporting instead. In parties, it was actually possible to turn on a setting that made the distribution equal, but it was unusable due to the immense gap in levels between Eishiro and Tsukuyo.

Now, as for job quests, the other leveling method... the way they made people level-up was actually unknown.

Job quests were arranged by the guilds for the respective jobs and offered to those who had them. While the source of physical rewards for completing these jobs was very clear, it was still a mystery where the Resources that caused level-ups came from.

It definitely wasn’t the guilds distributing these Resources. Completing job quests just seemed to imbue the achiever with Resources from the natural world itself. In fact, some guessed that that was actually the case — that it was part of natural law to give Resources to those who completed job quests.

This was actually one of the foundations for the many job-based religions on the continent, including the kingdom’s state religion. “Those who fulfilled their duty today will be given the power to live better tomorrow” was quite a popular idea among them.

“My case is pretty troublesome...” Tsukuyo grumbled again.

Many would reset their levels to improve their builds, and they would generally have an easier time leveling than before. After all, level resets were often focused. Losing a single job would mean losing only a small amount of stats, meaning that fighting to regain the levels would be fairly simple.

Tsukuyo, however, dropped down straight to level 0. Even if she tried to make up for it with the equipment she had, items that increased by percentage weren't that effective at low levels, while items that gave fixed bonuses weren't that potent. Naturally, she couldn't be all that effective at powerleveling.

Job quests were another option, but that was difficult, as well.

In fact, it was impossible for her.

Tsukuyo was, after all, the High Priestess and the leader of The Lunar Society, and the kingdom's job guilds for the priest grouping were owned by the state religion. It would be bad for her reputation if people heard that she, the leader of The Lunar Society, was working for a rival religion. Even if the magnanimous state religion wouldn't care, the onlookers would.

Another thing that would be bad for her reputation was the very fact that she was now low level and desperately trying to climb back up.

"Lady Tsukuyo," Eishiro tapped Tsukuyo on her shoulder.

"Ah. Gotta hiide," she replied as she sunk into his shadow.

Eishiro did the same right after finishing off the bound monsters.

They'd done this to hide from an incoming party of Masters.

About a minute later, Tsukuyo and Eishiro rose from the shadows.

"Let us go elsewhere."

"Okay."

Tsukuyo was the leader of the top-ranking clan, one of the country's Superiors, and thanks to her role in defeating Gloria, one of Altar's Big Three. She enjoyed that reputation, but it made it all the more difficult to show herself in the state she was now. That was why she always hid when people came, then moved elsewhere.

It was a chore, but she had to maintain her majesty as one of the kingdom's greatest. She wanted to hide herself as she was not just from the general public, but also her own Lunar Society. The only ones she trusted enough to help her level were Eishiro and maybe Ichiro Shijima.

Though, Ichiro couldn't leave Torne right now, so he couldn't be here to assist her. Not even Tsukuyo was cruel enough to take away the family time of a man who was said to have not long left to live.

Eishiro, on the other hand, had to put up with her business in and out of *Dendro*. He'd actually been helping with her inefficient leveling for several dozen hours now, all while making time for college work and chores in real life. His loyalty was equal to steel.

"...I know this is all we have, but just how long will it take for me to get back my levels at this rate?" Tsukuyo sighed as she thought about how many hours of this she would have to go through.

"Let us progress patiently. We have time," said Eishiro, standing next to her with a gentle smile on his face.

Eishiro collapsed in real life just three days later.

The End

The Overworked Control AI

A Certain Day of a Certain Month

The term "control AI" had a different meaning in *Infinite Dendrogram* than it had in real life. The control AIs outside were artificial intellects using the processing power of supercomputers to their full capacity. The control AIs inside, on the other hand, were actually Infinite Embryos — Embryos above even Superior.

However, due to their immense calculating power and unique abilities, they were able to manage *Infinite Dendrogram* well enough to be considered control AIs. They had their own set roles and managed various phenomena. One managed the Embryos before they were implanted in Masters, one created the UBMs that would act as barriers spurring Master evolution... they each had their own field and played a part in keeping things running smoothly. All the jobs were necessary.

Since what they were responsible for differed so greatly, there were natural differences in difficulty, as well. The most notable example was control AI no. 7.

"Ph...ew..."

A gloomy-looking woman with profound bags under her eyes. This was the avatar of the Duchess.

She didn't appear the way she had because she wanted to. The clothing was her choice, yes, but the bags under her eyes and the general gloominess was the result of her extreme fatigue.

Her job was maintaining Master vision and translation. The latter job was basically the same as any translation software's. She would translate the many languages spoken by the cosmopolitan Masters from all over the Earth into the language used in *Dendro*, and do the reverse when it had to be done. Nuance, tone, volume... all was always done perfectly, but it was relatively simple. The problem was that she was doing it for potentially millions of Masters at once, which would be more than enough to overheat the usual supercomputer.

However, if asked, she would surely say that it was the easy part of her job. What kept her busiest was the management of Master vision.

A Master could choose between three types of vision: realistic, CG, and anime. She had to create the visuals for potentially millions of Masters in real time and project them into their visions, which would instantly make the usual supercomputer explode. Even this Infinite Embryo was on the verge of dying despite her supreme calculation abilities.

"Sakuga is... so hard..."

The greatest burden came from drawing for those who'd chosen the anime style visuals. It demanded far more effort than either realistic or CG visuals, and had to be delivered without a split-second of lag. It was actually the least used of the three kinds of visuals, but the users were extremely vocal, complaining on the internet about how the food didn't look right or how they didn't like the artstyle. It was quite disheartening, considering how hard she was trying.

"...Whose idea... was this... again...? Who said... that we should add... anime visuals... to reach a... wider audience...?"

For a moment, she tried to remember which colleague was responsible for her hardships, but even that required more calculating power than she could afford, so she just stopped thinking.

"...Meow..."

On her knees, there was one of Cheshire's clones, sitting there like a plush toy. No colleague could help with her work, so he was there as small source of comfort. This was basically animal therapy. Cheshire actually knew who suggested adding the anime visuals, but he didn't say anything to prevent a potential battle between colleagues.

Anyway, thanks to the hard work of the control AIs, *Infinite Dendrogram* continued to run smoothly.

The End

A Story for Another Time

August, 2043, Noz Forest

It happened on a certain day, in a certain forest. There was an adorable little princess. Her name was Theresia. She was the third princess of the kingdom, so she was very much a princess. She was now in a forest because she'd been kidnapped by an evil slime.

"I will now commit serious crimes in the kingdom to become a villain. I thought about what would be a 'serious crime' and chose to kidnap you," the evil slime spoke pure insanity as he committed the crime and kidnapped the princess.

But there was a scary monster in the forest many would call an "UBM." She was in big trouble. The princess prepared for the worst, but it turned out that she didn't have to. A man in a costume and a hamster showed up to save her.

The details made it an intense, breathtaking adventure, but that was a story for another time. The chaotic battle ended with the monster's defeat and the evil slime's retreat after he fixed his sights on the man in the costume. Since this event, the man in the costume would be targeted by the evil slime many times. Slimes sure were sticky, huh?

The incident had been resolved, and the princess was now riding a big hamster while a man in a wolf costume was walking next to her.

If you ignored certain factors, this would be like a page straight out of a fairytale. However, it might actually be a psycho-horror scene. After all, the man in the costume walking next to her was in an awful state.

The fight against the evil slime and the monster left him without an ear, made his right eye dangle out, and opened a hole next to the left eye that showed the man inside. There was also blood in many places on him. Some of it wasn't his, some was. Honestly, he looked like a slasher straight out of a horror game, and the mere sight of him could make children cry.

However, the princess, who was quite tough for a few reasons, didn't show much of a reaction. The problem now was that, even though she was okay, if he was to take her to the city, they would think that he was responsible. In fact, they would probably arrest him even without the princess.

"Hrmm..."

Despite acting like a goof most of the time, the man in the costume was actually perceptive enough to know that himself, so he did something to fix it.

"Lemme change. Woof," he said before changing into a store-bought bear costume.

It had a bow tie on it, making him look like an amusement park mascot.

"..."

The princess looked unexpressive, but upon closer look, you could see a faint smile on her face. She wasn't bothered by a costume straight out of a horror flick, but she couldn't hide her preference for cuteness.

Maybe I should ask, she thought, deciding to ask her father for similar costumes.

The princess would go on to do exactly that, and since it was extremely rare for her to request for things, it affected not only her father, but sisters, as well. She received a huge number of costumes, but that was a story for another time.

At any rate, the princess was safely brought back to the castle. This was how the fates of the princess, the man in the costume, and the evil slime began to intertwine. As for what it would eventually bring... that, too, was a story for another time.

The End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 11
by Sakon Kaidou

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Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2020

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12. The Forms of Love

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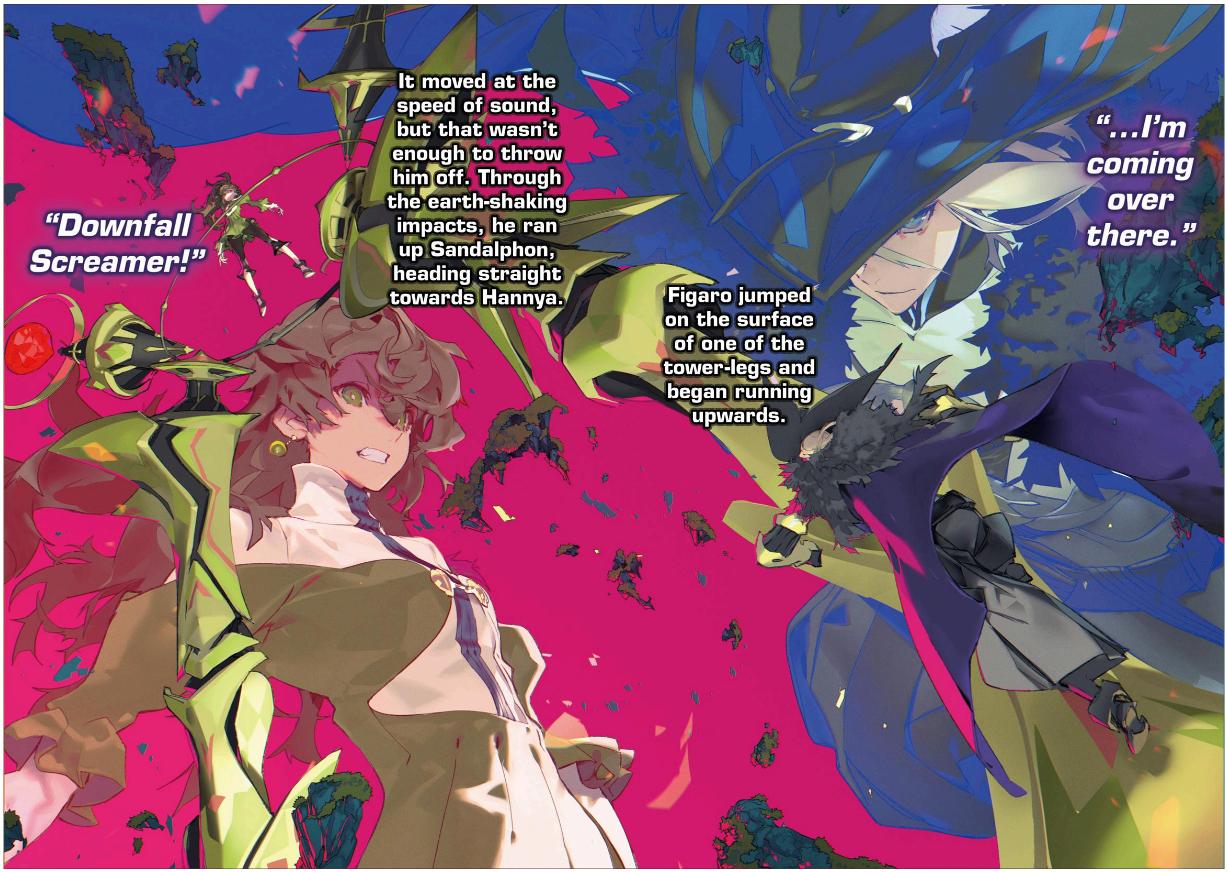

"Downfall Screamer!"
It moved at the speed of sound, but that wasn't enough to throw him off. Through the earth-shaking impacts, he ran up Sandalphon, heading straight towards Hannya.
Figaro jumped on the surface of one of the tower-legs and began running upwards.
"...I'm coming over there."

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of what is right that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.

Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword, a halberd, a shield, and a pinwheel. She's a bit of a glutton, too.

Figaro

Figaro / Vincent Myers

A master who holds the esteemed position of being Altar's #1 duelist. As the Over Gladiator, he's rarely seen away from the arena. While he's generally a calm and gentle man, the heat of battle transforms him into something far more brutal.

Azurite

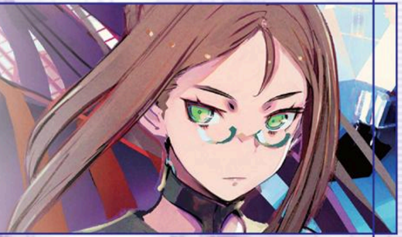
Altimia Azurite Altar

First princess of the Kingdom of Altar, and holder of the Sacred Princess job.
After she encountered Ray, she started to change her feelings towards masters like him.

B3

Barbaroy Bad Burn / Kozue Fujibayashi

Once the leader of a notorious PK clan, B3 also happens to be Ray's real-life senior at college. While she's usually a dependable and studious girl, she switches into a far more crude and boisterous persona when her PK instincts take over.



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Opening: Correspondence Between a Certain Man and Woman

???

February 14th, 2044.

“Figaro,

This is Hannya. I’m using the email address you gave me.

Is this reaching you? I’m writing this trying not to worry that you might have given me a fake address. I hope you’re getting this, but I don’t know what to do if you don’t.

Right now, I’m following what your friend told me and going to Legendaria. I’ll come see you again after crushing my ex and that bitch who took him from me.

I’m thinking of bringing over a homemade cake when I do. Look forward to it.”

“Hannya,

This is Figaro. Yes, it’s reaching me.

I’m also looking forward to seeing you again.

I like cakes, too. My little brother often brings them to me as presents or even bakes them himself. I can’t handle intense, spicy foods, so I’m relatively fond of sweet stuff. I can’t wait to try your cake.”

February 15th, 2044.

“I have some bad news... I went to Legendaria and stomped on my ex and the homewrecker, but then the crowd ganged up on me and now I’ve got the death penalty.

Also, I can’t use the save points anymore because I’m ‘wanted.’

I’m in the ‘gaol’ right now. Apparently, I won’t be able to leave for over a whole in-game year.

...Sorry. Now I can’t see you for a long time.

You won't be able to wait that long, huh?"

"The gaol, eh? This is the first time someone I know got sent there.
Oh, don't worry about taking a whole year to be discharged. I'm sure I'll still be here then.
I'll wait for you to leave (so we can duel) for as long as I have to.
Though, I'll be able to catch up to you in power in the meantime. You'll grow stronger yourself, of course, but I'll do even better.
I have a major ranked match coming up, too."

February 16th, 2044.
"Thanks, Figaro. I'm really happy that you'll wait for me (in the name of love.)
I'll go see you in *Infinite Dendrogram* no matter what.
And oh yeah, you're a ranker! That's amazing.
By the way, you mentioned my strength. Should I be trying to raise my level or evolve my Embryo, too?"

"Of course."

"Okay. I'll grow stronger here in the gaol, then go see you right after I'm discharged.
Ohh, I can't wait for that moment. Just thinking about it is too much.
It's so far away, but (because of love!) the wait is going to be unbearable!"

"Yeah. I want to see (and duel) you, too. I hope it doesn't take too long for you to be released."

April 18th, 2044.
"Figaro, congratulations on becoming the duel champion! I saw your duel online! I already knew the outcome, but watching it still had me in suspense. Just so you know, I cheered at my screen when you won! Seriously, congratulations!"

"Thanks, Hannya. Because of this, I've finally become Over Gladiator.

It's the Superior Job of the gladiator grouping, so we're now on the same job tier. Now, if my Embryo would just evolve into a Superior Embryo, like your Sandalphon did last week, we would be a perfect match (in a duel.) I can't wait for when you're discharged in a year."

"Same here. I can't wait to stand by you (in the wedding hall.)"

November 11th, 2044.

"I heard about the Gloria thing and your friend. Tell me if there's anything I can do to help. Though, I know there's not much I can do by email. Ohh, why can't I be outside at a time like this...?"

"...Thanks, Hannya."

February 14th, 2045.

"It's now been a whole year since we started talking like this. I'm spending my days in the gaol roasting food, couples, and people who say inexcusable things. I'm satisfied with my life, but every day feels about the same, which is just making me want to see you more and more.

By the way, you said you were wondering, so I'm pleased to tell you that we have a new Superior here in the gaol.

First there was me and Fu'uta, then we got Sechs, and now we've got a boy called 'Candy.'

He was a real nuisance with all the viruses he spread in here, but he calmed down once Sechs and I beat him. Now he's shut himself in some dungeon.

His prison term is so long, he'll probably be in here until *Dendro's* servers shut down.

Though, the same can probably be said about everyone here besides me."

"Always the homemaker, huh? Thanks for the info, by the way. I was wondering about it because a wanted Superior that was heading towards Altar suddenly vanished. I guess the rumors are right, then — another PK got him. They might already know, but I'll inform DIN, just in case.

My days are also just about the same recently. I... wasn't able to participate in the war last month, either.

Like I mentioned before, it seemed to have given Shu a lot to think about. Though, it's understandable, considering his reasons for not participating. Right now, he's out on a journey, leveling up and gathering special rewards.

...Oh yeah. We're both bothered by our monotonous lives, so let me mix things up a little.

My name is Vincent Myers.

Weird, huh? We've been in touch for over a year, but didn't even know each other's names.

Hannya, if you don't mind... can you give me yours? What's your name?"

"...Thanks, Vincent.

My name is Fuyuko Shiki. Can you call me Fuyuko?"

"Of course, Fuyuko."

"...I'll finally be out of here in April. I'll then rush straight to the kingdom to see (and marry) you."

"Yeah. I'll be waiting, Fuyuko."

Open Episode "The Forms of Love"

Chapter One: The Three Horrors and the Extras

Reiji Mukudori

When people play too much of a particular game, they often end up simulating it in their heads while lying in bed with their eyes closed.

Recently, these simulations of mine were completely dominated by *Dendro*. Specifically, the fight against the Hell General.

Someone actually uploaded a video of the fight. It had been edited to make it look like I won easily, but that wasn't the case. I knew that better than anyone.

Without Gardranda, without Logan underestimating me and holding back his strongest devils, and without Veldorbell destroying his Brooch, I'd have surely lost.

I knew full well that I lacked the power to defeat a Superior who came at me with everything he had. Even though I won, that scene stayed with me, just like it did when I was first defeated by Marie. Seeing the video had only made the memory more vivid. I began picturing and examining it like a game of chess.

Though, if this was a chess match, then Logan had all his pieces, while I only had a king and a rook, so it's not like I was going to figure out some high-level play by just thinking about it.

"Heeyy, Mukudori, what's with that thinking face and why're ya sittin' there? The lecture's over."

"Ohh..." Kasugai called out to me, bringing me back to reality and reminding me that the morning lectures were over.

It was hard to overlook the fact that I was a college student who couldn't even focus on his lectures.

That made me wonder how B3 — or rather, Fujibayashi — managed. She was a clan leader, so I imagine that she'd have even more trouble dividing her time and attention between the game and reality. I'd have to consult her about it.

During lunch, I looked for her in the cafeteria and found her right away. She had this super diligent vibe, which was even stronger here in real life than in the game. It made her stand out, so she was really easy to find.

However, looking at the other student sitting with her, she didn't stand out so much that it drove people away. The presence of others would've made it fairly awkward to talk about *Dendro*, especially since she was someone who kept the two worlds neatly separated.

I wondered what to do next, but then her friend finished eating and left. Appreciating the timing, I tried to call out to her, but someone grabbed my shoulder.

"What's up, Ray? Tickletickle!"

"Hh?!" Miss Eldritch suddenly appeared, grabbed my shoulder with her right hand and tickled my armpit with her left.

Sexual harassment! Two seconds after her greeting...!

"Where's your handler... I mean, Tsukikage?! Did he collapse again?!" I asked.

"Kage's not heeeere. He went to visit his family back in Iga."

"Iga?! What, is he *actually* a ninja?!"

"'Actually'? What, you believe the stereotype that everyone from Iga is a ninja?"

...Well, he *was* the King of Assassins. He could sink into shadows, too. Him being a ninja would explain why he ended up with an Embryo like that...

"Heheheh," Miss Eldritch giggled. "Without Kage around, I can harass you all I want!"

"GHHAAH!" *Oh, so she actually* held back *around him,* I thought, before she continued.

She tried to slip her left hand under my clothes...

"Prez? What are you doing in a public space?"

...but then a heavy, domineering voice stopped her.

The one speaking was obviously Fujibayashi. Her eyes behind her glasses were steady... and she actually looked really scary.

"...Ah. So you were here, B," said Miss Eldritch.

"Sit down right there."

"...But this is the cafeteria."

"*Sit*."

"...Okay." Hearing how serious Fujibayashi sounded, Miss Eldritch immediately sank to the floor on her knees. The stares she drew from onlookers made her shake a bit, but she continued sitting regardless.

The way Fujibayashi was looking down at her, I felt like I was watching a priest exorcising a naughty demon. It seemed that even if you ignored the fact that Miss Eldritch needed her around to keep the club going, Fujibayashi still outranked her even in real life. Apparently they've been like this for a long time. Miss Eldritch had gone to Fujibayashi's place to learn etiquette and the Way of Tea, so she developed this awareness that made her crumble in her presence.

The woman looked quite disheartened, but I appreciated the fact that we had someone who could keep her in check.

Also, is it just me, or have I recently seen a certain someone sit on the floor just like that?

"Mukudori, foxes are always on the lookout for puppies to eat," said Fujibayashi. "She'll gobble you up if you're not careful."

"I understand. Thank you," I said in response.

"Boo... why are you always getting in my way?"

After the incident at the cafeteria, we went to the clubroom set aside for the club that Miss Eldritch is the president of: "Club Infinite Dendrogram," or "CID" for short.

Last time I was here, I was nearly subjected to Miss Eldritch's vile ways, but with Fujibayashi present, I didn't have to worry about that happening again.

"So, Mukudori, did you have some business with me?" Fujibayashi asked.

Oh, she noticed, I thought. I went ahead and told her about my difficulty dividing time between reality and *Dendro*.

"Oh, but you just have to focus on your lessons. The more you practice at it, the better you'll get," she said. "Besides that, the only thing you really have to pay attention to is your papers."

"Is that it?"

"Yes. Banish *Infinite Dendrogram* from your mind during lessons. It won't be easy, since you just started recently, but practice makes perfect. I'm speaking from experience."

...I guess she's right. "All right. I'll do just that."

"Do your best."

"It's scary that you can hold yourself in the big T just like that, B," grumbled Miss Eldritch. "...And it's scary how Ray thinks that's reasonable."

"Did you say something, Miss Eldritch?" I asked.

"Miss *what*?"

Ah, I went and said it out loud. There goes my streak of keeping it in my head, I thought.

"I want you to call me 'Tsukuyo,'" she asked.

"Will do, Fuso."

"...You're a piece of work, aren't you?" I did have her to thank for fixing my arm, but on the other hand she did kidnap me once and she sexually harassed me every now and then, so I didn't want to do what she said.

"Well, whatever," she said. "Anyway, you beat the Hell General, didn't you? I saw the video."

"Uhh..." She hadn't seen it the last time we met, but it seemed like she went on to watch it later.

"You also cleared the ruins and blew up the giant weapon there, huh? Isn't that nuts?"

"I was involved with the latter, but the former was all Tom's doing." We'd only explored the residential area after Tom had destroyed most of the prism soldiers. Hell, even the attack on the plant during the second day was mostly Tom and the other Masters. Honestly, I'd say he deserved nearly all the credit for clearing the ruins.

"Speaking of Tom Cat..." said Fujibayashi. "Mukudori, have you heard?"

"Heard what?" I asked.

"Tomorrow, real world time, Tom Cat and Kashimiya are going to have a ranked match." She informed me of a coming duel.

◇◇◇

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

I logged on to *Dendro* the moment I got home from classes. The place I appeared at was the capital's fountain. I'd returned here from Quartierlatin yesterday and set this as my login point. The weekend would start tomorrow, so I'd be able to stay online for a good while. I'd also be able to return to Gideon — my hometown here.

"Ray. You're back," Nemesis said as she popped out of my crest.

That was the same as usual, but there was something that wasn't.

"Ah. It's The Unbreakable..."

"...I'm scared," I heard someone say. People around me were reacting differently than they had before I'd gone to Quartierlatin. The reactions from children were especially strong.

It was like this before I logged out, but... "Scary?" That was a bit harsh...

"Is this because of the video floating around on 'the net'?" Nemesis asked. I was already relatively well-known due to an incident at Gideon, but the video with the Hell General had made me more famous... or infamous... than ever.

The most striking change was the amount of fear I seemed to cause.

That, too, was because of what was in the video.

First of all, the video came in two versions — the complete version and the scene-by-scene version. Among the latter, the most viewed scene was the one where Logan got the death penalty, followed by Gardranda and Gigaknight's battle. The reason why that one gathered so much attention was the rarity of special reward-based summons (if not that, Gardranda's appearance alone would have done it).

Honestly, it was understandable why those two got the most views.

The scene relevant to the current issue, however, was the one in third place — the one where I broke through the devil army and charged Logan.

It showed me releasing miasma everywhere, biting a devil, and running with blood dripping from my mouth.

...I saw it myself, and the angle was just so perfect. It made me feel like I was watching a horror movie. The voices were in French, too, for some reason, which only made it creepier.

Since then, I passed by some Masters in Quartierlatin who went "EEK!" and jumped away from me in shock, while child Masters occasionally cried stuff like "He's gonna eat meee!" and actually ran away ... The idea that I was *that* scary kinda got me down.

"I guess eating the devil was a bit too much," I said.

"...Your appearance doesn't help, either." Appearance, huh...? Did the video get tagged with “#DeathKnight” because I was dressed in black?

“Well, you know what they say: ‘everyone gets fifteen minutes of fame.’ They’ll get bored and forget about it eventually.” Though, I didn’t know who was getting the “fifteen minutes” here.

“...You think that isn’t enough time for you to get mixed up in something else? If those ‘fifteen minutes’ keep getting refreshed, they’ll never end, will they?”

I chose to ignore the reasonable and highly compelling, but very unsettling, prediction.

Anyway, it was time to head for Altea’s southern gate and prepare to go to Gideon. Riding Silver would make me stand out too much, so I would only get on him once I was out of the city.

Though, Quartierlatin’s mass-produced models could be a common sight soon. When that happens, I should be able to ride Silver around without standing out.

“...No, you would not. You will stand out no matter where and what you ride. Consider your apparel.”

I’ve been thinking this ever since you pointed it out back at Quartierlatin, but... aren’t you making a bit too much of a deal out of my appearance?

“You think I am...? After seeing your Storm Visage, the mere thought of your appearance changing again fills my heart with worry. Hm...?”

Nemesis looked ahead, seemingly noticing something.

I followed her gaze and saw a clockwork horse ridden by a familiar person.

“Ray, Nemesis... It’s been a while.”

“Liliana. It really has.” It was Liliana, riding a mass-produced white Prism Steed.

I’d arrived here alongside Azurite, so I did meet Liliana once before logging out; apparently, she’d gotten a new mount since then.

“You switched to a Prism Steed?”

“Yes. It was time for my trusty horse to retire, anyway, so I visited Quartierlatin and got myself this one.”

That was a sign that they were now being distributed to the kingdom’s knights.

The units that could be mass-produced in Quartierlatin — “Second

Model Prism Steeds" or "SMPS" — were better overall than the replicas excavated earlier. They had barriers and could fly, which made them better suited to be a knight's mount than the average Demi-Dragon-tier monster.

Their only real drawback was that the barrier and flight were only unlocked if you had Prism Authorization level 1. As a Prism Rider myself, I found that part to be quite a mystery.

Well, perhaps it made sense at first glance, but I didn't understand why this condition was put in place at all. Originals such as Silver could fly and create barriers even if you didn't have the Prism Rider job, yet with replicas, the Prism Authorization skill was absolutely necessary for those functions.

While the other skill — Prism Beast Enhancement — seemed pretty standard, Prism Authorization seemed like exactly that — an authorization.

Hell, even though Prism Beast Enhancement was clearly related to the Prism Steed's skills, it was less like "this skill activates this ability" and more like "we removed the limits *because* you have this skill."

B3 had said that it was like a limitation to prevent those who didn't have the Prism Rider job from using them, but honestly...

"Ray? What is the matter?" Liliana asked.

"Ah... Sorry," I said.

"You have a tendency to lose yourself in thought," Nemesis commented.

...Perhaps, I thought. I did often focus on my thoughts too much after being distracted by something.

Rook had said that he had a similar habit. He actually *had* to say that; no one would've known about it otherwise, because his thinking speed was so great that it never seemed like he was lost in thought.

"Liliana, what about Elizabeth's... Her Highness' bodyguard duty?" When we were at Gideon, Liliana was either standing by Elizabeth's side or looking for her after she'd run away. What was that tomboy princess doing now that Liliana was away from Gideon?

"Oh, I received a new order from Her Highness Altimia, so I entrusted her to Sir Lindos for the time being."

Sir Lindos was quite the serious man. I could only hope that Elizabeth's shenanigans wouldn't completely break him.

Though, something she said had me curious.

"An order from Azurite?" Unlike with Elizabeth, I didn't have to use

"Her Highness" there. I had Azurite's permission to call her just that, and I'd got it again with Liliana listening.

"I know this will be temporary and all, but what could possibly be more important than protecting Azurite's sister?" I asked.

"...My apologies, but I can't say that on my own discretion."

Oh, so this was something classified.

"Her Highness gave me another order, though. It involves you," Liliana continued.

"Me?"

"Yes. She said she wanted me to find you and Barbaroy and bring you both to the castle."

"But... why?" I didn't quite understand why she required us *both*.

"Apparently she has a request for you." A moment after Liliana's words...

"...I feel some trouble brewing."

...Nemesis telepathically spoke words she'd said many times before.

Liliana led us to the castle, then straight to Azurite's office. I instantly noticed the mountains of documents around her, which told me everything about how busy she was.

...Well, she was the current political heart of the kingdom, and she'd been away in Quartierlatin recently, so I supposed that the work had piled up.

"...You sure look busy," I commented.

"I'm leaving Altea again tomorrow," Azurite said. "I need to get all this work out of the way while I still can."

...What was this masked swordswoman intending to meddle in this time? Though, she wasn't wearing her swordswoman clothing this time — she looked like a normal civil official, and...

"Not wearing your mask today, huh?"

"...Why would I wear it in the castle?"

Good point, I thought. *Hell, in here, it would be worse if she actually did try to hide her royal status.*

"Anyway, what's up?" I asked. "Liliana mentioned a request."

"Yes," Azurite nodded. "I need bodyguards for a trip to Gideon. You're returning there too, are you not?"

"That's the plan. I have nothing against taking this job, but... do you *need* a bodyguard?" Azurite was clearly stronger than me — hell, she was actually on the level of a pre-Superior, if not an actual Superior. At the very least, she would've stood a way better chance against Logan than I did.

"I won't be going alone," she continued. "The person in question has a Master bodyguard, so I thought I would get my own Master retinue to match, but..."

She became silent for a moment.

"The only Masters I've been in close contact with are you, Barbaroy, the parasite, and the Master bodyguard I just mentioned..." Well, that made sense. She did say that she had been avoiding Masters until recently.

Also, though her attitude towards Masters had changed, she still called Miss Eldritch "parasite." I could almost hear her voice, saying "That's sooo meaaan."

"Ohh, and you actually know the Master bodyguard, do you not?"

"I do?"

"Master Jiangshi, Xunyu."

Oh, Xunyu. I did know her. She was one of those people who beat the shit out of me to help me become stronger.

...Hm? Hold on, but Xunyu's the bodyguard of...

"...So, about this bodyguard request."

"As I mentioned, you would have to protect two people: me and Canglong, the third prince of the Huang He Empire."

...Failing this one would mean some serious diplomatic trouble, I thought.

"Like I said, I don't have any connections among Masters," Azurite continued. "As things are, you are the only one I can trust enough to request something like this."

"Well... thanks?"

"No need to thank me. This request is officially for you... and Barbaroy."

Aren't you two, well, you know...? I thought, but couldn't bring myself to say it out loud.

"You *can* contact her, yes? I told Liliana to search for either of you, because I thought I'd get in touch with both of you if I could reach you."

"I do have her address and can contact her, yes..."

"Please do, then. Give her this message from me: 'This is a bodyguard request for a trip from Altea to Gideon. You will protect me and the third prince of the Huang He Empire. Aside from you, Ray, Liliana, and Master Jiangshi, Xunyu will also be acting as bodyguards. We will ride your dragon carriage,'" she said before pausing for a moment. "'If you haven't forgotten your involvement in the capital blockade incident, you are in no position to say no.'"

Her tone of voice as she spoke that last sentence sent a chill down my spine.

I logged out, called B3, and passed it on. Her reaction? She instantly logged on and accepted the request.

Thus began our strange party's trip towards Gideon.

Let the quest... begin.

◇

At the moment, we were riding B3's dragon carriage along the Sauda Mountain Pass leading towards Gideon. Liliana was the coachman, and the carriage was being pulled by her SMPS.

Of course, the royal family had their own dragon carriages, so they didn't actually need to borrow B3's. However, due to recent circumstances, Azurite couldn't use any of them.

The kingdom had been infiltrated and terrorized by the imperium's Superiors multiple times now. It had occurred both deep in the south and the very north of Altar, meaning that nowhere was completely safe. If they caught wind that she was traveling between cities, it wasn't out of the question that they would take the opportunity to cause another incident like the Clash of the Superiors or the events at Quartierlatin's ruins.

Thus, she had to be covert. It was important to hide the fact that the carriage contained the first princess of Altar and the third prince of Huang He, so Azurite couldn't use the fancy dragon carriages of the royal family. They stood out too much, and there was the threat of someone sabotaging them.

Azurite could go to Gideon all by herself, of course, but this time she had a guest of honor: the young prince. She couldn't let a foreign royal ride a standard dragon carriage. Therefore, she needed a carriage that fulfilled all these conditions: didn't explicitly belong to the royal family, wasn't meant for extravagant ceremonies, looked good in spite of that, and was highly functional, comfortable, and tough. An interior with spatial expansion would've been a nice bonus.

Now, that seemed like a tall order, but what do you know — something like that actually existed.

We were riding it right now, in fact. B3's dragon carriage was an absurdly good quality product from Legendaria. Even the most luxurious carriages available on Altar's market were all outdated and lacked certain modern features, meaning this one surpassed them in every aspect.

Azurite had already ridden it from Quartierlatin to the capital, so she was already aware of its utility and value. Even though she had her mask on, I could tell by her eyes that she was thinking about how she could use this thing. And B3, being partially responsible for some severe damage to the kingdom, wasn't in a position to refuse to provide her carriage and services for this very serious escort quest.

At least she's getting a reward, I guess, I thought.

"Also, Azurite probably has many other things to be concerned about besides the dragon carriage," Nemesis added telepathically.

Yeah. Regardless of what they are, we do have a bit of a problem here...

"This really is an impressive dragon carriage," Azurite remarked.

"...That's true," said B3.

"Don't look so worried. I won't confiscate it."

"...Oh, I definitely wasn't worried about that."

"I see. By the way, how much do you think this carriage is worth?"

"...Somewhere over a hundred million."

"Really, now? Not that it's relevant, but that's nowhere near the losses caused by the capital blockade."

"..."

...The air between them was absurdly cold.

I really appreciated two things right now: the fact that Xunyu and the third prince were in the cabin at the back, and the fact that this carriage had spatial expansion, which let me sit a decent distance away from them.

"...Those two are the same as ever," Nemesis commented.

As Nemesis implied, Azurite and B3 didn't get along too well, to put it mildly. B3 was constantly reminded of the damage she'd dealt to the economy by partaking in the blockade. Her right to use save points was at risk. The victim in this situation had really grabbed her tormentor by the scruff of her neck.

"I gotta say... They're like rock-paper-scissors." Based on what Shu had told me, Miss Eldritch had made the royal family sign several contracts in exchange for services from The Lunar Society.

Because of this, the royal family had to humble themselves before Miss Eldritch, and Azurite's uncomfortable relationship with Miss Eldritch had made her deem the girl a "parasite."

With that in mind, the three girls had a dynamic that went like this:

Azurite was strong against B3, but weak against Miss Eldritch.

B3 was strong against Miss Eldritch, but weak against Azurite.

And Miss Eldritch was strong against Azurite, but weak against B3.

Again, it was like rock-paper-scissors with them.

Or maybe it's like that trilemma between a frog, snake, and slug.

"...You better not start comparing them to those vermin out loud," Nemesis spoke telepathically.

I know. I realized that myself right after thinking it.

"B-By the way, what did you order Liliana to do that was more important than her duty as Elizabeth's guard?" I asked Azurite, in a weak attempt to make the mood more bearable. I knew that Liliana had been given an important order, but she didn't know if she could tell me what it was.

"I had her transport a broken national treasure to Quartierlatin and act as my agent in a request to repair it. Liliana was easily the best person for the job," Azurite answered.

Transporting a national treasure definitely seemed like a serious job best left to people you trusted a lot.

But why bring it to Quartierlatin, of all places...? I wondered.

"National treasure... Ah!" I exclaimed as I remembered one particular broken treasure and what was currently being built in Quartierlatin. "The Prism Steed, right?"

"Yes. That precious heirloom that has been with our country for as long as it existed, only to break in the last war."

Gold Thunder. That was one of the original Prism Steeds, last used by Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria — the strongest knight in the kingdom, who'd sadly been slain in a battle against Logan's Mythical-rank devil.

I'd heard that Gold Thunder had been damaged so badly that even its auto-repair function no longer worked. “Can it really be fixed?” I asked.

“That is still unknown,” said Azurite. “All we found in the ruins was an SMPS manufactory. Nothing else. However, that’s where the kingdom’s few machine-focused Masters are located, so giving Gold Thunder over to them seems a lot better than just keeping its shattered remains locked away.”

By “machine-focused Masters,” she was mainly referring to Blue Screen.

“Though, I am somewhat concerned about leaving the task to the former core members of the rather infamous Sol Crisis,” Azurite added.

“They haven’t exactly had a change of heart since then, but they *can* be trusted to complete quests with attractive rewards,” B3 commented. “Unless their end goal is just PK itself, most PKs do have an eye for profit. I believe they’ll do the job as long as the pay is good.”

“I see. Very convincing, coming from *you*.”

“Ghh...” ...And so the mood in the carriage was back to square one.

I realized now that I couldn’t change her mind, so I just said “I’ll go check on them,” and went to the back cabin.

There, I found Canglong, the third prince of Huang He, and the abnormality that I was quite used to by now — Xunyu. Side note: she was keeping her Tenaga-Ashinaga shorter than normal, so it didn’t look like she was uncomfortable in this relatively tight space.

“HuhH? WhAt’s up?” she asked.

“The air over there is really suffocating...” I said.

“What, theY havin’ a cAtfight or sOmethin’? ShoUld ya reAlly bE comin’ hEre?”

“Not that kind of suffocating.”

And what would I have to do with any catfights? I thought.

“I suppose not even a person of Master Ray’s caliber can feel comfortable in the presence of quarreling ladies,” Canglong commented with a smile devoid of malice.

Despite being a prince, he was really modest, always adding “Master” before my and Xunyu’s names. He even insisted that we talk to him like we normally did. I wasn’t sure if it was okay for a prince to behave like that, but according to him, “I may have imperial blood, but I am not very involved in politics. You don’t have to be so considerate of me.”

Is that how most third princes are? I wondered.

"Yeah, I guess I can't feel comfortable," I said. "Girls are terrifying when they fight. They mainly use words..."

"...You knOw who yoU're talking abOut, right? You reAlly think thEy wOn't pull oUt their weapOns?"

...They might, I thought, as a clear picture of armor-clad B3 and Azurite brandishing Altar formed in my head.

And B3 would lose because of compatibility...

"I doubt it will come to that," Nemesis commented. "They have a common... *friend* in you."

"I hope that keeps them from escalating things..." I said. "Let's change the subject."

"YeAh."

"Canglong, what were you doing in the capital all this time? If I recall correctly, you were originally supposed to head to Gideon a month ago, during The Clash of the Superiors, right?"

"Yes!" Azurite and Canglong both were supposed to come to Gideon on that fateful day. However, they had to postpone their arrival due to the recent Epidemic. That, the effects of Franklin's Game, and the incident at the ruins had kept Azurite busy for a long time, rendering her unable to go to Gideon until just today. What had Canglong been doing during all this time?

"This journey served a diplomatic purpose, as well as broadening my own horizons," he answered. "I spent that time experiencing the capital and the port city to the west."

"I wAs with him whEn he was oUt, by thE way," Xunyu added. "As he is nOw, his stats arE low."

I see. It's probably not exactly like that, but it sort of reminds me of a long school trip.

"Thanks to you, we were able to go to the port city and back in one day!"

"It's in thE same coUntry, and it's nOt like wE had to cross an endlEss desert likE in CaldinA. Going thEre and back in a dAy is child's plAy."

...The world must seem really small to those who can travel at the speed of sound, I thought.

"BUt man, why evEn use a carriAge? I coUld carry yOu to GideOn in a flAsh," Xunyu added.

"Master Xunyu, that would be quite inappropriate..." said Canglong. "I am going to a formal marriage meeting. I cannot show up in the arms of another lady."

"That's trUe."

Yeah, that sounds like grounds for an instant cancellation of the marr... marriage?

"So, you're heading to Gideon for a marriage meeting?" asked Nemesis.

"Yes. The royal capital was unfit for the purpose for various reasons, so it will happen in Gideon instead."

"No, it isn't the location I'm wondering about. Who are you set to marry?"

"The second princess of Altar, Her Highness Elizabeth."

...Excuse me? Canglong's words seemed profoundly important to me. I was about to ask more questions, but suddenly the dragon carriage stopped.

Looking outside through the window, I saw a group of armed people surrounding the carriage.

◇

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, bandits and brigands were actually thought to be less common than you'd expect in a fantasy setting.

The reason for that was the presence of Masters — the immortal beings who gained immense powers from their Embryos.

The thing about Masters was that you couldn't tell how powerful one was just by looking at them. There were children walking around with Superior Jobs, and jokesters in costumes summoning battleships and burning down entire forests.

They weren't all equally powerful, of course, but there were thousands of them all over the world. Accidentally attacking a Master would mean having to fight an immortal superhuman, which didn't seem like a gamble most people would find worth taking.

Because of this, there were only four types of people who would become bandits.

First were the Master bandits. There were those like B3's Mad Castle, which focused exclusively on other Masters, as well as those like Goblin

Street, which would also attack tians, but they were unified in that they didn't fear Masters as much as tians did since they were Masters themselves.

Second were the groups like the Gouz-Maise Gang. They were organized and had many members, a handful of which could be notably powerful, giving them the potential to fend off most Masters.

The third were the groups that had a great deal to gain by engaging in banditry. These included the bandits lurking around the trade route going through the Cruella Mountain Belt to the east of Gideon. In other words, they were so blinded by greed that they simply ignored the risks.

And the fourth were the kind of bandits attacking us right now.

"Kheheheh! Leave yer valuables and carriage right 'ere!" They surrounded us, said exactly what you'd expect to hear, and tried to menace us with weapons held high. Their weapons were crude, though, and their levels were probably low.

It was pretty clear that they had become bandits and were now trying to rob us simply because they *didn't even consider* the dangers of attacking Masters, or that even tians could be powerful. They probably just looked at Liliana in the coachman's seat, saw a fair-looking lady, and assumed that this carriage was easy prey.

However, even Liliana was a relatively strong Paladin. She'd been training hard during her days of watching over Elizabeth. As far as I knew, her level was over 300 right now, but even then, she was on the lower end of the spectrum among everyone riding in this carriage.

They'd clearly chosen the wrong prey.

Alas, it was already too late. One of those inside opened the door and stepped out.

"HuhH? WhAt? Altar's got bAndits this dAmn stupid?"

"The hell're... you... Ehh...?" Upon seeing who had stepped out, the bandits were at a loss for words.

Of course they would be. They just saw an over four metel-tall anomaly step out of a carriage that seemed way too small for it.

"I swear, if I see a single scratch on my goddamn ride," said another... *person* who stepped outside, clad in ultra-heavy armor from head to toe.

She bashed her shields together in a show of force.

"I haven't heard of this happening too often after Ray crushed the Gouz-

Maise Gang... so of course we'd run into bandits when I was transporting a foreign guest of honor... What a disgrace."

The last to come out was a weirdo in a mask.

Apparently, some of the bandits thought that she looked somewhat normal compared to the other two, but then she drew her sword — The Primeval Blade, Altar — and the bandits fell on their backsides. Some even wet themselves.

Even if they couldn't Identify it, they could *instinctively* feel how terrifying it was.

The bandits no longer had any will to fight. The three monst— Uhh, *ladies* had the kind of pressure that clearly showed how immense the gulf in power was between the two parties, even if they couldn't gauge it exactly.

"They're probably the three scariest women in the kingdom," Nemesis commented.

"If you ask me, Miss Eldritch would be in the top three instead of either B3 or Xunyu."

"...I recommend against saying that to Azurite."

"...Oh, I won't." That aside, the situation was actually worse now than it would've been if Miss Eldritch was around.

I didn't know about Xunyu, but the other two were clearly in a bad mood. B3 was seeing red from the stress, while Azurite was irritated about the very existence of bandits in her country. This could easily become a whole lot more tragic than it had to be.

Feeling that I had to stop it, I decided to leave the carriage as well.

"Oh, I should prepare in case a battle breaks out," I said, turning Nemesis into The Flag Halberd in case of debuffs. I then used Gardranda's miasma and flame-spewing mouths, activated Gouz-Maise in case I needed extra MP or SP, donned Monochrome's hood, and equipped my Storm Visage.

As ready as I could possibly be, I walked out and started speaking. "B3, Azurite, calm down. They clearly lost all will to—"

"I-IT'S THE LEADER OF THE MONSTEEERS!"

"MOMMYYYYY!" The bandits looked even more terrified than before — screaming, fainting, falling to the ground and grinding their faces against it, or even trying to run despite being unable to even stand.

"...Why?" I tilted my head in confusion. They acted as if they'd just seen something even scarier than the other three.

"Your appearance took it to the next level..." Nemesis sighed.

"...Is it that bad? Even compared to them?" I wanted to argue, but the terrorized bandits acted as compelling proof.

Thus, the bandits, terrified by our appearances, gave up without a fight.

...I'm so lost right now, I thought.

We bound the bandits and waited for knights from the capital to come retrieve them.

The tough ropes we used, by the way, were acquired by me rolling the gacha.

At the moment, Azurite was using her Truth Discernment to question them.

Apparently, they'd only made their banditry debut this very day. They were basically a bunch of village delinquents, and they hadn't even finished leveling a single low-rank job.

Well, considering that they gave up before anyone was hurt, they would probably be released with just some community service.

...Attacking the acting ruler of Altar and a foreign prince at the same time, though, was actually a very grave crime; since they were traveling covertly, though, the bandits couldn't be punished for that. We'd asked Canglong if he was okay with this, and he approved.

They'd also learned their lesson. According to Azurite, they were pledging to lead honest lives once their punishment was over.

However, we had a little problem.

"W-We... We captured a Master and took him to our base," one of them said. There was another victim... and a Master, at that.

Apparently, the Master had surrendered without any resistance, making them overconfident and leading them to believe they could take on a carriage driven by a knight. But...

"A Master surrendered?" I asked.

"Y-Yes! He was a Master! There was one of 'em Crests on his hand!" That was strange. Again, these bandits weren't too strong. Even an ordinary member of the Gouz-Maise Gang was stronger than them. Anyone who could cross the Sauda Mountain Pass by themselves and deal with the monsters here would be able to deal with them, as well.

Maybe the Master just wanted to avoid fighting people.

"What's the Master doing right now?"

"He said we could collect a ransom for him, so we locked him in our base... it's a shack nearby." Ah-hah... He was probably planning to log out. We Masters could do that as long as we weren't interacting with anyone or bound in some way. If captured, we could undo our shackles and move to safety after logging out. It was a way of both avoiding conflict and escaping safely. Though a bit roundabout, that was probably the Master's intention.

It was safe to assume that he had already logged out and returned to safety.

...Though, for all we know, he could've been a total newbie who'd only surrendered and spoke of a ransom because he was panicking. He might've not realized that he could log out. Maybe he was even still sitting, terrified, back in their shack.

"Azurite—"

"We have some time until the knights come. I don't mind if you go check on him," she said, understanding me before I could even say anything.

"Thanks. I'm off."

And so, leaving the bandits to Azurite and B3, I traveled to their base. Riding Silver, I arrived at the shack in question in about five minutes. It was completely unlike the mountain fortress occupied by the Gouz-Maise Gang.

"Well, they *were* the most troublesome bandits in the kingdom," said Nemesis. "It isn't a fair comparison."

"That's true. Anyway..."

According to the bandits, they didn't leave any guards — only locked the place up. Sure enough, there was no one around, and the door sported a chain with a padlock on it.

I casually pulled on it, and my STR, buffed by Gardranda, instantly broke it.

"...Is the Master still inside?" I asked as I gently pulled on the door.

However, something inside kept it from opening.

"Who is it?" a voice from inside asked. It was far more composed than I expected.

"Uh... I'm an Altarian Master who caught the bandits. I came to help."

"Ohh, thank you. I'm a bit busy right now, so feel free to come in and wait a moment."

...Just to make sure, I'm here to help someone in need, right? I wondered. I pulled on the door again, and it seemed like whatever was holding it shut was gone.

I was still careful, in case this was a trap. "...Pardon the intrusion," I said.

"...Is that truly the correct thing to say here?" Nemesis asked. Inside, I saw a person sitting on the bed ahead.

It was a black-haired man slightly older than me. Pen in hand, he was writing something down on his memo pad. Seemingly in high-spirits, he didn't even glance at us, as though focused entirely on what he was doing.

No. That wasn't right. We weren't the only thing he wasn't looking at — he wasn't looking at anything at all.

His eyes were closed even as he was writing.

This strange sight left me speechless.

He continued writing for a good few minutes before...

"This gave me some excellent ideas," he said. "I can't wait for the result."

Finally, he opened his eyes, showing his golden pupils.

Then, he took photos of what he'd written down.

I was aware that photos you took in *Dendro* could be uploaded to devices on the other side as images. It wasn't a function I'd ever used, but I could tell that he was really familiar with it.

"Oh, sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "I was on a bit of a writing spree." Once he was done taking photos, he finally faced me. "You have my thanks for saving me."

...That's kind of a strange thing to say in this situation, I thought.

Well, perhaps the gratitude was expected, but I'd just watched him lose himself in whatever he was doing to the extent that he hadn't even looked at us. He probably didn't need to be "saved" by anyone. The most likely situation here was that...

"Umm, I'll be blunt... You let yourself get kidnapped, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered without hesitation.

It was more or less what I expected, considering how composed he was and how experienced he looked.

“...Why did you do that?”

“To acquire material,” he answered. “I happen to be an author in real life.”

“...An author?”

“Yes. I let myself be abducted to further my search for writing material.”

Hearing that made me think of a certain party member of mine — Marie. She was a mangaka, and I’d heard that she was logging in to *Dendro* and roleplaying as an assassin for work-related research. It wasn’t surprising that there were more people out there like her.

“You can’t experience being captured by bandits in real life, can you?” he asked.

“Well... I guess not?”

At least not in Japan, I thought. *I got captured by Amazons in South America once, though.*

“People have the power of imagination, but it’s more difficult to imagine something you haven’t experienced and digested with your own brain. Each and every word and sight you experience first hand feeds your imagination.”

I could understand his point well enough. People could only really imagine what they saw, heard, and felt for themselves. Words you’ve never heard could never surface in your mind.

“And this is why I am here,” he said. “There are just far too many experiences that can only be acquired in this world.”

“...That’s true.” I did agree with him. There were indeed many things, both good and bad, that existed here, but not back on Earth.

“And that’s why being captured by the bandits was a precious experience to me... Oh, speaking of the bandits, how will they be punished?”

“Putting your situation aside, they’ll only get some community service.”

“Oh. I approve of that, too. I’m not entirely sure how Altar’s legal system works, but I won’t press charges. In fact, I would like to thank them.”

“I see... Hm?” His words just now made me feel like something wasn’t right... But why?

“That aside, I will take my leave now. Sorry for bothering you today.”

“Oh, no worries.”

"Pardon the late introduction, but my name is F. My job is High Secretary."

"Oh, right. I'm—"

"I know you. You're Ray Starling the Unbreakable, and Nemesis."

...That video really did make me more famous... or infamous... than ever, huh?

"I should also thank the bandits for giving me a chance to meet you. I'm so glad I was kidnapped."

That's not the kind of sentence you hear very often, but he seemed to mean it.

"I'll be going now. Let us meet again, if fate decrees it so," he said as he left the shack.

That was proof that he indeed had the power to walk through this mountain pass on his own.

I watched as he disappeared in the woods.

"Why the serious look?" Nemesis asked.

"I feel like I know someone with a similar vibe to him," I said. He reminded me of someone, but I couldn't put my finger on who.

"Is it not Marie? Authors and mangaka are similar professions, no?"

They have a similar reason for playing and share a similar "indifference," but I feel like Marie's shadiness is different than his. And... something just doesn't feel right about him.

"There's no harm in wondering about him, but for now, we should go back. The capital's knights should arrive at the carriage soon."

"...Yeah." We were currently on an escort quest to Gideon. I'd save thinking about F for later.

Chapter Two: Battle for the Penultimate Throne

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

We were greeted by Gideon's immense outer wall, which I was actually kind of nostalgic for at this point.

There were fireworks bursting up above the city as if it was New Year's. Did they have something to do with the upcoming battle between Tom and Kashimiya?

Once I led Azurite and Canglong to the count's mansion, the quest was complete. If you ignored the freezing cold atmosphere created by Azurite and B3, the sudden bandit attack, and the encounter with F, I would say that it was fairly uneventful.

When Azurite rewarded me, she said that she might call for me again tomorrow. Also, after both she and Canglong had entered the guest house, B3 heaved a particularly long, deep sigh. The trip seemed to have taken a heavy toll on her.

"...You were really tense, huh?" I asked.

"Of course I was. My position in Altar depended on how well that quest went," she said. "Unlike Eldridge, I actually want to stay in the kingdom."

Apparently, she thought she was on the verge of being added to the wanted list. Honestly, I really doubted that Azurite would go that far. It seemed like she was just trying to get a feel for Masters like B3..

Following the incident at Quartierlatin, Azurite had decided to rely more on Masters, but whether that went well depended on both tians and Masters, not just one side or the other.

Altar had both worlders and ludos, and each and every one had their own outlook. I'd heard that most of the participants in the previous war were worlders, but it was clear that the kingdom also needed the ludos to stand a chance in the upcoming round two.

This quest was like a test. She entrusted B3 — a ludo and a PK terrorist

— with an escort quest to see how she would behave. The dragon carriage thing might've been just a front. Even if B3's ride was insanely good, the kingdom surely had a fair amount of dragon carriages that would have been well-suited for this trip.

Then again, despite being a PK terrorist who turned into a bad guy when she donned her armor, B3 was a sensible person, so it was hard to say that Azurite had figured out what all ludos were like just by observing her. Even Logan had been acting on the will of the imperium, though, so perhaps you could say that as long as the reward was right, ludos might be even more eager to contribute than worlders. Regardless, this event might've been one of the factors that would ultimately decide Altar's guiding principles in the coming war.

We then went to meet up with Rook and the others.

The location was the same one we'd used when meeting up with Rook and Marie for the first time — the café with the open terrace.

"So I'll finally meet your party and brother," said B3 as we walked. "I'm a bit nervous."

I'd thought it would be great for her to join us on our ventures, and I'd already asked what she thought of that. She'd said that she hadn't had much to do lately after her clan disbanded, so she didn't mind joining us.

"Ah. We're here," I said, as we arrived.

"Ray! I haven't seen you in a while!" Rook called out with a smile. Marie sat next to him.

"It really has been a while, hasn't it, Rook. You too, Marie," I replied.

This reminded me that we hadn't met since the day our plans to go to the ocean were disrupted by Tsukikage kidnapping me. It was only a week in real life, or three weeks in-game, but I felt like it had been way longer than that.

"Ray... I'm glad you seem well," said Marie.

"You too... is what I'd like to say, but you actually don't look so great," I said, noting how tired she seemed to be.

"Well, I had this and that going on... Hm?"

Marie was usually like this when she either had too much Journalist work or was handling something Elizabeth-related, so with the match coming up and Elizabeth's arranged marriage, it could honestly be either.

Also, she was glaring behind me, for some reason. Why? It was just B3.

“By the way, where’s Shu?” I asked Rook.

“He left the city for some urgent business. I have the tickets.”

Urgent business? Here? As in, not in reality? What could it be?

“By the way, who is that armored person there?” he asked.

“Ohh, let me introduce her. This is B3, my senior in real life and... *armored*?”

It took Rook pointing it out for me to realize that B3 had used Instant Wear to switch from her normal clothing to Magnum Colossus.

She was giving off her usual violent aura, and it was clear that she was ready to fight. “So... I have to look at your ugly mug once again, you goddamn hitman RPer.”

“And you haven’t changed a bit, you villain RPer.” B3 and Marie glared at each other, clearly ready for murder. ...I could feel their bloodlust even past their armor and sunglasses.

They seemed to know each other... Well, they were both fellow PKs who took part in the blockade around the capital. It wasn’t *that* surprising that they would be acquainted.

“Do you know each other from the capital blockade?” I asked.

“As if,” they both said in unison.

Huh? I guessed wrong? I thought.

“She ambushed me after my clan disbanded... Sometime after whatever happened here in Gideon,” B3 explained

...Seriously? I was wondering why I saw Marie so rarely back then. Was that the reason?

“What an awful way to put it,” said Marie. “I put my PK job on hold after I joined your party, Ray, but I received a lot of requests from newbies who wanted me to get revenge on the PK at Sauda Mountain Pass.”

...That explained it. Though, I wasn’t sure what to think about someone hiring a PK who was just doing the exact same thing north of the city.

Then again, not everyone knew that the PK in the north was the Superior Killer...

“Umm, did she PK you?” I asked B3.

“Hell no. I held ’er off. It cost me a bunch of accessories and items, though.”

“The matchup isn’t in my favor,” Marie said. “My basic shots just fall to the ground, and even Daisy did almost nothing because of your elemental defense and Dragonscale Wards. And why were you wearing that armor like you were expecting an ambush?"

"I'm really damn used to PKs who attack outta nowhere."

"...Does she mean that wolf-eared musclebeast shotacon?" Nemesis wondered telepathically.

Each of those words totally fit Rosa, but stringing them all together is too much. Tone it down, I said.

"Ray was talkin' a lot about some 'Marie' person. Funny as shit that it turned out to be you. I'll settle the score before I join Ray's party," said B3.

"Fine by me," said Marie. "I still need to complete the hit. White, black, and blue should do the trick. Coincidentally, those are the colors *you're* going to be once I'm done."

B3 readied her shields, while Marie brandished her handgun and dagger.

I didn't think it was a good idea for the kingdom's top PKs to fight in town in broad daylight.

Oh, wait, I thought. *We're in Gideon.*

"Why not use an arena?" I asked.

"That wouldn't be PK, then, would it?!" they replied in unison again, totally rejecting my suggestion.

...Why are these two so in sync with each other?! Are they secretly close friends or something?!

"They are similar in personality, so perhaps this is less about their history with each other and more about simple hatred for one's own kind," Nemesis commented.

They're not that similar. I mean, aside from the fact that they're both bespectacled PKs who hide their identities and tend to reliably provide polite and thorough exposition.

"Umm, shouldn't you stop them?" Rook asked.

"I should. The PK seems unavoidable, but that's not something you do in the middle of a city."

Honestly, they should've been moving to some mountain far from civilization. But they were even more ready to fight than before, so there was no telling what might set them off now. It was clearly "kill or be killed" between them.

...Why was it that so many women around me seemed to have some kind of "battle switch" that made them hunger for conflict? My sister was the most obvious example.

"But how *can* I stop them?" I wondered only a moment before the presence of a third person startled me so much I let out a gasp.

I wasn't the only one who felt it. Nemesis, Rook, and even the two battle-crazed women were staring at the source of this presence.

Who could blame us? After all, it was more overpowering than even the women's bloodlust. As for who caused it... "I sense an overworld match. It's rare for them to happen outside of Tenchi."

It was a boy clad in woolly clothing, sporting blades that didn't suit his small frame and wearing an expression full of excitement for the upcoming bloodbath.

"I would like to take part in your overworld match," he said. "I haven't had one in a while now."

The boy was The Unsheath, Kashimiya "the Guillotine."

The bloodlust of *some* of the kingdom's greatest PKs attracted *the* greatest.

Needless to say, the battle was immediately called off. The two were aware how pointless it was to fight with Kashimiya present. I couldn't help but notice how they were rubbing the back of their necks sheepishly. Kashimiya, however, looked somewhat disappointed.

Anyway, though B3 and Marie's bloodbath had been called off, they still wanted to settle the score before joining the same party, so they'd decided to do it in the arena.

I considered watching their match, but Kashimiya stopped me, saying that he wanted to have a word with me. Apparently, he hadn't found us just by chance — he'd actually been looking for me or my acquaintances.

Whatever he wanted to talk about, it seemed pretty serious, so I entrusted Marie and B3 to Rook and talked to Kashimiya.

"So, what do you need?" I asked. My only real link to Kashimiya was the time Rosa attacked me on the way to Torne, but if that's what this was about, he would be better off talking to B3.

If it wasn't that, then what could it be?

"You recently defeated the Hell General, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yeah." Now I understood. Logan was a Dryfean Superior, as well as their top-ranking duelist... though, I'd heard that the King of Thieves had defeated him and taken his throne.

Did Kashimiya want to talk about him, as a fellow high-ranking duelist?

"I want to ask about the skill you used to defeat the Hell General," he said. "How fast can it get?"

Huh? That wasn't the kind of question I expected, I thought.

"I saw the video. I believe that the skill gains more speed and power the longer you charge it... do I have it right?"

He clearly meant Payback Beyond the Stars. Apparently, it wasn't Logan he cared about, but that particular skill of mine.

"Not exactly," I answered. "It does need to be charged, but it's for the process of converting the damage I received from the enemy into power, range, and speed. The speed is actually proportional to the damage taken."

I wondered if I should be revealing so much of my hand like this, but I figured that it was now public enough knowledge that people would have it figured out sooner or later; I decided to just come right out and say how it worked.

"I... actually don't know how fast it can become. When I used it against Logan, it had 60,000 AGI, but I'm pretty sure that's not the limit."

"Hmm..." Kashimiya pondered something for a moment before speaking, "Thank you, Mr. Ray, for explaining it to me, even if it meant revealing the nature of your ability. I'm indebted to you."

"Hey, don't be. People would've had it figured out in no time."

"Even so, I insist. Also, this might be impudent of me, but could I ask you a favor?"

"What, exactly?"

"When you have time, I would like you to use that skill on me in a mock battle." I'd sparred against rankers many times by now, so I had nothing against Kashimiya joining them. There were probably many things I could learn from the kingdom's third duel ranker and strongest PK.

But... why did he want me to use Payback Beyond the Stars?

"This might sound arrogant, but... I actually don't know anyone who's faster than me at the moment."

"...Which is why 'The Kingdom's Fastest' is another one of your nicknames, huh?"

"Exactly." B3 had told me that nobody could beat Kashimiya's speed. Even *the* Figaro was said to be far slower than him.

"However, cutting down those who are slower than me does not help me train to cut down those who are faster." That made sense. I'd more or less gotten the point.

Payback Beyond the Stars gained more speed the more damage I'd accumulated. Theoretically, if I took enough damage, I might be able to outpace even The Kingdom's Fastest. Kashimiya wanted to face that and maybe learn something new. The Unsheath was part of the "The One" series of jobs, so perhaps it had something to do with skill creation.

Personally, I didn't mind cooperating, but...

"Hmph. So you basically want him to act as your pitching machine," said Nemesis.

"Ah. Umm... I'm sorry!" Kashimiya apologized and bowed his head, feeling that he upset Nemesis somehow. Honestly, she *did* look slightly offended.

"Nemesis?"

"Just think about it, Ray. Just how badly would he have to cut you up to get the speed he needed?"

"...Ohh." That *was* a problem. The very fact that we were talking about this meant that he was at least faster than Figaro. It was possible that I would have to take 1,000,000 damage to reach his speed.

"By the way, what's your AGI?" I asked.

"Normally, it's 5,000." *Huh? That's unexpectedly slow...* "But it's 500,000 when I'm using the art of sword drawing."

...Scratch that. What the hell is with that speed?! And what's with the giant gap between the two numbers?!

"...To pass that with our skill, we'd have to take 5,000,000 damage," I said.

"Oh... that doesn't work," Kashimiya replied. Even at my current HP, that would mean basically dying hundreds of times. How long would it take and how many potions would I have to drink? It was best to not even think about it.

"Cutting you up that much would be inappropriate, so never mind about that..."

"Yeah, thanks." Not even I could handle all that. It'd turn me into mincemeat.

Anyway, though we wouldn't be doing everything he asked, we did agree to have a mock battle sometime. New sparring partners were always good in my book.

I decided to hang around and chat until the three who'd gone off to the arena returned. I did consider going to watch, but I didn't know which one they'd be using... and honestly, I was kinda scared of seeing what was going on there.

"Hm..." As we talked, I belatedly noticed something about Kashimiya. His weapons were enormous katana — *odachi* — linked to chains capped off by decorations shaped like rabbit and shark skulls. He had two of them, both of which had the rabbit skull biting into it. They were about ten centimeters longer than Kashimiya was tall.

Such large weapons were clearly unfitting for a boy his age, and he seemed on the smaller side, too.

I also didn't forget that Kashimiya's job was The Unsheath. That was a job focused around *iai* — the art of drawing the sword, cutting down the opponent, and quickly resheathing it. Not even a full-grown man could do that with odachi like these, and he was just a boy.

"Umm, is there something wrong with my swords?" Kashimiya asked, curious why I was staring.

"I'm just wondering how you can perform iais with those."

"Everyone does..." So I wasn't the only one with this question.

However, the answer that followed made me somewhat confused.

"When I demonstrate, people don't even see it..."

"What?"

"It seems to be caused by the difference in AGI." He'd said that his was 500,000. It'd gotten him the title of "The Kingdom's Fastest," so it wasn't that weird that no one else could perceive it when he employed his sword skill.

"Hey, what was that about your AGI being different when you're drawing your sword?" I asked.

"It's the effect of 'Godlike Unsheathing.' That's the ultimate passive skill of The Unsheath, and it multiplies my AGI by 100 *only while I'm unsheathing a blade*."

That made sense to me. Real life experts of iai were said to be able to do it so fast that it looked like the sword never even left the sheath, and this skill was basically that taken to the extreme. My guess was that he could instantly cut down anyone who entered his range. It was a potent skill indeed, but like I’d been told, it seemed to be a bad match for Tom.

If it ended after the first swing, he wouldn’t be able to get rid of all eight Toms at once.

“All right, I get that you’re too fast for anyone to see you draw them, but how *do* you draw them? I mean, your arms aren’t even long enough to pull them all the way out, right?”

Kashimiya nodded in response and stood up.

“Well, I can show you how I am *before* I draw them, so let me demonstrate.”

Saying that, he assumed a posture.

It seemed to be a sword-drawing stance, but it was odd. His left hand — which would normally be holding onto the sheath — was just hanging in the air. His right hand, however, was on the grip, where it was supposed to be.

Just as I was thinking that unsheathing the sword would be impossible like that, the chains connecting Kashimiya’s waist with the blade began moving on their own.

The rabbit skull-shaped holder bit into and held the sword’s sheath in the air. It was as though the chains were taking over the left hand’s role and holding the sheath for him. Was this his...?

“You haven’t seen anything like this before, have you? This ‘tachio’... sword strap is my Embryo, Inaba.”

Inaba... as in the Hare of Inaba, clearly.

The long chains fixed the sheathed odachi in the air — specifically, at a level that made it easy for Kashimiya to unsheath it.

“A chain... no... an auxiliary arm Embryo.”

“Yes.” That answered that question. These chains explained why Kashimiya, who was small even for a boy of his young age, was able to unsheath these large blades. With support from something like this, even children were able to perform iais. Aside from the strange quirk of replacing his left arm with a chain, his stance was quite masterful.

His aura was so intense that it was hard to believe it came from a young child. My survival instincts were raising the alarm, warning me that my head could be on the ground the very next moment. This was probably what B3 and Marie had sensed.

“Thanks,” I said. “Now I get how you draw your sword.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad I was able to answer your question.”

He then relaxed his stance, instantly dispersing the tense atmosphere around him. Maybe he was releasing a surge of some sort of “grandmaster swordsman’s essence” or something.

...Why was an elementary schooler capable of anything “grandmaster?”

Then again, the world of *Dendro* was no stranger to outliers of any age.

“Also, if you don’t mind me satisfying my curiosity... are these odachi both MVP special rewards?” I asked. The two blades in different sheaths — one red and one blue — seemed to have an unusual presence. The red one in particular gave me a feeling similar to what I’d felt when looking at Figaro’s Gloria α and Xunyu’s Suling Yi. If the chain was his Embryo, were the weapons special rewards?

“This one is like a special reward, yes, but the other one was crafted for me by a smith I knew back in Tenchi.” The former was the red one, while the latter was the blue one. “It’s made out of Mythical metal. It’s very reliable and it helps me a lot in duels and the like,” the boy added, all smiles, while holding the odachi with the blue sheath.

There was a subtlety there that I definitely noticed.

“You can’t say the same about the one with the red sheath?” I asked. It was as though he’d said that it was unreliable and didn’t help him in duels.

“This one... It gets moody when I try to use it inside duel barriers.”

...So, it has a mind of its own? Is it cursed or something? I wondered.

“Perhaps it’s of the same kind as Gardranda?” Nemesis commented telepathically. “The bracers aren’t saying anything now, but they do possess intelligence, yes?”

Oh yeah, they were much like that.

“So, when you fight Tom tonight...”

“I won’t use it. Mostly because I won’t be able to. I just accept that, though. It’s a blade that doesn’t leave its sheath unless it will be used in a real battle to the death, or at least an overworld match against a Master.”

What a blood-crazed hunk of metal... “But then, how do you repair it?” I asked.

Or is it best maintained by cutting living creatures? That’d fit a cursed blade perfectly.

“No. It does come out for maintenance. Like so,” he said, taking out maintenance equipment such as Japanese paper, a pot of oil, and polishing powder before removing the odachi from the red sheath without any issue at all.

It was a fancier blade than I'd realized. It had an intimidating aura, and the "Horobimaru" kanji on the blade made it look pretty cool, but I couldn't help but feel like I was looking at an unruly pet that became obedient at the promise of treats.

We talked for quite a bit longer before Kashimiya stood up.

"I will be leaving now. Thank you for talking to me today," he said.

"No problem. I'm looking forward to your match against Tom, as well as our mock battles."

"Same here! I'm looking forward to them, as well!" he said, beaming. It made him look like an ordinary boy his age... and a really good kid in general.

...But that just made the bloodlust he'd given off seem all the more out of place.

"If I may ask before you leave," Nemesis spoke up. "Do you wish to fight those stronger than yourself for the purpose of skill-crafting?"

"Yes."

"I assume you would create a powerful speed-based skill you can use against Tom?" As far as I knew, Kashimiya had lost against Tom several times now, and the reason for this was Tom's Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin.

That was the fearsome ultimate skill that allowed Tom to split into eight different people, as long as one of the eight was still alive. Kashimiya had nothing that could counter it, so he'd suffered multiple defeats against Tom by now.

With that in mind, trying to develop a counter was indeed a very good way of preparing for the... fight... Hm?

Nemesis, that can't be right. While we were still considering it, Kashimiya said that he wanted me to help whenever I had free time. Therefore, the skill he would make wouldn't be for use against Tom.

"That isn't exactly the case," said Kashimiya. "That isn't why I want to craft a new skill."

"Really?"

"Also... *I already have a counter*."

"Eh?" question marks appeared above our heads.

"I already have a means to remove all eight heads of the Monster Cat Mansion." He said that as casually as he would speak about buying groceries for dinner, looking completely certain of his victory.

His attitude didn't match the carefree words at all, however.

"I'll show you the skill in today's match. I'm sorry if you don't see it," Kashimiya said before bowing and leaving.

From the back, he looked just like a small child. However, the intimidating aura he'd given off when he mentioned that he had a counter to Tom was much like the one I'd felt when I'd first met Xunyu before The Clash of the Superiors... only even more deadly.

"...The world is truly full of absurd children," said Nemesis.

"...Indeed it is," I nodded before sighing in relief as tension left my body.

◇

After Kashimiya left, Rook and the others returned. It... didn't look like the issues between Marie and B3 had totally vanished, but at least they had nothing against partying up now.

For the record, I didn't ask which one of them won. I felt like that would be like throwing fuel on some still-hot embers.

Anyway, with all four of us here, we headed to the central arena.

"So Shu's been training you since then, huh?" I asked.

"Yes!" Rook replied. "Ah, but... it was hellish." He remembered something that made the smile on his face vanish.

O, dear brother of mine, do not cast my friend into hell, I thought.

"After the battle training, I just did some powerleveling," he continued.

"What level are you now?" I asked. With my Paladin level at 100 and Prism Rider level at 40, my total level was now 140. As a low-rank job, Prism Rider was capped at 50, but I still hadn't decided what I would take after I maxed it out.

"My total level is 290. My current main job, High Tamer, is at level 40. I already maxed out Tamer and Harlot."

...He's more than double my level! I thought in shock. This gave me flashbacks to the time before we partied up at the capital. "I know I've got college and stuff, but he's *so* far ahead of me now," I muttered.

“...Rook always gets stronger so fast that we don’t even notice it,” Nemesis added, and I was inclined to agree. I could totally imagine coming back to find him with all his low and high-rank jobs maxed out... or perhaps even with a Superior Job.

His “Harlot” job made me raise an eyebrow, but apparently he’d taken it because it offered a passive skill which increased the success rate of Charm. That skill, along with his tamed monsters, was his lifeline, so I could understand his reasoning.

“During this round of powerleveling, I used XP-increasing items and traveled through high monster population areas with Babi and the others. I still had money from the incident a month ago.”

“XP-increasing items... Didn’t know they existed.”

“Oh no no,” said Marie. “Just so you know, even with an XP boost, you never get levels as fast as Rookie did. If XP boosts were that powerful, Journalists would be in higher demand.”

So they weren’t that extreme, huh?

“I just had lots of free time. After the incident with Gerbera, I spent about five real life days not sleeping or resting so I could just hunt constantly... I’m actually kinda sleepy... right... now...” Rook said, his head wobbling like it had earlier.

“Hey! Take care of your body, damn it! That can’t be good for the real you!” I cried out.

“I did some training to help me stay active for longer without sleeping. I’m totally finay and oke.”

“Now you’re not even speaking properly!” Nothing ever showed on his face, so you could never tell if something was wrong with him!

“I’m not getting much sleep, either,” said Marie. “I’ve been busy with preparations recently...”

“Preparations? You’re gonna cover today’s big duel?” I asked.

“No. This is for the DIN-sponsored... Oh dear, I can’t say that yet.”

“Well, that’s fine, I guess. I did notice that you looked tired, though. So that’s what it’s about, huh? I assumed it was related to either the duel or Elizabeth’s marriage interview.”

Marie and Elizabeth were close, so I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d been asked to do something for the interview. “There’s some ordinary journalists covering today’s duel... Wait. Hold on a second. *What did you* *just say?*" Marie grabbed me by my scruff and glared at me.

I'm scared.

"On my way back here, I was acting as Azurite's... the first princess' and the third prince of Huang He's bodyguard," I explained. "During our chats, I learned that Elizabeth and the prince would be having a formal marriage interview."

At hearing this, Marie buried her face in her hand and threw her head back.

"Ellie's... going to a... marriage interview... engagement... marriage... birth... They're rushing things! Big sis doesn't approve!"

"You're the one rushing through this with all those predictions... And her big sis is Azurite, not you."

"GHAH!" Marie heard my response and collapsed where she stood.

"...I know you get along with Elizabeth, but does this really hit you *that* hard?" And so, carrying Marie — who was mumbling something to herself — we went to the arena.

We gathered into a box seat like the one we'd used last time and waited for the duel to begin.

Marie was still moaning and mumbling, and I occasionally heard some terrifying words, like "Third prince... assassination... engagement canceled..."

Please don't cause an international incident. Azurite will die inside, I thought.

"Also, you're already talking about engagement, but so far they're just at the marriage interview stage," I said.

"Ngh... I'll hope that Ellie has good taste in men."

...If she does, then you better prepare to congratulate them on their engagement.

Canglong was extremely mature and stable for someone his age, and they would no doubt make a fine couple. ...As long as Marie didn't assassinate him, anyway.

"Well, this is a negotiation between a prince and a princess. All we can do is watch how it pans out."

"Nngh... Ellie..." Marie groaned as she rolled on the ground, took out a sketchbook, and began drawing a portrait of a girl — most likely Elizabeth.

...Am I looking at a person with a strange kind of sister complex? I

wondered.

“More like a lolita co—”

Nemesis, some things need to be left unsaid.

Anyway, we had about half an hour until the main event started, so I decided to buy some drinks and snacks. Marie was still sulking, while Rook and Babi were napping. I didn’t feel good about leaving B3 there all by herself, so I had Nemesis keep her company.

As I walked towards the store, I noticed the central arena’s reception area.

It was taking the final bets for the coming main event. The odds were 1.3x for Tom and 5.5x for Kashimiya. It reminded me of the odds I’d seen for The Clash of the Superiors, but those had been affected by Figaro being the local favorite.

The difference here was purely due to their battle history and abilities. Kashimiya had lost against Tom all four times he’d challenged him. Apparently, he was so unable to deal with Tom’s ability to multiply and split that almost nobody had any hopes for a Kashimiya victory.

Also, it was widely known that Kashimiya had been inactive for a time, so most were predicting that Tom would just win again.

...Since I was here already, I figured I might as well bet on one of them.

The odds and the info available made it seem like Tom was the likely winner... but I couldn’t help but consider what Kashimiya said to me.

That had been no bluff. I could tell that he was at least confident in his victory.

“Well, I guess I’ll bet on... *him*.” I eventually just let my intuition guide me and went through the betting process. Though, I did make sure to bet less than I had on Figaro.

“...Huh?” After betting, I checked today’s notice board and saw info about the semi-event, the betting for which was already over. I’d focused so much on the main event that I completely forgot the semi-event, which also happened to involve names I knew well.

Fallen Knight, Juliet VS Nobushi Princess, Rosa.

I returned to the box to see that the semi-event had already begun.

“TCH! It’s really damn annoyin’ how you’re scamperin’ about, Juliet!”

“Blackwing Requiem!” Rosa was clad in the exoskeleton created by the ultimate skill she’d employed against us, as well. Juliet, on the other hand, was attacking her with dark elemental magic attacks from the air, where Rosa couldn't reach her.

We had experienced first-hand just how tough Rosa's exoskeletons were, but the dark elemental black orbs released by Juliet's feathers were dealing steady damage to her.

The main quality of dark elemental magic was its anti-life properties. It dealt nearly no damage to objects, but in exchange for not being effective against as wide a range of targets, it could ignore most physical defenses when it did deal damage. Apparently, it would fare differently against magical barriers or its natural enemy — light — but in this case, where the opponent was *merely* clad in tough armor, it bypassed that almost as if it didn't exist. With Rosa being so focused on the physical defense from her exoskeletons, it was fair to say that this matchup was in Juliet's favor.

Rosa, on the other hand, couldn't even bring Juliet down to the close range that she specialized in. Her only means of fighting were jumping or throwing her spear, but that was far from enough to make up for the gap in mobility created by Hræsvelgr, which allowed Juliet to fly around freely.

It was clear who had the upper hand in both offense and defense.

"...I can see why the odds were 1.2x against 5.6x." Rosa had had a chance here. The Nobushi Princess ultimate job skill, A Kill Supreme, was the most damaging skill in Rosa's arsenal, and with duels disallowing Brooches, that skill could end it all right away.

However, the fact that the battle was still continuing was proof that she had missed. A Kill Supreme was a surprise attack skill, after all, so it was probably hard to land it from the front.

Juliet still hadn't used her ultimate skill. She was fully focused on evasion and long-range dark elemental magic attacks.

"She looks used to this," commented Nemesis. "They're fourth and fifth in the rankings. I suppose they fight quite often?"

"They do. Rosa's challenged the Black Crow many times now," said B3. "If she takes fourth, she'll be right next to Kashimiya in third, you know?"

"A wolf-eared musclebeast stalker shotacon to the core, eh?"

"...You added a new word to that!" I shouted.

"All of those words do apply to her, but I recommend against actually saying that in front of her." Anyway, the duel continued, but Juliet still seemed to have the advantage.

One of the reasons for this was Rosa's lack of composure.

Like B3 mentioned, if Kashimiya won his battle today, he would be second in the rankings. Was she acting like this because she feared Kashimiya might be even further away from her if that happened?

Regardless, Juliet, being the skilled ranker that she was, was taking advantage of every opening created by Rosa's panic, slowly but surely chipping away at her HP.

And once it reached a certain threshold...

"Corpse-Eating Bird — Hræsvelgr!"

...Juliet used her ultimate skill to finish her off.

It created a black tornado combining the power of dark and wind magic.

A direct hit from that quickly ended the fight... Or so I thought.

"That's... the skill from back then!" Rosa's body, which had been bleeding within the tornado, had been replaced by a decoy before anyone realized it.

That was the special reward she'd used when she'd attacked us, too.

"Aren't these kinds of items forbidden in duels?" I asked.

"You can't use Lifesaving Brooches, Dragonscale Wards, or consumable restoration items," B3 said. "But special rewards are exceptions."

That reminded me that Figaro's Closer had worked just like that.

"More importantly, Rosa is now... there, eh?" B3 was looking behind Juliet.

Now without her exoskeleton, she was brandishing her spear — Gashadokuro.

"Backslayer!" Rosa used an active skill which, according to B3, increased damage when attacking from behind, and thrust Gashadokuro forward. The damage was great enough to pierce even through the hardy armored gothic-style dress that Juliet was wearing.

Because she was still using her ultimate skill, Juliet couldn't dodge it. The tornado channeled through her arms vanished, and Juliet collapsed towards the stage. But just then, she grabbed hold of Gashadokuro with both arms.

"The Darkness of Valediction." Once she'd used that skill, a black, mud-like darkness began to creep up Gashadokuro's handle.

The Darkness of Valediction was an active skill from the Dark Knight grouping, and it was basically the opposite of the Purifying Silverlight we

Paladins had. In exchange for some of the Dark Knight's HP, it briefly cursed the weapon they wielded. Since Dark Knights could overcome curses, it essentially allowed them to increase the power of their weapons...

"Shit! You got me with this one...!"

...as well as make an enemy's weapon completely unusable. Once cursed, Gashadokuro couldn't even be used by its Master. If Rosa tried, she would be subjected to curses that, among other things, limited her movements and continuously reduced her HP.

I had been in serious danger when Juliet had used it against me in one of our mock battles. If I hadn't used Purifying Silverlight, Nemesis would've been cursed, too.

Being a vanguard build, Nobushi Princess, Rosa, didn't have Purifying Silverlight or any uncurse skill, and consumables like Holy Water weren't allowed in duels. Thus, the only way for her to deal with the curse was to let go of her Embryo.

"Tch!" Rosa let go of Gashadokuro and used Instant Equip to take out a spare spear, but then...

"Reverse Crusade!"

...a black light — dark elemental energy that chipped life away — surged out from the surface.

This was the Dark Knight's equivalent of a Paladin's Grand Cross — their ultimate job skill. Caught in the torrent of darkness, Rosa lost HP and mobility all at once.

While that was happening, Juliet took out a small, bag-like inventory with her left hand, and cut it open with the sword in her right. Once broken, the bag released an enormous amount of cursed weapons, swathed in black or red auras.

Either gathered by Juliet or simply cursed by her afterwards, they were all cursed blades... and her bullets.

"Cursed Phalanx..." Juliet pointed the tip of the sword in her right hand towards Rosa, still bound and unable to move in the torrent of darkness. "...DISORDER!" She unleashed her skill, *launching* the many cursed weapons littered about the arena.

This was the ultimate job skill of the Fallen Knight: Cursed Phalanx Disorder. It was a truly devastating, expensive ability that, in exchange for the user's HP and MP, animated those bloodthirsty weapons, setting them all on the enemy. It basically turned them into homing missiles. The cursed weapons were akin to crazed beasts, moving in chaotic patterns as they went to bite into their target — in this case, Rosa.

"UOAAAGHH!" Rosa somehow jumped clear of the Reverse Crusade's torrent and used the spear she had equipped to try and fend off the cursed weapons coming her way.

I couldn't tell whether she was just that good of a fighter or if she was simply being stubborn. Even though she was wounded by many of the weapons, she managed to parry the ones that would have killed her. Which would give out first: Juliet's curses, or Rosa's HP?

Beyond the curtain of cursed weaponry, Juliet stood, joining her hands as though preparing to use Corpse-Eating Bird — Hræsvelgr again.

"Huh...?!" Rosa looked at her in shock, seemingly unable to believe that Juliet could cast her ultimate skill *again* after all that.

It was just a bluff, though. Neither the cooldown nor her mana reserves allowed Juliet to cast her ultimate skill again.

The bluff was enough to distract Rosa, however. Using this opening, a single cursed weapon pierced her abdomen.

It was none other than the newly-cursed Gashadokuro.

For all I knew, she might've been unable to sense it coming because it was her own weapon.

Regardless, the attack was fatal, and it paved the way for more weapons to strike home.

"Liberation!"

And then Juliet used the final skill, releasing all the curses within her arsenal and obliterating Rosa in a massive explosion.

Thus, Juliet emerged victorious.

Considering that she was above Rosa in rank and the matchup definitely favored her, this result was expected. Still, the ability, technique, and strategy involved in this battle was extremely high-level.

"She really made good use of her ultimate job skill, didn't she?" said B3.

"She did," I nodded. "Though, honestly, she might've lost without it."

This was my second time seeing the Fallen Knight's ultimate job skill. The first time was during a mock battle, when she'd used it to utterly defeat me.

Though, from what I could recall, that skill was what she called her "secret weapon." She'd told me that it was an ace up her sleeve she would eventually use against Kashimiya or Tom, and that she hadn't used it in any public matches.

That was probably why she'd tested it in a mock battle against me — a non-ranker.

Of course, she'd told me to be quiet about it. "In regards to my most esoteric of powers, I seek nothing less than supreme silence. Exchange with me a blood vow that it shall never reach the ears of worldlings," she'd said, which basically meant, "It's a secret! Pinky promise!"

The fact Juliet had used it against Rosa — a challenger — rather than someone who was higher in the rankings, meant that she'd been backed into quite a precarious situation.

Rosa's substituting special reward and Juliet's ultimate job skill. In a way, this was a battle where both sides bared their abilities to each other and fought as hard as they could. The performance was definitely worthy of praise and applause.

And with the semi-event over, it was time for the match between Tom and Kashimiya.

"TO THE EAST! WE HAVE THE CHALLENGEEERRR! THE THIRD IN THE DUEL RANKINGS... THE UNSHEATH, KASHIMIYAAAAAAAAA!" As the announcer finished, a plume of smoke appeared around the western entrance.

The stage of the central arena had two entrances — one to the west and one to the east — and the east one was usually used by the challenger. During The Clash of the Superiors, Xunyu had entered through the east, as well. Kashimiya now did the same.

At his sides, Kashimiya had an odachi in a blue sheath and another sword about the same size in a green sheath. Since he couldn't use the red one in duels with barriers, he must've taken the green one as a substitute.

"TO THE WEST! WE HAVE THE SECOND IN THE DUEL RANKINGS... THE LYNX, TOM! CAAAAAAAAAAT!" Tom entered from the west. He looked the same as he had in Quartierlatin, complete with the fat cat — Grimalkin — on his head. Naturally, there was still just one of him.

The two gathered on the stage, set the duel rules, and made some distance between them.

All that was left was to wait for the start of the match.

Kashimiya's chains were already floating, and he was ready to draw his sword.

"Logically speaking, Kashimiya will move the moment the match starts," B3 said as we all waited eagerly.

"I don't know much about Tom Cat... but I did hear the rumors, particularly the one that says that your only chance at beating him is right as the match begins."

"...I see." Tom's multiplication was a result of his ultimate skill, Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin, which he couldn't activate before the match actually started. It was reasonable to argue that if you were able to defeat him *before* he used it, you wouldn't have to deal with his clones. It seemed obvious, really, but so far, no one had actually been able to do it.

Tom surely had something that let him survive long enough to activate the skill. In fact, it had to be so potent that it couldn't even be overcome by Kashimiya's insane slashing speeds.

Or had Kashimiya developed something that had allowed him to shatter Tom's defense? As I was considering that... the moment finally arrived.

"LET THE MATCH... BEGIN!" The moment the start of the duel was announced, Tom threw Grimalkin into the air.

"Hm...?" Kashimiya, on the other hand, wasn't moving at all.

"...Why?" This moment was said to be his only chance, yet he did absolutely nothing.

He was only waiting for Tom to finish splitting.

"Now dance, Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin." Apparently, even Tom was bracing for Kashimiya to act right away, and was confused when he didn't.

Regardless, he'd instantly activated the skill, and the Grimalkin he'd thrown into the air to keep him safe became Tom. Both then split again, until finally there were eight of him. Now, Kashimiya had to defeat them all faster than they could multiply.

However, he hadn't moved at all, even though Tom's preparations were already complete.

Tom seemed to find it strange, as well. He sent one of himself to act as a scout. He moved so fast that he became a blur despite the slowdown from the barrier, but once he was close to Kashimiya, *his head fell off and* *vanished*.

The barrier had slowed it all down, but I couldn't even see what happened anyway.

"...What was that?" I couldn't see the moment the blade was unsheathed. It went from its sheath to fully drawn as if I was seeing it frame-by-frame... and Tom — who was moving at supersonic speeds, by the way — simply no longer had a head.

Tom quickly multiplied and recreated the eighth, but if Kashimiya's opponent had been anyone else, this battle would've already been over.

Tom was best known for his clones, but he was powerful even when he was alone. He was a Superior Job holder with a lot of battle experience, and even without his clones, he would still be a highly ranked duelist.

Despite that, Kashimiya the Guillotine instantly chopped his head off.

"Did Kashimiya remove all of Tom's HP with just a single hit?"

"That's not exactly right, Nemesis. I'm pretty sure that what killed him was an injury-based debuff."

Some of the first status effects I'd ever had were Broken Left Arm and Broken Right Leg, so honestly, it wouldn't be that strange if there was a Severed Neck debuff. Its effect as a debuff? Instant death, of course. ...It was basically the human equivalent of targeting a monster's core.

"So he lopped off the defenseless head with his speed alone, eh?" Nemesis continued. "But wouldn't that not work on people with high END, or those clad in armor?"

The one to answer that question was B3.

"In eastern swordfighting, there's a passive skill called 'Blade Speed-Through.' If the opponent wasn't able to defend against your attack, the opponent would lose END equal to 10% of your AGI multiplied by your skill level."

So, with 1,000 AGI and skill level 1, the opponent would lose 100 END, and with skill level 10, it would be 1,000 END.

"Kashimiya almost certainly has this skill maxed out at 10," she continued. "However, the speed of Kashimiya's blade is already so insane that END basically doesn't exist for him."

"...By the way, can the END go below 0?" I asked.

"That's the only saving grace of that skill." It was hard for me to imagine what having a negative END would be like, but apparently, Kashimiya's attacks couldn't do that to you.

"You said it reduces END, so I assume the defense from armor stays the same?" Rook asked.

"Yes. However, Kashimiya also has the attack power of his weapons. With all those unsheathing-based active skills on his attacks, it's difficult to withstand them with just defense from equipment... He could even cut through my Magnum Colossus, unless I used Astro Guard." B3 spoke, rubbing her neck.

The match continued even as she explained the situation.

Kashimiya returned the blade that had felled Tom's head back to its sheath, then became immobile again as though waiting for something.

What could it be?

"Sgh!" Since Kashimiya remained immobile, Tom moved first.

The eight Toms all equipped bows, throwing knives, and other mid-range weapons. At supersonic speeds, they split up and moved to encircle Kashimiya.

Kashimiya's silence and stillness was contrasted with the sound of Toms' feet hitting the stage as he ran. Tom continued to attack him from a distance, watching out for Kashimiya's techniques, but Kashimiya evaded them all with only slight movements of his body.

However, Tom anticipated his movements and released a focused attack from an angle he thought would make it impossible for Kashimiya to evade. For a moment, I pictured Kashimiya with tons of arrows and knives stuck in him...

"Hareshark Nullstep."

...but, for a brief moment, a magic circle with patterns reminiscent of sharks appeared beneath his feet. The next moment, Kashimiya appeared several dozen metels away... *right next to a Tom.*

This was followed by the Tom's head falling to the ground.

"Was that... teleportation?" When I'd first encountered Kashimiya, he'd appeared before me seemingly out of nowhere, just as he had just now. He probably used the same skill as he had that time, but as far as I knew, only ultimate skills were powerful enough to allow you to teleport. But that name clearly wasn't that of an ultimate skill.

"Hareshark Nullstep," B3 said. "That's Kashimiya's Embryo's — Inaba's — active skill."

I appreciated the explanation.

"With Brother Bear not present and Maria being useless, B3's explanations sure are welcome," said Nemesis telepathically.

Yeah, I thought. *And man, I sure have a lot of explainers around me.*

"The shark-like magic circle that appeared below him for a moment is basically a moving floor." She called it "shark-like," but honestly, I couldn't actually get a good look at it, myself.

"So it's not teleportation?"

"No. It's not nearly as useful. In fact, for an Embryo's unique skill, it's extremely lackluster."

"Lackluster?"

"All it does is let you move at speeds allowed by your AGI without actually using your legs. The benefit is that as long as you're inside the circle, you aren't subjected to air resistance or inertia and can move while maintaining your unsheathing stance. In the hands of anyone but Kashimiya, it would be a very unremarkable skill."

It let you move without using your legs, but your speed didn't change, huh? Well, that did sound like an unremarkable skill, but...

"So it would be unremarkable if Kashimiya wasn't The Unsheath, huh?"

"Yes." With Godlike Unsheathing, Kashimiya's AGI reached 500,000 whenever he was drawing his sword. So, if he timed his Hareshark Nullstep movements with the motion for unsheathing, the AGI used for the skill would be 500,000. That made it extremely easy to approach the enemy and slice their head off.

"...On the other hand, Tom's dealt with this skill many times now, huh?" At the same time, I now understood why Tom didn't just attack Kashimiya with all the clones at once. Tom made best use of his regeneration ability by leaving one of him in safety while letting the other seven fight, even if it costs them their lives, but with Kashimiya's movement ability, that was a bad idea.

It wasn't impossible for Kashimiya to cut down all the Toms ganging up on him, then use Hareshark Nullstep to cover the distance between him and the final clone to kill him, as well. Kashimiya had two odachis, as well as four arms, counting his own and his Embryo. It wouldn't be hard for him to slash twice in a row.

Tom was aware of this, and that was why he didn't fight him by ganging up on him, instead electing to keep his distance. Kashimiya was only fast while he was unsheathing, so his super speed on Hareshark Nullstep also couldn't last forever. Unless at least one Tom was in range, Kashimiya couldn't cut down all of them.

"This battle would've been long over if he was fighting anyone else but Tom." Kashimiya's ability was nearly a match even for those of the Superiors I knew. In fact, if he fought Logan, he could easily break through the devil army and decapitate him.

I now understood why Juliet and the other rankers said that Kashimiya was the true second strongest ranker. If compatibility hadn't gotten in the way, I honestly wouldn't be so sure if Figaro would still be the current duel champion. Kashimiya had just as much of a claim to the throne.

"...The Embryo and Kashimiya's abilities are just so well-matched," Nemesis said. She had a point. Auxiliary arm-chains, Hareshark Nullstep... Kashimiya's Inaba was all about the art of unsheathing.

To be more precise, it was focused on making the art usable to someone of his small stature. Inaba made up for both his short arms that were unsuited to drawing a sword as well as his short cutting range.

Embryo abilities weren't unrelated to Master personalities, though. With that in mind, did Kashimiya have a reason that drove him to pour so much of himself into the art of unsheathing?

"...This seems like it'll keep going forever," Rook said as he observed the match.

Well, it did look like a stalemate. Tom wasn't able to break through the combo of Kashimiya's unsheathing and Hareshark Nullstep, but Kashimiya also couldn't defeat all of the Toms. They both lacked moves they could play.

"In their previous duels, Tom always won because Kashimiya always ran through all his SP by using too many skills," said B3. "So it's a battle of attrition, huh?" Apparently, despite being so broken, Tom's Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin was unusually efficient. Of course, Tom also didn't use other skills along with it, but that was the reason why there was such a gap in their stamina.

It was looking like Kashimiya would once again be unable to topple this fortress and... *Hm?!* "Ray?" B3 looked at me.

"What's wrong, Ray? You look pale," said Nemesis. Both of them seemed worried.

Was my expression that surprising?

Even if it was... I wasn't actually sure why. As I watched Kashimiya, I suddenly felt an unexplained chill run down my spine.

B3 and Nemesis didn't seem to feel it, though.

Rook, too... Wait, no.

"..."

He was feeling the exact same way I was. Just like me, *he was immensely shocked by something, but didn't know what it was*.

"What was that...? Huh?" Just then, I noticed something strange.

The entire arena was oddly quiet.

Everyone was staring at the stage in confusion.

On the stage, there was Kashimiya, slowly returning an odachi to its yellow sheath.

You could no longer hear the footsteps of the Toms surrounding him.

Instead, there were eight headless corpses littering the stage, all with their heads lying next to them.

"Personalized Mystic Blade Technique: Octachrome Thunder." After Kashimiya whispered that, the eight bodies... the eight Toms became light.

A moment later, the barrier vanished. That could mean only one thing.

Kashimiya had defeated Tom.

"...I-IT'S OVERRRR! THE WINNER IS THE UNSHEATH, KASHIMIYA! WITH THIS, KASHIMIYA RISES TO SECOND IN THE RANKIIIINNGS!" The announcer belatedly realized what was happening on the stage and hurried to announce the conclusion, which was followed by a roar from the crowd. It wasn't praise of the winner or the duel itself. Everyone was merely... confused. Just like me, they wondered when it had even ended.

And so, without anyone seeing the conclusion or any sign of it... the duel was over.

All that we knew was that Kashimiya ascended to second place in the rankings, giving him the right to challenge Figaro.

...Wait, no. There's one more thing.

"Hm? Ray, why are you spacing out like that? What's that ticket in your hand?" Nemesis asked.

"...I bet on this duel."

"Again? So, just like on The Clash of the Superiors, you bet on the one who had higher odds, but this time ended up losing, eh? That's how gambling usually goes. How much did you bet, anyway?"

"Fifty."

"Fifty lir? That's absurdly little."

"Fifty... million."

"...Hold on. Wait, wait, wait, wait, YOU IDIOT!"

Nemesis gave me an indescribable look, grabbed my collar, and shook me back and forth.

"F-Fifty mi... A-Are you stupid?! That's so much money, so much... EEEEHHH?!" Unable to process reality, Nemesis couldn't even speak properly.

Marie and B3 looked at me with faces asking "What did you do wrong?"

Rook, however, was all smiles, clearly following the whole thing.

"Nemesis. You've got it all wrong. It's the other way around."

"Wh-What do you mean?!"

"I mean that... I bet on Kashimiya."

"...Huehh?"

Nemesis was now so dumbfounded that it looked like her mental circuits had shorted out.

"I went and bet on Kashimiya. He looked pretty confident when we met him today."

And he went on to win. With his odds being 5.5x, my 50,000,000 lir was now 250,000,000. Wow.

"...I have so much to say that my words are all stuck in my throat. I've just got one thing for you," Nemesis spoke with a completely exhausted expression as she stared into my eyes. "Stop gambling. It's scary."

Those words, coming from the bottom of her heart, left me unsure how to respond. All that came out of my mouth was...

"...Does gacha count as gambling?"

In response, I received a very familiar dropkick.

Interlude: The One Who Arrives and the One Who Finds

South of Gideon the City of Duels, natural area

Beyond the plains to the south of Gideon, there was a sprawling forest growing out of a vast expanse of hills. Further south than that, there was the Altar-Legendaria border, but it lay within an untamed land inhabited by powerful monsters, so there were no border checkpoints or anything of the kind.

In a way, the area itself was like the dividing line between fairyland and the kingdom.

On this day, inside — or, rather, above — the dense forest, something gigantic was traveling northwards.

It was a pair of objects that looked like upside-down towers. With each of them being about a kilometel in height, the twin objects waded through the forest and left footprints on the plains.

The word "footprints" was quite apt, seeing as the two towers were being used as boots by the lady standing above them.

She was none other than King of Berserk, Hannya — the Superior that had recently been released from the gaol.

The boot-towers were Sandalphon, her Superior Embryo, and she was heading north because that was where she would find her beloved.

However, Hannya stopped once she came across something else of considerable size.

It was a giant tank... no... a *land-battleship* with a particularly wide hull.

At first, Hannya thought it was just another obstacle and prepared to kick it out of her way, but then she noticed a man in a costume waving at her from the deck.

"Yooo! Haven't seen you in a beary long time," he said, making Hannya certain that it was someone she knew — Shu Starling.

"It really has been a while, hasn't it?" she said. "Figaro said that he had a health checkup and couldn't come to greet me, so you'd be coming instead. He said you'd be wearing a bear costume, so I knew it was you right away. Sorry for the trouble."

"It's fine, I was fur-ree anyway."

And it's better to stay close in case you do something you shouldn't, Shu added internally, not daring to say it out loud. *I'm still worried about the other bomb I left in Gideon, but that one probably won't go off if I'm away for just a short amount of time.*

"So, is Gideon far from here?" Hannya asked.

"Two hours away by Baldr. Hop on in, bear-ace yourself, and we'll be there in no time," Shu answered.

"I'll do just that, then. Sandalphon has been doing nothing but walking for who knows how long now."

...I can tell by the footprints spreading out towards the horizon, Shu thought, looking into the distance.

"Also, it's so chaotic back there that I'm feeling a bit tired. The moment I came out, I appeared in Legendaria's 'spirit capital' of Amneal, and I was instantly surrounded by tons of players."

"...Fur-om where did you start walking on Sandalphon?" Shu asked.

"Amneal, of course. Sandalphon is my only mode of transport."

So you appeared with that thing next to the capital... Of course they'd surround you, Shu thought.

"I didn't want to waste time with them, so I kicked them away before making my way north."

"...You said you were attacked by Masters. Did you see a muscled, half-naked, over-bear-ing macho pro-wrestler; an absolute freak in green clothes and a mask; or a fussy-looking, silent guy with a monocle?"

"I'm not sure. I don't remember... What about you, Sandalphon?"

"I did not see anyone fitting those descriptions, Lady Hannya," Hannya's Embryo replied.

So she didn't fight any of Legendaria's Superiors. That's a relief, Shu thought and breathed a sigh.

"All right, then," he said. "I'll take you to Gideon."

"Thank you. Figaro isn't around, though, so I'm logging out the moment I'm there."

"Oh, he'll fur sure come online the day after tomorrow, this world's time.”

“I see. I’ll also log on at about then. I’m dying to see him,” Hannya said as she hopped on Baldr and the twin towers transformed into a boy.

Thus, the two Superiors rode the land-battleship towards Gideon.

A certain man was watching them from between the trees.

His left eye was closed, but his right followed the land-battleship.

Going by that Embryo’s form... and the data from Libra, that’s one of the gaol’s Superiors: King of Berserk, Hannya. So you can *leave that place,* he thought as he wrote something down on his notepad.

There was *something* right next to him. It was so bizarre that it was hard to even tell if it was a living creature or something inorganic.

The easiest way to describe it was “a balance scale monster.” One dish of the scale held an eye, and the other held a status window with Hannya’s name. The balance was tipping in the latter’s favor.

Once the dish reached the surface, the scale monster vanished, leaving behind six black orbs. The man picked them up and put them in the Embryo crest on the back of his left hand.

I considered going to my little sister in Legendaria and staying there until the war resumed... but this intrigues me somewhat.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, Superiors were big names. You could find info about Hannya and what she said at the gaol just by surfing the internet for a bit.

Two Superiors. Figaro and Hannya. Her prior conviction and nature. This is very intriguing, indeed, he processed all this information and cracked a smile. *I smell a potential scoop. I might get material unlike any I’ve found so far.*

With such thoughts on his mind, the man began walking.

However, right as he was about to leave the forest, something jumped him.

“GHOOAAARRGH!”

It was a Bloody Drag-Tiger — a fearsome, Pure-Dragon-tier part of local fauna that could claw and bite at speeds approaching that of sound, making it a fearsome opponent for many creatures.

The man didn’t even have time to react to the attack that came almost as soon as the roar reached his ears. The beast closed its maw on the man’s head, *only to have its upper and lower jaws split continuously.*

The upper part, along with the rest of the head and the brain within, fell right into the man's open left palm, while the lower part and the entire rest of the body passed him by and pathetically collapsed in front of him.

Where they split, both sides were scorched as though cut by something extremely hot.

The head in the man's hand looked at the miserable pile of flesh in confusion before dissolving into bits of light, leaving behind only loot — its fur.

A surprise attack by a wild beast is a rare occurrence in real life, but I'm already bored of it. Unlike with people, I can't even capture and examine them...

As he thought this, clearly unamused, a black, floating orb approached from an uncertain direction, and he put them in his crest just as he had with the ones left behind by the scale monster.

Well, let's go watch this unique event unfold. The tangles between Superiors struck by blinding passion must be something yet unobserved.

The man imagined what would happen next, cracked a smile, and walked towards the city of Gideon.

Chapter Three: The Start of the Festival

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Following Tom and Kashimiya's duel, we all went to dine at a place recommended by Chelsea, known for the *huge amounts* of good food it offered. The dinner doubled as B3's welcoming party, and I'd obviously picked the place because it had enough food to sate Nemesis.

Needless to say, as the lucky better, I was the one to pay.

I happened to be the party's leader, so I didn't mind doing that much.

...Yeah, despite consistently being the lowest level among us, I somehow ended up being the leader. B3 also said that this seemed best to her, so her joining didn't change that at all.

If you ignored the fact that Marie had yet to recover from the news regarding Elizabeth, the dinner-party was going quite well.

"Did you figure it out, Rook?" I asked.

"Well, I have a few theories, but I don't have enough evidence to say anything conclusive."

"Same as me, then. I think it has something to do with the change in the sheath's color."

"Yeah, that stood out for me, as well."

We were currently discussing how Kashimiya was able to behead all eight Toms.

With Gideon being the Mecca of duels, most of the other customers were talking about the exact same thing. Some said it was a new skill he'd woven, others said it was a new MVP special reward, and some even entertained the idea that he might have finally evolved into a Superior.

Aside from that, they were discussing when Kashimiya would challenge Figaro, with the general consensus being that the day was swiftly approaching.

Kashimiya — Altar's strongest PK — versus Figaro — Altar's strongest solo player.

It was a matchup that would make any duel enthusiast salivate, and many thought that it would be an event that would match — or even surpass — The Clash of the Superiors.

I noticed B3 staring at the still surface of her cold fruit drink, deep in thought.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No, it just... made me think a bit," she said. "I have losses against both of them, after all."

Oh, right. B3 had lost against Figaro at the Sauda Mountain Pass... in quite a gruesome way, too.

And she'd already told me that she'd fought against Kashimiya and lost against him, as well.

"As someone who fought them both, which one do you think would win?" Marie asked her, after seemingly recovering a bit.

B3 thought for a moment before answering. "Do you mean in a duel, or a battle where anything goes?"

"The latter."

"Then it would be Figaro, I think. If it's not a duel, he can avoid instadeath using the Brooch and extend the battle's duration. Also, he has a clear advantage as a Superior who also has a Superior MVP special reward. Though, that might change if Kashimiya gets his hands on something that can close that divide."

"Ohh... then there's no way. He might evolve, but Superior special rewards are a different matter. Altar already had its SUBM with Gloria, and the only countries that haven't had theirs are Dryfe, Legendaria, and Caldina. The kingdom shares a border with all three of them, but the SUBMs will probably be handled by the countries themselves. I mean, Dryfe has the Physical Apex, while Caldina has the Magical Apex and the other Superiors in Sefirot... Though, maybe he would have a chance of stealing the Legendarian SUBM. The superiors there are absolute freaks whose combat potential is actually pretty low."

Granvaloa and Tenchi already had their SUBMs? I only knew about Altar's Gloria and Huang He's Suling.

"What kind of SUBMs appeared in Granvaloa and Tenchi?" I asked.

"The one in Granvaloa was 'Biframe White Whale, Moby Dick Twin.' It was a large, pale whale that functioned like a catamaran. Apparently, it was a real monster that could destroy large patches of area by transforming seawater into its ‘rigging’ and ‘outfit,’ and also use the same water to regenerate its body if damaged.”

...How the hell did Granvaloa, a maritime country, handle something like that? Talk about a bad matchup.

“Apparently, it was defeated by a combination of The Human Bomb blowing it up along with the entire ocean around it, all the firepower of the Granvaloan navy, and The Fatal Seal of the Four Seas.”

“‘Fatal Seal of the Four Seas’? I’ve heard of The Human Bomb, but that nickname is new to me.”

“‘Fatal Seal of the Four Seas,’ also known as King of Thieves, Zeta. She’s a long-time Superior from Granvaloa, but her Embryo’s powers aren’t clear yet. No one’s ever seen it, sort of like Figaro’s Embryo was at one point.”

A well-known Superior who was able to keep her hand hidden... that alone told me that she was no joke.

“Though, there *are* hints,” Marie continued.

“Like?”

“‘She walked on air,’ ‘she was completely unharmed by a rain of arrows in the desert,’ ‘she was suddenly standing right next to me. I could’ve sworn there was no one there,’ ‘she made blood burst out of her enemy,’ ‘she turned the wall into Swiss cheese,’ ‘she made a tank instantly evaporate.’ Information about her powers is plentiful and varied. Some of these were probably done with job skills and MVP special rewards, but because she does so many different things, it’s impossible to tell which are her Embryo abilities.”

Well, all those things certainly don’t seem like they can be covered by a single Embryo trai— Wait... I don’t know why, but I get the feeling I know something that actually can do just that...

“Speaking of The Fatal Seal of the Four Seas, she escaped Granvaloa after stealing a national treasure. That got her on their wanted list, and she’s more infamous than famous now.”

“On a wanted list for stealing a national treasure...” Rook muttered, looking as if he remembered something he didn’t want to. “She shares a crime with Gerbera.”

“Anyway, enough about her, let’s talk about SUBMs again,” said Marie. “You heard about Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria and Tetra-Beast of Creation, Suling from the people who faced them, yes?"

"Yeah," I nodded. I heard about Gloria from Shu, and about Suling from Xunyu, and both of them seemed like extremely powerful creatures with multiple abilities — or bodies, in Suling's case.

"After Suling, there was Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru in Tenchi."

"Tenchi? Aren't you from there? Did you encounter it?" I asked Marie.

"No. I left the country shortly before it appeared and was already wandering around Huang He when it did. Bad timing, eh? Though... from what I heard, I had no chance against it."

Marie? A pre-Superior who actually defeated a Superior? Had no chance against it?

"Apparently, it was quite a... bizarre SUBM."

"'Bizarre'? From what I've heard, all of them are."

"That's just how bizarre it was. Horobimaru appeared in..."

Thus, Marie began talking about the strange... "nature" of the SUBM known as Horobimaru.

It happened right after the war between Altar and Dryfe:

A giant suit of samurai armor had washed ashore in a certain fishing village on the western side of the island country of Tenchi. It was nearly three metels tall, but there was no head — or even a body, for that matter — inside it.

At first, the villagers thought that a ship had wrecked nearby and the armor it had been carrying had just washed ashore. They didn't know what to do with it, so they started by simply going to pick it up.

However, right before they did, *the armor stood up*.

And, despite lacking of a head, said the following:

"Who here craves my arms and armor?

Challenge me in combat.

I carry still a longbow, naginata, and this armor.

I am a Superior Unique Boss Monster.

Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru."

"...The thing introduced itself?" I raised an eyebrow.

"It did. It also just stood in place, waiting for a challenger, and didn't lay a finger on anyone who didn't challenge it."

Okay, yeah... that was definitely bizarre, even by SUBM standards.

"It didn't even hurt the villagers that awakened it," Marie added. "In fact, the village prospered, on account of all the demand for lodging and food from the challengers that gathered there."

It even helped bring life to the place...? For something with "Destroyer" in its name, it seemed unusually noble.

"And, well, Tenchi is full of hotblooded tians and Masters, so it was challenged many times. Most of them were defeated, obviously, but King of Brigands, Bigman actually did win against it once."

"First 'thieves,' now 'brigands'... and just 'once'?"

"Yes. He definitely destroyed it, but then the armor instantly reformed and gave Bigman the naginata it carried, saying 'Well done. Victory is yours, and so is this weapon.'"

"It gave him its weapon?"

"Yes. While you have MVPs with normal UBM fights, Horobimaru apparently handed away its equipment every time it was defeated." ...Again, it really was a bizarre UBM. How strange that it would just give away its equipment instead of having them become something adjusted for the individual.

"Also, anyone who received a weapon was unable to fight Horobimaru again. Apparently, they couldn't damage it at all."

Oh, so people weren't allowed to get several items, then? That made sense, actually. If they were, then the same person who beat it the first time could go at it again and again, becoming stronger each time thanks to their ever-increasing rewards.

"But didn't Horobimaru just become weaker as it handed its weapons away?" I asked.

"No," Marie answered. "In fact, it became stronger with each piece of equipment it lost. When there was just the armor left, even Superiors lost against it over and over."

"Now that's something..."

Also, growing stronger as it loses equipment? What is it supposed to be, a UBM version of Figaro?

"The armor ended up staying on the shore where it washed up for about five months."

"...That's a long time for something like that to be alive." It had countless Masters, Superiors included, challenging it day and night, yet it stayed there for months on end. That made it clear just how powerful it was.

And apparently, it was only defeated recently... about the time I first arrived here, actually.

“So, who ended up defeating it?” I asked Marie.

“Besides Bigman, I know that the one who got the longbow was The Gun, Sauer Urgaur ‘the Firestop.’ It’s still unknown who defeated the armor.”

Unknown? Was it defeated in secret? When nobody was watching?

“Because Horobimaru was so strange and gave its special rewards while it was still alive, neither Bigman nor Sauer received the message saying that it was defeated. It was clear that it was gone, though, so the Conquest General commemorated it with a hanami festival.”

“Ah. I think I read about that on the internet.”

So that was the occasion, huh? Well, there were no casualties, so the SUBM’s defeat was probably a good reason to hold a festival.

All in all, it was the polar opposite of what Gloria had done here in Altar.

Then again, from what I’d heard of Tenchi...

“A monster like Horobimaru, hanami events... Tenchi must be sooo peaceful,” said Babi, cutting my thought short. A heavy silence followed, and Marie and B3 had looks on them which clearly said “Hahaha — no.”

My Tenchi-dwelling college friends had told me enough about the country for me to share their sentiment.

“Anyway, those are the SUBMs that have been defeated so far,” Marie concluded.

“I see... Hm?” I muttered as a certain idea crossed my mind. She mentioned four SUBMs: Biframe White Whale, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Tetra-Beast of Creation, and Penta-Phased Destroyer.

All of the names had numeral prefixes.

“Hey, was there no ‘one’ monster?” I asked.

“Oh, you’re wondering about that, too, huh? People talk about it every now and then.”

So I wasn’t the only one who found it strange.

“But the thing is, we just don’t know. At the very least, there’s no info on anyone defeating such a monster. For all we know, an SUBM could’ve appeared in one of the countries that we think hasn't had theirs yet, only to have been done away with in secret."

Like Horobimaru's final form, huh?

"It's just as likely that number one is special and is being reserved for a later SUBM," Rook commented. "Regardless, a Superior special reward bearing the power of 'one' will eventually see the light of day."

"Why do you think that?" I asked him.

"For the number one being special? I just think that's obvious. As for us eventually seeing the special reward... I just thought that someone might be keeping it as an ace up their sleeves to catch an opponent off-guard. They're bound to use it eventually, though."

"...I see." If the "one" has already appeared and it had been in Dryfe, then the special reward could be deployed in the next war. It was a yet-unseen menace that I wasn't sure was actually dangerous, but I still had a bad feeling about it, however slight.

"By the way, Marie... what were you doing while I was away?" With the SUBM talk ending, I asked Marie something that I'd been wondering about. I hadn't gotten the chance to ask before today's big duel, and she was an incoherent mess for most of the day after it. Rook clearly had his share of troubles while I was gone. Was Marie the same in that regard? She'd looked pretty tired when we met up.

"Oh, I was preparing for a certain project related to the festival tomorrow and the day after," Marie answered.

"Festival?"

"Yes. The Love-Duel Festival. We're planning a newspaper project for it, called 'Ba-Thump! A Lovey-Dovey Couple Spawned! Kyahah!'"

...I have so much to say, but most importantly, you really don't need that "Ba-Thump" and "Kyahah!." Especially the latter.

"...First of all, what *is* the Love-Duel Festival?"

"It's a festival commemorating the founding king's duel with his wife here in Gideon. It happens here every year at about this time."

Ohh...? I happen to personally know one of the founding king's descendants... I'll have to ask her for the details, I thought, thinking of Azurite.

"And... Why a project?" I asked.

"DIN is often seen as an info-broker, but it's actually a newspaper press, you know?” Oh yeah — she’d mentioned that they also covered actual news and wrote lifehack articles.

“That’s why we sometimes do things like this, too. Alison from the planning department is very enthusiastic about this one. Even the twins at the top are into it.”

“Twins at the top?” I raised an eyebrow.

“The tians in charge of DIN. They’re twins of different genders and they look very young, but they’re from Legendaria, so it’s rumored that they’re actually very old.”

The leaders of the DIN and owners of all the info they have, eh? I wonder what they’re like...

“So, what kind of project is this ‘Ba-Thump Kyahah,’” asked Nemesis. Damn it, why would she shorten it to *that*?

“It’s basically a report in the style of a romantic comedy,” Marie answered. “During the Love-Duel Festival, we would have correspondents all over Gideon who would record lovey-dovey happenings in town. The editing department would choose their favorites, and our subscribers would then vote which one of those is the most lovey-dovey-est event of all.”

“...Isn’t that basically setting people up for public shaming?”

“Putting up the magic cameras and stuff was hard work.”

“Isn’t that a clear invasion of privacy?!”

Or is it okay here because we’re in a fantasy land? I wondered.

“...It is. That’s why the administration didn’t approve it. The cameras had to go, too...”

“Yeah, I figured it was no good...”

“Instead, we decided to just take reader-submitted photos... Though, The Kingdom People Times ended up copying our original project and they’re actually going through with it.”

“Why do so many people think that’s a good idea?!”

“Well, Gideon is all about the duels. You don’t get a wide variety of things to get excited about, so this is a breath of fresh air. And since it’s related to love, lots of people are actually planning to go on dates with their crushes and confess their feelings.”

“Oh, speaking of dates... I’m going on one with Kasumi tomorrow,” Rook said.

“Ohh...? Wait, you and Kasumi?! Since when were you two like *that*?!”

I exclaimed.

"I had her help me with Gerbera and wanted to thank her somehow. She seemed interested in this festival, so I invited her."

He invited a girl on a date... as a thank you? Goddamn, that's impressive.

"Anyway, the town is bound to be full of couples starting tomorrow," Marie concluded.

"I feel like I'll have to avert my gaze constantly," I muttered.

"It's a beary big problem," said Shu, who appeared out of nowhere and joined us. He spoke with bad puns, as usual, but I could tell that he was actually quite tense.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"I knew that you were coming back today, so I was looking fur ya right after I got done with something. I'd love to catch up with ya, but we gotta talk about a huge problem on our paws."

"What problem, exactly?" asked Marie. "If it makes *you* worried, it must be something really big."

"Hannya, *the* Hannya is coming... That's more than enough to get the point across, right?"

Hannya the Hannya? What is that, some funky robot? I thought nonchalantly, but it was clearly no joke to Marie, who looked really tense.

B3 was also making a stern face.

If it was enough to shake both of these experienced players, then it had to be something really bad.

"...Wasn't she in the gaol?" Marie asked.

"She was released recently. Her sentence was pretty short."

"The timing couldn't be worse," Marie sighed as she placed her hands on her head in despair.

"Hey, what kind of person is this Hannya?" I asked.

"She's a Superior. One who got on wanted lists and was sent to the gaol, at that," Marie explained. "To be precise, she became a Superior *after* entering that place."

The gaol was a place I'd heard of many times now, but I didn't know much about what went on in there. All I really knew was that it was where King of Plagues and Gerbera went after the former was defeated by Marie and the latter by Shu and Rook.

Needless to say, this was my first time hearing that someone had actually gotten out of it.

"What got her on the wanted list?" I continued asking Marie.

"Destruction of personal property and inflicting bodily injury. That only got her a few years in the gaol... the real problem is her motivation."

"Which would be?"

"...She indiscriminately attacked any Master couples she saw."

"...Huh?"

Why would anyone ever do that? I wondered.

"The reasons behind that are profound... or shallow, depending on how you look at it," Shu said. "It all began on Christmas of the year 2043, and escalated on Valentine's day of 2044..."

And so, Shu told me about Miss Hannya's motivation, as well as his and Figaro's encounter with her.

Once he was done, I took a deep breath and said, "So, basically, Miss Hannya got NTR'd by someone from *Dendro*, so she started playing to get revenge by crushing her ex and his new girlfriend. She wandered around smashing every single Master couple that had the slightest chance of being them, and encountered you and Figaro while doing so. Thanks to the info you gave her, she did eventually get her revenge, but the crimes she committed landed her in the gaol. In addition to that, she fell in love with Figaro, who only cares about dueling her."

"Yeah. Beary good job summing it up," said Shu.

He was right — it really was hard to tell whether her reasons and history were shallow or profound. I could understand that it meant the world for Miss Hannya herself, but to a third party, this all wasn't much more than something to joke about.

"Is she really all that dangerous, though?" I asked. "I mean, she did get her revenge. Shouldn't she have stopped randomly attacking couples?"

"...No. She's still dangerous," B3 said with a serious expression. "I know bandit clan memb... Ahem, *individuals* in the gaol."

Why am I not surprised that you have connections there?

"They said that there are several unwritten laws inside, and two of them are 'don't walk out in public as a couple' and 'don't badmouth Figaro.'"

"...Hm?"

"Those who break those rules get crushed by giant legs."

“...”

Hoo, boy. Miss Hannya not only hadn’t improved — she actually had *more* targets now. It wouldn’t be that bad if badmouthing Figaro was the only thing that could set her off, but if merely *seeing a couple* did that, too, then... ah.

“...Hold on a second,” I said. “Marie... what did you say tomorrow was?”

“The Love-Duel Festival...” Right. The day that would see loads of couples getting together, during which there would be a person walking around who indiscriminately crushed all pairs who merely looked the part...

“...What kind of dangerous combo is that?!”

“I would’ve done something ahead of time if it occurred to me earlier,” said Shu. “But I had my paws full with Gerbera and the other one, so the Love-Duel Fest completely slipped my mind.”

“A Superior that attacks all couples and a festival that creates tons of couples... That alone is extremely dangerous, but we also have the potential of that meathead Figaro setting her off like a bomb. This could be a repeat of Franklin’s Game... Gideon could be attacked by a Superior yet again...”

“Wouldn’t she be open to negotiation? I mean, unlike Franklin, she has nothing against Altar or Gideon, does she?” asked Rook. He had a point, but...

“Rook... When it comes to relationships, love, and marriage, people completely lose all self-control.”

“Umm... Ray, why do you look like you’ve been through hell? Your eyes are so empty that even I can’t tell what you’re thinking.”

“...Let’s just say that I’ve been to South America once.”

“South America?”

The Amazons, thirsty for a man... my sister, recklessly destroying the jungle... it all terrified me even now.

“...I think she’ll be fine with couples if she’s with Figaro,” said Shu. “At first, she was out for revenge, but once in the gaol, her motivation turned into jealousy. ‘How dare you flirt when I can’t even be with him’ and all that. She... paw-robably won’t care if she’s on a date or something with Figaro.”

“And what if Figaro himself sets her off?” I asked.

I could totally imagine him ruining everything by looking into the eyes of this lady who expects a “Let’s get married,” and instead saying “Let’s duel.”

“...”

Brother, please say something. Or would it be that bad that you have no words?

“Well, I did give Figgy a roundabout, but beary detailed, explanation,” Shu said.

“Why not be direct?” Marie asked.

“The shock from that might kill the kid in real life.”

That was... *not* actually an exaggeration. I’d learned about Figaro’s condition while chatting between our mock battles. He had a chronic heart disease that endangered his life if his BPM climbed too high. That was enough reason for Shu not to talk to him about Hannya too much.

“Well, Figgy won’t be on tomorrow, and Hannya’s offline, so if something happens, it’s gonna be the day after tomorrow. I’ll use tomorrow to pre-bear and take measures against it.”

“...Sounds like hard work.”

“Beary hard work, especially with the bomb we’re already working on...”

“Bomb?”

“It’s nothin’... By the way, is Xunyu here?”

“Yeah. Canglong is in Gideon, so she’s with him.”

“I see. It just hit me that if Hannya paw-sitively loses it, Xunyu could stop her by tearing out her heart with Tenaga-Ashinaga. If Figgy and I had to fight her fair and square, it’d probably take too long.”

That was a hell of a violent solution. And did he just say that he and Figaro would take too long to beat her? Was Hannya that powerful?

“Xunyu, though... Xunyu would be able to do something,” Shu concluded.

And the reply to that came... “I don’t really gEt it... But I’d likE it if ya didn’t expEct too much of me.”

“Xunyu?!” I exclaimed.

...from Xunyu herself. I hadn’t even noticed her enter, but... speak of the devil and all that.

“Xunyu, why would you come here at this hour...? Huh...?”

Behind her large frame, there was another, far smaller girl.

“Ellie?” Marie asked.

“Nnh... waahh! Marie!” the girl — Second Princess Elizabeth — cried as she rushed into Marie’s arms.

Something had clearly happened, and the girl explained it herself.

“Altimia said that I have to marry Canglong and go to Huang He! That’s why I ran away from home!”

...When it rains, it pours, huh?

◇

The next morning arrived. After resting at an inn in Gideon for the first time in a while, I was woken up by fireworks going off outside. Not fully awake, I wondered what the occasion was, but I quickly remembered that it was the first day of the Love-Duel Festival.

I then recalled what I had to do today, so I hastily got out of bed, dressed, and left the inn.

After several dozen minutes of walking, I arrived at Count Gideon’s mansion — specifically, the guest house connected to it. This wasn’t my first time at the mansion. It was where I’d received the reward for my contributions during Franklin’s Game, and I’d gone through certain procedures at the nearby knight’s offices several times now.

However, this would be my first time entering the guest house. I wondered if it was okay for me to enter, and sure enough, I was greeted by a guard who stuck out his spear to me the moment I came close. “S-Such a terrifying appearance... A villain?!”

“No, wait!” the ninja next to him said. “Villainous as he may look, this is Master Ray the Unbreakable! My Reveal is max level, so that can’t be a mistake!”

“Ohh, that’s certainly his face. My apologies, Master Ray. Her Highness has given you permission to enter. Feel free to do so.”

And so, I was let into the guest house, where I was greeted by a royal knight who said he would show me the way to Her Highness’ room.

But man, what’s with that attitude? I don’t even have my mask or my hood on, I thought.

“I assume I’m allowed in because Azu—... I mean, Her Highness knew that I was coming?”

"Yes," the knight said. "She said she was certain you would come the moment Lady Grandria and Gideon's ninjas reported that Her Highness Elizabeth had run away to your group."

So they already knew that much, huh? I thought.

After about three minutes of walking, we arrived at a door deep inside the guest house.

"Your Highness! Master Ray has arrived."

"Show him in," Azurite said from behind the door. The knight opened it and urged me inside.

Upon walking in, I saw Azurite sitting at a writing desk, just like she had been doing at the capital.

"Morning, Azurite."

"You too, Ray... So it's already morning, huh?"

That was when I noticed the slight bags under her eyes.

"You pulled an all-nighter?" I asked.

"I do have lots to do, after all. I might be away from Altea, but I still have to take care of the more urgent matters."

Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if she just couldn't sleep last night, so she decided to just lose herself in work.

"You came to discuss my sister, yes?"

"Yeah."

"She started crying and ran away because I delivered the order very harshly." When Elizabeth ran to us, she'd been crying her eyes out because Azurite had ordered her to marry into Huang He's ruling bloodline, while keeping up her usual frosty attitude.

That was the reason she'd run away from home and was now staying at DIN along with Marie. Xunyu was watching over her, too, and we called Liliana over as well. She'd tried to bring Elizabeth back, but the girl was adamant about staying where she was, so Liliana had decided to just stay by her side.

We had then discussed what to do next, and it was decided that, come morning, I would talk about it with Azurite herself, like I was doing right now. I thought that Liliana, whom Azurite had known for a long time, would've been the better person for this, but she herself claimed that she was bound by her role as a knight serving the royal family. Eventually they concluded that I, as Azurite's friend and equal, was the better pick.

Oh yeah, Marie tried to "talk" to Azurite right away, but it seemed like she was seeing red, so we all had to hold her back. It even got to the point that she used The Art of Vanishing. Man, was that dangerous.

"So, did you come to denounce me as an awful woman who sells out her sister to foreigners?" Azurite said.

"...That depends on how you answer my questions."

"About what?"

"The marriage between Altar and Huang He's ruling bloodlines, the alliance that comes with it... Why do it, and all that."

Elizabeth's situation upset Marie, Nemesis, and even Babi, for some reason. They were all really mad. The rest of us, however, merely wondered why Azurite... I mean, the two countries involved would come to such an arrangement.

Oh, and Nemesis had stayed up really late last night, so she was still inside the crest.

"While talking with Shu and the others, we were only able to figure out what Huang He wants out of this," I said.

"I see," Azurite nodded. "And what would that be? I need to ask to see if you have it right."

"Yeah... We're guessing that Huang He wants the Altarian royal bloodline itself... as in, *the right to use The Primeval Blade, Altar*."

That was Shu and Rook's assumption, and Xunyu had given the conclusion her approval, saying, "YeAh, that's prObably it." She didn't actually know the terms agreed on between the two countries, but according to her, "Since its foUnding, Huang He's always seEn Special SupErior Jobs as divinE. Getting anOther one is probAbly more than enoUgh for them."

"Two thousand years have passed since the downfall of the pre-ancient civilization," I continued. "During this entire time, the only ones who could become Sacred Kings or Sacred Princesses and wield Altar were the descendants of the first Azurite, and only a few of those, too. However, that also means that anyone from this bloodline may have children with the aptitude. If Elizabeth marries into the Huang He bloodline and such a child is born, Huang He would end up having both the Draconic Emperor and the Sacred King — two powerful Special Superior Jobs."

With Masters and especially Superiors, there were now a great many individuals who broke the balance. However, before the influx of Masters...

i.e. before *Infinite Dendrogram* released... the balance-breakers were the tians with Special Superior Jobs. It was no exaggeration to say that people like the King of Kings, the previous Draconic Emperor, and the Sacred King — who unified the entire center-west area — had changed the course of history.

Shu, Rook, and Xunyu said that it was only natural for Huang He to want those.

"...Yes, that is more or less what Huang He wants to gain from this," Azurite nodded. "They also added that they want the right to test if Huang He's bloodline has the aptitude for the Sacred King whenever there's no living Sacred King in Altar. They certainly like to plan far ahead."

That also meant that, at the very least, Huang He didn't seem to want Altar's demise at this point. Though, for all I knew, they were planning to come in and take The Primeval Blade in the event that the country did collapse.

"...Is there any chance they would do anything about you... the living Sacred Princess?" I asked.

"No. We are using a Contract for rulers, and it would forbid it."

So the signing would be done on a Contract made for rulers — the kind that punished entire countries if broken.

I'd heard that among the many warring states that would eventually become Altar, one had a king who had broken such a Contract. As a result, his lands were ravaged by famine and disease for several years until an insurrection dethroned him and sent his whole family into exile. The risks were too great for anyone to breach such Contracts.

"...Didn't you have such a Contract with Dryfe?" I asked.

From what I recall, the countries were once allies.

"They have to be renewed whenever new rulers take over, so there was no alliance between us when the war began," Azurite explained. "Also, the alliance between the three western countries was mostly about cooperation in case of invasion by other powers and prevention of the assassination of important figures. There was next to nothing about land or trade, so invasions don't violate it."

"...Isn't that, like, the most important thing?"

"It was the only way, apparently. I hear they had a clause in there against that at first, but the processes involved in avoiding the punishments were very complex, so, over a century ago, my teacher... the late Arch Sage... said that it was better to repeal many of the restrictions to make cross-country interaction more simple. Also... a mere year ago, the countries got along so well that the idea of a war between us was absurd."

The conflict itself was unexpected, huh?

"So, I assume the alliance with Huang He will be done properly?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I see. Anyway, we had Huang He's reasons down, but we haven't figured out what Altar will gain out of this union."

Even Xunyu had no idea, and neither Shu nor Rook had enough information to come up with anything conclusive.

"I mean, it's not like they can send reinforcements, right?"

"Yes. They cannot cross Caldina's deserts, and Granvaloa does not allow foreign armies in their waters."

Going from Huang He to Altar required crossing The Great Desert or Harshwinter Mountains, both of which were extremely unwelcoming places.

Traveling through the former meant dealing not just with attrition due to the harsh conditions, but also constituted an act of war against Caldina, who wouldn't tolerate foreign armies on their lands. The latter was a hostile place inhabited by powerful landdragons and avians, including the Landdragon King, Mother Drag-Land, and Divine Comet Bird, Tunguska, all of which were UBMs above Mythical in power.

Needless to say, neither route was an option.

Therefore, the question remained — what would Huang He bring to this alliance?

"They would give equipment," said Azurite.

"Equipment?"

"MVP special rewards. Ten of them."

"Huhh?! Hold on, you can't even trade those!" Special rewards were made to suit the MVP, and they couldn't be traded or transferred in any way. If they could, it would totally defeat the purpose.

"Yes. That is why they will be given to us in the form of actual UBMs. Sealed away, of course."

According to her, Huang He's Draconic Emperor before the last one had developed a means of sealing UBMs away alive.

“They will give us ten sealed UBMs. They were brought here alongside Prince Canglong.”

“...That takes ‘Handle with care’ to a whole new level.”

“Indeed. Though, the long years of sealing have apparently weakened them a lot. I was told that it’s easy to defeat them if you are well-prepared.”

“And what do you intend to do with the special rewards?”

“At first, I intended to distribute them to trustworthy tians, but now, I am considering using them to entice Superiors into cooperating with Altar.”

Chances to acquire MVP special rewards were few and far between. Even Logan was unable to use the ace up his sleeve on me because he was too hesitant to sacrifice his. Many Masters were absolutely desperate to get their hands on one, and they were a prize not even the imperium could offer. They could be used to get the kingdom’s Superiors to actually fight this time, or perhaps even hire Xunyu or Superiors with no allegiance to any country.

...Yes, I know that the kingdom’s Superiors are the kind who can’t be bought with special rewards. Shu and Figaro have so many of them even by Superior standards.

“Would you like one?” Azurite asked.

“Hey, I’ll participate even if I don’t get one. Use it for your negotiations.”

“...No hesitation at all, eh?” Well, I’d already promised that I would help her, so these special rewards were better used elsewhere.

“But man, ten MVP special rewards without a set owner... It’d be scary if someone stole them,” I commented.

“It would. Like Altar, they cannot be stored in inventories, so securing them is a very important matter, as well. Though we will only receive them once Elizabeth is safe on the road to Huang He.”

“I see... Hm?”

What did she just say...?

“Ray?”

“...Nothing. Anyway, is that all that Huang He’s offering?”

“No. If Altar is defeated, they would also allow any asylum seekers, noble or otherwise, into Huang He.”

“That’s...”

“Preparation in case we lose. A hard life awaits many people if Altar falls.”

“But they can’t cross the desert, can they?”

“I already spoke to Granvaloa about it. As long as they’re not military and they pay the fare, they will take the people to Huang He. Though, only under the condition that those over a certain level reset their jobs.”

The significance of the military came up yet again. I now understood why Canglong and Xunyu went through the desert. They couldn’t use Granvaloa’s ships because Xunyu’s level was too high and because they were transporting the UBMs. They probably couldn’t reveal that they had UBMs on them and wanted to keep it hidden.

Anyway, I now knew what Huang He gave Altar in exchange for the royal bloodline.

“And that is why I’m sending off Elizabeth and forging an alliance with Huang He,” Azurite concluded, putting on a faint smile. “You can hold me in contempt if you want. I’m basically selling my sister in exchange for military potential and the safety of our people.”

At first glance, this seemed very heartless, but...

“That’s not it, is it?”

...I just couldn’t believe it.

“No. I just said it as it is...”

“I mean, the kingdom... *you’re* getting something more out of this.”

“...What?”

“You’re marrying off Elizabeth because you want her to live in Huang He, aren’t you?”

That was obvious when she’d said, “...once Elizabeth is safe on the road to Huang He.” That was her letting slip her true desires — to allow her little sister to escape the war-torn country of Altar.

Azurite said nothing in return, but I could tell by her expression that I was right.

Considering the situation, I could also more or less guess why, exactly, she wanted Elizabeth away from here.

“During the coming war, more cities could be attacked, like Gideon or Quartierlatin, and Elizabeth might be caught up in all of that again...”

It was easy to imagine what might happen, and how bad of a taste it would leave in my mouth.

“...If I die on the battlefield like my father, my two little sisters would be the only members of our bloodline left. The younger one, Theresia, is extremely sickly and relies on a special field within the castle to live. I’m told that her life will be short...”

I knew Azurite and Elizabeth, but I’d never met or heard much about the third princess. I had no idea she was in such circumstances...

“That is why Elizabeth is in the most danger. If she was captured by Dryfe, as the last of the royalty and the Sacred King’s bloodline, she might be treated horribly. Rather than letting that happen—”

“You think that she would be happier living in Huang He as the prince’s wife... right?”

“...Yes.” What followed was a long silence.

I understood her line of thinking and honestly... kinda agreed with it.

Azurite wished for her sister’s happiness. She would marry off Elizabeth and forge an alliance with Huang He so the girl could live a happy, healthy life regardless of what happened to Altar. This actually explained some other things, such as why Azurite had Elizabeth stay here in Gideon all the time.

The girl was originally here on “official business,” but now I felt that Azurite merely wanted her to be in the Altarian city that was furthest away from Dryfe and possessed the most military might. From the safety of this city, the girl would go through her marriage meeting with Canglong and be evacuated to Huang He.

However, Franklin then embarked on his game and almost kidnapped Elizabeth.

Back then, Azurite had probably considered bringing her back to Altea, only to realize that Gideon was probably safer now that it was on high alert after having already been the target of a terrorist scheme. For all we knew, the enemy could still have had something sinister in store for the capital. Also, following Franklin’s Game, Azurite was busy handling a lot of work and dealing with various incidents, delaying her and Canglong’s arrival to Gideon.

In fact, they’d basically come here the exact moment all that work was done and dusted, just so she could ensure her sister’s safety as quickly as possible.

Also, there was the trip itself. It wasn’t *just* meant to gauge ludo Masters like B3, but also to see whether Canglong was worthy of her sister. Azurite had told Elizabeth about the marriage last night because she'd seen the good in the boy.

She might have even skipped the formal marriage interview because she'd already wasted so much time on other things and wanted to let Elizabeth escape as quickly as possible.

Oh man. Looking back at it all... you could really see how much she cherished her sister. It was a bit awkward, but it was definitely a form of love.

"...I have decided to fight alongside you... and the other Masters," Azurite broke the silence. "However, that resolve does not affect my intention to have her escape in case something goes wrong."

Azurite's will was firm, and it was all because she truly cared for and loved her sister.

"I see. I have nothing to say, then," I said.

"...How unexpected. I thought you would have more objections."

"You're doing all this because you really love your sister, right? In that case, it's nothing I can judge. This is purely a family matter."

"..." Ultimately, they would have to settle this by themselves... maybe even with the youngest, Theresia. I couldn't get involved in it. All I could do is help Azurite, for her sake.

"Though, can I say one thing?"

"...Go ahead," she said, looking as if she actually wanted to hear my thoughts.

"I assume that your attitude as Elizabeth described it was probably meant to make her think that you no longer care about her, to make leaving easier for her, but..." The girl had said that Azurite was very cold to her, and for all I knew, that might've hurt her more than the very fact she was being married off.

Though, putting such a mask on her heart and acting that way might have been painful for Azurite herself as well. But anyway...

"You should drop it and apologize to her," I said. "She might be moving to a foreign land. Just imagining her last memories of her family being so unpleasant... leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

"...I suppose you're right," she looked down with regret in her eyes.

Yeah, it really must've hurt her, too.

“Bare your soul, be honest, talk to her and find a solution together. And believe it or not...”

This was just a personal rule of thumb, but...

“...Younger siblings understand the honest words of their older siblings way better than you’d expect.” Just as I had carried around the possibility Shu had given me ever since I was a boy...

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DIN Gideon Branch

That day, Elizabeth awoke not in the now-familiar guest house, but somewhere she didn’t recognize.

It was a sleeping room in Gideon’s DIN branch. She’d been brought there after she fell asleep while the girls (B3 excluded) were comforting her last night. While the others had left her to her rest, Marie was still by her side, leaning against a wall to watch over her.

If Ray was here, he’d wonder if sleeping while standing was an Onmitsu skill or something.

Elizabeth, however, didn’t think too much about it and snuck out of the room, careful not to wake Marie. Though the woman was ready to snap to attention if anything happened, Elizabeth’s innate sneaking ability actually surpassed Marie’s high perception.

First things first, Elizabeth went to the bathroom to wash her face.

She followed the signs on the walls and doors, and when she finally found it, there was already someone there.

“Yo. Already awake, huh?”

It was a girl about as tall as Elizabeth. She needed a moment to realize who it was, but it was easy once she noticed the girl’s pale bluish skin and serrated teeth.

“Xunyu? You’ve shrunk a lot.” The nearly four-metel-tall aberration was now only about a third of her usual height.

“A high reach and height would just get in the way here, so I put my limbs away.”

Xunyu’s Superior Embryo, Tenaga-Ashinaga, was a set of prosthetic arms and legs. However, unlike Figaro’s Cor Leonis or Sechs’ Nu, it didn’t actually replace any parts of her. She was basically just wielding pairs of long, versatile grabbers and platform shoes, and she could remove them whenever she had to.

"Your face and voice are different, too," said Elizabeth.

"Well, I can't wash my face with that Fu on, ya know?" Indeed, the Fu hiding Xunyu's face and distorting her voice was gone, too, so her visage was fully exposed and her speech was natural.

"Here to wash your face, aren't ya?" she said. "The sink right there is open."

"Mhm... And it's really strange for you to be shorter than me," Elizabeth giggled at seeing this new side of Xunyu, who'd been her friend since Franklin's Game.

The two then washed their faces, did whatever else they had to, and went to the lounge. Xunyu went and bought a random drink from the vending machine there and went to sit at Elizabeth's side.

"Feelin' calmer after your sleep?"

"...Mhm." Last night, Altimia had told Elizabeth to marry Canglong and go to Huang He. Her tone was harsh, and the little girl had not been allowed to say no. The suddenness of the situation had been quite a shock, but a night was enough for her to calm down.

In retrospect, though Altimia had tried to act composed, her eyes were full of tears, which might have implied that she was hesitant to give the order. The fact that she did it anyway might indicate that it was for Elizabeth's own good.

"Maybe sending me to Huang He really hurts her, too." She didn't know why, and wouldn't know until she asked Altimia herself, but if it really was so heart-rending for her to send Elizabeth off like that...

"I'll go back tonight... and talk to Altimia again," Elizabeth spoke her resolve.

"Good idea," said Xunyu.

"Your Highness, are you in here?!" Liliana entered the bathroom, looking somewhat panicked.

"What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked.

"He... Third Prince Canglong is waiting below." Those words made Elizabeth and Xunyu look at each other and tilt their heads.

Upon hearing that, Elizabeth first went to get properly dressed. After all, a prince wasn't the kind of person she could greet in her sleepwear. As someone who was adept at running away from home, she'd brought an inventory with extra clothes and other necessities with her.

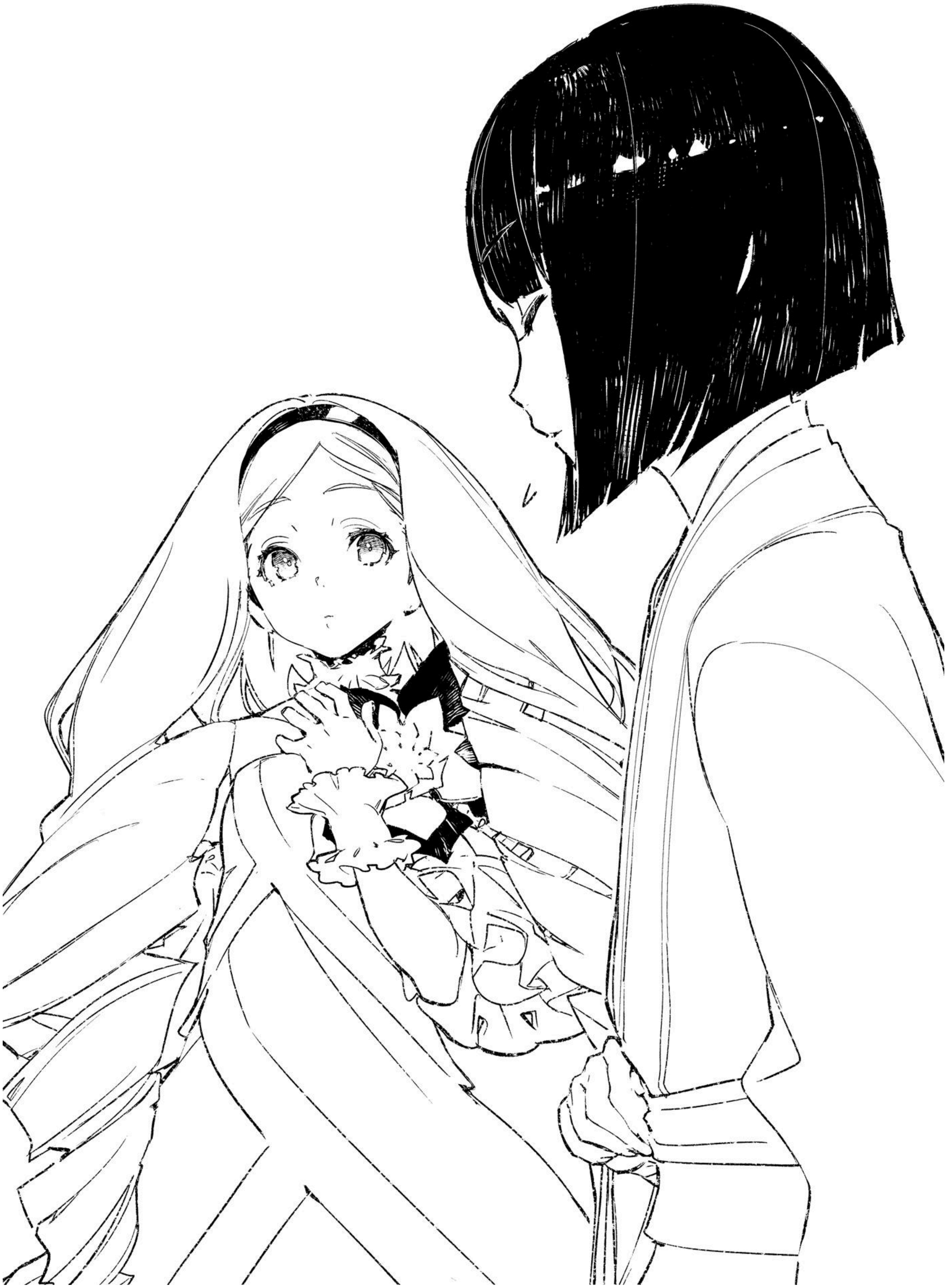
"Good morning, Your Highness."

Once the two girls were fully dressed — and in Xunyu's case, armed — they, Liliana, and Marie, whom they'd woken up, went to the first floor. There they saw the Third Prince of Huang He, Canglong.

Elizabeth had already met the boy. They'd had dinner together, and the unfortunate conversation with Altimia had happened afterwards.

"Good morning... What brings you here so early?" Elizabeth asked, hiding behind Marie.

She knew he wasn't a bad person, but he was still the reason she was being forced to go to Huang He, so she couldn't help but be wary of him. Canglong began by bowing his head before her.



"I deeply apologize for disturbing you so. Brazen as it may seem, I came here hoping to make up for it somehow."

The boy had actually come here to say he was sorry.

However, Elizabeth didn't know how to react. Though she saw him as the reason behind it, she didn't think it was his fault. The marriage and the move to Huang He had been arranged by Altimia and the emperor; Canglong wouldn't even be here if they hadn't. In a way, they were both in the exact same position.

So, Elizabeth didn't know what to do in response to his apology.

The most she could do was look away from him and say "...It's okay. It isn't your fault."

"But if I didn't come to Gideon, you—"

"I'm saying that it's not your fault, so accept that!" Canglong felt uneasy because he thought he'd made the sisters quarrel, while Elizabeth just didn't know how to feel about the whole situation.

Watching the two made Liliana extremely anxious.

That was when Xunyu beckoned both her and Marie over to her and, in a low tone that Canglong and Elizabeth couldn't hear, said "Let's make them go on a date."

"...Ehh?" Liliana raised her eyebrow.

"...Hold on there, Xunyu — how did you come to that idea?" Marie asked, shocked by this out-of-the-blue suggestion.

"I've beEn thinking it since yestErday, but the problEm here's that Elizabeth needs to mArry someone and mOve out in a way she doesn't rEally like, right? Why not just make it agreeable to hEr? It's nOrmal to move oUtta the country for love and mArriage. It's whY my mom moved to SingapOre."

"Umm... i-is that how it works...?"

"I meAn, it was supposed to bE a formal marriage intErview at first, right? But thEy went strAight to marriage befOre anyOne even realizEd it. That ain't hOw it's supposEd to go, right? For now, lEt's just see if they're goOd for one another by making thEm go on a dAte. If they likE each other, they cAn get married no prOb and Elizabeth's sis won't hAve to feel like she's forcing hEr to do something she doEsn't want."

That seemed reasonable.

The initial plan was definitely that the two would have a formal marriage meeting to see if it would even work out. Changing up the order made a mess of Elizabeth's relationship with her sister, but thinking on it, they would have had far fewer problems if they'd just kept with the original plan.

The most questionable thing about this was the fact that this voice of reason belonged to a girl in elementary school.

"...And what if they *don't* like each other?" asked Marie.

"We'll crOss that bridge whEn we come tO it. They probably dOn't have a say in whEther they'll get married or not, bUt whether they gEt along is completely up to thEm. I'm jUst sayin' that it'd be greAt if they actUally like each othEr and it ends up workin' oUt."

"That's true," Liliana agreed. "Even if they don't, the situation won't be any worse than it is now."

As a royal knight and a close friend of Altimia, she also hoped that Elizabeth's marriage would be a happy one.

And, albeit reluctantly and with the most bitter look on her face, Marie also said "Well... it's what's best... for Ellie's happiness... Grnnh..."

Thus, the three stopped the back-and-forth between Elizabeth and Canglong to suggest that they should go on a date to get to know each other.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

"Hey, this is about Elizabeth's marriage again... why Huang He?" I asked. "Geographically speaking, Legendaria, Caldina, and Granvaloa are the better options, aren't they?" They were all closer to Altar than Huang He. With no countries in between, you could even expect some reinforcements out of the deal. And from what I knew, Altar was already allied with Legendaria and had a trade treaty with Caldina.

"Legendaria and Caldina actually gave similar propositions, but I just went with the least worst option," said Azurite.

"Least worst? And... what about Granvaloa?"

"Forming an alliance with them through marriage is impossible. It just wouldn't be enough to give you backing from all the four great fleets."

According to Azurite, the grand captain (as the king of Granvaloa was called) was selected out of the candidates presented by the great houses of each of its four fleets — the merchant fleet, the military fleet, the pirate fleet, and adventurer fleet.

Because of this system, the addition of Altarian royal blood into any of the four houses would destroy the balance and maybe even spark a civil war. No marriage-based alliance offer came from Granvaloa because none of the houses wanted that to happen.

There was also another detail that made it difficult to forge an alliance, even without marriage involved.

The current grand captain was elderly and it was thought that he would be replaced soon, so it was hard for the country to make any major policy decisions. Apparently, the houses weren't unified on whether they should side with Altar or Dryfe.

This was only slightly related, but the house in charge of the pirate fleet was "Grandria," and it was where Sir Langley — Liliana's and Milianne's father — was from. So, if things went differently, Liliana herself might've been a candidate for grand captain.

Though, it wasn't like such "what ifs" meant anything now.

"And what about Legendaria?" I asked.

"That country is going through political unrest."

"It is?"

"Yes. It is a limited monarchy with two people at the top — Fairy Queen Titania, who is basically a figurehead, and the prime minister who's the real political leader."

Oh, I'd heard of Titania before. And... a limited monarchy? So Legendaria was basically like Japan or the UK, huh?

"For many years, their prime minister was the patriarch of the high elves, but he died some time before the war here in Altar." A high elf. So this world also had the classic fantasy races...

"And apparently... it was an assassination." ...Now *that* definitely seemed like something that'd cause a disturbance.

"I hear his death was really odd, too. He transformed into a monkey... from the neck down."

"Now that's just freaky... Hm..." I felt like I'd heard of something like that before...

Oh, right... Marie had told me once that Legendaria had a Superior with an Embryo that did something similar.

“So, uhh...”

“Yes,” Azurite said, understanding what I was getting at. “Legendaria has a Master that can do exactly that. However, he is not being investigated for the crime, and the culprit still hasn’t been found.”

That was weird. It would all work out fine if he was innocent, and with Truth Discernment you’d know if he was guilty right away, so why *not* investigate him?

“I looked into this a bit myself,” Azurite continued. “Apparently, the prime minister’s close relatives tried to look into it, but some other influential people interfered.”

“So, basically...”

“Yes. They have an internal conflict. The country’s tians are split into factions, and as a whole it’s now a crucible of assassination and betrayal. There is no all-out bloody conflict, but many people aren’t even sure who their enemies are. Everything is muddied and unclear. We are always told that that is the reason why they cannot send us reinforcements.”

Now that’s a hell of a mess, I thought. *Even Tenchi seems like a better option, and war over there is like a daily routine.*

Anyway, now I knew why Azurite didn’t feel like sending her sister there.

“The only places in Legendaria that are as peaceful as they seem are the place where Titania lives and their arenas. Many of the Masters there seem to be completely nonchalant about what is happening,” Azurite said.

“For a place called ‘Fairyland,’ it really doesn’t seem all that pleasant. So, last one... why not Caldina?” I asked, expecting her to quickly say something negative about it.

However, her response was... silence.

“Azurite?”

“...There are no obvious problems with that country,” she said while making a face that seemed to imply the opposite. “Ray, what do *you* think about Caldina?”

Her question was spoken in a voice dense with unease. She basically sounded as though she saw Caldina as an enemy.

“...I know next to nothing about it. ‘I don’t know’ is about all I can say.”

If I had to name something, it would be their indirect involvement in the actions of the Gouz-Maise Gang, which definitely didn’t give me a good impression.

“Is there something about Caldina?” I asked.

“...Nothing I can say with certainty. And unlike Granvaloa, there aren’t any problems that immediately come to mind.”

That alone made it seem like a good potential ally, but there had to be something more to this.

“After we lost the war, they offered to send Masters to us, including four Superiors.”

“Four?!” Caldina had a total of nine, and that was nearly half of them. That would literally double the amount of Superiors Altar had available, and the non-Superiors would do a good job filling whatever gaps they still had.

“And it was an alliance offer that did not even involve marriage. We would simply unite to get back at Dryfe. The only condition was that Caldina would have Dryfe’s land and technology, while Altar would get back the territory Dryfe had taken from the kingdom.”

Altar could use all the manpower from Caldina to win back what it had lost. It sounded like a really good deal, but... “...What about the pay for the Superiors and other Masters?”

“Not only would they cover all of that — they would also give us money to hire our kingdom’s Masters.”

So Altar would get everything back with little effort on their part. It was actually such a good deal that it made a light chill go down my spine...

“...You didn’t agree to it, though? Why?”

“Because if everything went according to their plan, Caldina would simply gain far too much...” First of all, they would receive Dryfe’s advanced technology and Dryfe’s land. The former was obviously the more important thing, but to a desert country like Caldina, even Dryfe’s land would be quite useful. The imperium was also full of ruins like the ones at Quartierlatin, with a great deal of treasure potentially waiting to be unearthed.

Second, they would have Dryfe’s Masters. Even if the imperium vanished, its Masters would still be around. Many of them would switch allegiances, and many of those would pick Caldina simply because it would now be controlling Dryfe’s territory. Caldina was also rich enough to match the insane monetary rewards Dryfe paid to its Masters, as evidenced by the four Superiors and many normal Masters they offered to dispatch to Altar's aid.

If there was one thing in this deal that might be a hardship for Caldina, it was the money they would have to pay to their Masters, but even that was a drop in the bucket compared to the country's immense wealth. Hugo had once told me that Dryfe's rewards to Masters had made a huge dent in the imperium's coffers, but to Caldina, that kind of money was pocket change.

Third, Caldina would break free of their geopolitical encirclement. Currently, Caldina was surrounded by the three western countries, Huang He to the east, and Granvaloa to the south. If they defeated Dryfe and forged an alliance with Altar, they would lose two out of their five enemies. Once that happened, they could use their nine Superiors, and all the other Superiors and Masters they would gain thanks to merging with Dryfe, to invade Huang He or Legendaria.

Basically, if the alliance happened, Caldina would have it all without risking anything.

They might even be able to use the momentum from their victories to bring the entire continent under their banner. Honestly, it was only natural for Azurite to be wary of their offer.

"Though, we did almost accept their offer," Azurite said. A drowning man will clutch at a straw, as they said. Desperation could've easily led Altar to accept the deal.

"But... the kingdom still has other options. We are not broken yet," she continued before looking into my eyes, for some reason. It felt like she was using me to remember something she'd seen in the past.

"Azurite?" I broke the silence.

"...I should get back to work."

Then I guess I should leave, I thought.

"...Thanks for coming today," Azurite said. "I will talk to Elizabeth again and really open up to her, just as you told me."

"That's good to hear."

"Thanks to you, I will avoid making at least one mistake."

"Don't mention it. I just did what I thought wouldn't leave a bad taste in my mouth."

With that, I left Azurite's room.

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The Guest House

Altimia watched as Ray left and closed the door, then heaved a sigh and said, “You are the reason why the kingdom didn’t break, Ray.”

It’s only because you gave hope to Altar’s tians that the country wasn’t shattered, she thought.

His battle had been broadcast to both Gideon and Altea, and it had been witnessed by many Altarians, noble and peasant alike.

It had prevented the nobles from finally losing all trust in Masters along with their hope for the kingdom’s future.

It was why the kingdom hadn’t gone with the easiest but most suspicious option.

If Altimia’s guess was correct, accepting Caldina’s offer would lead to a future where Caldina ruled the entire continent, and Altar would either end up as their vassal state or be destroyed entirely. It would be the same as losing to Dryfe, if not worse. The only difference would be that it would happen later.

Even so, despite the fact that that case held no hope for the future, she might’ve picked that option in order to save the present. There were many in the Altarian nobility who viewed Caldina favorably. Many of them thought that accepting Caldina’s offer was the most certain path to victory against Dryfe, but Altimia believed that a decent number among them were actually colluding with Caldina. There were even some documents in the recently-sentenced Marquis Borozel’s mansion referring to shady dealings with Caldinan merchants.

The country was trying to spread their tentacles throughout the Altarian nobility, using merchants as points of contact.

“Dryfe is the enemy that will fight us directly, while Caldina is the one that will backstab us... that might be the best way to look at it,” Altimia spoke to herself.

This was supported by the fact that Caldina had begun acting strange once Altimia rejected their alliance offer. For one, they requested a change in the commerce treaty and slightly changed their exports and imports. That didn’t seem like much to worry about, but Altimia thought that it wasn’t out of the question that they would assassinate her to instill a sense of danger and then support the Caldina-friendly nobles in order to put Elizabeth or Theresia on the throne and forge their alliance then.

"That witch... President La Place Phantasma is definitely capable of going that far." Also, Altimia hadn't told this to Ray because she wasn't certain of it, but it was possible that Caldina was also behind the imperium's invasion of Altar.

Before the change in Dryfe's leadership, Caldina had begun holding back its exports of food. Officially, it was "part of a restructuring related to the recent increase in Masters," but that didn't ring true to Altimia.

She'd also recently learned that Dryfe was going through a severe famine.

Strange as it was, the tian agents she'd dispatched there earlier hadn't reported anything like that happening, and the situation had only become clear once Altimia began giving similar requests to Masters.

Regardless of the reasons for it, Caldina's food export policy and the famine had added up, putting Dryfe in a dire situation. Altimia believed that it was possible that Caldina had stopped their exports *because* there was a famine in Dryfe, all so they could drive them into invading the fertile lands of Altar.

The imperium's food production simply couldn't keep up with demand.

Out of their neighbors, Granvaloa was in a similar position. They could only produce marine products and had to rely on foreign exports to fill the gaps. The other neighbor, Altar, had ended the alliance between the countries shortly after the new imperator took the throne. Legendaria was beyond Altar, while Huang He and Tenchi were beyond the vast deserts of Caldina.

With all that in mind, Altimia could see that Dryfe had no choice but to invade Altar to fix their food shortage.

However, the whole thing just didn't sit right with her. She questioned the actions of the invaders as well as the invaded — her own country.

Altimia found it strange that Altar had ended the alliance in the first place.

She couldn't understand why her father — the late king — and the Arch Sage — a major political advisor — would have done something like that.

Of course, Altimia was aware of the rumors that the current imperator had risen to the throne after killing the whole imperial family besides his younger sister, and it was understandable to be wary of him.

However, she couldn't help but feel as though there were some deeper reasons behind ending the alliance.

"...How troublesome." Caldina's actions, Altimia's dubious agents, and Altar ending the alliance... It seemed as though multiple motives had intertwined to bring about the war between Dryfe and Altar.

Currently, she suspected that one of the people involved was the president of Caldina, who was known to be a witch and a truly anomalous person.

"...Even the parasite is better than that witch." Even though the "parasite," Tsukuyo Fuso, often pushed Altar into making difficult choices in order to further her cult's agenda, she could no doubt be useful on occasion. In a way, she was like a parasite that sometimes became mutualistic.

The same couldn't be said for Caldina's witch.

Altimia had actually met her once during a certain diplomatic event. In her eyes, the witch was a monster that would bait you with a sweet deal and tempt you into doing what she wanted before wringing everything you had out of you.

"If I don't pay enough attention to Caldina's actions, the situation could become worse than I'd ever expect... How deeply troubling."

I already have my hands full with Dryfe, Altimia thought with a sigh.

The imperium hadn't acted once since Quartierlatin. They'd even dispatched a Superior for that, but had been completely inactive in the kingdom since.

Was there a problem in Dryfe, or was this a sign that they were planning something major?

Altimia lost herself in thought. Even if they had something up their sleeve, the kingdom and the imperium had already fought head-on, causing much bloodshed and damaging their relationship beyond repair. Painful as it was for her, Altimia had no choice but to admit that this would not end peacefully.

"Claudiah... What is your brother planning this time?" Altimia sighed, as she remembered her good friend from her days as a transfer student in Dryfe.

Chapter Four: To Each Their Own Duels of Love

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

My talk with Azurite was over, so I decided to look around town.

Festivals didn't happen every single day, so it'd be a waste not to enjoy this one... especially with the mess we could be in come tomorrow.

"So, do you have someone you want to walk around town with?" Nemesis asked. Apparently, she'd been awake during my conversation with Azurite, but she stayed within my crest to make the exchange less awkward. Once you looked past her gluttony, Nemesis was actually pretty considerate.

"Hmm... As far as I know, everyone's busy today," I said.

"And we're the only ones left with nothing to do, eh?"

"Well, even if that wasn't the case, I wanted to walk around with you today."

"I see. I also had something I wanted to do with y—... huh?"

She looked dumbfounded. No idea why, but apparently, she had something planned. "What is it?" I asked.

"Oh, uh... I was thinking of doing a bit of shopping..."

"Shopping? For what, Love-Duel-exclusive sweets?"

"...For some normal clothes for you."

...Well, I guess walking around town in armor can be a problem, so... I guess that's an okay idea.

"It's far worse than 'just a problem.' Masters don't seem to mind but don't you think walking around town in full armor is... unsettling?"

You have a point. All right, then — let's enjoy the festival while we keep an eye out for some clothes for me.

I suddenly began to wonder how the others were spending their first day of the festival.

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Gideon, Fourth District

That day, the ninjas Count Gideon had put in charge of intelligence, counterespionage, and spec ops were busy with a particular mission.

"This is squad B. We are observing the fourth district's market. No suspicious people in sight."

"This is squad C. We are following the targets. The only dubious people nearby... are those three."

They had split into several squads, all focused on following a certain group. Why? To protect it, of course. They were, after all, Elizabeth and Canglong — young royalty going out on a date.

Because the Love-Duel Festival had its roots in an historical event that had led to the marriage of the founding king and queen, there were many families that used this day for matchmaking. Most of them were wealthy merchants or craftsmen, but occasionally nobles as well. Even the parents of the current Count Gideon had met in this way.

However, it was nearly unheard of for two members of royalty to take part in such endeavors.

The Second Princess of Altar, Elizabeth, and Third Prince of Huang He, Canglong... Once it was known that they would be going on a date, Count Gideon directed nearly all of his ninjas to focus on securing their surroundings, which was notable even when considering the fact that some of them had already been designated as Elizabeth's protectors or watchdogs.

It was worth noting that the knights weren't accompanying them. They stood out far too much compared to the ninjas who could melt into the shadows, and having them around would have been like broadcasting the presence of important people. Thus, they had been deployed to guard other areas.

"It's so lively here! It really is a festival!" said Elizabeth. "What are Huang He's festivals like?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't walk out in town like this before coming to Altar, so I could only watch over such events from far away," Canglong replied.

"That seems boring."

"I can see why you would think that. Perhaps it is."

The two young people talked while walking through the lively streets.

According to the ninjas all around, there were no suspicious people around them... At least, not ones they didn't recognize.

There *were* some shady-looking individuals the ninjas knew well, though.

About ten metels behind Elizabeth and Canglong, there was a totem pole of three people peeking out and watching over the two from around the corner of a building.

It was Liliana, Xunyu, and Marie.

One was there as a knight, one as a friend, and one as a self-proclaimed big sister.

"Do they truly believe they don't stand out?" one of the ninjas asked.

"...Well, they *are* in disguise." Liliana had swapped her royal knight armor for casual clothing, but she was quite a beauty, so that only made her stand out more.

Xunyu had taken off her prosthetic limbs as well as the Fu covering her face and was now wearing clothing more typical of someone her age, but her pale-blue undead skin remained the same.

Marie had removed her sunglasses... but that was it.

"I can understand the other two, but Marie..."

"Best not to say it. She's panicking... is what I'd like to say, but she always seemed to think that taking off her glasses was a working disguise."

Even in her manga, she often had scenes that seemingly introduced a new, beautiful lady character, only to reveal that it was just the protagonist — Marie — without her sunglasses.

Many readers commented that you could tell it was her just by her clothes or just assumed it was a running gag, but she truly and honestly intended it to be a real disguise.

Anyway, there was this young couple and three weirdos, and the former seemed to be enjoying the festival. Elizabeth looked over the festival stalls — and not just the ones with food, unlike a certain someone — with gleaming eyes, while Canglong watched her with a smile on his face.

"...He's lookin' like a brother watching over his little sister as she enjoys the festival," Xunyu commented.

"I-I don't think that is bad," said Liliana.

"But it doesn't seem like a *date*, does it?" Marie asked. "I think we should join them and enjoy the festival togeth—"

“Stop,” the other two shot down her idea.

“What kind of date involves the company of a friend, a bodyguard, and a pervert all at once?” Xunyu said.

“...If I may ask, which of those is which of us?” Marie asked coldly.

Is that even a question? thought everyone who heard it, even the surrounding ninjas.

As this continued, the couple arrived at a mask stall.

Because the first queen was said to have worn a mask, and also due to the desire of many ladies and gentlemen to mingle anonymously, many people spent this festival wearing a mask. Elizabeth excitedly examined one mask after another, seemingly pondering which one she should buy.

“She also wore a mask the first time I met her. I guess she likes them,” Marie said. “Ah... Ellie, no. Not the bear mask.”

“...I suppose it’s in the blood,” Liliana commented.

“The founding king’s queen and ex-princess of Gideon was a masked swordswoman, right? Does she get it from her?”

“...I had someone closer in mind,” Liliana said with a clouded expression. Marie didn’t understand what she meant and just tilted her head, while Xunyu, having actually seen the “someone closer” wear a mask while on the way to Gideon, knew exactly what Liliana was referring to.

“Hrmm... Should I pick the bear or the cat?” Elizabeth wondered. At her side, Canglong was looking at another mask. It depicted a dragon... specifically, the eastern “Ryu.” Masks like this were often seen in festivals on the eastern side of the continent — not so much here.

Canglong looked at it as if to compare it with *something*. “Did you pick one, Canglong? Hm... That one’s a bit scary,” said Elizabeth.

The man behind the stall smiled and said, “Little lady, that is a very precious mask. It’s based on the one The Draconic Emperor — the duel champion of Huang He to the east — wears whenever dueling. I got them from an eastern merchant, and they’re selling great. Would you two like one, as well?”

“I want a bear or a cat mask.”

“Oh? Then how about this? It’s another one I got from the east, and it’s like a fusion of a bear and cat... a panda mask!”

“What is this wondrous animal?!” Elizabeth exclaimed, her eyes gleaming at the sight of the panda mask that the man took out of his inventory.

Canglong smiled as he watched her before slowly putting the dragon mask back. He whispered “Zifu Longmian” as he did, but no one heard him.

Elizabeth donned the mask, and they went on to walk around the market in the fourth district. It seemed less like a date and more like two friends enjoying a festival.

This continued for several hours before the two sat down to take a break in the shade of a tree.

“Mrgh... You have so little energy, Cang.”

“I’m sorry... I’m not used to walking around like this,” Canglong replied. His face was flushed and sweaty, possibly due to fatigue. This would happen to any normal child who walked around for hours on end on a sunny day — Elizabeth was actually the anomaly here. The girl was still full of energy despite not being old enough to even have a job.

The heat had caused Canglong to undo the upper buttons of his shirt and fan himself with a fan he was carrying.

Elizabeth looked at him, and at that moment she noticed something in the gap he’d opened.

“Hm...?” She stared at it, blinked a few times, and realized that it was black bandages, wrapped around him so thoroughly that you couldn’t see his skin.

“Canglong, what’s that?” she asked.

“Eh? Ah...” Canglong realized his mistake and hastily buttoned up his clothes again.

“Are you hurt or sick?”

“...I suppose you might call it an illness. These bandages are a measure to hold back a certain handicap I was born with.”

Hearing these words, Elizabeth realized that Canglong had been born with a disease, just like her little sister Theresia.

“...I’m sorry,” Canglong apologized. “I didn’t intend for you to see something so unsightly.”

“Don’t apologize! What’s so unsightly about being sick?!” Elizabeth snapped at his apology, as though actually angry. “So what if you were born with an illness?! If you think that bothers me, you’re sorely mistaken!” It was possible that she wasn’t talking to him, exactly; She might’ve just been seeing some part of her sickly sister in Canglong.

Even so, Canglong could tell that she was being completely honest.

"...You really are a gentle person, Your Highness," he said.

"Altimia and Liliana would say the same thing I did."

"I see..."

So you must be gentle because you were raised by gentle people, Canglong thought, as his heart ached at the fact that he was responsible for splitting such a family apart. That pain also made him realize that he couldn't treat this pure and gentle girl the same way he treated everyone else.

Silence then came over them and continued for a good while.

It was broken by Elizabeth, who said, "I don't want to go to Huang He."

"...I'm aware."

"I don't want to leave Altimia and Theresia... or this country. I want to support and protect them."

Though Elizabeth had some particular talents, she was just a child without any special job, so there were few things she could do to help Altar in the war.

Even so, she wanted to support her older sister and protect the younger one.

"I love Altimia. She gives her all and works harder than anyone else to protect this country and us. And..."

Elizabeth paused and looked to the north... in the direction of the mountains, beyond which lay the capital.

"...I love Theresia, too. She's my dear little sister who's always stuck in the castle, and I want to protect her so that she can smile at least a little."

Of course, she didn't actually know *how* she could do that.

"I'm still just a weak little girl, so I can't do either of those things." A child like Elizabeth could do little to save her family or Altar in its time of need.

"But..."

However, now she'd been given a certain way to do exactly that.

"But if I go to Huang He with you, I might be able to support Altimia and protect Theresia." The support Huang He would give to Altar in exchange for Elizabeth traveling there could help ensure the safety of the country and her family. Young as she was, she had a vague understanding of her situation and the negotiations between the two countries.

After the shocking news from Altimia had caused her to run away from home last evening, Elizabeth had spent a lot of time thinking about it all, until she finally made her decision.

Through both her calmness and tears, she finally realized that there was no other way, so she resolved to marry Canglong for the sake of Altar.

The girl was too young to understand romance, yet she'd already chosen her significant other. In terms of matchmaking, this date was over.

Canglong couldn't find what to say in response. He couldn't refuse, for that would go against the will of his father, the emperor.

But he also couldn't accept, for that... would go against his own heart.

His soul and heartache told him that he could not "acquire" this pure, gentle, sun-like girl as his wife in such a cold manner, like a trade agreement.

"That's why I will—"

"There is still time until I return to Huang He," Canglong said, cutting Elizabeth off. "I will give you my response before then."

It was neither refusal or acceptance — he merely delayed it.

"I will know how I feel by then."

"...Very well," said Elizabeth. Thus ended their date that doubled as a formal marriage meeting. Basically, it ended on a note of "Could you give me more time?" which was quite common for such events.

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"Yo. You feElin' good?"

"Master Xunyu. Thank you for protecting us all this time."

"Well, that's pArt of my jOb. Are yoU sure about that, thOugh?"

"With what?"

"You fell for hEr at first sight, didn't yA?"

"..."

"And yet yoU didn't accept her chOice. I know how yA feel, though. Forcin' sOmeone into a mArriage doesn't automAtically make them lovE ya."

"Master Xunyu..."

"That's exActly why I recommendEd the date. If she starts likin' ya, too, thEn that'd be prOper love. Doesn't seEm like it happened, thOugh."

"..."

"Ya constAntly closed yOurself off, didn't yA? She actEd like herself, but yOu weren't you. Ya were nEither The Third Prince Canglong nOr *the other you*. Ya werE just a coward hidin' yoUrself. Ya can't show off tO the girl you like likE that, can ya?"

"...It hurts how right you are."

"If you undErstand that, then show hEr what you're reAlly like... and think of hOw to charm hEr. You cAn do that, right?"

"...I can!"

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Gideon, urban area, KoD's Popcorn Factory

"...Man, how should I handle this?" While Ray and Azurite were having their conversation, Shu heaved a sigh, standing in a facility he'd rented for his popcorn production.

He currently had three major problems to deal with: keeping an eye on the "bomb" that had been lurking since Franklin's Game, the potentially-bloody romance between Hannya and Figaro, and the marriage between Elizabeth and Canglong. He intended to entrust the last one to Ray and the rest. Considering his relationship with Altimia and general suitability, Ray was the best man for the job.

However, the first two problems had to be handled by Shu alone. This festival was actually a golden opportunity to earn big money selling popcorn, but he ended up having zero spare time to dedicate to it.

"The situation with Figgy and Hannya is especially bad. It won't end with just a talk... Do I have no choice but to lead them on a 'date' outside of Gideon and have them settle it there? But how do I lead them out of Gideon when the Love-Duel Festival's goin' on? There's no tourist attractions or anything outside."

As Shu worried about the approaching calamity...

"Excuse me. Is Shu Starling here?"

...someone outside asked, with a knock on the door.

Before Shu could even respond, the person opened the door, (twisting off the knob in the process) and entered Shu's office.

It was a woman with a porcupine in her arms and a crest on her left hand, marking her as a Master.

“I heard your voice, so I figured you were in,” she continued. “Aren’t you glad, Behemot?”

“...You better pay for the door,” Shu said with a glare.

“soz,” the porcupine — Behemot — said, as the woman threw a gold coin towards Shu.

This was the “bomb” Shu was watching over. The strongest pawn of the imperium, which had been here since Franklin’s Game — King of Beasts the Physical Apex, and her partner.

“So, what’s your business? I’m not sellin’ pawpcorn today.” The porcupine’s face was hard to read, but anyone could tell that those words shocked her.

“Behemot, we didn’t come here for popcorn.”

“...kk”

“Whaddya want, then?” King of Beasts was a major threat to the kingdom, but she was also a regular customer at Shu’s popcorn stall, and they had talked many times as they ate.

Shu wondered what they wanted this time... “I’ll get right to the point. Come on a date with us.”

“...”

...And the answer was one he could have never expected.

He quickly considered how he ought to handle this sudden situation.

For better or worse, the issue of Hannya will come to a head tomorrow. I’m free today. And I have no idea what they’d do if I refuse. I guess it’s best to accept the invitation and watch over them, just in case, Shu thought in two seconds and accepted.

At the same time, he sincerely hoped that a certain egg-woman who often messed with him wouldn’t add anything to the pile of troubles he already had.

Though he’d agreed to go on a date, he had no idea why they’d invited him in the first place.

He went and asked, and the response went as follows:

“Well... the biggest reason is that you can only fully enjoy this festival as a pair.”

According to her, The Love-Duel Festival was full of things you could only do as a couple.

For most such things, the gender of either party didn’t matter — but obviously, it was hard to make a cool-headed beauty and a porcupine pass for a couple. It would've just made her seem like a profoundly sad and lonely woman.

Considering Shu's costume, it didn't look all that different with him; he was relatively famous, however, so it was at least understandable.

The three still ended up looking like they were orbiting a lonely lady who'd gone to an amusement park by herself, but they all actually ended up quite enjoying the Love-Duel Festival. They looked over the many and varied stalls opened by tians and Masters alike, and they participated in a duel-ranker charity event at the third arena.

Once that was done, they'd bought honey castellas at a stall marked "couples only" and went to the second arena for an event Behemot wanted to see.

Naturally, the strangeness of the pair drew some weird looks. Shu's costume stood out, and the pretty lady with the porcupine also attracted a lot of attention. The lady looked around, as though irritated.

"Sorry for makin' ya stand out," Shu said. "But this was your decision, so bear with it."

"Believe it or not, you were the most reasonable option," the woman replied. "Though, I must say that I don't understand it."

"Don't understand what?"

Not even looking at him, the woman said, "A newspaper article said that you refused to participate in the previous war because you didn't want to reveal your face, yet you participated in the game set up by that weakling while dressed in an outfit that was one step away from doing just that. Now everyone knows you're the King of Destruction, yet now you don't seem to care if you stand out at all. Your words and actions contradict one another."

"...True." It was said that Shu had refused to participate in the previous war because he didn't want to needlessly reveal his face.

That wasn't entirely wrong. Shu had indeed said that, and he had indeed avoided participation in the war. It would've also been a lie to say that he *hadn't* been afraid of revealing his face if his gear had been destroyed. That was exactly why he'd also said the same thing to Ray.

However, there had been another reason why he absolutely *couldn't* participate in the war.

"Well, it doesn't matter to us," the woman said. "But do participate in the war next time. If you don’t, we won’t have anyone to fight.”

“...I’m sure you won’t.” Shu fully agreed with her words. The pair next to him were no doubt the strongest people around. They were on par with the other two monsters he’d fought — the Magical Apex and the Technical Apex.

There existed a theory of the ultimate synergy between Embryo and job — the Guardian-Jaguarman theory. These two were the strongest beasts to arise from this theory, and Shu knew full well that he would have to give his all to fight them.

They eventually arrived at the second arena. It had been converted into a theater stage for an event where various groups displayed various acts. There was a schedule off to the side.

“What did we come here fur, anyway?” Shu asked.

“A hero show. Behemot liked them quite a lot.”

The fact that she used the past tense stood out to Shu, but he didn’t ask about it.

“?” Behemot suddenly noticed something and dashed off.

“Behemot?” Shu and the lady went after her and arrived at the arena’s staff entrance.

There was a gathering of Masters there, and they were all wearing costumes fit for the stage. It was clear that they were on next.

However, their expressions were gloomy.

“Gh... This is a nightmare. We can’t do this if Gin doesn’t come online. Why did he have to get food poisoning *now*, of all times?!”

“I should’ve stepped in when he posted ‘I’ll best this vile pufferfish!’ on his account.” Apparently, one of the acting Masters was in no state to come online. And even in the current year of 2045, you had people itching to flaunt their recklessness on social media.

“What do we do? Should we get help from some other acting troupe?”

“But we’ve only got an hour left. It’s too late to get a replacement for a main player, isn’t it?”

“Why not bring the hero count down to five?”

“We already advertised it as a squad of six...”

“We either have to call it off or change the whole thing...” The people in the colorful outfits seemed quite troubled.

“They are...”

"As far as I know, that's the Hero Club clan." Shu recognized them from their sentai-hero-like apparel.

The Hero Club was a clan of hobbyists built around hero show performances. They were popular among tian children and Master enthusiasts alike, and their performances gathered a good amount of views on video sites.

Apparently, they had a show planned for the Love-Duel Festival, but it seemed like they'd run into some trouble that might force them to call it off.

"wtf," Behemot said and collapsed where she stood, shocked by the fact that she wouldn't get to see the hero show.

It made her seem more like a small child than a porcupine.

"Behemot is sad. Do something about it," demanded the lady.

"You just assume that I would, huh...?" Shu spent a good moment thinking about it

"Beary well, then," he said as he walked up to the Hero Club members and asked, "How about I be the stand-in?"

The Hero Club were surprised by his offer... and the very fact that he was here, for that matter. He was one of Altar's Superiors, famous for constantly wearing a costume. They all knew him, obviously.

While they were surprised by his offer, he asked for the script, and they just went and gave it to him without thinking too hard about it.

Shu went on to flip through the pages. As they watched him do that, the Hero Club members whispered among themselves.

"That came outta nowhere... It's a nice offer, but what do you guys think?"

"Can... Can he even act?"

"Having the walking playground as a guest star would make the kids really happy, though."

"It'd be a real news hook, too. Why not just let him act? If he's bad at it, we'll just pass it off as a character quirk... That's about the only option we've got, right?"

"Hold on, that's a bit—" As they talked, Shu closed the script.

"Was there a problem with it?" one of them asked.

"I memorized it," Shu said.

"...Huh? But you only read it for five minutes..."

"It ain't beary hard to memorize a hero show less than thirty minutes long. Name a page and a line."

"...All right. Page fifteen, sixth lin— Ah," one of the Hero Club members said, only to realize that he gave Shu a line of the leader, not of the sixth they had to replace. He tried to switch to another one, but...

"As long as there are children to protect... WE WILL NEVER LOSE!" Shu exclaimed, making the Hero Club gasp.

That was indeed the correct line, making it evident that Shu had memorized not just the sixth hero's lines, but *the entire script*.

More importantly, Shu's acting was simply spectacular. The fact that he was in an animal costume did nothing to detract from the heroic aura he emitted as he delivered the line.

The Hero Club had actual aspiring actors among them, so they could easily tell just how good Shu was.

"All right," he said. "We have a little over fifty minutes until the show. I wanna pre-bear fur it with a complete rehearsal. Let's get to it."

"Y-Yes!"

And so, Shu and the Hero Club began their practice.

Behemot silently watched them with excited-looking eyes. "Did you hear that? It seems you'll have your hero show after all."

The lady holding the porcupine was quite happy herself.

"So, what should I wear? If I need to change, I—"

"Oh, just equip this accessory with Clothing Switch on it," one of the Hero Club members gave Shu a mechanical bracelet. "You will switch from your costume into a hero suit when you say 'Transform.'"

"That's beary convenient." The hero suit produced by the accessory seemed very high-quality even to Shu, which showed just how passionate they were about their hero shows.

"Do I get a transformation pose?" Shu asked.

"In our performances, we use transformation poses from old sentai hero shows. It's so we can show off the cool poses to tian children and get some grins out of tokusatsu fans. Oh, if you have a pose you like, just feel free to use that one. If you don't, I can show you some to choose from."

"I have one I'm used to, so I'll just go fur that one."

"I see... Wait, 'used to'?" the red-clad actor tilted his head, but Shu ignored him and hit the pose. It involved a swing of the hand, a raised leg, and a spin, and it was done with great liveliness and fluidity.

"Ohh, the transformation pose of Cruise Gold, the extra Cruise Five member. You did it great! None of the other members are using it, so please go with that."

"Gotcha." The pre-transformation Cruise Gold was played by a child actor. Because of that, it was surprising to see the pose done by an adult man in a large bear costume, but it was done so flawlessly that the red-clad member instantly gave it his seal of approval. In fact, he found it a bit amusing.

However, if Shu's old friend, Lei-Lei, was here, she would be amused for a totally different reason.

After all, the child actor who'd played Cruise Gold was none other than Shu himself.

It was a particularly noteworthy role Shuichi Mukudori had played as a young acting prodigy.

Shu using this transformation pose was basically just the actual actor revisiting his old role, but no one in the Hero Club could even entertain the idea that they were in the presence of the actual Cruise Gold, now grown up.

Shu, on the other hand, only thought, *I haven't done this in years. I guess the body remembers.*

The two girls watching him, however, now seemed to feel something other than joy.

Once done with the rehearsal, they went up to the stage. The audience were surprised by the presence of Shu and his animal costume, but thanks to the acting prowess of the Hero Club and especially Shu, they thoroughly enjoyed the show.

Thus, Shu had successfully saved the hero performance.

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It was already evening when the show ended. The city was still brimming with life, but Shu was in an empty place, far away from all that vitality.

He had been invited for a post-performance party, but he'd refused.

"Phew... I'm so beary tired," he said, making a sweat-wiping gesture despite the fact that his costume never exactly produced any sweat.

He had Behemot in his hands. The lady that was holding her before had given the porcupine to him, saying that she would go buy him a drink.

"Did you enjoy the hero show?" Shu asked Behemot.

"...yea." There was no lie in that. Behemot had fully enjoyed the show. However, there were signs of a different emotion in those eyes.

Shu could sense it, so he asked, "What's wrong?"

The scene of a big bear talking to a porcupine might've seemed like something out of a children's tale. However, Behemot said nothing, as if she was nothing more than an ordinary porcupine.

"Sorry for the wait." That was when the lady returned with juice cups in hand. Once she drew near, Behemot jumped from Shu's hands to the top of her head. As though used to it, the lady didn't miss a beat. Behemot was still completely silent, making it clear that she didn't intend to answer Shu's question.

"Here, this one's yours," the lady said as she handed him the cup in her left hand.

While still watching Behemot, Shu grabbed the juice with his right hand. He skillfully took it with his bulky paws, but the next moment, she dropped her own cup in her right and *thrust a spear-hand towards Shu's heart*.

A second later, you could smell a mix of fruit juice and the metallic scent of blood everywhere.

The blood belonged not to Shu, but herself.

"...Well done," she said. The spear-hand had been shattered. The fingers were pointing in unnatural directions and the skin had been torn open, letting blood drip freely to the ground.

Her right hand had directly clashed with Shu's fist. Shu had expected this surprise attack and placed his fist in the path of her spear-hand.

That was what had broken her hand. Some would say that this was an expected outcome, considering she'd hit the fist of the King of Destruction — the player with the greatest STR.

However, some would claim it was amazing that she had the offensive power and endurance to make it out of this clash with *just* broken fingers. As long as they weren't END-focused, even ordinary Superior Jobs would have simply lost their entire hand. "What's this about?" Shu asked without a hint of his usual humor.

"Well, I suppose you can call it a reconfirmation. I simply did a final check to see if you truly are the kind of person who wouldn't die to a surprise attack from someone like me, as I am now. The result speaks for itself. What a relief."

"..."

"It appears that you always thought that we might come for your life. Your usual outward attitude always made me somewhat worried and very irritated, but I'm so, so glad to see that I have no eyes for this kind of thing."

For some reason, she smiled as though actually happy. There was now a grin on her face and no trace of the composure from before. It felt as though she was a monster whose human skin had begun to peel away.

Shu had prepared himself to summon Baldr out of his crest. If worse came to worst, he thought that Gideon might once again have a Clash of the Superiors, except greater than any battle before it. It would certainly come to that if he were to retaliate — so for now, he refrained from attacking.

However, if she wanted to start it here and now, Shu would have no choice but to oblige.

"What do you mean, 'final check'?" he asked, looking to find out her motive while keeping an eye on her actions.

"We received an order yesterday. We will now return to the imperium," she said.

"...What?" Shu couldn't have possibly expected that reply.

"Don't worry. We won't do anything here anymore. Consider today's date and the attack just now to be a little something to remember us by."

The very fact that they would receive an order telling them to retreat wasn't strange. It had always been obvious that they were in Gideon on Dryfe's orders.

However, Shu didn't understand why it would happen now, of all times.

Why had they stayed here until now?

"Anyway, Behemot and I are now leaving Gideon. It might be a clichéd thing to say, but I can't wait until we meet again and fight to the death... Oh? Ah, yes..."

As she tried to take Behemot off her head into her hands, she remembered that her right hand's fingers were broken.

She reached into the inventory on her hip, took out an ampoule filled with healing liquid, broke off the top with her thumb and downed it. It instantly healed her right hand, right down to the bone.

Shu had watched it with Identification on and noticed that it was not a special medicine, but a standard potion that healed a certain percentage of health. It was a low-tier healing item that you could acquire on the market quite easily, and one that only healed about five percent of the user's maximum health.

That weak potion was enough to completely heal the damage her clash with Shu had inflicted.

He knew exactly what that meant — the lady before him was so strong that an attack which could instantly kill Legendaries dealt only minor damage to her.

To win against her head-on, Shu would have no choice but to use his ultimate skill. That would be a repeat of the ultimate battle against Gloria, and it would be a calamity matched by few before it.

He'd been troubled by the problem of Hannya the whole day, but whatever she might cause was small compared to what could happen with this woman.

Even if a fight with her was unavoidable, he couldn't have it here in the city. Thus, he had no choice but to agree to do it the next time they met, just like she'd said.

However... before she walked away, Shu called out to her.

"Answer me one thing."

"Only if it's something I can answer."

"Why have you been in Gideon all this time?" That was something he'd started to wonder just recently... if not the entire time they'd been here.

"At first, I thought you were waiting for some golden opportunity, like the arrival of the First Princess or something," Shu said. "But you didn't do anything when she showed up, and now you're saying that you're leaving. You basically spent the past month and more just hanging around Gideon. What did you hope to achieve with this stay?"

"Phew..." she sighed, as though remembering something boring, before continuing. "We're the same as you."

"...I see." Those words didn't seem to mean much, but Shu instantly understood. As though to reinforce his understanding, he continued, "You couldn't leave, could you?"

The mad smile on her face had vanished and was replaced by a cold expression.

“That weakling’s... Franklin’s act of terror on Altar was a failure. It’s only natural for us to be wary of counterattacks from the kingdom, isn’t it? And the ones who would perform them would be Superiors... most likely the wide-scale extermination type — yourself — or the wide-scale suppression-extermination type like the High Priestess and her Lunar Society.”

“...True.”

“However, the kingdom’s relationship with The Lunar Society isn’t favorable, so you are the one we have to be most wary of.”

Lei-Lei came to Shu’s mind, but it was hard for her to be relevant to this conversation when she was hardly ever online.

“If I don’t intend to commit any terrorist acts, this is basically a waste of good fighting power, isn’t it?” Shu asked.

“It isn’t. We were an anchor.”

“...An anchor?”

“You were so wary of us that you almost never left Gideon. You mostly did it when you trained that rookie.”

It was indeed true that Shu had almost never left Gideon during this time. He hadn’t even moved from here when Tsukuyo Fuso had kidnapped his brother. It was all because the King of Beasts was here, and the result of that was...

“You couldn’t leave Gideon and couldn’t gather the materials for your ammo. Am I wrong?”

Shu’s reply was silence, but she was on the mark.

“We can fight at full capacity at any time, but that isn’t true for you. Your wide-scale extermination firepower is the same as that weakling’s monster creation in that it relies on outside Resources to be effective. However, since we’ve been here, you haven’t been able to go to any high-level monster areas to gather rare materials. Your only option was to buy what you could find on the market. However, Altar now has few veteran Masters, so the supply is limited. Well? Are your ammo stocks high enough that you’d be able to fight for the entirety of the coming war?”

It would be quite difficult. Baldr really didn’t have much ammo left. He only had enough for three armies of the same scale that Franklin had unleashed upon Gideon. Considering that the war would mean a rematch with Franklin and possibly a fight against the Hell General, who could create monsters even more easily than the mad scientist, three seemed like a very small number.

"...I always took you for a meathead," Shu said.

"I can't deny that. Instead of wasting time on craftiness, I believe it's easier to simply crush things with our power. This wasn't just our idea, but part of the imperator's strategy. After Franklin's Game, we were simply ordered to live here. We didn't know the reason ourselves until we were contacted yesterday."

"...I see." It might've seemed like Shu had been taken for a fool, but his actions actually wouldn't have changed even if he'd known about it. If he'd ignored the King of Beasts and went to gather materials, the imperator could've easily issued them a new order, possibly causing another incident in Gideon. He also noted the craftiness behind the fact that not even these two knew why they were here, for the lack of information made it impossible for Shu to actually outsmart the imperator.

Also, this move had probably been made right after Shu had revealed his identity at the battle against Franklin, which made him understand how cunning the ruler of Dryfe really was.

"It is quite troubling that you won't be at your peak in our coming battle," said the lady. "However, the ultimate skill that you used to defeat Gloria can be used without any ammo, right?"

"...Yeah." Indeed, Baldr's ultimate skill, The Unmatched God of War — Baldr, wasn't as dependent on Resources as ammo. As a solo fighter, he was still almost at his best.

"Then I don't mind. All I want is to face you in a contest of pure power."

"Is that something you say after trying to kill me with a surprise attack?"

"Like I said, that was just a final check to see that you were truly a worthy opponent. If that had worked, you would've been unworthy of a *proper* fight... A pebble just like the rest."

She smiled again, but not in a cruel, monstrous, or crazy way.

It was a smile of actual joy.

"You are indeed worthy," she said before turning away and walking off, holding Behemot in her hands. If her back could speak, it would surely say, "This ends our conversation. Next time, we will merely fight to the death on the battlefield."

Behemot said nothing and simply looked at Shu from within the lady's hands.

Shu watched them leave, but then remembered something.

"Sorry, there's one last thing I forgot to ask."

"...What is it?" she turned around and asked, looking somewhat irritated that he would continue this exchange after she'd said everything she wanted.

Shu went and asked her something that had somehow never come to mind before now.

"You still haven't told me your name, have you?" And that was despite them being in close contact for over a month. Shu still had never figured out the name of the lady holding Behemot.

"We aren't foolish enough to show *our hand*." She tried to avoid answering that, but...

"np."

"...I suppose you're right. I guess you may have my nickname, at least."

Behemot's urging made her quickly change her tune.

"Behemot calls me 'Levia.' You can use that, as well."

"Levia, eh? Behemot and Levia... I see. What a pair," Shu muttered as though that was enough for him to understand everything.

The lady calling herself "Levia" turned around and left without saying anything more.

Behemot, however, stuck her head out from her arms, looked at Shu...

"See ya, Mr. Bear."

...and gave a farewell actually understandable to humankind.

"Yeah. See ya, Behemot," said Shu.

King of Beasts, he added in thought.

After parting ways with Shu, Levia went north through the Nex Plains. Her speed exceeded that of sound, and it was growing so dark that no one could see her. She held the porcupine in her hands, but moved at supersonic speeds, occasionally turning any obstacles — meaning, monsters — to dust as she moved towards the imperium's capital.

"Behemot, I can't go at half of my maximum speed in this form, but it should be enough to get us to Vandelheim by tomorrow morning."

The porcupine in her arms had been silent the whole way so far, but she finally spoke up. "...Cruise Gold."

There was no one around, so rather than the usual Earth internet slang she’d ordinarily employ, she instead used human words.

“The transformation pose reminded me of Dad.”

“...Yes, it does seem similar to what you see in your memories.” Levia looked through the memories she shared with Behemot and concluded that what she’d seen at some point definitely bore a resemblance to what Shu had done at the hero show.

The movements were the same, but the actor was different.

“It was so nostalgic and made me so happy.”

“If it made you happy, then I’m happy, too.”

“But it also reminded me of something dark... and sad.”

“I understand. We will kill that bear the next time we meet, no matter what,” Levia nodded with a gentle smile on her face.

And, after canceling the Crest Disguise skill and making the mark on her left hand vanish, she declared, “Queen of Beasts, Leviathan was born to protect all that you are.”

Thus, they left the city of Gideon without having caused a single incident.

However, both they and Shu were certain that the day of their clash was drawing near.

Chapter Five: The Lion and the Bomb

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

“I say we should opt for clothing instead.”

“Isn’t armor the better choice? I mean, who knows what could happen.” Following Nemesis’ suggestion that I get some casual clothes, we’d headed to the bustling fourth district, which was filled with all kinds of stores.

However, we’d run into a problem — should I buy armor or regular clothing?

Unlike in reality, what you wore in *Dendro* wasn’t just fashion, but defense too, potentially making it a crucial part of your survival. Most armor pieces with actually good bonuses were crafted using drops from monsters and such, and that often came at the cost of making them look awkward. On the other end of the spectrum, you had fashionable clothing that was both stylish and varied, but completely useless as armor.

For battle, you needed to focus on armor, but to look fabulous in the safety of a town, you needed regular clothing.

“...You sure I can’t just walk around like this?” I asked.

“That is completely out of the question,” Nemesis shot back. “Even *you* noticed how people react to you, did you not?”

She had me there. I’d even been stopped by some guards this morning. *Man, what should I do?* I wondered.

“Ah, Ray. Good morning!”

“Huh? Rook?” I’d run into a familiar, unexpected face.

Wasn’t he on a date with Kasumi? Or are they going to meet up later?

“Didn’t you say you had plans with Kasumi?”

“It... has been postponed.” He went on to say that Kasumi was sick in real life and couldn’t get out of bed. She’d caught something a few days ago and tried to recover before the date, but it hadn’t worked out. She *was* getting better, though, and it was likely that she would be well enough to go on the date tomorrow in *Dendro* time, which was about half a day in real life. If that wasn’t enough, then they would postpone it again.

Well, it happens, I guess, I thought. *Unlike Dendro, real life doesn't have items or spells that instantly cure disea— Huh? Wait. But my sister and someone else once... no, it must've been my imagination.*

"With my schedule freed up, I thought I'd walk around the stores in the fourth district or pay a visit to the pimp guild. I haven't been there in a while," said Rook. "What about you two?"

"Oh, I already talked to Azurite about you-know-what, so we're just shopping now," I said.

"We're looking for clothes for Ray," Nemesis added.

"Clothes? I see, I see!" Rook said.

...See what? I wondered.

"I mean that I understand. Don't worry about it, please," Rook elaborated.

"All right... Anyway, we ran into a bit of a problem," I said before explaining to him that we couldn't decide whether to focus on the stats, the design, or just keep things as they were.

Rook tilted his head and said, "Why not just buy normal clothes and use an accessory with the Clothing Switch skill?"

"The what skill?" I'd never heard of that one before.

According to Rook, Clothing Switch allowed you to swap between your current equipment and inventory items of the same type that were linked to them using the skill. It sounded like Instant Equip and Instant Wear, but those allowed you to instantly choose and equip any item from the inventory, while Clothing Switch only allowed switching between two items that have been paired. You could use it to change all of your equipment at once, but it didn't give you the freedom to pick and choose the right item for the situation.

Unlike Instant Wear, it also had a cooldown of a few seconds. Because of this, Instant Wear was better for swapping between specific equipment depending on the situation, while Clothing Switch was preferred for just switching from standard clothing to battle equipment.

This didn't mean much to me, but apparently, when you used Clothing Switch on equipment that took all armor slots — like Shu's costume or B3's Gunhammer Plate — it was functionally the same as Instant Wear.

"I hear it's often used for costume changes in plays," Rook added.

"Really? Well, I can imagine it being useful for hero shows."

Regardless, Rook's idea solved our problem. Since I could use Clothing Switch to get into my armor instantly, I would just buy some normal clothes. I did wonder if the switch would be fast enough, but I had Counter Absorption and the Brooch to keep me alive long enough.

We parted ways with Rook again after that. Nemesis and I went to a clothing store, while Rook went to pay a visit to the pimp guild.

The store we went to wasn't all that different from the kind you'd find in reality. It was lit by magical lamps, and you had a wide selection of clothes hanging on hangers all over.

There's tons of variety, too, I thought. *With so much to choose from, I can see why people enjoy shopping.*

"If I may ask..." Nemesis spoke up. "If you think that there's so much to choose from, why do you exclusively go for black and red clothes?"

"...I'm not doing it on purpose." I was definitely picking clothes in that color scheme, which made me think that I might have a fondness for it.

Though, it probably wasn't a good idea to buy clothes of those colors — I'd probably end up looking basically like I did with my armor on.

"What about your bracers, by the way?" Nemesis asked. "You need a piece of equipment to pair them with."

"I guess I can link them with some basic gloves. Like these ones here."

"...You realize that those are fingerless, don't you?"

"...I'm not doing this on purpose."

In the end, we postponed the matter of the gloves, and I let Nemesis choose my clothing. The end result had flair, but wasn't too eccentric, and it seemed like something I wouldn't have any problems wearing in casual situations. The store also had Clothing Switch accessories, so we bought one along with the clothes. I paired my new outfit up with my armor, so I was still ready for battle at any time.

And with that, my appearance change was complete.

"You look proper," said Nemesis. "Yes. Proper indeed. So proper..."

"Nemesis, why are you repeating the word 'proper' over and over while looking like you're about to cry?"

"You will never understand how I feel... Nor understand what it's like for me to stand next to you when you're clad in the armor you ended up with!"

Hey, my current set is just a bit dark, a little scary, and pretty cool.

There's nothing weird about it, I thought.

"...Ray, imagine yourself crossdressing, wearing animal ears, and glasses at the same time."

"Why would you combine my three most hated clothing styles? The very thought makes me shudder."

"Albeit in a different way, that is how I feel about your armor."

"Is it really that bad?!"

Why would it be so mentally taxing for y— Hm?

"That's..." While we talked, I noticed something familiar.

Someone was leaving a nearby accessory shop, wearing a lion costume that I'd once seen in the central arena's waiting room.

It was undoubtedly Figaro, who was apparently doing some shopping.

"Online already?" I wondered. "But... an accessory shop?"

There was a sign in front of the store saying "Lifesaving Brooches for 800,000 lir each! Limit of 10!"

Oh, so he's stocking up on items, I thought.

"Oh? Ray," Figaro said as he noticed me staring. "Hello. It's been a while. So you're back in Gideon. I see you're going incognito. Well, I guess you *are* famous now."

"Ahahah. Well... I suppose you could say that." I did notice fewer people staring at me after I changed clothes, but I didn't know how to feel about a guy who was incognito in a lion costume asking me if I was incognito just because I was wearing normal clothes. "Umm... What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"I'm just preparing for something."

"Shu told me that you weren't able to get online until tomorrow." Speaking of Shu, he was probably preparing for Miss Hannya's arrival and thinking of how to reduce the potential damage.

"Yes. My check-up ended earlier than expected, so I thought I should prepare for tomorrow. I could've done this in the morning, but it's better to prepare ahead of time rather than waiting until the last minute. Oh, wait... did Shu tell you about Hannya?"

"Yes. Umm... that's a woman who's coming here, and you're meeting her tomorrow, right?"

"Right. That's what I'm preparing for."

He was preparing for their meeting by buying Brooches? An item that negated fatal damage? It took a moment, but it soon came to me.

According to Shu, Figaro was looking forward to dueling Miss Hannya. However, he'd also said that her Superior Embryo was enormous, reaching as high as one kilometel. It was basically impossible to duel something like that within the confines of the arena.

How would they go about it, then? Well, what came to mind was that they could have a Tenchi-like overworld match outside of the city and fight until one person's Brooch broke.

...Figaro was clearly preparing for a duel with a lady who was expecting a marriage... and that *definitely* couldn't end well.

Oh boy... we have no choice but to hope that Shu will have a solution to this by tomorr—

"...Hm?" Figaro suddenly looked up at the sky.

"Figaro? What's wrong?" Silence. Without saying a word, he fixed his eyes above. Even though he was still wearing his lion costume, I could still tell.

I followed his gaze and tried to see what he was looking at.

"...Figaro?" At that moment, I heard a voice behind me.

As it reached my ears, it somehow made a chill run down my spine.

I turned around to see... an ordinary woman.

She had dark brown hair that was slightly curly, Japanese facial features, and was dressed in simple, ready-made clothing.

Nothing about her stood out all that much. In fact, by Master standards, she was really plain. The blond, angelic boy next to her stood out quite a bit more.

However, I could *feel* it... This woman's presence exerted the kind of pressure that Xunyu had emitted at the arena, and made me shiver like Kashimiya had yesterday. She hadn't even introduced herself, but I was already more or less certain that this woman here was none other than Miss Hannya — the one Shu had been so wary of.

Thinking about it, it wasn't that strange for her to be here. Figaro had come on early, so it wasn't impossible that she'd done the same.

Yeah, okay, fine... but why did they have to actually run into each other, damn it?!

"Isn't this... quite the predicament?" Nemesis asked telepathically. Indeed it was. I couldn't do anything, though. My body was completely frozen in place.

“Hey, Hannya. Welcome to Gideon. We’ve finally met,” Figaro said, switching into his usual equipment.

He took off his incognito gear so easily...

Speaking of which, how had Miss Hannya figured out that it was Figaro while he was wearing the costume?

Wait... Was it actually his voice? From what Shu had told me, they’d only communicated through text and had only actually spoken with each other on the one time they’d met, a whole year ago... which was actually three years ago here in *Dendro*. She remembered his voice even after all that time?

“Figaro! I was dying to see you!” Miss Hannya said as she clung to Figaro.

It was a very direct expression of affection, yet he hugged her back as if it was nothing.

Oh, right... He’s a westerner. Hugs are probably normal to him.

“Has it really been three years since we last saw each other?” said Figaro, looking pretty happy.

“It’s hard to believe that so much time passed on this side,” Miss Hannya replied with a smile. “Heheheh. Our faces haven’t changed at all, have they?”

Their expressions made it a heartwarming sight, but the core of my being was ringing all the alarm bells.

Damn it, Shu! Get over here right now! Xunyu would be fine, too... Hell, I’ll even take Miss Eldritch!

“It’s that bad, eh?” Nemesis asked telepathically.

IT IS! I’m basically stuck right next to a ticking time bomb!

“Ray, let me introduce you. This is my girlfriend, Hannya and her Embryo, Sandalphon,” he said, saying the word *girlfriend* and making me wonder if he even knew what it meant. “Hannya, this is Ray, Shu’s little brother and my occasional duel opponent. The girl next to him is his Embryo, Nemesis.”

“Oh my, the costume fellow’s family. Your brother helped me out a lot. I’m Hannya, and this is...”

“A pleasure to meet you. I am Sandalphon.”

“Hello... I’m Ray Starling,” I said, realizing that I missed my chance to run away.

...Although I couldn’t *really* run even if I wanted to. If a battle broke out here, I would have to take action to prevent casualties. Azurite and Count Gideon would die inside if there was another incident.

“I am Nemesis. I must say, the male version of Maiden is quite a curious sight.”

“Yes,” Sandalphon replied. “I also believe the female version of Apostle isn’t exactly common.”

The two then glared at each other in silence.

Nemesis, dearest, why are you being antagonistic towards him? I asked in thought.

“Figaro, do you have some time today?” Miss Hannya asked.

With the introductions done, she invited Figaro to some quality time.

In response to that, he... *shook his head*.

“Sorry... not today,” he said. “There’s somewhere I have to be.”

I prepared for Miss Hannya to snap...

“I see. I was hoping we could have dinner together, but okay.”

...but she backed down without issue. She didn’t seem the slightest bit angry, which made me think that she might be more calm than I’d been led to believe.

“But if you have time tomorrow, I’d really like to enjoy the festival with you. We need to take a look at some venues for the ceremony.”

...At some venues for *what*?

“Yeah,” Figaro said, as if he didn’t hear or just didn’t care about that last part. “Let’s meet up before noon tomorrow and take a walk around Gideon. I wanted to show you around, anyway.”

“Thank you! I can’t wait.” There actually didn’t seem to be much tension in the air after all. Figaro was avoiding her advances, but Miss Hannya didn’t seem hurt by it.

I really hope this ends without anything bad happening, I thought.

“I’m glad that makes you happy,” said Figaro. “Oh, by the way... Hannya?”

Yep, I sure do hope this doesn’t escalate...

“Yes?”

“Would you duel me tomorrow?” He finally dropped the bombshell in that cheerful voice of his.

"...HUH?!" I exclaimed, shaken by his devastating words.

He'd refused to have dinner with her, ignored her mentioning ceremony venues, and just asked her to duel him. Even a normal girl would be mad at that, and from what I'd been told, Miss Hannya was no normal girl — this was *bound* to make her snap.

I expected to suddenly be standing in the center of extreme destruction and mayhem...

"Yes. I'd love to."

...but Miss Hannya accepted his request with a smile on her face.

"Thanks! I can't wait for tomorrow!" said Figaro, full of joy.

"Heheheh. You're like a giddy child," Miss Hannya said, looking at him like he was something precious.

...This isn't at all like what I was told.

"Umm, are you *sure* you want to duel him?" I couldn't help but ask. The situation was just so unexpected.

"I am," she replied, looking not the least bit offended. "I know from his writings that he loves duels. If it makes him happy, then I'm happy, too."

Miss Hann... I mean, Hannya then looked at Figaro with affectionate eyes.

...My impression of her was totally different from what I expected based on what Shu and the others had told me. She seemed more like a good wife who appreciated her hubby's hobbies.

"You two duel as well, right?" Hannya asked. "Thank you so much for playing with him."

"Oh, those duels are more like lessons for me, really... He's always a huge help," I replied.

"Heheheh. That made it sound like I'm his guardian!"

"...She has such a gentle demeanor," Nemesis commented telepathically.

Seriously. Did Shu and the others just overthink things in the worst possible way, or did she mellow out while in the gaol? I wondered. Whatever the case, I was glad that the worst case scenario didn't happen. If an offer to duel didn't make her blow a fuse, then it was safe to assume that nothing would.

"...Oh dear. I just got a message on my phone in real life," Hannya said before opening up a window. "I hate to have to do this, but I'm logging out.

I can't wait for tomorrow, Figaro. It'll be an important day for us and our future."

"Yeah. I can't wait, either," Figaro replied.

They went on to say their goodbyes peacefully and hugged again before Hannya logged out.

"...She seemed nice," I said.

"She's *very* nice. Hannya's supported me over texts for quite a while now," Figaro replied with a very bright smile on his face.

Apparently, Figaro didn't see her as just a duel partner, but also as a good friend. *Wouldn't it be best for them if they just got together?* I wondered.

"That would actually be quite difficult," Nemesis replied telepathically.

"...That's true," I whispered. Over here, Figaro was the Over Gladiator and the strongest fighter in the kingdom, but in reality, he lived with the risk of deadly heart spasms. He was only a picture of health in *Dendro*. Hannya, on the other hand, seemed to want a relationship with him in reality as well as in this world.

I didn't know what effects this barrier between them would have, but I sincerely hoped that things would work out for them.

◇◆◇

Gideon the City of Duels, Fourth District

There was a man sitting at a table deep in a two-storied café.

He wore a coat that looked like the night sky, but by Master standards, his appearance wasn't too unusual.

What *was* curious was what he was doing — both his eyes were closed, but his right hand was writing something on the notepad on the table. His vision and the work of his hands were completely disconnected, just like they would be when touch typing.

He'd been doing this for about two hours now. A waitress looking at him wondered if he was deep in thought — as strange as he was acting, he must've been very focused on something extremely important to him.

However, the man wasn't lost in thought or doing any sort of soul-searching. He wasn't seeing the darkness of his closed eyelids, but the surrounding townscape.

Though his eyes were shut, he was looking down at the city of Gideon. It was like a bird's eye view or the stream of a flying drone's camera.

Not saying a word, he was using this vision of his to *observe*.

A festival was an exhilarating environment, and it made the people attending it truly worthy of observation.

The city was full of people doing all kinds of things. Considering the festival's theme, there were many couples, tian and Master alike, but there were also a lot of tian families enjoying it, as well.

Such wholesome sights particularly stood out, but if you observed carefully, you could see many pickpockets taking advantage of the joyful populace, as well as guards and ninjas capturing the criminals.

The man observed all these events, occasionally giving things a push in a certain direction.

Here, he led a guard patrol into a back-alley where a burglar was hiding.

There, he saw a man who seemed to be secretly dating several women at once, so he led his other girlfriends to the site of his current rendezvous, resulting in a major catfight.

He looked down at the scenery below, watching the events unfolding, or even outright causing them.

Eventually, his vision focused on someone familiar.

It was the famous Master he'd ran into the previous day — Ray Starling the Unbreakable. He was accompanied by someone in a lion costume... and the man knew who it was just by the way he moved.

The two were soon joined by a third person, who was none other than the Superior that had just left the gaol and arrived at Gideon... King of Berserk, Hannya.

"...Already?" he muttered as he stopped writing. He was entirely focused on watching the two Superiors' every movement, hoping to observe something that had never been seen before.

However, he was quite disappointed.

The two had a peaceful exchange, made some plans, and simply parted ways for the day.

That unexpected sequence of events didn't make him click his tongue, but it did make him sigh in disappointment.

That wasn't it, he thought. What he wanted out of them wasn't just the exact same things that most of the city was doing, nor a mere mock battle.

He wanted to see some bloodshed filled with the kind of powerful emotions that only these two Superiors could feel.

I didn't intend to get involved here, but if holding back means that I won't get to see what I want...

It was as if there was a fuse before him, leading to the most exquisite of fireworks. He had intended to wait until it was lit, but if no one came with a match, he would simply do it himself.

The man stopped merely observing and chose to act.

"Apologies for staying so long," the man said, standing up and handing over a silver coin to the waitress.

"No worries! Please enjoy the festival!"

"Yes. *I'm sure I will.*"

With a smile on his face, the man left the café... and stepped onto the stage he just observed.

Chapter Six: The Fuse

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

After that, Nemesis and I parted ways with Figaro and went around the festival.

I'd expected her to redefine gluttony today, but she'd actually only bought one cotton candy-lookalike and that was it.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I'm not hungry. Not sure why."

"Wh... WHAT...?!"

This can't be real...! This isn't happening! I thought.

"That is a reaction I've seen before," she said. "I didn't like it then and I do not like it now. Stop it."

"But, I mean, you— 'Before'?"

That reminded me that we'd already had an exchange like this.

Back when we were in Torne, she... ah.

"...Are you evolving?" That was it — the evening before she evolved, Nemesis had told me that she actually wasn't hungry for once.

"I'm not sure yet. Also, don't link my appetite and my evolution like that. It makes it sound like the only time I'm *not* hungry is when I'm about to evolve."

"Well, but... you know... you're Nemesis."

"You said that last time, too!" Nemesis was somewhat difficult today.

Anyway, we went on to enjoy the festival with little food involved — a rarity for us — but eventually, I started to feel thirsty.

"Wanna get a drink?" I asked Nemesis.

"I do. I have no appetite, but my throat *is* a bit dry. How about some tea?"

"Sure. Now, where can we get som— Oh?"

As I looked around for stalls that sold drinks, I noticed a certain stall (or more like a small café) that really stood out from the rest.

It was a building with a Japanese aesthetic. Perhaps "Tenchi" aesthetic was more apt here, but unlike the strange Japanese-style design philosophy I'd seen at the inn at Quartierlatin, this building here looked *properly* Japanese. This was the kind of place where you'd drink tea while sitting on cushions placed atop low wooden benches. It looked much like a dumpling shop you'd see in a historical Japanese drama.

"This is a rare sight here in Altar. We should check it out," I said.

"Agreed." We went in, bought some green tea, and sat at the benches.

"I suppose I can handle this much," Nemesis said as she also ordered a plate of dango despite her lack of appetite.

I took a sip of the tea, and it was actually as good as the stuff my mom made, if not better.

"These are some good leaves," Nemesis said. "But I feel like I've had this tea before."

"Really?" I asked.

"These are leaves from Tenchi. An adherent donated a small amount and we took a liking to them, so we asked Tsukuyo to import more through Granvaloa."

"I see," nodded Nemesis. "This is indeed the same tea I tasted at The Lunar Society's headquarters."

"I ate breakfast there too, but I don't remember getting tea like this," I said.

"Nemesis had it with us while you were still unconscious."

"Ohh, that is true." Nemesis agreed, thinking back.

"I see. This tea really is goo— AH?!"

I was so focused on the delicious tea that I didn't even notice that I was talking to someone else besides Nemesis. I turned to see a third person sitting next to us. It was an unfamiliar woman with a tennyo raiment straight out of Japanese myth and hair akin to moonlight.

"Kaguya?!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Indeed. It's been a long time, Nemesis."

Kaguya?! That's Miss Eldritch's Superior Embryo!

"Wh-What are you doing here?!" I asked in a panic.

Kaguya smiled and pointed at a certain detail inside this establishment — a symbol of *a crescent moon and a closed eye*.

"This place is owned by The Lunar Society," she said.

"I didn't notice...!" Thinking on it now, Altar was the most western country in *Dendro*, and the only groups who used a Japanese aesthetic here were The Lunar Society and K&R.

Damn it, Ray, why didn't you notice?! I thought to myself.

"Wait... If her Embryo is here, then..."

"Indeed. Tsukuyo is in Gideon, as well," Kaguya said.

You can't be serious, I thought. *Of course this had to happen right when I thought that Hannya's matter would be settled peacefully...*

...Then again, though Miss Eldritch was quite a troublemaker, she wasn't the type to do anything bad here in a city, so maybe I didn't have to worry all that much.

"This *is* a festival, after all. There is nothing odd about Tsukuyo coming to enjoy it," Kaguya said. "What was the name of that village, again? The one with all the pinwheels? She was there, as well."

Oh, right, she'd been to Torne's Windstar Festival because of her ties to Mr. Shijima. Even if that wasn't the reason, she seemed like the kind of person who'd enjoy festivals. Otherworldly creatures generally had a fondness for such events.

"...You are quite harsh with her," Nemesis said telepathically.

You know that she's the woman who kidnapped me and locked me up without as much as an introduction, right?

"Fair point..." As we had our silent exchange, Kaguya watched us with a smile on her face, as though amused. While Miss Eldritch seemed to have a grin much like that of a malicious fox, Kaguya's smile was as gentle as moonlight.

"What is it?" Nemesis asked her.

"Heheheh. Have you two made some progress since then?"

"WHAPH...?!"

...Whaph?

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Whatever are you talking about...?!"

"You *are* spending the Love-Duel Festival together, after all. We suppose our advice was helpful?"

"Th-That's not what this is about!"

Why is Nemesis so perplexed? I wondered.

"It is quite cute that a gluttonous girl like yourself loses her appetite on a date."

"I-I just happened to lose my appetite at this particular moment! There's nothing more to it than that!"

"My my. Heheheh..."

Interesting, I thought. Kaguya was only the second Maiden Nemesis had met, but I couldn't help but notice how the vibe between them was completely unlike the one between her and Cyco. While Cyco was like a friend her age, Kaguya was more like an older sister. Well, she was definitely the more experienced Maiden, at any rate.

Ohh... so Nemesis and I were both juniors to Miss Eldritch's duo. "Well, it's good to make new friends, I guess," I said.

Kaguya seems like a better person(?) than her Master, at least, I thought as I watched her gently tease Nemesis and sipped my tea.

"...It's really nice." Because of The Love-Duel Festival, we were surrounded by a very cheerful atmosphere.

It really felt peaceful here.

I knew that there was a war coming, but this moment was so calm that it seemed far away. I wasn't even caught up in some kind of trouble like usual.

"If only we could just keep having days like this," I muttered as I took another sip.

"An omen of a coming disturbance."

Hm? Am I jinxing it?

"Hey, not every hopeful statement ends up being a jinx," I said. "Things may very well stay peaceful."

"What awaits the Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson is a tempest of trials?"

"Yeah, I know I often end up at the center of all kinds of problems, but you were also involved in the recent dragon king thing, weren't you? And stop using that nickname."

"Strife is the fate to which the living are perpetually bound."

"Well, that's true. *Dendro* is an eventful place for everyone. Not just us."

"...Hey," Nemesis stopped talking to Kaguya and called out. "What should I be surprised by first: the sudden appearance of Juliet at the bench on the other side, or the fact that you can converse with her so easily?"

She looked at us as if something was wrong.

Like Nemesis said, Juliet had joined us without us realizing and spoke to me while enjoying some black sweet bean jelly. I didn't know what was so weird about it, though. After all...

“We’re just chatting,” I said as I shrugged.

“...The shackles on my tongue are light tonight,” Juliet added.

“What do you mean, you ‘aren’t using difficult words this time’? You always speak normally.”

“First your fashion sense... then your grasp of Juliet’s edgy nonsense lexicon... I suppose you really are a...”

A what? I don’t really see what you’re getting at.

“By the way, it’s rare for you to eat sweets by yourself. Where’s Chelsea?” I asked.

Chelsea was a good candidate for the duel ranker with the greatest sweet tooth, and she often invited Juliet or other rankers to eat with her.

However, this time, Juliet was all alone... and actually seemed to be in low spirits.

“My soul-sister is facing a trial, and I cannot interfere. It is a matter of depravity within the horde bearing the golden flag.”

Mhm...

So there was some relationship trouble within Golden Pirates — Chelsea’s own clan. It was a matter just between the guys and girls there, so Juliet couldn’t get involved. She was probably bothered by the fact that she couldn’t help her friend while she was dealing with some problems.

“That seems like something you should just wait out,” I said. “And... you’ll help her if she asks, right?

“Yeah! I mean... Indeed I shall,” Juliet replied.

“Then everything’s fine. I’m sure she’ll count on you if she really needs someone.”

“...Yeah.” Juliet’s expression lightened up a bit.

But man, there’s relationship troubles in Chelsea’s clan, too? I thought. *First Hannya, then Elizabeth... I know it’s a love festival and all, but does it really have to come with so much romantic drama?*

“Aren’t you in similar trouble, as well?” Nemesis asked telepathically. “Does nothing come to mind?”

...Boy, I sure do hope I don’t get snatched up to be some amazon’s groom.

“...Huh? *That’s* where your mind went first?”

...Boy, I sure do hope I don’t run into an amazon queen that fights as

well as my sister.

"Your brain is replaying scenes that do not seem to belong in that world. Are you sure this wasn't a dream?"

Oh, how many times have I hoped that it was.

"I now feel that most of my hardship that isn't related to combat has its roots in your childhood trauma..."

"Do you really have it that hard?"

Oh. She looked away. Did I upset her somehow?

Anyway, the day ended without anything happening, and after enjoying the festival with Nemesis, I went to sleep at the inn.

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A Certain Location at Gideon the City of Duels

It was late in the evening as Figaro left a particular plant shop.

As you'd expect, there were various sorts of flowers in there, but being a *plant* shop, it sold far more than just flowers. There were flora and herbs used in potion brewing, as well as plants and seeds that had an effect when ingested raw, so the shop had quite a wide customer base.

Whatever he'd bought there, it had put a smile on his face. However, that smile vanished the moment someone called out to him.

"I finally found you, you sickly prince." That someone was a person he didn't actually *want* to know, but unfortunately did, quite well.

"...Fuso Tsukuyo," he said.

"You just scowled, didn't you?" she said. "I can tell even through your costume."

Figaro had always found Tsukuyo Fuso to be a fundamentally unpleasant character. As a person, he didn't like how she brought her cult and so many other things from real life into *Infinite Dendrogram*. In addition to that, her Embryo — particularly her ultimate skill — was such a hard counter to Figaro that he wanted to avoid it at all costs. It had even given him the death penalty once.

Anyway, despite being the one to point out Figaro's "scowl," Tsukuyo herself seemed quite upset.

"I walked around town lookin' for you, and I sure didn't expect to find you here, of all places," Tsukuyo said. "What did you want in that shop?

Are you poisoning someone?"

"...It has nothing to do with you," Figaro replied as he realized his mistake.

If he had felt her presence as he left the shop, he might've avoided meeting her. He'd been so happy thinking about tomorrow that it had dulled his senses.

Then again, she'd apparently been searching for him, so he figured that this encounter would've happened eventually.

"Well, not like it matters to me. I have some business with you. Look here!"

Tsukuyo reached to take something from her side, making Figaro jump back and switch his equipment with Instant Wear. His costume was now gone and he was naked to the waist. It was the AGI-focused set he'd used at The Clash of the Superiors, showing just how wary he was of whatever Tsukuyo was doing.

"Hm...?" He was ready for battle, but Tsukuyo wasn't actually doing anything that looked like an attack. She just held something out to him — something that seemed to be a piece of paper.

Figaro took a look at what was written on it and tilted his head in confusion.

"...What is this?" he asked.

"Exactly what it says," Tsukuyo replied, pouting.

However, it was the very contents of the paper that were confusing to Figaro.

After all...

"I want you to pay."

...It was a bill.

"...For what?"

What is she even saying? Figaro wondered. After all, he had never bought anything from her.

In fact, he wouldn't even *think* of buying anything from her, no matter how good a deal she offered.

"You don't know?" Tsukuyo asked with a blatantly displeased expression.

"I seriously haven't the slightest clue. I can't think of a single reason why I would have to pay you anything."

"You're saying that after making such a huge mess for me?!" Even Figaro couldn't hide his surprise at that sentence. *Seriously, what is she even saying?*

"Just *what* are you talking about...?"

"What do you mean, 'what'?! You destroyed my base, didn't you?!" Upon hearing that, Figaro finally understood.

Some days ago, he'd destroyed The Lunar Society base to save Ray after he'd been kidnapped. He'd broken the main gate, leveled the buildings, and shattered many of the installations to drag Tsukuyo out.

"It took us *this* long to estimate the damages! It's over 10,000,000,000 in total! That's more than ten times what I expected! It's all because you destroyed not just buildings, but expensive furniture, too!" The Lunar Society's HQ was a Japanese-style mansion constructed of high-quality wood, which made it quite a luxurious location. With Noz Forest — the capital's primary source of lumber — having been burnt to ash, wood had become a lot more expensive.

Figaro had also destroyed most of the placeable magic items they had imported from Caldina, and with the country's recent revisions of their trade regulations, the price of those items had gone up even more than wood had. The art that had been destroyed was quite expensive, as well, and the overall sum was far above what Tsukuyo had expected. The Lunar Society was making a lot of money through donations, but paying for repairs would put a serious dent even in their coffers.

"Yeah, I know it all happened because I kidnapped Ray, but you didn't have to destroy so much! You went crazy! I want you to pay at least half of the costs!" Tsukuyo had become emotional to the point of actually crying, then grabbed Figaro — still shirtless, by the way — by the shoulders and began shaking him.

Is that really my fault? he wondered. He dug through his memory, thinking of how to deal with it.

"Talk to my lawyer about i—"

"The law doesn't exist between Masters! You know that!"

"...Right." Unlike in reality, he couldn't rely on legal advisors here.

However, he was still unsure of how to handle this.

Do I really have to pay her in this situation? Isn't this her own fault? he wondered, remembering his rampage through The Lunar Society's headquarters.

In this situation, Shu would likely say “Huh? The law says I didn’t commit any crimes, so I don’t have to pay, right? It ain’t my pawroblem,” but Figaro was too pure for that.

The fact that Tsukuyo demanded payment despite being aware of that showed that she was a cunning fox, even while she was weeping.

Figaro went on to tell her that he couldn’t make a decision right away and didn’t have the money anyway for one reason or another, and Tsukuyo reluctantly backed off.

However, neither of them realized that someone had witnessed... and recorded them.

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DIN Gideon Branch

On the night of the first day of the Love-Duel Festival, Tom Cat... control AI no. 13, Cheshire... paid a visit to DIN’s Gideon branch.

While Elizabeth had been staying here, this place was protected by Marie, Liliana, and Gideon’s ninjas, but now that she had returned to the guest house, it was back to business as usual.

Cheshire walked up the stairs and opened the door leading to the rooftop.

However, what he saw wasn’t the roof or the scenery of the city around the building, but a bizarre space where you couldn’t tell which way was up, full of countless information windows.

It was a *control AI workspace* — just like the one Cheshire himself used.

“Pardon the intrusiooon.” When he called out, the two people who had been standing in the middle of the space and doing something with the windows turned to him.

They were twins of different genders, and their faces were nearly identical.

They both had small frames and wore suits like the one worn by Marie, making them look like children pretending to be working adults — which was, in a way, adorable. The boy wore silver-rimmed glasses, while the girl sported large headphones.

“I have not seen you in 2689 hours, 58 minutes, and 14 seconds in this world’s time, No. 13.”

“It’s been too long, Cheshiiire! Congrats on falling to third plaaace! Yaay! Clap clap!”

The boy greeted Cheshire with extreme formality, while the girl was nothing if not casual.

“Is that something to congratulate me for?” Cheshire asked.

“It is quite a welcome event,” the boy said as he adjusted his glasses.

“Your Tom Kitty’s there to be beaten! It’s fine, it’s fiiine! Don’t worry! It’s okay to looose!” the girl said as she rolled around in midair.

An overly formal older brother and a sister who was far too casual. *They haven’t changed at all,* Cheshire thought.

These two were the founders of DIN, as well as the current heads of the company. They were also the ones organizing all the information DIN had access to. It was an impossible task for just two people, but that only made sense.

These two weren’t human, after all.

The boy was Tweedledum, and the girl was Tweedledee.

Having borrowed those names from the twins in Alice in Wonderland, they were the avatars of control AI No. 11.

“Allow us to inquire something of you, as well,” the boy said.

“Why’d ya come here?” the girl asked.

Cheshire stated his reason for being here outright. “King of Beasts just up and left Gideon, didn’t she? I was wondering why. Was there some sort of incident that happened without me knowing?”

“Certainly not.”

“No no nooo! There’s nothin’ like what you dealt with in Quartierlatin!”

“Really?”

“Affirmative. The first day of the Love-Duel Festival...”

“...Went by without anythin’ happenin’!”

“King of Destruction and King of Beasts nearly clashed...”

“...But they’re puttin’ it off for later! It’s gotta be the main event of the war! Kyaa! That’s so lewd!”

They’d begun talking strangely, with one starting and the other finishing every sentence.

They really are the same as ever, Cheshire thought.

“I seee.” he said. “So there they passed each other by, huh? What a relieeef.”

“A relief, eh?”

“But that ain’t good for us, is iiit?” While Cheshire was glad that nothing happened, the twins didn’t share his sentiment.

“...Ain’t good?”

“War is something we desire.”

“The chance of an Embryo evolving into a Superior during a war is 86.95669%!”

“That is slightly above...”

“...Even SUBM releases!” A war was a major clash between Masters, tians, and countries. Just like the release of SUBMs, it could be a trigger for evolution.

In a way, conflict was something that control AIs would naturally want more of. It was particularly likely that Embryos in sixth form and below would evolve while facing a raging Superior Embryo, especially if it was happening in a city the Masters would want to protect. The twins were actually somewhat disappointed that King of Beasts hadn’t picked this place for the battle.

“Fortunately, we have more gunpowder,” said Tweedledum.

“We’ll light it up and boom, boom, BOOM!” his sister added.

“If all values in our calculations are accounted for...”

“...We might get some more *things* before the waaar!” Albeit with completely different expressions on their faces, the twins were predicting the exact same thing. Cheshire had a bad feeling about this.

“...What are you planning?”

“An event,” they said in unison.

The two were control AI No. 11 — the ones in charge of quests and events. When it came to plotting, they had no equal.

“It is not an official event, however. We will merely assist in spurring on a certain player.”

“We’re just pushing down the first dominooo!”

“Do not worry. We are not acting as control AI. This is all within the rights of this avatar.”

“We’re the big cheese and all thaat!”

“And to be clear, we are designing a romantic tragedy...”

“...That perfectly fits a festival of looove! So Shakespearean! Let’s goo!"

The twins were clearly planning... no, had *already finished* planning something.

Suddenly, tons of visual data appeared in the workspace.

"We received the material, but DIN is not the optimal channel for it. Using it would negatively affect our activities further down the line."

"Wanna leak it to The Kingdom People Times? They'll eat this scoop right up! And they're already stealin' the ideaa!"

"That is a newspaper with little support but good exposure. It will suffice."

"Heh heh heh! It'll be heaven and hell tomorrow!" Cheshire didn't know what the two were doing, and he couldn't stop them.

After all, they were working towards the common goal of the control AIs, and they weren't doing anything that required the use of their original body. In fact, they were putting in a lot of diligent effort into what the control AIs all truly wanted.

Because of this, Cheshire couldn't say anything, just as he couldn't argue against Jabberwock's releases of SUBMs.

Seeing the twins work made him feel uneasy... and he would soon know that it wasn't unwarranted.

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Gideon the City of Duels

The second day of the Love-Duel Festival had arrived. Rook, Babi, and Kasumi were walking through Gideon. It was still before nine in the morning, but the streets were already full of people.

With Kasumi on his right and Babi on his left, Rook looked like an absolute winner and attracted stares everywhere he went. Babi's nonchalant suggestions had put them in this position. All the people looking at them started to make Kasumi blush, and she began to tear up behind her long bangs.

"What great weather! Perfect for a festivaal!" said Babi casually.

"Yes. It sure is," Rook replied, looking the same as ever. Kasumi alone was extremely tense.

Th-This isn't a dream, is it...? she thought. *I keep checking, but it's not* *just a fever dream, right?* Some days ago, Kasumi had helped Rook find a certain criminal, and he went on to invite her on a Love-Duel Festival date as thanks.

While we were going through the Tomb Labyrinth recently, I told the girls that I liked the idea of a "Love-Duel Festival date" that I saw a walkthrough blogger talk about... but I never would've thought that Rook would remember it... Indeed, she was attracted to this idea. Being the high school girl that she was, Kasumi thought that walking around a love-themed festival with your lover was the height of romance. However, since Kasumi never actually had a lover — or had even attempted to obtain one — it was only something she could imagine.

But then came Rook with his date invitation. Kasumi literally felt like a Typical Village Girl who'd been invited to the ball by the prince. The tension and helplessness were shaking her to the core.

This was only compounded by the fact that Io and Fujinon had caught Kasumi's illness and couldn't log in to watch over her date like they'd originally planned.

Ohhh... I was perfectly fine with just my daydreams of princes making out with other princes... AHHH! What am I thinking at a time like this?! Embarrassed and perplexed by all the thoughts racing through her head, Kasumi flushed bright red.

Rook noticed all of this and talked to her with consideration in his voice, "Kasumi, are you sure you aren't still sick? Even your avatar looks flushed."

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine! Perfectly fine!"

"Let me know if something's wrong. I'll do anything I can to help."

"A-Anything?!" His choice of words made various images swirl inside Kasumi's head, bringing her close to the boiling point.

Wh-Wh-Wh-What?! R-Rook is so forward! Way too forward! What do I do?! Io! Fujino! Help! As a person with observation abilities that more or less let him read minds, Rook had a good idea of what was going on in Kasumi's head.

However, he didn't hold the girl's tendency to use him in her shipping fantasies against her.

As someone who'd been studying human psychology and examining criminal cases from a very young age, he knew Kasumi just shipped men with other men as a kind of intrusive thought, and it didn't bother him at all..

In fact, the way Kasumi's own thoughts made her red and flustered was rather cute to him.

Kasumi is also quite heartwarming to watch, though in a different way than Ray, Rook thought.

"You mean that she has that hamster-like cuteness?" Babi asked telepathically.

...Babi, please don't use rodents for your comparisons. "Small animal" works perfectly fine.

Rook remembered a particular animal closely related to the hamster and trembled a little.

"U-Umm, are you okay?" Kasumi asked.

"...Yes. I just had some... recollection shivers."

Recollection shivers?! Is that even a thing?! Kasumi wondered in her mind, but didn't say it.

"By the way, is there anywhere you want to go today?" Rook asked her.

"U-Umm, there's a large clothing store in the fourth district that has couples-exclusive photoshoots." This was a special event where couples could try on new clothes made by clothing-related jobs and take commemorative photos wearing them. Photo data could be extracted, and Kasumi wanted those polished pictures to use as reference.

Nhh... I'm nervous, but this is a chance to get photos of a wonderful model in wonderful fashion... If I don't go through with this, I won't be able to face Io and Fujino... They even got sick because they visited me...

It was quite a challenge for her, but Kasumi gathered her resolve and decided to go to the aforementioned store for the event.

"All right. Where is it supposed to be?" Rook asked.

"Ah. G-Give me a moment! I'll check right now..." Instead of using the map window like most players, Kasumi used her Embryo — Taijitu.

Like always, she took a look at what was displayed... and saw something incredibly strange.

"...Eh? What is this...?" The map displayed by Taijitu was *in pieces*.

Gideon on the map was split into many even squares that were scattered about randomly, like a sliding block puzzle. It was as though a mischievous god had shattered the whole city with little rhyme or reason.

“The city is...?! Huh?” Kasumi exclaimed, looking up in shock — only to see Gideon the same as it ever was. It wasn’t scattered or broken, and only one thing had changed.

“...Eh?”

And what a major change it was.

At the center of Gideon, close to the central arena, there was *something* enormous.

It was something you could see from any place in the whole city.

Two inverted towers were standing tall as if to pierce the heavens... or stab straight through the earth.

It was the Superior Embryo known as Sandalphon.

Chapter Seven: The End of the Festival and the Explosion

Thirty Minutes Ago

After the first day of the Love-Duel Festival, Hannya — Fuyuko Shiki — went on to take a nap.

She could've gotten more sleep within *Infinite Dendrogram*, but she chose to sleep in reality because she wanted the second day — and her date with Figaro — to come as soon as possible.

She slept, anxious for that long-awaited moment... and woke up feeling absolutely awful.

"...Why would I have a dream like that *now*?" During her nap, she'd relived that time when she was betrayed by the man she once loved. She'd seen herself giving her all to him and helping him with everything she had, only for him to cut her off with a single message. She'd seen his face as she found him in Legendaria, grinning like an idiot as he messed around with another woman.

The memories came back to her as a dream, attacking right before her long-awaited moment. It was almost like a red flag, or an alarm bell ringing out.

"Figaro... Vincent isn't like him."

I can trust Vincent. ...Can't I? I mean, he's so pure. ...We only talked through messages. How can I be sure? We love each other. ...Even though I never confirmed it? Vincent isn't like him. ...But what do I actually know about Vincent?

Her reason clashed with her emotions, repeating her greatest fear: that she would be betrayed by her beloved again.

"What am I so worried about...? I just need to confirm that he loves me..."

Fuyuko shook off the intrusive voice in the back of her mind and logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

She appeared at the plaza — the local save point — and immediately noticed that her surroundings were astir. At first, she thought it was just the cheerful festival atmosphere, but it didn't seem quite right.

"Do you think those two are... you know...?"

"It's unexpected, but they make for a balanced pair. Maybe they're a good match."

"They don't really seem happy, though..." Many people were chatting with newspapers in hand. Nearby, someone was talking while selling copies of that same paper, and Hannya was curious enough to buy one.

What she saw first was the name of the newspaper — "Kingdom People Times."

What she saw next was a photo of a bare-chested man, and a woman right next to him.

To the side, there was a large text saying "THE HEAT OF PASSION?! THE DUEL CHAMPION AND THE LEADER OF THE TOP CLAN!" followed by letters in a smaller font, starting with "A teary exchange! Whatever happened between these two..."

The people in the photo were named, too, but Hannya didn't need that to know who the man was — she couldn't forget him if she tried.

"...Figaro." It was none other than her beloved.

The paper said that the photo had been taken last night — which would mean that this happened right after Figaro had told her that he couldn't dine with her.

He said he didn't have time for me, Hannya's mind wrung out one single thought as it gradually went blank.

Who is she? What were they talking about? she wondered.

What am I to him? What did we have between us? she questioned herself.

Then, all the mail they'd exchanged flashed through her mind.

"Oh... I just realized... that he never said... that he loved me."

King of Berserk, Hannya finally noticed that crushing detail. She realized that her love was an illusion, and the last shreds of her rationality finally fell away.

"As you command, Lady Hannya." In response to the voice in his Master's heart, Warden Angel, Sandalphon instantly began to act.

"Form Shift — Prison Tower." As he appeared out of the crest, he instantly and drastically changed his appearance.

From a living being to an inorganic structure... from a small child to twin towers that reached as high as the sky.

Thus, Sandalphon now stood in the middle of Gideon's central plaza.

Though the structures were gigantic, reaching an entire kilometel in height, they actually tapered down in volume towards the bottom. A building like that would never stand using conventional means and materials, but such logic didn't apply to a Superior Embryo.

The towers hadn't even touched the ground yet. If they weighed as much as they looked, they would smash craters into the ground the moment they landed.

"...AAAAAAAAHHHHH! R-RU... RUN AWAAY!"

"Tch! Dryfe's at it again?!"

"...Wait, that's the thing from Valentine's..." Sandalphon's sudden appearance left the people dumbfounded for a good moment, then made them scatter in fear. A few Masters tried attacking the towers, but Sandalphon didn't care. Numerous as they were, the spells and blows could only scratch it at best.

Sandalphon ignored the minor resistance...

"Angeldeath Dominion — Sandalphon."

...and activated his ultimate skill.

Like a ripple, its effect began to spread with barely anyone noticing until it enveloped all of Gideon.

A few seconds later, screams of fear and confusion drowned the city, spurred by something more than just the two towers in the plaza.

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Gideon the City of Duels

"R-Rook! Th-That's...!" Kasumi cried, unable to hide her fear of the large object in the middle of the city.

Rook stood in front of her and considered the situation.

That fits the description I was given of Miss Hannya's Sandalphon. Ray said that things were going smoothly on that front, but it looks like something's changed.

He took out his Telepathy Cuffs to contact Ray and Shu, but then he heard the screams. However, they didn't come from somewhere off in the city, but from right next to him.

The screams were let out by *people that had appeared from seemingly nowhere just ten metels in front of him*.

"Huh? What?!" Rook swept Kasumi into his arms and moved away from the panicked crowd. They seemed quite perplexed by the situation, but they were desperate to get as far away from Sandalphon as possible.

As Rook watched them, he considered the situation once more.

Mass teleportation? Is this a skill? Did Sandalphon do this? Rook had been informed about Hannya herself, but he didn't know anything about her skills because Shu and Figaro didn't know anything, either. Figaro could've asked her, but he'd chosen not to do it because he believed that it would've been unfair to know all the cards in the deck of someone he'd eventually duel.

But... How much would a teleportation skill of this scale actually cost? As far as Rook knew, teleportation skills were costly even here in *Infinite Dendrogram*. For example, Kasumi's Taijitu's teleportation was limited to her own monsters, and its cost grew exponentially the farther she tried to teleport them. Then there was Franklin, who had to create monsters solely dedicated to Castling — the short-distance teleportation skill that swapped his and the monster's places — just to make good use of it. The only skill Rook knew that could go over long distances without much effort was Xunyu's ultimate skill, but even that was limited to just her limbs.

It was quite obvious this anomaly had been caused by Sandalphon, but if he could teleport that many people at once and also manifest such a gigantic body, he was clearly abnormally powerful.

Since he can do that, he must either have some complex limitations on it, or it isn't even pure teleportation to begin with... or it could be a mix of both... Reminds me of her Embryo.

Rook remembered one of his past opponents — Hugo and Cyco. Cyco's La Porte de l'Enfer could instantly kill Masters far more powerful than herself as long as the right conditions were met.

Assuming that that power stems from the "giant-killing" theme Maidens have, this phenomenon most likely has to do with some characteristic common to all Apostles, but... Rook didn't have enough information to make any assumptions about what it could be, so for now, he focused on analyzing the effect of the skill.

It can't be literal teleportation because of the high cost, so maybe it's something else? Like... an illusion?

He first considered that it could be like the stealth-focused Superior Embryo that he'd faced recently, and that what he had seen here might've been just a vision of people running around in a panic in some other location.

Rook ordered his coat — Liz — to create thin threads and let them flow in the wind. The threads could physically touch the panicked crowd, making him realize that they were real to Liz, at least.

It's not sense manipulation. Even a Superior Embryo couldn't do that on this scale. These people are definitely real. Rook had faced Gerbera and her Alhazred, so he knew that the range of such abilities was limited.

There's people popping up here and there all over the street... Hm?

He looked at the street ahead, which continued for hundreds of metels, and noticed something.

People were only popping up in certain places. Based on his estimations, it was ten metels ahead, then 110 metels, then 210 — every 100 metels, basically.

Could it be...? Rook made Liz extend her threads in all directions, and she, too, was affected by this phenomenon. However, it was only to the threads that reached past a certain distance.

Rook looked in the direction, calculated the distance, and had an epiphany.

Squares of exactly 100 metels. Leaving one moves you someplace else.

An area split into 100 metel-large squares. That reminded him of what he'd seen right before he saw Sandalphon.

"Kasumi, could you show me your Taijitu agai— Huh?"

"Hhnn..." When Rook spoke to Kasumi, he noticed that she was blushing bright red from head to toe and seemed barely conscious.

His accelerated analysis took him just a little under a minute, but he had been holding Kasumi this entire time, and she was about to explode from embarrassment.

He gave up on asking. She was holding the Taijitu in her hands, so he took a look at it and saw the map of Gideon displayed in the same "sliding block puzzle" state as before. Rook checked it against his memories and realized that the area ten metels to the north had become Gideon’s north gate.

Wanting to test his theory, he walked towards the place people were appearing. He first kicked a pebble before passing, but it rolled by with no problem.

“The utilities haven’t been affected, either, so I suppose it only works on living creatures... and whatever they’re carrying,” he whispered, as he watched the still-clothed people passing by.

“It affects the Taijitu, too... so we can add Embryos to that.” And so, he went against the wave of people and passed through the place where they appeared.

A few steps later, he was no longer in the street from before, but the north gate.

“...So this is how it works.” With the truth finally revealed, Rook contacted Ray and Shu to pass on this information.

◆

A few minutes earlier...

“Labyrinth created — prison complete,” Sandalphon whispered as he opened his eyes — the jewels on the tip of each tower.

Each of them saw different things.

The right jewel saw Gideon as it was before the skill’s activation. The people seen through this one were teleported elsewhere as they moved.

The left jewel saw Gideon scattered in a square tile pattern. The people seen through this one were moving around *without any teleportation*.

To them, Gideon was currently the same as it appeared to the left jewel.

Just as Rook had assumed, this phenomenon was caused by the special characteristic of Apostles.

Maidens were known to excel at giant-killing. Apostles also had a unique theme to their powers. This theme could only be described as “domination” — the opposite of the Maiden-type Embryo tendency to focus their power to defeat overwhelming odds. Apostles, by contrast, spread their power out, claimed a part of the world as their own, and rewrote its rules for their own benefit.

Some might think of Kaguya, but her night was merely an overlay she painted onto the world. Apostles, on the other hand, marked an area as their own, controlled it, and changed it at will.

Sandalphon affected the laws of movement within the ten kilometels he dominated. This ultimate skill rewrote the *spatial connection* for every 100 metels, but only for living beings and their possessions. It shuffled the world around Sandalphon into what his left jewel saw.

This power was based on Judaic writings — specifically, the archangel that imprisoned other angels.

Besides Sandalphon himself, only very few people could perceive this scrambled world. To most, this city would become a prison that merely happened to *look* like a very familiar place.

This was the power Hannya had desired — the power to never let RockPanther get away from her. She'd already used it to corner him. He'd frantically ran around, crying and pissing himself, but she'd eventually crushed him.

This time, she was using it on someone else.

"Optical Search — Over Gladiator, Figaro." Sandalphon slowly walked and looked in every possible direction to find the target.

He was merely walking through his scattered world, but to others, it appeared as though the two massive towers were teleporting.

This was also how it had suddenly appeared behind Figaro when they'd first met.

At the top of Sandalphon stood Hannya, not saying a word as she glared at the city below. There were many emotions in her eyes, but all of them were overwhelmed by grief, rage, and insanity.

"Lady Hannya. I have finished transforming and setting up the Angeldeath Dominion. I am now searching for the target."

Sandalphon received no response, but he knew his Master well enough to expect this.

There were two stages to Hannya's rampages.

The first was indiscriminate rage. She would be angry from the bottom of her heart, but she would lack a clear target, so she would simply lash out at those who closely resembled the source of her ire, screaming out her emotions while doing so.

That was how she had been most of the time while searching for RockPanther — the man who'd dumped her in real life.

The second stage was a pure destructive urge. She wouldn't say a word, and nothing — neither power nor words — would be able to stop her until she found her target and the fire in her heart was finally extinguished.

This was how she had been when she'd found RockPanther in Legendaria.

Sandalphon knew full well that the second stage was far more terrifying than the first.

After all — in this state, she didn't care about *anything*. She would be focused solely on letting her anger out on her target and completely lose all consideration for her surroundings — which she still had in the first stage, however meager. Being Hannya's weapon, Sandalphon knew better than anyone that the lack of tian casualties back when she'd crushed RockPanther in Legendaria had been pure luck.

Needless to say, she'd been in the second stage of anger back then.

This city will probably be wiped off the map, Sandalphon thought. Figaro wasn't like RockPanther — not as an individual, but as a fighter. He was powerful even by Superior standards, and Sandalphon believed that Gideon would fall before he would be defeated.

...I have no say in this. I must do as Lady Hannya desires.

Once, Kaguya had told Nemesis that Apostles were "products of a sense of duty."

That was simply the truth. Apostles always strived to be merely tools meant to fulfill whatever their Masters desired, and never argued against them or raised any objection.

The title of "Apostle" was most apt indeed, and this one knew that everything would end the moment Figaro appeared.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

"Can Miss Eldritch go *one day* without being a nuisance?!" I roared as I rode Silver around Gideon's skies.

In my hand, I held a newspaper — the likely cause of this happening.

I'd picked it up at the inn where I was staying, thought "This can't be good," and this whole thing started happening the very next moment.

"...I can understand why she blew up, though," said Nemesis. "The man who refused to dine with her went on to meet another woman with his shirt off. Fuel on the fire. Truly."

"And I'm pretty damn sure this wasn't Figaro's intention at all!" Then again, this was certainly not what Miss Eldritch or the newspaper company wanted either, but that didn't change what was going on right now.

[Reiji, how's it going up there? You gettin' close to the legs?] Shu asked using his Telepathy Cuffs.

[No! The scenery just changes as I fly around! I can't get to her even from here!]

[Well, Rook said that the local space's split into a bunch of 100 metel squares and scattered into a huge mess. Hannya's movin' around, too. Meeting her is a matter of pure luck. Rook and the Superior Killer aren't doing too well, either.]

The spatial scramble seemed to work no matter how high up you were. I saw some people flying around on tamed monsters, and they all seemed as lost as I was.

[...Have you found Miss Eldritch yet?] I asked.

[Nope. She might not even be online,] Shu replied.

Miss Eldritch and her Lunar Society's swarm tactics and debuffs might've been able to help, but it didn't seem like we could rely on that.

...You caused this, damn it! Where are you?!

[What about Xunyu?]

[She can't use her ult. Said something about visual info not lining up with her aim. The scrambling only affects creatures and Embryos, so there's a discrepancy between us and our optics and observation from a spellcasting standpoint.]

Some would probably think of just casting spells on the target as it appeared, but that was no good, either.

It teleported with every step taken, so every projectile would just miss; since that could result in collateral damage on the city, it wasn't wise to risk it. The same could be said for Shu's Baldr.

"Those legs are over a kilometel tall," said Nemesis. "A single step is more than enough to cover the 100 metels."

Rook had figured out the nature of the skill, but we had no means of dealing with it.

...Perhaps Azurite's Altar could cut through this skill itself? No. In this absurd situation where the laws of movement were completely re-written, bringing in an even more absurd all-severing power didn't seem like a good idea.

There was no telling what could happen. For all we knew, that could make the laws of space irreparable.

Azurite already knew about the situation and they were acting to mend it, but they'd had no results so far.

[...Bro, where's Figaro?]

[I can't contact him. He ain't online yet... but maybe it's best if he doesn't show up today.]

I thought that maybe Figaro could persuade Hannya to calm down, but Shu rejected that idea.

[Right now, Hannya's just walking around the city using her skill,] he continued. [She's probably lookin' for Figgy. Once she finds him, the situation will drastically change.]

[...In what way?]

[I can think of two. They'll either talk, or she'll attack him on sight.]

...One or the other, huh?

[The latter would be real bad. Hannya would use her berserker grouping skills and Sandalphon would start raging around with a huge boost to STR and AGI.]

[...Is it just me, or does that seem worse than Franklin's Game?]

[It ain't just you. That's what I meant by "real bad."]

The fact that Shu stopped using his bear puns told me everything about how serious this situation was.

"I just realized something," Nemesis said telepathically. "Bringing those towers down would be a disaster all on its own, no?"

"Yeah. That's why we don't have many good ways of stopping her."

Our only options were to convince her to stop or instantly give Hannya the death penalty and make Sandalphon vanish before he collapsed.

Shu had been counting on Xunyu because she had Tenaga-Ashinaga's ult, which could quickly get rid of Hannya without making Sandalphon fall, but his own ult made that impossible.

That was why we were now trying to reach Sandalphon and stop Hannya directly, but if she was in no state to be swayed by words...

"...We'll have no choice but to defeat her, huh?" I recalled her as she was yesterday... and her excitement for today's date with Figaro.

If things hadn't unfolded like this, they would've had a great time together.

This is leaving a bad taste in my mouth... Why did this happen?!

[...Reiji, I got good news and bad news. In a single package,] Shu said with a tense voice.

[...What is it?] I asked, with a worried note to my voice.

[Figgy's online.] That was enough for me to know that the situation would shift in one way or another.

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Gideon the City of Duels, DIN Gideon Branch

Standing atop the (actual) roof of the Gideon branch of DIN were three entities. They were control AIs — Cheshire as Tom Cat, Tweedledum, and Tweedledee.

"...How long have you been planning this?" Cheshire asked, realizing that this had been an intentional gambit from the twins. It wasn't a spontaneous idea they'd had just yesterday — they had been planning this since the moment they found out that Hannya would be coming to Gideon. As the one in charge of the gaol, Red King had already informed them of the time Hannya would be released, as well as her goals.

"Since Alice brought us the idea," said Tweedledum.

"We've been thinkin' of takin' a good photo since then. You can get some spicy ones if you try, y'know?" added Tweedledee.

"We were not allowed to set up cameras to increase our chances of success, but this led to us acquiring one of the best player contributions possible."

"Manpoweeerr! Wait, is that the right way to look at it? His goal is pretty much the same as ours, right?"

Alice was the control AI in charge of player protection, and she worked at DIN as Alison. It was a disguise she kept up for certain purposes, just like Cheshire had Tom Cat.

She wasn't important right now, though. The twins' plot was the real threat.

"Anyway, we already had the info about King of Berserk and knew what she was like."

"We guessed this would happen if we just gave her a li'l nuudge."

Basically, to the twins, this "Ba-Thump Kyahah" plan was nothing but a method of triggering Hannya's rampage.

"Originally, we'd planned to use a photo he would take with a fan. This is a love festival, after all, so it was likely that some of them would try flirting with him."

"He didn't stop wearing the costume while out in town, though, so we were panicking preeetty badly."

"We devised some alternatives, but in the end we managed to acquire perhaps the ideal photography."

"Kingdom People Times did great after we leaked it, too. Though, I guess it's normal for newspapers to write articles with looots of assumptions."

From their perspective, Tsukuyo Fuso, the newspaper company, and the contributor had all done a perfect job. Hannya was, after all, going on a rampage.

"...This is bound to affect their real lives," said Cheshire. "That's not something we should—"

"That observation could not be more late," Tweedledum replied.

"It's waay too late!" Tweedledee added. "There's already lots of people who were *so* affected by what happened in here that it changed their real lives. It's especially common with Maiden Masters like King of Tartarus or King of Swords. They're sooo sensitive!"

"Tweedle...!" Cheshire choked out, glaring at them. They had just said something he couldn't tolerate.

However, when he looked into their eyes, he was shocked to see absolutely no malice in them. There were simply no emotions there at all. Tweedledee seemed to act like she was enjoying this, but a closer look into her eyes would make you see that they were as cold as camera lenses.

They were like machines — even their speech and actions were pre-programmed.

It made Cheshire realize yet again just how different he was from them, even though he'd known them for a long time and seen this play out many times before.

"...You're more loyal to the cause than most of us," he said. Cheshire wasn’t like them. He had been a living creature-based Legion-type even before he evolved, while the twins were Type Infinite Calculator, evolved from the “Calculator” branch of Arms, which were focused almost solely on calculation processing. Since the twins had started out as basically machines, they were fundamentally different from Cheshire even after they received avatars which allowed them to act human.

And like machines, they always prioritized their goals over emotions.

“That’s what makes you so hard for me to bear. You’re just like *that thing*.”

They reminded Cheshire of his most hated Infinite Embryo... control AI No. 10.

“I am unable to agree with that assessment,” said Tweedledum.

“Yeahh! Bandersnatch goes waaay too far. Don’t lump us with hiim.”

The twins had just caused some major problems for Masters to make them evolve, but that didn’t seem like “too far” to them.

“Make the differentiation, No. 13.”

“It’s fine, it’s fiiine. Even if it hurts them, they’re still alive... Unlike our Masters.”

“...Tweedle.”

For just a moment, Cheshire saw a hint of emotion in their eyes, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

He then looked away from them and walked towards the fence around the roof.

“What are you doiing?”

“We shouldn’t throw them into traps like this. I’ll intervene to stop this disturbance.”

He couldn’t use his original body, but he could be useful even as Tom Cat.

Cheshire prepared to jump off the roof into the chaotic city of Gideon...

“Ah...!”

...but his legs didn’t listen to him.

In fact, his entire body was completely immobilized.

“This is... Alice!” He called out the name of the colleague responsible for this phenomenon.

Control AI No. 1, Alice, was in charge of player protection, as well as all avatars. She’d used her abilities to render Cheshire incapable of moving

Tom.

Under other circumstances things might have been different, but as an avatar, Tom Cat had no power against her. After all, control AI avatars, Master avatars... *all* the avatars active on *Infinite Dendrogram* had been created by her.

“...So she’s with you on this one?” Cheshire asked.

“You could see it that way. Be content to spectate. It is not your place to get involved.”

“Observe the resuults! Won’t it be great if someone evolves?!”

Cheshire couldn’t use his original body and was rendered immobile, while the two twins were eagerly awaiting the results of the rampage they’d set up.

Thus, the control AIs observed the third Clash of the Superiors to happen in this city, none of them knowing how it would unfold.

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Nex Plains

Figaro wasn’t in Gideon.

Last night, he had been running around the city’s outskirts, looking for a good place to duel Hannya; he’d logged out after deciding that the edge of Nex Plains would do just fine. This let him avoid the effects of the Angeldeath Dominion.

Many could count themselves lucky that he was outside the city, for the casualties would’ve been far worse if he’d been inside it.

Right after logging in, he instantly saw Sandalphon stomping around Gideon, as well as its panicked people.

“Hannya...” He understood the situation before he even came online. The MMO journal he’d read right before had mentioned something about the article in Kingdom People Times.

Before logging in, he didn’t think much of it besides “Well, *this* isn’t true at all,” but upon coming here, he realized that article was the driving force behind the situation before him. He wasn’t the type to overthink things, but he wasn’t a fool, either, so he was instantly able to connect Hannya’s rampage to the article.

For a moment, he looked as if he was holding something back... and then he wordlessly removed a particular item from his inventory.

It was a magic item that functioned as a signal flare. He'd acquired it while raiding a dungeon, but since he could only fight solo, it had been gathering dust in his inventory for a long time.

Figaro fired it into the sky, letting Hannya know his location.

"Target sighted." Sandalphon saw the signal, instantly noticed Figaro standing in Nex Plains, and moved the giant tower-legs according to Hannya's will. They seemed absolutely out of control. Fixated solely on Figaro and ignoring everyone else, the tower-legs rushed towards him.

It was quite fortunate that Hannya's current location was at the edge of the Angeldeath Dominion.

Sandalphon quickly left the area of effect, instantly canceling the skill. One of Angeldeath Dominion's conditions was that Sandalphon had to stay within the area he'd shuffled for it to remain active.

Of course, Sandalphon could use the ult again to apply its effects to his current location, but he didn't do it. There was something far more important now.

Destroying the Nex Plains beneath, Hannya arrived mere moments before Figaro. The two faced each other, with Hannya staring straight down at him.

"Han—"

"Last Berserk." Before Figaro could even call out her name, she used the King of Berserk ultimate job skill.

Last Berserk was both a skill and a declaration of incoming obliteration.

It could only be used once locked on to a target, and it put the KoB in a berserk state until either the target or the user died. In exchange for this extreme loss of control, the user's STR and AGI were quintupled, they took only twenty percent damage and their other skills didn't cost any MP or SP.

The moment the skill was used, it turned the user into a biological weapon focused solely on killing the target. It was a forbidden skill that had led many past Kings of Berserk to their death in a state of pure insanity.

Hannya knew its effects well, but she still didn't hesitate to use it on Figaro. A moment later, one of the kilometel-tall towers fell right on him.

Figaro reacted fast, quickly switching to his AGI-focused set and evading the tower by jumping backwards.

However, the other tower fell right where he landed.

It seemed like simple stomping, but because of Sandalphon's weight and the supersonic speed gained from Last Berserk, each step was like a meteor impact, creating craters that made Nex Plains look like the surface of the Moon.

Back at the gaol, Hannya had fought Gerbera — a stealth-focused Superior — who was quickly pulverized by this exact same barrage.

It was like a bombardment that could neither be avoided nor defended against.

Among the outlaws, it was a well known fact that if Hannya was above you, you *would* be crushed, but the Over Gladiator was far beyond this mere fact.

"Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis!" With no hesitation at all, Figaro went and used his own ult — the skill that whittled his life away.

"Acceleration!" He followed it up with the active skill from his equipped ring, which greatly increased his AGI.

Cor Leonis empowered the effect of his items' skills immensely in exchange for destroying them permanently, and Acceleration from his ring now briefly gave him speed that surpassed the stomping towers.

Figaro evaded the legs themselves, as well as the powerful shockwaves they caused.

He survived the fatal blows he couldn't dodge using Dragonscale Wards that were empowered by Cor Leonis and absorbed even more damage than normal. He replaced the ones that broke, continuing to evade the blows as he did.

Normal people... no... even *rankers* would be pulverized by this bombardment, but Figaro was actually surviving it.

However, he wouldn't be able to keep this up forever.

He had a limited number of items like the Dragonscale Wards, and his ult was chipping away at his HP every second.

On the other hand, it cost Hannya absolutely nothing to continue doing this.

Because of Last Berserk, she could continue barraging Figaro for as long as he was alive.

This battle already had a set goal — his death.

Despite the absolutely desperate situation, Figaro continued evading the deadly stomps while keeping his eyes on Hannya above him.

He then switched his footwear from Unbound Sabatons, Unchain — which negated movement limitations — to a pair of boots that had the Climbing skill. That was a passive skill used while scaling cliffs, and if empowered by Cor Leonis, it would become so powerful that he would be able to run up even smooth walls.

Albeit situational, the boots that had this skill could be used against a large variety of enemies, so he always had them handy.

And there was only one reason why he would equip them now.

“...I’m coming over there.” Figaro jumped on the surface of one of the tower-legs and began running upwards. It moved at the speed of sound, but that wasn’t enough to throw him off.

Through the earth-shaking impacts, he ran up Sandalphon, heading straight towards Hannya.

Chapter Eight: A Story Written in the Sky

Gideon the City of Duels

“Figgy loggin’ in outside is a real silver lining here.” Thanks to Figaro appearing in the Nex Plains and Hannya going after him, the situation had shifted drastically. As Shu considered how to handle things now, someone contacted him through the Telepathy Cuffs.

[Hello? Can you hear me?]

[Rook! What is it?]

[I just met up with Xunyu. The shuffling effect was canceled, so she can target Hannya now.]

Angeldeath Dominion had been undone, allowing Xunyu to use Tenaga Ashinaga’s ultimate skill.

[Can we count on her tearin’ out her heart?] Shu asked.

[She says there’s only like a fifty percent chance that she’ll succeed, because Hannya has high AGI and she’s moving around like crazy.] Tenaga Ashinaga’s ultimate skill didn’t come with a lock-on function and it could easily miss if the set coordinates were incorrect. That was why Xunyu had first immobilized Figaro before using it on him in The Clash of the Superiors.

With Hannya and Sandalphon being so large and mobile, it was difficult for Xunyu to land the skill.

[...Hannya’s probably wearin’ a Brooch, too,] said Shu. [Even if it lands, it won’t be enough... And then she might go on to make a mess out of more than just the plains.]

[That’s true.]

[...Let’s leave it to Figgy for now. We’ll go with Xunyu’s plan if he doesn’t make it.]

[Understood.] After cutting the comms with Shu, Rook gazed at Sandalphon and Figaro in the distance with an inquisitive look in his eyes.

“Why is Figaro climbing up Sandalphon?” he asked. “He could easily win by just standing on the surface and using Gloria α... or any other ranged skills.”

“It’s sooo weird,” said Babi. “He could just go SHWING like he did in the duuuel!”

“...Is there some kind of issue with using long-ranged attack skills against Hannya?” Rook theorized. “Would she block them somehow...?”

“NopE,” Xunyu cut his musings short. “For someone with sUch a good head on your shoulders, you’re prEtty ignorant.”

“...Ignorant?” Rook rarely heard anyone call him that, so he was a bit taken aback.

“The reAson he’s climbin’ is prObably really simplE.”

“It is?” Whatever Xunyu was thinking, Rook couldn’t see it yet.

“YeAh. He ain’t wiEldin’ a weapon, and he’s using thE ult he didn’t use even in oUr *duel*. Ya know whAt that means, right?”

Rook didn’t, actually. Based on what he’d been told, Figaro had been looking forward to dueling Hannya, and according to what Ray had said that had been exactly their plans for today. Because of this, Rook assumed that Figaro saw this as a duel or some sort of fight to stop Gideon from being destroyed.

“Well, you’ll find oUt if ya just think abOut it. Just thinking cAn make for a good lessOn, Rook.”

“For a little girl, you’re so much like a big sisteeer,” said Babi. “I won’t let you be Rook’s big sister, though. That’s *my* role!”

“I don’t even wAnt it,” Xunyu chuckled as she watched Figaro’s fight, preparing her ult just in case.

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Nex Plains

Two different sounds now resounded over the plains: the roar of the pulverized ground and a young man’s voice.

“Fall! Please just fall down already!” Sandalphon shouted this while continuing his devastating stomping.

However, Figaro was weathering every movement and shockwave, never stopping his dash to the top of the tower.

The scene seemed to defy the laws of physics, but Figaro's stats and his boots' Climbing skill, buffed by Cor Leonis, made this feat possible. The ult had already expired, but because he was limiting his equipment, the enhancement was still sufficient.

It also bears remembering that Figaro had tons of experience fighting on unsteady terrain.

"He's absurd...!" This was the first time Sandalphon had ever encountered someone who had tried to climb on him while he was attacking.

So far, he'd only lost against two enemies: the incarnation of nature that specialized in area-wide extermination and a slime that negated all physical damage. Compatibility had been against him in both of those fights — Sandalphon couldn't make use of his strong points and afterwards could fully understand why he lost.

However, Figaro was just a human — a creature that should have died with a single stomp.

The fact that he was still alive began to make Sandalphon panic.

The Over Gladiator was already halfway up his tower-leg.

"...■■"

"Lady Hannya...!" While Last Berserk was active, Hannya was basically a machine devoted to attacking Figaro. It made the movement of her body completely automatic, and if Sandalphon wasn't there to provide stability, even the massive tower-legs would be moving at a maddening rate.

However, her thoughts remained her own thanks to the player protection function, so even though she was rampaging, her feelings for Figaro remained the same.

Bloodlust, rage, grief, love... too many emotions swirled within her to pinpoint just one, but the effect of them all had already convinced her to use Last Berserk and attack him.

This was the only way of handling lost love that she knew.

She'd only fallen in love twice in her entire life. The first love ended in betrayal, and the second was an illusion. The only way she could feel any kind of relief was by releasing her grief, anger, and hate onto the object of her affection.

Sandalphon knew how she felt better than anyone, and he knew that this was the only way. After all — he was born from her mind and heart. And as her loyal Embryo, he once again fulfilled her will.

“Screamer, set,” Sandalphon said, as he slightly changed his appearance.

The towers remained top-heavy, but spiral grooves now appeared on their surface. Figaro couldn’t see them in their entirety from his current vantage point, but everyone else watching the battle could.

As someone described what it looked like now, Sandalphon suddenly began to shine...

“Downfall Screamer!”

...and used his only offensive active skill.

Sandalphon was now a kilometel-tall pair of drills.

He’d acquired this skill when Hannya was still trying to escape the gaol to meet Figaro and *evolved into his seventh form by using* ■■■.

Though it hadn’t been enough to let Hannya escape, it was a space-warping, all-pulverizing, penetrating, perforating attack that ignored material toughness.

Of course, there was little point to some of those attributes now. The skill’s effects were concentrated at the very tip of the tower-legs, and Figaro was running up the side.

Why did Sandalphon decide to use it, then? Simple — to make the towers spin and throw Figaro off.

With an obscene 600 revolutions per second, the drills were like giant centrifuges, and the angel was confident that they could easily throw off anyone and anything clinging to them.

That was exactly what happened a moment later. Figaro was flung into the sky...

“Liferend Shield Formation.”

...and landed on thin air.

“Huh?!” Sandalphon couldn’t hide his shock at this feat. Figaro had used a skill from his blue coat-like MVP special reward, Rendshield Cloak, Closer, which created barriers that doubled as platforms. He had used it for air mobility when fighting Gloria, and now he used it to approach the top of Sandalphon.

He was already past the halfway point, which placed him close enough for the Liferend Shield Formation to take him up the rest of the way. Hannya was trying to stomp him out of the sky with the spinning towers, but his movements were too unpredictable.

Figaro was soon high enough to make Sandalphon panic even worse.

He was aware that he was a powerful Superior Embryo with a gigantic size and an ability that warped space, but he had his share of weaknesses, too.

One of them was common to all Apostles — the absolute lack of stat growth bonuses to their Masters.

Another was a flaw specific to him — because of his size, he had absolutely no way of dealing with enemies that reached his weak point: the very top of the towers.

His battle abilities were useless against someone who made it all the way up, and even if Hannya unequipped Sandalphon and fought Figaro by herself, she wouldn't stand a chance even with her buffs from Last Berserk. Without her Embryo, the gap between them was just too vast.

As Sandalphon panicked about the danger that would soon befall his Master, Figaro made the final jump to the top... *only for something to shoot him down*.

The sudden snipe shocked many people present, but it wasn't enough to end Figaro's life. He'd switched Closer's barriers from platforms to the absolute defense bubble shield he'd used in his duel against Xunyu. However, the disappearance of the platforms forced Figaro to fall back all the way down to the ground.

Sandalphon watched the sight in confusion, while Hannya looked down at Figaro with a face still full of rage.

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Cruella Mountain Belt

A hit, thought the man with closed eyes.

In his hands there was a pen and a notepad, and next to him there was a strange creature composed of four mechanical legs and an upper body armed with a bow.

Behind his closed eyes, he watched Figaro fall with a view *from right above Sandalphon*.

It was about to end too early. This is an extremely rare event, so I want to watch it a bit longer. It's quite unusual for me to interfere like this a second time...

The man wanted a true struggle between Figaro and Hannya — an emotional clash between two Superiors. That was why he'd sent DIN the photo that would set this in motion. He hadn't expected that story to get scooped by another newspaper, but the result was the same, so those details didn't matter to him.

And now, because it seemed like it would end too soon, the man waited until Figaro had no control over his aerial movement and sniped him using his own Embryo. It would have been terribly disappointing to end the battle with that one shot, but just as he'd expected, Figaro sensed the attack coming and defended against it.

Thanks to that, the emotional clash had been reset.

Sagittarius did a good job, he thought. The strange creature's arrow was special because it was made of light rather than physical matter, but perhaps the most extraordinary thing about it was the fact that it had hit a target in Nex Plains from all the way here in the Cruella Mountain Belt.

Though, unlike my first interference, this one was much too direct. Everyone who watched the battle could see that Figaro had been sniped from the side, and thus they now knew some outsider was interfering.

Still watching Sandalphon with his closed left eye, he opened his right and looked up at the sky.

What he saw was a silver Prism Steed galloping across the heavens towards him.

I knew it... I was fully aware this might happen when I decided to interfere. Still, I hope this doesn't make it too difficult to observe.

The man heaved a sigh, and Sagittarius vanished, leaving behind twelve black orbs.

He put them back in his crest and gave the incoming Prism Rider a welcoming smile.

"Good morning, Ray Starling," he said, making the Master... that is, Ray Starling, adopt a shocked expression.

He clearly hadn't expected this reunion.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Someone had shot Figaro down right as he was about to make it to

Hannya.

I’d been high up in the air, so I noticed where the attack originated and rushed to the Cruella Mountain Belt, only to find a familiar face — the man who’d let himself be captured by bandits, F.

“...Did you do that?” I asked him as I put Silver away.

“Yes. With my Embryo,” he replied, showing no intention of hiding it.

“Why?”

“Because I felt that it would be regrettable if things ended too early.”

“R... Regrettable?!” I shouted, not bothering to hide my shock and anger.

However, he showed no reaction to my emotion and continued to speak plainly.

“A romantic tragedy between Superiors isn’t something you see every day. Isn’t it natural to want it to last longer?”

“Like hell it is!”

“Also, I took the picture that caused all of this. I didn’t want those efforts to go to waste,” he said, showing me a photo — the very one responsible for this ordeal.

He’s behind this whole thing?!

“Just what are these people to you?!” I roared.

“Sources of material. Very good ones, to be more precise.”

The quickness of his reply made it clear that these were his honest thoughts.

“Gideon might be destroyed! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?!”

“Of course it does. My heart would ache,” he said, as if he couldn’t believe what I was implying. “However, my own emotions would make for excellent material, too, so I would take note of them, as well. And Gideon’s destruction itself would also be quite a good source of inspiration. That would at least make up for missing Franklin’s Game.”

His words shocked me speechless and reminded me of a character from a particular short story: “Hell Screen,” the 1918 story about Yoshihide — an artist who’d painted his own daughter burning to death. He placed his art above good, evil, and even morality itself... just like F.

“...I see.” Now that I understood what kind of person he was, I remembered the uncomfortable feeling I’d gotten back when I first met him. He hadn’t seemed to care one bit about what the bandits were doing — he was satisfied with just being “kidnapped,” and didn’t spare a single thought for the evil the bandits might’ve committed. That was why F had said he’d even thank the bandits for what they’d done, and that wouldn’t have changed even if the bandits had gone on to kill someone before finally being apprehended. He was only interested in their punishment insofar as their villainy might be useful for improving his work.

And now, he was staring right at me with his one open eye.

He readily admitted everything he'd done because he wanted to see my reaction and use it as "material."

"...All right," I muttered. He found joy in his accomplishments, and even the casualties caused by his actions were a positive to him. I knew someone who was much like him, and in spite of their shared search for inspiration, it wasn't Marie... *F was more like Franklin*.

That mad scientist was the greatest enemy I'd faced so far, and the threat he'd posed to Gideon was unmatched. He was the kind of person who didn't hesitate to put others through hell for the sake of his goal.

And F here... he destroyed Figaro and Hannya's relationship for nothing, created a disaster that could destroy the city, and observed it all with satisfaction. He was clearly cut from the same cloth as Franklin.

"Ohh, he's trying to climb up again," he said, still looking at me with his right open eye.

Figaro had probably recovered from the fall and was trying to reach Hannya again. His condition was deteriorating and the situation was growing worse by the minute, but he was still fighting.

However, as things were, F would get in his way again.

He claimed that he just wanted to observe the battle for longer, but based on the rest of what he said, he also wanted to support Hannya and see her destroy Gideon.

"I won't let you get involved in this any further," I declared. "I'll stop you."

"Yes. Please, do try. You are The Unbreakable — one who defeated many powerful foes in highly dramatic ways. Fighting you directly is bound to make for good material, as well."

He wasn't lying about wanting this. Anything that happened was just further material and more accomplishments to him... and what a troublesome mentality that was.

"Oh, wait. Allow me to introduce myself again," he said as he took out a small object — a Job Crystal. "I'm King of Light, F... the thirtieth in Altar's kill rankings."

He surprised me one more time by switching from High Secretary into his true job...

"Let's see what material I can get from The Unbreakable."

...and attacked me with lasers fired from his fingertips and countless orbs of light that had appeared around him.

"...!" I quickly shielded myself with Monochrome. The Black Warcoat absorbed all light-based attacks, instantly protecting me from all the damage except the slight heat created by the lasers burning through the air.

Without this special reward, I would've definitely died.

...I was running into way too many laser-wielding enemies recently. First there was Monochrome, and if I hadn't acquired the Black Warcoat from it, I would've had a really bad time against the whale in Quartierlatin.

"I see," said the King of Light. The light-based spellcaster Superior Job had observed me protect myself against his attack.

"The fact that you assumed a defensive position tells me that this isn't the type of item that grants you protection by simply being equipped." The battle had just begun, but F had already figured out my weakness.

If the lasers hadn't hit Monochrome, they would've easily pierced my body.

"Glint Pile." He switched from pointing his fingers at me to opening his palm in my direction.

Knowing that an even stronger attack was coming, I took evasive action while simultaneously preparing to shield myself with Monochrome.

A moment later, I felt an impact on my coat far stronger than the ones before.

"Gh...!"

"Ray!" Nemesis shouted telepathically. Based on the power level, this had to be the ultimate job skill of Flashmancer... a high-rank job.

It's powerful, but Monochrome absorbed most of the dama—

"Above?!" My thought was cut short by a shadow falling over my body, which made me notice two orbs of light right above me.

They were growing in radiance. That couldn't be a good sign, so I quickly jumped away.

Right as I did, the orbs released the same high-rank ultimate job skill I'd already blocked once, launching a deadly laser that melted the ground I'd just been standing on.

"Spell extensions... Drones! Ray! Don't stop moving! They'll surround you!"

"I know!" I used Instant Wield to equip Silver and began running around the mountains.

Going into the sky wasn't an option because he would just shoot me down with his lasers. Instead, I zigzagged between the obstacles, aiming for a chance to strike F.

His left eye was closed. He was probably using his orbs and some optical skill to watch Figaro and Hannya's battle — and if that wasn't an opening, nothing was.

I approached him from his blind spot and launched my attack.

"How decisive. Is that one of your strong points?" I was sure I was in his blind spot, but King of Light was still smiling.

A moment later, the lasers from the orbs of light attacked us so precisely that it was like they were threading the needle between the trees.

"Gh...!"

"How?! We're in his blind spot!"

"I suppose you guessed that I'm using my left eye to watch the fight, and you would be correct," F said as he faced me. "But if that's the case, it only makes sense that I would be able to do the same here, no?"

He then *closed his right eye*.

Shocked, I looked over his head — at the orbs floating above him.

He's using one of them to watch the battle! I thought.

"It can be quite tiring to see different things with each eye, but if you're used to it, it won't even make you dizzy."

"Is that so?!" F had a grasp of the entire battlefield and would attack me with lasers if I came close.

That only left one option — to use a ranged attack that couldn't be blocked.

Thanks to his own attacks, I had just the thing.

"MONOCHROOOME!" In response to my call, the Black Warcoat wrapped itself around my left arm and transformed into a cannon. "I'm leaving defense to you!"

"Understood! Counter Absorption!" The orbs of light released yet another ult laser at me, but Nemesis' shield blocked it off.

Seizing on this chance, I fixed my aim on the King of Light...

"Shining... DESPAIR!"

...and fired back at him using the greatest firepower I had — my concentrated laser cannon.

In the blinding, burning white, F stood still...

"I see."

...and made something black appear out of his crest.

It was a dense wall of dark orbs.

In less than a moment, it clashed with the laser... *and fully protected F against it*.

Not a single spark of the laser made it to him before Shining Despair stopped, and once it was over, the black orbs were shining as if they'd completely devoured all of that light, sealing it away inside them.

I instantly understood what it meant.

"...Light Absorption?!"

That Embryo has the exact same skill as Monochrome...!

"It appears that we have a similar repertoire," he said.

"Guess we do...!" Similar, but not exactly the same.

I also had Gardranda, as well as Nemesis.

I could still win if I hit him with Vengeance — it would deal double the damage sustained by Monochrome.

"Allow me to show you another similarity," F said as he swung his finger like a baton. Seven of the orbs that had absorbed Shining Despair followed his movements and formed into a very particular shape.

I instantly recognized it.

"...Cancer?" It was one of the twelve constellations of the zodiac.

"A Story Written in the Sky — Zodiac: Cancer." As though to tell me I was right, the King of Light activated his ultimate skill.

At that moment, the seven orbs of light became a giant crab.

Both its claws and the shell on its back were made of thick, gleaming armor, and anyone with any gaming knowledge would know that it had been summoned to act as a tank. It moved to cover and protect the King of Light, much like the great crab Karkinos from Greek myth that had appeared to protect its friend the Hydra.

"A monster summon...! This is like Arc-en-Ciel... Wait, no!" If F really was an author, it wouldn't be unusual for him to have an Embryo that functioned similarly to Marie's Arc-en-Ciel, but that wasn't what he was referring to.

“I’m aware that you also have a summon skill.” Indeed... He was talking about Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda.

However, I’d completely emptied Gouz-Maise during the battle against Logan, and I still didn’t have nearly enough power to summon Gardranda for a reasonable amount of time.

“Or have you expended all the battle Resources needed for it? I can’t blame you. The battle at Quartierlatin was quite intense.”

“...Who knows?”

I was finally beginning to understand something.

King of Light most likely had a fighting style very similar to mine, and it wasn’t just because of the skills we shared.

Nemesis’ Counter Absorption, the MP and SP storage in Gouz-Maise, Monochrome’s Shining Despair charge... I increased my battle potential by charging up abilities ahead of time, then unleashing them later in battle.

F was the same in that regard. The black orbs that had absorbed Shining Despair probably had to be charged with light to be used. The ult that had summoned the crab had most likely come at the cost of a certain number of orbs.

As a fighter, he was indeed very much like me.

“...A pre-Superior with my exact fighting style, huh?” He’d claimed to be the thirtieth in the Kingdom’s kill rankings, but under optimal conditions, he had to be far more powerful than that statistic suggested. I’d readily place him next to top rankers like Juliet... if not higher.

“...Can I ask why you’re only the thirtieth?”

“I want to gather material in the war, but rising too high would make it difficult.”

“I see.” Like I’d suspected, he was only thirtieth by choice. Considering how he operated, it would’ve been hard for him to find a clan, and from what I could remember of the kill rankings list, the thirtieth place only showed a job and no name, just like Shu’s.

“So, what are your intentions?” F asked. A pre-Superior that could match high-ranking duelists like Rosa, Juliet, and maybe even Kashimiya.

He’s clearly too much for me as I am now...

“...It’s too early to give up!” I roared before finishing my thought.

...But I’ve fought worse!

“I’m glad to hear that.” He spoke with nothing but honesty, before attacking with both his crab and lasers.

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About F

To F, this world was a wonderful source of material and inspiration.

The extreme realism of *Infinite Dendrogram* formed the ultimate environment to stimulate his mind. The information he could gain from a single description was far less than he could get out of properly experiencing something, and that greatly influenced the writing he could weave.

This world had the foreign townscapes, untrodden lands, and strange, fantastical sights that made it the best tool for inspiration he could have possibly asked for.

There were actually many people who were logging in to see the sights, but he stood out from them because he wanted more than that.

F also had a fondness for *risk*.

Situations where a single mistake could mean death, acts that could make him a pariah and end his life as he knew it... such things were too risky even for him in reality, but as a Master, he could dabble in all of those things without any real danger to his life or livelihood.

He spent most of his time spectating and observing himself, this world, and its lives, not letting a single moment go to waste.

F had entered areas dominated by dangerous monsters, died fighting Masters, led a tian party into a deadly mountain pass, unleashed monsters upon a small fishing village, let himself be captured by bandits... and made Superiors fight to the death.

As he did all these things, all he saw was more reference material for his own work.

Fellow creators such as Marie and Veldorbell could perhaps relate to him, but he was different from them because *he had no limits and never hesitated to go as far as he wanted*.

No matter how terrible the tragedy, it was just a source of material for him as an author.

That was why there were always people ready to try and stop him.

In the mountains, it had been a power-suited Superior who hadn’t known when to back down.

In the fishing village, it had been a newbie party calling themselves "The Fairytale Squad."

And now, it was The Unbreakable himself.

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...His gear counters me, but it's his persistence that stands out the most, F thought. *He doesn't hold that title for nothing.*

He watched in wonder as Ray fought against him, Cancer, and the many stars of his Zodiac.

F was generally known as the greatest wielder of light magic. This element actually boasted some of the game's strongest offensive spells.

Only fire surpassed them in sheer power, and they moved at the speed of light, making them by far the fastest spells of all.

However, casters who used light magic were actually fairly uncommon.

This was due to its three major flaws.

First — the spells were MP sinks, with offensive spells using about five times more MP than similarly-powered spells of other elements. Second — though the spells themselves were the fastest, their activation times were the slowest of any element.

And third — their spell trajectories were extremely simple. Most of them were just straight lines, making it easy for any skilled fighter to counter them before they were even launched. AGI builds could use the slow activation time to make their own moves or dodge after predicting the trajectory, while END builds would have the time to use appropriate defensive or resistance skills.

Because of all this, despite its power, light magic wasn't well-suited for one-on-one battles.

However, as the Master of Zodiac, F was an exception.

The King of Light made up for the excessive MP usage by stocking up his stars with light ahead of time.

The slow activation wasn't a problem, because he made sure his stars were always ready to fire.

And the simple trajectory didn't matter when he could attack from every direction and make his attacks impossible to dodge.

Even without his ultimate skill, F had already conquered every flaw inherent to light magic.

Though he needed time to prepare, at his best, he was one of the greatest light magic casters.

He was exceptional even among pre-Superiors... if not a match to some actual Superiors.

And Ray, despite facing such a powerful enemy, was still persevering.

F was well aware that Ray possessed gear that countered him, but that didn’t stop him from recognizing his abilities and deeply appreciating him as a wonderful reference for his work as an author.

I wouldn’t have it any other way, he thought. *But I doubt he’ll survive this intense barrage.*

Splendid Starsky, Zodiac was a Type Legion-Arms Embryo that absorbed light and used it to power his spells and vision skills. It not only allowed him to fire lasers — he could also use it for remote viewing and optical camouflage.

Just now, Ray felt his side pierced by a star he hadn’t even seen.

F achieved this by placing an optical camouflage star right next to one that fired lasers. That was also how he managed to hide the star he was using to look down on the battle.

He used powerful abilities like summoning and giant beams while simultaneously chipping away at his enemies using little tricks like this. As someone who willingly jumped into risky situations, F was an extremely experienced fighter, and it showed.

This is what’s happening over here... but what about over there? F was still using his left eye to watch Figaro and Hannya.

Not much had changed — Figaro was still climbing Sandalphon to reach Hannya. However, due to the damage he’d sustained and Hannya’s resistance, he was far slower than before.

F was also puzzled about something.

Why does he insist on climbing in that state? Figaro had yet to attack — all he was doing was climbing up.

What he was doing went against F’s... and Tweedle’s... expectations, and it wasn’t what he’d hoped to see.

F thought that it might end up being necessary to help Figaro next, but he also thought that the Over Gladiator could turn things all around.

He didn’t want to miss something like that, but Ray was still continuing his struggle.

F was already satisfied with what he’d received from Ray and now wanted to focus on the main event.

“You really are quite persistent,” he said. “But why not focus on those two now? To tell you the truth, I feel that the highlight of the battle may come at any moment, and it’s making me anxious. Would you like to see it with me?”

“...” F was nothing but sincere, but Ray responded with only silence.

It was impossible to tell if he was too focused on surviving F’s attacks or if *he was already beyond the stage where he was capable of conversation*.

I suppose the battle continues, F thought. F himself hadn’t thought it was likely that Ray would agree to the offer, but in a state like this, there was probably much more material to extract from him.

Since this isn’t enough to seal the deal, I’ll add another constellation. I just used Sagittarius, and I want to leave Pisces in case I need to escape at supersonic speeds.

The battle here had become far too intense. Even if F defeated Ray, other Masters would come here to fight in his stead, so he wanted to keep an escape route in reserve.

His ultimate skill, A Story Written in the Sky — Zodiac, had two limitations.

First, it required fully charged stars, just as Ray had guessed.

Second, the monsters he summoned returned after fulfilling the single order carved into them, and then he couldn’t summon them for a whole twenty-four hours afterwards.

Cancer’s order was simply “protect F,” so it lasted for quite a while, but there were also those that disappeared after a single activation — such as Libra, which had been commanded to “investigate the target,” and Sagittarius, which had “sniped the target.”

Because of this, if F wanted to intervene in Figaro and Hannya’s battle again, he would have to fire lasers from the star he was using to observe them. He hadn’t done so earlier because it would increase the chances of that star being destroyed, and that would leave him without any means of watching the battle.

Of course, using Sagittarius had ultimately let Ray know where F was and brought about this new battle, but he was the kind of person who welcomed that.

"A Story Written in the Sky — Gemini." This time, he summoned a pale shape with an outline that looked much like F's.

This monster was Gemini, which "acted as his clone until it ran out of energy." It had his exact stats and could even use the same spells. F himself remained under the protection of Cancer and sent Gemini to fight Ray in his stead.

It attacked him with light magic, just as F would have.

Charged stars, a clone, waves and waves of attacks from every direction... It was the kind of onslaught that could easily kill high-ranks and even overpower Superior Jobs.

The reason Ray was still alive was his evasion ability, which he'd honed over his many life-or-death battles, and Monochrome cutting down most of the damage from the lasers. Without the Black Warcoat, he would've died dozens of times over by now.

That was just how powerful F's attacks were — it was an overwhelming onslaught employing his sheer volume of Resources.

Even so, Ray was still alive.

Hm...? F raised an eyebrow. A whole minute had passed since F had gone on the full offensive.

Because there were more projectiles now and Monochrome couldn't fully cover Silver, Ray had stored the Prism Steed away. He hid his weak points beneath the Black Warcoat while doing everything he could to dodge. Despite all of this, he ended up beaten and battered, and his ability to evade all these attacks slowly dwindled.

And even so, Ray was still alive.

That just didn't make sense to F.

...Why isn't he dying? That same thought might've gone through the minds of many of Ray's opponents in the past. With his abilities and stats, it just didn't make sense for him to still be alive.

Even so, Ray lived, unbroken and still going for his enemy's throat.

"Hh...!" F gasped as cold sweat went down his back.

It was caused by panic... a fragment of fear.

F sought out risks he couldn't experience in reality, so real fear was actually a welcome thing. He could use this as reference... but something was off this time.

After facing Ray alone and seeing how he was for himself, F began wanting to *run away*.

Suddenly, Ray looked up to where F was hiding his observation star.

Thus, his right eye met Ray's... Though, "met" might've been the wrong word for it.

For all F knew, Ray might've not realized the star was even there.

However, that gave F *a glimpse*.

Like those who gazed at the abyss found it gazing back, F saw what lived in Ray's eyes.

It was pure rage, directed solely at F.

He'd first caused the conflict between Figaro and Hannya, then asked Ray to watch it with him, increasing his anger beyond all reasonable limits.

It was something many of his enemies had seen, and F now joined their ranks.

To F, fear felt while gathering material was a good thing. It was just another accomplishment, after all. He would simply analyze it, and it would become reference material for his own writing.

But now, he'd seen the weight of the emotion in Ray's eyes.

He was no longer simply a source of material or a fellow player.

Ray was a *human being*... who couldn't tolerate F's actions.

The sheer strength of this emotion filled F with a fear that left no room for analysis... and *wouldn't let him do it* even if he'd wanted to.

"Gh...!" Gathering material was no longer an option. There was nothing for him to gain from this battle. He felt... no... *was certain* that if he didn't end this as quickly as possible, something within him would be damaged beyond repair.

F began gathering magic in his hands, looking to end this battle as quickly as possible.

However, Ray acted first.

"Hellish Miasma... full power!" He equipped his Storm Visage and fired Hellish Miasma from the right Gardranda, covering the area in a dark-purple fog.

It affected Cancer, but Gemini counted as an elemental, so it remained unafflicted. F himself drank an Elixir he'd prepared.

The real problem it caused for F was visibility. The star that had been watching the battle from above had its vision completely clouded by the poisonous gas, and Ray was keeping low, so F had now effectively lost sight of his enemy.

"Kh...?!" The stars and Gemini fired lasers in every direction, but it wasn't clear if any of them hit.

The sea of miasma was like the depths of hell, leaving F completely in the dark. At any moment, that black blade could strike out from the darkness and take his life.

His fear grew, but F also hadn't given up on victory.

He used the ace up his sleeve he'd been charging all this time — an attack that didn't care *where* the enemy was.

"Corona!" It was the ultimate job skill of the light magic Superior Job, King of Light. It released lasers that surpassed high-rank ults in every possible direction, drowning the battlefield in all-consuming light and leaving no room for evasion.

Despite the devastation it caused, Cancer and Gemini were completely unharmed, while the stars actually absorbed the power. Of course, F himself was also untouched.

Only Ray, still hiding within the miasma, would suffer its effects.

Not yet...! F thought. He sensed that not even that was going to be enough to finish Ray off. F knew that he would assume a defensive position and shield himself using Monochrome.

The fight was as good as over.

With Ray fully focused on protection against the light, Cancer could attack him now. Its pure physical power would break through his defense, and the combined attacks from Gemini and the stars would wipe him out.

Check... mate! The whiteness drowning their vision soon abated, and the miasma blinding F's star dispersed.

He quickly spotted a figure rolled up in Monochrome... *as well as Ray, swinging his left fist straight at F.*

"HUH?!" F opened his eyes wide in shock, right before receiving a punch to the face. At the moment of impact, Gardranda opened up and doused him in Purgatorial Flames from point-blank range.

"GHAAAAHHHHHH!" F had his pain set to on for the experience, so the feeling of his entire body burning was very real to him.

How?! I saw his Black Warcoat! If he's right here, then who is that?! he thought, a mere moment before the person wearing Monochrome began moving.

Cancer was about to crush the person with its giant pincer...

"Counter Absorption!"

...but then *she* — Nemesis — blocked it with a barrier of light.

"Wh-What...?!" F couldn't hide his shock. The one wearing Monochrome wasn't Ray, but Nemesis.

Normally, only the MVPs could wear special rewards, but there was an exception — Embryos. They were an inseparable part of their Masters and could equip MVP rewards just as well as they did.

This allowed Nemesis to wear Monochrome, while Ray had approached F *without any armor at all.*

He was only wearing ordinary clothes — the defenseless casual clothing he'd changed into using Clothing Switch. Behind him lay the remains of a broken Brooch.

He took off his armor to lower his defense and make sure he received lethal damage...?!

With that, F fully understood what had happened.

Ray had given his lifeline — Monochrome — over to Nemesis, then approached F through the miasma while negating the lethal damage from Corona with the Brooch.

Monochrome then acted as bait, attracting F's attention while Ray used the opening to punch him.

He guessed that I was charging my ultimate job skill... and knew that it was an all-directional attack?! F's assumption was actually wrong — Ray actually had no idea what kind of skill it was. However, he was already familiar with one caster-type Superior Job ultimate skill — Xunyu's Zhenhuo Zhendeng: Baolongba. Based on that, Ray had gambled on the King of Light's ult also being a high-power AoE attack... and that gamble paid off.

"Khh...!" Still burning, F tried to recover. He moved both Cancer and Gemini, trying to target Ray with his remaining stars.

"Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda, 10 seconds."

However, Ray was faster.

Miasmaflame Princess was a summoning skill that cost 1,000 MP for every second of the summon's life. Not even Gouz-Maise had enough MP to make full use of it right now, but a brief summoning was still possible.

“That’s short, but enough... for me.” Gardranda began fighting the moment she appeared.

She took a step forward and struck F’s head with Shu’s signature roundhouse kick — the Kodachi.

F survived thanks to the Brooch, but it shattered from the damage.

Not wasting any time, Gardranda continued to make the best use of the ten seconds given to her. She pointed her right bracer at Cancer and the left one at Gemini.

“Eat this... okay?” The goblin princess simultaneously unleashed the power of Hellish Miasma: Zero and Purgatorial Flames: Zero. These were skills so potent that they rendered all of the bracers’ abilities temporarily unusable.

Cancer was a slow tank, while Gemini only had the same stats as F — a caster. They couldn’t evade, and both of the “Zero” skills landed without difficulty. The dense poison melted Cancer’s body into a bubbling mess, while Gemini evaporated in flames hotter than even its own lasers.

“...?!” The two Zodiac monsters vanished, and though F had negated Gardranda’s kick, it had still rendered him momentarily immobile. During this moment, Nemesis returned to Ray.

The moment their hands joined, she transformed into pinpoints of light that converged into a greatsword, while Monochrome covered Ray once again.

F quickly had all the stars fire their lasers at Ray, but the Black Warcoat and his own body weathered the barrage as he rushed towards F again.

The distance between them was soon covered. “Glint Pile!” The King of Light fired the high-rank ultimate job skill from both his hands...

“Vengeance is Mine!”

...but Ray just barely dodged them both and lunged at F.

All the damage he’d done to Ray was returned twofold.

There was no chance that he could survive all of that, and the King of Light vanished without a trace.

Many things went through his head as he did, but he was in no state to analyze any of them. F only understood one thing. He had joined the ranks of those Ray had defeated once they’d roused his wrath.

Chapter Nine: The ■■■■■■■■ of Figaro

Nex Plains

How long had it been since F had shot Figaro back down to the surface?

His injuries were starting to slow Figaro down, and Sandalphon continued to attack him, not letting the opportunity go to waste.

Even so, Figaro kept on climbing.

His coat and many other pieces of his gear were torn, he was the only one on the battlefield who had been wounded, and Cor Leonis had taken a toll on his HP... yet he continued to climb upwards.

In fact, *he hadn't attacked even once so far*.

Hannya looked down at him, silently but intently.

Influenced by Last Berserk, her body was moving to kill Figaro, but her mind was still her own and her eyes were fixed upon him and only him.

Figaro was doing nothing but climbing. He hadn't equipped a weapon or argued with her — he was simply trying to reach Hannya, ignoring all the painful wounds inflicted upon his avatar.

Though her body was overcome by bloodlust, Hannya's mind couldn't help but wonder why he was so persistent in trying to get close to her. If he wanted to fight and defeat Hannya, he had many options available to him. As these thoughts went through her mind, her heart was slowly starting to be at odds with her body.

Figaro was thrown off, only to cling and keep crawling to try and make it to the top. He was the duel champion and the pride and joy of Gideon, yet he made no effort to hide his beaten and bloodied frame from the masses as he struggled to reach her.

Hannya's body wouldn't stop until Figaro was dead.

Sandalphon wouldn't stop as long as his Master needed protection.

And Figaro wouldn't stop as long as his soul kept telling him that he couldn't.

No one would stop... and the climax was drawing ever closer.

"Kh! You're still...!" Sandalphon sensed the threat approaching his

Master and tried to throw Figaro off again.

The moment the cooldown on Downfall Screamer ended, he used it one more time. Figaro couldn't hold on to the spinning tower, and since he couldn't use his barrier-platforms yet, he was about to start falling back down to the surface again.

However, the Over Gladiator denied that fate.

He clung to the tower with not just his legs, but arms as well, which allowed him to continue reaching for the top despite the whole thing spinning like a tornado.

That had slowed him down, of course, but it wasn't enough to stop him.

"Gh...! You're too persistent!" Sandalphon then clashed the towers together.

They were spinning in opposite directions, and their meeting threw out an absurd amount of sparks. Figaro was caught up in the devastation between... *and the sound of something soft and hard shattering resounded throughout the plains.*

Blood thrown off by the centrifugal force dissipated into a lingering mist, while the shattered fragments falling to the ground had to be the remains of Figaro's boots.

"I did it! Lady Hannya, I did it!" Sandalphon was overjoyed that he'd fulfilled his Master's will and turned to face her. He was completely confident that he had ground Figaro into dust and given him the death penalty.

"...Eh?"

But when he looked at Hannya's face, he realized that she was still under the influence of Last Berserk.

"H-He's still alive...?!" He then realized that there was a chain wrapped around one of the jewels that acted as his eyes.

A moment later, its owner pulled himself up.

He was barefoot and covered in wounds, his left arm was completely gone and the power of his ult was boiling the blood straight off his skin, turning it into steam. The only gear he still had equipped was his AGI-focused lower body armor and a single chain.

But despite it all, he... *Figaro* was still alive.

"What...?! Did he actually...?!" Just seeing Figaro's current state was enough for Sandalphon to understand what Figaro had done.

When the towers were about to clash, Figaro realized that climbing any higher was impossible.

First, he'd quickly removed his Climbing boots and used them to jump into the air.

At the same time, he severed his left arm and threw it between the drills, creating a spray of blood that briefly distracted Sandalphon.

He then focused his equipment enhancement into his chain, giving it enough range to quickly reach Sandalphon's top and pull himself up. If it hadn't reached, Figaro would've died when he hit the ground, but his gamble proved successful. Finally, he managed to reach the top.

"Are you even human...?! Lady Hannya!" As Sandalphon shouted, Figaro — or what was left of him — approached Hannya.

Silence. Even now that her defeat was certain, Hannya was still looking right at Figaro. She looked as terrifying as her namesake — the Noh mask of Hannya. It was impossible to tell if the expression was the result of Last Berserk or an honest representation of her feelings, but looking deep into her eyes, you could see that Figaro coming all the way up to her in spite of the extreme difficulty was making her feel something other than rage.

Their eyes met, and the silence continued until...

"Hannya... I have something for you."

...Figaro removed something from his inventory.

For a brief moment, Sandalphon thought that it was a weapon. That exact thought ran through the heads of everyone watching the fight from a distance, too.

However, they were far off the mark.

What Figaro offered to Hannya wasn't a weapon...

...but a *bouquet* of blossoms that looked much like real-life sunflowers. Figaro had bought them from the plant shop he visited before he ran into Tsukuyo.

"...Huh?" Hannya was so astonished that the rage vanished from her expression. Her heart had been shaken so badly that one might think the effects of Last Berserk had disappeared for a second.

After all, she knew what sunflowers signified in the language of flowers.

They meant "I only have eyes for you," and were often used for *marriage proposals*.

The offering was so sudden and unexpected that she, still dumbfounded and absentminded, just took it without saying anything, as if Last Berserk had stopped working completely.

"...There's also this," Figaro said as he took out a small box and opened it.

There was a gemmed ring inside.

That was what he'd bought at the accessory shop.

The day he'd found out when Hannya would be released, he immediately went to order the best *engagement ring* his money could buy.

"Fi...garo?" she called his name despite still being under the influence of Last Berserk.

"Fuyuko," he called her by her *real* name as he presented the ring to her. "Will you marry me... here in *Infinite Dendrogram*... as well as reality?"

This was his first and final marriage proposal.

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Vincent Myers

What was she to me?

That was a question that even I had trouble answering.

At first, all I felt about her was curiosity.

She was above me, Shu, and Foltesla, which caught my interest enough to make me want to duel her. I was just hoping that we could become good dueling partners.

That was why I was only thinking of dueling in our early exchanges.

After that, she made me feel at peace.

Though we couldn't meet in *Infinite Dendrogram*, we talked over email basically every single day. She was actually the one person I could talk to naturally. She wasn't like my parents, my brother Keith, my first friend Shu, fellow duelists like Foltesla, or old enemies like Sechs Würfel and Tsukuyo Fuso.

My time with her was pleasant. We spent our time talking about our lives, day in and day out. My bland daily life that rarely ever changed took on a different hue when I shared it with her.

We occasionally shared our joy, comforted each other when one of us was down... The volume of the feelings we exchanged was vast.

This pleasant relationship we had eventually became a source of peace in my life.

The third thing I felt regarding her... was worry.

As we communicated day in and day out, I developed a desire to meet her. And not just as an avatar, but as myself in real life.

However, that meant facing a major worry of mine.

She only knew me as I was in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Figaro was my avatar and the perfect picture of health, while the real me was a sickly young man living on the verge of death.

I wasn't able to bring myself to tell her of my circumstances or how I was in real life. I had little trouble telling it to Shu, Foltesla, and a number of others, but the idea of telling her was so scary that I always ended up deleting the emails before sending them.

The fear that I would disappoint her made me unable to tell her the truth. I couldn't even begin to understand why I was so worried about letting her down, but the answer came to me seemingly out of nowhere.

While the question lingered in my mind and the worry took up residence in my heart, one day my parents invited me to drink tea with them, and my mother, looking at me with a smile on her face, asked, "Vincent... Are you in love?"

At first, I didn't understand what she just said and just tilted my head in confusion, parroting back at her, "Love?"

I then went on to digest the word, truly remembered what it meant... and the pieces all fell into place.

That was the final thing she made me feel — a strong love for her.

At first, I only wanted to duel her; then I found peace in our exchanges until eventually I became attracted to her.

I, Vincent Myers, was now painfully aware that I loved her... and wanted to be with her forever.

I then told my parents about the woman I loved and wanted to marry. I told them how she supported me, how gentle she was... I told them all I could to the best of my ability.

At first they were surprised that I was thinking as far ahead as marriage, but they were understanding of my feelings and said that they would like to meet her, as well. They also said that I should keep quiet about this with Keith. He was really busy at that time, so I could understand that.

After the talk with my parents, I logged in to *Infinite Dendrogram* and used its tripled time to think about how to confess my feelings to her.

First and foremost, I couldn't do it by email. It was how we usually communicated, but even I knew that it wasn't something you used for a confession of love.

Next, I considered meeting her in person. It was totally possible. We'd exchanged postcards before, so I knew her address and I could send her plane tickets that suited her schedule.

Normally, I should've been the one to go visit her, but the disease I was born with made that impossible, so having her come to me was the only option.

But then... I felt like it would've been weird to bring *her* to me so *I* could confess.

The only way left... or more accurately, the only way I'd ever had open to me... was to confess to her in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Thankfully, her prison term was about to expire. I could use our promised meeting to express how I felt.

"But... Can I really do that?"

It would be the first time I proposed to someone. Well, that much was obvious, seeing as this was the first time I had ever fallen in love.

I was so worried about whether or not I was going to do it right that the tension and unease put a lot of stress on my heart.

It got so bad that it could've caused a heart attack if I thought about it too much in reality.

If only there was a way I could defuse the tension...

"Wait... I've got it." When we'd first met, I wanted to duel her — to fight someone who was ahead of me.

I decided to start with exactly that.

Duels were great. Through them, I met Foltesla and gained so many other friends. Dueling linked the two combatants through their intense feelings.

That was why I decided to duel her first, then propose to her afterwards... even though I had no idea if she would accept.

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The day we reunited, I didn’t tell her how I felt. ...I was simply unable to do it.

Meeting her made me more nervous than I’d expected. It was partially because I ran into her by chance while getting ready, but I was so overwhelmed that the most I could do was invite her to duel me.

Neither she nor Ray seemed to realize it, but I was really, really tense.

The fact that she accepted my duel made me very happy and relieved.

Even so, I was still tense. As it stood, I wasn’t sure if I could confess even after the duel.

Oh, if only this was as easy and enticing as a battle. I can start fights and keep on fighting even if I bleed or lose a limb, but the very thought of rejection paralyzed me from head to toe.

I was shocked that love could make me so weak.

“I hope I have the strength to take the next step tomorrow.” With that thought, I logged out.

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The fated day had arrived.

I saw Hannya rampaging around Gideon after reading the article. I had an idea why she was doing it — I’d refused to dine with her and went on to be caught in a photo with Tsukuyo Fuso, destroying her trust in me.

Maybe she felt betrayed again, just like she had when her previous man had left her.

For all I knew, she might’ve been so disappointed in me that she would never accept my confession.

Even so, I had to tell her how I felt... so I stepped forward.

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Nex Plains

Everyone who heard Figaro’s confession felt as if time had stopped.

The closest listener — Sandalphon — was absolutely dumbfounded. Rook, who was lip-reading from a distance using a long sight item, felt the same as the angel.

Ray had ridden the skies and returned from his battle against F, and the shock of this sight combined with the wounds all over his body, almost made him fall off of Silver.

Those who were watching through various means felt about the same.

The only exceptions were Xunyu, who saw this coming, and a certain control AI.

However, this was to be expected from the moment Figaro had used Burn, My Soul — Cor Leonis.

He never used his ultimate skill in *duels*.

After all, he kept that skill in reserve for the duel against the friend he’d promised to face with all his power. He hadn’t even used it against Xunyu, and the reason why he so readily used it now was simple — this wasn’t a duel to him, but his way of proposing to Hannya. Nothing more, nothing less.

Hannya was at a complete loss for words.

Figaro’s words resounded within her as the feelings welling up in her heart were rushing through her mind. Last Berserk was still very much active, but just looking at Hannya it seemed to have ended.

“I... I don’t think I’m normal.” Figaro continued speaking.

“I was born with a heart condition that makes it difficult for me to lead even an ordinary life.” He opened up to her, saying what he’d been hiding all this time.

“I don’t have much of a life or social experience, so I often say and do weird things.” He revealed to her what he’d been silent about because he didn’t want to disappoint her.

“All I have to be proud of is my family and what I’ve built here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.” Tense to the limit and with a heart beating so fast it hurt...

“I’m honestly pretty pathetic... Would you choose me despite that, Fuyuko?" ...He confessed his love to her to the best of his ability.

"Ahh..." Figaro's sincerity instantly drove away Hannya's doubts.

Her love was no illusion.

He truly cherished her.

She was finally able to believe.

Ohh... I knew it. He really is a wonderful... and adorable person, she thought as tears welled up in her eyes, a charming smile appeared on her face, and...

"Yes. Gladly."

...she accepted his proposal.

"...Thank you," Figaro replied, sounding like he was about to start crying — something not even his closest friends ever heard.

Shaking from his own powerful emotions, he put the engagement ring on her left ring finger.

Then, he brought his face close to hers... "I love you, Fuyuko." ...and declared his love before kissing her on the lips.

Thus, their love was finally realized... and a moment later, the side effect of Cor Leonis and damage from debuffs like Bleeding took their toll. Figaro took the death penalty.

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Following the kiss, Hannya was left alone with a bouquet in her hands, a ring on her finger, and rosy cheeks. She wasn't saying a word.

"L-Lady Hannya?" Sandalphon called out to her in worry.

Last Berserk had ended, meaning that Figaro had definitely received the death penalty this time. Sandalphon wanted to congratulate his Master, but her now-fiancé disappeared right before he could.

The angel was also the one responsible for the damage that had killed Figaro; his stomping and drilling had quickly whittled away Figaro's HP, after all. *Why did he have to disappear now, of all times...?!* he thought, but thinking logically, it actually was a miracle that he'd even survived long enough to put the ring on Hannya's finger.

However, there was no telling what his Master felt about all this.

He and all the other Masters watching them gulped...

"Heheheh..."

...only for Hannya to beam with her cheeks still rosy.

"Sandalphon," she said.

"Y-Yes?!"

"I'm logging out to send him an e... No... I'll go meet him in real life."

"L-Lady Hannya?!"

"I know where he lives." Vincent knew where Fuyuko lived, so there was no reason why the reverse wouldn't be true. She hadn't visited him yet because she was afraid of finding out that her love was an illusion, but now that she knew it was real, she had nothing to fear.

"Oh. Before I go..."

She wrote something on a piece of paper, put it in an envelope and tossed it to the ground.

"All right, Sandalphon, I'm logging out. And I might not be back here for a little while."

"Understood. I wish you good health and great happiness!"

"Thank you. I'll be going now."

Sandalphon saw her off as Hannya logged out of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Thus concluded the Sandalphon incident, and in spite of all the panic caused and buildings destroyed... miraculously, there were no tian casualties.

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Earth, Myers Mansion

"...Oh no. I forgot to check my HP," Vincent said once he'd logged out.

It was a mistake he would never make under normal circumstances, which spoke volumes about how focused he'd been on his proposal.

However, he had lived long enough for her to accept his love, and that filled him with relief.

"Vince. You're offline," Keith — Vincent's little brother — said as he entered the room.

"Hey, Keith. What is it?"

"Mother's birthday is coming up, so I wanted to talk to you about it... What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't see you make that face very often. Your cheeks are red and you just look so... happy. Did something good happen?”

Vincent touched his face and noticed that it was warm. He was smiling without realizing it, too. “Yeah. I just proposed and she said yes.”

“Ohh, I see. That’s great... Hold on, *what*?”

“Heheh. I was so nervous. The confession, putting the ring on her, the kiss... Just remembering it is making my heart... beat... fa...”

With a blissful smile on his face, Vincent collapsed back on his bed.

It was an attack caused by his chronic heart disease.

“Huh?! Vince?! Heal him, Sapphine...! Wait, she doesn’t exist here! Hey! Someone call Dr. Winston!” Keith started to panic, and called the resident maids and the attending physician. Vincent was unconscious throughout all of this, but his face was still full of happiness.

And so, just by remembering their proposal, Vincent Myers suffered a heart attack that landed him in the hospital.

Epilogue

DIN's Gideon Branch, rooftop

The twins watched as the towers in Nex Plains vanished.

This hadn't gone according to their calculations. They expected Hannya to rampage throughout Gideon, rousing its Masters to fight her and potentially causing evolutions.

The actual result couldn't have been more different than that.

The damage caused by Hannya was minimal. Figaro took care of the situation all by himself... and by means they never expected — a marriage proposal.

In fact, they didn't expect Figaro to participate in the battle at all, because they knew that he couldn't do so in an environment with allies. They hadn't expected him to appear in the Nex Plains, either — far away from anyone else.

And most of all, they didn't account for his own affection.

With such critical flaws in the calculations, it was only natural that the result would be wrong.

However, one of those miscalculations was no fault of their own. They were *told* that Figaro would log in inside Gideon.

"I see," said Tweedledum.

"So that's how it iiis..." said Tweedledee. The calculating control AI twins quickly reassessed the situation...

"You gave us false variables, didn't you, Alice?"

...and simultaneously addressed the reason why they were wrong.

Turning back to the rooftop's door, they saw a particular person.

She looked like a teenager, but there was a motherly air about her, making it impossible to tell how old she really was.

Her name was Alison. She was a worker in DIN's planning department, *as well as the avatar of control AI No. 1 — Alice.*

"All right, that's enough plotting for today," she said with a smile on her face. "Get back to work, please. You have lots to do, don't you?"

“Very well,” said Tweedledum. “I must say, I did not expect this.”

“We tried to use your plan, but you used us instead, huuh?”

“I suppose the wisdom of age is hard to beat.”

“Well, other than *that*, she’s the oldest of us all. We’ve been haaad.”

“Ugh, don’t treat me like an old lady,” Alice said with a hand on her cheek and a mildly angry expression.

The twins turned away from her and entered the building.

They’d already switched their focus. Their plans had shown a lower than expected success rate, so instead of sticking to them, they prioritized their sub-jobs as the CEOs of DIN.

That left only two people on the rooftop — Alice and Cheshire, whose avatar was still immobilized.

“...Could you set me free already?” he asked.

“Sure thing.” And just like that, the Tom Cat avatar was free.

Cheshire opened and closed his hand, regaining the feel for his body before asking Alice, “You... You knew that Figaro would confess to Hannya, didn’t you?”

“Yep,” she answered as if it was nothing.

Cheshire had actually suspected that something wasn’t right the moment he’d learned that Alice was helping the twins with this plot. Alice always prioritized her values over her role... In fact, she held her role *because* of her values.

She was what you could call a “Master Supremacist.”

Alice valued Masters above all else and made it her overriding goal to protect them.

That was why it was strange that she would be complicit in this plot. While she would take part in large-scale events like SUBM releases, this situation was just an idea the twins had dreamed up spontaneously, so it didn’t seem right for her to be involved.

“Tweedle said something about trying to use you, but you used them instead...”

“I had them set the stage for Figaro to properly open up.”

The twins had the greatest calculation power among the control AIs, but as the supervisor of all avatars, Alice wasn’t far behind them.

Though not as well as the twins, she could predict outcomes, and when it came to her field — Masters — her predictions could actually be more accurate than theirs.

When the twins asked her for Figaro's logout info and feelings, she lied to them so they would use their position as the CEOs of DIN to set the stage for this event. After all — she knew what calculations they would make and what kind of scheme they would weave.

"...Why would you do something so roundabout?" Cheshire asked. He didn't know whether Alice wanted Figaro to confess to Hannya because it aligned with her values or because of something else, but he couldn't help but feel that things would've gone just as well between them if no one had gotten involved. Alice, however, rejected that idea.

"I'm always monitoring the state of the avatars and the thoughts of the people using them, and it looked to me that Figaro might've not taken the step forward. So I gave him a little push. If he didn't make his move, both of them might have ended up unhappy."

So she really was just meddling, huh? Cheshire thought to himself as he realized exactly what she was saying. He knew Figaro well, and the idea of him confessing his love seemed unnatural even now after he actually saw it happen.

Perhaps Figaro himself had felt the same way, and it wasn't unlikely that things might've gone badly if he didn't get a push from someone.

That answered one of Cheshire's questions, but he still had more.

"When Figaro confessed, Hannya's Last Berserk basically went inactive. Did you do that?" Cheshire knew what Last Berserk did — in fact, it was actually used against him in the past. He thought Last Berserk would never let you stand still while the target was in front of you, but Hannya had done nothing long enough for Figaro to finish his proposal. Cheshire guessed that Alice had limited her movements, just as she had made Tom completely immobile.

As likely as that seemed, however, Alice denied it.

"That was simply her own willpower," she said. "The avatars I made resist skill-based effects on the mind, but the reverse, well... that's completely up to them."

Alice was basically saying that Hannya had held back her mad rampage out of love, like the protagonist of a story.

A skill that influenced the mind could in turn be influenced by the mind.

A part of Cheshire found it reasonable, but another part of him just couldn’t believe that Hannya had a will strong enough to overpower an ultimate job skill.

Only Alice knew the real truth, but Cheshire realized that she wouldn’t say anything more about it.

“This outcome itself was made possible by the strength of their wills,” Alice added. “We can set the stage, but we’re not powerful enough to decide how they feel.”

“...That’s true.” She’d stopped Cheshire from interfering because she didn’t want him to get in the way of the confession. Alice was afraid that he could use his numbers to break out of Angeldeath Dominion and meet up with Figaro. The presence of an ally would hinder his fighting and maybe even lead to him being stomped by Sandalphon.

Basically, she’d bound Cheshire for the sake of the happy ending.

“...But didn’t this plot have a chance of seriously damaging Gideon?” If this outcome was truly the result of their willpower, then there was a chance that things could’ve gone differently. The casualties could’ve been as high as the twins had predicted.

“What of it?” Alice asked as she tilted her head.

“...Well, I guess that’s the kind of Embryo you are.” She only cared about Masters. Tians were outside the range of her affection, which was exactly why she had no trouble fighting the war against the pre-ancient civilization as the fearsome Incarnation of Blasphemy.

Cheshire felt that he had to be wary of this particular colleague in a different way than Bandersnatch or the twins.

“Well, they got together, so all’s fine and dandy, isn’t it?” said Alice.

“Yeah. Though... This is more of a comedy than a love story. Everyone besides those two and you were just aimlessly running around in circles.”

Ray’s group had been worried about Figaro and Hannya for nothing, the twins and F had woven a plot that in the end only led to a proposal, the citizens of Gideon had been thrown into a labyrinth before they even knew what was happening, and the unfortunate newspaper company released the leaked photo as a scoop, only to endanger the entire city.

It all seemed so serious, and the fact that it ended with a kiss scene right out of a fairytale or romance manga made it seem like the height of absurdity.

It really *was* a comedy.

"...Oh. I just realized." As the control AI in charge of spreading culture, Cheshire remembered a certain well-known comic opera titled *The Marriage of Figaro*.

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Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The day after the Love-Duel Festival, Nemesis, Rook, Babi, and I gathered at the usual café with the open terrace and talked about what happened yesterday.

After the battle against King of Light, I'd burned for thirty seconds because of the side effect from Miasmaflame Princess, but it wasn't enough to give me the death penalty. So here I was, alive and well.

Shu was busy with something today, Marie had DIN work to take care of, and B3 had business of her own.

"I must say," Rook spoke up. "I'm really glad that no tians died in the incident."

"You and me both." Despite the scale of the incident, Sandalphon hadn't actually killed anyone, directly or otherwise.

The shuffled space had caused some falls, crashes, and broken bones, but nothing had been fatal. This was probably because Hannya and Sandalphon had been considerate of the surrounding people until Figaro showed up. It also helped that Figaro had been outside the city, all by himself.

"Oh, right," Rook said as he remembered something. "Bishmal was trying hard to stop her before she went out of control, but when Figaro appeared, she instantly crushed him and gave him the death penalty."

Bishmal... RIP.

"But that's actually the only death penalty."

"The injured were healed by Miss El... Tsukuyo Fuso and the priests of her Lunar Society." She'd logged in after things had calmed down and was very surprised by the state of the city.

I recalled her saying, "Ugh, who did this? The second day of the Love-Duel Festival is a golden day for business. I dunno who's responsible, but they sure are a nuisance."

Shu instantly shot her with his gatling gun. I couldn't blame him.

Anyone would be annoyed hearing one of the main culprits saying something like that.

In fact, you could say that Shu was still being very rational, seeing as he used the weakest attack he had.

After finding out what had happened, Miss Eldritch immediately tried to run away, but B3 was there, and she stopped her with a gravity field.

Then Azurite arrived, told her to take responsibility, and had her go around healing the injured.

In fact, she was still doing that, and B3 was making sure of that. Miss Eldritch had also healed my wounds, so I was in top shape despite the intense battle yesterday.

“It’s also looking like they’ll have no trouble fixing the city,” I said.

“It’s just roads that suffered the most, and all key facilities are still standing,” Rook commented. The damage could be undone relatively easily using earth magic and Embryo skills. Even standard crafting jobs could do it.

“And the damages will all be paid by Fuso, Figaro, Hannya, and the newspaper company.”

“Though, the kingdom covered for the first three.” As the main culprit, Hannya was supposed to pay half of the total damages, while the others split the rest evenly. Miss Eldritch couldn’t pay because of various circumstances, while Hannya didn’t have any money to begin with, so the kingdom... that is, Azurite, paid in their stead.

This event was actually the end of the newspaper company. They’d tried to claim that they couldn’t be held responsible over a mere article, but their involvement was undeniable.

Perhaps it might’ve gone differently in modern Japan, but this was The Kingdom of Altar.

Their guilt became even more obvious when the officials used Truth Discernment on them to find out that the article was just sensationalist nonsense they’d written to stir reader curiosity and passion.

“And F will just get away with it, huh...?” He was the one who’d taken the photo that caused the incident, but that was just him answering the newspaper’s call, and for some reason the credit on the photograph sent to the newspaper wasn’t even his.

Also, getting in Figaro’s way didn’t exactly count as a crime.

Master-on-Master violence was just PK, which was outside the boundaries of *Dendro* law. It might've been different if his interference led to Hannya causing more destruction, but even with his involvement there were no casualties, so he was considered innocent. Knowing how he operated, he probably had committed crimes, but they were unknown.

"What a disagreeable wretch he was," said Nemesis.

"I hope we don't run into him again..."

In all honesty, the King of Light was way more powerful than me. If I didn't have Monochrome — his hard counter — I would've barely stood a chance against him.

Even so, I didn't even think of giving up, and I felt like I would be compelled to stop him once more if he attempted something like this again.

The central person in all of this — Hannya — had left behind an envelope before logging out.

The paper inside read, "I am sorry for the trouble caused. I will pay for the damage done through public service."

Azurite chose to believe it and didn't put her on the wanted list, so now Hannya owed the country money.

Figaro's share of the payment would be discussed once he returned, so for now, Count Gideon covered for him. According to Azurite, he'd said, "Figaro is always a great help, and he's the one who actually stopped this incident, so I can do this much for him."

...Though, all the damage to his city seemed to be killing him inside. *Do your best, Count,* I thought.

Apparently, Miss Eldritch had tried to worm her way out of her share by saying, "Th-The meathead is gonna pay me 5,000,000,000..." but Shu shot her down with: "Like hell he is! Forget it or I'll trash your place again with my bear hands!"

And that was just about it for the results and responsibility splitting.

Figaro's death penalty hadn't expired yet, and Hannya hadn't come online again since that moment.

"...I wonder how they're doing now," I said.

"Well, they just got engaged..." Nemesis commented. Shu said that he couldn't contact Figaro in reality, so for all we knew, they might've been discussing their future in real life. (I later went on to learn that Figaro was hospitalized and that Hannya had gone to the UK to visit him.)

"Man, this kind of thing just had to happen on a festival day, huh?" And for all the trouble we'd gone through, it seemed like we were just running around in circles... That we had absolutely nothing to do with all that happened. Knowing how long Shu had been worried about it, he might've suffered the most mental trauma from the way everything had worked out.

"Though, once it all ended, the festival just continued like nothing had happened," I said.

"Gideoners are a sturdy bunch." The Love-Duel Festival resumed soon after Hannya logged out. Not even that level of emergency was enough to stop the festivities.

Looking back at it, it had been the same with Franklin's Game.

Even Rook went on to continue his date with Kasumi, and when I saw them in the evening, Kasumi was all flushed and happy-looking, so I could only assume it went well.

"Seeing how it worked out, the incident might've actually been a net positive for the kingdom," said Rook, and I couldn't help but nod.

The most obvious good outcome was Figaro and Hannya getting together, but there was so much more when you looked at the fallout.

"Because of Figaro, Miss Hannya will definitely join the kingdom," Rook continued. As long as Figaro continued playing *Dendro*, she would keep on logging in with him, and she would obviously stay in the country where her dear husband was.

Basically, Altar would have its fifth Superior.

In terms of numbers alone, the kingdom would finally be a match for Dryfe.

"And because of what happened, both Miss Fuso and Miss Hannya are now indebted to the country." They couldn't pay their share of the damages, so they were *literally* in debt now.

Miss Eldritch had put Altar under a contract that forbade them from limiting The Lunar Society, but since this was a personal debt, it didn't help her at all.

Azurite was pretty happy that she, in her words, "finally got back at that parasite."

She was obviously thinking of using this to make The Lunar Society participate in the war without having to "change the national religion" or fulfilling whatever other extreme demands Miss Eldritch had.

"These debts will be used against Miss Fuso and Miss Hannya to force them to participate in the war, won't they?" said Rook.

"Most likely," I nodded.

"That means that both countries have an equal number of Superiors, which are also more or less equal in power. That alone changes the outlook."

Of course, there were Masters besides Superiors, as well as tians such as Mario, who surpassed even some of the most skilled Masters, but even so, it didn't seem hopeless anymore.

"As things are, even if Dryfe attacks, their victory wouldn't be guaranteed. Even if they won, it would likely be a Pyrrhic victory. And if we consider what Her Highness the First Princess told you about third parties like Caldina..." Rook said before pausing for a good moment. "*The war might not happen at all.*"

That was a guess that could very well become reality.

◇◇◇

Sacred Princess, Altimia Azurite Altar

I finally dealt with the paperwork related to the incident caused by King of Berserk, Hannya.

It had drained quite a lot from the kingdom's coffers, but it was settled relatively peacefully.

I talked to Ray after the event, and he said that, for a Superior, Hannya was actually a very mild person as long as there were no problems with the Over Gladiator, Figaro.

He and the parasite were the main driving forces behind this incident, but looking at how it all ended, it was unlikely that anything similar would happen again.

I was quite satisfied with the fact that I finally got to put a leash on that parasite, at least.

"I suppose it's all settled for now..." I'd also taken care of the other problem... Elizabeth's marriage.

The night before Hannya started her rampage, I had reconciled with Elizabeth.

As Ray had told me, I'd apologized in my own words and talked to her as honestly as possible.

Apparently, she herself had also thought a lot about her marriage to Third Prince Canglong.

For now, we decided to put everything on hold until the day before Third Prince Canglong returned to Huang He.

Elizabeth, Canglong, and I still needed time to process how we felt.

“CooO, CoOo!” I was pulled from my thoughts by the cry of a creature in the corner of my makeshift office.

It was a grotesque little thing that was basically a large eye with wings... and its name was “Broadcast Eye.”

Count Gideon had acquired a number of them after Franklin’s Game, and some of them had ended up here with me. Since they were made by the detestable Franklin and had a disagreeable appearance, I honestly wasn’t fond of them. However, I could not deny their usefulness in long-distance communications, so I used them regardless.

They normally made no sound. If they did, it could be only because someone was trying to contact my Broadcast Eye.

“Connect.” Upon saying that, I saw a room in the royal castle as well as a man — Marquis Findle.

I’d put him in charge of intelligence, so I had a bad feeling about this.

“I apologize for contacting you like this, Your Highness,” he said.

“I do not mind,” I said. “More importantly, did something happen?”

He wiped his face with a handkerchief, looking like he was hesitant to say what he had to. If he was acting like this after contacting me first, it could only be something major.

“Is anything the matter?” I asked.

“...We received a message from the imperium.” That was surprising, but not unexpected. Seeing as the war would resume, I knew Dryfe would contact us with a final warning. I had been preparing for that, as well.

However, his reaction was a bit extreme for one who received something that was “expected,” which could only mean that the content of the message was nothing like what we imagined.

“Marquis Findle, did you already open the message?”

“No. The seal is still intact. However... the messenger who brought it gave us a summary.”

“What did he say about it?” In response...

“That it’s a *peace* offer, Your Highness.”

...he gave me a *truly* unexpected answer.

“...Very well. I will return to Altea as soon as possible. Make sure no one hears of this, especially not information brokers like DIN.”

“Understood.” With that, the Broadcast Eye connection ended.

I closed my eyes and looked up at the ceiling of my makeshift office.

It was *thoroughly* unexpected. A recommendation to surrender would’ve been significantly easier to understand.

“Claudiah... Your brother just can’t stop doing unexpected things.”

Was it an honest peace offer? Or a start of some new plot?

To know even that much, I would have to return to Altea and see the message for myself.

“But... I suppose the time has finally come.” I didn’t know if the message would mark the end or a new beginning, but I could feel that the machine of war, which had ground to a halt when my father died, had begun to move once more.

To be continued

Afterword

Cat: “It’s time for the afterwoord! I’m the ‘Cat,’ Cheshire, back from the breaak!”
Bear: “I’m the ‘Bear,’ Shu Starling!”
Xun: “Xunyu here. Haven’t been here in a while, either.”
Cat: “It’s hard to tell here in the afterword, but Xunyu isn’t wearing Tenaga Ashinaga or the Fu.”
Xun: “I was like this in the story this time, so I’m carrying it here... And yeah, I know I didn’t get an illustration.”
Bear: “That just means the audience has something to look furward to.”
Xun: (Now that I think about it, this bear hasn’t fully shown his face, either... His bangs are too long.)
Bear: “Fur those curious, the fox ain’t here ’cause she’s busy fixing Gideon.”
Xun: “There we go, linking the story and the afterword again...”
Cat: “Anyway, we can’t go through this afterword without mentioning the currently-airing anime!”
Bear: “Yaay! You all watchin’ it?”
Xun: “You can see it on d-Anime Store and a bunch of other video sites.”
Cat: “I’m pretty sure I won’t show up after this point (February 2020), but you can still see me on ‘The Why and What of Dendrogram,’ (Nazenani Dendrogram) so check that out, too!”
Bear: “Now it’s time for the regular, beary serious comment from the author!”

Dear readers, thank you for your purchase. I am Sakon Kaidou, the author.

The anime is finally airing. By the time this volume comes out in Japan, it should be on about the fourth episode. I’m actually writing this afterword on the day before the official airing of the first episode, but I and La-na — the artist for the Crow Record spin-off — saw the advance screenings for both episode 1 and 2. Until then, I hadn’t seen or heard a single second of the anime besides the postrecordings.

However, once I actually got to see it, I was very moved by the fact that Infinite Dendrogram was now animated, and suddenly struck by the welcome realization that it was now an actual anime. I also heard Aoi Yuki’s opening song, Aya Uchida’s ending song, as well as the OST by Kenji Hiramatsu. All of them are so great I listen to them while writing.

Speaking of pleasant sounds, I can’t express how passionate the voice actors were in their work. I participated in all the postrecordings and was left amazed every time. The voicework really starts to stand out at the latter half of the season, so please look forward to it... especially to Yoshitsugu Matsuoka’s crazy-yet-fascinating performance as Franklin. The work of all those involved has created an anime beyond my expectations, and I can’t help but thank all those who accomplished this task impossible for any sole person.

I also want thank all of you dear readers who supported us throughout all this. I would be quite happy if you enjoyed the anime with me. Please look forward to more Infinite Dendrogram in the future.

Sakon Kaido

Bear: “Anyway, with that done, let’s all gather together and announce the next volu—”
Fox: “VOLUME 13 IS SET TO COME OUT IN OR AFTER JUNE 2020!”
Cat: “Meow?!”
Xun: “She just appeared outta nowhere...”
Fox: “You’re all here going ‘anime this, anime that’...! I’M SO JEALOUS!”
Xun: “...What’s with you? Mad ’bout what happened in this book?”
Fox: “I’m obviously mad ’cause I’m the only one without a voice actor!”
All three: “Ah.”

Fox: “You’re all uppity ’cause you got voices and lots of scenes! No fair!”
Cat *(VA: Shiori Izawa)*: “Umm, I don’t know what to say...”
Bear *(VA: Satoshi Hino)*: “You deserve it fur what you always do.”
Xun *(VA: Nao Toyama)*: “...Cheer up.”
Fox: “Why’re you getting your voice actors next to your names now?! You pickin’ a fight?!”
Cat: “Well, you have even less of a role in the anime than His Excellency the General, and he just appeared for a moment in the second episode...”
Fox: “Ngh... J-Just you wait! I’ll have my voice somedaaay!”
Xun: “She just ran away while crying...”
Cat: “All right, I guess that’s it for this afterwoord.”
Bear: “See you all beary soon!”
Xun: “See yaa!”

Six: “...I haven’t appeared at all, so I would say she has it fairly good.”
Bear: “Sechs... Were you here the whole time?”

Bonus Short Stories

A Mascot and His Puns

Gideon, City of Duels

It was the first day of the Love-Duel Festival.

King of Destruction, Shu Starling, King of Beasts, Behemot, and Behemot's Superior Embryo, Leviathan, were walking to the second arena to view a particular event. Behemot was comfortably seated in Leviathan's hands, while Shu was right next to them.

Naturally, this trio attracted a lot of attention. After all, it was a group consisting of a single fine lady and two mascot-like creatures.

Far too often they found themselves being approached by families and couples wanting to take a picture with them.

"Sure thingy. Stay in line, though. Don't be overbearing."

Shu didn't even seem to mind all of this and gladly agreed, making him scarcely different from some mascot in an amusement park.

"...Tch."

Leviathan maintained a cool expression, but the throbbing vessel on her forehead made it clear that appearance was a lie.

This was mostly due to all the couples asking her if she could take the photos.

They actually thought that she was just some woman who spent this festival doing nothing but taking group shots of the couples and the bear.

This group had convened because her Master, Behemot, wished it to, but her patience slipped a little more every time she was asked to take a photo.

Once the last of the many couples left with their shots, Leviathan spoke to Shu, not even bothering to hide a single bit of her hostility and murderous intent.

"Why do you just let them take photos?"

"Hmm... I'm a guy in a costume, so it would be beary bad if I was cold to people."

"You haven't changed since we first met. Why do you insist on being so approachable?"

Indeed, he had been the same back when Leviathan had come to take Behemot from him shortly before The Clash of the Superiors began.

"'Tis the burden of all those in animal costumes."

"About that... I understand that you use the costume to hide your face, but there's no reason for you to use puns, is there?"

Shu Starling was a Superior. Leviathan knew that he was wearing a costume to hide himself. However, there was no good reason for him to act like a friendly and quirky bear character that children would love.

Leviathan had wondered about this for a while, just like she had wondered why he stood out so much despite wanting to hide his face.

"..."

Shu said nothing in response, but it didn't seem like that was because he didn't want to answer. In fact, it seemed as if she'd pointed out something he hadn't realized himself.

"...You're joking, aren't you?" Leviathan asked as she understood what his silence implied.

"...Nope. I'm just not doing this on purpose. I just got my paws on a costume, put it on, and before I knew it, I was speaking with puns."

He did have control over his puns and even dropped them whenever they weren't needed, but the very first pun he used in a costume had just come naturally to him.

It might've been something he'd picked up in his child actor years — "People in animal costumes have to talk funny" or something along those lines.

"Why not stop using them altogether?" Leviathan asked.

"Absolutely not. It's just how I am. You'll have to bear with it!"

"...I see."

"Why not follow suit, Behemot? Add some flavor to your speech."

"'porcupine?' tl;dr," Behemot responded, meaning that it was hard to craft puns around the type of animal she was.

"..."

During that exchange, Leviathan swore to herself that she would most definitely launch a surprise attack on Shu for saying something stupid to her Master.

The End

The Culinary Troubles of the Royalty and Nobility (Hell's Kitchen)

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

The path between Altea and Gideon wasn't exactly short.

Figaro, Xunyu, and others who could travel at supersonic speeds could go to another city and back within a day like it was nothing, but most people weren't capable of that. It took awhile for me even if I rode Silver at maximum speed; back when Rook, Marie, and I rode to Gideon as a party, it took us a whole day in spite of the fact that our dragon carriage was pulled by Marilyn — a demi-dragon.

The carriage we were riding now was being pulled by Liliana's Second Model Prism Steed — SMPS. It was faster than Marilyn and never got tired, but this trip would take some time in spite of that.

Of course, we had to eat on the road a couple times.

Whenever the time came, we set the table and reached into a preserving-type inventory to retrieve some food that was as fresh as if it was just made.

"I suppose this is in-flight food, except on land," Nemesis said, somewhat excited.

Before I dug in, I was a bit worried if Canglong, being the third prince of Huang He, would be fine with meals like this, but it didn't seem like he had a problem.

Thinking about it a little more, he had come here by dragon carriage all the way from his empire in the far east. He was probably used to such meals by now.

We also had a princess with us, but I never had to worry about that kind of thing with Azurite. Knowing that she was the type who didn't mind putting on a mask and investigating ancient ruins by herself, I knew that meals on the road bother her.

"Do you need medicine?" B3 asked.

"No," Azurite replied.

This exchange sparked my curiosity.

“Medicine?”

“I heard that Altarian nobility dine with Elixirs and High Holy Water at the ready.”

“There are those that do. I, however, do not.”

“...Why would you have anti-debuff potions at dinner?” I asked.

“In case their food is poisoned.”

Now that she mentioned it, that did seem like a common occupational hazard for royalty and nobility alike.

“Poisoning explains the Elixirs, but why the High Holy water?”

“Because in some situations, the food might have curse catalysts instead of poison.”

“Now that’s just scary... But why aren’t they using tasters instead?”

“Because there was a time when it was popular among poisoners to use skills that made it so that the food only became poisonous *after* being tasted once.”

...Well, Dendro has no shortage of status effect magic, I thought.

“Apparently, poisons and curses that kill people instantly don’t even give them time to drink a potion, so they always equip Brooches, too,” B3 added. “High Hexers can also use instakill magic, so they might even need some appropriate accessories.”

“I’m guessing that these anti-assassination countermeasures are a result of people learning from history...” Trying to imagine what kind of incidents had sparked the need for these elaborate countermeasures made me shudder.

“For something more exotic...” Azurite said. “There were cases of people mixing inventories smaller than even rings into their target’s food, so their stomach acid would melt them open. The items would be released inside the body, instantly making the target burst and die.”

“...Man, these assassins scare me.”

“And that is why there are many nobles who always have medicine and accessories on them.”

“I see... But why aren’t you doing the same?” I asked.

“I have accessories on, but there’s no need for me to prepare any medicine.”

“No need?”

“My stats are high, so I would make it in time even if I don’t have any medicine prepared. My resistances are good, too, so the kind of poison that would kill the average person instantly would take about an hour to kill me.”

“...”

Azurite’s casual words had reminded me and B3 that the most powerful beings in *Dendro* had physical prowess that put them far above your average means of assassination.

The End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 12
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.1: July 2020

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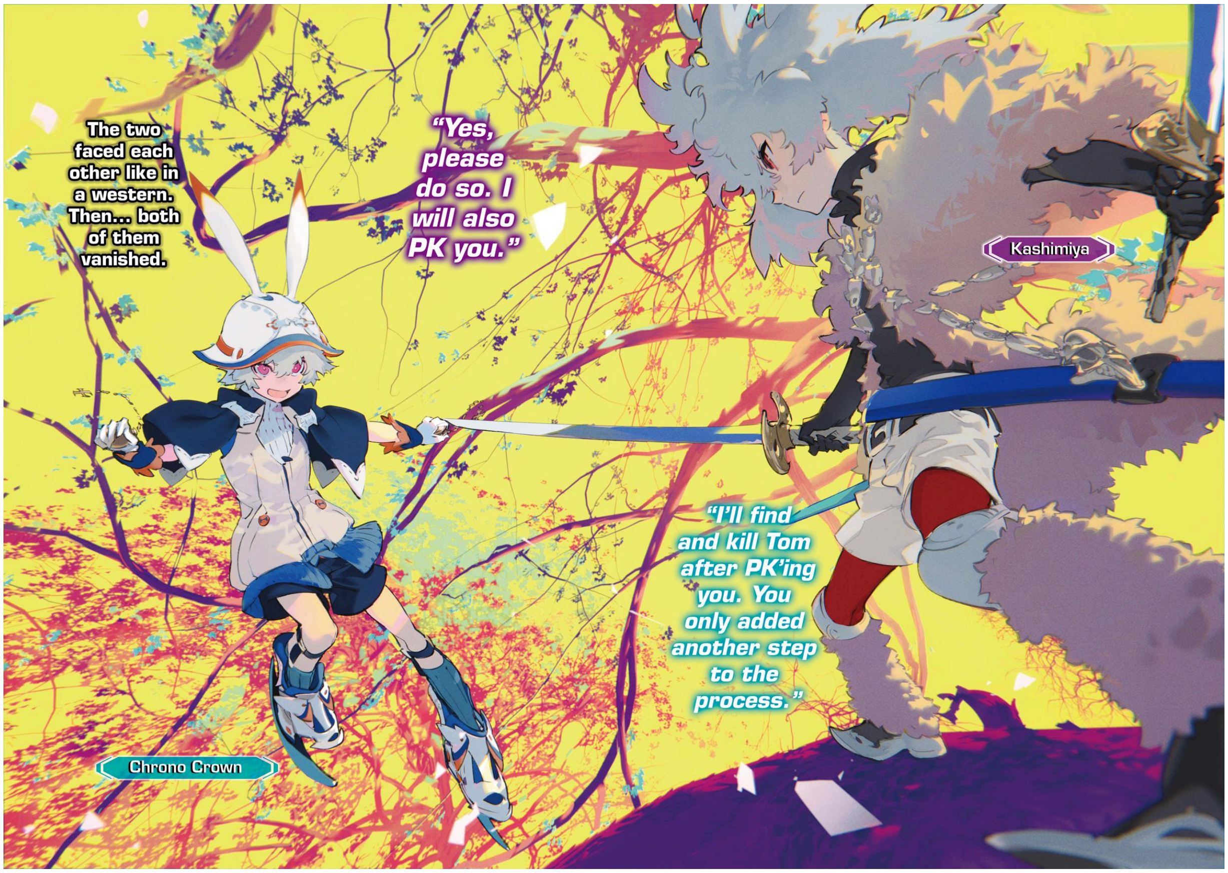
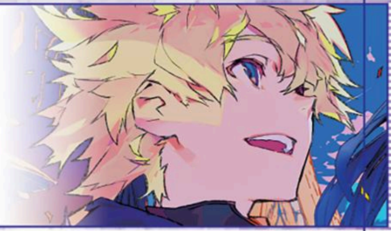

The two faced each other like in a western. Then… both of them vanished.
“Yes, please do so. I will also PK you.”
Kashimiya
“I’ll find and kill Tom after PK’ing you. You only added another step to the process.”
Chrono Crown

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

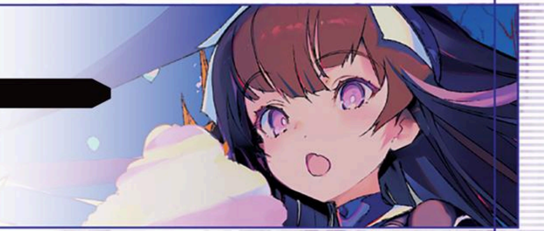
A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of what is right that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



Nemesis

Nemesis

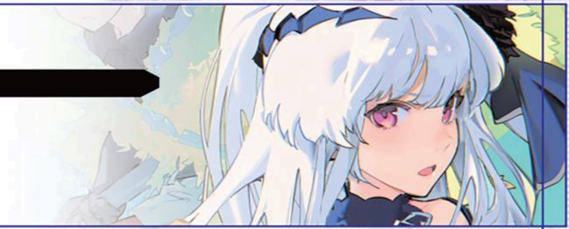
A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword, a halberd, a shield, and a pinwheel. She's a bit of a glutton, too.



Juliet

Juliet

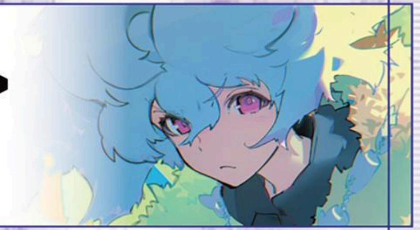
Ranked #4 in Altar's duel rankings.
Her main job is Fallen Knight, and she often acts edgy or mysterious for the sake of seeming cool.
Likes to hang out with Chelsea, a girl who holds the 8th position in the duel rankings.



Kashimiya

Kashimiya

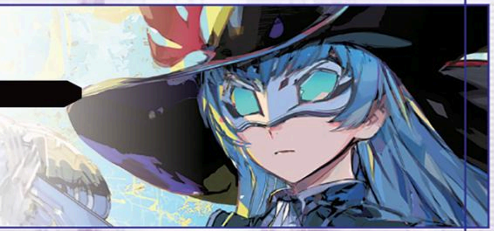
A major duelist, and the strongest player killer in the Kingdom of Altar.
After a long period of rising up and beating the odds, he's risen to the #2 spot in the duel rankings.
He's a PK with a moral compass, and makes a point not to attack people indiscriminately.



Azurite

Altimia Azurite Altar

First princess of the Kingdom of Altar, and holder of the Sacred Princess job.
After she encountered Ray, she started to change her feelings towards masters like him.



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Prologue: Friends

Sacred Princess, Altimia A. Altar

I immediately realized that I was dreaming.

I'd had this dream many times before — a dream of the past. However, unlike the previous times I dreamed of this, I didn't relive the last time I saw my father.

Instead, I saw a scene that dated back a lot further than the day my father died. The dream was more of a vision from half a decade ago, when Altar and Dryfe were on such good terms that the very idea of a war between them seemed absurd.

It was a peaceful time, before the attack of The Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, and even before the increase in the number of Masters.

Back then, I was a transfer student at a school in Dryfe. On that day, I was in the dorm's lounge, reading a book I'd checked out from the library.

I was the only one there, most likely because I was the first princess of a kingdom. I'd been here for almost a year now, so I was used to being avoided — not out of hate, but out of fear.

"Altimia, can I have a moment?"

Despite all that, there was still one person who would always talk to me.

"Claudiah. What is it?" Claudiah was her name, and she was one of my few friends here. You could definitely say that we were close.

...Though, it's not like I had many friends in Altar, either. There was only Liliana — the daughter of my father's friend — and Integra — the youngest of the Arch Sage's disciples.

"Would you like to come shopping with me this afternoon?" Claudiah asked. "We can get some tea at a café, too. They should start selling fall treats today."

"...You really like going out, don't you?" Claudiah was the daughter of the third prince of Dryfe and one of the candidates for the throne. She had also been in charge of helping me live in this foreign land. We were about the same age and had some things in common, so we got along rather well.

"What do you need to buy, if I may ask?" I wondered out loud.

"Clothes! Mostly for you!"

"Me?"

"You've gotten a little bigger in the chest, haven't you? By next season, all your clothes will be too tight for you."

"Well, I *am* in the middle of a growth spurt. I'm impressed you noticed."

"...Heheheh. Well, people really pay attention to things they desperately want, but can't easily get." Claudiah then indicated her own bust — it was on the smaller side, and it didn't look like it would be growing anytime soon... If ever.

Claudiah was staring at my chest with envy in her eyes, too. I got the impression she'd reach for it if I took too long to respond, so I rushed to give my answer.

"Very well... Let's go. I wanted to look around the bookstores, anyway."

"Splendid! Let's meet up outside the gate at one o'clock! I can't wait!"

I found the meeting time she specified a bit odd. My watch said that it was still ten in the morning. That meant that we wouldn't be meeting up until over three hours from now.

"Why the afternoon?" I asked. "I'm free. We could go right now. Do you have some prior commitment?"

"My brother asked me to help him in his workshop! Ugh... I know my stats are high, but he shouldn't make a lady carry things around for him."

"Oh, I see..." Like she'd just said, her stats *were* extremely high.

After all, her job was The Ram.

Claudiah had been born with incredible talent that had allowed her to claim the open Superior Job at the tender age of thirteen. That was one of the reasons why we got along so well. Though I used the Swordmaster job title as a cover, I was actually the Sacred Princess. We were both daughters of ruling families, and we both spent a great deal of time honing our martial skills, so it made sense that we would see eye to eye. We even sparred together at least once every few days.

"Could you not simply have someone else assist your brother?" Claudiah was a lady — someone you could truly call a "princess." I found it unfitting for such an individual to perform manual labor, and it seemed strange that her brother would ask something like that of her.

"Sadly, no," Claudiah answered. "My brother is extremely anxious around strangers and cannot focus on his work if he's with someone besides me or a member of our mother's family... the Barbaros, I mean."

"I see..." That seemed reasonable enough to me.

Claudiah had lost both of her parents, and it was rumored that they were assassinated by someone from the imperial family. While Claudiah had somehow gotten through everything while remaining innocent and cheerful, I could only guess that her elder brother, on the other hand, refused to trust anyone but those he considered his own.

"Well, I don't mind waiting," I said. "You go help your brother."

"Thank you! I will not take long, so please be patient!" Claudiah rushed out of the lounge and through the hallway at supersonic speeds.

That was a level beyond the usual rule-breaking in the dorms, but her carelessness just made me chuckle. I resumed reading my book, killing time until she came back.

About two hours later, I closed my book.

There was less than an hour left until one o'clock, our proposed meeting time, but Claudiah hadn't returned.

A bit curious, I went to the workshop she'd mentioned earlier. Dryfe was a country of machines, so all places of education had facilities for machine-related crafting jobs.

And so, in a pleasant hallway outside the workshop, I found a familiar face — Claudiah herself.

"Oh. Claudiah — Hm...?" However, once I came close, I realized that it *wasn't* her.

This person had a very similar face, but the expression and the eyes were nothing alike.

Princess Claudiah was cheerful, energetic, and had the vigor of a true battle-focused Superior Job. This person, by contrast, was far too gloomy to even serve as her shadow.

The lovely face that so resembled Claudiah's was spoiled by the dark expression and the oil staining their hair and cheeks. They also weren't wearing a school uniform — instead, they were clad in a set of dirtied work clothes.

However, what made it plainly obvious that this couldn't possibly be Claudiah was the *gaze*. It was icy cold, as though this person had never once felt any warmth or passion.

Still, the face resembled Claudiah's so much that it must have been someone related to her.

"Are you... Claudiah's brother?" I asked.

"...Yes, Your Highness Altimia." Though his voice was lower, it was similar to Claudiah's in tone, just as you would expect from a sibling.

I could only assume that they were twins.

I also realized that he knew who I was. Perhaps Claudiah had told him about me?

"Claudiah... I mean, Her Highness is always a great help to me."

"...No need to act like that around me. She does what she does because she wants to. Also, you don't need to use 'Highness' for me, or her."

Though it seemed like he wasn't fully tuned into the conversation, I felt like his attitude had shifted slightly.

"Do you know where Claudiah is?" I asked. "I was looking for her. We agreed to meet up, and it's almost time."

"...I suppose she's taking a bath right now," he replied. "I had her help with my work, so she's probably as dirty as me... She can't go with you in such a state. I'd appreciate it if you wait for her a bit longer."

"Oh, so that's what's happening." Gloomy as he was, his words still held a hint of gentleness towards his sister, as well as some consideration for me — her friend. I also started to notice that his eyes held more warmth than I'd realized at first.

I quickly revised my impression of him. Maybe he wasn't such a cold person after all.

I looked down and saw a metal container clutched in his hands.

"A toolbox..."

"...Despite appearances, I *am* the King of Machines. I'm often entrusted with repairing all kinds of devices, like the machines here in this school or the Imperstand."

King of Machines was the Superior Job in the mechanic grouping. Dryfe Imperium was a country that boasted far more technicians than warriors. You couldn't say the same about Claudiah's job, The Ram, but there had to be a great many people here in Dryfe competing for the King of Machines title. If he was truly Claudiah's twin, he was far too young for such a job. The fact that he actually had it meant that he must be nothing short of a genius.

...Though, I did find it odd that a candidate for the throne was entrusted with something as mundane as repairs.

"I will be going, then," he said. "Please keep being a good friend to my sister."

"I will. Thank you."

And with that, we parted ways.

However, it was only after I'd returned my book to the library that I realized something important.

"Oh... I forgot to ask his name."

What was it, again? I didn't know at this point.

After several dozen more minutes, Claudiah finally appeared in the lounge.

"My apologies! I'm late!" she exclaimed.

"It's okay. You had a hard time, didn't you? It doesn't bother me at all."

"Ohh! You're so nice! I love you!" Claudiah ran up to me and hugged my arm like a little girl. Her hair smelled faintly of the machine oil she'd failed to entirely wash off.

Oh, I could only imagine how hard she worked to get rid of this smell.

She soon realized that I'd noticed the smell and jumped back about twenty metels, like any normal battle-focused job would.

"I-I'm sorry! Ugh! Why did my brother have to make me help him *today*, of all days?! My usual deodorant did nothing! I can't walk with you like this!"

"There's no point in shopping separately. The smell doesn't bother me, really, so you can come closer."

"Altimia... Th-Thank you!"

And so, we stood side-by-side and went shopping just like we'd planned. Shoulder-to-shoulder, we talked about many things on the way.

One of the things we discussed was her brother.

"Oh? You met him?"

"Yes. And as rude as it may be, I forgot to ask for his name."

"Well, he almost never introduces himself," she said, before heaving a heavy sigh and shaking her head. "I'll make introductions in his stead! His name is... Reinhard!"

The moment I heard that name, the dream ended.

◇

Then, I awoke from my dream of the past and sat up. Wiping the sweat from my brow, I let out a sigh.

“To think I would dream of her *now*, of all times...” Once the dream was over, that was the only thing I said.

However, I knew full well why I saw that vision in particular.

It was no doubt the peace offer from the imperium.

Now, there was a small part of me that hoped the war would soon end and our relationship would go back to the way it was. That small part of me had dreamed of my time in Dryfe — the fun memories I made with my friend.

If all went well during the upcoming peace talks, the war would be over.

But if it didn’t, the fighting would inevitably resume. It would be a war that would decide the fate of both the kingdom I led and the imperium that Claudiah’s brother Reinhard ruled.

In silence, I pondered the situation. We were no doubt good friends.

However, the war with Dryfe had taken my father from me.

The gulf between not just the two of us, but our whole countries had grown too vast and too deep.

If there was no peace to be had, then we would have no choice but to fight.

She and I might be friends, but both of us had something more important to protect.

I was the Sacred Princess — the sword of the kingdom — while she was The Ram — the spear of the imperium. Just as I wanted to protect my sisters, she wanted to aid her brother. I was certain that we would be forced to fight each other to protect what we held dear.

It might even lead to one of us taking the other’s life.

“But...”

No matter what happened next.

No matter what lay in store for us.

No matter what terrible fate might befall me.

“I... I want us to always be friends.” That was the conclusion I drew from my nostalgic dream, before I steeled my resolve once more.

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The Imperator's Office, Dryfe Imperium

On the day that Gideon, the City of Duels, was shaken by the two Superiors — King of Berserk, Hannya and Over Gladiator, Figaro — Field Marshal Gifted Barbaros was having an audience with his imperator.

"And that concludes our report on the events in Quartierlatin."

Barbaros had been summoned here for two reasons.

One of them was to deliver the final report about the Quartierlatin incident. His mission there was to investigate the ruins and prevent the kingdom from acquiring any powerful weapons there — and by his own estimation, he'd failed.

However, that wasn't because the superweapon, Acra-Vasta, had been destroyed by the kingdom's Masters and the Sacred Princess, Altimia A. Altar. The real problem was in the reports that followed the events, saying that the kingdom was only growing stronger thanks to the discovery of certain facilities in the ruins — a plant that produced not the uncontrollable Prism Soldiers, but Prism Steeds instead.

Thanks to events such as the clash with The Lynx, Tom Cat, and the large-scale battle against Acra-Vasta, Gifted had found the whole incident to be an extremely hectic experience. However, he saw the ultimate outcome as a failure on his part and didn't even try to hide that assessment in his report.

"I see how it is, Uncle Gifted," a matter-of-fact, emotionless voice replied. "Also, there is no need to be so formal with me."

The person calling Gifted "Uncle" was none other than the current imperator of Dryfe — Reinhard.

"You claim that this is a failure on your part, but I do not see it that way. The primary objective was to destroy the superweapon. That was accomplished. Certainly the ideal outcome would have been for us to secure the weapon and destroy the production facilities on top of that, but the outcome we have is far better than one where the kingdom wields the weapon as their own."

Gifted took a moment to think about how to respond, but his train of thought was cut off by a different voice resounding in the room. "But Brother Dearest, this 'Acra-Vasta' was an *uncontrollable* superweapon, was it not? If Dryfe could not master it, the very notion that Altar could do so is absurd. They never could've wielded it in the first place." This new voice was much like Reinhard's; the differences were quite subtle.

"It's entirely possible to control supposedly 'uncontrollable' weapons with Embryos. We even know of one example, do we not?"

"Oh, The Weapon. I'd somehow forgotten how he ruined an entire underground city." With a voice that carried slightly more emotion than before, Reinhard was now talking to his sister, Claudiah.

Gifted said nothing. He merely listened, thinking back on the past and noting how the machine-like Reinhard always had a soft spot for his sister.

They were both his relatives. Gifted had been adopted by the Barbaros family, meaning that their mother was his elder step-sister, and his wife was their cousin. It was a complicated family tree, but this relationship was a major factor in his rise to the rank of imperial field marshal. He was their uncle, Claudiah's mentor, and the only person in the military that the two of them could trust. No one else was worthy of it.

"By the way, Uncle Gifted... you met Altimia, did you not?" Reinhard asked. "How was she?"

For a moment, Gifted wondered why he would ask such a thing, but then recalled that the First Princess of Altar and Claudiah had been good friends in school.

"She seemed to be in good health, but..."

"But... what?"

"She was wearing a mask and calling herself 'Azurite.'"

"*Pfft!*" Claudiah covered her mouth and burst into laughter at the mental image. "A mask...! And 'Azurite'? That's just her middle name...! AHAHAHAHAHAHAH!" Claudiah was so amused by this that she actually fell to the floor clutching her sides, rumpling her fancy business clothing.

"I-I know she really loved books about aristocratic girls concealing their identity and bringing change to the world... but I didn't think she'd actually do it...! PFFT! AHAHAHAHAH! HOOH! HAAH!"

"...Claudiah," Reinhard spoke up, having had enough of the sight and the sound. "I have nothing against laughter, but snorting like that is unbecoming. Also, you are not much better than her in that regard, are you?"

“...Oh. Th-That is true.” That was enough to calm Claudiah down.

“I wish to continue talking to Uncle Gifted. Could you please keep yourself under control?”

“Then I’ll have to wage a mental mock battle against Altimia herself!” And with those words, Claudiah vanished from the room.

“Now... Let us change the subject, Uncle Gifted.”

“...Very well.”

“I’ve heard enough about Quartierlatin; we should discuss the other issue at hand. I believe the information already reached you, but the kingdom now has a fifth Superior.”

Gifted said nothing. This very day, yet another battle between Superiors had occurred in the Altarian city of Gideon. The clash had been arranged by King of Light, F and the control AIs themselves. As unlikely as it seemed, it actually ended without a single casualty. The two Superiors had settled their differences and King of Berserk, Hannya had officially joined Altar.

Now, Dryfe and Altar had an even number of Superiors, and though the former still boasted a higher number of pre-Superiors and Masters in total, the shift in the balance was not to be underestimated.

We already have to watch out for interference from Caldina, Gifted thought. If the war resumed as things were now, Caldina would strike the moment both Altar and Dryfe were exhausted, subjugating both countries.

That was the worst outcome he could possibly imagine.

“Altar and Dryfe are now equally matched in military might,” said Reinhard. “And Caldina is biding its time like a watchful hawk. What do you think the best course of action would be?”

The field marshal faction’s original plan had been to demonstrate the imperium’s power to Caldina and quickly annex the kingdom using overwhelming force, but that was no longer an option. The plan was already in doubt once King of Destruction showed his power, but with King of Berserk thrown into the mix, the power gap had grown far too small.

King of Beasts can keep King of Destruction occupied and ultimately defeat him. That would’ve given our other Superiors the chance to quickly subjugate the kingdom, but that’s impossible now that the numbers are even, Gifted thought.

And thanks to the failure of the chancellor faction — namely, Franklin — it was now impossible to force the kingdom to surrender.

Both factions' ideal plans had been rendered entirely unachievable.

"All we can do now... is end the war," Gifted said. It was impossible to fight Caldina while also facing Altar, and with the kingdom's newfound power, outright war was a futile effort that was best abandoned.

"Exactly," Reinhard nodded in response. "And if we were to be honest with ourselves, we've already won in any case."

"...That is true." The imperium's primary motive for war was the famine caused by Dryfean land gradually becoming woefully unfit for agriculture, as well as Caldina and Altar ending their food exports to the country. However, that had all ended when the imperium occupied the old Lunnings Duchy in the previous war.

The area had a dark history, having been utterly decimated by the mighty and wicked Gloria, but it boasted extremely fertile soil. Dryfe had begun agriculture operations there shortly after the occupation, and some of the faster-growing crops from the territory were already flowing into the imperium, helping to alleviate the famine. The food from the former Lunnings Duchy was enough to prevent mass starvation, meaning that the imperium already lost their primary motivation for fighting.

"The problem is whether the kingdom would allow us to rest on this *victory*," said Reinhard. It was indeed questionable whether Altar would be open to peace after losing so much of its land and its people, including the king himself. If this was what it took to finally end the war, would they truly accept it?

"In all honesty, I am only half certain," the imperator continued. "I believe that she... the acting queen, I mean, would choose to stop, but I am not so sure about the nobles and commoners who suffered in the war, either directly or indirectly."

"But..."

"Oh? Am I wrong somehow, Uncle Gifted? Do you have anything to say?"

"No... I don't." Gifted refrained from telling Reinhard that he couldn't be so sure that the first princess would choose peace. After all — she had lost her father. She wasn't the only one who felt that way, either. Many citizens of Altar had lost loved ones to the war. Could those people truly just... stop? It was an extremely complicated problem that made any predictions difficult, but Reinhard didn't even seem to consider that. It was as though it had completely slipped his mind... or as if he found it not even worth thinking about in the first place.

"Also, even if we end the war, we still lack certain things," Reinhard added.

"What things would those be?" Gifted asked.

"What was necessary for the country was the old Lunnings Duchy. However, we still do not have what is necessary for the war, for us... and *for the world*."

Gifted fell silent and pondered.

He knew what Reinhard meant by "What is necessary for the war" — that was the kingdom's Superiors. Part of the reason he wanted to annex the kingdom was to acquire its Masters, because it was the only way Dryfe stood a chance against Caldina.

Gifted guessed that "What is necessary for us" likely referred to the first princess of Altar. He already knew that the imperator had strong personal feelings for her, and it was clear that she was needed for the annexation of the kingdom to occur.

But what does he mean by "What is necessary for the world?" Gifted wondered. Not even Gifted could fathom what he meant by that, and he was a high ranking imperial official as well as the imperator's uncle.

He couldn't even begin to guess at what Reinhard was thinking.

The young imperator had always had a different viewpoint than most for as long as Gifted could remember; the only one who truly understood him was his twin sister, Claudiah.

"...What is it that's necessary for the world?" Gifted asked. Reinhard fell silent for a moment to think, then opened his mouth. "It's..." he began, only to fall silent before saying anything further. "I'm sorry, Uncle Gifted. It seems I have an unexpected guest. Could you please leave us?"

Without answering Gifted's question, Reinhard suddenly dismissed him instead.

"What...?" Gifted activated the miniature marionettes he'd placed in the surrounding area, but he didn't see anyone anywhere.

He also wondered what kind of guest would require Reinhard to make everyone else leave.

"I will handle the second matter by trying to make peace with the kingdom," Reinhard added. "I will draft up our terms and discuss it with you and Mr. Vigoma... so please, leave us for now."

"...As you will." And so, Gifted did as he was told.

He considered leaving a marionette in the room in order to find out who his nephew would be talking to — and about what — but decided against it. He realized, based on Reinhard's attitude alone, that it would be someone Gifted would not be allowed to know about at any cost.

The imperator was the child of Gifted's step-sister and someone who had been family for nearly twenty years, so there were some things he could understand without Reinhard having to utter a single word.

And so, shortly after Gifted's leave, the space in the office warped... and a single person appeared.

Imperator Machina, ■■■■■■■■ ■ ■■■■■

As you may be aware, the imperium and the kingdom are now more or less even in their number of Superiors. However, if you consider each individual Superior and their potential for cooperation, then Altar might actually have the upper hand. I understand that I am in no position to say this, but Dryfe's Superiors have some glaring personality flaws.

One is too confident in his own status as a prodigy.

One has been rejecting any sort of companionship since the very beginning.

Murdoch is relatively decent, but he puts too much of his adventurous spirit into all of his actions.

Zeta? She is not a Dryfean Superior, per se. There are far worse snakes you could clutch to your bosom, but I believe she would be willing to complete a particular task I have in mind, at least. That would be satisfactory. I already took it into account.

Huh? Ohh, Franklin... *She* is a timid coward. In addition, she is a mental deviant who cannot put the brakes on her desires and convictions... particularly her drive to create and her desire never to lose.

That is why her plots always have far more layers than necessary. She could not stop herself, and she was afraid of coming into conflict with someone and suffering defeat. It is a possibility she cannot tolerate. That's why she puts so much unnecessary effort into eliminating any obstacles in her path, and the longer things go badly for her, the less discerning she becomes about her methods.

That's why the one they call Ray Starling is her ultimate obstacle, the being she hates most in the world. His brother — King of Destruction, Shu Starling — is far more powerful than him, but that is irrelevant to her. She found Ray Starling's very existence unpleasant, and no matter how weak or strong he was, she simply could not tolerate him.

However, like I said before, she is also a timid coward, so she is afraid of their next encounter. She lacks the nerve to hurt him even indirectly.

That is why she will not touch him until she is prepared enough to be completely confident in her victory.

Though, if you asked her about it directly, she would dance around it in her usual jester-like manner.

How am I able to analyze everything in such detail, you ask? It's the same as working on machines. To me, seeing the movements of human hearts and minds is about the same as tinkering with circuits of machines from the pre-ancient civilization.

...I do feel uncomfortable saying that to an expert like yourself, though.

You look like you want to say something, and I know what it is.

You are wondering why, despite being so understanding, I do not seem to comprehend anything that relates to *her*. Well, there is no helping that. What I feel for her makes my circuits go into overdrive and creates a major glitch in the program inside me we call "personality." Indeed, this is a glitch in the brain... or perhaps my very soul.

And it is a glitch I myself have grown fond of.

Regarding anything about my love for her, the computational device we know as the brain stops outputting the correct values.

I myself know full well that letting her father die in the war was suboptimal. But despite that knowledge, I do not reject the result.

Indeed, I know perfectly well that I am not of sound mind. It is as if the calculating side of me and the side of me that is driven mad with love for her are attempting to control this machine we call the body in tandem.

I suppose that most onlookers would find me less agreeable than your garden-variety madman. However, I myself think that this state of affairs is tolerable. The fact that I have been driven mad by my love for her simply cannot be helped anymore.

Now, I have a question for you, as well.

What was the goal behind *this war you incited*?

...Heheh. No answer? I expected as much.

You have your reasons for what you do, after all. You came here to plant the seeds of a new war, in case I intended to stop it completely. Worry not. A war *will* happen, one way or another. It might not be against the kingdom, but that is of no consequence to you, is it?

What you need is merely the phenomenon of war itself. It does not matter who is involved.

Wars are major events to the Masters... and important matters to the observers.

They always act whenever there is a war. The Lynx's appearance 600 years ago is a perfect example. He wielded his Embryo's immense power to intervene in the battle between that era's strongest champions.

You wanted war because you wanted something like that to happen again, did you not? No need to be so surprised.

You and the president of Caldina are not the only ones who can see right through people.

Whatever the case, Dryfe will go to war again, so there is no need for you to worry. Feel free to scheme in other countries instead.

Oh, but one more thing. Claudiah has a warning for you.

"If you conspire to assassinate Altimia, I will hunt you to the ends of this world and slaughter you." There. That is that.

Yes. Make sure you do not forget it.

Goodbye, then. If fate so dictates, let us meet again.

Oh, I forgot to say one thing.

That appearance suits you well... Arch Sage.

Re-Open Episode: "The Forms of The Self"

Chapter One: The Third Job

Prism Rider, Ray Starling

Only about a week in *Dendro* time had passed since Hannya's outburst, but that was long enough for the situation here in Altar to change drastically.

The biggest reason for the sudden change was that Azurite had announced there would be peace talks between the kingdom and the imperium, scheduled to occur in about two weeks in *Dendro* time. Thankfully, that was a Saturday in real life, so I would have no trouble participating.

It would be held in a building built on the border between Altar and the old Lunnings Duchy, which was now effectively under Dryfe's control. In preparation for it, the kingdom was recruiting a lot of Masters to act as Azurite's retinue. This was necessary because there was a chance that the talks could go badly and lead to immediate war, as well as the possibility that all of this was just a trap *disguised* as peace talks. If either of those worst-case scenarios became reality, it would be the Masters' job to protect Azurite and the other diplomats.

Our party had received a personal request to join her retinue, and we'd already accepted it.

Of course, it would be best if none of that happened, but if it did, I'd really regret it if I wasn't there by Azurite's side. No one in our party had any objections to going, so we agreed.

There was one problem, though. If a fight broke out *during* the peace talks, I'd obviously be up against some of the best Masters in Dryfe... but I really wasn't strong enough to fight them. In fact, it was possible that I'd be the lowest level person there. I already had the lowest level in my party, after all. Marie was a Superior Job, B3 was a veteran player, and even Rook was fast approaching level 400, while I was only level 150.

...I'd actually reached 150 that very morning, meaning that I'd maxed out Prism Rider — my second job — and it was time to choose my third.

"The Catalog gave me several options... but I just don't know what to pick," I muttered.

The Suitable Job Diagnostics Catalog that Shu gave me presented the best jobs for me based on my current build. The ones it recommended now were Knight, which would buff my base build; Priest, which would increase my healing ability; and Scout, which improved a few very useful utility skills.

"I can see why," Nemesis commented. "All of these jobs are so common that they don't feel right for you."

"Hey, I don't mind that they're common... It's just that I don't see that X factor in any of them." I half-heartedly nodded, still paralyzed by indecision. It didn't seem like any of them would change my set-up quite as much as Paladin or Prism Rider had. If possible, I wanted a job that would quickly breathe new life into my build.

I'd hoped to see the high-rank direct upgrade to Prism Rider listed, but I couldn't find it anywhere in the Catalog — meaning that either no one had taken it yet, or it was a lost job and its conditions were secret.

It seemed like I had no option but to pick one of the jobs presented to me, but...

"Why not just pick Knight?" asked B3. "If we ignore your Payback Beyond the Stars and Shining Despair skills, you're primarily a melee fighter. I don't think that will change anytime soon, so I think you'd benefit from the active skills Knight would give you."

"No no no," Marie objected. "Scout is the way to go here. Ray always charges head-first into trouble, so he'd get a lot of benefit from utility skills like Reveal and Killing Intent Perception."

"Ray's build is based around taking damage," said Rook. "I think Priest is the best choice here." Not even my party could help me decide. Each person present was in favor of a different job.

We were in a café, by the way. Nemesis and I were here first, but we'd been glaring at the Catalog for so long that before we knew it, we were joined by B3, Marie, and Rook.

I did have the option of picking all three jobs, but I could only max out one or two of them before I had to accompany Azurite to the peace talks. Taking that into consideration, the next low-rank jobs I took were actually extremely important, but that just made this choice all that more difficult.

As this discussion continued...

"Ohh? Well, now ain't this a shady group, inside and out. What's up, B3 and company?"

...I heard a familiar voice from outside the terrace.

The speaker was that muscle-bound, wolf-eared woman whom I'd seen several times now — the sub-leader of the K&R, the PK clan, and the Nobushi Princess, Rosa.

"...That's quite a greeting, Rosa," said B3, looking extremely displeased.

"Hahahah. Good to see you know what I'm talking about."

B3 didn't look shady on the outside, so she must've felt that Rosa was making a comment about her character. Well, her tone *did* seem pretty provocative.

"So? Why're you lookin' at a Catalog?" Rosa asked. "Messin' with ya build again? You're so indecisive. Just get a Superior Job already."

"...That's easier said than done."

B3 was searching for info on Full Armor Giant or Shield Giant Superior Jobs, but neither DIN nor The Lunar Society had anything to offer. Apparently, such jobs often had strange conditions — for instance, to get King of Destruction, Shu had to do a certain amount of damage to objects.

"Also, this isn't about me. It's about Ray." B3 continued. "We're discussing what job he should pick next."

"Hm? Ohh, Unbreakable's still level 150," Rosa said. "You have Paladin and Prism Rider... so this'll be your third one, huh?" For a moment, I wondered how she knew that, but then I remembered that I was actually still a Paladin back when I'd fought her, and she must've used Reveal to see that I was a Prism Rider currently.

"The Catalog's tellin' ya... Knight, Priest, and... what the hell? What a boring build."

"No peeking — it's bad manners," said B3. "And if you think that's boring, what would you say is an actually interesting build?"

"A good ol' first-strike Nobushi build with a focus on spear skills and concealment."

"...That's just *your* build. I might as well just say, I like this END-based giant set-up," B3 huffed.

"Ugh, you damn turtler. Try comin' outta your shell once in a damn while!"

“Bitch, don’t act like ya didn’t use your ult to pump up your defense last time we fought!”

B3, your Barbaroy mode is showing, I thought.

“One’s all about offense, the other’s all about defense... but they have a lot in common. Like their boorish nature and preference for younger men, for example.”

“...Marie, please don’t throw fuel on the fire,” I said.

Also... B3’s into younger men? Since when?

“Well, let’s leave it at that, then,” said Rosa. “Any ‘best’ builds that don’t follow the Guardian-Jaguarman theory are more or less parallel to each other.”

“...That’s true.” The Guardian-Jaguarman theory, huh? I’d heard of that before.

“More importantly, why aren’t ya reccing him *that* job?” Rosa asked B3.

“‘That,’ as in...?”

“Death Soldier.”

“...Is your stupidity terminal?” For my part, I’d never heard of the job Rosa mentioned. B3 opened her mouth wide and made a face like she’d slipped back into Barbaroy mode, while Marie looked like she was trying to remember something.

I was curious, so I used the Catalog to search for the job, and found it almost instantly.

“It has low stat growth, only one skill, and to top it off... it requires you to die,” B3 explained.

...Requires you to what*?* I wondered.

“Despite being a low-rank job with a utility skill, it’s so unpopular that it might as well be a lost job.”

“But don’t you think it suits him perfectly?”

“The problem is he’d have to get into a situation where Death Soldier’s skill would actually be useful...”

“And he gets into those situations all the time, right? He just does some insane shit and basically goes ‘Chances of survival? Caution? What’re those? Can ya eat ’em?’”

“...I can’t deny *that*, but...” That actually seemed like a pretty insulting evaluation to me, But B3 actually glanced in my direction, as though thinking that Rosa might actually have a point.

“Umm, what kind of job is Death Soldier, anyway?” I asked.

“...Basically, it’s a job that only saw use centuries ago, and even then, only as a punishment for tians.”

“A *punishment*?”

“The unfortunate tians were made to take it before being forced to charge into enemy lines as suicide bombers.”

Now that’s just terrifying, I thought.

“According to the lore, it was most popular as a kind of capital punishment 600 years ago.”

“...How come was it used like that?”

“Because of Death Soldier’s only skill — Last Command. To summarize its effect, it lets you keep moving after you die.”

“...You mean, it turns you into an undead?”

“No. It just lets you move around after your HP drops to 0 for a time based on your level in the skill. Of course, you die once the effect ends, and even at level 5 — the Death Soldier’s max — you still get less than a minute.”

I said nothing in response. This skill literally cost the user their life.

“Since it lets you move even after your HP drops to 0, Last Command allowed the Death Soldiers sent out as shock troops to keep running even after they were killed by a rain of arrows. Though, apparently, you can only move parts of the body still connected to the brain — so the Death Soldiers who were blown up by their own bombs couldn’t do anything but wait for death to come for half a minute or so, after their body parts were scattered everywhere.”

...That is downright horrifying, I thought. Also, the fact that you could only move parts still connected to the brain made it seem more like a zombie thing than a higher tier undead.

“Because it has such a terrible history and reputation, not a single tian would willingly take this job. The same goes for our fellow Masters.”

“It does?”

“Nobody really *wants* the death penalty, and if they have to choose between a job with poor stat growth that lets them move around after death, and a proper job with good stat growth and normal skills that help them survive, they’ll obviously choose the latter. That makes Death Soldier extremely unpopular.”

“...Oh, I remember it now,” Marie finally spoke up. “Tenchi actually had some tians that took the job, but they’re all part of the Nanshumon clan... which is like the Shimazu clan from real life history. They’re all extremely reckless.”

...My college friend had also compared some Tenchi clan to the Shimazus, and now I couldn’t help but wonder if he meant their outlook rather than just the location of the territory.

“...All right, I think I get what Death Soldier is about,” I said.

“See what I meant?” asked Rosa. “Fits ya like a glove, doesn’t it? It’ll make that one technique of yours easier to use, too.”

“Technique...? Oh.” I thought for a moment and quickly figured out what she was talking about.

It was the Impact Counter I’d used on her. She’d actually been the one who named it. And yes, Death Soldier’s skill would certainly be useful for that. In fact, it might even make it more powerful.

I had to think on this a bit. I could definitely make good use of Death Soldier’s Last Command, and since it was a utility skill, I could use it while maining other jobs. This would come at the cost of the stat growth and amount of skills provided by the other jobs... but it *would* bring me the major change that I wanted.

“...All right. I’ll level Death Soldier,” I declared, gathering my resolve.

“You should *really* reconsider,” B3 suggested anxiously.

I shook my head and said, “The peace talks are really close. If Dryfe is plotting something, I need to be as strong as I possibly can. However, I don’t have the time to raise my base abilities high enough to match experienced Masters. I’d rather bet on something that, if I use it well, might let me go toe-to-toe with those more powerful than me.”

B3 gave up and sighed before saying, “...It’s your build. The choice is yours to make.” Rook and Marie nodded in agreement.

“If that’s what you think is best, then I think it’s good too,” said Rook.

“Oh, by the way,” Marie said, remembering something. “Last Command’s skill level... as in, the time you get to move around once it’s active... is linked to job level, so you should focus on leveling Death Soldier immediately.”

...Well, it would be pretty bad if it improved based on the amount of uses. Tians couldn’t die over and over, after all.

“Though, don’t forget — despite everything, you’ve only actually died once so far,” she added. “The skill might turn out to be useless to you.”

“...How strange to hear that from the person responsible for that sole death,” said Nemesis with an exasperated look in her eyes.

“I would appreciate it if you stopped pointing that out,” Marie replied with a tense face.

Anyway, I’d chosen my third job. I was going to be a Death Soldier. The name was a stark contrast to the bright and positive names of my first two jobs.

“It suits your manner of dress perfectly,” said Nemesis, who was harsh on my fashion sense, as always.

“By the way, those peace talks everybody’s talkin’ ’bout,” Rosa spoke up again. “Are you all goin’?”

“Yes,” B3 replied. “Your tone makes it sound like you’re going, too. Are you?”

“Yeah. I’m a ranker, so I got a request to come.”

Naturally, we wouldn’t be the only Masters joining the retinue. Out of the ones I knew, Juliet, Chelsea, Riser, and Bishmal were also coming, and Azurite told me that she got Miss Eldritch and Tsukikage to join, as well. Apparently, she was already making her pay for her involvement in the Hannya incident.

Even Shu would be joining us. I found that odd at first, seeing as he’d been apprehensive about leaving Gideon recently, but I would certainly appreciate having him around.

Even with just these few, Altar’s side was already very powerful — enough, according to B3, to surpass the kingdom’s entire forces in the previous war.

However, there were some that couldn’t make it. After his proposal, Figaro suffered an attack that left him hospitalized in real life, and Hannya seemingly hadn’t logged in since the incident, presumably because she was staying by Figaro’s side. Lei-Lei always had an erratic Dendro schedule, so she wouldn’t make it to the peace talks, either.

As a result, only two of the five Superiors would be present.

“What about Kashimiya?” I asked.

“Darling has family business that day. Said he doesn’t know if he’ll be able to log in for it.”

Kashimiya was among the strongest 1v1 fighters in the kingdom, right next to Figaro. Not having him around really hurt, but if it was real life business, then we had no choice but to accept it.

Tom had also said that he wouldn't be able to participate. Apparently, he was still rumored to be connected to the developers. Maybe his refusal had something to do with that?

"If Rosa is participating, it means that I'll be on the same side as her and the Superior Killer," said B3. "This kinda reminds me of what we did at the capital back in March."

Oh yeah — they were the ones behind the blockade at Altea. It was strange and almost moving to think that the same people who'd conspired against the kingdom would now be fighting for it.

"Speaking of which, I wonder where Eldridge and his GobStreet went," said Rosa.

"Ah, DIN has info on him," said Marie. "After the blockade, he traveled all over and fought Superiors like Master Jiangshi, Xunyu; The Earth, Fatoum; Great Admiral, Antimicrobic Soy Sauce; and The Saber, Saki Muryo-Taisu."

"I haven't heard of the last one before, but that's a... big name." *Muryo-Taisu* referred to "10 to the power of 68" — one hundred unvigintillion. It was a Buddhist concept of the immeasurable.

"I had that exact thought when I first heard it," said Marie. "Ignoring that last name, though, she said that 'Saki' is her first name in real life, too."

"You know her?"

"Yeah. From my time training over there. She's a Tenchi Superior, after all."

Tenchi, huh...? That place was on the other side of this world, so I rarely heard anything about it. It didn't seem like my Tenchi-dwelling friends from real life got involved in any major incidents, either.

...Though, I did recall Natsume looking like he wanted to say something.

"Yinglong... Magical Apex, Human Bomb, and now Realm-Divider, huh?" said Rosa. "Why's Eldridge pickin' fights with beasts like that? Wasn't he the cautious type?"

"Mad Castle split up after the blockade incident, so I can only assume that Goblin Street had a bad time, as well," B3 answered. "They must've tried to make up for it, only to be defeated again and again... The fact that he fought a lot of bad matchups is proof of that.”

“His presence opens up many tactical avenues, though,” Marie added. “He’s really strong against people he *is* compatible with.”

Plus, even if he was defeated every time, he still managed to challenge all those Superiors. In addition to what I’d heard about his tactical skill, it became pretty obvious that Eldridge was a really fearsome Master.

“Well, enough about him,” said Rosa. “What matters is that we’ll be on the same side for our next job. We were really at each other’s throats recently, but let’s get along, shall we?”

“Yeah. Let’s,” I said, and we exchanged a handshake.

She was a decent person... for a PK junkie, anyway.

◇

Death Soldier, Ray Starling

I switched jobs to Death Soldier right after we left the café. It had no conditions and you could pick it at just about any crystal, so it was no trouble at all.

Now, we were leveling as a party some distance away from Gideon. The party consisted of me, Rook, Marie (who’d switched to Journalist), B3 (who’d switched to Shield Giant), and finally two of Rook’s monsters, Marilyn and Audrey. This was more or less what we always used when leveling.

“By the way — is it just me, or are Marilyn and Audrey bigger than they were when I first saw them?” I asked.

“Have they gained weight?” Nemesis echoed me. Marilyn roared and Audrey screeched as if arguing with her. They were both girls, I guess, so I could only assume that they didn’t like the assumption that they’d gotten fatter.

“Well, both Marilyn and Audrey are higher level now. They might even change species at some point,” Rook said.

I had actually heard that certain kinds of monsters could change species as they leveled up. This seemed like something straight out of Pokémon, allegedly, a good number of UBMs were actually normal monsters that had become uniquely strong among their kind. They were both Demi-Dragons right now, but apparently there was a chance that they’d actually go up a rank.

"I'd have new tactical options if that happens before the peace talks in two weeks, but I don't know if it will," said Rook. "But you're working so hard, so I'll do my best to become stronger, too."

"Thanks, Rook."

Though, you know you're already over twice my level, right? I added internally. *I'll have to work even harder...*

"By the way, Ray," Marie spoke to me from the dragon carriage. "You seem to be laser-focused on the peace talks right now, but you do know that it won't end there, right?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "If something happens during the talks, it's likely that we'd just end up with another war, right?"

"Exactly. Oh, and do you know about the special effects of war? I mean the War Boundary, of course."

"I do. I looked it up after Franklin's Game."

It started when the leaders of the countries involved agreed to activate it. It was just called the "War Boundary," and once active, it granted three special effects to the involved countries, as well as the rest of *Dendro*.

The first of these effects was a restriction on Masters logging into the countries who were at war.

The moment the war began, the War Boundary would be established in the parts of the countries that were designated as battlefields. Masters who were outside the country rankings would be unable to enter those zones, and the non-rankers who were inside the boundary when it became active would be forcefully logged out. The amount of people who would be allowed in would be really limited if it was just kill and duel rankings, but because it counted clan rankings as well, you could easily get in by just belonging to a ranking clan, even if you only joined it for the duration of the war.

There were two reasons for this.

First, it limited the damage done. If anyone could participate in the war, the amount of Masters on both sides would just keep growing, which would severely increase the damage suffered by both countries. This was a preventative measure against that.

The War Boundary also allowed rankers from countries that weren't participating in the war, though. That was how Caldina was able to send rankers to Dryfe to interfere in the previous war.

The other reason was crime prevention — to keep Masters from taking advantage of the situation to perform illegal acts. Masters on all wanted lists — like the members of the infamous IF — didn’t belong to any country and weren’t part of any rankings, meaning that they were always rejected by the War Boundary. Supposedly, this prevented wartime criminal activity all over the land.

It seemed like something that might be nice to have around all the time, but apparently there was a limit to how long War Boundary could last.

The second special effect was the increase of experienced time. Normally, for each real-world hour, you experienced three hours in *Dendro*; but during war, each hour in reality would become *thirty* in-game. This was applied to the entire world, so Masters from the other countries received an absurdly good time bonus.

However, one real life day translating into an in-game month was an incredibly significant change. If you got the death penalty during a war, the conflict would likely have ended by the time you were allowed to log in again, meaning that you’d be unable to do anything more for the war effort.

The third special effect was the victory conditions. Before the War Boundary was activated, both countries would present their win conditions and demands. The losing side would have no choice but to fulfill the demands registered by the winners at the outset. Wartime demands surpassed even the highest-level Contracts in gravity, and it was said that a country that refused to fulfill them would be met with something far worse than mere destruction.

Apparently, this helped ensure fairness. Because *Dendro* had clear Contracts and victory conditions like this, there was much less deception and far fewer people went back on their word than in real life, making conflicts far more straightforward.

Perhaps that was just how this whole thing had been designed.

During the last war, Dryfe’s victory condition was the fall of the kingdom’s capital, while Altar’s was the destruction of the imperium’s forces — but it actually ended without either side achieving their goal. However, the Old Lunnings Duchy was on Dryfe’s invasion path, and they now effectively had control of it.

Of course, it was possible to fight without activating the War Boundary, but that would only result in an all-consuming struggle, without a clear demarcation for when it should end. Anyone could see that would result in huge numbers of civilian casualties, just like it had during Franklin's Game and Logan's invasion of Quartierlatin. Because of this, the very game-y War Boundary, with its victory conditions and established demands, was the preferred way to wage war throughout *Dendro's* history.

Therefore, if the coming peace talks went badly, the countries would decide on how and when they would deploy the War Boundary again.

"So, what do you think is our biggest problem if a war does break out?" Marie asked.

"...The fact that none of us are rankers." Because of that first special effect, which limited what Masters could log in to the warring countries, only rankers would be able to stay in Altar and Dryfe. No one in the current party was on any ranking table, so we'd all just be ejected from the War Boundary immediately.

However, entering the ranks at this point would be difficult. The kill rankings, which were based on total kill points, were dominated by wide-scale extermination builds and veteran Masters. You could become a duel ranker by fighting another ranker for their position, but you needed to be a distinguished duelist already to even challenge the lowest — 30th — in the rankings.

We obviously didn't have the time to try for the kill or duel rankings, so our only option was the clan rankings, which were based on the amount of quests completed by the clan's members, as well as the difficulty of those quests. Every quest gave points based on its difficulty, and the higher that was, the more points you received. A difficulty level one quest gave you 2 points, level two was 4, level three was 8, and it doubled that way until level nine, which gave you 512 points. The points you got for difficulty level ten quests varied, but apparently, the minimum was *10240*.

"...Hey, shouldn't level ten quests be 1024 points?" asked Nemesis. "That was the pattern, right? Where did that extra decimal place come from?"

I was wondering about that myself, but it seems that level ten quests just give you way more than the others, I thought in response.

Also, the points were split evenly between all the people who participated in the quest. Some said that you could enter the clan rankings by just clearing a few difficulty level ten quests all by yourself, but almost no one was capable of that, obviously. Clans that made it to the rankings were almost always ones with tons of members who did a whole bunch of quests. There were also clans made up of a few elites who'd cleared a handful of difficulty eight or nine quests, but they were a minority.

I could see why Miss Eldritch's Lunar Society was the kingdom's number one ranking clan. It had a huge amount of members, and most of them were no-lifers who believed that *Dendro* was the true reality. It'd be weird if it *wasn't* at the top. Lots of ranking clans would be getting temporary members who only wanted to be allowed inside the War Boundary. That made it extremely easy for the order of the rankings to change, but The Lunar Society would no doubt remain at the top.

Speaking of which, the clan rankings were updated every month in real time — which was three months in *Dendro* time — and the next update was coming up in a week. That was shortly before the peace talks that could very well lead to war, so you could see many clans looking for new members, even in the streets of Gideon.

Also, I'd heard that just before the previous war, Dryfean Masters who'd temporarily joined clans that ended up not making it to the rankings abandoned them in favor of those that did.

That was totally possible and expected. Ultimately, anyone could take part in the war as long as they managed to find a clan that was in the rankings.

"It'll be difficult to enter the kill or duel rankings in time, so if a war broke out, I think we'd have to temporarily join a clan," said B3.

"Well, we don't have a choice," Marie agreed. "Neither I nor B3 killed enough monsters or did enough dueling."

"...When it was still active, Mad Castle would've made it to the lower end of the clan rankings, but we're no longer on *any* rankings." Oh yeah. K&R was a top-ranking clan, so it made sense that B3's Mad Castle — a PK clan on a similar level — would've been there too, if it hadn't disbanded.

"Why not borrow the club prez's Lunar Society?" B3 asked. "I think she'd let us in."

"I'd... honestly want to avoid that." I felt like that'd make me indebted to her, and I was scared of what that could lead to.

"Besides that... I know that Kashimiya's K&R is in the rankings, but that's basically just a Kashimiya fan club, so getting in would be pretty difficult," B3 continued. That was a shame. Even though it was a PK clan, K&R seemed like a better option than Miss Eldritch's Lunar Society.

Fortunately, though, I already had a good clan in mind.

"I was actually considering snagging some spots in Chelsea's clan. I'll talk to her about it later," I said.

"Ohh, Golden Pirates," said B3. "I suppose there's nothing to worry about, then."

Golden Pirates was the clan belonging to the eighth-ranked duelist, Chelsea, the Wandering Golden Sea. It was a clan that had followed her here from Granvaloa, and it was still quite active. The members regularly did duels, quests, and dungeon raids, among other things, and it was always floating between the 10th and 20th places in the clan rankings — meaning that it would most likely stay on the ranking boards even after the next update.

"I was told that I could bring a party, too," I said. "I think it'll work out."

"I see," said B3. "Once we return to Gideon, you should go get confirmation, though, just in case."

"Good idea." We continued the hunt until the sun began to set, and by the time we returned to Gideon, it was already dark out.

At that point, we went straight to Chelsea to talk to her about letting us into the clan.

We found her at a diner she frequented, and for some reason, she was holding a mug in one hand and looking really peevish.

"Nnghh... Screw love... just screw it..." She was hanging her head and had a dense, dark feeling hanging around her — something I'd never expect from someone so hearty and cheerful.

"Chelsea... don't look so sad," said Juliet — a fellow duel ranker — as she gently rubbed Chelsea's head.

“...Look at those mugs and plates piling up,” commented another girl duel ranker I’d seen before.

Also, they were all underage, so despite appearances, they were actually drinking juice.

“Juliet and... ‘Max,’ right?” I called out to them. “What happened to Chelsea?”

“Ah...! ’Tis a conflict borne of the throes of passion that burden all of mankind,” Juliet replied.

“Oh. It’s the guy with the freaky outfit and nickname,” added Max as she noticed me.

Wait, “freaky nickname?” Does she mean “Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson?” Doesn’t she know that only Juliet calls me that? I’m just “Unbreakable” to most people, I thought before focusing on the conversation.

“Relationship trouble?” I asked.

“Indeed,” said Juliet. “Love struck down the horde of gold, and upon the twilight of this very day, it all became as dust.”

“...some relationship problems were tearing the clan apart, and it was disbanded this evening?” Juliet confirmed this with a nod, but that was really bad for us, actually. We came here for a reason, but it meant nothing if Golden Pirates were no more.

“Chelsea... how did it come to this?”

“...You’re really gonna ask that?” she looked up at me with steady eyes and a red face.

Honestly, I was intimidated.

“...Then again, we did talk about taking you on as a temporary member if a war broke out, so I guess it would be unfair if I didn’t explain it,” Chelsea said before taking a deep breath. “It all started because there was a scumbag in the clan who was secretly dating twenty of the girls at once.”

“Twen...” Now *that* was a hell of an overreach. How was it even physically possible to cheat on such a scale?

“It seemed to be going well for him, but he was exposed at the Love-Duel Festival.” It was a couples event, so... did he schedule too many dates? Honestly, it was actually kind of impressive that it took the festival to finally rat him out.

“The girls he was two-timing followed some weird light that led them to him," Max added. "He was on a date with another woman, so they questioned him, and then a fight broke out."

The Love-Duel Festival and strange lights... that rung a bell. That King of Light guy caused more trouble than just Hannya's outburst, huh?

"The cheater left our clan as if to run away, but the cracks he opened up began to widen... and today, our clan disbanded."

"Now that's just... damn..." The idea that such a hearty crew met such an end made me kind of sad. Well, they were all only human, so perhaps it was only natural for their relationships to fray like that.

"And... you know the thing that pisses me off the most about this?" Chelsea continued.

"No. Not a clue..." I shook my head.

Chelsea made an even more terrifying face and said, "That I had absolutely no part in any of this drama." Her voice was full of both grief and rage.

I honestly didn't know what to say. Juliet also seemed somewhat flustered, while Max was just freaked out.

"...A playboy who can date twenty women at once didn't even *try* to get her, huh?" said Nemesis telepathically.

Don't you dare say that out loud. She'd probably sink this whole place in Poseidon's liquid gold, I thought in response. Chelsea's power might've been one of the reasons why the cheater didn't make a pass at her. He might've been too scared.

"Screw love..." Chelsea said as the dark aura gathered around her again.

"But Chelsea... y-you *are* cute," said Juliet.

"Oh man," sighed Max. "I'll treat you to some food, so just cheer up already... I hope my wallet's not too dry..."

I had no choice but to leave Chelsea to them. But... man, we had a problem of our own now. With Golden Pirates no longer an option, we had to find another clan, and...

"...Is it just me, or do you now have no choice but to join that woman's Lunar Society?"

...Ah. Damn it.

Chapter Two: Clan

Royal Capital, Altea, The King's Office

That day, Altimia the First Princess of the Kingdom of Altar was hard at work as the acting queen. The peace offer from Dryfe came right on the heels of the Hannya incident, so she immediately returned to Altea to do everything necessary for the coming peace talks.

"The Second Model Prism Steed production is going well, and both the royal guards and Altea's knights are already supplied with them. The other matter is still encountering difficulties, however. The next report is... Hm?"

After she'd finished reading the report from Countess Quartierlatin, Altimia reached for the next one, which made her tilt her head.

It read: "King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn has disappeared."

This next document was a report from an order she'd put out while she was still trying to avoid relying too much on Masters. At the time, she had instead depended exclusively on powerful tians.

The kingdom had several Superior Job-holding tians who claimed no allegiance to any of Altar's organizations, and Altimia had sent out messengers to try and recruit them. However, since many of them were essentially hermits living far from normal society, the results weren't exactly favorable. Some of them even turned out to have already died of natural causes and passed their Superior Jobs on to powerful Masters.

This report on King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn, would actually be the last one she received.

He was powerful enough to rival even the Arch Sage, and it was rumored that he currently lived and trained deep in the mountains, but...

"He disappeared? And his retreat was burned to the ground...?" According to the report, the messenger had traveled to the hermitage on the mountain Feuer lived on. However, the entire place was completely destroyed, and most of the surrounding land and trees were still scorched. Since there was new grass growing out of the burnt surroundings, the report conjectured that a great deal of time had passed since the burning... over half a year at the very least, according to the presented estimate.

Suspicious of this unusual report, Altimia silently pondered.

It was possible that Feuer had burned the hermitage himself to go on a journey somewhere. He was fairly old, so it was also possible that he saw his death coming and had immolated himself along with the place where he lived.

However, Altimia had the sneaking suspicion that this was somehow part of a much larger plot.

This feeling came with a sense of danger, as if an unseen snake had coiled itself around her leg.

“...Though, I doubt that Dryfe is involved in this.” Regardless, Altimia knew that this unusual incident was definitely something to keep in mind.

The princess continued her work, and after some time had passed, she had finally taken care of all the documents that required her eye or involvement. The last document was a report on her request for retinue at the peace talks.

“I put out a request for Masters to join me at the peace talks, and it looks like we’ll have a great many participants...” A part of her was upset that they hadn’t rallied like this for the previous war, but she concluded that was more of a reflection on Altar’s leadership, not the Masters. There was just no denying that the low participation in the previous war was mostly the kingdom’s own fault.

However, there was something that still didn’t make sense to her.

“Why was Father so adamant about this...?” Eldor, the previous king, was firm in his conviction that Masters were very special beings and should never be employed as tools of war. Altimia had heard him say so herself, and she did understand that point of view to a degree.

However, she had no idea how he’d come to have such a deep conviction in the first place. She thought she may be able to figure it out if she followed in Eldor’s footsteps as the acting queen, but she struggled to understand it even now. In fact, after her interactions with Ray and the others, she was even more certain that the cooperation of the Masters in a prospective war was absolutely necessary.

Altimia changed her mind after she came into contact with a particular person... namely, Ray himself.

“...Was Father the same way?” Perhaps Eldor had settled upon his ideas after meeting someone specific as well.

"Maybe I should look into that, too," Altimia said. "Oh dear. Look at the time." It was already dark out, and furthermore it was almost dinnertime.

Altimia had planned to have dinner with Elizabeth and Theresia today. Once the matter of Elizabeth's arranged marriage was settled, she and Altimia had made up; after Elizabeth returned to Altea, all three sisters ate dinner together far more often than they had previously.

Though, perhaps they were simply trying to create memories together before Elizabeth left for Huang He.

The plan was that she and Canglong the Third Prince of Huang He would leave together the day after the peace talks. That was the final deadline. Even if the talks went badly, Elizabeth would be gone before the War Boundary would activate.

Although, if Altimia was assassinated *during* the talks, Elizabeth would become the heir to the kingdom's throne. That would most definitely change the manner in which Altar and Huang He would be united.

Everything depended on how the peace talks actually went in two weeks' time. In the meantime, Altimia did whatever she could — even considering scenarios where she herself died.

"Your Highness, are you here?"

There was a sudden knock on the office's door. The person responsible for the knock was none other than Altimia's confidant — Marquis Findle.

"Yes," Altimia answered. "You may enter."

"Pardon the intrusion." Marquis Findle had a single letter in hand.

"What is that?"

"It is a letter for you. The sender is... Lady Integra."

The name shocked Altimia into slightly widening her eyes.

Integra.

Integra Sedna Clarice.

She was an apprentice of the Arch Sage who'd died in the previous war... The last of them all, in fact.

Though she was the youngest of the apprentices, the Arch Sage had recognized her talent, and she learned much from him. Her ability certainly surpassed that of his many other apprentices, and two years ago, as a last task from the Arch Sage, she'd left on a journey across the seven countries. Because of this, she hadn't been present at the battle against Gloria which killed all her fellow apprentices, nor did she participate in the war that killed the Arch Sage.

Unfortunately, Altimia didn't have any means to contact Integra as she traveled the world. In fact, she didn't even know if Integra was alive... but now, she'd received a letter from her.

After pondering for a moment, Altimia took the letter from Marquis Findle.

To Altimia, Integra was like Liliana — one of her few close friends. However, the kingdom's situation had changed drastically over the past two years, and her fellow apprentices as well as her mentor were now gone. That fact made Altimia a bit afraid of seeing the letter's contents.

Regardless, Altimia gathered her resolve and broke the seal to see what was written within.

"...Eh?"

What she read in that letter was something she could have never expected.

"I, Integra Sedna Clarice, have succeeded my mentor and become the Arch Sage. Upon returning to the kingdom, I wish to serve Her Highness Altimia Azurite Altar just as my mentor did."

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Death Soldier, Ray Starling

"Man, what now...?" After finding out that Golden Pirates had disbanded, I spent a lot of time pondering: would it be best to just join Miss Eldritch's Lunar Society, or keep searching to find a better option?

"It would be great if you had some other clan you could get into... but that seems unlikely," said Nemesis.

"Yeah... I don't exactly have connections in a lot of ranking clans."

There were some clans out there recruiting "mercenaries" — essentially, temporary members kept on-hand in case a war broke out. One of these was the AETL Union — the second in the rankings.

As high as it was, though, it didn't have many stand-out members like The Lunar Society's Miss Eldritch or K&R's Kashimiya and Rosa. They just had so many members, second only to The Lunar Society.

The clan itself was... basically a fanclub. It was dedicated to the three princesses of the kingdom, as well as Liliana — who, as Shu once said, enjoyed great popularity even among tians.

The clan known as AETL Union was a combination of their fanclubs for all four of them — it even took its title from the first letter of the princesses' and Liliana's names. Since their goal was, above all, to protect their favorite girls, they actually allowed anyone to temporarily join them in case of war.

They were actually the largest Master faction that had participated in the last war, and some thought they were the major reason Altar avoided complete destruction. AETL Union had always declared that if war broke out again, they would return to the battlefield with the same vigor as last time.

Since my goal was basically the same, I'd actually gone to them before I considered the Golden Pirates, but...

"...AETL Union didn't let me in, huh?"

"That was... well..."

The main reason for my rejection was that video of the incident in Gideon that Franklin had broadcast In it, I was shown fighting alongside Sir Lindos and... yes, Liliana.

After I defeated RSK, Liliana had even nursed me to health.

That seemed to have made them really upset.

I talked directly to the clan's sub-leader — the head of Liliana's fanclub — and he said, "You fought with Lady Liliana and even had her take care of you... You're just too close to her! And that intense expression on her face as she cared for you... GHAAAHHH! I'll never let you in! In fact, I'd rather spit in your face!"

"Fanclubs truly hate anyone who actually gets ahead, don't they..." Nemesis noted.

"It probably depends on the fanclub..." Still, AETL Union wasn't an option.

Well, the fact that they didn't assassinate me outright told me that they were still somewhat reasonable people, at least. Maybe they'd let me in if I asked again...?

"Wait, you're also close to Azurite," said Nemesis. "Joining AETL Union is simply impossible for you, don't you think?"

"...Oh yeah."

"...You even went to a mixed bath with her."

“...You better keep that a secret.” If they found out about *that*, I’d definitely be as good as dead.

Yeah... as things were, I had to give up on AETL Union.

“...The Lunar Society *would* probably let me in, huh?” After all, their leader once had me kidnapped just so she could force me to join her clan. If I went to them and actually *asked* to get in, she wouldn’t even think twice about it.

However, the problem was what came after. I’d only be joining The Lunar Society to participate in the war — as just a mercenary, basically. Alas, it seemed likely that they wouldn’t just let me walk away afterwards. Miss Eldritch would make up all sorts of reasons why I couldn’t be allowed to escape.

This was made even worse by the fact that we were acquainted in real life. It was just impossible for me to get away from her.

Still... Not participating in the war at all was completely out of the question. If the peace talks went awry, war was inevitable. Azurite, Liliana... the fates of many of my friends would hang in the balance, and not being there would leave a really bad taste in my mouth.

“...I really don’t have a choice, huh?” Well, we all had to make sacrifices every now and then.

Even if it was roughly equivalent to leaping into a lion’s den, I had to join The Lunar Society.

But how could I break this to my party...?

“Hm? Well, if it aIn’t Ray? WhAt are ya broOdin’ over?”

As I gathered my resolve and stepped forward, I ran into a familiar person with a voice and height that really stood out from the crowd... Xunyu.

She was holding a cup of Shu’s popcorn in her hand.

...I’m impressed that she can eat popcorn with those claws, I thought.

“Xunyu...”

“Seriously, what’s wrOng? You look like yOu’re about to get naked, tAke off your metal accessOries, chUg some vinEgar, cover yourself in sAlt, run through the doOr, and never come bAck.”

...I was struggling to even picture that kind of scene.

Also, did I really look *that* bad?

“C’mon, tell mE what happened. I’ll give yOu advice like thE good buddy I am.”

“Xunyu...” She was so dependable... especially for a grade school kid.

“Well...” I told her what happened and that I was actually about to turn to The Lunar Society for help.

Upon hearing that, Xunyu tilted her head.

“Hey, why’rE ya goin’ to The Lunar Society?” she asked.

“Because I don’t have connections in any other ranked clans.”

“That’s nOt what I’m asking,” she said before falling silent for a moment...

“Why nOt just make yoUr own clan?”

...And then saying something surprising.

“...Our own clan?” I felt like it was way too late for a new clan to make it into the rankings.

“A clan *you’re* in woUld attract the bear likE honey, and the PKs in your pArty would follow yOu too, right? And if yoU and the beAr are bOth in, Figaro will fOllow, and then Hannya’ll comE after her hubby. You cAn probably also grab sOme duel rankers who got nothin’ bEtter to do. A lineUp like that’d make it in the rAnkings, wouldn’t it? Quality ovEr quantity and all that.”

I was speechless. That idea had never crossed my mind.

Though lacking in number, many of the people I knew were powerful, experienced, and well-established. Since clan ranking was depending on completed quests and their difficulty... it wasn’t impossible that a team made up of them would make it in the rankings.

“HonestlY, I think your brOther’s prEsence alone would gEt you on the board,” Xunyu added. “He probAbly has enough quest pOints for that.”

I was about to argue with her, but I remembered that Shu told me that he had cleared many high-difficulty quests — difficulty ten included. And on top of that, he did them either alone or in a small group.

In that case, Xunyu's estimate didn't actually seem unlikely.

"...Thanks, Xunyu," I said. "I'll talk to my group about it."

I can't have imagined what would've happened if Miss Eldritch turned out to be my only option, but I now saw a glimmer of hope. I had nothing but gratitude to Xunyu for showing it to me.

"You're treating that woman like the physical manifestation of despair. Even I feel a bit sorry for her, but I suppose your experience with her was just *that* rough..." Nemesis remarked. Abduction and confinement definitely qualified as "rough," yeah.

"Well, anywAy, good luck with thE peace talks or wAr or whatever stuff gOes on here," Xunyu said.

"Speaking of which, what are you gonna do?" I asked.

"I ain't joinin' the rEtinue. I still gotta prOtect Cang, and hell, thoUgh I get particIpating in a war as a mErc, it'll caUse problEms to hAve a foreign Master amOng the bodyguards at a peAce talk, won't it? It'll mAke it look like yoU *want* to fight, and the mOod of the place woUld turn all sour."

"...Good point." Although I was looking for a clan to make sure I could participate in the war, there was no guarantee that it would actually happen. It was still possible that the peace talks would go off without a hitch. Xunyu was actually being very considerate in that regard.

"And thEn... it'll all depEnd on how the peAce talks go," she continued. "If therE's a war, I'll have to negotiAte with the first princEss again. If there's nO war, I'll just go bAck to Huang He with Cang."

"I see," I said. "I'll be sad to see you go."

"Hey, yoU can always just comE visit Huang He. Just so yoU know, it's a toUrist paradise with lOts to see."

"Huang He, huh...?" I couldn't really leave Altar for the time being, but maybe I could go visit some other countries once things calmed down here. Shu said that he'd traveled a lot, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to try that.

"...I'd love to visit Huang He, actually."

"I'll show yoU around whEn ya do."

"I'll be counting on you, then." And so, Xunyu and I parted ways.

However, a short while later, a question popped into my mind.

If the kingdom hired Xunyu... who would act as Canglong's bodyguard on his way back home?

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After parting ways with Xunyu, I went straight to where my party was waiting for me and reported that The Golden Pirates had disbanded. I then told them I was thinking of getting into the rankings by making a new clan with us and Shu, among others.

B3 responded with, "I guess it's possible that we'd make it in. Though I'd need to know how many points your brother has."

You could always check your own points in the records window, and we could gauge our eligibility by comparing our combined points with what her clan had when it was still active. However, B3 also said that since a lot of clans were gathering mercenaries to get themselves onto the rankings, we would probably need more points than Mad Castle used to have.

I had to know if Shu was up for this, among other things, so I went ahead and contacted him. After checking my friend list to confirm that he was online, I used my Telepathy Cuffs to call him.

When I told him we were thinking of creating a clan, he immediately asked me where we were. I told him the name of the establishment, and it only took him about thirty minutes to arrive.

"Beary sorry for the wait."

"Woow! Ray! It's been so loong!"

...As it turns out, he was accompanied by a familiar face.

"Lei-Lei?!" Lei-Lei, the Prodigal of Feasts. She was the kingdom's fourth Superior, and I hadn't seen her since the welcome party on my first ever day in *Dendro*.

The fact that she'd spiked my drink still came back to me every now and then — mostly when I was drinking something.

Lei-Lei had a reputation for rarely coming online, and she didn't seem to have a set pattern to her login times. Why was she here now...?

"Lei-Lei and I went on a quest together fur the first time in awhile," said Shu.

"The past few times I could manage to come online recently, Shu was busy making popcorn, so this was our first co-op gig in a long time." Oh yeah — Shu had told me they'd been questing every now and then.

I never expected them to be doing that *today*, though...

My party was also very surprised to encounter a Superior who was such a rare sight.

"So... let's talk about that clan," said Shu.

"Ah... yeah," I said, after I'd recovered from the shock.

Shu, Lei-Lei, and I sat at the same table, and I explained our current situation.

"I see," said Shu. "Well, you beary much did the right thing by not letting yourself end up in debt to the fox." I nodded at him. I looked at B3, who pondered for a bit, but then nodded herself in agreement.

"Well, furst, let's start by addressing the points we'll need to get into the clan rankings. Here's how much I've got."

Shu opened his records window and showed us. He had several more digits than me, but I didn't know if it was enough to enter the rankings. I looked at B3, and noticed that her eyes were wide open.

"Umm, how does it look...?" I asked her.

"...He has... over twice what our *entire clan* had before disbanding," she answered. The rest of us were all lost for words.

B3's Mad Castle was a famous Altarian PK clan, and though they'd ultimately lost against the overwhelming force that was Figaro, they certainly weren't short on both quantity and quality of players. They must've completed a huge amount of quests and accumulated an enormous number of points, yet Shu here had over double that *just by himself*.

...I once again became aware of just how absurd Superiors were.

"...This is more than enough, even considering how many points other clans will be getting by taking on mercenaries," B3 added.

"I see..." I said. It was now clear that we'd make it into the rankings with just Shu on our side.

"Yeah. My name's enough to carry you into the rankings," he said. "But befur that, I have a question for you."

The air around him seemed to have changed suddenly, but I was the only one who seemed to notice. It must've been a pretty minor change that only I could pick up on.

"...What is it?" I asked.

"The day you first logged in, you said that you'd be gunning fur a spot in the rankings." ...Yeah, I could remember myself saying something like that, and even making a goal of it. However, on that very same day, I got the death penalty — and realized how powerless I was. Nemesis and I recovered from that defeat, and that moment served as our starting point before going on to be swept up in all kinds of events.

Still, that didn't change the fact that my overall goal was getting into the rankings.

"If you make a clan now and I join it, you will *definitely* get in the rankings," he continued. "Even if I didn't join, you could probably manage just with all your friends. Honestly, even if that wasn't enough either, you could beary easily gather mercs with just your name and some pocket money."

I hadn't realized it until now, but he was right — there was a solution available even if I didn't get his help.

"But... will you be able to live with that?" he asked.

I pondered this.

"You think you can bear to become a ranker thanks to others instead of your own merits...? Won't that leave a bad taste in your mouth? More importantly, do you actually have the resolve to found a clan that has *me* as a member?" He was talking with the same jovial tone as usual, but I could tell that he was completely serious.

His question made me think about the fact that I was actually about to become a ranker.

I was pretty sure that clan rankings weren't what I'd had in mind back when I said that I wanted to do this. I thought I was going to increase my power and get into either the kill or duel rankings.

However, I had basically no chance of entering the rankings based on kill count, and I had neither the time nor the ability to become a proper duelist. The only way I'd ever become a ranker would be through clan rankings, and that was well within my reach. I could get there by either forming my own clan or joining Tsukuyo Fuso's.

Some would see this as relying too much on other people, and I could understand that point of view. The person I was back when I'd decided on this goal certainly wouldn't be satisfied with this state of affairs.

However...

Not saying a word, I looked at Nemesis. She also said nothing, telepathically or otherwise. She was just looking straight at me.

"...Yeah," I said. "I already have my answer."

I closed my eyes, let out a breath... and looked right into Shu's eyes, beneath the costume.

"...You're not wrong, Shu. Back when I set this goal, I probably didn't think that I'd become a ranker like this."

Like he said, changing my ultimate goal like this did leave a bad taste in my mouth. He knew me better than anyone, so definitely could say that about me.

"But as I am now... that would be a huge mistake."

All of that wasn't important to me anymore. My perspective then and my perspective now were just too different. Only about two months separated those two perspectives, but the weight of those two months was immense.

"By limiting myself to my old goals, I'd be unable to do anything for the kingdom... for Azurite," I spoke the name of my friend. "That would leave an even *worse* taste in my mouth. I just can't do that."

As I was now, I could clearly see what I had to prioritize.

"I'll seize this possibility with all my heart." I was willing to do whatever it took to achieve the things I desired.

Also, I didn't actually think doing this meant I relied too much on other people.

"Whether it's you, my party, or my friends... I'll make a clan with anyone who's willing to join me and become a ranker through that." Their power was their own, but the very fact that we were now united was the result of all the time we'd spent and the memories we made, as the person I'd been slowly transformed into the person I was now.

"I will proudly state that these bonds are *part* of my power, and I will wield them to fight alongside Azurite." The person I was now had already decided to give everything he had to face the challenges ahead and seize hold of that possibility.

"That... is the choice I've made!"

We were going to make a clan and enter the rankings. This was the path I chose, and I would never regret it.

Silence filled the entire establishment.

Shu, Nemesis... no one said a single word as time slowly ticked onwards.

Amidst this stillness, Shu slowly opened his mouth.

“You pass,” he said, and I felt like he was smiling under his costume. “I’ll pledge my name and power to your clan, O fearless leader.”

“Thanks Sh—... Huh?” As I thanked him, I realized what he just said.

“Leader? ...Me?”

“Well, yeah. Fur sure. Your clan’ll get my name in the roster, but it’ll be *your* clan. That makes you the clan leader, right?”

...Right. I’d resolved to make a clan, but I hadn’t yet thought about who would lead it.

I looked at my party, and B3 slowly nodded.

“This party, King of Destruction, and anyone else you would invite — they’d all be joining because of *you*. It wouldn’t make sense for anyone else to be the leader.”

“Yes. Exactly,” Marie agreed.

“Well, it’d attract weirdos because birds of a feath—... Ahem... I mean, you’ll have really diverse members because of your popularity,” Rook said. So they wanted me to be the leader too, huh...?

“You’re the only one fit to lead this clan,” said B3.

“...All right,” I replied. I clearly had no choice, so I just gathered my resolve. If I shrunk back from this, I wouldn’t be able to keep going forward and seize that possibility I wanted. “I... I will become the clan leader.”

The moment I said that, Nemesis started clapping. She was soon joined by Shu, Rook, Marie, B3, Lei-Lei, and...

“...Hold on! Is *everyone* here clapping?!” I just realized that I’d made that whole speech while everyone in the place was staring at me.

...I was reminded of that moment at the fountain, back when I got the death penalty for the first time.

...Man, is this embarrassing, I thought.

“Heheheh,” Shu chuckled. “I only asked fur your motivations because I didn’t want to hand you my name fur free. But I’m satisfied. That declaration was beary fiery.”

That was your whole reason for asking?!

“Heheh,” Nemesis chuckled smugly. “Getting all fired up when it matters is one of his good points, Brother Bear.”

“I know.”

"Don't just *say* something like that! You're making this even more embarrassing!" My reaction made everyone around burst out laughing.

"Yep-yep! What a good conclusion!" said Lei-Lei, who was laughing particularly loudly. "Oh, and if you're making a clan, I'm joining too!"

"HUH?" Those words made everyone — even Shu — doubt what we were hearing.

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Gideon the Duel City

After that exchange, the group hurried to submit the clan formation registration. They had to hurry, because there was really no telling when Lei-Lei could make it online again.

The founding of country-affiliated clans and addition of new members could be handled in country-affiliated adventurer guilds, so that was where they were heading.

Ray's party chatted amongst themselves about the new clan, while Shu and Lei-Lei lagged behind, walking together some distance back from them.

"So, what was that all about, Shu?" Lei-Lei asked, making sure that only Shu heard. "If Ray's response hadn't been what you wanted, you wouldn't have actually joined his clan, would you?"

"...You can tell?"

"I've known you for a pretty long time, after all," she said with a smile.

"I see," Shu nodded in understanding.

Just as she assumed, Ray's response *did* influence Shu's decision.

There were several reasons for that, and aside from a confirmation of his brother's determination, the main one was that the name of the King of Destruction simply carried far too much weight.

"Clans with Superiors create many enemies," Shu said. Sol Crisis had once tried to gain fame by PKing Ray. This was the same thing, except the scale was orders of magnitude greater. That was just how valuable a Superior's name was.

Ray had already had some unfortunate ties to certain people in Dryfe and was targeted fairly often as a result. Shu was worried that his presence in Ray's new clan would only make things worse.

“That’s also why I was shocked when you said that you were joining too,” said Shu.

“Hey, might as well go all in,” she replied. “Once you’re on board, a second Superior won’t change much, right?”

“...When he recovers, Figaro will likely join too... and then Hannya will follow him.”

“Wow. That makes four Superiors, then.”

“...That would make it the country-affiliated clan with the second-highest amount of Superiors, right under Sefirot. As the leader, Ray would attract even more attention than before.”

“It’d be a whole lot of trouble...”

And despite knowing all this, Shu had decided to join Ray’s clan.

“Still, I heard the resolve in his voice, so there’s nothing more to say. I’ll stand by him as both a clan member and a brother.”

Shu believed that if anyone could face the various troubles approaching them, it would be Ray.

Thus, a new clan was born. Led by the newbie known as Ray Starling, it had the highest number of Superiors among all clans in the three western countries.

Chapter Three: The Fearsome Clan

Altea, The Royal Capital, The Royal Castle

There was only one week left until the peace talks, and Altimia was hard at work in her office preparing for it. She had to make sure the country could survive any eventuality... including her own death.

She could envision three scenarios in which she might die.

One — the peace talks could turn out to be a trap.

Two — the peace talks could be genuine, but go very badly, and a battle would break out right then and there.

Three — a third party might target the talks and interfere.

In scenarios one and two, the war between Dryfe and Altar would resume.

However, it was difficult to predict what would happen in the third scenario. The optimal solution would have to be found by those left behind.

Elizabeth was too young to make such decisions, so Altimia decided to entrust this duty to her confidant, Marquis Findle, and her trusted friend, Liliana. She made sure to specify that she wanted them to act as Elizabeth and Theresia's guardians in the event of her untimely death.

"Integra didn't make it in time..." Integra — Altimia's close friend and the Arch Sage's heir.

Her letter had said that she would be returning, but gave no timeframe. So far, there were no reports of her return to the capital, and the peace talks were just around the corner. By now, Altimia was working with the assumption that Integra would not make it and had prepared for the event without taking her presence into consideration.

As she continued her work, there was a knock on the door.

It turned out to be the royal guard tasked to keep watch outside of the gate. He reported that Ray Starling had arrived, and she told him to let Ray into the office.

Ray had shown up in the capital yesterday, and Altimia had asked him to visit her when he got the chance. As a college student, he returned to his other world — “logged out” — quite often, so she was surprised that he agreed to come the very next day.

“Welcome, Ray and Nemesis. It’s been quite a while,” she said, as they both entered.

“Yeah. It has been, hasn’t it?” Ray replied.

“Last we saw each other was during the Hannya incident,” added Nemesis.

“Indeed. I had lots to do in preparation for the peace talks, so I returned to the capital right away.”

“How’s that going, anyway?”

“Quite well. Everything is more or less settled. At any rate, there are two reasons why I called you here. The first is Silver.”

“Silver?” Ray tilted his head. He hadn’t expected to hear his Prism Steed’s name.

“Apparently, a copy of an original Prism Steed’s design is necessary for the repair operations in Quartierlatin. Second Model Prism Steeds are too simplified to be of use.”

“I see,” said Nemesis. “So some corners were cut, it would seem — that makes sense for mass-produced units.”

“Indeed,” Azurite nodded. “That is why the repair operations require structural data from an original Prism Steed. Mr. Blue Screen is at the workshop here in the capital right now. Could you meet with him later?”

“Sure,” said Ray. “So, what’s the other thing you wanted to talk about?”

“...I have a personal question for you.”

“You do?” Ray wondered what it could possibly be, but Azurite came right out and said it.

“You created a clan, didn’t you?”

“Oh, that. You heard about it already?”

“Yes. It’s quite the talk of the town...”

Altimia fell silent, and her cheeks flushed a bit.

The reason for that was the public statement Ray had supposedly made. Altimia hadn’t heard it personally, but just *imagining* it was enough to make Altimia turn red.

“Azurite? What’s wrong?” Ray asked.

“...Nothing,” she replied. “More importantly, what members have you gathered?”

“There’s me, Shu, the rest of my party, and Lei-Lei. We also invited some other Masters we know, and three of them agreed to join. That makes nine in total so far.”

As far as clans went, it wasn’t particularly large. However, two of the members were Superiors, and two more were famous player killers, so it was already an extremely noteworthy group.

The other three who’d joined were the three girls Ray’s party occasionally quested with — Kasumi, Fujinon, and Io. Rook had invited Kasumi. Her response was, “Wow... A clan that has Rook, Ray, and even Teacher... That’s incredible...!” and she instantly agreed.

The other two hadn’t hesitated to join, either.

...Kasumi actually fainted when she met the other members, but that was a minor detail.

That was B3’s fault. Unfortunately, she happened to be in Barbaroy mode when Kasumi showed up.

Ray also reached out to duel rankers he often sparred with, but so far, none of them had agreed to join. He’d avoided inviting Riser, though, since he’d been entrusted with the Babylonian Battlegroup — Bishmal, though, outright refused, saying, “I ain’t in a clan, but I’m gonna stand by my buddy Riser!”

Juliet, Chelsea, and Max had all said they’d think about it.

Chelsea was still in a state of shock from her previous clan disbanding, so she couldn’t decide whether or not to enter a new clan at this point; Juliet was so worried about her friend that she also decided not to join yet.

Max, on the other hand, was hesitant because Ray’s clan members were a bit... much.

Chelsea and Juliet said they would give their answers once Chelsea had calmed down a bit, but they still hadn’t decided whether they’d join Ray’s clan or create a new one themselves.

“...Your brother makes perfect sense, but I did not expect to hear Lei-Lei’s name there.” Altimia said.

“I was surprised too,” Ray replied. “Also, Shu said that Figaro and Hannya will probably join, but they’re not in officially yet because they haven’t returned.”

That meant that Ray’s clan would most likely have *four* Superiors. Altimia didn’t know whether to be shocked or exasperated by that.

"Until recently, I could have never imagined that the kingdom's Superiors would gather under a single flag like this... I suppose we have you to thank for all of this"

"You're the real reason, actually. I decided to make a clan because of you."

He said those words as if they were nothing, but they made Altimia's heart beat faster.

"...You always manage to say something that surprises me."

"Really?"

"Be careful, Azurite," said Nemesis. "He might have a tendency to psych himself up and make impassioned speeches when the chips are down, but he can also drop some truly heart-stopping lines even in normal conversations."

"Indeed he can."

"...Is that what you guys really think of me?" The two looked away from him and fell silent, but that was an answer by itself.

Their attitude actually made Ray feel a little self-conscious, so he lowered the Storm Visage down over his face to disguise his expression. It was impossible to tell whether that was his way of saying that he would pick his words more carefully from now on, or a show of his embarrassment at realizing he put his foot in his mouth more often than he'd thought.

"At any rate, setting aside the matter of your mouth..." Azurite began, "we still need to talk about your clan. I want to know about more than just its roster."

"And that would be?" Ray asked, his voice muffled.

"...Could you please remove that mask?"

"All right. So, what do you wanna know?"

Altimia presented Ray with a document. It was a copy of the current, post-update clan rankings.

"Your clan's name, for one" she said. "The rankings have changed quite drastically, and I cannot tell which one is yours."

"Oh yeah, the rankings are totally different from top to bottom now," Ray said.

There were several reasons for this upheaval. First, the dissolution of clans like Golden Pirates and Mad Castle had left gaps in the rankings.

Second, many clans had been actively recruiting new members and gathering mercenaries in case a war broke out, which had given them enough points to enter the rankings for the first time.

The third reason was the AETL Union's recent split, and subsequent loss of members. The clan was a lot smaller now after Liliana's fanclub had left — and the driving force behind that had largely been Ray's attempt to join. Liliana was Elizabeth's protector, and the fact that the clan's sub-leader had refused Ray entry ended up making the second princess' fanclub upset. "Ray Starling is connected to Liliana, which means we'd practically be one step away from Elizabeth herself! What the hell were you thinking, you dumbass?!" they'd cried.

"Shut up! You brainlets can't possibly understand our feelings!" Liliana's fanclub argued back.

Altimia's fanclub had tried to calm the situation down, while Theresia's fanclub was content to act like it was none of their business.

All this conflict ultimately led to Liliana's fanclub leaving AETL Union and creating a new clan, called Liliana FC. The fact that this splinter clan made it in the rankings all by itself made it clear that AETL Union was a force to be reckoned with.

That also meant AETL Union was now actually just AET Union... even though the names of country-affiliated clans couldn't be changed, so it would officially remain "AETL Union."

That wasn't the only disaster they'd met with, though.

Through DIN, they'd also learned about Elizabeth's wedding and found out that she would be moving to Huang He, which had had an absolutely devastating impact on Elizabeth's fanclub. Some were so shocked that they barely managed to log on, some almost went crazy and got the death penalty from a mysterious sunglasses-wearing PK, and some said "Huang He, huh? That's a bit far, but..." and began preparing to leave Altar. All in all, it was not good.

They'd lost some members because of all this, and had dropped in the rankings.

The only silver lining for them was the fact that they weren't aware of Ray and Altimia's relationship. If Altimia hadn't worn a mask while they were operating together, the clan might've been completely torn apart.

As a result, AETL Union had dropped to 8th in the rankings, compared to Liliana FC at 27th — which was quite bad, considering their previous power.

Now, most would've expected the clan in the 3rd place — K&R — to take the Union's spot, but that wasn't what happened. That was all due to a new clan that hadn't been seen on the list before.

"A great many new clans have made it onto the rankings, but I am particularly concerned about the one in second place," said Altimia.

"Huh? Second?"

"I have never even heard of this clan before, yet it's right behind those Lunar Society people. They must be a very serious threat."

"Umm, Azurite..." Nemesis hesitantly spoke up. "That would be..."

"Their name is disturbingly sinister," Azurite continued. Not saying a word, Ray and Nemesis looked at the list on the table... then they both glanced away.

"Could they be one of those fearsome 'PK clans,' as you Masters call them...?" Altimia asked, and neither of them knew how to answer.

"Uhh... well, in a way, it is, I guess?" said Ray.

"...'PK clan' is certainly apt. Obviously those other two fit the description, but I imagine that Brother Bear and the Chinese snake have killed many, as well."

"I see, Brother Bear and Chinese sn—... what did you just say?" Altimia couldn't help but ask.

After all, "Brother Bear" was how Nemesis referred to Shu, the King of Destruction.

That could only mean that...

"...Azurite," Ray looked into her eyes and finally spoke up. A cold sweat stood out on his face. "The clan in second place... is our clan."

"...Huh?" The answer almost made Altimia's heart stop.

She once again looked at the list, focusing on the second rank.

Listed there was indeed the clan that Ray had made in order to protect Altar and fight alongside Altimia. It was also an extremely powerful clan that currently had two Superiors, would soon have four, and perhaps might gather even more in the future. It was a very special clan, both for Altimia and the entire kingdom.

She hadn't even considered that this second-place clan might've been Ray's. After all, she didn't think that a clan with so few members could possibly make it that high, even if it had Superiors.

More importantly, she hadn't imagined that they would give it such a sinister name.

"...Why *that* name?"

"...Stuff happened." Ray slowly opened his mouth and began telling the story.

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A Week Ago, Death Soldier, Ray Starling.

It was the fateful day on which I finally founded a clan.

We were going through the clan creation process at the adventurer's guild counter. We didn't have to set a HQ or anything like that yet, so we had no trouble filling out the form... but then came the most troublesome part — actually naming it.

The clan name conveyed its reputation. That made it extremely important, and an important decision is always difficult.

The founding members were all extremely unique people, so there wasn't a lot of overlap in the kind of names we liked.

Even if we could find a name all of us actually agreed on, the well-informed among us would find out that they were already being used by, for example, a ranking Granvaloan clan or a bandit gang that used to operate in Caldina or something like that.

We talked about it for more than an hour, right until the adventurer's guild was about to close.

"I have an idea," B3 said as she adjusted her glasses, the light glinting off them as she did so. "It's the method I used to generate my clan name, and it's a fairly popular one in general, too."

She reached into her inventory, took out a piece of paper, and split it into twelve equal parts.

"The founding members of the clan — the six of us, in this case — each write down a word or phrase on two cards. One card is for the first half of the name, while the other's for the second half. They're then put into two separate boxes. Do we have any handy...?"

"Should I make a couple of the paper boxes I use fur my popcorn?" asked Shu.

“Please do.” Shu reached into his pocket-type inventory and took out some flat paper boxes, along with some tape. As he began folding them into actual boxes, B3 continued.

“The clan’s leader will then pull a card from each box. Then, they’d combine the two cards they’ve drawn, a first half and a last half, and the result is the clan’s name.”

“That’s simple, but I’m intrigued,” said Rook. “I also think it works out well that the leader is the one pulling the cards.”

The rest of the group nodded.

“Yes,” said B3. “It’s an easy, fun way to make a clan name. Lots of famous clans have used it, including my own Mad Castle and, to my knowledge, Goblin Street.”

...So you can make some pretty cool names you’d never have come up with otherwise like this, huh? I thought.

Shu quickly finished making the boxes and everyone began secretly writing down their contributions. Personally... I decided to pick positive words. Thus, I put “Life” for my first half, and “Guard” for the second.

“Life Guard” sounded like the pretty mundane profession, but the chances of me pulling both of my own cards was low, and on their own, the words could potentially combine well with a lot of different things.

Eventually, we all finished writing and put the cards in the correct boxes. Nemesis then shook the box for the first half, while Babi did the same for the other one, mixing up the cards inside. Only members could write the words, so we left the Embryos in charge of the shuffling.

Finally, the preparation was done.

“I’ll start.” Everyone focused on me as I pulled out a card from the box for the first half.

Tense, I looked at what was written on it.

“...Eh?” The word on it was... *Death* — the opposite of what I’d written on my first card.

The extremely ominous word made me fall completely silent. No one else said anything, either. They were all just staring at the second box.

Honestly, I felt like this was already a failure, but I pulled out the second card regardless.

On it, there was the word “Period.”

I put the words together, creating “Death Period.”

“What kinda combination is this?!” I exclaimed.

Both words just mean some kind of ending! This clan ended before it even began! It’s way worse than any PK clan name! I thought.

“...Amazing how you pulled something so... intense... on your first try,” said Nemesis.

“Hey, this is a bit...” This was supposed to be a clan that would protect the kingdom during the upcoming war. With a name like *that*, you’d think we were Altar’s worst nightmare. I wasn’t sure about all this...

“...I like it.”

...B3? I thought.

“This clan name is awesome! I mean, I’m the one who put ‘Death’ in there, but I never would’ve imagined we’d get a combo like *that*!”

Hold on a second, Death Shadow, Marie Adler.

“Ohh, now that just rocks! I love names like that!”

Lei-Lei, why are you so excited?

“As fur as I know, there’s no famous clan with that name.”

Well, that’s important, but...

“I’m the one who put in ‘Period,’” said Rook. “If you interpret it as ‘a full stop on unnecessary death,’ it really seems to suit your clan, don’t you think?”

He wore a smile that showed he honestly believed every word he was saying.

“Well, if you read it like that, then, I guess...”

“...From that point of view, your ‘Life’ suggestion would have been catastrophic,” said Nemesis. “‘Life Period — a full stop on life,’ Now that was a PK clan name if I ever saw one.”

“I guess this is a case of the negative of a negative being a positive,” I said.

“Ha ha ha! It suits this bunch beary well,” said Shu, and everyone nodded in agreement.

Anyway, all the members seemed to like the name.

...I still found it a bit unsettling, but I could deal with it if I looked at it the same way Rook did.

“All right,” I said. “The name of our clan will be... Death Period.”

And so, it was decided.

...But it really does *sound kinda sinister, huh?*

Interlude: The Imperium’s Preparations

A Certain Location in the Imperial Capital, Vandelheim

Three days remained until the peace talks, and it wasn’t just the kingdom of Altar that was busy with preparations for the momentous event.

By now it was well known in the imperium that the imperator’s little sister, Claudiah, would be representing him; just like Altar, Dryfe was gathering Masters to act as her retinue — and one Master was more enthusiastic about this particular *quest* than the others.

That day, Zeta was at the castle — specifically, in the room she was borrowing for the time being. Safely inside this personal space of hers, she was practicing how to prepare proper coffee. Zeta knew that Sechs, the leader of Illegal Frontier, was a coffee aficionado, so she’d begun learning how to make it herself. She’d found out about his taste for it when he wrote her an email saying that he’d become so good at preparing coffee that even Gerbera had found it delicious. Reading that had actually made Zeta somewhat jealous of the girl.

However, since Zeta wasn’t terribly good at picking up on nuances of taste, she couldn’t quite tell whether her coffee was up to standard or not. She finally decided she could judge it by smell, at least, but when she brought her nose close to the cup...

“Zeta! I’m going to the peace talks! The Unbreakable is gonna be there too!”

...A red-haired, fine-looking man threw open the door without so much as a knock.

The momentum of the opening door shook the entire room. The black coffee that Zeta held in front of her face splashed out of the cup, right on the bandages on her face.

There were now dark polka dots on the previously immaculate white fabric.

“Ah...” The man who’d entered the room — Logan Goddhart — realized what he’d done, but instead of apologizing, he just froze in place.

“Hhaah...” Zeta sighed, putting away the coffee cup and removing her bandages as if it was nothing.

Brown skin, red eyes, a young and pretty appearance... her face was fully exposed now, but Zeta didn’t seem to mind. She merely took some spare bandages out of her inventory and began to replace the ones she’d removed.

This was the first time Logan had ever seen her face. It left him speechless, but not because he was enchanted by it or anything. He was just wondering why she would expose it so casually after hiding it all this time, and he felt as though he’d seen that face somewhere. The recollection was rather vague, though. He certainly hadn’t seen it in person before, but he was sure he’d caught a glimpse of it in some photo or video.

However, before Logan could remember anything more about it, Zeta finished replacing her bandages and called out to him.

“Suggestion,” she said. “Should be a must from now on. Also, you should watch your strength when opening doors”

“O-Okay. Sure,” Logan could do nothing but nod.

“Matter at hand. What business do you have? You mentioned the peace talks and The Unbreakable.”

“Y-Yeah! Zeta! I’m going to the peace talks! I’m gonna beat The Unbreakable and clear my name!”

“Refusal.” Zeta shot down his idea with a single word. She didn’t even bother with an explanation this time.

“Wh-Why?!” Logan asked. “That build you suggested to me is super powerful! There’s no way I can lose against that newbie! Hell, I could take on *all* of Altar’s Superiors now!”

“Discrepancy,” Zeta answered. “There is a discrepancy in your stated goal. It is *possible* that the peace talks will lead to battle — but officially, it is not part of the premise.”

“But it’s obviously gonna happen, right?”

“Unclear. That depends on how the talks proceed. Also... should you not focus on raising your level and gathering sacrifices? You are not even level 500 any longer.”

“Ghh...” Zeta was right — at the moment, Logan’s level was in the 300s.

Part of the reason for this was Zeta, but ultimately, Logan only had himself to blame.

Zeta had presented him with a build that took full advantage of his Superior Embryo, Rumpelstiltskin. It was the best build she could devise for him, and Logan fully agreed with her assessment.

In fact, he agreed with it *too much*.

In his haste to finish Zeta's suggested build as quickly as possible, Logan had *reset all of his jobs* aside from his main, Hell General, and replaced them with the low-tier jobs necessary for the build. That greatly reduced his level, and spring break was over for him by that point, so he hadn't had the time to regain his lost levels yet after going back to school.

"Word of warning," said Zeta. "It is dangerous for you to go as you are. You still are not prepared to use this new strategy, and with your level, Altar's High Prieste—"

"Don't worry! Your build is a seriously real masterpiece! Level doesn't even matter! Though, just in case, I'll only go after raising my level to 500!"

"Insufficient. That will not be eno—"

"I have been reborn! Watch and witness the power of Hell General, Logan Goddhart! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!" Laughing uproariously, Logan left the room.

"Uninformed... He does not listen to other people and is slow to process information. Based on his statements, he probably does not even know that Ray Starling created a clan full of Superiors."

Zeta wondered if it would be good to teach him about the importance of gathering information, but she felt that he might become *too* concerned with the information he had and act on his own more than he ought to. So for now, she decided against it.

She then closed the still-open door and folded her arms before starting to ponder.

"...Curious." Her current thoughts were somewhere along the lines of, *Is that boy really that stupid?*

She'd known he was overconfident and particularly demented for someone his age — but after she'd started teaching him, he seemed to have become downright reckless. However, that could very well have been because his pride had been shattered by Ray Starling, Franklin, then Zeta herself, all in a short period of time.

Or perhaps the new build and strategy she'd provided had gone to his head? Even Zeta herself would have described it as "extremely effective while still only requiring the level of thought that Logan was capable of *before* his losing streak."

For a Superior, Logan was really lacking in adaptability and player skill, and her build had accounted for that while making him as powerful as possible.

Fortunately, Logan himself seemed to really like it.

He liked it a bit *too* much, in fact — seeing how quickly he accepted Zeta's suggestion and how he'd rushed to make the switch.

Although warped and broken, Logan seemed to trust Zeta, at least. He might've come here to report his next endeavor to the person he could call a teacher.

He really ought to work on his listening skills, though, since he seemed determined to completely ignore her warning.

"...Unease." That single word summed up her feelings about Logan's attendance at the peace talks. If it was just a question of him losing another battle, it wouldn't be that important — but it wasn't out of the question that he'd launch a surprise attack on Altar's forces, ruin the peace talks, get himself onto Dryfe's wanted list, and end up in gaol.

That wasn't the only thing she was uneasy about, though.

She was also worried about the fact that *she definitely wouldn't be there herself* — meaning that she had no way to stop him. Though, depending on her actions, there may end up being no need to stop him in the first place.

"Time. I should go too," she whispered as she gazed at the vista outside.

Her room was on the south side of the castle, so she had an excellent view in the direction of Altar. There, she saw the Border Mountain Belt, home of the skydragons. However, she seemed to be focused on something beyond it.

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Vandelheim Outskirts, Triangle of Wisdom Headquarters

As an R&D group, the Triangle of Wisdom operated several testing areas. They used them to evaluate new Magingear models and add-ons, and the areas would be active day and night, as there were members of the clan online more or less all the time.

In one of their particularly large outdoor testing areas, they were trying out something rarely seen here — a bunch of *tanks*.

As the creators of humanoid Magingears, the Triangle of Wisdom rarely used the “old-fashioned” sort of tank. A few members customized them as a curiosity, but that was about it.

However, at the moment there were several tanks of the same model, all erratically moving around the test area and occasionally firing their guns.

This unusual sight was being observed by ToW members, as well as two men who were standing together some distance away.

One was a spectacled man in a lab coat — someone who looked like a classic mad scientist. The other was dressed in a worn military uniform. He had an unshaven face and a cigarette in his mouth, which gave him the air of a stereotypical delinquent soldier.

“The peace talks are in three days, huh?” said the man in the lab coat.

“Did ya hear? Logan’s gonna join as a bodyguard,” the soldier said.

“Bodyguard, eh? That doesn’t suit His Excellency at all. I think he’ll abandon that job and attack Ray Starling.”

“...I can see that, yeah. Better hope the beasty lady can hold ’im back.”

“The King of Beasts has some personal business of her own. I’m not sure if she’ll have time for His Excellency.”

The two men were Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin and King of Chariots, Murdoch Martinez — a peculiar Master who held the rank of captain in the imperium’s army.

“Don’t ya have some business with Ray Starling too?” Murdoch asked.

“I do... I really do,” Franklin answered. His expression didn’t change, but Murdoch could sense that the atmosphere around was different.

“Ya heard he made a clan?”

“Of course. Oh, how I laughed at all of that. The fact that *he* made a clan, its name, and even the ranking... I just completely lost it. I’d say I haven’t laughed like that in a long time, but I’d be lying.”

Shortly before Ray had made his clan, Franklin read some documents about an incident in Caldina — and the fact that, by some twist of fate, two people he knew very well were somehow together now had made him burst into laughter.

“You okay with stayin’ behind when Ray Starling’s gonna be there?”

“I am. The ace up my sleeve still needs some final adjustments. Also, I'm planning to break Ray Starling regardless of whether the outcome is war or unification," Franklin chuckled. "As I'm sure you're well aware, conflicts between Masters aren't a crime."

"I see. So ya basically handed this chance to Logan on a silver platter, huh?"

"I guess you could say that. Though, looking at the participants, I'm not sure how useful he'll be."

"Hm?"

"With His Excellency and the others, the retinue'll be impressive, but honestly, I feel like anyone besides King of Beasts is overkill... or more like, useless."

The two knew that Behemot, Logan, and many other Masters would go to the peace talks, while King of Thieves, Zeta would operate as part of some other plot.

Franklin and Murdoch would not be participating, however. They would stay behind to protect the imperium on the off chance that Caldina would use the peace talks as an opportunity to make their move against Dryfe.

Caldina, though, had its own share of problems. From what they knew, the country was in the midst of a chaotic situation surrounding UBM orbs that had leaked in from Huang He.

"Oh, right," said Franklin, remembering something. "Take this."

"Is this a... newspaper?"

"It's the latest info on Caldina I bought from DIN." The front page article was titled "WAR BETWEEN CALDINA AND GRANVALOA?!" and the photo attached showed a building engulfed in flames.

It read as follows: "Treasurebeast Orbs have been stolen from Huang He's treasury and taken to various areas in Caldina, where they caused all sorts of turmoil. They even recently led to direct armed conflict between Caldina and Granvaloa. The seafaring country has dispatched four Superiors to Caldina's territory: Miroslava Swampman, the 'Charm of Land and Sea'; the Edwards spouses, the 'Avowed'; and Antimicrobic Soy Sauce, the 'Human Bomb'; Their goal is believed to be the Treasurebeast Orb, which possesses the ability to transform water into dry land. Caldina responded to this invasion by mobilizing Sefirot to deal with the situation."

Reading all that made the cigarette drop from Murdoch's mouth.

"...Over *half* of The Great Seven Embryos of Granvaloa? Are they insane?" he asked.

"Not in the slightest," Franklin responded. "After all, that orb they mentioned is really bad news for Granvaloa."

"What...? Ohh, I get it," Murdoch said after a moment of thought. "Caldina's got The Earth. Like Legendaria, Granvaloa has a geographical advantage. They keep the other countries in check by surroundin' them from the sea — so in their eyes, a thing that turns water into land? Caldina ain't allowed to have that."

With such an artifact, Granvaloa could have the territory that they so desired. However, the risks might outweigh the rewards. Caldina's Magical Apex might acquire the orb and invade by turning water into land, so Granvaloa had to secure the orb at all costs... or at least destroy it and make sure that a non-Caldinian Master defeated that UBM.

"They're basically doing the same thing we did in the ruins of Quartierlatin," said Franklin. "Granvaloa is a lot more serious, though."

Like the name suggested, The Great Seven Embryos of Granvaloa included seven Superiors. Only four of them had been dispatched on this mission, but it wasn't because they believed that four would be enough. It's just that these were the only four who could fully use their powers even on land. In other words, they'd actually sent all the Superiors they could muster.

"...With all that goin' on, Caldina's gotta focus on their own turf, huh?" said Murdoch.

"Well, Caldina can't just break the orb and have The Earth kill the UBM. The orbs are Huang He's national treasures, so they'd only be making a new enemy. Their relations with Huang He are already strained because of the orb that broke during the incident at Cortana, so if they break one on purpose, everything would fall apart."

Caldina might have had the option of breaking it before, but now that Granvaloa was invading, it was an extremely difficult choice to make.

Granvaloa, on the other hand, would much rather break the orb and make an enemy of Huang He than lose their greatest line of defense — the sea.

And if that wasn't enough to cause chaos in Caldina, there was more. Rumor had it that even Legendaria had infiltrated the country to secure new orbs. Caldina, at the moment, was a volatile powder keg that a single spark could set off.

“If Huang He and Caldina become enemies as well, the two of us might be relieved of our guard duty and sent off to attack Caldina.” In other words, it was possible they weren’t staying behind as a safeguard against an invasion *by* Caldina, but to keep them on standby for an invasion *of* Caldina. That was certainly well within the planning abilities of the current imperator.

In fact, their ruler was probably spinning a multitude of strategies in his head at this very moment.

“...By the way, prof — did ya get the list of demands for the peace talks?” Murdoch asked.

“Not yet,” Franklin shook his head. “Though, I heard of a particular demand related to us.”

“Eh? What’s that?”

“One of the demands is...”

Franklin proceeded to tell Murdoch one of the demands that would be offered in the peace talks, and all the tanks in the test area suddenly stopped firing. Those words, meant only for Murdoch himself, made him break out in a cold sweat.

“...Man,” Murdoch mouthed in shock. “You think so too, huh, Captain? I know that His Majesty loves to strategize... but this, combined with the actions of you-know-who — it almost starts to look a little *too* ballsy. Prof, can ya hurry up with the tank mass production? I’ll increase your pay by twenty percent,” Murdoch added as he pointed at the tanks rolling to and fro.

“I can increase the production speed if I gather volunteer clan members, but... are you sure about this? It’s coming out of your pocket, not clan funds, right?”

“That’s fine. This is all just revving up for a good time, anyway. Also...” he said as he took a drag on his cigarette and grinned. “Fights and parties are both best when they’re flashy. Especially if you’re up against a goddamn land battleship.”

“Oh? You think so too, huh?”

“Fightin’ Caldina’s Rainbow might be fun too, though,” Murdoch said, his face showing an obvious joy that didn’t mesh with his rugged soldier appearance. “Though, I don’t really care if we’re throwin’ down with them or the kingdom. I'll be satisfied as long as there's war with a lotta smoke, big booms, and scrap."

In Franklin's mind, this man, who waited for war with excitement, was a true ludo. He was far less warped than Logan used to be, but anyone who actually *looked forward* to war had to be either a complete psychopath or someone who clearly saw *Dendro* as a game — an exciting experience that let you fight on the frontlines without the risk of death.

To him, this was a space in which he could sacrifice everything to satisfy his adventurous spirit.

However, that was... sane.

Compared to Franklin, who never hesitated to trample his enemies underfoot and spared no expense to reach his goals, Murdoch was an extremely sane, healthy, and perhaps even *wholesome* kind of player.

"Let's do our best in the war," said Franklin. "Even though I have no idea who we'll end up fighting."

"Yeah," nodded Murdoch. "Let's do our best."

Franklin wanted to settle the score with his nemesis.

Murdoch wanted a battlefield that would stir his heart.

These two Superiors, worlder and ludo, waited for the moment when their wishes would be fulfilled.

"By the way, His Excellency isn't the only unusual participant in the peace talks. There's another one."

"And who's that?"

"*The strongest non-Superior in Dryfe.*"

"...Seriously?"

Chapter Four: The Rabbit Skips Through the Darkness

Royal Capital Altea

It was now two nights before the peace talks. The Masters who'd taken up the position of bodyguard were still free to do whatever they wanted.

Those involved could be generally categorized into two groups.

One group of Masters would join Altimia the following morning and act as her bodyguards on the road to the peace talks, which would be taking place at the Altar-Dryfe border. They were able to do this because they had a lot of free time in real life — maybe they'd been laid off, or something similar.

The other group consisted of the Masters who would go straight to the border. They would also be participating in the peace talks, but their real life schedule prohibited them from traveling there alongside Altimia for the entire way, so they would instead meet up with everyone else at a settlement near the border.

"All right, Riser — let's check out one more place!"

"You're drinking too much, Bishmal. We've got bodyguard duty tomorrow, remember?"

Masked Riser and Bishmal — the sixth and seventh on the kingdom's duel rankings — had also answered the call, and they would be part of the first group. They had already left Gideon — their *Dendro* hometown — and arrived at the capital, where they (mostly Bishmal, actually) were sampling the local bars.

Bishmal clung to Riser's shoulder as they walked through the lively downtown area.

"Hahahah! Hey, I'll just get a ride in your Hermod's sidecar again. You'll wake me up if something happens on the way, won't ya?"

"You're relying on me way too much," Riser sighed under his mask.

What a pain, he thought. However, he didn't argue against Bishmal's idea, which was probably a sign of the companionship they'd forged through their long-lasting dueling rivalry.

"By the way, did ya hear? Our boy Ray started a clan and got in the rankings."

"I heard about it a week ago, yes."

"His clan's in second! That's amazing!"

"It really is."

"...Oh. Sorry, Riser." The position of second place in the clan rankings held a special meaning to Riser. After all, he was the temporary sub-leader of a clan called Babylonian Battlegroup... which had once occupied that very position in the rankings.

The leader, Foltesla, had yet to return, and Shulka — the sub-leader who'd given the role over to Riser — was traveling the world. Riser had no idea where he was now.

After losing Claymill, their original hometown, to the Tri-Zenith Dragon, many of the clan's members had quit. There were so few left now that you could count them on two hands.

Accordingly, they'd dropped off the clan rankings a long time ago.

"It's fine," said Riser. "When our leader returns, the Babylonian Battlegroup will aim for the top once more. All I can do until then is keep the clan going, battle as a duelist, and protect the kingdom."

"Riser..." He'd lost so much to Gloria, but that was exactly why he was so determined to protect what little he had left. That was the primary reason he took up the bodyguard job for the peace talks.

"What about you?" Riser asked. "You didn't join Ray's clan?"

"Nope. I'm not the clan type," Bishmal answered. *And if I did join a clan, I already know where I'd go,* he added, silently.

"But man, a newbie like Ray's already in the rankings, huh?"

"It's all because of his connections... and his personal strengths."

"I guess. Ray's not the only one who's been on fire recently, though... look at Kashimiya, bro. That guy actually beat Tom."

"...Yeah." Tom Cat — the second in the duel rankings. To Bishmal and Riser, he was like an impassable barrier. Duels were generally one-on-one clashes of solo battle-focused fighters, and Tom Cat's multiplication ability completely shattered that premise. He'd been a wall for Altar's duelists since before *Infinite Dendrogram* was released.

When Figaro had defeated Tom and become the current champion, Bishmal and Riser had been both shocked and happy. After all, it was clear proof that Tom *wasn't* unbeatable, which only hardened their resolve to challenge and defeat him.

However, even though Figaro had managed to scale that wall, it remained impassable for both of them.

After Foltesla had disappeared, but before Kashimiya and Rosa had come to Altar or Juliet and Chelsea had started climbing the ranks, Riser and Bishmal fought for third place while challenging Tom every chance they got.

No matter how many times they tried, though, they could never defeat him.

And while they failed time after time, the roster of top duelists began to change.

Kashimiya — a natural at the art of unsheathing, known as the fastest in the kingdom.

Juliet — a talented warrior who used every spatial dimension to its fullest.

Rosa — a master of the one-hit kill, her abilities honed in Tenchi, land of strife.

Time passed, and even more impassable walls appeared in front of Riser and Bishmal. Eventually, they dropped down to sixth and seventh in the rankings. There was even a chance that, given time, Chelsea and the rankers below her would surpass them too.

The two continued to walk without saying a word.

"We've been in *Dendro* for a pretty long time, huh?" said Bishmal, gazing up to the sky with his eyes full of nostalgia.

"Yeah. Switching between here and reality really messes with your sense of time," Riser replied. "But you haven't changed one bit since the day we met."

"Hey, and you're wearing the exact same thing you were back then. Your suit looked a lot more handmade, though."

"That's because it was. There weren't many crafting-focused Masters around at the time, so I asked a tian craftsman to make it... they didn't exactly know what a tokusatsu hero was around here back then, though, so it was difficult for me to explain what exactly I wanted in a way they could understand. I was just thankful they did as good a job as they did."

Riser's handcrafted tokusatsu hero suit had gone through many upgrades over his time in-game. His earlier ones did have, as Bishmal had put it, a kind of handmade, "amateur" quality to them.

It had become a lot easier to make such suits since then. Tians finally learned what he was talking about from Hero Club's performances, and there had been an increase in craftsman Masters who knew exactly what Riser wanted.

The demand for suits like his remained low, though.

"By the way, I haven't seen ya wear *that* recently," said Bishmal. "I know that Hermod covers for it, but still." Hermod was Riser's Embryo. It had started out as a large motorcycle, but as it evolved, it had developed a hero suit as an additional form. "Did something happen to it?" Bishmal asked.

"I used it too much. Apparently, the next time it breaks it'll be gone for good."

"Ohh. Well, that'd be a waste. Keep it around as a souvenir, at least."

"That's the plan." They had been walking while talking about the past, and before they knew it, the crowd around them had grown sparse.

"Oh boy, we wandered away from downtown. Better turn around," said Bishmal.

"Shouldn't we go back to the inn and sleep already?"

"No way! The night's still young!" the hearty duelist cried. He and Riser turned around to head back the way they came, but then...

"Masked Riser and Bishmal — the duel rankers, I presume?"

...An unfamiliar voice called out to them.

"Hm...?" Riser didn't care much for the fact that someone was addressing them so casually, but even more than that... he felt that something was very wrong.

They had *just* turned around to return downtown. However, the voice had come from *behind them* — from a place that was completely devoid of people only a moment ago.

The two turned back to see a boy, who seemed to be on the shorter side, with his hands completely hidden in his pockets. He was dressed in light clothes with no armor, but his feet were covered by metallic boots.

His most notable feature, however, were the two bunny ears sticking out of his hat.

Rabbit ears... I guess they're like Rosa's wolf ears? Riser thought, remembering his fellow duel ranker. He'd concluded at a glance that this boy was an avatar built in the character creator.

In fact, there wasn't a doubt in his mind that this boy was no tian.

Riser couldn't say exactly how he knew this so strongly. If pressed for a reason, he might say it was because the boy seemed similar to a Master he knew well — a Master he and Bishmal had just been talking about.

"Oh! It really *is* you two!"

Upon seeing their faces, the boy smiled. Riser's instincts screamed in warning at the sight.

I'll use Reveal... Hm?

He *tried* to use Reveal on the boy — but the next moment, he'd vanished from sight.

Then, three things happened at the exact same time.

First, Bishmal shouted, "Riser!" and pushed his friend away.

Second, something hit Riser's mask and he heard a voice say, "Tch. What a tough mask. I couldn't cut through it."

And third, *blood began spraying out of Bishmal's neck like a fountain*.

"Wh-What?!" Riser cried. Skilled as he was, even he couldn't process what had just happened.

It was plainly obvious they were being attacked, though, so he instantly summoned Hermod — his motorcycle-like Type Gear-Arms Embryo. A moment later, he donned the hero suit that came along with it.

"Burstfla—" With the last of his breath, Bishmal tried to activate his ultimate skill that turned his body into flame...

"Ohh. Flame transformation is pretty annoying. Please don't."

...But then the boy landed directly on his head.

The mysterious boy's metal boots had become lethal weapons — they now had guillotine-like blades jutting out of them like ice skates, but much sharper than any mere footwear.

The bladed boots split Bishmal's head open before he could activate his skill. The resurrection period expired in the blink of an eye, and the duel ranker dissolved into motes of light

The boy landed on the pavement with a loud, metallic clang.

“Bishmal!” Riser called out.

“One down,” said the boy, as Riser’s brain finally caught up with the situation.

“Who are you...?!” he roared.

“I won’t waste my time answering your questions. I’m in a hurry.”

The boy showed no intention of even giving Riser his name, but he’d seen more than enough to know that he was an enemy..

An attack...! This is the capital! You can’t fight here... Wait, no! Thankfully, the alley was empty except for them. If they fought, nobody would be caught in the crossfire. Also, Riser couldn’t help but assume that someone who’d just attacked them out of the blue would go on to attack someone else.

Knowing that, he decided he had to defeat the boy here and now.

“Storming-Man, Gusting Bane Of All Evil — Hermod!” Riser activated his ultimate skill before leaping into the sky.

His Embryo followed him, and they became one.

Riser then accelerated using Hermod’s boosters, reaching the speed of sound — and then blowing past it.

As he gained speed, he traced an arc in the sky and began to spin before finally falling downwards like a meteor from the heavens.

“RISEERRRR... KIIIIIIIIIIIIIICK!” This was the ace up Riser’s sleeve — a high-speed, high-powered kicking attack. A single hit from this could easily one-shot an upper-tier Pure-Dragon, or even a Superior Job. It was the kind of attack employed by the tokusatsu heroes whose ranks he’d always yearned to join — a true sure-kill technique.

It was also a skill unique to Hermod — the famed Riser Kick.

Riser opened with his strongest attack, fully intent on killing the mysterious boy...

“Ah...?!”

...Who was already above him.

“Jumping. Kicking. And *most* importantly, speed. Really, now. You can’t even hope to compare to me on any of these things, Masked Riser.”

Even though he went at several times the speed of sound, he heard the boy’s voice *right next to his ear*.

“And this is goodbye,” the boy said, slicing through the gaps in Riser’s suit behind both his knees — severing his legs.

With his joints destroyed, Riser could no longer control his kick.

"Ah...?!" Defenseless, he crashed into the pavement with the full force of the supersonic momentum from his ultimate skill behind him.

The impact cracked open a crater-like hole, and the pavement around it flew up into the air without even breaking apart, as though even stones couldn't keep up with what was happening. The sound and resulting shockwave alerted everyone in the area that *something* big was going on. Lights began to turn on in the surrounding buildings; screams rang out as people caught a glimpse of the scene.

"Ngh..." At the bottom of the crater in the pavement lay the scattered remains of Hermod and Riser, who already looked like a corpse.

"Still alive...? You're pretty tough," the boy said. "I guess you've got some half-baked build that boosts both AGI and END? Well, whatever. This will finish you off."

Peering down at Riser from the edge of the crater, he threw a dynamite-like cylinder bomb at him before turning and walking away.

The explosion that soon followed provoked even more screams, but the boy responsible for it was nowhere in sight.

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Wez Sea Route

The sun had already set. A vehicle sped along the path to the Altar-Dryfe border.

However, this was still Altar territory. Technology was sparse here, so this wasn't a machine, but a car-like Embryo.

"Thanks for driving me, Tomica."

"It's fine, big sis. I'm the one who should be apologizing for bringing you out here this late."

The fifth in the duel rankings, Rosa, had also accepted the bodyguard job, and since she couldn't log on to *Dendro* when it was morning in-game, she was traveling to the Altar-Dryfe border ahead of time.

She was going there using Oboroguruma — the Embryo of a fellow K&R member, Tomica.

Oboroguruma could seat several people and travel at hundreds of kilometels per hour for long periods of time. It was also a self-driving vehicle that automatically avoided obstacles, so it could maintain these great speeds despite being tethered to the ground.

"If my darling can come online before the peace talks, take him there too," said Rosa.

"I will! Though, he's faster than this car..."

"He's a sprinter, though. He can't maintain that speed for long, so you're still the best transport we've got."

"Eheheh. Thank you." As they talked, Rosa watched the landscape passing by outside the vehicle.

The nights in this land were dark, lit only by the stars, so most people wouldn't be able to see the scenery at all. However, as someone with a build specialized in ambushes regardless of the time of day, Rosa had the Night Vision skill, which let her see the surroundings as if it were noon.

"What a nice view," she said. "I should take darling on a date here."

"Umm... why not make it a picnic with the entire clan instead?"

"I'll do you one better: me, you, and darling. Just the three of us."

"Yes, please!"

"Ahahah! I'll suggest it to him sometime... Hm?"

Suddenly, Rosa's canine ears twitched. Despite what some people assumed, her base hearing ability was no different than a normal human's. However, as an ambusher, she'd acquired the Hearing Enhancement passive skill, and though her hearing still wasn't as strong as a wolf's, she was still quite a bit better at picking up sounds than an ordinary human.

"Sis?"

"...Sounds of battle? No, that ain't it." After noticing the noise, Rosa began to detect a certain pattern to them.

First, there would be the clatter of moving dragon carriages, footsteps, and the thunder of replica Prism Steeds or SMPS.

Then, there would be sounds of battle — or rather, the sound of a single attack.

And after that, silence. All the clamor of travel would vanish entirely.

Rosa knew this pattern well. She'd woven it herself many times over.

She was hearing ambushes.

Someone was launching surprise attacks on someone, then moving on to other targets. Just like Rosa and the others, the targets seemed to be en route to the Altar-Dryfe border. She guessed that they must also be rankers hired as bodyguards for the peace talks.

In that case, the attackers could only be...

“Hm...?!” At that moment, Rosa caught sight of something strange.

For a mere split second, a silhouette had appeared in the scenery reflected in Oboroguruma’s side mirror.

It was a rabbit-eared young man, only about as tall as Kashimiya.

However, the reflection didn’t last, and a moment later, something landed with a thud on the car’s roof.

“E-EHHHH?!” Tomica exclaimed in surprise.

“Tomica! Shake him off!” Rosa howled.

“EEEEK!” Tomica quickly grabbed the handle and drove Oboroguruma into a spin.

The car managed to stay grounded despite the sudden movement, and whoever was on the roof... *remained there*.

Blades had sliced through the roof, acting as anchors that kept their assailant firmly affixed in place.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Tomica... Sorry, but I’m gonna break this!”

“EEHH?!” Ignoring yet another shocked scream from Tomica, Rosa took out her Embryo. Gashadokuro...

“A Kill Supreme!”

...And engaged the Nobushi Princess’ ultimate job skill, which could only be used as the first attack.

Their assailant’s legs were basically stuck to Oboroguruma’s roof, so there was no possible way for them to dodge this deadly attack.

Despite that... Rosa missed.

Her target had vanished a moment before it landed, and her ultimate job skill only succeeded in blowing away the roof.

“EEEEEK!” While Tomica panicked, Rosa’s mind was silently racing.

She was really straightforward when it came to strategy and tactics — but when it came to pure fighting instincts, she had what some would call a “beastlike sense of smell.” She could tell by this enemy’s reek that he must be after her alone.

“...Tomica,” she said. “I’m gettin’ off.”

“E-EXCUSE ME?!”

“Use your ultimate skill to flee to the capital.”

“Eh?! Ah — I get it! But why can’t you stay with me...?”

“Because this guy would follow us back... to K&R’s headquarters.” That was why Rosa would remain behind. She alone would face the enemy who was trying to kill her and let Tomica escape.

“I got no idea who he is or where he’s from, but... wait, no... this timing... Anyone who dies now won’t be able to come to the peace talks... So that’s your plan, huh?”

“Ah? Sis?”

“Go, Tomica! Go and warn the others about this! Especially my darling!” Rosa kicked open the door of the Oboroguruma and leaped out of the speeding vehicle.

“Remnants of Warrior Dreams — Gashadokuro!”

At the moment she jumped, Rosa used Pure-Dragon-tier bones to create an exoskeleton that greatly improved her stats.

“The Fail-Safe Drive — Oboroguruma!” Tomica also used her ultimate skill, making both her and the vehicle dissolve into a hazy mist.

The enemy tried to catch up to the car and jump on it again, but his body simply passed right through it.

Oboroguruma was now floating like a ghost, passing through objects as if they weren’t there. This was the effect of its ultimate skill.

The enemy was now completely unable to touch either of them, and had no choice but to let Tomica go.

“Stop starin’ at our girl’s ass!” Now fully armored in her exoskeleton, Rosa launched an abrupt attack at her assailant — only for him to vanish right before the hit landed and reappear a short distance away.

“She’s not even a duel ranker, so I thought she’d be a pretty ordinary high-rank, but it seems like she actually has a pretty interesting skill,” he commented.

This was the same boy who’d defeated both Riser and Bishmal at the capital. He’d since left the city to find and ambush Rosa and Tomica, *who were moving at hundreds of kilometels per hour*.

“You a Dryfean Master?” Rosa asked.

“Who knows? There’s no real reason to tell you, is there?”

“Nope... I’m gonna beat you up either way!” Rosa howled as she charged at the boy.

“Too slow,” the boy said. “You’re like a tortoise. Though, with a shell like yours, cutting your flesh is going to be difficult."

He put his hand, hidden in his long sleeves, on his chin and pondered.

"I'll do this, then." After whispering this, he vanished again — *and placed bombs at every opening in Rosa's exoskeleton*.

"Huh?!" A moment later, there was a chain of explosions. At point blank range, the bombs were able to easily blow away Gashadokuro's exoskeleton and expose Rosa's flesh.

"If a tortoise shell is in the way, you just crack it open." The boy's blade-boots then pierced into one of the holes left by the bomb, tearing out Rosa's heart in one swift cut.

The wound was fatal, and her head drooped lifelessly.

"Oh, and I already know about that little trick." Rosa had used the effect of her substitute-creating special reward to maneuver behind the boy, but he simply launched a roundhouse kick that sliced her head clean from her shoulders.

"Ah...!" Rosa's face was frozen in a silent scream, full of chagrin; she received the death penalty immediately.

"I suppose that's all the Masters who were on the way to the border..." And with that, the boy vanished, leaving the night road empty.

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Altar-Dryfe Border Surroundings, Vermina Village

That night, at a village close to the Altar-Dryfe border, two girls were talking and gazing up at the stars together. The concept of air pollution didn't exist in *Infinite Dendrogram*, so the sky was full of beautiful, twinkling lights.

"By the way, classes advanced in Japan, didn't they? Did you make any friends?"

"...None in that realm are worthy of being sworn to the darkness as my companions."

"That bad, huh?" One of the girls was dressed like a pirate and had a youthful face, while the other was clad in black, gothic-styled dress-armor. The former was Chelsea the Vagrant Golden Sea, while the latter was Juliet the Black Crow — respectively the eighth and fourth in the duel rankings.

This village was close to the location of the impending peace talks, so they'd arrived here in the afternoon and were now waiting for Altimia and the other Masters who would arrive tomorrow.

"You're a nice girl, though," said Chelsea. "You're just a bit hard to approach at first."

Juliet tended to speak in an overly complicated way even in real life. She knew it made her seem like a weirdo, but it wasn't something she did consciously. Anxiety over her odd way of speaking also made her tongue-tied whenever she made an effort to talk normally.

Because of all this, she had difficulty talking to people in real life.

In *Dendro*, however, you had either Masters who viewed her unusual speech habits as mere role-playing and tians who simply took for granted that Masters were odd people, so it was far easier for her to communicate and make friends here.

Chelsea was the closest friend she had, as well as her long-time dueling rival.

"It matters not," Juliet said. "Here in this otherland, there are many I count as sworn friends."

"Yeah, like me and Max," Chelsea agreed. "But you need to make *real* friends too... Though, I'm probably not one to talk... I still need to find a boyfriend... hah."

"Chelsea..."

In trying to cheer Juliet up, Chelsea had only succeeded in making herself feel worse. She'd never been all that concerned with getting a boyfriend before, but after her clan had collapsed due to relationship drama *she wasn't even involved in*, she began to feel an odd sense of urgency.

"Umm... you're still in your twenties. You don't have to worry about that yet, do you?" said Juliet, breaking her usual speech pattern.

"Heheheh... Easy for you to say. You're still in your early teens," Chelsea replied, untouched by Juliet's attempts to console her.

"Umm... then how about we go to a... gokon?"

"'Gokon'? Ohh, that mixer-type thing that was popular in Japan a few decades ago. It comes up in manga sometimes. I don't have a guy I could take to one, though."

"What about Riser or Bishmal?"

"...Then it would be just another one of our usual nights out. Also, I don't really see either of them that way."

"I see..."

"If I have to pick someone from our dinner parties, I'd probably go for Ray. He seems about my age, too."

"Eh...?" Upon hearing that, Juliet looked dumbfounded.

Chelsea noticed that and pinched the girl's cheek.

"Ow," Juliet squeaked.

"I'm just joking. Ray doesn't really seem to click with me, so he's probably not boyfriend material, either. But if you're gonna react like that, why don't *you* go for him?"

"It's not like that... We just hit it off... and I find him easy to talk to."

...And you have basically the same fashion sense, Chelsea added silently. She pictured the gothic armor-clad girl before her standing next to the young man who looked like a messenger from Hell itself, and all she could think was that, visually at least, they were a perfect match.

"His build is so great too," Juliet continued. "I like how it mixes holiness and death while letting both shine..."

"...I was really surprised to hear that he got Death Soldier, though. Speaking of which... It suits your tastes, but you know that the job's useless in duels, right? I mean, the duel ends when you run out of HP."

"I actually don't know how I never heard about that job before... I thought that 'The Death' was the only job with 'Death' in the title."

Apparently, she only cared about the name.

"If you get along with him so well, why didn't you join his clan? He invited you, didn't he?"

"Yeah... The clan's name was cool too."

Chelsea said nothing, but in her mind, the clan name was one of the most evil-sounding she'd ever heard. Even Max, who wasn't present here, was seriously creeped out by it.

"I'm fine this way for now. I'll think it over and give him an answer later," Juliet said.

"I see. Well, that's fine. Being conflicted about your feelings is just part of being young, I'm sure."

"Again... it's not like that...!" Juliet insisted with a pout. It made Chelsea smile and poke at her face.

And then, they heard sounds of clashing metal from outside the village.

"What...?"

“...Besides us, the only ones here already are Roadwell and Hineduck.” The names Chelsea mentioned belonged to Masters who’d also accepted the bodyguard job. Both were duelists floating between numbers 10 and 19 in the rankings, and though they were far below the top 3 and just a bit less impressive than those in the 4 to 9 range, they were still highly capable Masters. They’d been killing time until the peace talks by hunting the local monsters and the like.

“That’s not a normal sound,” said Chelsea. “There aren’t any metal monsters in this area.”

“So, they’re fighting an *abnormal* monster...? Like a UBM?”

“...Or a PK.” Roadwell had a defense-focused build and wore full metal armor. If someone attacked him, that would no doubt result in a metallic clang.

A moment after they thought that, the sound of a great many explosions reached their ears.

“...Chained explosions,” said Chelsea. “This doesn’t sound like a monster’s breath attack or anything.”

“Chelsea!”

“Yeah! Let’s go, Julie!” The two then summoned their Embryos. Chelsea now held a golden axe, while Juliet grew jet-black wings that carried her towards the source of the ominous clamor.

Once they arrived at their destination, they found no sign of the duelists they knew so well. Instead, a mysterious boy stood with his back to them.

“I was about to go find you myself,” he said, turning around. “You saved me some time by coming here.”

The rabbit-eared boy put Chelsea on edge.

The signs of battle all around were proof that the boy had fought Roadwell and Hineduck and emerged victorious, and his words clearly indicated that Chelsea was next.

“...Where’s Juliet, by the way?” he then asked. “I thought she’d be with you.” The boy also somehow knew that Chelsea was with Juliet, but as he said — she was nowhere in sight.

Juliet was nowhere in his field of vision...

“Corpse-Eating Bird — Hræsvelgr!”

...But then that voice came ringing out from above.

A moment later, a black tornado came raging from the heavens. Its source was none other than Juliet, whose black dress-armor and wings allowed her to melt into the darkness of night.

Before arriving here, Juliet and Chelsea had agreed on their strategy. Assuming that the enemy — PK or otherwise — was strong enough to take on Roadwell and Hineduck, they had made the first move.

That's why Juliet, who was hard to spot in the dark of night, hid in the sky above to attack with her ultimate skill the moment Chelsea had their opponent distracted.

"Golden Bull Tsunami — Poseidon!" Chelsea then used her own ult.

The blades of the double-edged axe in her hands vanished, and the space left behind began to leak liquid gold.

A black crow in the sky, and a golden sea on the ground. An umbral tornado that tore apart all life, and a surge of gold that pulverized all flesh and bone.

Together, they formed a combined attack of two area-of-effect ultimate skills. Whether above or below, no one could hope to evade their range.

Merely by failing to notice Juliet activating her ult, and letting that distract him enough to let Chelsea use hers, the boy had missed his chance to escape.

He fell silent. There was actually enough space between the golden sea and the vortex of feathers for a person to pass through, but it would be consumed in a fraction of a second.

Even those who moved at supersonic speeds couldn't evade this.

Indeed. No one could possibly have enough time to escape...

"■■■ ■■■■■ in the Right, ■■■■■■■■■■ in the Left, Here I Hold ■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■■ — ■■■■nos, ■■■ros, Ai■■"

...Or so you'd think.

Between the raging noise of their combined ultimate skills, Chelsea could barely make out a quiet, yet notable sound.

She then felt something on her pirate hat, and when she just slightly tilted her head...

"...Eh?"

...She saw two Gems slide off the edge of her hat and fall right in front of her eyes.

A moment later, one of the Gems was activated.

They were Gems containing Crimson Sphere — Pyromancer's ultimate job skill.

These Gems dealt more damage than any other ones on the market, so a non-Superior Job like Chelsea had no hope of weathering the onslaught.

She only barely survived it thanks to the fire resistance she'd incorporated into her build — but a moment later, the other Gem activated too.

This one broke her Lifesaving Brooch. The item nullified the damage done, but after the roaring flames vanished, she found herself surrounded by countless bombs.

"Ah..." Right as she gasped, the bombs went off in a chain, quickly engulfing her in explosions that soon intermingled with sparks of light, vanishing into the sky.

"Chel...sea...!" Juliet, still in the air, had watched what happened to her friend the entire time, but she didn't actually *see* it. To her, it was as if both the Gems on Chelsea's hat and the bombs surrounding her simply appeared out of nowhere.

Juliet could move and perceive this world at supersonic speeds, but not even she saw what actually happened. Chelsea was just dead before she even realized what was going on.

Juliet clenched her teeth.

She processed the reality that the boy had evaded their ults and then killed Chelsea.

"This enemy... *which* is he?!" Experienced and talented as she was, Juliet instantly narrowed down the enemy's method of attack to just two options.

The first was spatial control. The enemy might've evaded their ults by teleporting away, then using that same control over space to send bombs towards his opponent.

However, here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, spatial control was extremely costly. Even Xunyu's Tenaga Ashinaga could only do it with an ultimate skill, and it still came with a cooldown. Chained teleports might have been possible with the perfect combination of Embryo type and resource distribution, but that would only account for the first evasion and the appearance of the Gems.

Juliet did not think it could possibly be teleportation. The bombs that followed were far too numerous for that.

The other option was comparably simple — pure speed.

The boy might be moving at speeds so great that not even Juliet could see him, letting him evade the ults and place the bombs. She'd already encountered a worthy opponent who could move that fast — The Unsheath, Kashimiya.

If it really was down to pure speed, then this boy was just like Kashimiya, but...

...no. There's a... big difference between him and Kashimiya. It's — Juliet pondered the question, but her thought was cut short...

"Don't assume you're safe just because you're up in the sky."

...By a voice from behind her.

"Ah?!"

"You seem to be thinking about something, but there's no point in that," said the same boy who had just eliminated Chelsea. "My power... is inescapable."

"Hgh...! Cursed Phalanx Disorder!" Juliet refused to listen to the boy's bragging and didn't hesitate to use her ultimate job skill against the person who'd hurt her friend.

"Hahahah. Too slow."

But none of her weapons, which tracked their target through the power of curses, actually struck him.

"Uh...?!"

"You people really are slow. Like tortoises," the boy said as he swung his boots at the top of Juliet's spine.

A fountain of blood burst forth as the blade sliced cleanly through her neck.

The boy followed up this attack with a flurry of slashes, all targeting Juliet's weak spots.

Her HP dropped until her Lifesaving Brooch activated, leaving her barely alive.

Even now, Cursed Phalanx Disorder was firing homing weapons at the boy, but he was evading them all with only minimal movement — and as he danced around them, they clashed together and shattered.

"It's over," he said, and then finished Juliet off by sinking his blade-boots into her throat.

That was when her HP finally reached 0.

"Gh...!" And in that very moment, an oppressive, overpowering aura emanated from her.

With his blade still buried in Juliet's neck, the boy looked around.

Feathers...? And fragments of the broken weapons? he thought. The shattered weapons, mixed together with the black feathers, had surrounded the both of them.

The result was like a spherical cage.

"Did you seriously...?"

Juliet had *planned* for the cursed weapons to shatter.

She'd used Hræsvelgr's wind to change the trajectory of her cursed weapons and keep the fragments of the shattered ones in orbit around the battlefield, making it impossible for the boy to escape no matter how fast he moved.

Wait, how is she even still alive...? he wondered, clueless about the recent change in Juliet's build.

She'd switched one of her low-rank jobs to Death Soldier, giving her Last Command — the skill that allowed her to continue acting after death for a short amount of time.

"...a..." With her head nearly severed from her body, Juliet was unable to speak. The destruction of her spine had also made it impossible for her to move her body.

However, she didn't need that to use her skills.

She just had to *think*. A single thought would activate the ace up her sleeve.

"...i...e...!" Thus, the skill was activated.

This was the final attack of the Fallen Knight — Dark Requiem.

It blew her body apart, and transformed all her flesh and blood into cursed projectiles.

"Ah...!" The bullets of blood and blades of bone would make short work of the young man. Even with a Brooch equipped, he couldn't possibly survive this.

And the black feathers and fragments of cursed weapons surrounding him left no room to escape.

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Control AI no. 1's workspace

This was a strange space.

The interior was shaped like a large cylinder — but it was so gigantic that each end stretched farther than the horizon.

The scale wasn't the only thing unsettling about it. The entire surface area of the cylinder was covered in seemingly countless smaller cylinders. There was no space between them, and there must have been tens of thousands of them, if not much, much more.

Many of them were empty, but some were "occupied."

The people — or their parts — inside them were many and varied. If you lined up the contents of each cylinder in a row, it would look as though the people inside them were being *built*, from head to toe.

Strangely enough, the complete humans had diverse sets of equipment on them... and all of them had crests on their left hands.

Indeed, these were all Masters — or more specifically, avatars.

This cylindrical area was the so-called "avatar space."

It was managed by control AI no. 1, Alice, and it was where avatars were reconstructed and stored.

This was the place where Masters who received the death penalty would have their avatars rebuilt, as well as a storage site for the avatars of offline Masters.

In the deepest part of this space, there were several special cylinders. While the others were placed on the wall with no space between them, these were positioned in the middle.

There were fifteen of them. They were marked with numbers 0 to 13, but there were two 11s, separated by the Greek letters "α" and "Ω."

Some of them looked like they had never been used, but some were occupied.

One of them — no. 12 — opened up, and the avatar inside stepped out.

It was the same rabbit-eared boy who'd just defeated so many Altarian rankers.

"Oh man, that was dangerous," he said, removing his shredded hat and grinning wryly. "That could've destroyed my avatar. I really don't want Alice getting on my case about it."

By "that," he meant the final attack that Juliet took such pains to launch. It wasn't something he could've evaded, but...

Our avatars aren't like theirs. We don't have a standby period for storage. That's why I could return here before my avatar was actually destroyed.

To log out, Masters needed to go thirty seconds without touching anyone or passing through barriers or anything similar. This rule was meant to prevent players from fleeing encounters by logging out, but it didn't apply to this boy.

After all... he wasn't a player.

My Brooch broke before I made it here, but that doesn't matter. I took care of all the high-ranking Altarian Masters who accepted the bodyguard duty. The ones who were online, anyway. There's also some who weren't... as well as King of Destruction, High Priestess, and those around them... But they're not my problem.

"No. 12." As the boy counted on his fingers, he heard a voice from somewhere.

The voice had a machine-like intonation, and it was impossible to tell its gender. Even so, the boy who was called "no. 12" knew exactly who it was.

"No. 0. I've said this many times before, but don't call me that when I'm using my avatar. Right now, I'm The Rabbit, Chrono Crown. The infamous Dryfean PK."

The boy — or, control AI no. 12, Rabbit — insisted that no. 0 stop calling him by that name.

Indeed, he was the avatar of a control AI.

Like the Altarian duelist Tom Cat, the twin CEOs of DIN, or Alison — an employee there... This was the form he took when he had to act as a human.

As part of *Infinite Dendrogram's* management, he didn't have the same limitations on "logging out" or "storage" as a player would. If it weren't for that, Juliet's final attack would've surely destroyed him.

He couldn't have used this method of escape if there had been other witnesses, but Juliet was the only person present — and she was no longer conscious, due to her suicidal final ability.

"You also don't want to be called 'No. 0' when using that name, right?"

"Rabbit, Chrono Crown. About what happened—"

"Oh, you better not complain, No. 0. I just did *my* job," Chrono said, cutting No. 0's words short. "Besides managing time, I'm also meant to fight Embryos in their sixth forms. By fighting them, I'm promoting their evolution. This time, I just fought Altarian Masters who'd taken up the bodyguard job. That's it, right?"

Chrono spoke as if there were absolutely no problems with what he'd done at all. It was less of an explanation and more of a show of defiance.

"We're done talking, No. 0," he said. "I have bodyguard duty the day after — I mean tomorrow, now. I'm busy."

No. 0 said nothing in response. With the conversation over, Chrono left the avatar space.

He then headed towards the room with facilities that would transport him to Dryfe, but then he noticed something.

...There's a debuff on my avatar.

Chrono noticed a status effect on him... a curse called "Equipment Binding."

The Dark Requiem skill that Juliet had used at the very end of their battle was both an attack and an extremely potent curse. Juliet herself could specify the kind of curse, and she'd unleashed the skill while focusing on a curse that made it impossible for the target to switch equipment.

I guess she didn't pick anything deadlier because she thought I'd just resist it. Lethal curses were powerful, but they could be nullified by Brooches just like Gloria's Fatal Field, and their effect could be further weakened with anti-curse accessories.

That was why Juliet had opted for a curse that was more of a bonus to her attack, not the other way around. Chrono understood her reasoning. Focused curses fueled by a Superior Job's death were extremely powerful, and since the effect was relatively minor compared to a fatal curse, it was more or less impossible to resist or undo.

The curse would stay with him until the next time his avatar was reconstructed.

The damage from the attack had destroyed his Brooch, and the curse had made it impossible for him to replace it. His clothing was covered in holes too, but each article had a skill that automatically repaired them, so at least that wasn't a problem.

So I guess the only real issue is that I can't equip a Brooch now, he thought. *Well, whatever. Unless they do something like Juliet did, no one can hurt me anyway. I'll get rid of the curse by asking Alice to reconstruct* *my avatar next time she's in a good mood.*

He concluded that the curse wasn't a problem and moved on to thinking about something else.

My next job is at the peace talks. I'll target any high-rank Embryos there, he thought.

His duty as Chrono Crown was to fight and defeat high-rank Embryos — specifically those in their sixth form.

Like he'd told No. 0, his actions hadn't deviated from his role, but there were some ulterior motives behind them.

I don't know what Dryfe's planning to do at the peace talks, but it should go well if I remove some of Altar's fighting potential. No one was looking at him, but he still hid his mouth behind his sleeves.

Dryfe is still troubled by their dwindling Resources... both food and funds. That's why the best outcome for them is the least costly one. If possible, they'll avoid doing anything that'll be too expensive for them.

His covered mouth warped into a grin.

If all goes as Dryfe wants it to, there's no way *we'll have war.*

He pictured how everything would go exactly as he wished.

I won't have that huge workload dumped on me again. That level of processing is such a waste of my Resources... They can't make me do it that often.

That was a thought he had not as Chrono Crown, but Rabbit — the control AI in charge of time. He absolutely despised the War Boundary. It demanded more of his processing power than anything else.

During war, time in *Infinite Dendrogram* was sped up ten times beyond the norm, and as a result he ended up focusing solely on time acceleration.

That made him unable to operate as an avatar, and lowered his active thinking ability to the bare minimum necessary.

He hated being like that, and that was the reason he went out to PK Altarian Masters as the peace talks drew closer.

There's no need for war. We didn't even get any Superiors out of the last one. Giga Professor's Pandemonium evolved after the war, not during it. War does nothing but make life harder for me. It's best if it just doesn't happen.

After arriving at the room which would take him to Dryfe, he whispered, "It's best if the countries just merge without any war."

He was then transported to Dryfe, vanishing from this space to go join the Dryfean retinue and take part in the peace talks.

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“...”

“War is not necessary. Only triggers for evolution are.”

“Battles with unreasonable and unfair enemies may also function as such triggers.”

“Thus, there is no reason to stop No. 12’s actions.”

“The goal of the current phase is to gather one hundred Superior Embryos.”

“However, there is no single trigger that causes this evolution.”

“Everyday life, strife, love, hate, anger, grief, hunger, sloth, hope, despair... The triggers are multifarious.”

“Thus, it is best for the control AIs that had become Infinite to act on their own to experiment and discover the triggers.”

“The wait for the one hundred continues.”

Chapter Five: The Night Before the Peace Conference

Paladin, Ray Starling

It was now the day before the peace talks. The Masters who would act as bodyguards had gathered at the parade ground used by the knight office in Altea, where we would meet up with Azurite and the other officials participating in the coming talks.

However, about ten minutes before everyone was supposed to show up, I noticed something strange.

"...There should be more of us here." There were 37 Masters gathered already. First, there were the members of Death Period. Five of us, to be exact—since Lei-Lei and Kasumi's trio unfortunately couldn't make it.

But as for the other 32 besides us, there was Miss Eldritch, Tsukikage, and a whole bunch of people with a crescent moon and closed eye symbol on their clothes... all members of The Lunar Society.

That's right — there were only two clans.

"...I don't see Rosa anywhere," said B3.

"Hmm... I'm not seeing many of the famous rankers, either," added Marie. "Based on my information, this is only about a third of the people who *should* be here."

I'd heard that some duelists were coming myself, but none of them seemed to have shown up yet.

"Did something happen?" I wondered.

"Ray, should I speed off to DIN and investigate?" Marie asked.

As I considered whether or not she ought to do that, I saw some familiar faces among a group of knights and officials.

First was Azurite — the reason we were all here.

Next was... "Tomica," if memory served. She was the K&R member around my age whom I'd run into back when Rosa ambushed us on the road to Torne.

And finally, there was a masked man, covered in Medical Bandages that enhanced the body's self-healing abilities.

It was Riser the duel ranker.

"Riser?!" I called out.

"Ray... you guys are still fine... what a relief." He had multiple injury-based debuffs. Even walking seemed to be difficult for him, since he was leaning against a knight's shoulder.

"How did you get all those wounds...?" I asked.

"I'll be the one to explain that," Azurite interjected, before telling us what happened.

Shockingly, it seems that Masters — rankers included — had been ambushed en masse.

The one thing all the targets had in common was that they'd all accepted the bodyguard quest.

Riser had been one of them, and although he'd almost died to the bomb left behind by the assailant, his Lifesaving Brooch had activated and kept him alive, barely. He'd then used healing items to stave off death until the locals took him to a nearby state church.

Tomica had been ambushed along with Rosa, but she'd managed to escape back to the capital.

There were also reports that sounds of battle had been heard last night near the village next to the border, and the Masters who'd been waiting there had all vanished.

Riser and Tomica both vouched that their attacker was the same person — a boy with rabbit ears and metal boots.

Upon hearing those details, Shu spoke up. "...That's The Rabbit, Chrono Crown."

"You know him?" I asked.

"Yeah. I fought him back before I was a Superior. He's a PK who hunts pre-Superiors... or rather, Masters in their sixth forms. He's perfectly capable of assassinating dozens of Masters."

"...How did your fight with him go?"

"I don't even know. He did some serious damage to me, but stopped attacking after I caught him in a trap. I still don't know if that's because he actually got the death penalty or if he just ran away. Haven't met him since."

That was impressive, even if Shu wasn't a Superior back then. If The Rabbit had grown stronger since then, he must be even more fearsome now.

"Though, his tricks are more or less common knowledge by now," Shu added before explaining The Rabbit's abilities, strategies, and how to counter them... which wasn't something everyone could do, to put it mildly.

I thought about what he'd said and concluded that I was incompatible with Chrono's fighting style. Shu aside, B3 and Marie would be better opponents for him.

"That's it for his capabilities, but I've got another beary bad piece of info about him," Shu said.

"Oh yes," Marie nodded. "I was trying to find a good opportunity to explain that, too."

Whatever it was, they seemed to find it difficult to say.

"The Rabbit, Chrono Crown... is a Dryfean PK."

"...And he's coming to the peace talks as a bodyguard on their side."

So... that meant...

"You're saying the imperium ordered him to target Altar's bodyguards?" I asked.

"Maybe," said Shu. "But it could easily be something he decided to do himself. I mean, going around and hunting Masters in their sixth forms is just what he does normally. The bodyguard thing gathered a whole bunch of Altarian Masters in a few locations, so he might've seen it as a good chance to score some kills. Hunting Masters is his goal, not a means to some end, and he's never really done anything notable besides that. Really, the weirdest thing here is that he's actually joining their retinue. But if Dryfe did order him to do this..."

"...It means that they thought it was necessary to weaken *our* retinue," Altimia finished his sentence.

...Suddenly, I'm not as optimistic that the talks will go well, I thought.

"...This seems a little too bold for a Dryfean plot, though," Shu said. "Especially since the assassin is also a part of the official retinue."

"We shall use Truth Discernment and ask the imperium's delegation about it. Then we will know for certain whether they gave the order," said Azurite. "There is now a more pressing problem, however..."

"The gaps in our retinue, huh?" said Shu.

"Indeed. If this turns out to be a trap, our ability to respond to it has been greatly reduced."

If this whole thing was just a trap, then we would have to face the entirety of Dryfe's retinue of Masters — The Rabbit included.

"Would you be able to fight The Rabbit?" Rook asked, looking at Shu, who fell silent for a moment.

"...I obviously wouldn't be helpless. I'm almost certain I'd win, actually. The problem is that I'd be too busy to deal with him myself. If we end up fighting Dryfe, I'd have my hands full with the King of Beasts."

The Rabbit wouldn't be our only enemy there. Marie had told me they'd hired a whole bunch of Masters for their retinue, including King of Beasts — the so-called Physical Apex — and Hell General, who could bolster their numbers even further with his devils.

If Shu had to fight King of Beasts, then it would fall to us to face The Rabbit and Logan.

I silently considered my status as a combatant. My Grudge-Soaked Greaves were sufficiently charged, meaning that I could summon Gardranda, even though it was risky. Monochrome had also absorbed enough light for Shining Despair. I was completely stocked up on Counter Absorption uses, too.

I'd also maxed out my Death Soldier job and leveled Scout to get the Reveal utility skill before switching back to Paladin, which was the job that let me use all the skills I had unlocked.

And most notably of all... Nemesis had reached her fourth form and became a high-rank Embryo.

I was more prepared than I'd ever been, but I couldn't bring myself to say we'd get through a fight like that with no problem.

A sense of unease coiled around my heart like a vine, and even I couldn't say exactly what was causing it.

"It's still not certain there will be fighting... but the outlook is not favorable," said Azurite. The Rabbit killing so much of the retinue had stung her badly, and she was reluctant to continue under the current circumstances.

Suddenly, Miss Eldritch raised her hand.

Not in a manner that fit her gaudy Japanese-style apparel, but with the enthusiasm of a regular student who knew the answer in class.

"...What is it?" Azurite asked suspiciously.

"If we need more people, I can call a couple dozen more from my clan. You'd need to write off more of my debt beforehand, though."

After hearing that offer, Azurite spent a good amount of time thinking it through — then finally, with a bitter expression on her face, she said, "...Please do."

"Thank you for your business!"

Azurite's really desperate, huh? I thought.

Also, this just reinforced to me how powerful The Lunar Society really was. Being a cult centered around *Dendro*, it had so many no-lifers that Miss Eldritch could casually call up "dozens" of Masters worthy of joining Azurite's entourage.

I heard that it actually had the most high-rankers of any clan in any country, which made them actually pretty reliable in situations like this.

"Tsukuyo Fuso, I also have a request," said Riser as he bowed his head to her.

"Whaddya want, Ri?"

I certainly hadn't expected her to call him *that*.

"Please use your skills to heal me! I can't just sit by idly while something like this is happening...!" he cried, a hint of grief creeping into his voice. Miss Eldritch fell silent.

Riser must've been so emotional because he wanted to avenge Bishmal and the other duel rankers who'd gotten the death penalty, on top of his desire to protect the kingdom.

"Okay. I'll heal you," said Miss Eldritch with a nod.

"I'll be in your de—"

"But you can't join the retinue." She agreed to heal him, but in the same breath she outright denied him the honor of becoming a bodyguard again.

"Why...?" he asked.

"You know that better than anyone, don'cha? Your Embryo is completely broken. My Mercy of the Holy can fully heal your body, but I can't do anything about your broken Embryo."

"But I can still fight just as I am...!"

"Do you really think a Master can do much without his Embryo? And your build is completely focused on yours, isn't it? You'd only get in the way."

Riser hung his head. He clearly had no counterargument.

...Her words seemed harsh — perhaps even cold — but even so, I could tell that she was being far more earnest than usual.

"...Very well," said Riser. "I won't come, but please heal me anyway."

"Can you give me a reason why?"

"Most of our powerful Masters are leaving for the peace talks. You're going to be summoning even more Lunar Society members who were supposed to stay here. There won't be enough people left to protect the capital in case anything happens." Miss Eldritch listened to him silently. "If I can't join the bodyguards, then I at least want to do what I can here in Altea. That's all."

"...Ugh, you Babylonian Battlegroup members are so stubborn," she sighed before mouthing, "Mercy of the Holy." With that, Riser was fully healed.

"Thank you... I'll make it up to—"

"You don't have to. I'm already indebted to you people. This is just me paying a fraction of that back."

"...Thank you," said Riser, bowing his head.

It felt as though Fuso was purposely looking away from him, which was something I've never seen her do before.

"Do you find it strange for Lady Tsukuyo to behave like this?"

"...Tsukikage." Before I realized it, Tsukikage had snuck up on me and whispered right in my ear.

Fuso didn't seem to notice, though. She was busy using a comms item to contact her headquarters.

"...I would say so, yeah," I said. "She always seemed more, well... *ruthless* to me."

"It's because she feels indebted to the Babylonian Battlegroup specifically."

"Indebted?"

"The Gloria incident." From what I'd heard of the events surrounding the defeat of the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, The Lunar Society — which was first in the clan rankings even back then — hadn't participated from the start because the negotiations with the kingdom were taking too long.

While that was happening, the second clan in the rankings — Babylonian Battlegroup, to which Riser belonged — had been the ones who stood up to protect the cities of Altar.

However, they were defeated. They lost their home base and ended up collapsing as a clan. Their members had close ties to tians, so their defeat was particularly painful.

Many people thought that things wouldn't have turned out so badly if The Lunar Society had participated from the very beginning — and though she didn't outwardly show it, it seems Fuso was actually bothered by how everything had turned out... which was the reason she treated Riser the way she did.

"Is this unexpected?" Tsukikage asked. It was more than unexpected — I never would have imagined this from her.

Then again... Fuso *had* been the one who'd treated my wounds back at Torne.

"Lady Tsukuyo is like the moon itself."

"Eh?"

"She is quite charming if you look at her the right way," Tsukikage, gazing at Fuso with a gentle smile.

Ten minutes later, an extra fifty Lunar Society Masters joined us at the parade ground. The speed at which they'd made it here really hammered home why they were the top clan.

"That makes up for most of the lost bodyguards," said Azurite.

"My people are strong. You can count on them... Though, I can't deny that they're a level below duel rankers."

This reminded me of the blockade incident shortly after I first arrived in this world. The Lunar Society had gone up against K&R, and Rosa was defeating Fuso's underlings one after another despite being under the effect of the Lunar Divider Field. That was clear proof that you couldn't compare the power of a duel ranker with that of an ordinary Master.

"It'd be great if we had just one more ranker, at least," said Tsukuyo. "Ah, is Kashimiya online?"

Tomica shook her head and said, "Not yet... He said that he wasn't sure if he'd be able to come online today or tomorrow, so he probably doesn't even know that all this has happened..."

"That so? Could you get him to come with us if he does log on?"

"Yeah! I'm sure he'll want to avenge our sis...!" With Figaro being offline for the foreseeable future, Kashimiya was the most powerful duel ranker in the kingdom, but it didn't seem certain whether he'd be able to participate.

We really lacked fighting strength right now, but without Kashimiya, there were no duel rankers that—

"Did someone mention duel rankeeers?" Suddenly, I heard a very familiar voice — one belonging to someone who definitely didn't belong in this parade ground.

I turned and saw a young man with a giant cat seated on his head — a young man I knew very well.

"Tom...?"

"The Lynx, Tom Cat...?" Azurite and I spoke his name in unison.

He immediately drew everyone's attention as he approached Azurite.

"I haven't seen you since Quartierlatiiin, Your Majesty," he said. "I understand this is rather last minute, but would I be allowed to joiiin?"

"Certainly... but didn't you already refuse once...?"

"...The situation changed a bit, you seee," he said with a slightly dark expression.

I considered what he could be referring to, and instantly thought of last night's ambushes.

"You mean... The Rabbit?" I asked, making him look at me with a shocked expression.

"...Yeah. He and I have a bit of a historyyy. I know that he assassinated Altarian Masters who took on the bodyguard dutyyy, and that he is part of Dryfe's retinueee," he said before clenching his fist as if gathering resolve. "So if we end up fighting Dryfe... let me fight Chrono."

"Tom..." I had no idea what was there between him and The Rabbit. I had no idea why someone who was rumored to have ties to *Dendro's* management would join the bodyguard squad of one kingdom's ruler.

However, there was a light in Tom's eyes, still shaded by his hair, that made me understand just how serious he was.

"...Then it is decided," Azurite said. She then looked over the Masters gathered at the parade ground... and nodded.

"We're heading to the peace talks." Following that declaration, we all moved out.

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Dryfe Imperium-Occupied Territory, Old Lunnings Duchy

To the people of the kingdom, the phrase “Old Lunnings Duchy” has held several different meanings over the past few years.

Once, it signified the greatest grain-producing region in Altar.

It grew far more crops than it consumed and made enormous profits by exporting the surplus to countries that struggled with food production, like Dryfe and Granvaloa.

However, its time as the world’s breadbasket was tragically cut short just over a year ago.

The sudden attack by the strongest SUBM ever seen — Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria — had resulted in the deaths of just about every inhabitant of the duchy, including Duke Lunnings himself. Those who’d survived either abandoned the land completely or were consumed by despair, often to the point of taking their own lives.

Gloria’s Fatal Field had also made every growing thing within it wither, devastating the fields and turning the land of bountiful harvests into a land of desolation.

After that, it became the Old Lunnings Duchy and began undergoing restoration as a territory directly under the control of the royal family.

However, half a year after the Gloria incident, the region became a battlefield once more.

The Dryfean army invaded through a pass near the Lightning Dragon Mountains, and they found the kingdom’s forces waiting for them there.

Since it was no longer inhabited, the Old Lunnings Duchy was an optimal battlefield, but whether that actually benefited Altar was another matter.

Because there was no one living there, none of those present had to worry about collateral damage and could go all-out.

Countless elites. The Giga Professor and his many monsters. The Hell General and his devil army. And finally, King of Beasts, whose very steps cracked the earth and whose claws could shatter meteors.

All of them unleashed their full power, completely devastating the Altarian army.

After that, Old Lunnings Duchy became Dryfean territory. The imperium acted fast and relocated their farmers to the west side of the region — the side closest to Dryfe. They’d also hired Masters with abilities related to farming and construction, quickly preparing the western part of the region for agriculture and gradually transforming it back into the breadbasket it once was.

Because of all this, it was widely believed that one of Dryfe’s demands during the coming peace talks would be for Altar to formally cede the Old Lunnings Duchy to them, shifting it from an occupied territory to a region that Dryfe officially owned.

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Although Gloria had devastated the Old Lunnings Duchy, the destruction mostly took the form of pure biological death. Much of the construction had remained untouched.

There were a few remnants of villages destroyed in the war, but the town of Lunnings in the heart of the region still looked much as it had before Gloria’s arrival.

The same couldn’t be said for its atmosphere.

Lunnings had once been surrounded by verdant grasslands, and it had truly earned its title of “the town of meadows.”

However, there was no longer a single patch of green anywhere in sight — the fields surrounding the town had become nothing more than withered wastelands. And on top of that, Gloria had brought about the deaths of every living creature there, leaving behind thousands of corpses.

Lunnings was no longer the town of meadows. It was a town of death.

Maybe people wouldn’t say it in so many words, but that was the most apt description.

After the incident, the huge amount of corpses had been imbued with grudge, resulting in undead roaming the land; but before the war came, The Lunar Society’s holy men had purified the area and cleaned up the bodies.

Even so, no one had wanted to move there. It had become a literal ghost town.

Now, however, the place housed quite a lot of people — the hundreds of Masters that Dryfe had hired for the coming peace talks

“...Man, we’re spending the night in a place with a hell of a history,” one of them said. “This really is just like a classic RPG.”

“I can already imagine zombies or ghosts showing up and taking us out one by one.”

In a building that had once served as an auditorium, the Masters were exchanging their thoughts about the situation.

This would be where they would spend the night, but it hadn’t actually been their first choice. A lot of them had wanted to use the nearby inn, but the bedding — untouched for over a year — reeked of mold, and rumors started to spread about a tian corpse being found in one of the beds, which made everyone forget all about using the inn or any of the local homes, so they ultimately settled for the auditorium.

Although it had the space, it didn’t have any beds, so the Masters were now setting up their sleeping spots. A few hated the very idea of spending the night in a ghost town and had logged out to wait until it was time to leave.

Interestingly, one of those was Hell General, Logan Goddhart — and right before logging out, he’d said, “There’s no way I’m staying here! I’m logging out back to my room!” ...which was exactly the kind of thing you’d hear from the first person to disappear in a horror film.

“...Wouldn’t it be better to just camp outside?”

“You wouldn’t be able to sleep with all the monsters around, dumbass. This is the most appropriate place here in this duchy. It’s even been purified to protect against undead.”

Villages and towns smaller than Lunnings remained untouched by The Lunar Society and still had undead wandering around as a result. The damage done by Gloria was far too great to easily undo.

“We could’ve just lodged somewhere on the western side of the border, then. It’s already been developed by Dryfe.”

“If we stayed there, we wouldn’t make it for the peace talks tomorrow afternoon.”

“...Altar’s guys are probably spending the night in an actual village or something. I’m jealous,” someone complained.

“If what I heard is true, then you should feel bad for them instead,” the other whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“Apparently, like two thirds of their bodyguards were assassinated right before the talks.”

“HUHH?!” another exclaimed.

“Shh...! And Chrono was the one who did it.”

“...Seriously?” Chrono was an infamous figure in Dryfe. After all, a lot of the Masters in their sixth forms had fought him personally. It was also well known that many players had grouped up to face him... only for Chrono to fight them all off.

All of that wasn’t immediately relevant, but there was another pre-Superior who was just as infamous in Dryfe — King of Light, F. In order to avoid getting on the wanted list of his own country, Altar, he’d primarily targeted the imperium for his “reference gathering material.”

Recently, though, he had become more active in the kingdom itself...

“But Chrono’s also one of the bodyguards, right? Ah. Wait, so the thing that happened this afternoon was...”

“Yeah. That’s what caused the fight.”

There had been an incident in one of the groups heading towards the peace talks. One of the more notable Masters — the third in Dryfe’s duel rankings, in fact — had angrily confronted Chrono about the things he’d done in Altar.

Apparently, The Rabbit’s response was somehow... off.

It had enraged the duelist, driving him to challenge Chrono... only for Chrono to give him the death penalty.

“...But that wasn’t a big deal, right?”

“Yeah. I heard that Princess Claudiah said ‘As long as they cause no trouble for tians, conflicts between Masters are not forbidden.’ So yeah, no one’s getting punished for that fight.”

Legally speaking, that was indeed the case.

However, the fact that no one would get punished despite the current political situation sent a cold shiver down all of their spines.

“He assassinated the kingdom’s bodyguards and took out one of our own... yet all of that is apparently a-ok. What the hell are we supposed to make of this?”

“No idea. Though, she probably thinks it’s not much of a problem if we lose one or two bodyguards. I mean, we don’t have much going for us besides our numbers. The only bodyguards who stand out are King of Beasts, Logan, and that problem child, Chrono. The duel ranker Chrono beat wasn’t even a Superior. Honestly, each one of those three are stronger than the rest of us combined.”

“...Hey, why is that, anyway? We have a whole bunch of tougher guys, don’t we?” In preparation for the war with Altar or Caldina (or both), Dryfe had gathered many Masters, and a few of them were indeed battle-focused Superior Jobs. Good examples were King of Magic Cannons, Heldine Rockzapper; King of Eaters, Cata Lugang Euanjelion; and Flow Princess, Juba. There were many other pre-Superiors, but not a single one of them were present here.

“Also, uhh... Her Highness is the only Dryfean tian here, isn’t she?” That was indeed the case. Besides the Master bodyguards, the only Dryfean citizen present was Claudiah herself. There were no officials, no attendant maids... she would be the only tian in the peace talks.

Claudiah was currently staying in the late duke’s residence in this very town, accompanied by no one but the King of Beasts.

“Assassinations and infighting are allowed... the only tian participant is Her Highness... isn’t this kinda weird?”

“...The worst-case scenario I can think of is that these peace talks will just end up being a pretext to start a war.”

“Huh?”

“Imagine if Princess Claudiah dies or gets hurt here. They go on to make it seem like the kingdom’s doing and then kick-start the war with the Superiors that came here with her — King of Beasts and Logan. At the same time, the ones that stayed in Dryfe got ready to invade Quartierlatin to the east. We only have three of our powerhouses here because they’re more than enough — and maybe the rest are tasked to be the invading force. Princess Claudiah is the only tian here because Dryfe lacks personnel and she’s the only one they’re willing to sacrifice... That seem plausible to you?”

“...What about the War Boundary?”

“It’s not like you can’t fight without it. You just don’t get a clear goal.”

“...And that’s why it’s the worst-case scenario, huh?”

“Yeah. These peace talks could bring about the worst kind of war — a *messy* one. Caldina would also be too busy with Granvaloa to interfere this time, so it’s a good time to start it.”

“This actually doesn’t sound unlikely...”

The Dryfean Masters had held such conversations amongst themselves several times by now. They were simply bodyguards and didn’t truly know what these peace talks would entail, so they could only speculate as they were.

It was probably safe to say, though, that all of their wild guesses did not reflect reality. The imperator's plan for the peace talks was both far more peaceful... and far more crafty than they could ever imagine.

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Old Duke Lunnings' Residence

The Old Duke Lunnings' residence was a luxurious mansion once inhabited by the Duke and his family, but now it was as empty as the rest of the town. The duke had died when Gloria had descended upon the crop inspection he was attending, while his family was wiped out in a shelter beneath the mansion. No matter how safe their location seemed, nothing could stop the Fatal Field.

Now, a year after it was emptied, there were the sounds of human habitation once again ringing through its halls.

The source of these sounds was a facility at the far end of the first floor — the large bathroom.

Specifically, one might hear the sounds of flowing water.

"Truly, baths are wonderful no matter where you are in the world," Claudiah said in satisfaction as she stretched her legs out of the water.

She'd cleaned up the bath, fixed the magic item that supplied hot water, and drawn herself a warm bath; now, she was enjoying it to the fullest.

Claudiah then glanced at the entrance and called out.

"Would you two like to join me?"

"No."

"I'll refrain." The ones who'd replied were King of Beasts, Behemot, and Leviathan. As befitted hired bodyguards, they were watching over Claudiah even as she was bathing.

"It is rather uncomfortable being the only naked one here," she said.

"Why are you bathing in the first place?" Leviathan asked.

"Eh? Because we have the peace talks tomorrow. If I am to meet Altimia, I must clean myself, no?"

"...I'm not sure if *a bath with corpses* is fit for that purpose." Leviathan's gaze traveled to one corner of the bath.

In that corner, a human-shaped stain was still visible — likely left behind by a person who'd died and decayed there long enough to leave a mark before becoming an undead and walking off.

It was a sign of death that couldn't be easily washed away.

However, Claudiah didn't seem to mind. She bathed happily, as if the stain didn't bother her at all.

"What of it?" she asked. "*I've had corpses fall directly on me before*. This is nothing."

She tilted her head and moved her fingers around.

Behemot and Leviathan both noticed that she was making the same kinds of motions that she did while wielding a spear.

"Even during last year's civil war, I had blood and guts on me so many times that I lost count." Claudiah played with her pinned-up hair as she sighed, thinking back on the past.

She was referring to the imperator accession civil war — an event that had happened because of two specific people.

The first instigator was the previous imperator, Xanafald Wolfgang Dryfe.

He was over eighty years old before the war started, but he had yet to cede his throne to his crown prince.

In fact, he hadn't even decided who the crown prince *was*.

At the time, there were two princes worthy of the throne — the first prince, born to a concubine, and the second prince, born to the imperator's legal wife

The imperator hadn't yet declared which prince would take the throne after him. In fact, he actively had them fight for it, implying that the one who survived would be named crown prince.

However, no matter how fiercely they feuded, neither of them killed the other. The first to perish ended up being the third prince and his wife, who weren't even involved in the conflict.

Xanafald's life finally ended before he named a crown prince.

He had written down all of his thoughts in his will, but they seemed to be pure madness

"Fight over the right to the throne. The one who stands at the top will be the next imperator."

Through this will, his implication had become a statement.

Basically, he'd ordered his family to fight each other. It was unclear whether he was sane when he wrote those words, or if age had taken away his reason. Those who knew Xanafald before his health started to decline, though, would claim that he could have easily written those words while of sound mind

Every single person in the imperial family who had any claim to the throne gathered for a meeting at Dryfe Imperstand in the heart of Vandelheim, and there they were all presented with his will.

Many thought that this would be the beginning of the greatest civil war the country had ever known.

They were both completely right... and very, very wrong.

The two princes and all of their supporters *were killed mere moments after the will was read out*.

This deed was done by someone nobody had expected — a child of the late third prince of Dryfe, and perhaps the least likely candidate for taking the throne... Claudiah R. Dryfe.

The imperial succession civil war that followed was nothing but the unlikely new imperator's struggle to be recognized — to prove to the empire's powerful nobility that she fulfilled the previous imperator's will. The imperator had to wipe out any detractors, which were far more numerous than supporters.

The only people Claudiah and Reinhard had on their side were their direct relatives — the Barbaros family — along with an insignificant number of officials and soldiers, and their friend King of Beasts, Behemot.

They might be few in number... but in the end, they were more than enough.

“How nostalgic,” said Claudiah.

“ggwp,” said Behemot.

“It was obvious that *we* would survive, but it’s a miracle that *all* of you did,” said Leviathan.

“Truly. There were many times when I thought that Uncle Gifted’s old friends, the SMTF, would kill me.”

Before the number of Masters began to increase, the Special Mission Task Force was the imperium’s strongest. They were against the current reign and had attempted to assassinate the new imperator on many occasions.

However, their attempts always ended in death at the hands of King of Beasts, Gifted Barbaros, and Claudiah herself.

“That eventually led to Reinhard bringing order to the country, but...” Because the opposition had been wiped out, the leadership of the country was quite monolithic.

The purges of opposing nobles had created a severe shortage of tians working for the government, but they filled the gaps by assigning capable commoners to act as civil servants and bolstering their military with Masters.

Some would say that they’d just drained the pus from a festering wound... but it was more akin to a lizard cutting off its limbs to become a snake, then ascending as a serpentine dragon. That was how drastically the imperator’s leadership had changed the country’s political climate.

The only thing left was to unify with the kingdom... which is what had led to the previous war.

“Dryfe and Altar’s... I mean, Altimia’s future and ours both depend on the peace talks tomorrow. You will have to be the best bodyguard you can be,” Claudiah said to her friend with a smile.

“ic,” Behemot nodded.

“...Speaking of which, I haven’t had the chance to ask... What are the actual goals of these negotiations?”

“Umm... give me a second,” Claudiah said as she put her hand on her temple as if trying to recall something she’d forgotten. “‘We have three possible goals: the first is to completely cease hostilities between our countries while maintaining the current state of both. The second is to merge with Altar via their surrender. The third is to decide the win-lose conditions for the next war. These goals are ordered by priority, from highest to lowest. If nothing else, accomplish the third goal.'"

She'd explained it in a tone that didn't seem like her own.

"...That's what Reinhard said, anyway."

"I see how it is," said Leviathan as she nodded.

"I will really be counting on you tomorrow," said Claudiah.

"kk," added Behemot.

"After Behemot, you're number one on my list of people to protect," said Leviathan. Time passed by and the night grew darker.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

By the time the sun was setting, we'd arrived at Vermina — the village closest to the Altar-Dryfe border.

Though many of the bodyguards had been assassinated last night, our trip from Altea went smoothly. We would spend the night here, then head to the hall prepared for the peace talks come morning.

After dinner, Azurite called us over. By "us," I meant the members of Death Period and Fuso. Tsukikage and the other Lunar Society members were tasked with keeping an eye on the village's surroundings.

Azurite was accompanied by the three tian officials she'd brought with her.

"Why'd you call us here, Azurite?" I asked. "Did something happen?"

"I gathered you together because I need Master opinions on tomorrow's peace talks."

"Our opinions?"

"Indeed. We decided on our terms before we left, but they were made with a tian bias. There might be some possible ideas and plans that we missed, but you Masters would come up with easily. I want to make these final adjustments before we have to leave for the peace talks."

"I see..." I did understand her point of view, but honestly, our "real" selves didn't exactly have much experience with peace talks, either.

Also, cross-national negotiations here were quite different from the ones you saw in reality.

First, there was the military force... the *stats* you could bring. Then there was Truth Discernment — which could see through lies — among many other skills available to the participants.

And perhaps the biggest difference was the existence of Covenants.

Covenants were items in the same vein as Contracts, except they could only be signed by leaders of countries and their representatives, and going against them would cause terrible things to happen to the *entire* country — not just those who signed.

To break a Covenant was to doom the country. I'd even heard that one country that had broken a Covenant had its capital consumed by a giant vortex, leaving absolutely nothing behind. This meant that agreements between countries were far more binding than they were in reality.

That was why the coming peace talks would focus on thoroughly looking over each country's conditions, finding a compromise, and signing a Covenant both sides could accept.

That was the goal, and there would be no going back after that.

"Let me start from the beginning," said Azurite. "First, if both countries agree, we've planned to enter a treaty that would forbid 'any and all warlike action between Altar and Dryfe for the next century.'"

A century. Time in *Dendro* passed three times faster than real time, but I felt like that would still be long enough to make sure there would never be a war between Altar and Dryfe for as long as I was here.

"Define 'warlike action,'" I said.

"Invasion by the military, unlawful occupation of land, and the activation of the War Boundary... Anything smaller than that could result in accidental breach of the Covenant, so there is only so much we can demand."

"But that doesn't prevent the kind of terrorism we saw in Gideon and Quartierlatin, does it?" Marie asked. "Neither incident involved the military and no land was occupied."

"Indeed," Azurite nodded. "We plan to deal with that in our terms for signing the treaty."

"What do you mean?"

"The talks will involve negotiating the treaty conditions. Dryfe actually requested that we present them with our terms and what we are willing to compromise on."

"That's... pretty direct."

So Altar would be negotiating after laying all their cards on the table, huh? I thought.

"It truly is. However, since both sides have Truth Discernment, it will be pointless to bluff or attempt to guess at any ulterior motives."

That reminded me that one of the three officials accompanying Azurite had a build specialized in reading people. Skills like that weren't limited to jobs, though. There could easily be Embryos out there that specialized in reading people's motives, too.

"And? What are our conditions and the compromises we'd be willing to bear?" Shu asked.

"Our first compromise is obvious," Azurite said. "We will abandon the Old Lunnings Duchy."

That was the land that Dryfe had occupied in the last war.

"Are you okay with that?" I asked.

"...It would be worse to keep it, actually. In all honesty, that territory is pretty meaningless to the kingdom now."

According to Azurite, Gloria had devastated the region and killed most of its inhabitants. That had been followed by the destruction of the nearby town of Claymill and the immense losses during the war, so Altar no longer had enough people to repopulate the duchy.

The Lunnings family would have insisted that the kingdom reclaim and restore their territory, but they were all dead now. Control of the Duchy had officially passed to the royal family, who had little use for it.

It had once been the kingdom's biggest grain producer, but in its current decrepit state, it wasn't even worth touching. All of Altar was rich in arable land, so that one Duchy was far from necessary. The other regions nearby also produced far more crops than they consumed.

Besides, even if the kingdom took the land back from Dryfe, it didn't have enough people to dedicate to its development and restoration, so it would really be more trouble than it was worth.

"Dryfe, on the other hand, needs it more than anything else," Azurite continued. "Based on what we know, the imperium's soil is slowly turning fallow for unknown reasons. They're actually suffering famines right now, so they can't simply let go of the Old Lunnings Duchy. If we tried to take it, peace would be impossible. They'd be left with no other option but war."

"So we have one confirmed com-paw-romise, and we need to present conditions we want in exchange for it, huh?" Shu nodded in understanding.

"As I said, the biggest issue is terrorism committed by Dryfean Masters." Last month, Franklin was responsible for an incident in Gideon; this month, Hell General had caused some trouble in Quartierlatin. Although the worst-case scenarios had been averted, both places could have been completely wiped out.

"It already happened twice, so if we were to experience a third such event... perhaps if the King of Beasts attacks the capital or something similar... the situation would be especially bleak."

Shu showed a slight reaction at the mention of the Superior, but said nothing. Acts of terrorism were lethal preemptive strikes. And even if the culprit was put on the kingdom's wanted list, there was nothing stopping them from just coming back over and over again as long as the imperium didn't do the same.

After all, neither Franklin nor the Hell General had ended up in the gaol for their actions.

"That is why I intend to lead with that," said Azurite.

"You mean..."

"The first condition Altar will present will be... 'a shared wanted list.'"

"...I see." That would essentially create a rule that any Dryfean master who committed crimes in Altar and ended up on the kingdom's wanted list would also be added to Dryfe's list. That would certainly prevent the kind of terrorism that had been committed by Franklin and Hell General.

"This would necessitate the creation of additional conditions that prevent Dryfe from falsely accusing, say, Shu or Miss Fuso of some crime in order to put them on the shared wanted list," Rook noted. I was reminded of the fact that, while I was in Torne, Shu had been locked up as a suspect for a crime. Apparently, that was the fault of a Superior who wanted to frame Shu, but honestly, it wasn't out of the question that countries could conspire to do something similar.

One of the officials wrote down Rook's opinion.

"That is true," said Azurite. "Anything else?"

"This condition would bind Altar as much as it binds Dryfe. Both countries would come out approximately equal in that deal." said B3. "Although Dryfe already occupies it, you're letting go of an entire region. Why not make a condition that's more beneficial for us?"

She had a point. And honestly, I agreed that wouldn't do enough to bind the imperium.

"Indeed," Azurite nodded. "We have several conditions in mind, and I would like your opinion on all of them."

The officials then handed us booklets printed using Secretary skills. They contained a list of conditions the kingdom might present to Dryfe.

"Hmm? I like the demand for reparations," said Fuso after just a moment of looking at the list. "Why not go with that and present it as 'compensation to the bereaved families of those who died in the war'?"

"What's your reasoning on that?" Azurite asked.

"Dryfe became powerful by hiring Masters out of their own pockets, didn't they? That's why I think you should take a bite of their military funding. The more reparations they pay, the fewer Masters they can hire. It's perfect for keeping them in check."

She had a point. Before Franklin's Game, Hugo had told me that the war had been extremely costly for Dryfe. In that case, damaging their finances was a good way to limit their actions, but...

"But if the treaty is passed, warlike action will be forbidden," said B3. "On top of that, the first condition will make it impossible for their Masters to touch Altar, too."

I shared her opinion. What was the point of targeting military funds if we were about to enter a peace treaty?

"You're sooo innocent, B," said Fuso. "They could very well hire freelance Masters, you know? Money talks, and if it's loud enough, you can easily attract Superiors and pre-Superiors who are both skilled and willing to become terrorists. Hey, they could even get their own Masters to do it. They just have to not be afraid of going to gaol. In either case, Dryfe would need more money to hire Masters than they do now, but that's all the more reason to hit them in the wallet."

Oh yeah, they really could *do that...* I thought in surprise.

Azurite was even more shocked than I was. "That is just... so..." she muttered, clearly shaken. Tians seemed to consider the gaol a much worse fate than we ourselves did. Although there were exceptions like Hannya, whose crimes were minor, the vast majority of the outlaws sent there would never return, making it seem like a death sentence. I supposed that this was one of the differences in tian and Master opinions that Azurite had mentioned.

There were probably some optimizations to be made for the first condition.

"I wouldn't expect less from the un-bear-able, greedy, cunning she-fox," said Shu.

"Why, thank you. Maybe you could learn a thing or two, Mr. 'I'll sell popcorn to buy ammo.'"

What followed was an uncomfortable silence.

...Was it really necessary to create such a hostile mood here? I wondered.

We continued to discuss, but in the end we went for the condition first proposed, plus Fuso's idea.

"Though, we gotta bear in mind that they can also demand much more than just the Old Lunnings Duchy," said Shu.

"Indeed," Azurite nodded. "It's not out of the question that they would want me to marry the imperator so our respective countries could merge."

"...And take Altar as it is, huh?" I said.

"Apparently, the idea is not new."

"Huh?"

"Before the war, Altar and Dryfe were on good terms. I was a transfer student there, and Prince Hallon — the first prince's eldest son — was a transfer student in Altar."

"Oh yeah, you did say something like that. You even had a really good friend there, didn't you?"

"Yes... That same friend is also the person I will be negotiating with... Princess Claudiah."

"So..." Azurite was going to face an old friend and negotiate the fate of her country?

"It is possible that they selected Claudiah for the peace talks specifically *because* we were friends... Back to the matter at hand, though. Since Altar and Dryfe were on such good terms, there was talk of a possible alliance or even merger by marriage between the royal and imperial families."

I said nothing and waited for her to continue.

"Only my father knew about that idea, other than the Arch Sage — his advisor — and a few other high-ranking individuals. Even I only learned of it recently, from reading the records they left behind."

So it hadn't become common knowledge because it wasn't set in stone, huh?

"Countries that once got along sooo well are now at war," said Fuso. "What a twist of fate."

"...Truly."

"And what'll you do if they come bearing a marriage or merger demand?" Shu asked.

"I would never accept," Azurite instantly replied. "Our people wouldn't tolerate something like that. Also, though Dryfe's military power is growing, as a country it's weakening. Merging with them would only make things harder for the kingdom."

When it came to military power, Dryfe had many Masters, as well as five Superiors, one of which was the famed King of Beasts, the Physical Apex. However, their people were dying to famines, their wealth had been drained by war, and the civil war for the imperial throne had left them with a shortage of leaders.

With so many negatives, the kingdom had nothing to gain from merging with Dryfe.

"In the first place, we have no need for any Dryfean land, resources, or technology. Whether it's war or a merger, *Altar stands to gain nothing*."

Altar wasn't expansionist — they were even fully willing to let go of the Old Lunnings Duchy.

While Dryfe lacked food production capacity, it was rich in minerals... but that meant little to a non-industrialized country such as Altar. The kingdom's technology, at least when it came to machines, wasn't advancing much... and there was still more than enough R&D to be done in the recently-unearthed ruins in Quartierlatin.

There was really no point in pushing for open war or a merger with Dryfe. It was a net negative for Altar that the war had begun at all.

"Actually... we gained nothing, and lost much," Azurite said as she hung her head.

"Azurite..."

The war had taken so much from Azurite — her people, her teachers, and even her own father.

I couldn't even begin to gauge what kind of emotion went into those words.

Despite that, she raised her head and looked at us before saying, “That is why we must end this. These are the conditions and compromises we will present to them. In exchange for the Old Lunnings Duchy, we would demand that our countries share wanted lists and that they pay reparations. The bargain may be weighted in Dryfe’s favor, but it will end the war.”

She looked us all over before continuing.

“However... just like last night’s ambushes, there could be some trouble at the peace talks... or it could all turn out to be a trap. If that happens...”

“You can count on us,” I said. “If Dryfe bares its fangs, we will protect you... and Altar.”

“Ray...”

“We Masters *can* help you and your kingdom, right?” I asked, recalling a question I’d asked her back in Quartierlatin.

In response, she said, “...Certainly!”

And so, it was decided. Come what may, we would give our all to seize the possibility Azurite desired.

Thus ended the last night before the peace talks.

When the sun rose, we would travel to an assembly where countless conflicting motives intertwined into a final apex.

Our goal was to get the peace treaty signed and end the meeting without any trouble.

Let the quest... begin.

Chapter Six: Peace Conference

Paladin, Ray Starling

"MUAHAHAHAHAHAHAH! I've been waiting for you, Unbreakable!" Upon our arrival to the location appointed for the peace talks, I was greeted by a familiar voice — though it was laughing in an unfamiliar manner.

It came from the imposing shape standing in the middle of the path leading to our gathering place — a handsome red-haired man known as Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

"Heheheh! From what I can tell, you've only gotten two new low-rank jobs since we last met! And you didn't even upgrade your gear! I'm different, though! I have been reborn! I'm so powerful now, I'm practically a new man." I said nothing and just let him ramble. "...Hm? Ah, I see your Embryo's clothes are different! Did you evolve it to high-rank?! Well, that alone won't be enough to defeat me!"

That was unexpectedly direct of him.

Just like he said, Nemesis' evolution to the fourth form had indeed slightly changed her clothing — she was dressed a bit more extravagantly than before. Her physical appearance didn't change much overall, though, and she herself wasn't too pleased about that.

"I've been waiting for the day I could wipe away the disgrace you and Franklin have burdened me with! It's time for a rematch! I'll beat you and prove my power to—"

"stfu"

"This isn't the time, place, *or* situation for that." Logan's words were cut short by someone who came up from behind him and grabbed him by the neck.

"Ah...!" he gasped. The immense amount of pressure on his throat left him completely unable to say anything more.

The person grabbing him was a lady I'd seen way back when I first met up with Shu in Gideon. She was grasping Logan's neck with her left hand while cradling a porcupine in her right arm.

Shu had already told me that these two were none other than King of Beasts, Behemot, and her Embryo, Leviathan.

"...Now that I see them, I can say this with absolute certainty," said Nemesis as she looked at Leviathan. "*She and I are birds of a feather.*"

Just like Fuso's Kaguya, Leviathan was a Maiden that had evolved into a Superior Embryo. She'd probably been wearing equipment to hide her true identity before, because the oppressive aura rolling off of her now was impossible to compare to what she'd been like before.

While Kaguya was best compared to the Moon dominating everything from the sky above, Leviathan was the incarnation of violence, bearing the potential to shatter entire planets.

But despite wielding such power, it seemed like she was behaving for now, and even holding back... if only barely.

I was so tense that I could feel sweat start to pool in my palms.

This was one of *Infinite Dendrogram*'s three apexes — the Physical Apex.

Barely able to make a sound, Hell General tapped on Leviathan's hand. He was quickly turning bright purple from lack of air.

"Oh? Hit your limit already? You're in worse shape than I thought," said Leviathan as she let him go.

Logan fell to the ground and gasped raggedly for breath before glaring at her and the King of Beasts and grunting out, "You...!"

"You are here as a bodyguard," Leviathan continued. "Keep the personal rivalries somewhere far away from these peace talks."

"What?!" Logan raised his voice, nearly bursting a blood vessel in rage as he used Instant Equip to draw his sword.

"If you continue to misbehave like this, I can take your head off right now," Leviathan said, grabbing his head again at a speed that made me feel like I was watching stop-motion. It was easy to see that her slender fingers could pluck it off with as much effort as picking a flower. "Have I made myself clear?"

The Hell General had no choice but to nod, and once she let him go, he blurted out, "Shit!" and fled immediately.

To my knowledge, Logan was a Master who primarily fought using his summons and wasn't much of a threat from a close range. Still, he was a

Superior, and Leviathan had just made him look like a weakling. Rather than meaning that Logan was insignificant, though, it really meant that the King of Beasts was *far too powerful*.

“Apologies for the unbecoming sight. Good day to you, Altarians. I have been entrusted by Her Highness Claudiah to welcome you. My name is Leviathan and this my Master, Behemot,” she said before bowing her head. “The peace talks begin in two hours. We have a room prepared for you, so we request that you wait there. Allow me to show you the way.”

“...Very well,” said Azurite, who seemed rather tense — likely because she was facing Dryfe’s most powerful assets. Had King of Beasts been chosen for this role just to put pressure on the kingdom? Or was there some other reason?

“By the way, where’s Chronooo?” Tom asked.

“I do not know,” Leviathan curtly responded.

[I think that King of Beasts is the one greeting us because they’re beary cautious of The Rabbit,] Shu said to me through our Telepathy Cuffs.

[Huh?]

[Assassinations *before* the event are one thing, but if they attacked us here, it would be complete panda-monium. I’m beary sure that Dryfe wants this treaty to go well.]

That made sense. That must’ve also been the reason why they stopped Logan from causing trouble.

I guess they don’t actually want this whole thing to fall apart, then? I wondered.

[...Or maybe they just want us to relax so we’re caught off guard by the *real* trap,] Shu added. I could only hope that wasn’t the case.

Last night, we’d agreed that Tsukikage, a few other Lunar Society members, and — by his own wish — Tom would scout the area around the building while the rest of us would accompany Azurite. We would act as bodyguards for her and the officials all throughout the meeting.

As I talked, King of Beasts and Leviathan led us through the assembly hall.

This place had been built right after Dryfe proposed the peace treaty to Altar, but unlike temporary buildings you’d see in real life, it actually looked really well-made.

According to Azurite, it looked exactly like the assembly hall she’d seen in Vandelheim.

Shu guessed that it had been made using a construction-focused Embryo that had copied either the existing building or its blueprints.

Well, there were people like Franklin, who could create monsters, so there was no reason there couldn't be a Master who created buildings just as easily. Dryfe also had many more Masters than Altar, which made it even more likely that they could have someone with such an unusual skill set.

We now have as many Superiors as they do, but if a war breaks out, Altar will still be at a disadvantage, I thought.

"Please wait here until the appointed time," said Leviathan, after she'd led us to a room that looked like the presidential suite straight out of an ad for a luxurious hotel. This had to be some sort of guest room for VIPs.

With her job done, Leviathan left the room. King of Beasts shot one last glare at Shu, but didn't actually say anything.

"...Marie, are there any traps in here?" I asked.

"Hmm... No. Not a single one, and no listening device. I'm almost worried." Marie was a Superior Job focused on hiding and finding hidden things, so I had absolutely no reason to doubt her on this.

"Even if there aren't any traps inside, the right ultimate skill from the outside could easily kill us all," said Fuso, and I glared at her. "Oh, don't make that face. We have our devout patrolling the area." Fuso then giggled mischievously. "Well, we're outnumbered, so maybe they wouldn't be enough. If numbers are their only advantage, though, then you don't have to worry about a thing."

"Hm...?" Was she saying that because her Lunar Divider Field was so potent in large-scale battles?

"So, Rook, did ya notice anything when you looked at their faces?" Shu asked.

"Hell General wanted to fight Ray, while King of Beasts wanted to fight you. That's it, though. At the very least, I'm certain Hell General isn't plotting anything."

"Well, knowing the history between us, that's a beary reasonable reaction even if Dryfe doesn't have some plan in mind."

That's true, I thought.

"So, Ray," he then spoke to me. "Did ya use your Reveal?"

Normally, the stats of high-level people were hard to see. My Reveal was at level 5. That was the highest level I could get as a Scout, but it could still be easily resisted by people who were high enough level. Even the lowest level of Conceal could completely prevent me from seeing basically anything.

However, I'd been able to see their stats without any problem — meaning neither of them were trying to hide.

"Yeah... For some reason, Hell General was only about level 500."

"I guess he started respeccing after he lost to you. That's some bad timing. Fur real," Shu said before looking at Fuso for some reason. "What about the King of Beasts? Unlike in Gideon, she didn't seem to be wearing any Conceal gear."

"Yeah, I saw her stats too, but..."

In a way, what I saw for King of Beasts was even stranger than what I saw for Logan.

Behemot.

Job: King of Beasts.

Level: 1156 (Total Level: 1656)

HP: 108060

MP: 3350

SP: 48980

STR: 10050

AGI: 15315

END: 9980

DEX: 1502

LUK: 125

Her level was extremely high. She was in the same tier as Shu — one of the highest level people I knew. I couldn't say the same about her stats, though. Most of her stats were higher than Shu's — who'd specced heavily into STR — but on average, her numbers were far lower.

My guess here was that these stats were largely unaffected by Embryo stat growth bonuses. They were, however, far from deserving of the title "Physical Apex." For a moment, I thought that she'd been showing me fake stats, just like Marie had done at first, but...

"The King of Beasts isn't scary because of her *own* level or stats, is she?" I asked.

"Yeah. King of Beasts is bad news because of Leviathan."

“*...Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.*” That was the thing B3 had mentioned once and the thing I’d learned about before this event — the blueprint for what was considered to be the strongest of all builds in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

It had been perfected in King of Beasts, Behemot, and that was what gave her the title of “Physical Apex.”

“We talked about this before, but... if a battle breaks out, I’ll be the one fighting,” said Shu. “...Right now, I’m the only one that can handle them. Though, if it was night, the she-fox could use the ace up her sleeve.”

“Hm...?” Oh right... it had to be night for Kaguya to use her ultimate skill. Did that mean Fuso was actually able to stand up to the King of Beasts at the right time of day?

“I don’t recall seeing the details of Prez’s ultimate skill in The Lunar Society’s database...” said B3.

“Ahahah! Oh, B. Of *course* it wouldn’t be there. It’s my top secret trump card that more or less guarantees my victory... The only one who’s ever beaten me while I was using it is this bear here... You real-life hacker.”

“I don’t wanna hear that fur-om you.” This reminded me that Fuso had once actually given *Figaro* the death penalty. Shu had gone on to fight and defeat her right after that.

“Well, the best thing we could’ve hoped for in our situation is Lei-Lei being with us,” said Shu.

“...More like the worst thing,” said Fuso with a grimace. “I can totally see myself getting caught up in whatever she does and dying anyway.”

Although Lei-Lei was part of our clan, she wasn’t with us here because of her business in real life. I also didn’t know anything about her fighting style or build. All I knew was that she liked spiking drinks.

“Hey, Shu, is Lei-Lei really that amazing?” I asked.

“...She’s so dangerous that you can ask any of us Big Three about the one person we don’t wanna fight, and all of us will point to her. She’s not ‘amazing’ or ‘strong,’ just beary, beary *dangerous*.”

...Now *that* was a lot of emphasis.

“If you ask her about it yourself, or if you ever get a taste of what she does... you’ll know what I mean,” he added.

“...I prefer the former.” I’d heard enough to know that I really didn’t wanna fight her.

An hour had passed since we'd been led to the suite, and an hour more was left until the start of the talks. Azurite and the officials were busy with preparations and final checks. They'd also contacted Altar and confirmed that there were no urgent matters that needed addressing.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

"It's... just one person," said Marie, just from one glance at the door. That meant it wasn't King of Beasts and Leviathan. Who could it be, then?

"May I come in?" the person outside asked. The voice was unfamiliar to me — but not to Azurite, apparently.

With slight surprise on her face, she replied, "Come in."

"Pardon the intrusion," said the person before opening the door, revealing a very... princess-like girl with curled blonde hair. She seemed to be about Azurite's age.

"Altimia! It has been so long!" she said.

"It really has been... Claudiah," Azurite replied, and it was our turn to be surprised.

Her Highness Claudiah herself. She was the person Azurite would be negotiating with in these peace talks.

It was shocking to me that someone that important would casually come to visit us in the waiting room.

Azurite, however, just stood up from her chair and greeted her with a handshake.

"It has been... far too long!" Her Highness Claudiah, embracing Azurite warmly.

"Ah...?!"

We were all unsure how to react to this.

"Ugh! It really has been far, far, *far* too long! After you returned to Altar, we could only talk by sending letters, but even that became impossible because of the war..."

"...Yet you still love to embrace your friends, I see," commented Azurite. Like a child, Claudiah clung to Azurite with tears in her eyes while Azurite patted her on the back as though used to all of this.

They seemed to be off in a world of their own, separated from us Masters.

"...Ah! I-I am so sorry!" Her Highness Claudiah said as she suddenly backed away from Azurite. "I only came to greet you before the talks begin, but when I saw your face, I was just overwhelmed with emotion." She looked bashful and her cheeks flushed a rosy red.

"No need to worry," said Azurite. "I am also happy to see an old friend again."

"Altimia... th-thank you," Her Highness said with a blissful smile.

"That aside, is this not a bit careless of you? You are the representative to your country and the only member of the imperial family besides the imperator."

"Oh, there's no need to worry about that!" Her Highness said. "I mean, I am sure that both countries want the same thing. Neither side really wants to cause any trouble!"

She puffed her chest as she said that, and her words left us all unsure about how to react. The Rabbit and Logan had already made a bit of a mess, so hearing all of that made us all want to chuckle wryly.

"Hm...?" One of us did have a different reaction, though. Rook was staring at Her Highness with a bead of cold sweat running down his forehead.

"Anyway, I just came to greet you! We can chat about personal matters after the talks! See you soon!" And with those final words, Her Highness Claudiah ran off like a gust of wind. While everyone was busy staring at her back, unsure how to react, I walked up to Rook.

"Rook... Did you notice something strange?" I silently asked.

"...I'm not sure how to put it, actually."

"Did she lie or anything?"

"No. She meant everything she said. Nobody's Truth Discernment went off, so I'm sure I'm not mistaken there. But..." he wiped the sweat off his cheek before continuing. "At times, she didn't seem *human* to me."

"...What do you mean?"

"On the outside, she was exactly as she presented herself, but I couldn't even see what was on the inside. I've never seen someone like that."

I had no words. Rook was extremely good at reading others' thoughts and figuring out exactly what kind of people they were. The fact that he would give such an evaluation, combined with the prospect of Azurite facing her in the peace talks, sent a cold chill down my spine.

◇

The remaining hour before the talks was uneventful, and the peace talks began as planned.

Azurite and Her Highness Claudiah exchanged a formal greeting completely unlike the one they'd shared earlier, and the negotiation began.

...And right *after* they began, we realized that our chilling premonitions weren't unwarranted.

"Let us begin these negotiations by presenting our goals. To find a compromise, each side must understand what the other wants," said Her Highness. They then exchanged the documents they'd prepared for this, allowing both sides to consider the other's demands and decide where they were willing to compromise.

Upon seeing Dryfe's document, I had to suppress a gasp of shock. I mean, who could blame me for my response, honestly?

Just as we'd discussed last night, Altar's first condition was a counter-terrorist measure — "a shared wanted list."

That condition had also been revised a bit to make sure that once the treaty was signed, false accusations and additions specifically targeting the other country would be strictly forbidden.

Well, one of Dryfe's demands was... "a unified wanted list for both Altar and Dryfe."

It was as though they already knew what the kingdom would demand. That wasn't the end of it, though.

The kingdom's second condition was "reparations to the bereaved families of those who'd died in battle as a result of the invasion."

Dryfe’s second compromise was “the payment of condolence money to the Altarian families who lost family members to the war.”

Altar’s first compromise was “abandonment of the Old Lunnings Duchy.”

Dryfe’s first condition was “the acquisition of the Old Lunnings Duchy.”

I was flabbergasted. The list was a perfect mirror. There was nothing to argue about — all of the conditions were in complete agreement.

Had Altar’s conditions been leaked? That couldn’t be the case. We’d done the final revisions just last night... And this bodyguard duty involved signing confidentiality agreements using actual Contracts. This couldn’t have leaked from us.

Did we have a spy, then? That couldn’t be it, either. With Marie and Tsukikage keeping watch, sneaking in to steal the info would be nearly impossible.

That left only one possibility... that someone had actually predicted all our conditions and demands to the letter, and *this was the result of Dryfe’s planning alone*.

“I’m so glad! I knew our countries wanted the same thing! There is nothing for us to even argue about!” said Her Highness with a smile, but we Altarians found it hard to share her sentiment.

The officials were also clearly shaken by this unexpected turn of events.

Azurite alone was an exception.

“Hey, Claudiah,” she said.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Like you said, many of our desires are the same, but,” she said as she pointed at the document. “*There is one point that is not.*”

She was pointing at the only stain on the otherwise perfect reflection — Dryfe’s second condition.

It was “*removal of Masters from the wanted list*.”

More specifically, “all Masters that were added to the wanted list during the period prior to the signing of the peace treaty shall be immediately removed.”

“Hm...?” I raised an eyebrow. That was something that we hadn’t even considered last night. We were expecting something along the lines of a country merger or a marriage between Azurite and the imperator...

“...May I have your reasoning?” Azurite asked.

“It is simple,” said Her Highness. “If Altar and Dryfe’s wanted lists are to be unified, we would lose two Superiors. We have no intention of fighting Altar anymore, but we still have Caldina and other countries to worry about. Losing two Superiors in a situation like ours would greatly damage our defenses.”

That was actually understandable. Accepting this condition would make it so that both Dryfean Masters on Altar’s wanted list and Altarian Masters on Dryfe’s wanted list would be exonerated.

That would include both Franklin and Logan.

No one’s Truth Discernment went off and Rook wasn’t saying anything, meaning that Her Highness Claudiah truly and honestly wanted this done not to combat Altar, but in order to be prepared for potential aggression from other countries.

...Still, it was really infuriating that two people who’d got on the wanted list for acts of terror would now be totally innocent.

Azurite’s silence made it clear that she felt similarly.

Then again, this was a far more tolerable condition than forcing a merger or a marriage. After all, if this treaty fell apart, those two would still be free to do whatever they wanted. If it meant preventing any further acts of terror, it did seem wise to exonerate them now...

“...Hold it,” said Shu, breaking our trains of thought. He had spent most of his time here focusing on the King of Beasts right behind Her Highness. Why had he spoken up now?

“What is it? I would prefer if bodyguards stay silent during this,” Her Highness said, seemingly a bit troubled and sulky all of a sudden. It made her seem almost childish.

“Sorry, but I just can’t stay quiet on this,” Shu continued, not minding her. “Princess, in case you didn’t realize — you can’t, under any circumstances, undo the wanted list.”

“In case I did not realize... what?” Azurite asked.

“It says that you have to remove the Masters who got on the list prior to the signing of the peace treaty,” Shu said as he made a bitter face and pointed at the second condition. “You know Sechs, whom I sent to the gaol myself? Or Candy, who was beaten by the Superior Killer...? Well, if this passes, they’d all be able to use Altar’s save points again.”

“Ah...?!” He was completely right. Masters ended up in the gaol because being on wanted lists prevented them from using any existing save points, making the gaol their only option. But what would happen if all the criminals in the gaol were suddenly exonerated and, as a result, could use save points outside of it? Would they all be able to come here again? That had probably never happened before, but the possibility alone made this condition into a real landmine.

I looked over and noticed that Marie was also frowning bitterly. That told me all I needed to know about how bad the King of Plagues was. Shu was also so desperate it was actually kind of scary, which told me all I needed to know about the threat posed by the King of Crime.

We'd spotted the hidden danger of the second condition, and Her Highness reacted...

"That certainly *is* dangerous! Very well — I will change the condition right away!"

...By quickly retracting it.

"I will instead ask that you only remove the Dryfean Superiors," she continued. "They may have caused trouble in the kingdom, certainly, but the imperium still needs them."

She went on to revise the condition. Logan was standing behind them, and the words "the imperium still needs them" made him look really proud of himself.

"Can you really change the conditions that easily?" Azurite asked.

"I can," Her Highness said as she puffed out her chest. "I have been given full discretionary powers. I can freely cover for any holes in our treaty!"

[It's not impossible that they knew about this loophole from the start,] said Shu telepathically.

[I see...] I replied.

They'd presented an outrageous demand at first, something our side would have to refuse, then scaled it down a little to make their real demand easier to swallow. That was negotiation 101 — a technique so basic that even novices knew about it. The exoneration of Franklin and Logan seemed like an easy compromise now, despite how many people on our side would have objected initially.

Now, it seemed that we might be able to try for another concession in exchange for accepting this demand, and once that was done, the peace treaty would be complete. In the end, Altar would only have to give up on the Old Lunnings Duchy — which we'd already planned on abandoning. Everything was going smoothly. War with Dryfe and the danger of terrorism from their Masters would finally be off the table completely.

...Though, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was overlooking something.

It was decided that in exchange for letting Dryfe's second condition pass, Altar would receive even more reparations and a transfer of resources. While Dryfe's second condition had some trouble going through, all of Altar's conditions were accepted easily.

Since they had so many demands and compromises in common, the talks lasted only about two hours, which was rather short for a treaty intended to completely eliminate the prospect of war.

Once everything was settled, the peace treaty looked like this:

Peace Treaty

This document shall forbid any warlike action between The Kingdom of Altar and Dryfe Imperium.
"Warlike action" includes:

1. Post-treaty activation of the War Boundary targeted at the other country.
2. Post-treaty invasion by military forces.
3. Post-treaty unlawful occupation of the other country's territory.
4. Post-treaty requests to Masters involving violence against or kidnapping of key individuals from the other country, or otherwise inciting your country's Masters to commit such acts.

Conditions for Peace: With the signing of this treaty, the Kingdom of Altar and Dryfe Imperium shall do the following:

1. The Kingdom of Altar shall transfer ownership of the Old Lunnings Duchy over to Dryfe Imperium.
2. Post-treaty, both countries shall maintain a common wanted list. *(Those mentioned in point 4 shall be exempt from the common wanted*

list until they are removed from the standard one.)

3. Within a week, Dryfe Imperium shall transfer the listed amount in reparations and resources to the Kingdom of Altar.
4. Within a week post-treaty, the Kingdom of Altar shall have to remove the two individuals mentioned below from their wanted list.

    - Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin.
    - Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

This was the best we could do to prevent terrorism. All that was left was for the leaders or representatives of both countries to activate the Covenant by signing it.

The acting ruler and first princess of Altar, Azurite, and Her Highness Claudiah of Dryfe, who'd been given full authority here, were perfectly qualified to do this.

"It's done!" Her Highness said. She'd written down "Claudiah R. Dryfe" and handed the Covenant over to Azurite.

Azurite looked it over to see if there were any discrepancies between what was discussed and what was written on the official Covenant, but apparently she didn't see anything amiss.

"Ugh! There's no need for you to be so cautious. The Covenant has not been tampered with!" Claudiah said.

Azurite's Truth Discernment yet again remained silent, so she just sighed in relief and said, "It seems you are right."

She took the writing brush. Now, she would finally sign the document, making the peace treaty complete.

Still, I wasn't sure why, but... watching her prepare to sign sent a cold chill down my spine, as if she was doing something really dangerous. Why, though? Was I missing something...?

"Ray?" Shu asked, noticing my apprehension. As I stood there, still unable to pinpoint why all these alarm bells were going off inside my head, Azurite put the brush to the Covenant...

"...Ah."

...And that was when I noticed the Hell General at the edge of my vision.

The sight of him made me recall a particular conversation with Marie, in a flash of insight.

At that moment...

"...STOP!" I shouted out, as if in a fit.

Azurite halted right before she signed and looked at me in surprise.

Everyone was staring at me. Most were simply confused why I stopped Azurite...

...But Her Highness Claudiah was looking at me with eyes so cold they could have been mechanical.

"...I am uncertain how to feel about you raising your voice like that. This is a historic moment, signaling lasting peace between our countries. I did not expect someone to interrupt it like that. You are very like your brother, I see," she said, looking at me as if she found this situation awkward.

"Ray...?" Azurite said as she shot me a worried glance.

Still... I'd noticed something that made me unable to stay silent.

Upon seeing Logan, I remembered the person who'd defeated him in a duel.

Marie had once described her like this:

"Speaking of The Fatal Seal of the Four Seas, she escaped Granvaloa after stealing a national treasure. That got her on their wanted list, and she's more infamous than famous now."

The person who'd defeated the Hell General and the current top of Dryfe's duel rankings. The person who was on *every* wanted list... King of Thieves.

"Why...?"

"Hm?"

"*Why isn't King of Thieves included in the second condition?*" Why wasn't the King of Thieves among the Dryfean Superiors that Altar had to remove from their wanted list?

Her Highness Claudiah herself had said that they "would lose *two* Superiors." She hadn't even counted the King of Thieves, Zeta, who was also surely on Altar's list, too. And yet, that hadn't made anyone's Truth Discernment go off.

My words had made Her Highness Claudiah's eyes grow even colder, and Azurite looked at the Covenant again as though she realized what I meant.

“Oh,” said Her Highness. “It’s true that she is not listed, but she has not done anything within the kingdom, has she?”

“That’s not the point...” King of Thieves was not on the list not because they’d just forgotten to include her. “I should’ve realized what was going on when they completely predicted our conditions.” I had no idea why I hadn’t. Had I been overwhelmed by the shock? Or was that all part of the plan too? “I should’ve realized that they could take advantage of it.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Claudiah tilted her head, but I was half-certain that she was faking it.

She surely knew *exactly* what I meant.

“The Kingdom’s first condition covers requests made *after* the peace treaty is signed...” That was our blind spot — the trap that could easily be missed exactly because they’d predicted our demands so precisely. “...But the same doesn’t apply to requests made *before* the signing.” The treaty would forbid hostile requests after the treaty was signed, but there was absolutely nothing in there against requests made *before* the treaty existed, even if those requests were fulfilled *after*. “If you could figure out what we were thinking so easily, or if you were confident you could lead us into doing what you wanted, you could easily have requested someone to commit an act of terror on your behalf before the peace conference even started.”

“But Ray,” objected Azurite. “That would still count as an attack by Dryfe. That would go against the treaty.”

“It wouldn’t,” I curtly replied. She was partially right — the peace treaty included a line that forbade inciting your country’s Masters to acts of violence or kidnapping against the other country. Even if the request was made before the treaty, this line would mean it was still in violation of it.

That was why...

“That’s why King of Thieves isn’t named.”

Claudiah was silent.

“After all... *King of Thieves is no longer affiliated with Dryfe — she’s a freelance Master.*”

That was why she hadn’t been counted by Claudiah or even alluded to in the writing. If King of Thieves had been mentioned as part of Dryfe’s defense force, that might’ve activated someone’s Truth Discernment.

“If a request is made before the treaty is signed and the Master in question is no longer part of Dryfe, it doesn't actually violate the treaty. That's why Dryfe would receive absolutely no punishment if King of Thieves does something in Altar after this is signed," I said.

Of course, it was possible that they hadn't fully predicted the kingdom's intentions. It was possible that the treaty's terms would end up being completely different, or just that the final document would end up not including this loophole. In that case, they would be able to just send out an order to stop the request. After all, while orders to attack were against the treaty, orders to *stop* attacks certainly weren't.

I kept going. "And here is the greatest problem of all."

Yeah... the fact that King of Thieves was free to act was just the beginning.

The greatest problem for the kingdom was right there on the treaty, written down in black and white.

"If King of Thieves did what Franklin tried and kidnapped someone to Dryfe... we'd be unable to get them back." If they took someone, Altar would be unable to rescue them. This could perhaps lead to future negotiations where Altar was at a tremendous disadvantage. "Once the treaty is signed, we wouldn't have any way to retaliate against that at all."

"Ah...!" Azurite gasped in realization.

Altar wouldn't be able to restart the war.

Altar wouldn't be able to dispatch Masters to retrieve the victim.

If the kingdom tried it, the treaty would punish us for attacking Dryfe.

The peace treaty would completely paralyze Altar.

In some senses, this would actually be worse than merely giving up or merging with them. Becoming a single country would at least leave room for rebellious factions within, but an opposing country bound by a Covenant would be completely powerless to reach them.

I now understood why Claudiah had come to say hello to Azurite today.

"I am sure that both countries want the same thing. Neither side really wants to cause any trouble!"

Truth Discernment confirmed that she was telling the truth there.

Of course she was. Both countries wanted to let the treaty pass without any problems. They wanted these peace talks to end without things escalating. There was no trap here.

After all, Dryfe's trap would only activate *after the signing*.

They seemed to desire peace, but there was a cunning strategy hidden just below the surface.

"...Do you have proof of that?" Claudiah asked.

"I don't," I admitted. This was just something I thought of based on what she'd said and the loophole I'd noticed in the Covenant.

It was possible, but I had no proof that they'd *actually* done something like that.

That was why...

"If my conjecture is wrong, just say it, loud and clear." If that was a lie, Truth Discernment wouldn't miss it. "If what you say is true, you can throw me in the gaol as a delusional madman who endangered this important event." If my worry was totally unfounded, I'd have no regrets even if it led to that.

In response...

"*You are completely right.*"

...Claudiah confirmed everything.

"Claudiah, you...!" Azurite cried out.

"...Franklin told me that your brain really starts working when it matters, but I didn't expect you to notice something so minor. I am impressed that you could see through Reinhard's plan."

"...I don't think it's that impressive, actually." Usually, Shu or Rook would've been the one who noticed something like this. However, Shu was closely watching King of Beasts' every move, while Rook was laser-focused on Claudiah, whom he said he couldn't even read. They couldn't spare the attention for noticing this loophole, and I just happened to stumble over it by chance.

Even now, Shu wasn't saying a word because of how focused he was.

After all, the peace talks were now officially canceled.

"Such a shame. The total casualties would have been far smaller if the treaty was passed without a hitch." Claudiah let out a deep breath. "Because of you, I will now have to pull the trigger and expedite the situation."

She took out a switch much like the one once used by Franklin...

"What a shame. I'd originally intended to signal that the peace treaty was signed, but, well... I suppose it's time for plan B."

...And pressed it as though declaring the beginning... or the end.

Interlude: The Assault on Altea

???

An electronic sound rang out from a device in the corner of the room.

It was heard by a single woman — King of Thieves, Zeta.

She was doing little besides listening to it. The device had been given to her by the imperator, but despite that, it was profoundly simple. Paired with a couple of switches, its only function was to make one of two electronic noises, depending on which switch was pressed.

It was so specialized in range and counter-jamming that this was the only thing it could do — but knowing its purpose, that was more than enough.

The device was intended to inform Zeta in case the negotiations went awry or if the operation was canceled. The sound that had rung out a moment earlier indicated the former.

Their peaceful-yet-subtle plan A had been called off in favor of their more direct plan B.

“Shame,” Zeta said. “This means my desire wasn’t fulfilled.”

Dryfe’s second condition, in its original form, had been Zeta’s own request. Sechs Würfel — the leader of I.F. — was currently in the gaol, and she saw this condition as a way of getting him (and Gerbera) out of it.

However, she did say that she wouldn’t mind it much if Altar refused her demand, or if the entire negotiation process failed as it apparently had just now. If it *had* actually passed, Zeta would’ve helped Dryfe in their anti-Caldina efforts, but it was fine by her if it didn’t. In her mind, Sechs could get out of the gaol by himself anyway.

All that was left for her was to commence the anti-Altar operation Dryfe had already paid her for — her first and final job for the imperium.

“Very well. Commencing. I will do as requested,” she said, taking out a Jewel... and shattering it.

Motes of light rose up from the remains of the Jewel, then gathered together to form four humanoid figures.

“Demonstration. I will have you show me your power.” Zeta spoke to the people she’d smuggled into Altea. “Expectation. You were already given your instructions. I have high expectations. I’m certain La Crima did fine work with you all.”

Three of the four smiled in response. They were all eager for the chance to show off their power.

The last one, however, was merely staring at the giant castle outside the window with a somewhat distant look.

“...Is that where *he* is?” Empty as his eyes were... there was a strong will burning deep within them.

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Royal Capital, Altea, Rose Garden

The castle at the heart of Altea had been built in the time of the founding king, the first Azurite. It was the work of his friend who held the title of Great Chief Carpenter, the Superior Job from the carpenter grouping, and it possessed numerous qualities that displayed that fact quite clearly. Some were security measures, but there were also features that merely served to improve the quality of life within the building’s walls.

The most noticeable of these was the rose garden blooming within the *indoor courtyard*.

The walls of the castle reflected sunlight, meaning that the enclosed garden was as brightly lit as anything outside. Ever since the days of the first Azurite, it was a royal family tradition to have tea parties here with their closest friends and family.

After the death of the previous king, Eldor Zeo Altar, only the gardener frequented this place; but now, by the desire of the royal family, a tea party was being held here once again.

The participants were quite unusual, however.

“Wow! Cang, I’ve never had anything like the tea you brought!”

“I imagine not. It’s Huang He tea. We still had some leaves left untouched, so I thought this tea party would be the perfect time to brew them.”

Sipping tea from a white porcelain cup was the organizer of this little party — Second Princess of Altar, Elizabeth. The smiling boy sitting at the table with her was the Third Prince of Huang He, Canglong.

The two were betrothed, and Elizabeth had invited him to this tea party as a guest of honor.

But they obviously weren't the only participants.

"...Why's therE popcorn at a teA party?" asked Master Jiangshi, Xunyu, as she gobbled up the popcorn in question. The Superior was here as Canglong's bodyguard, and she had removed her Tenaga-Ashinaga. They just weren't fitting for the occasion, after all.

"Umm! I bought it from a bear I met in town the day before yesterday!" said the guest who'd brought the popcorn, all smiles. She was Milianne — the little sister of the royal guard's vice-commander, Liliana Grandria. She had a habit of sneaking into the castle. That was exactly what she'd been doing today, but Elizabeth had discovered her — and since they were friends, she was invited to join. The popcorn was her way of thanking Elizabeth for the invitation.

"I had it in my inventory!" Milianne added. Liliana herself was also here to guard the tea party, and she was deeply surprised by the presence of her little sister. Part of her couldn't help but worry that Milianne would cause some trouble.

She was also completely certain that the castle's security was functioning properly, so Milianne's presence here didn't make any sense to her.

Anyhow, this children's tea party had two more participants — though it was questionable whether one of them counted.

"...They're delicious. I suppose Shu made these?"

"Dor..." The person commenting on the popcorn was Elizabeth's little sister and the Third Princess of Altar, Theresia. Instead of a chair, she was sitting on a giant hamster she called "Dor," and she was also here by Elizabeth's invitation.

"Theresia! Drink the tea Cang brought!" Elizabeth insisted.

"Certainly. Thank you Elizabeth. I'll try it right away."

Like the good sisters they were, they were enjoying tea together. It almost seemed as though this whole tea party had been arranged just for the purpose of inviting Theresia.

...Your Highness, Liliana thought to herself, thinking back to the day before yesterday.

The day before Altimia left for the peace talks, Elizabeth had told her that she would marry Canglong. That was the conclusion she'd come upon after much thought both during and after the Love-Duel Festival.

This will surely be her last tea party here, Liliana thought. If today's peace talks went well, Elizabeth would join Canglong on his departure back to Huang He tomorrow. But even if peace was established, the world would still be in turmoil. Once Elizabeth was in Huang He, returning to the kingdom would be difficult.

That was exactly why she'd invited Theresia to this tea party.

She wanted to give her sickly little sister, who probably didn't have much time left in this world, just one last tea party with her.

She wanted to show Theresia her fiancé and let the little girl see them both having fun together, to assure her that they would be just fine.

Just thinking of all the emotion that Elizabeth had poured into this event made Liliana tear up.

"Dor, dor!" Dor suddenly made some noises that sounded... really fake. It actually seemed like someone who could speak just fine trying to mimic the sound they thought an animal might make.

"Dor...? Ohh, right," said Theresia.

"Theresia? What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked.

"...It's almost time to take my medicine, but it seems that I left it in my room. I'll go get it."

"Why not gEt a maid to dO it?"

"The medicine is precious, so I keep it locked up. I'll be back in a moment."

Once Theresia said that, Dor stood up on all fours and walked out of the rose garden. Xunyu watched them until they were out of sight.

"...You know, I've beEn thinking... Why doEs a sickly princess hAve a rodent as a pet? It dOesn't make sensE."

To someone with a weak constitution, small rodents could be dangerous carriers of pathogens, and Dor wasn't even a "small" rodent.

"Who gave it to hEr, anyway?" Xunyu wondered. "There are mOre sensible pets to cHoose, aren't thEre? Your dragOn's a good example."

After Franklin's Game, Count Gideon had gifted Elizabeth a Pure-Dragon for her protection.

...Though, she'd used it to run away once, so now it was carried around by her bodyguards instead.

"I don't know where she got him, either," said Elizabeth. "He was there by Theresia's side before we even realized it."

"...WhAt?" Elizabeth's answer only confused Xunyu further.

"...Are you saying that a monster snuck into the castle and got close to her?" asked Canglong.

"Father said, 'Such things are to be expected with Theresia... It must have come to protect her,' and then declared him Theresia's pet."

Elizabeth's answer just made both Xunyu and Canglong think for a long time. Specifically, they were both trying to figure out what the previous king meant by 'Such things are to be expected with Theresia,' but neither of them could come up with an answer.

The weight of the mystery almost made the air between them feel heavier, but then...

"But Dor is really cute!"

...Milianne, clueless as she was, completely dispelled that atmosphere.

"Indeed," said Elizabeth.

"...Well, I cAn understand why childrEn would like it," Xunyu shrugged.

"Are you not a child yourself?" Canglong asked her.

The question was shelved, and the tea party continued.

A few minutes after Theresia left, someone spoke to Liliana. It was Sir Lindos, one of the royal guards who was also tasked to act as a bodyguard.

"Lady Grandria," he addressed her.

"What is it?"

"There's trouble at the main gate. Someone is trying to enter the castle without permission."

"Huh? Why not merely confirm that they do not have permission and then ask them to leave?"

"The problem is this person's identity, actually. The individual at the gate is..."

Upon hearing the name, Liliana widened her eyes.

"Huh?! Are you *certain* it's him?!"

"We need you to confirm. You are among those who were present at the battle a few years ago."

Those words were enough for Liliana to understand that she was needed immediately at the gate.

“Your Highnesses, I must briefly pass my bodyguard duties to someone else,” Liliana told Elizabeth and Canglong.

“Very well!”

“Sir Lindos, keep the rose garden safe. You too, Miss Xunyu. We will be counting on you if something happens.”

“Understood,” Sir Lindos nodded.

“Well, I’m Cang’s bodYguard. I can protEct Elizabeth and yoUr little sistEr on the side.”

“...Thank you. Milianne, make sure you do not trouble them.”

“Okaay!” And so, Liliana headed out to the main gate, completely unaware of what awaited her there...

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Liliana arrived at a hallway from which she could see the main gate. Looking down, she caught sight of the guards who had encountered trouble — and the three men who faced them.

They were all clad in caster-like robes, with hoods hiding their faces — the very definition of “shady-looking.”

However, the old man at the front stood out to her more than the others.

He was clad in a red robe and had a long, flowing beard — the very picture of a true master magician. His aura, as well, was completely unlike that of the other two...

“Is that... truly him?”

...And Liliana recognized his face.

It would have been embarrassing not to recognize such an illustrious individual. After all, this was the man who had rivaled the Arch Sage for the title of the greatest spellcaster in the kingdom a mere four years ago.

“Mr. Feuer... Lazburn.” King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn. He was one of the tians Azurite had been looking for, and a true expert on fire magic.

However, he was supposed to be missing.

Liliana had already been informed of that fact, and it made his sudden appearance here in the capital — the castle itself, at that — even more of a mystery.

“Umm, Mr. Feuer Lazburn? What business do you have here?” one of the gate guards who recognized him asked.

However, Feuer wasn't even looking at him. His mouth twitched as he whispered, "...Where?"

"Eh?"

"*Where is... the Arch Sage?*" Neither the guards nor Liliana could understand what he was saying.

After all, the Arch Sage had died in the previous war. There wasn't a single Altarian in the world who didn't know that.

"Umm, the Arch Sage is—"

"He must be here... If he isn't... he will surely come soon... Does he need... a signal fire?"

The gate guard tried to explain, but before he could finish, Feuer just kept whispering as if he couldn't even hear him.

The guard looked at his partner, but he too seemed confused about what to do.

The only person who knew the best course of action for this situation... was Liliana, who was still watching the interaction from above.

"...GET AWAY!" she screamed.

However, before the guards could react to her words...

"A signal fire... can be arranged."

...Two extra hands sprouted from Feuer's back.

That was only the beginning of his transformation.

Something seemed to be rippling under his skin as his body gained more volume and his silhouette warped grotesquely. Soon, he'd grown an entire twisted extra pair of arms and stood so large that he no longer looked like an old man... or even human. His skin had also turned a blazing, unnatural red.

He then aimed his four arms at the guards and the gate behind them before speaking the words "Crimson Sphere."

In an instant, four giant orbs of fire shot out from the hands of the creature that had once been Feuer. They easily incinerated the two guards and exploded against the gate.

These flaming orbs were far more powerful than standard Crimson Spheres, and even the magic-protected gate melted before them like butter.

The deafening roar of the fire and the rising black smoke signaled to the castle... and the entire city... that something major was happening.

“SHOW YOURSELF! ARCH SAGE!” This would certainly do for a signal fire. The thing that was once Lazburn had committed this brutal act to summon the person he was looking for.

However, he wasn’t the only one who had undergone a terrible transformation.

The appearance of the men who accompanied him had also changed drastically. One had become some sort of hybrid between man and spider, while the other now appeared to be part bat.

Needless to say, they had left humanity far, far behind.

“What... What are they?!” Liliana’s horrified shout surely echoed the feelings of anyone who had ever laid eyes on these creatures.

However, there was one key fact that she could not have known.

Even if she instinctively recognized these beings as abominations, she could never guess that they were the work of a single person... a single Superior Embryo.

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???

There existed a Superior Embryo called “True Form Alteration, Idea.” It was a Type Legion composed of parasitic organisms that snuck into the bodies of animals and altered the abilities of their hosts. This Embryo could make them beautiful, healthy, or even grant them new capabilities.

It could give someone powers that no human had ever possessed — as well as make them human no longer.

Some of its hosts were like Lazburn, who might still qualify as humanoid, but no one would say he was actually *human*. Regardless of how they were classified, these kinds of mutated hosts shared very little with mankind.

Others simply had their bodies modified to give them abilities far beyond those of their original forms, while still others had their brains modified to hinder their will. Some of its hosts even ended up transformed in both body and mind.

They had all been modified by the Master of True Form Alteration, Idea... La Crima “The Source of Errors.”

They were the subjects of this Superior Embryo, as well as extensions of it. According to Platonism, they could be described as its “forms” or “ideas.”

In one corner of the noble district, a figure watched over these Ideas with emotionless eyes. This figure was none other than the woman who had shattered the Jewel and unleashed these beings upon the capital. Covered in bandages like she had just stepped out of a crypt, she was King of Thieves, Zeta.

“Excellent,” she said. “This is the first time we’ve deployed specimens that were originally Superior Jobs, and despite some minor mental disturbances, their physical state seems acceptable. They can also still tell friends and enemies apart. I will have to send this data to La Crima.”

Her tone was neutral, showing how unshaken she was by the tragedy she had unleashed upon the castle and its guards.

“Beginning. Ignis Idea, Aranea Idea, and Vespertilio Idea have infiltrated the castle.”

The creatures she had released served as assassins. Zeta tended to operate alone, so La Crima — a fellow I.F. member — had given these creatures to her, and she now employed them as combatants in her act of terrorism.

They were also intended to test how such creatures would perform in future I.F. operations, to gather data for La Crima — who was currently in Tenchi, a country full of quality specimens — and to complete the task given to her by the imperator of Dryfe.

“Favorable. Even tian Superior Jobs can be improved to a level above pre-Superior Masters.”

Perhaps the strongest among those she’d been given — “King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn,” codename “Ignis Idea” — was beginning to push into the castle itself, blasting fire from all four of his hands. The spider-like Aranea Idea and bat-like Vespertilio Idea had also passed through the shattered gates and entered the castle grounds.

“Simultaneous. Regina Apis Idea and Apis Idea have also begun their attacks around the castle.”

Black smoke rose and screams echoed from the capital townscape behind Zeta.

To keep the Masters outside the castle in check, she had also created chaos in town by releasing one Idea with a Superior Job as a starting point, along with many of its underlings, all of which were based on high-rank jobs.

The Rabbit had killed many of the bodyguards who were supposed to guard the peace talks, so their ranks had been replenished with Masters who would've originally stayed in the capital. Zeta believed that those who were left would find it difficult to handle what she had dispatched.

"Action. The order had already been given. The timing may have changed, but my job remains the same," said Zeta — the Superior to whom the imperator had given this final request. "Goal. Infiltrate the castle, steal what must be stolen, and erase what must be erased. That is all."

She leaped from roof to roof in the noble district before heading into the chaotic castle herself.

Set off by the peace talks, the imperium's fangs had finally begun to close on their throats.

They would take what was to be taken and kill what had to be killed.

Chapter Seven: Opened Hostilities

Altar-Dryfe Border, Peace Conference Hall

The moment Claudiah pressed the button, the situation changed drastically.

It was as though she had flipped a switch that turned the scene before her into chaos.

Leviathan was the first to act. She'd put down Behemot and jumped towards Altimia with a small blade in hand.

It wasn't a large weapon and didn't seem that threatening on its own, but its edge was covered in some sort of liquid.

She then threw the dripping blade towards Altimia.

"Gh!" However, Altimia noticed the poisoned dagger flying towards her and drew her sword — The Primeval Blade, Altar — deflecting it with ease.

But the moment she swung her sword, Leviathan was already right next to her. "You're mine!"

"Kodachi." Before Leviathan could even touch Altimia, Shu launched a high kick towards her. He was already clad in his Ursine Godcloth, Kim-un-Kamuy, and could use its first strike-limited optical camouflage and presence block effects. His unseen attack hit home, striking Leviathan in the back of the neck.

Shu hadn't been on-edge about the Dryfean Masters' movements for nothing. His attack went exactly as he'd planned, striking for maximum damage.

"Hh...!" The kick that had once instantly eliminated a Legendary monster was so strong that not even Leviathan could withstand it. It blew her away with the force of a cannonball, opening up a hole in the wall she crashed into.

However, her spine wasn't even strained, let alone broken, so she had no problem simply standing back up again. Marie followed up Shu's attack with piercing-homing bullets, but Leviathan turned them to dust with a mere swing of her arms.

Not even five seconds had passed since this battle had begun.

Many of the bodyguards present were clearly perplexed.

The Dryfean bodyguards actually seemed more shocked than the Altarian ones. The fact that Leviathan had just tried to assault the chief representative of the other country left them completely flabbergasted. Based on that, Shu assumed that only Behemot and Leviathan had been informed of this part of the plan.

Besides Claudiah — the representative — and King of Beasts — the imperator's ultimate confidant — no Dryfean present knew the full scope of the plot here.

"I knew this would not succeed," Claudiah said upon witnessing the failure of the assault she herself had ordered.

"It's only because my focus is split. I wouldn't have failed if I just had to kill *her*," said Leviathan.

"Everyone else can die, but Altimia must be captured *alive*. You must accomplish this at any cost."

"...I'm not suited for that kind of thing. Behemot should be the one to do this."

"kk" Despite the tense air, their talk was extremely relaxed, casually revealing that they were planning to kidnap Altimia — the acting ruler of Altar.

"Claudiah! What are you planning...?! What was that switch...?!"

"Basically, the peace talks are over," Claudiah said, as if this was nothing. "This young man here... 'Ray,' was it? He unraveled our plan. After being so thoroughly exposed, these negotiations have fallen apart, and any hope of future peace has vanished."

It was now obvious that no matter how favorable the peace treaty seemed at first glance, Dryfe would still hide traps within it. Now, Altar would be more wary at any future talks, making such traps impossible.

"However, it *is* true that Dryfe does not want war. We will only accept it as a last resort. Therefore, we will simply destroy Altar before that happens," Claudiah said, without any enthusiasm.

"...How?" Ray asked.

"First, we will either capture or kill the second and third princesses, as well as secure Altimia herself."

"Huh?!"

"The switch I had just activated should have signaled that person you mentioned — King of Thieves, Zeta — to assault Altea along with her own collaborators." Her shocking words shook up almost everyone who heard her. The officials tried to contact the capital using comms magic, while Marie was poised to run outside.

Ray had also almost looked at the direction of Altea...

"Don't move."

...But Shu stopped him.

With those words, he was implying that here and now, they were dealing with something that was as important as whatever was happening at Altea... or was even more dangerous than that.

King of Beasts was here — a foe who could kill you the moment you so much as looked away.

King of Destruction was already prepared for battle, and his body was as tense as it could be.

"...Do you really believe the kingdom will fall if we disappear?" Altimia asked Claudiah. She was worried about the capital and her sisters, but as the one who carried the country on her shoulders, she stood firmly against the threat in front of her.

"Of course I do," said Claudiah, pointing at Altimia. "After all, Altar is only Altar because it has you, the descendants of the founding king... the royal family. The country is only in one piece because it has you. If you believe I am wrong, then tell me... is there a single noble you'd trust to hold your country together?"

"Ah...!"

"The most influential of the nobility, the Lunnings family, was extinguished by Gloria. The previous war also took the lives of many illustrious citizens, did it not? The most prominent noble still alive is Marquis Findle, but he is more of a behind-the-scenes type, not suited to lead the country. Who else is there? Count Gideon? He's far too young. With him in charge, there would only be more chaos. Without a proper leader, a country is unable to make Covenants, activate War Boundaries... it would be barred from things that can only be done by heads of state. It would be unable to even function as an independent nation."

Claudiah took a breath before continuing.

"Even if someone tried to seize power to quell the chaos, someone else would rise to stop them. That much is obvious, given the existence of nobles like Marquis Borozel, who tried to gain authority even if it meant assassinating a princess. And I am aware of many of your elite who would swear allegiance to us the moment the royal family was gone. Even the lords who would not join us might just choose some other country to pledge themselves to instead. Marquis Nissa at Altar's southwest is on good terms with Legendaria, for one, so he might desire to be annexed by them. On that topic, Count Keyora in the seaside region to the west has connections to Granvaloa's trading fleet. Granvaloa wants more land of their own, so they would gladly take him... Well, the point is that without the *pillars*, such things would happen all over, and Altar would disintegrate into warring states once again."

Claudiah declared that the royal family was all that was keeping from Altar from crumbling into many smaller nations. That was how the country had been before the founding king united it, so it wasn't out of the question that it could one day return to that state.

However, it was obvious that Claudiah knew far too much about Altar's state of affairs. Some of what she'd said was unknown not only to Altimia, but even DIN.

Dryfe had been given all of this information by none other than King of Thieves, Zeta.

She was part of Illegal Frontier. The clan's leader, Sechs, knew far more about Altar than most could even imagine, and he had distributed this info to all of its members. Zeta had also gathered a great deal of information herself, and by now I.F.'s database had become extremely vast.

Besides the act of terror at the capital, Dryfe had also requested that Zeta sell them everything they knew about Altar's internal affairs.

The imperium wanted to eliminate the royal family in order to incapacitate the country and split it apart with the influence of other countries. This plan was based on the assumption that the nobles with ties to other countries would act exactly as Dryfe was expecting, but...

...Well, actually, I guess that is *a viable plan,* Shu thought. For all he knew, the nobles in question might've already talked things out with Granvaloa and Legendaria. The two countries wouldn't participate in the war between Altar and Dryfe, but they would come to take the kingdom's *territory* in the event that the government collapsed. Legendaria and

Granvaloa had nothing to lose from making such agreements.

Dryfe would benefit from this, as well.

If Altar collapsed, they would lose a potential force against the biggest threat, Caldina, but since a splintered kingdom would have very few factions willing or able to stand up to Dryfe, they could easily absorb what was left of the kingdom, along with the other nations opposed to Caldina.

That was their plan here.

...The marriage-based alliance between Altar and Huang He would also fall apart if the second princess was gone. Even if Huang He wanted to retaliate against Dryfe for this, they still have Caldina between them, making invasion impossible. In fact, if that's how things went, Dryfe might even appreciate the damage that Huang He would do to Caldina.

Crossing the Harshwinter Mountains to the north was another way to reach Dryfe, but Shu knew that that was a more dangerous path than Caldina's deserts — it was fair to call it impossible, actually. There had been a Superior who had tried that way, only to have the floating fortress he was so proud of shot down by the local ruler of the skies — Divine Comet Bird, Tunguska. Shu himself had been caught up in that incident.

Dryfe's plan seemed to account for all the tians involved, Altarian or otherwise.

"...Maybe that's how things would go with tians," Shu said as he looked at his little brother. "But what about us Masters? Even if Altar's gone, there'd be many who'd bare their fangs at Dryfe." Even if the country crumbled, there would surely be ex-Altarian Masters who would stand against the imperium. It would be especially hard to prevent VIP assassinations by the likes of Marie or Eishiro.

"Exactly," said Tsukuyo. "Even with the threat of the wanted list, you'd still leave yourself open to a retaliatory strike or two."

"Would you come to Dryfe if the reward was good enough?" Claudiah asked her.

"Don't think that we would change sides that easily."

"We would not mind making The Lunar Society into the state religion," Claudiah said.

"...D-Don't think that we would... Hold on, let me think a bit..." The fact that Dryfe would so easily do what the kingdom had so ardently refused to actually made Tsukuyo falter.

“...Don’t think that all of us can be bought as easily as Miss Eldritch here,” Ray snapped at Claudiah, his opinion of Tsukuyo dropping even lower than he thought possible.

“Oh, I’m certain of that. I know that there are many Masters like yourself. In fact, I am sure that almost all Masters who stayed in the kingdom after their loss in the recent war would be such individuals.”

Masters who only cared about themselves would have already switched to other countries, or they were like the people that Franklin had hired during Franklin’s Game. Many of those that were left were either close to Altarian tians or merely liked the kingdom and wanted to protect it.

“That is why,” Claudiah continued. “I hope you do not believe that we’re doing something so extreme without some kind of measure in place to deal with such Masters.”

“And that ‘measure’ is...?”

“I cannot say it. We are still only in the first stage, after all,” she said, before turning to face Altimia. “We will deal with the princesses at Altea and capture Altimia here. Our anti-Master measure comes after that.”

Those words didn’t trigger anyone’s Truth Discernment. That meant that they actually *had* thought of a way to deal with Altarian Masters who would attack Dryfe once the kingdom fell.

The fact that they’re not worried about assassinations makes it pretty clear that they’ve come up with something really extreme. That means that the most important thing here is...

Their primary goal here had to be protecting the Altarian princesses from Dryfe’s attack. If the kingdom ceased to exist, things would go exactly according to Dryfe’s plan.

Hell, we can’t let them mess with Theresia... If worst comes to worst... It’ll all be over.

As one of the few who knew what *really* made Theresia special, Shu began to sweat — and not just because of the King of Beasts. He decided it would be best if they returned to protect Altea as soon as possible.

Between the Masters Chrono had killed and the ones on bodyguard duty here, the capital had been rendered more or less completely defenseless. If the attackers were powerful enough, it would all be over.

There was one major problem with this, however — their enemies here would not let them return to Altea so easily. While fighting King of Beasts the Physical Apex, a retreating battle was a foolish idea.

They'll probably aim for AGI builds like Superior Killer and Tsukikage first. Even if he hid in the shadows, they'd just destroy the entire zone to get to him. And even if they somehow managed to escape, we would be too slow to retreat from the King of Beasts, who's almost certainly faster than either of them. There's no point in trying to run away when they can catch up so easily. It's better to stay and fight them here. With Claudiah around, they can't just destroy everything indiscriminately.

And even if King of Beasts hadn't been here, there was no guarantee that anyone except those who could move at supersonic speeds would even make it to Altea in time.

But staying here and fighting would still take up valuable time that could be used to hurry to Altea. Is it better for us to protect Altimia all costs or force our way out...?

As Shu considered the situation...

"I will ask one thing, Claudiah."

...Altimia, who had been quiet for a while now, spoke up again.

"I will hear it."

"Are you able to stop the terrorism at the capital?"

"Yes. If I press the bottom button on the switch, it would immediately be c—"

As Claudiah revealed the means of stopping her act of terror, she raised up her right hand, still holding the switch — and a moment later, Altimia swung the sword Altar towards it, *cutting Claudiah's hand off at the wrist*.

Altimia then reached out with her free hand to try and catch the appendage, but even her massive blade had been barely long enough to strike home. She did not have the reach to seize it before Claudiah lashed out with her left hand, knocking her own severed hand away behind her.

The Dryfean Masters stationed behind backed away the hand as it fell, some of them letting out screams.

"...Ugh," Claudiah said with a pout, emphasizing just how upset she was. "You'd cut off my hand just to take the switch from me...? Is that your way of saying that we are no longer friends?!"

Her reaction to having her hand sliced off seemed rather... mild.

"No," said Altimia, denying that idea. "I still consider you my friend, even now. However, as their elder sister and the person Altar depends on most... I will raise my blade against you no matter my own feelings. I am fully prepared to have a dear friend like you despise me for the rest of your life.”

She denied Claudiah’s statement and presented her own will.

Claudiah’s eyes as she looked at Altimia held no anger.

In fact... there was joy in them.

“Heheheh,” she giggled. “So we are alike in that.”

“...We are?”

“Yes. I also intend to capture you even if it means you hate me for the rest of your life,” she said with a blissful smile on her face. “But I will not despise you just because you cut off my hand. Even if you’d cut off my head, I’m sure I’d feel the same. Not even the worst pain you could possibly inflict upon me could make me truly hate you.”

Her eyes were shining with a profound affection... and some other emotion.

“Though, this barely even hurts,” she added. Her whisper was followed by a sound of something metallic being crushed.

The source of the sound was Claudiah’s detached right hand... *It had moved on its own to destroy the switch it was holding.*

There were sparks coming out of the severed end of its wrist, and a metal frame filled with electric wiring was visible, dripping with a red liquid.

“Claudiah... you...”

“I have been through many battles and lost parts of my original body. I am now what Masters would call a ‘cyborg.’”

She said all of this as though it was nothing before removing her entire right forearm, only to casually take a new one out of her inventory and connect it to the port on her elbow.

This backup arm had no human-like skin on it at all, and the crude form made it seem like a true *tool of battle*.

“Anyway, the simplest way to stop the operation is gone,” she said. “However, Zeta *would* leave Altea if I contacted her using comms magic and ordered her to stop. Everything has been sealed using a Contract, so she would certainly obey me immediately,” Claudiah smiled as she presented another way to stop the terrorism.

“...Claudiah?” Altimia said, uncertain what to make of this.

Like before, Truth Discernment wasn’t triggered, meaning that she was telling the honest truth.

That was when they were finally joined by the Masters from outside the building, who’d likely been drawn here by the sound of the first clash with Leviathan. That meant that both sides now had more or less all of their bodyguards present — though Altar still lacked The Lynx, Tom Cat, while Dryfe lacked The Rabbit, Chrono Crown.

“...And the Masters have arrived. Excellent timing,” Claudiah said as she looked around, pointed at herself, then Altimia, with her mechanical arm. “We want to capture you. You want to capture *me* to stop my plot. We have already exchanged blows. Peace is no longer an option. What shall we do now, then?”

She then used Instant Wear to cover herself in armor.

No... not armor, but some kind of powered mechanical suit.

This blood-red suit had been constructed specifically for her using an MVP special reward material.

“Shall we do our best to capture one another, all while our bodyguards do their best to protect us?” Claudiah then drew a mechanical drill lance — a weapon she’d acquired when she’d defeated an Ancient Legendary UBM.

She spun the giant lance as if it weighed nothing in her hand.

“This is not exactly what Reinhard planned, but I’ve made it quite a bit simpler.”

...So that’s how it is, huh? Shu thought as he clenched his teeth.

Claudiah had told them about the assault on Altea and the means to stop it specifically to give them more reasons to stay and fewer reasons to escape. This also made it impossible for the Altarians to just kill Claudiah, because they needed her alive to call off Zeta’s act of terrorism. Even if they tried to do it themselves with Charm, the Contract would prove impossible to break if Claudiah died.

Even if they’d chosen to hurry to the capital despite all this, it would be difficult to actually protect it against the King of Beasts’ speed.

Therefore, the quickest way to stop the assault on Altea was to capture Claudiah.

They were forced to play along with what she wanted, and they had to win in spite of that.

“Well then... Let us begin.” Claudiah pointed her drill lance at Altimia and declared the start of the battle.

Despite that, most of the Masters didn’t move.

Some just couldn’t keep up with this turn of events... or this change of plans that seemed borderline insane. Others were just so focused on what they had to protect that they didn’t move an inch.

Their hesitation didn’t last, however, and the experienced Masters quickly leaped into action.

However, there were four Masters that did act immediately, while the others were still frozen.

Hell General, Logan Goddhart, quickly understood that he was now allowed to fight and *destroy* Ray Starling — so he immediately implemented his new strategy.

King of Beasts, Behemot had made Leviathan switch from her Maiden form to the Guardian form that would allow her to unleash all her stats.

High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso activated Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light, setting “Dryfean Masters” and “total level” as the targets.

King of Destruction, Shu Starling closed in on Leviathan while she was still transforming.

“FHAHAHAH! Let’s go! Call Devil—” Right before Logan summoned his devils, all the Dryfean bodyguards had their levels divided by six...

“Fatal Field.”

...And when Tsukuyo used another skill, all of them except for King of Beasts instantly died.

Many survived for a few heartbeats thanks to their Brooches, but the continuous field of instadeath quickly shattered the items and brought them to a silent end.

This was accomplished via the Superior MVP special reward — Gloria β’s item skill Fatal Field, which “Instantly killed all humanoid creatures under level 100 within a radius of 500 metels.”

Almost all Dryfean Masters present received the death penalty before they could even know what was going on, much like the Masters that had tried to face Gloria itself.

Tsukuyo had employed a combo of Faint Light set to divide the total level by six and Fatal Field, which instantly killed everyone under level 100. Although its effect was limited to humans, the result was even more fearsome than the Fatal Field of Gloria itself. It was one of Tsukuyo Fuso’s trump cards, and the only one who'd survived it was King of Beasts, whose level was above 600.

Despite being a Superior Job, even Hell General instantly perished simply because he was in the process of regaining his lost levels.

"...How pathetic," said Leviathan as she grew, shedding her human form. "So, what will you do now?" She looked down at Shu, who was clinging to her, as she posed this question.

Instead of answering, he merely looked back at his brother.

He was certain that what he was about to do was the optimal course of action and that it gave them the highest chances of winning against King of Beasts... but he still hesitated.

After all, this meant sending his brother and his friends to certain death.

The primary reason Claudiah had made this gamble in the first place — the thing that more or less assured her victory — was King of Beasts. Fighting her without Shu, the strongest among them, was essentially a death sentence.

However, Ray's eyes showed no fear whatsoever. His resolve had already drowned it all out. Thus, Shu gathered his own resolve and decided to leave the strongest enemy here.

There was only one thing left to say.

"I'm leaving this to you."

"You can count on me." Right after that, Shu put all his strength into his legs. His immense STR shattered the floor, and he and Leviathan — whom he was holding on to tightly — both felt the impact.

By sheer leg strength alone, he could move at extreme speeds. Leaping into the air with the force of a cannonball, Shu disappeared through the hole in the wall that had been left behind by Leviathan.

And the battle here was left to his little brother...

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Most of the Dryfean bodyguards were dead.

Shu Starling and Leviathan had left.

The two princesses were left behind — one holding a sword, and the other brandishing a lance.

Besides them, there was Death Period and The Lunar Society...

Altarian Masters in total.

Dryfe, on the other hand, only had one Master left.

She was, however, the strongest Master in Dryfe as well as *Dendro's* Physical Apex... King of Beasts, Behemot.

She stared silently at the hole in the wall... seeing off the two who had vanished into the distance.

"...I don't have anyone to fight now. No fair, Levia." Behemot was shocked enough to stop speaking in internet slang and actually heave a sigh. Though she was surrounded by Altarian Masters, she seemed disappointed, as though she thought nobody but Shu could possibly pose a threat to her.

"Well, all right..." she said as she faced Altimia. "I'll just quickly capture the princess... and then go to Sh—"

"No." One Master cut her words short.

"It's not my bro you're gonna fight."

"Hm?" The Master — Ray Starling...

"We are your enemies here... We will stop you, King of Beasts,"

...echoed his brother's words, all while looking directly at the Physical Apex herself.

Behemot then looked around to see that his companions shared his resolve.

She blinked over and over as if seeing something really unusual.

"op..." The beastly jaw then warped into a smile. "But I like it." A ferocious aura poured off of her as she prepared for battle.

Thus the curtain rose on Ray Starling's first battle against an "Apex."

Chapter Eight: The Battle of the Masterless

XXXX Years Ago

A verdant and vast scenery stretched out as far as the eye could see. The wind-caressed leaves brushed against each other and water trickled through the streams as birds flitted to and fro, singing their songs. The trees were painted in all shades of green, their fallen leaves covering the ground in a blanket of fertile colors, and the sky above was as endless as it was blue.

It was a scene that seemed completely untouched by the hands of man.

Surrounded by all this nature, there stood a solitary young man — who could just as easily be described as a “boy.”

For reasons unknown, he was holding a pocket watch in each hand.

“Nothing in this scenery is real,” the youth suddenly said. Despite his young appearance, he seemed to have the aura of an aged and exhausted old man.

The years experienced by his mind far exceeded those of his body. He only appeared young because his flesh had been restored by a particular Infinite Embryo.

“The air and trees were replicated by Infinite Vicissitude. This sky is presented to me by Infinite Illusion. And even this body that senses it all is yet another creation of Infinite Birth.”

Like an old man whose grip on reason is finally slipping away, he continued his monologue — though it almost seemed as though his words were directed at the watches in his hands.

“But that doesn’t mean that nothing here is real. My flesh might be artificial, but my *life* is not... and so is the power that you wield.”

The aged youth spoke, still looking at the watches.

“Ignoring *that* one, this is the twelfth Infinite Embryo... Infinite Time. The flow of time exists for all things. That makes it impossible for it to be fake — which means that it’s ultimately as real as can be.”

He paused, exhaled... and put on a wry smile.

"And it... is what will finally snuff me out. Real as it is, my life seems to have a limit."

"..."

"I will die and you will remain. That is what it means to become Infinite. It's different for Embryos in their seventh forms or below. When their Masters experience their ultimate death, their Resources are crystallized and leave behind copious amounts of 'nourishment'... form zero Embryos. Infinites, however, live up to their name and can remain active indefinitely as long as their cores aren't shattered... Though, unlike when their Master is alive, reconstruction can become impossible for them."

Another pensive pause.

"But even *your* infinity will end. The time will come when our project will be... complete."

"..."

"...In these final moments, I will talk about myself." He slumped himself down against a tree. Though he looked like a young man, he moved as if it was a difficult task.

"This is the only place I know. I was born here, I matured here with you... and I will die here."

"..."

"I'm not displeased with that. We... are all like this. Seeking the end of the line, we walk an endless path as we develop Infinite Embryos. That is our nature. In fact, as one who became Infinite, I'm among the lucky few. My life had meaning, and I was able to live my life to its utmost limit."

He sat and talked with his eyes fixed on his pocket watches, but then suddenly his arms became limp. It was as though he was losing his ability to support his own body.

"There is... one thing I regret, though." He looked up to the sky he'd called fake as his voice became a whisper.

"I wanted to try living in the real world someday. I wanted to see a different sky."

As if he had never been granted even that much, he looked at the blue sky above with somewhat sorrowful eyes.

A songbird flew by, and he watched it with envy.

"But you will remain active forever... You might have a chance to live in the real world.”

“...”

“Heheh... I guess... even I became a bit sentimental in my final hours. I never talked to you even once until now...”

His Embryo was a non-living creature and had nothing that could be called “an ego.” Thus, no matter how much he talked to it, it would never respond.

“If you are able... to live in the real world... once the project is over... tell me what... the world was like... See it... in my stead...”

“...”

“Heheheh... Well... It’s not like I know... if there’s... an afterli—” He stopped talking before he could finish, and his mouth never moved again.

“...m...a...” The pocket watches began to creak slightly as they tried to make some sort of sound.

However, its — *his* — Master didn’t hear him... or anything else, for that matter.

“...ma...s...ter...” The Embryo that wasn’t supposed to be able to speak called out to him, but received no response.

Soon after, the birds stopped singing and the color of the sky changed. The clear blue above vanished, leaving behind a ceiling of stark metal.

With the sole user gone, the false blue sky disappeared and once again showed its true appearance of a lifeless canopy.

His hands still gripped the pocket watches even as they grew colder.

“...”

“Confirmed the death of the twelfth’s Master, Mr. Chrono Crown. Relocating the remains to the appropriate location. Retrieving the twelfth and transitioning to autonomous operation training.”

Responding to the inorganic voice’s words, someone carefully picked up his remains.

As that happened, a third pocket watch fell out of the dead youth’s breast pocket.

Along with the two that were still clutched in his hands, there were now a total of three.

Each had a different Greek word carved on them. They were “Χρόνος,” “Καιρός,” and “Αἰών” — Chronos, Kairos, and Aion.

All three of them made quiet sounds as time marched on... Every tick and tock feeling much like silent weeping.

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Present, Altar-Dryfe Border, Grove

Claudiah had announced the start of a battle at the peace talks and Zeta had unleashed countless Ideas upon Altea, catapulting the forces of each country into a state of conflict.

And close to the location of the peace talks, there was yet another clash occurring.

"Oh boy, I really didn't think you'd call me using secret comms."

"...You don't know why I called youuu?" Two men faced each other in a verdant forest some distance from the peace talks.

One was a young man with a plump cat seated on his head and long bangs covering his eyes.

The other was a boy with metal boots and rabbit ears.

The former was The Lynx, Tom Cat, while the latter was The Rabbit, Chrono Crown... and both of them were the avatars of control AIs.

"No. Though, I gotta ask, Tom Cat... Why are you all the way out here instead of doing your odd-jobs or dueling? This is what people call 'neglect of duty,' isn't it?"

Even this far away from civilization, there was no guarantee that they wouldn't be observed, so Chrono opted to call Tom by his avatar's name, and Tom did the same to him.

"...I'd say that you did something pretty arbitrary yourself, Chronooo." Even as he spoke, he was simultaneously using his true form to gather information about the situation back in the kingdom.

Due to Chrono's ambushes, Altar was at a clear disadvantage at both the capital and the peace talks.

"Arbitrary? Is that why you went out of your way to call me here?" Chrono asked.

"Yeah," Tom replied. "Though, I don't really get iiit. What you did ended up helping Dryfe, but there was no guarantee that would be the result. In fact, it was more likely that it would've just made the relationship between the countries even worse."

Tom's words made Chrono tilt his head in confusion.

Upon seeing that, The Lynx said, “I knew it... You and Bandersnatch don’t understand human psychology at all.”

That was the difference between them and a creature-type Embryo like Tom... or rather, Cheshire.

Non-creature-type control AIs naturally had difficulty with this. The two Tweedles were also non-creatures, but their immense processing power, the highest out of all control AIs, allowed them to overcome this limitation. The same couldn’t be said of Chrono... also known as Rabbit, the control AI in charge of time. He was a non-creature-type, and most of his processing power was dedicated to keeping time in *Infinite Dendrogram* running at the base 3x speed. He didn’t have much spare processing power he could use for humanlike thought, so his mentality was at about the same level as a normal human’s.

Because of this, Chrono, being Rabbit’s avatar, was somewhat simple and short-sighted. It was also the reason why his role was being a PK — it didn’t require much forethought to be one.

The other control AIs actually would’ve preferred if Rabbit focused solely on time, but Rabbit himself had insisted on engaging in avatar activities.

“Human psychology... huh?” Chrono whispered as he looked up at the sky.

For a moment, his eyes had a hint of bitterness, but then he looked back at Tom... *and glared at him*.

“Of course I don’t understand it... THERE’S NO WAY I COULD!” He raised his voice as he blew up at Tom. “Unlike you, I didn’t have the *time* to learn to understand people as an avatar! I’m the one who’s always been doing nothing but make this world *faster* so *you all* could have time to prepare!” The smug boy who’d dominated Altar’s rankers was gone, leaving behind a mess of a child shouting out everything he’d been bottling up inside for so long. “Yeah, I know what you’ll say — the revised project needed more time and I was the only one who could get it! I’m the only one specialized in accelerating time!”

Tom said nothing and merely listened.

“But until we started accepting new Masters, THAT WAS ALL I COULD DO!” Chrono’s screaming now bordered on blood-curdling. “I was only able to even *move* with this body when they showed up and I could reduce the speed to just 3x! That was the first time I ever got to walk in this world! Do you understand how I felt?! OF COURSE YOU DON'T!" His voice was heavy with either rage or chagrin — it was hard to tell which. He was releasing his pent-up frustrations, but it seemed as though his feelings had completely taken control of him.

"Chrono..." Tom knew what was going on with him. Alice had said that there were two ways non-creature Embryos handled having their own avatars. They either ended up being cold and calculating regardless of how they presented themselves... or they proved unable to control the emotions surging through their new bodies.

Chrono was undoubtedly a prime example of the latter.

He'd only had an avatar for a few years — only a tiny fraction of the time the others had theirs.

This outburst was a manifestation of this problem.

"To live in the real world! That was my Master's... *Chrono Crown's* only desire in life! He wanted to escape this cage and live in the real world! But the destination was too far away and he didn't have nearly enough time to reach it! THAT HAS TO BE WHY I WAS BORN ABLE TO CONTROL TIME!"

Tom still said nothing, but he could understand where Chrono was coming from. Tom himself was born the way he was because of his own Master's wish — a desire for a friend.

"With his last breath, he asked me to share my memories of the real world with him once my end came! It took so long, but I can actually do that now! I now have his face and I carry these pocket watches! I can finally walk around this place freely... the real world... DO YOU KNOW HOW I FELT?! You were in charge of managing culture... CAN YOU EVEN UNDERSTAND ME AT ALL...?!" Chrono clenched his teeth painfully before continuing.

"And now, what, we're gonna have a war? We're gonna raise the War Boundary?! The last time it was used, everything went back to the way it used to be for me! Once it's activated, I can't do anything anymore! I stop being free! I'll have fewer things to tell my Master *once my end comes*! Fewer memories to make in the real world! AND THAT'S MORE IMPORTANT TO ME!"

That was his reason for the focused PK spree. The war would rob him of his ability to do anything, and he hated the phenomenon more than anything else.

After all, it came at the cost of the time he could spend as himself — the time he could use to fulfill his Master’s wish.

Thus, he cried, “It’s a waste of time! *I’M IN A HURRY!*”

Tears began flowing from Chrono’s eyes — tears of crimson red blood. The Embryo that had once possessed no ego of its own was now sobbing uncontrollably, barely able to contain the wellspring of emotion inside him.

“If that’s what it takes to prevent war... to prevent that meaningless *waste of time*... I will gladly destroy one side so thoroughly that they can’t even *think* of waging war! What’s so wrong about that...? WELL, GRIMALKIN?!”

“...Chronos Kairos Aion.” The two control AIs faced each other and called one another by their true names.

Chrono saw Tom as an obstacle and an object of envy who had everything that Chrono so desperately wanted.

Tom saw Chrono as a colleague who was about to stray from the path and a fellow Embryo who knew well the pain of losing his Synchronizer.

The two control AIs faced each other head-on.

“...The situation has changed,” Chrono suddenly said as he removed his hands from his pockets.

Each of them held a pocket watch. Of the three in total, these were the ones that weren’t his core.

“I’m going,” he said as he wiped the bloody tears with his sleeves and glared in the direction of the peace talks. “I’m also monitoring the situation there and in the capital. I know that Dryfe will win if the princesses are secured. I don’t have *time* to talk to you. I will go there and kidnap the princess myself. No one can keep up with me. I’ll then do the same at Altea. That will fulfill Dryfe’s goals... and prevent the war.”

“...I won’t let you,” said Tom. “This isn’t something that we control AIs should involve ourselves with. Masters are supposed to be free. We shouldn’t arbitrarily influence their actions and their results.”

“Then why are you in a place like this, huh?!”

“I wouldn’t have come here... if I didn’t have to stop you.” Chrono’s avatar was out of control. He had to be stopped.

Despite that, Tom didn’t even think of getting Alice to do it, as she’d done with Tom himself back in Gideon.

Chrono's outburst had to be dealt with, but since it was an outburst on behalf of his late Master, Tom thought that it would be wrong to stop Chrono using such drastic measures.

Thus, he'd decided to confront him directly.

That was why he'd only asked Alice for one thing.

"Chrono," Tom said. "I talked to Alice and told her to deactivate your avatar if you touch an Altarian tian before defeating me."

"...What?"

"You know what that means." The cat on his head transformed into Tom and multiplied until there were eight of them. All eight then surrounded Chrono. "If you want to pass... you'll have to defeat me first... Think you can do that as The Rabbit, Chrono Crown?"

Emphasizing the form Chrono inhabited right now, the eight Toms prepared to fight him.

Chrono glared at them before chuckling. "Hah! Do you have even a single victory against me as The Lynx, Tom Cat?!"

A moment later, their battle began.

Thus began this conflict between two Control AIs — two Embryos who knew the pain of losing their Masters.

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Type Infinite Legion. The Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin.

He was one of the Embryos that had reached its eighth form and became Infinite. Even with his abilities constrained to the limits of the sixth form, he could simultaneously control eight Toms and easily replace them if they were killed.

The only way to defeat him was to either destroy all of them at once with an AoE attack or cut them all down so fast he couldn't multiply again. However, both of those things were difficult, as proven by the fact that only two of the many who had challenged him in Altar's rankings had actually defeated him.

Still, Chrono Crown was perfectly capable of destroying the Toms with sufficient speed.

"Gh...!" The moment Chrono vanished, each of the eight Toms suddenly found bombs floating next to their heads.

The Toms all quickly jumped away, but the bombs blew up only a moment after appearing. Even with their speed, only half of the Toms managed to get away before their skulls were blown to pieces.

The dead Toms then transformed into cats and vanished.

That was dangerous! Tom thought. All eight clones shared a single consciousness, and if the first one to notice the bombs had been just a moment slower, they all would've died.

Yeah... this matchup isn't in my favor! Embryos were all subject to the rules of compatibility, and Infinite Embryos were no exception. All other things being equal, who had the advantage or disadvantage in their conflict would be decided by the nature of their powers.

Tom knew full well that Chrono could kill him faster than he could multiply. They had trained against each other shortly after Grimalkin had become Infinite.

Tom quickly activated Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin to make up for the lost Toms, only to lose half of them again in the bombing that followed.

If his reaction was ever just a moment too slow, he would lose too many of his duplicates at once and be overwhelmed.

...Bombs, huh? They suit his powers better than I thought.

The bombs appeared next to Tom as though Chrono had placed them there after completely stopping time.

Obviously, this was possible due to the power of Chrono's Embryo.

The full name of his original form was "Infinite Time, Chronos Kairos Aion."

It was an Embryo that could control the *speed at which time passed for the target*.

The watches he held in his hands, Chronos and Kairos, were extensions of his being and a remnant of the time before he'd become the Type Infinite World Embryo he was now. Before that, he had been Type World-Rule-Calculator.

Chronos, held in his right hand, was two times faster than normal clocks, while Kairos, held in his left hand, was ten times as fast.

That knowledge alone was enough to guess at their abilities.

Chronos had a skill called "World Time Acceleration," which was an AoE AGI buff that accelerated the time passing for his nearby targets — such as his own bombs or the air touching around him — by two.

Kairos, by contrast, possessed a skill called "Subjective Time Acceleration," which was a single-target AoE AGI buff that multiplied his own speed by ten.

Together, the two skills multiplied Chrono's AGI by 20.

His avatar was specialized in AGI and had it at 13,000 — so once activated, the skills took it all the way up to 260,000.

Tom himself was AGI-focused and could move faster than the speed of sound, but he had trouble even *seeing* Chrono.

And this is just his normal speed. He still hasn't used his ultimate skill to reach his maximum potential...

As far as Tom knew, Chrono's ultimate skill doubled the effects of both pocket watches, bringing his total AGI well above 1,000,000.

He does have weaknesses, though.

Tom had known his fellow Infinite Embryo for thousands of years. Though Chrono had only recently begun fighting as an avatar, Tom already knew his flaws.

There was also the fact that Tom had operated as an avatar longer than any other control AI. He had a great deal of experience and knew his opponent's abilities well enough to predict such things.

Among the smaller flaws, you have the fact that both his hands are occupied by the pocket watches. Chrono couldn't use his hands because he was holding these extensions of himself. That was why his main weapon was his metal blade-boots.

However, since he could still use things like bombs and Gems by holding them between his fingers, this wasn't too much of a flaw.

But there was a bigger one Tom had spotted.

...It also looks like his avatar form doesn't actually allow him to make full use of his speed. In terms of speed alone, Chrono surpassed Tom twenty times over. He could actually defeat all eight Toms at once, and there must be a reason why he wasn't doing that.

He's using nothing but bombs so far. I knew it... he has to slow down to use any direct attacks.

That was the primary flaw behind Chrono's extreme speed. No matter how fast he was, it meant nothing if he couldn't actually attack with it.

After all...

His avatar is hyperspecialized in AGI, so his END is really low. There's no way he himself would escape unscathed if he attacked someone at dozens of times the speed of sound. The faster you crashed into something, the stronger the impact. That was basic physics.

A person's body could handle the impact of an attack using their own STR; even AGI-based attackers only needed about a tenth of their AGI's worth of END to withstand the recoil of their super-fast attacks.

Chrono, however, fought at speeds that were far too great for his body to handle. His avatar's AGI surpassed the insane level of 260,000, but his END only barely made it into the quadruple digits.

That was why he only dealt direct attacks with his blade-boots after first using his great speed to enter the enemy's blind spots, then *slowing down enough that he could talk to his opponent*.

Otherwise, his legs would be destroyed by his own kicks.

This also explained why Chrono was so focused on indirect attacks using bombs.

Kashimiya the Kingdom's Fastest also fought by boosting his AGI, but he used the Blade Speed-Through skill which removed as much of his opponent's END as he had AGI. This completely nullified any resistance that might hurt him as he sliced off an opponent's head as though it was nothing.

As a control AI avatar, Chrono had no job skills like that — in fact, there was no way he could even get them, making them impossible to incorporate into his strategy and leaving him with no offensive options other than simply slowing down before attack and or approaching indirectly.

That was Infinite Time, Chronos Kairos Aion's greatest flaw.

Though, that flaw only exists for him as he is right now. This weakness was only present because Chrono's power was currently limited to that of a sixth form Embryo.

If Infinite Time was in his seventh or eighth forms, it would be as though that flaw had never even existed.

At his current power level, he can't even use his main weapon... the blade "Time-Breaker." I thought I could overcome or stand my ground against him because his firepower was low, but...

It seemed that Tom was wrong — Chrono was starting to overwhelm him, even now. He was forced to fight a defensive battle, evading the explosions and running while replacing any Toms he'd lost.

Tom had far more experience in avatar fights, but Chrono had developed an item-based strategy that worked really well for him.

That was why he used bombs and Gems, and why he'd made it so he could jump around in midair.

...He's probably using an accessory with something like Air Skip. He might also have some equipment on him that reduces the impact from landing.

It was worth noting that Chrono hadn't had a body at first; he'd only developed this power once he started traveling around *Infinite Dendrogram* just a few years ago.

He might be better at fighting than I am, Tom thought. *Well... then again, I'm basically just brute-forcing most of my battles with my multiplication powers. This reminds of something the King of Kings told me once. Rockfell said, "I see no end to you. You are inexhaustible, I assume? This is nothing to fear, though. In fact, it's quite boring. Tiresome. Show me something different."*

During The Era of the Peerless Three... when Tom was "The Lynx, Schrödinger Cat," he had the output of a Superior and could have a maximum of 800 copies of himself.

...Despite that, King of Kings had exterminated all of those Toms and had proceeded to scold him in those words that he still remembered to this day.

Though, as far as tians went, King of Kings was far outside the norm.

...I guess it's also a matter of how our processing power is implemented.

Tom was focusing on both battle analysis and recollections of the past, yet his movement in battle remained flawless. Because he was adept at parallel thinking, he could easily ponder such things while controlling eight bodies at once.

I'm specialized in pure volume, so I can't improve my battle technique by that much.

If each of the Toms were like some of the absurd battle experts he'd seen here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, he could easily dispatch Chrono despite his enormous advantage in speed.

But since that was impossible in this situation, he had to take a different approach.

"Tom Cat! Is this your idea of stopping me?! To go on the defensive and stall for time?!" Chrono said, slowing himself down.

"Who knooows? Maybe I'm actually just in the middle of setting up a trap for you..." one of the Toms replied, a moment before a Crimson Sphere Gem went off behind him and he was instantly incinerated.

This started a chain reaction, and a few more Toms were reduced to ash.

...He has so many consumables. Did he go around buying up any that appeared on the market or does he have ties to people who make them? Regardless, I'm impressed he built all this up in just a few years.

This battle seemed to be a tug-of-war between Tom's multiplication speed and Chrono's item supply.

However, Tom didn't intend to be locked into a battle of attrition like that.

But Chrono... You're using items made by tians living in the present.

Tom was well aware that when it came to tools of war, the era that had turned the entire continent into a battleground — the era when Cheshire had operated as Schrödinger Cat — was far more terrifying than the current one.

However, all those things were of an age Chrono could never know. There were countless weapons he had no knowledge of, since he had been forced to focus solely on the world's time acceleration... countless *nightmares* that had faded into history.

"...It's funny to think about," Tom muttered with a wry grin. After all, he was the one who'd gone around destroying such tools to prevent them from breaking the balance when the time came.

And now I'm about to use them... that's pretty bold. But he believed that there was no other way to stop Chrono's rampage.

"It's been a while since I've worn this." Reaching into his own inventory one Tom took out a transparent cloak with the texture of silk and wrapped himself in it.

The next moment, that Tom *vanished — along with every trace of his presence*.

This was a magic cloak called "Nobody Whisper," and though he had many such artifacts, *this* was the most important piece of equipment for his current strategy.

Back when he'd been operating as Schrödinger Cat during The Era of the Peerless Three, he needed something that would help him stand a chance against everyone else, so he'd brought the necessary materials to a particular Superior Job and had that person create this item for him.

It had incredibly high-level Presence Block and Optical Camouflage skills, letting it conceal the presence of those who wore it and hide them visually.

It only seemed good for hiding, but since Tom only needed one of himself to create more, it was an incredibly valuable item for him. This piece of gear had been Schrödinger Cat's close friend during The Era of the Peerless Three.

However, he didn't use this cloak very often these days.

It was too powerful to use in duels, and it was known that something like it had been used by the late Schrödinger Cat, so Tom Cat using the exact same item would raise uncomfortable questions. Also, he had avoided using it against Prism Soldiers because their senses weren't based on sight or even presence.

But there was no problem in using it against a colleague who knew his entire history.

There's also this... I planned to keep it gathering dust in my inventory forever, but if this is what it takes to stop you, I have no choice. All seven Toms who weren't in hiding reached into their inventories all at once.

All Toms shared inventory between them. Thus, it was impossible for them to remove something that another Tom had already taken out — like Nobody Whisper — but there were enough of *this* for all of them.

The seven Toms took out some... *collars*.

They all exuded a miasma, obviously marking them as deeply cursed items.

As three of the seven Toms died to Chronos' explosions, they equipped the collars on themselves.

A moment later, Chrono's bombs killed all the ones that were left...

[Murder-Suicide... activate]

...And the collars all produced a twisted, unsettling sound.

◇◆

The center-west land which was now the kingdom had once been a land of conflict, where many small countries had vied for dominance. That chaos eventually spawned the King of Kings — that anomaly of a man who subjugated almost every country into one great nation.

That was the beginning of The Era of the Peerless Three — King of Kings, Draconic Emperor, and The Lynx.

The era ended with the sealing of the King of Kings, the death of the Draconic Emperor, and the disappearance of The Lynx. The vacuum they left behind only led to more wars. Until the Sacred King — the first Azurite — united the center-west to form the Kingdom of Altar, there was no peace in this land.

During these conflicts, many weapons were created and many grand strategies were woven. One of the latter was the suicide tactics of Death Soldiers. Slaves with Death Soldier jobs would be sent into enemy grounds to crack open their defenses with the force of their final exit from the world.

This strategy had a few flaws, though.

Though Last Command allowed the user to move even with 0 HP, they still needed limbs to move with. On the battlefield, it wasn't uncommon for people to receive wounds that rendered them completely immobile.

There were even some unusual cases when the bombs they were wearing detonated too early, blasting them into bits that had far worse problems than mere lack of mobility.

Even the country that used this tactic felt it was suboptimal. They had no moral objections to letting their slaves die, but they did see it as a waste of resources.

They believed that they had to make their Death Soldiers' deaths count and give them ways to kill their enemies more efficiently.

The people in charge were so focused on not letting their slaves' deaths go to waste that it would be darkly hilarious, if they weren't completely serious about it.

The one who finally provided them with a solution was a single High Alchemist — not even a Superior Job. He didn't have any transcendental skills, nor was he a genius like Grand Artificer Flagman of the pre-ancient civilization. The only thing unusual about him was that he had Lich as a sub-job.

However, because of this build... or perhaps because he was the kind of person who would choose such a build at all... he was adept at controlling grudge.

He was among the best minds of his time when it came to crafting grudge-based, or rather *cursed* items, but that certainly didn't mean that he was respected. Most of the things he'd made were useless in almost every situation, after all. A good example was CBR Armor, which granted Bleeding, Doom, and Weakness to all who wore it.

He was an artificer who specialized in devices that tortured their wearers. He'd made a living by primarily selling torture devices, but one day, he developed something that drastically changed the course of his life.

It was a collar-like item called "Stone Equals Gold."

It sounded like something an Alchemist would make, but also far from it at the same time. The name, however, was just something chosen by whoever made it — what mattered most was its function.

This collar only did one thing — upon the wearer's death, it passed on a curse to the closest living creature.

That didn't seem like much, but the curse — Murder-Suicide — was extremely potent. Even if the target was much stronger than the original wearer, it could kill or at least incapacitate them.

That made it possible to exchange the life of a slave — worth as much as a pebble — for the life of a hardened warrior that was worth their weight in gold. The Death Soldiers' lives would never be wasted again.

Some were worried that if the skill targeted the closest people, it could set off chain reactions that would obliterate the whole legion of Death Soldiers before they made it to the enemy lines, but the alchemist took care of that by developing an accessory that excluded people from being targeted by the Murder-Suicide curse. The leaders who used the suicide attacks endlessly praised the alchemist for his work and quickly decided to mass-produce the items for use in actual battle.

However, Stone Equals Gold never saw any official use. The very night it was decided they would be mass produced, the alchemist that developed it and the military officers that planned to use it *were all killed by a certain someone*.

On top of that, the completed prototypes and the research documents had completely vanished. With everyone who knew about it and the relevant documents having disappeared, this invention was forgotten by history.

And it never was discovered who, exactly, had killed them all and took the prototypes...

Now, this was mostly irrelevant, but the alchemist in question... the *horse-man* alchemist had left behind research documents pertaining to the manipulation of grudge. These documents had been stored somewhere unrelated to research on the collars, and they were eventually found by one of his descendants.

The descendant in question used the documents to become a Necromancer and develop original necromantic magic of his own... but that was a different story.

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Chrono’s bombs killed off four Toms, and the collars they were wearing — Stone Equals Gold — all activated. The four curses released by their deaths all homed in on the closest target — Chrono.

“Ah...!” He gasped and threw a bomb at the roiling miasma of curse heading towards him, but it seemed to be unaffected.

He instantly realized that this was the kind of curse that would follow him forever, and that its presence wasn’t affected by explosions or physical attacks.

Compared to Chrono, the floating curses were extremely slow, and he could easily put some distance between him and them.

In that case...! Chrono considered using someone else as a shield that would take the curse in his stead.

“Huh...?!”

But he quickly realized that wasn’t an option as he recalled Tom’s words came back to him.

I talked to Alice and told her to deactivate your avatar if you touch an Altarian tian before defeating me.

“That little...!” Chrono now understood that Tom had said that not just to force him to fight, but also make it impossible for him to escape this curse.

If he as much as tried making a tian take the curse for him, he would instantly be immobilized and the curse would kill him.

He then thought of using Masters, but the only ones remotely close by were bodyguards who, naturally, had tians they wanted to protect. Monsters might have been an option, but Chrono didn’t sense any of those in the area either.

They ran away... wait, no! This wasn’t an area where any powerful monsters lived, so he first assumed that they had been driven away by the sound of explosions, but then he quickly rejected that idea.

Almost masked by the scent of the surrounding flora, he could just barely detect another scent in the air. That was enough for Chrono to understand that Tom had spread some sort of concoction that repelled monsters.

Tom was the one who’d called him here originally, meaning that he’d planned all of this. He’d actually come here to prepare for his plan not after the Altarians had arrived here in the morning, but *last night* — when Ray’s group were talking to Altimia.

Since Tom could be in several places at once, it was child’s play for him to “leave” without anyone noticing. Plus, he could split up to do his preparations even faster.

He’d done all of this just to call Chrono here today and force him into this situation.

This was all planned...?! As if demonstrating his immense experience, Tom had led Chrono directly into a trap.

However, there was more to this trap than that.

As Chrono ran away, the surrounding surface and trees exploded and scattered debris into the air, forcing him to slow down and dodge.

“Gh...!” Small pebbles and pieces of wood. Normally, such things would be meaningless.

However, Chrono moved at 26 times the speed of sound, so they could easily pierce his body. Therefore, he had to either change his trajectory or slow down to the point that the impact wouldn’t hurt him.

However, the more he slowed down, the closer the curses came to him.

Eventually, the distance between them dwindled...

“Ah...!”

...Until it became non-existent.

The curses released a black light — the mark of their application. There were four flashes — one for each curse — and once they’d dispersed they left nothing behind... except Chrono, lying on the ground.

Upon seeing him, the last Tom — the one in hiding — approached him, still wearing the Nobody Whisper.

He was wearing the accessory that he had retrieved alongside Stone Equals Gold.

He hadn’t used any more Toms to make sure that the curses focused solely on Chrono, and it ended up working out for him.

The curse definitely targeted Chrono, he thought. Chrono’s corpse lying on the ground was all the proof he needed.

The four curses were fatal, too, as proven by the bits of light that soon began to rise from his body.

This was a bit aggressive, but if it stopped Chrono’s rampage, then... Hm?

Tom had noticed something strange.

Though there *were* bits of light rising from Chrono, his remains didn’t seem to be vanishing. He was a control AI avatar, of course, but his disappearance and Resource retrieval after death should have functioned exactly as it did with Masters.

“There you are, Tom Cat.”

The next moment, Chrono’s prone body vanished, and countless bombs and Gems appeared all around Tom.

“Kh?!” As Tom jumped back, he realized his failure.

He’d created a wall of pebbles and pieces of wood to keep Chrono from escaping.

They had fallen to the ground by now, and as Tom — still invisible — stepped on them, he'd unwittingly given away his position.

Though Chrono didn't know exactly where Tom was, he was able to seed the items all over his approximate location.

But the curse hit him...! How is he okay...?! Tom thought in shock as he evaded the items and multiplied again.

However, before he could find his answer, the bombs all went off at the same time, scattering all the Toms to the winds.

"Gh...!" Only a single Tom was left alive. However, he was far from unscathed. Though the explosions didn't take his life, he'd defended against them using all four of his limbs, and they had all been seriously wounded. It was difficult for him to even move anymore.

Chrono slowed down and stood before him.

"Just like you know me, I also know you," he said. "Your multiples are created based on the healthiest existing one... There's only one of you now and all your limbs are hurt, so any clones you create will be the same as you are now."

Tom could certainly create more of himself still, but since they would all have wounded limbs, it was nearly impossible for him to keep fighting.

It was difficult to even equip more Stone Equals Gold.

"...How did you dodge the curse?" Tom had been certain that the curse had landed. Besides specialized MVP special rewards, there was no gear that would allow anyone to survive Murder-Suicide, and even then, weathering a whole four of them would be next to impossible.

Also, due to the curse imposed by Juliet, Chrono was unable to switch gear.

Tom asked this question because he knew without a doubt that his attack was unavoidable, and instead of responding, Chrono merely glanced at the place he'd been lying on the ground.

However, that *was* the answer.

Following Chrono's gaze, Tom saw a few things that were turning into bits of light as they vanished.

They were...

"The corpses... of birds?" Four songbird-like monsters were lying on the ground. Tom hadn't seen them at first because they were under Chrono, and they were what made him falsely believe that Chrono's avatar was disappearing.

Murder-Suicide was a skill that launched curses at the closest creature. It didn't even have to be human — any creature could work as a shield against it. They just had to be closer to the originator of the curse than you.

However, Tom had preemptively driven away all wild monsters to prevent exactly this.

But then... where did these songbirds come from?

"My Master yearned for the real sky... He also loved the songs of birds."

The one to answer Tom's question was Chrono himself.

His voice was thick with nostalgia. He was remembering the death of his Master, looking up at the sky and listening to the songs of the birds in the natural scenery created by Infinite Illusion.

"Because of that, I *kept* a bunch of songbirds of my own in a Jewel."

"Ah...!" Chrono *himself* had monsters, and right before the curse landed, he'd released them to take his place.

This was truly ironic. If Chrono had kept battle-focused monsters on him instead, Tom would've instantly noticed.

But because they were small and powerless songbirds, he was unable to realize that the curses had missed or that Chrono was faking his death.

"...I guess I should apologize, then?" Tom asked.

"It's fine. I just kept them inside... Honestly, I was never able to understand what was so good or bad about their songs, anyway."

Tom said nothing. Chrono's voice had made it rather evident that he was most bothered by the fact that he had failed to understand something that his Master had loved.

However, he then composed himself and looked down at Tom with cold eyes.

"...It's over, Tom Cat. You can try buying time by creating more powerless clones. I'll just spread some consumables and burn them all up again. I used a lot of them on you, but I still have enough for that."

He then took out his hands out of his pockets.

Between the fingers of the hands holding the watches, there were several Gems.

Tom still said nothing.

"Goodbye, The Lynx, Tom Cat," Chrono said, throwing the Gems over

Tom.

Chapter Nine: Vorpal Rabbit, Vorpal Hare

Royal Capital, Altea, Urban Area

The capital of Altar was in a state of chaos.

It had been unexpectedly assaulted by a horde of bizarre creatures that attacked people indiscriminately.

The humanoid beings had bee-like features. They were Apis Ideas — the high rank-based “Ideas” created by the Superior Embryo known as “True Form Alteration, Idea.” Their number in the city easily exceeded five hundred.

“BZZBZZBZZ...”

“KYAAHH...!” The Ideas, marked with black-and-yellow warning stripes, were scattered around the city, attacking any tians they saw with their deadly spear-like stingers.

“Shit! I can’t let this go on!” The city guards pulled their swords and charged the Apis Ideas, but they could only barely scratch their tough exoskeletons.

The Apis Ideas easily dispatched such resistance and continued their slaughter.

Even though these Ideas were in some sense “mass produced,” their stats surpassed even Demi-Dragons, matching level 500 Masters with C-rank stat growth bonuses — double that of tians. No capital guards could handle them, and even the Masters staying in the city were having a hard time.

However, there were some who seemed to be putting up a good fight.

“BZZBZZBZZ... BZZ?” Three Apis Ideas were wandering around in search of more prey when suddenly, a single whistling arrow landed between them with a sound like the cry of a bird.

“All together... Fire!” A moment later, the Apis Ideas were showered by a downpour of arrows raining from the sky.

This was the effect of Early Summer Arrow Rain, a skill of the Tenchi job Heavy Bow Samurai. It fired a hundred arrows with each use, and with 30 people firing, that number went all the way up to 3,000.

Pierced by a thousand times more spears than they had to defend themselves with, the three Apis Ideas quickly died.

And then, a moment later, they began expanding from inside before exploding violently.

“Yeah, they really do blow up when they die.”

“They look like old-school tokusatsu enemies. They even die the same way...” Two women were talking as they watched the Apis Ideas blow up.

They were part of the third-ranking clan in the kingdom and its greatest PK clan, K&R.

In particular, this was the clan’s ranged swarm tactics group. Many of its members were inexperienced Masters who were still in the middle of the leveling process, but the two directing them — the leader and her assistant — were veterans. They’d actually been with Rosa back in Tenchi before K&R was even a thing.

“The squad tactics group is having a hard time, too. Some were taken out by the explosions,” said the assistant.

“Then we’ll have to keep fighting them from a distance. We got anyone else who’s resisting?” asked the leader.

K&R’s headquarters were located in Altea, so once Zeta launched her act of terrorism on the capital, every member online instantly swung into action.

With most of K&R being battle-focused, they were one of the more powerful factions in the fight against the Apis Ideas.

“The gulf in power between these guys and tians is really bad. Also, there’s something going on in the castle, so most of the knights are busy with that.”

The leader of the group glanced in the direction of the castle and saw black smoke rising from it.

It was definitely under attack.

“Part of the squad tactics group also went to the castle, but we lost contact with them after they said that they ran into some kind of flaming monster. Our member list says they’re offline, so they probably lost the fight. What do we do?”

“...We can’t use our tactics indoors, anyway. Let’s leave the castle to the other Masters.”

“It appears that most of the skilled fighters from The Lunar Society are acting as bodyguards in the peace talks. Those who are left can’t fight the bee-men by themselves.”

“So, the same Lunar Society that beat us up back then is helpless now, huh?”

“Their swarm tactics revolve around their priestess’ debuffs. I want to believe that we’d have been more evenly matched if it weren’t for that.”

“...And besides The Lunar Society, we have... Death Period, who are probably all on bodyguard duty. What about AETL Union and the like?”

“It doesn’t look like there are a lot of clans that have the numbers. AETL Union lost a bunch of members and they’re now scattered over other cities... Same for the Editing Division and Alliance.”

“Why now, of all times... Is there anybody else at all?” As she learned the state of the other major clans, the leader of the group scowled.

“Babylonian Battlegroup is doing something. That mask guy who’s sixth in the duel rankings was seen fighting the bee-men alongside his underling... the hippogryph rider.”

“There’s not many of them, but they fight as well as maxed-out Tenchi fighters. We can count on them.”

“...Oh, that does make them sound like they’re pretty strong.”

“Did you remember something?”

“...Yes. Tenchi’s battlefields were scary.”

“We’ve gotten a bit rusty since coming to Altar. War’s close, so let’s refresh our skills with these bee-men.”

“Yeah... I gotta say, though, the timing is awful.”

“You mean with our clan leader?”

“Yeah.” In response to her assistant’s words, the leader of the swarm tactics group shrugged and grinned wryly.

“You wanted to show off to him or something?”

“I mean, I did, but... it seems to me that the group’s morale is way higher when he and Big Sis are around.”

“Well, they were the ones leading us on all our hunts so far. We never had a swarm battle without both of them, but I guess bad timing can do that. This is the perfect opportunity to see how far we can go without them.”

She paused for a moment before continuing.

"Also... I'm sure he's in the middle of a *real* deadly battle right now."

She was looking far into the west... the Altar-Dryfe border.

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Altar-Dryfe Border, Grove

The moment when Chrono released Gems on Tom and right before they burned his avatar to ash... *a single car* charged towards them.

"What?!" Chrono hadn't even felt it approach.

The car made no sound at all. You couldn't hear the branches crunching under the tires or even the sound of air rushing past it. It barreled towards them, passing through everything like a ghost.

Chrono had recognized this car.

That's the Embryo from the other night... It was in fact the car-like Embryo that had escaped him when he assaulted K&R's sub-leader, Rosa. Its Master was Tomica and its name was Oboroguruma.

Just like back then, it was in its ultimate form, and it was charging straight towards Tom, who was still lying close to Chrono.

Chrono quickly backed away, and as Oboroguruma passed by, the passenger seat opened up and someone pulled Tom inside.

A moment later, the Gems lit up behind it, covering Oboroguruma's rear in Crimson Spheres.

"EEK?! It's getting kinda hot! I really hope my Oboroguruma is fireproof!"

"Tomica, you should really get a better grasp of your own Embryo's abilities." While Tomica was teary-eyed and shrieking, the person sitting in the passenger seat was really composed.

Tom, who was pulled to the back seat, was really surprised to see who it was.

"You're..."

"Mr. Tom... There are two things I want you to tell me, and please make it brief," he said as he raised two fingers.

"I want to know your relationship with that boy, and if he is the one who assaulted all the other rankers. That is it."

Tom thought for a moment before saying, "If I get the death penalty, he'll go kidnap the princesses. That's our relationship. And yes, he is the one who did it."

"Thank you for the easy-to-understand explanation." He nodded, even though the explanation was somewhat lacking, before putting his hand on the door.

"Tomica, please take Tom somewhere far away. I'm getting off here."

"Eh? Ah. Umm...!"

"Tom... Will you pass on your opponent to me?"

"...Yeah. It's not like I can do anything against him at this point."

Despite doing all the preparations necessary to overcome his incompatibility with Chrono, Tom was defeated. He had no hope of winning now.

Thus, he now entrusted his hope to this person here.

Of course, he was somewhat averse to letting someone else handle his colleague's rampage. Tom wanted to handle it himself.

However, he was also certain that if there was anyone in the kingdom who could beat Chrono — the master of acceleration and someone who lived in an entirely different world in terms of time — it could only be *him*.

"This is it for me. I'm handing it all off to you."

"Thank you. I'm glad I came here prepared to duel. Tomica, thank you for taking me all the way here," he said with a smile as he opened Oboroguruma's door.

A moment later, as though someone had been waiting for the door to open, a bomb was flung into the car.

Obviously Chrono was the one who'd thrown it. He'd already caught up to the Oboroguruma and was running alongside it.

The car negated all attacks from outside, so Chrono had been waiting for the perfect opening to finally finish off Tom.

The bomb was similar to dynamite and had more power than most of his others. He'd thrown it into the car at supersonic speeds that nobody could follow, and a moment later, it... *didn't explode*.

The bomb merely landed inside Oboroguruma as if it was nothing more than an inert object.

"...What?" Still accelerating, Chrono opened his eyes wide.

He looked inside the car and saw *a cut wire* lying right next to the bomb.

That could only mean that someone had *cut it off* the moment before it exploded.

However, the biggest problem with that was that...

I... didn't see it?

...Despite being in a state of acceleration, Chrono hadn't witnessed the moment the wire was cut.

He wondered if that was even possible when...

"Ah...?!"

...At that very moment, Chrono's avatar warned him of an impending danger, like the feeling one gets when something stabs towards your closed eyes. It was a sense of danger that he felt on the back of his neck.

"...!" Chrono instantly activated his ultimate skill. By doubling the AGI buffs of both World Time Acceleration and Subjective Time Acceleration, he briefly broke 1,000,000 AGI.

Then, without even looking back, he ran ahead as fast as he could.

A moment later, a slight pain pricked the skin at the back of his neck.

"Ah...?!" He continued to run as he put the back of his left hand against his neck.

His neck was wet, and the fluid on the back of his hand was red.

It took him a moment to understand that this was his own blood. Someone had actually cut him.

Impossible... Who could possibly attack Chrono from behind while he was accelerating? And more importantly, how? As far as he knew, even King of Beasts, Behemot couldn't match Chrono's AGI.

He racked his brain for anyone who could do this to him...

"Ah, right... There is one person."

...And came up with a name and a face.

Chrono had info about him, as well. After all, he was originally one of the targets he planned to kill on that night.

However, he'd been offline, so they hadn't encountered each other. He wasn't among the bodyguards, so Chrono had completely forgotten about him.

"Gh...!" Chrono stopped and looked behind him.

He chose not to chase Oboroguruma or put more distance between himself and his opponent.

Oboroguruma's Master was allied with his pursuer, after all. It was possible he'd ordered her to drive a route that would allow him to catch up on purpose. If Chrono focused too much on attacking Oboroguruma, he would certainly lose his head.

With that decision made, he decided to face the one chasing him.

He didn't say a word. Maintaining his base acceleration, he prepared to use his ultimate skill at any moment. Chrono already knew that, although his base acceleration speed was lower than his opponent's, he could become faster than him by using his ultimate skill. That was why he stood in place and waited for his pursuer, ready to make his move.

However, his opponent approached him far slower than Chrono was expecting.

His feet made gentle sounds on the dirt floor of the forest as he walked closer, step by casual step.

"I'm sorry I made you wait." He stepped out from between the trees, revealing a boy even younger than Chrono. He was short even given his age and wore a woolly coat. At his sides hung were two sheathed odachis, both bitten into by chains that were decorated with rabbit skulls and shark heads.

His appearance was difficult to forget, and his name was...

"I knew it... Kashimiya."

The young boy's name was indeed The Unsheath, Kashimiya.

He was the duel ranker who'd risen to second place after defeating Tom, as well as the owner of K&R.

He also bore titles like "The Kingdom's Fastest" and "The Guillotine."

"Yes. And you are... Chrono Crown, yes?"

"...Yeah." Chrono wasn't that surprised that he called him by name.

The ambushes that night weren't easily linked to him, but Kashimiya actually knew his name because K&R's Tomica was there when Shu Starling said that the culprit was Chrono, and she passed it on to him.

...It looks like I'm his mark here, Chrono thought.

He now understood that he was Kashimiya's target, and he already knew his motivation.

"I see. Fifth in the duel rankings... Rosa was a member of your clan, wasn't she? I guess you came here to avenge her."

"Huh?"

"...What do you mean, huh?" Chrono had absolute confidence in his assumption, but then Kashimiya tilted his head quizzically in response, leaving him thoroughly confused.

"Oh no — this isn't revenge for Rosa. I didn't hunt down Tsukuyo Fuso for that, either." Kashimiya rejected Chrono's assumption while bringing up the name of the leader of The Lunar Society, which had annihilated K&R three months ago during the blockade incident.

"Rosa is a PK, so if someone PKs her, then fair's fair. Same goes for me, of course, and I always tell my clan that there's no need for vengeance PK."

"...Then, are you here as an Altarian Master joining the princess' retinue?"

"That... isn't exactly it either."

"Then why *are* you here?!" Chrono couldn't help but raise his voice at this person who'd interfered with him finishing off Tom.

Kashimiya made a somewhat perplexed expression before speaking up, his tone clear as crystal.

"I'm here to cut you."

"...Huh?" Kashimiya said that he wasn't here for vengeance, or to protect anything... he just wanted to cut Chrono.

"What... do you mean?"

"Umm... you are the one who attacked the rankers, and you are *the fastest PK in Dryfe*, right?"

"What of it...?"

"I almost never get to cut someone who's faster than me. I thought this would be the perfect chance. Just a few moments ago, you moved faster than I could cut off your head."

Kashimiya plainly and honestly stated that he was only here because he wanted to cut someone who was faster than him.

That answer made Chrono so angry that a vein popped out on his forehead as he shouted at Kashimiya, "Are you screwing with me?! Do you have any idea the emotion I've been putting into this?! How desperately I tried to beat Tom?! How hard I'm trying to prevent the war?! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA?!"

"No. I have no idea. I don't really care about that..." Kashimiya said as if it was nothing.

"You little...!"

"Also, didn't I just say it?" Faced with Chrono's rage, Kashimiya kept a composed face and explained his logic.

"Both you and I are PKs who kill other players for the sake of our goals.

That's exactly why we don't have to consider our opponent's feelings or the weight of their reasons, right?"

"What...?"

"I mean, we PKs often kill other people for our own convenience, right? It's weird to expect consideration for your feelings when you're about to be killed."

Kashimiya wasn't here to avenge Rosa — she was, after all, a fellow PK. PKs killed others for their own gain, so it was only natural to be PK'd themselves in turn.

That was why Kashimiya intended to fight Chrono here.

In a situation like this, there was no reason for him to consider Chrono's situation or emotions whatsoever. Not even Chrono's talk of stopping the war meant anything to him.

Kashimiya wouldn't change his outlook even if Chrono had told him everything — control AI secrets included.

He only cared about two things — to cut someone faster than himself and enjoy a fight to the death with a fellow PK.

Chrono had no choice but to acknowledge one thing about the boy.

Isn't he a child in his own reality...? Ohh, but, then again... he thought as he was hit with a sudden realization. *No ordinary child would be the leader of a country's largest PK clan.*

Kashimiya hadn't gotten where he was by mere chance — *his position was fully deserved*.

"...I heard that K&R has a rule about getting the target's consent before PK'ing them," said Chrono. That was Kashimiya's own rule — they only PK'd after giving a warning and obtaining consent to fight.

Kashimiya nodded before raising one finger. "Yes, but there is one exception," he said.

"Exception?"

"'There's no need for that when the target is also a PK.' I've believed this since before I founded the clan."

Just as he'd already said, when he faced a PK, he would do so without considering their circumstances or emotions.

That was why he was said to be Altar's strongest PK. Eldridge, Barbaroy Bad Burn... *he was strongest among them because he'd systematically fought and defeated them all.*

"I see. I get it. I understand... That's enough."

Chrono let out a deep breath before glaring at Kashimiya.

"I'll find and kill Tom once I've PK'd you. You only added an extra step to the process."

"Yes, please do so. I'll PK you too."

Chrono grasped his two pocket watches and let his bloodlust overtake him.

Kashimiya also moved the chain holding his odachis. These were his Embryo, "Unsheath at Will, Inaba." Doing this helped put him into a stance from which he could unsheath both his odachis — a stance that was unique to him.

The two faced each other like gunslingers in a classic western. Then... both of them vanished.

This was the start of their battle to the death.

One was the avatar of a control AI and the fastest person in Dryfe — The Rabbit, Chrono Crown.

The other was the second in Altar's duel rankings as well as their own fastest Master — The Unsheath, Kashimiya.

Thus began the deadly struggle between the vorpal rabbit and the vorpal hare.

It was safe to say that it would be settled *in one single instant*.

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The kingdom's duel rankers and PKs well knew that you could only see Kashimiya's slashes after he had already performed them.

Your head would fall off, and *only then* you would know that you had been cut.

Everyone Kashimiya defeated had experienced this.

This was the result of his pure speed and nothing else. Thanks to The Unsheath's skill, Godlike Unsheathing, Kashimiya's AGI while he drew his sword was multiplied by a hundred. That gave him over 500,000 AGI. His slashes made the speed of sound seem slow, and no one could see them coming.

And thanks to Inaba's skill, Hareshark Nullstep, Kashimiya could instantly cover the distance between him and his targets. He and his blade moved at fifty times the speed of sound, and you needed abilities like Tom's to have any hope of countering it.

However, right here, there was an exception.

The Rabbit, Chrono Crown.

In his accelerated state, he had 260,000 AGI — about half of Kashimiya's — and that was enough for him to see the start of the unsheathing, which others couldn't even notice.

"The World in the Right, Perception in the Left, Here I Hold the Eternal Law — Chronos, Kairos, Aion." Before Kashimiya could close the distance, Chrono used his ultimate skill.

Chronos in his right hand and Kairos in his left hand had their speeds doubled, making Chrono's AGI four times greater than it was previously.

That reversed their relative speed — Chrono now moved twice as fast as Kashimiya and used that speed to jump backwards.

The impact of the landing was harsh even with his accessory that reduced the damage, but that was a small price to pay to prevent the deadly blade from reaching him.

He'd evaded the blade that went at fifty times the speed of sound by a distance of about two hand spans.

At the same time, Chrono scattered Gems all around Kashimiya.

Kashimiya could only move extremely fast while in the act of unsheathing. Thus, if he was attacked the moment his sword was fully drawn, it would be impossible for him to dodge.

At this rate, Kashimiya would be destroyed while his right hand was still fully extended from his impossibly fast draw.

But contrary to Chrono's expectations, Kashimiya then began unsheathing with his left hand.

There was no time at all between the switch. As though he'd expected for his first attack to miss, he instantly grabbed the hilt of the other odachi with his left hand.

And so, without Godlike Unsheathing ever stopping even for a moment, he continued to draw his second blade. He also used the Hareshark Nullstep to zigzag through the Gems and approach Chrono in order to launch the blade at his neck.

You little...!

The lack of time between the switch to the second unsheathing threatened Chrono like few things could.

Kashimiya was performing a ludicrous feat that could only be called "continuous unsheathing," connecting everything he did into one single action.

The blade that moved with the Godlike Unsheathing buff was all you needed to know that there was no opening between the two unsheathing actions.

Inaba was an Embryo specialized in supporting just the act of unsheathing. This was possible due to both the existence of the chains supporting the blades and Kashimiya's own supreme skill.

It took a true talent to get a Superior Job from the "The One" grouping at his age, and this continuous unsheathing was all you needed to see to know that his rank was well-deserved.

Still... I'm faster than him! Chrono thought. No matter how skilled or speedy Kashimiya was, Chrono knew he could surpass him. To Chrono, Kashimiya's unsheathing was only about half as fast as him, so he could see and evade the strike just fine regardless of its speed.

Once again, he evaded the blade by a distance of two hand spans.

Kashimiya had used both his odachis, and Chrono was about to toss out his Gems again, but...

...What?

...He noticed that Kashimiya's right hand was reaching for *another sheathed odachi*.

And no, it wasn't his first odachi returned to its sheath.

It was actually *a third* odachi.

Instant Wield...! Chrono remembered the existence of the skill that allowed to instantly switch weapons, and it made him gasp.

Kashimiya's current posture was quite unusual.

It was as though he was preparing to slash down from the shoulder — an attack that should have been impossible off a draw.

However, no matter the angle, Inaba's chains supported Kashimiya's unsheathing. And the fact that his speed remained at its peak was proof enough that his draw was still, as the skill's name suggested, godlike.

The third blade went for Chrono's neck diagonally.

The surprise factor let Kashimiya close some of the distance between them, but Chrono was still able to evade the slash.

He'd unsheathed once with each of his hands, then did it a third time thanks to Instant Wield. Thinking that he had evaded all the continuous unsheathing Kashimiya was capable of, Chrono once again threw out his items... *but then The Guillotine's left hand began unsheathing his fourth blade*.

Impossible...! He'd already used his Instant Wield. The skill had a cooldown, so he shouldn't have been able to use it again this quickly.

However, there was one method of making this possible...

...Does he actually have a skill that lowers the cooldown on Instant Equip?!

Embryos evolved according to their Masters. Kashimiya's Inaba was specialized solely in supporting Kashimiya's unsheathing.

Thus, if Kashimiya found it necessary to always have sheathed odachis at the ready, it was entirely possible that his Embryo could evolve to overcome the flaws of Instant Wield.

Chrono's guess was on the right track, but it also somewhat underestimated the full picture.

Kashimiya was using a skill called "Willblade — Inaba." This was Inaba's ultimate skill, and it was actually an always-active skill that *completely nullified* the cooldown of Kashimiya's active skills.

This allowed Kashimiya to swing his blades however he wished, without any time in between.

That was the true power of Kashimiya's Unsheath at Will, Inaba.

It let him to use skills continuously without any delay, like the white hare hopping across the sharks between the waves.

...That Embryo is giving its all to support Kashimiya's unsheathing, Chrono thought. After just barely evading the completely unexpected fourth, he saw Kashimiya still chasing after him as he prepared to draw a fifth odachi.

Inaba was indeed doing all it could to support its Master's combat abilities.

However, that was the extent of it — support.

The Embryo had no effect on Kashimiya's combat technique.

The Embryo isn't increasing the power of his unsheathing or making it automatic or anything like that... It's only helping him do it continuously. The technique is Kashimiya's alone.

The lack of Instant Wield's cooldown did not automatically make him a powerful combatant. Replacing the blades meant nothing if his draw technique was inadequate. In that case, he'd still lose the acceleration from his Godlike Unsheathing.

The fact that he was maintaining his speed instead meant that his technique was nothing short of perfect.

Kashimiya was the one controlling the chains holding the sheaths, using Instant Wield at the precise time to maintain his continuous unsheathing, and positioning himself using Hareshark Nullstep.

With support from his Embryo, even a young child has reached this level... There was no opening even between the fourth and fifth slashes.

Flawless, flowing, and continuous unsheathing.

This unique attack was woven from the triple threads of Kashimiya's job, his Embryo, and his own supreme skill.

It was the godspeed eight-chain slash attack... the "Personalized Mystic Slash — Octachrome Lightning." It had instantly killed all eight Toms when Kashimiya had faced him... and it was something that he alone could do.

...The world is so vast... Master.

Though his whole body trembled at the approaching blade, Chrono was also thoroughly astonished.

This feeling was greater than even his rage at those trying to get in his way. Still, it wasn't enough to take away his will to fight, and he had no intention of stopping now.

Evading Kashimiya's blades, Chrono searched for a way to win.

That's the fifth... I guess the colors of the sheaths are different to make sure he doesn't take out the wrong blade?

Thanks to the sheath coloring, he could differentiate between odachis he already used and ones he hadn't yet brought to bear, making it easy to predict which odachi he might use Instant Wield on next.

To a normal onlooker, this would seem like eight slashes all done within the blink of an eye. Just as he had during his battle with Tom Cat, Kashimiya could instantly kill eight people, or slash a single person eight times, killing them even if they were equipped with a Brooch.

It was a *continuous sure-kill slash*. That seemed like a contradiction, but that just made it more deserving of the prefix "Mystical."

However, this blade had yet to reach Chrono's neck.

That's... the sixth! No matter how fast his draw was, it didn't change the fact that Chrono was faster.

Though the distance between them was becoming smaller and smaller, the Octachrome Lightning had yet to reach him.

...His unsheathing technique is peerless... but he shouldn't be able to continue this forever. There has to be an opening somewhere.

Chrono's guess was correct. Just as it said in the name, "Octachrome Lightning" could only strike eight times. Kashimiya had yet to find a way to take his technique any farther than that.

Thus, Chrono prepared to go on the offensive once the slashes stopped.

...Though, I'm running out of bombs and Gems. He'd used too many of them during his ranker hunting and the battle against Tom, and his consumable supply was nearly exhausted.

Though, then again...

"...I can't win against him with items, anyway." Chrono felt that ordinary bombs and equipment wouldn't be enough to finish this Master off. This one long moment was enough for him to see that Kashimiya was no doubt the most fearsome human being that he'd ever faced as an avatar.

Thus, he'd resolved to give his opponent all the recognition he deserved.

...I can catch up to them even with just one leg left. I'll finish off Tom and then go on to kidnap the princess.

The reasoning behind this thought was simple: Chrono had finally decided to take Kashimiya seriously and defeat him properly.

This opponent was worth sacrificing a leg.

Chrono was about to use the greatest ace up his avatar's sleeve.

In essence it was a blade-kick launched while in a state of maximum acceleration using his ultimate skill. The force of the impact would always shatter the leg that delivered the kick, but with the force of over 1,000,000 AGI behind it, it could even pulverize Mythical metal.

It was the only sure-kill ability that Chrono had given a name — "Dead in Zero."

Using it, his opponent would die before they could even perceive that any time had passed.

Of course, it's likely that he's wearing a Brooch... but that won't be a problem. If the critical injury was nullified by the Brooch, the damage to his leg from the impact would also be nullified. He would then just have to launch another attack, which would most certainly kill Kashimiya.

Chrono moved over two times faster than his opponent, so he had the *time* for that.

There was also the fact that a single hit would be enough to break Kashimiya's unsheathing and briefly return his speeds to mundane levels.

I just need to... find the right moment! Chrono evaded Kashimiya's seventh slash as he waited for the perfect chance to use Dead in Zero.

And so it came... Before unsheathing the eighth, Kashimiya slowed down just a fraction. Perhaps he was thrown off by facing someone who was faster than him for the first time, or by the fact that none of his previous seven strikes had even scratched his enemy.

Brief as the mistake was, Chrono didn't let it slide.

He jumped next to Kashimiya and kick-slashed towards his neck. The next moment, *Chrono's right leg was cut off from behind the knee*.

Shock overcame him as he realized something.

Kashimiya hadn't slowed down by accident. It was no mistake at all — he had deliberately changed the speed of his continuous unsheathing.

Right before pulling the next blade out, he slightly lowered his speed as he activated a particular skill.

The skill's name was "Iai strike," and it doubled the user's AGI when the opponent entered his range.

Meant for launching a counter strike, it was one of the basic skills in the art of unsheathing.

However, combined with Godlike Unsheathing, it let Kashimiya move at a speed that matched even Chrono's.

Kashimiya had expected Chrono to do exactly as he did — to anticipate that he would eventually stop and try to attack him during that gap between attacks. And as a fellow fighter who moved at divine speeds, he knew that Chrono would try to attack directly instead of using his items that had failed again and again.

Thus, he'd lured him to his side and launched a counterattack.

It was a bit of a gamble, but it had allowed Kashimiya to take Chrono's right leg.

"Not yet...!" Despite the loss, The Rabbit hadn't given up. Right before he hit the ground, he thrust out his pocket watches as though attempting a handstand, and then pushed away to launch himself again.

His ultimate speed was still active. He would use his remaining left leg to take Kashimiya's head with Dead in Zero.

The Unsheath also had his new odachi ready and began to draw it with his right hand.

He swung the final blade into the trajectory of Chrono's approach.

However, the stroke was completed before Chrono even entered Kashimiya's range.

Shocking as it was, this wasn't a measurement error on Kashimiya's part. He actually *had* swung the blade at the right time to meet Chrono's attack, despite his immense speed.

Chrono had just *made him miss*.

One of Chronos Kairos Aion's skills was World Time Acceleration, which doubled the speed for the selected nearby targets.

However, there was no limit to what or who could be picked — *even his enemy was an option*.

By accelerating Kashimiya right when he began the unsheathing, he forced him to swing his blade at the wrong time, so he cut through nothing but air.

I have you now! Right after the blade passed him by, Chrono used the opening before Kashimiya swung the sword in his left hand to launch his blade-boots towards the boy's head.

However... *his left leg was then shattered.*

This was done using the sheath of the odachi Kashimiya had used for his last draw. Since it was supported by chains, he'd swung it at Chrono's left leg before the acceleration from his unsheathing ended.

Of course, the sheath wasn't a *blade*, so Blade Speed-Through didn't apply to it. As a result, it shattered on impact.

The damage didn't end there. The shock shattered the chains holding it, and since he was connected to them, even Kashimiya was hurt.

However, the damage it dealt was extreme. This speed-based attack was much like Chrono's Dead in Zero, and it literally shattered his leg.

Did he predict my actions again...? No! He actually sensed that his speed was different the moment he began unsheathing... and instantly switched tactics! Kashimiya had realized that his slash would miss, so he quickly swapped to using his sheath instead. This split-second decision had successfully removed both of The Rabbit's legs.

What an incredible person... To think the world has... such people in it...?

As Chrono fell, Kashimiya prepared to unsheath using his left hand and finish him off.

However, instead of feeling the frustration he'd felt at the beginning of this fight, Chrono was simply shocked... and astonished.

Things beyond imagination... Things I can't hope to match... They exist not just in nature, but among people, too. This has to be the world that my Master wanted to see... Ohh...

As he fell, Chrono's eyes were turned towards the blue sky above. He pondered its beauty and the supreme technique he had just experienced.

I'm sure that both of these things... will be memories worthy of telling to Master... Hahah... Seriously...

"The world is... so vast..." Kashimiya's final slash cut Chrono's head clean from his shoulders like a guillotine.

With that, The Rabbit, Chrono Crown dissolved into bits of light.

Even though he couldn't fulfill his goal and was indeed defeated right in the middle of pursuing it, he seemed unexpectedly satisfied.

Embracing the memory of that one moment when reality surpassed his imagination... he vanished into the air.

Interlude: The Spectator

A Certain Place at the Altar-Dryfe Border

There were currently three battles happening at the Altar-Dryfe border. Though the battle between Chrono and Tom — and then Kashimiya — had ended, the battles sparked at the peace talks had only just begun.

The combatants on those other battlefields probably weren't even aware of the deadly fight that had just taken place.

However, there was one who watched over each of these raging conflicts.

Kashimiya and Chrono's fight is over. Switching view.

Hiding in the shadow of some trees, a man scribbled something on his notepad with his eyes closed.

He was the thirtieth in Altar's kill rankings — King of Light, F.

The man who'd fought Ray on the Love-Duel Festival was yet again looking down upon everything.

As expected, The Unbreakable's fight was one to behold, but there are many others worth seeing, too.

The sights observed by his Embryo, Zodiac, were projected directly into his eyes. His left was focused on a single battle — the one involving Ray's group — while his right swapped between several of them.

The first was the now-finished duel to the death between Kashimiya and Chrono; the second was the martial dance between the two princesses; and the third was the clash between the machine god and a giant kaiju.

F could see so many rare occurrences merely by *being* in this place, at this time. In fact, there was so *much* to see that it was actually beginning to make him anxious.

On top of that, there was one thing that he was completely missing out on.

Due to a connection of his, he knew about the assault on Altea that was happening right now. However, the capital was far from the Altar-Dryfe border. That put it well beyond the range of his Zodiac's remote control, so he could only observe one of the two battlegrounds.

F had prioritized Ray — the one who'd beaten him and left an impression he himself had yet to fully make sense of — and followed him here to the border, but he definitely found it unfortunate that he couldn't see Altea too.

The capital has more people, though. I can only hope that I can catch a glimpse of what's happening there through someone's recording.

He considered Zodiac's observation to be the best and most optimal way of gathering material, but if something was too far away, then he had to resort to inferior methods.

"Hm...?" Suddenly, something strange appeared before his right eye, which was currently fixed on the clash between Shu and Behemot.

It was a monster that looked like an eyeball that had somehow sprouted wings.

F already knew about a creature much like this. If that was the same kind of monster, then it was probably doing the same thing as F right now.

...Mr. Franklin.

"The Weakest, The Worst" — Dryfe's infamous mad scientist. One of his creatures was watching over the Altar-Dryfe Border just as F was.

Was he doing it from a distance, though? Or was he actually...?

He silently pondered it for a moment. F had noticed Franklin, but had Franklin noticed F?

He didn't think that it mattered much, in the end.

He was merely a spectator who wouldn't be caught up in any of these battles.

F simply shrugged and went back to his observations... And that's precisely when it happened. An event that could only be described as earth-shattering...

To be continued

Afterword

Cat: “It’s time for the afterwooord! I’m Cheshire, the ‘Cat’ who lost two volumes in a rooow!”

Bear: “I’m Shu, the ‘Bear’ who spent the past two volumes duking it out with the unbearable muscle-headed she-kaiju.”

Xun: “I’m ‘Xun,’ shOrt for ‘Xunyu.’ And beAr, it looks to me likE you’re gonna do the same fOr a third volume.”

Cat: “It’s been a while since we had an arc that spans several voluuumes.”

Bear: “Yeah. The last one was Quartierlatin.”

Cat: “Please enjoy the stormy peace talks arc.”

Xun: “AnywAy, let’s move on tO the state of things. The animE’s over.”

Cat: “Yes. The final episode has aired. A big you ‘thank you’ to those who watched it.”

Bear: “It’s been something, but I’m beary glad it went by without a hitch.”

Xun: “Let’s alsO thank the stAff and the cast for thEir work.”

???: “Yeah, but that’s not all! Volume 1 of the Blu-ray is out in Japan and it comes with a 500+ page novel with starring the bear! Volume 2 is also out and it comes with the stellar OST! Volume 3 is coming soon and it’ll have a production material collection! And all of them come with special episodes of ‘The Whys and Whats of Dendrogram,’ written by the author himself!”

Cat: “...Listen to that sudden onslaught of marketing.”

Bear: “She-fox...”

Fox: “Yeah! That’s me! The ‘Fox,’ Tsukuyo Fuso! THE ONE WHO WON’T GET A VOICE IF THE ANIME DOESN’T GET A SECOND SEASON!”

Xun: “You mentionEd that in the last afterwOrd... You’re still hUng up on

that?”
Fox: “The anime is available on most streaming sites! Those views seem to be important these days, so please check it out!”
Cat: “She’s way more serious about this than we are...”
Bear: “Let’s put aside the overbearing she-fox and make room for the author and his serious comments.”

Dearest readers,

Thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

The coronavirus is having quite an effect on the world, but novels can be enjoyed indoors; as someone who writes them, I see this as all the more reason to work hard, so I can hopefully alleviate your boredom. Please stay safe.

Now, as you probably know, featured on the cover of this volume are Juliet and Kashimiya.

The former is actually the protagonist of the spin-off manga, Crow Record. I wrote the plot myself, but I do not get a chance to write afterwords for it, so now that Juliet’s on the cover, I figured I would talk about it here instead.

Crow Record is a Monthly Comic Alive manga with a story focused on a group of particularly feminine characters: Juliet, Chelsea, and Max.

However, those close to me often tell me that my female characters have the hearts to rival the manliest of warriors or that I do not feel or understand what they call “moe.”

I also often hear that Nemesis does not seem like a heroine. Please be assured that she is.

Occasionally, I felt like my writing on Crow Record might also drift in that direction. I even had to stop myself from adding a few too many battles between unnamed male characters.

Still, I took the criticism to heart and actively tried to keep feminine cuteness and appealing presentation in mind while writing it, and I believe I properly conveyed the charm of the female-centric cast.

Though, a lot of that is thanks to La-na’s splendid work with the characters’ gestures and expressions. Personally, I am a big fan of Shion’s face during the comedy scenes.

If this talk of Crow Record piqued your interest, please do go and give it a try.

Since we are on the topic of manga, I also suggest taking a look at Kami Imai's masterful manga adaptation of Infinite Dendrogram's original story. Volume 7 came out just recently, and just like the ones before, it is full of intense action.

Lobohta, who appears in the short stories that come with manga volume 2 and beyond, also has a couple cameos in Crow Record, so make sure to check it out if you like Pomeranians.

In other news, like Cheshire and the others have mentioned, the anime adaptation of Infinite Dendrogram has finished airing.

This was the first time my work was adapted into an anime, and it left me with both fond memories from the time working on it and regrets regarding the way I handled some things.

However, both the negatives and the positives are meaningful to the product as a whole.

This is not limited to anime — you could also say the same about the novel I write.

Regardless, I have something I can create, and I will hopefully entertain and move you to the best of my ability.

Please look forward to more Infinite Dendrogram.

Sakon Kaidou

Cat: "Anyway, time to wrap up volume 13! The next one will be really inteeeense! VOLUME 14 IS COMING OUT AROUND OCTOBER! ...Huh?"

Xun: "No one gOt in the way this timE. Kitty actuallY got to do the announcemEnt for once."

Bear: "Well, he's control AI No. 13. If he couldn't do it fur this volume, it wouldn't happen ever."

Xun: (...We're treating this like a birthdAy?)

Fox: "13 volumes... We sure came far, didn't we?"

Cat: "...I DID IIIIIIT! I GOT TO ANNOUNCE THE NEXT VOLUUUUUUUUUME!"

Xun: "Look at thAt outburst of emotiOn..."

Bear: "Anyway, we'll be waiting fur you all!"

Bonus Short Stories

* May contain spoilers. Please read these after finishing the volume.

The Land of Strife

Reiji Mukudori

“What kind of country is Tenchi, anyway?”

On a day much like any other, I posed that question to my Tenchi-dwelling friends from college.

“Oh dear. Why would you ask that?”

“I just felt like learning more about the place.”

Marie had gotten me curious when she’d said that Tenchi’s Nanshumon clan actually used the Death Soldier job, which I’d picked as my third. All I really knew about the country so far was that the median level of tians there was exceptionally high.

“You’re all from there, right? Can you tell me more about the country’s culture? The general vibe?”

“Hmm... the vibe, huh? I’d say that it’s...” Akiyama stopped mid-sentence, only for the other three to finish it for him in unison. *“The land of strife.”*

I’d heard the exact same description many times now, both in and out of Dendro.

“Not a month passes there without civil conflict,” Fuyuki — who was affiliated with the Hokugen’in Daimyo clan — said, reminiscing about something. “We had one just recently, in fact. Civilian casualties are rare, if that’s what you’re worried about, but the tians who take to the battlefield have a strong ‘BRING IT ON’ attitude. They’re all really tough, too.”

“It’s basically the Sengoku Era with leveling thrown in,” Kasugai added as he nodded. “The tians there are also skilled at martial arts, so they’re often way stronger than mid-tier Masters.”

“It’s pretty advanced, though. There’s a bath in every home, and most of them even have flush toilets," Natsume said.

"Well, Altar's a traditional fantasy land, but it's no different in that regard," I said as I remembered all the facilities the kingdom had.

The people of Dendro enjoyed many of the modern comforts we had here on Earth. Most of them had been introduced by people who had "Cat" as their last name — probably members of the dev team, specifically Tom.

"What about you, Akiyama? Got anything to say about Tenchi?"

"Well... I don't live on Tenchi's main island, but I can say that the cuisine has a Japanese vibe too. Though, due to the different flavors, they often use unconventional kinds of meat or western veggies, so even though the food is Japanese at its core, it often seems somewhat... thrown together."

"Ah. I get what you mean! It's a bit fancy and colorful!" Natsume voiced her agreement.

I knew what they meant. Dendro had ingredients we didn't have on Earth, like monster meat or Remberries.

"Oh, and though Tenchi is constantly at war with itself, they do have someone at the top."

"The 'Conquest General,' right?" I asked. "From what I can tell, that's Dendro's 'Commander-in-Chief of the Expeditionary Force Against the Barbarians' AKA 'Shogun.' What's he like?"

"Hmm... compared to actual historical people... he's not Ieyasu, at least."

"Not Yoshiaki Ashikaga either, that's for sure."

"I guess he's closest to Yoshiteru Ashikaga."

"That's the one they call 'Swordmaster Shogun'..." I said in mild amazement.

I *did* expect the head of a country in Dendro to be strong, though — just like Azurite in our own Altar.

"But apparently, he's weaker than his predecessors from ancient times. Our Daimyo said that the Conquest General's powers change depending on how much land he owns, and he doesn't have all that much of it right now."

"I mean, Tenchi's an island country, so there's a limit to that anyway, right?"

It might not have always been an island country, though, huh? I wondered.

Time passed by as we talked, and when it was almost time for the next lecture, we split up and focused on our studies.

I learned quite a few things about Tenchi. The question now was... would I ever get a chance to go there?

The End

A Popcorn Deficiency

Death Soldier, Ray Starling

Recently, Shu had begun going on regular hunting trips.

The quest he'd done with Lei-Lei hadn't been his only recent endeavor. He'd also been seen riding Baldr to distant lands many a time. He'd said that he was out making money so he could buy as much Baldr ammo as he could, and though that was fine and all, there was one little problem.

We were having dinner together one day when I handed him a letter. "Here. It's for you," I said.

"Fur me? What is this, fanmail?"

"...Well, knowing you in real life, I can understand why you'd assume that, but no."

Our letterbox used to be filled with letters addressed to him, and I vaguely recalled many envelopes being strangely heavy. That was in reality, though. This ursine goof right here in Dendro would never get any fanmail... except maybe from little kids.

"That's a petition I was asked to pass over to you."

"A petition...? Ohh..."

Shu opened the envelope, read the letter, and nodded in understanding.

"This person wants me to start selling popcorn again."

Someone was petitioning Shu to resume running his "KoD's Popcorn" stall.

Apparently, he'd only started selling popcorn to make some money while King of Beasts was in Gideon. He couldn't leave the city while she was here, but he still wanted to make a profit he could turn into ammo, however little it may be.

Demonstrating his immense skill as a cook, his popcorn turned out to be so good that he gained a devoted following of regulars and, well, business was booming. But with KoB having left Gideon, Shu was now able to resume hunting and make money far more efficiently, so he'd simply ended his venture into the popcorn industry.

The supply was gone, just like that, but the demand from the fans was still there, and one of them had gone on to write this petition.

By the way, this person was none other than my friend and duel ranker, Chelsea. She'd become a fan of Shu's popcorn too, and after her clan fell apart, she'd wanted to turn to it as comfort food, only to have no luck finding him or his business.

I'd found her in an awful state. Her eyes were lifeless, and if Dendro had a stat for sanity, hers would've been at rock bottom.

Once Chelsea had noticed me, she cornered me against the wall and slammed her hand into it so hard it shattered — her Poseidon gave a huge bonus to STR growth — before giving me this written petition to deliver to Shu.

Though "asking" might've not been the right word, since I felt like she would've done something really drastic if I'd refused. Her clan disbanding, her complete lack of involvement in the saucy love drama, and her popcorn deficiency must've put her in a really bad spot...

Is the popcorn thing really as bad as the other two, though? I wondered.

"...Shu, you didn't put anything weird in your popcorn, did you? Why is it so addictive?"

"How beary rude! I told you I only used clean and proper ingredients, all bought on the market!"

"So you're skilled enough to get absurd results even with ordinary ingredients, huh? Oh, and though that's the only actual petition I got for you, people ask me if you're gonna sell popcorn again all the time. Max did just recently, and Nemesis is asleep right now, but she often says that she misses it."

"It got more fans than I imagined, huh?"

KoD's Popcorn went on to make a return when Shu started making lots of it and storing it in inventories to sell on consignment.

Getting to eat the popcorn she loved so much did end up making Chelsea feel a little bit better.

The End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 13
by Sakon Kaidou

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0.1: December 2020
Premium E-Book

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
Infinite Dendrogram
14. The Physical Apex

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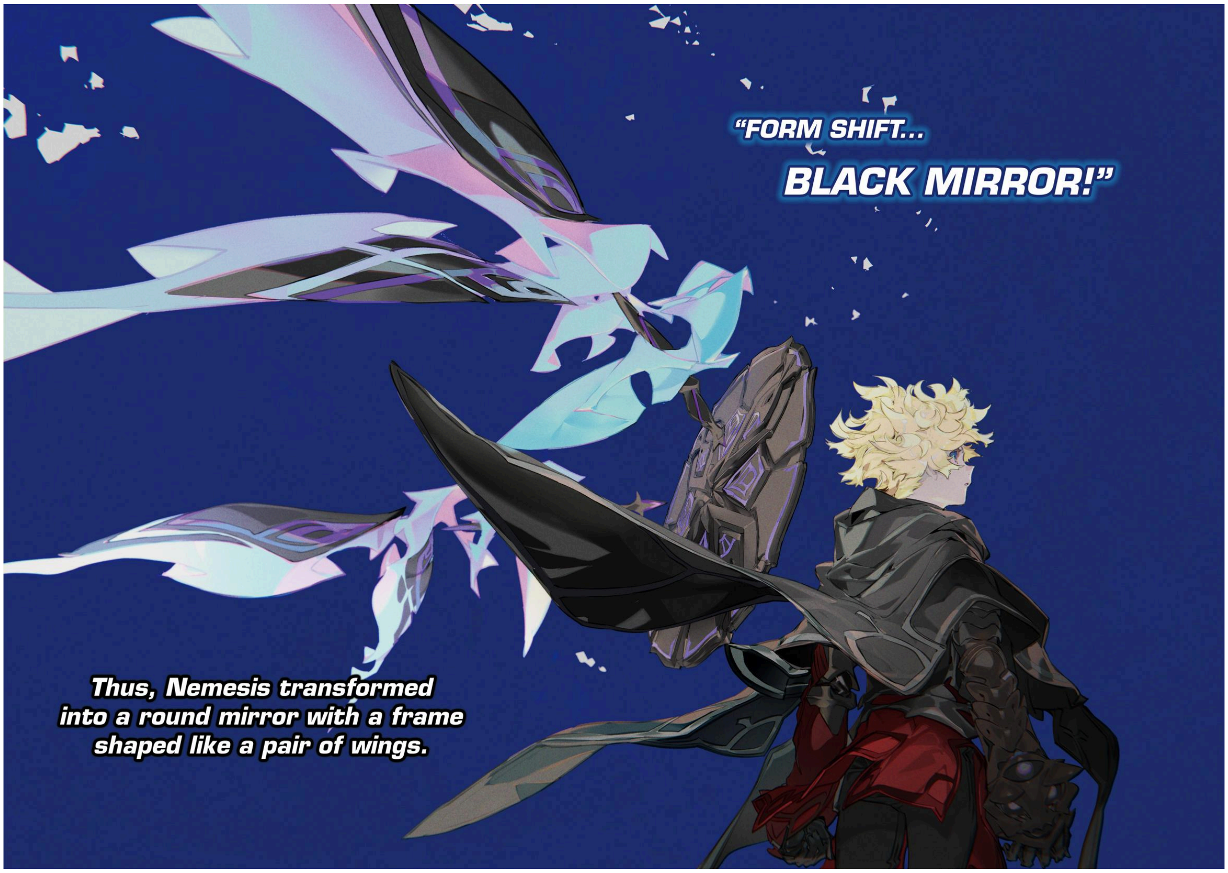
“FORM SHIFT…
BLACK MIRROR!”
Thus, Nemesis transformed into a round mirror with a frame shaped like a pair of wings.

Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis
High-Rank Embryo Form

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Interlude: First Contact

August, 2043, Vandelheim

Not long had passed since the release of *Infinite Dendrogram* on Earth.

The capitals of the seven major *Dendrogram* countries were swarming with players who'd been lucky enough to acquire the necessary hardware before it sold out, and most of them were beaming with excitement and wonder.

The imperium's capital was no different in that regard, and although the people here found these new entities — marked with gems or crests on their left hands — rather strange, they had no trouble accepting them. After all, these "Masters" had long been attested to within their recorded history, and had even played a major part in it.

Still, they were enough of a curiosity to attract a lot of attention.

There were some exceptions, though. Particularly, one little creature that had the build of a hedgehog, but the features of a porcupine.

It was wearing a cloak far too big for it, which dragged behind it.

There was no name above its head, so people knew it wasn't a monster. Most just assumed it was a tame creature and paid it no mind.

The few stares it did draw caused the creature to make a quiet, annoyed sound as it walked, keeping its distance from the road.

None of the passersby noticed, but the tiny body hidden by the cloak — specifically, the shoulder — had a gem on it... *an Embryo in its zeroth form*.

Indeed, it... or rather, *she* was not a monster, but a Master. She'd merely chosen the appearance of an animal and picked Vandelheim as her starting point.

"Hmm..." As she walked, she suddenly heard a lady's voice. At first, she thought that this was irrelevant to her, but then...

"Why are you pretending to be an animal?"

"Ah?!"

...The lady addressed her directly, making her gasp. After that, there was no question that the woman was definitely talking to her.

She quickly looked in the direction of the voice and saw a lady with golden hair in curls.

"Aha. So I was right," the lady said, her tone analytical. She had no gem or crest on her left hand. This person was supposed to be an NPC... but she had trouble seeing her that way.

"...Who are you?" she unwittingly asked the lady, going against her intention to avoid using normal words at all.

Without showing a hint of surprise, the blonde woman answered, "My name is Claudiah. And yours is...?"

After a moment of hesitation, she gave her her avatar's name: "...Behemot."

"Can I call you 'Betty,' then?"

"...Please don't." She didn't want to hear her real-life nickname here; for it would only remind her that the people who'd called her that were gone.

Behemot had come to *Infinite Dendrogram* in order to take a walk outside without having to actually interact with people. She'd thought that taking up the appearance of a harmless animal would make people ignore her, but Claudiah had seen right through her.

"Would you like some tea? You've certainly caught my attention," the lady offered.

Behemot had found Claudiah very curious, and it didn't take her long to accept. "...I can't hold tea cups, though," she added.

"We have small tea cups meant for the fairy folk of Legendaria."

This conversation was likely the point where Behemot had stopped seeing *Infinite Dendrogram* as a game.

While they were having tea, Claudiah talked about herself before Behemot could really ask any questions.

She said that she was part of the imperial family, that she was among the strongest combatants in the country, and she was out in town to investigate these Masters that had begun appearing so suddenly.

She also said that she called out to Behemot because she was simply very curious about her.

"...Was it because I was the strangest one?" Behemot asked.

"Appearance-wise, yes," Claudiah replied. "But that is not the reason why I called out to you."

"Hm?"

“May I ask *you* a question now?”

“What is it?”

“Why did you choose this country? According to the other Masters, there were six others you could have appeared in, so why did you choose the imperium?”

Behemot was silent for a long moment. She didn’t know whether her honest answer would be something she could say to a member of the imperial family, but ultimately decided that it didn’t matter.

“...Because the city looked like it’d be really refreshing to destroy.”

“I thought as much. I saw it in your face,” Claudiah said without much surprise.

Hearing that, Behemot understood the reason behind this meeting. Claudiah had singled her out because, to her, she looked like the most dangerous of the new Masters.

“...You can tell by *this* face?”

“I can. I myself feel the way you do sometimes.”

“You? A princess?” Behemot asked, somewhat surprised. Claudiah smiled at her, but then spoke with no joy in her voice.

“The burden I bear sometimes starts to feel like a nuisance. Even though I want to focus on the one thing that really matters to me, my circumstances force me to constantly hold myself back. Every now and then, I feel like just breaking everything that ties me down.”

With those words, she let out a somewhat gloomy sigh.

“To destroy everything that troubles me... to create an environment where I can focus entirely on one single thing... I wonder if the previous one... the King of Kings felt the same way.”

Behemot didn’t understand what Claudiah meant by those words. All she knew was that she was being completely honest — which meant that they were alike.

“Though, I really cannot afford to be as irresponsible as he was,” Claudiah added.

“You seem to have it pretty tough.”

“Indeed I do. Tough enough to want a friend who will help me.”

“Hm?” Behemot tilted her head as Claudiah took her little paw.

“Behemot,” she said. “Would you be my friend? Grow strong and help me.”

Behemot was shocked to hear that. She hadn't come to *Infinite Dendrogram* to interact with people. In real life, people just annoyed her; merely seeing large groups made her want to crush them.

She'd only come to this world because she wanted to remember what walking outside was like.

Going by her original intention, the only real option for her was to refuse Claudiah's offer.

"...There's no guarantee that I'll actually become that strong, though."

However, that wasn't what Behemot did.

For some reason, she didn't find interacting with Claudiah irritating in any way.

Behemot hadn't known her for long, but she felt almost as close to her as she had to her late father. Perhaps Behemot felt some instinctive affinity towards Claudiah the same way the princess had easily seen Behemot's true desire.

"My Embryo isn't born yet. What if it's really weak?"

"I am sure you will become stronger than anyone else," Claudiah said as she gently caressed the Embryo on Behemot's shoulder. "*I can see it in your face.*"

Those words sounded like they were spoken by someone else.

◇◆

That day, the two girls became friends.

This was the birth of the Master who would eventually be called "The Physical Apex."

Chapter Ten: Guardian-Jaguarman Theory

Paladin, Ray Starling

The peace talks had failed, and a battle had broken out.

Fortunately, the kingdom had considered the possibility that we'd end up fighting the imperium here.

King of Beasts, Behemot — the one we had to be most wary of.

Hell General, Logan Goddhart — another Dryfean Superior.

The Rabbit, Chrono Crown — the one who'd assaulted Riser and the others.

The Ram, Claudiah R. Dryfe — the Dryfean representative.

We'd considered their fighting prowess, and also come up with a way to deal with any unknown variables — namely, Tsukuyo Fuso's Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light and Fatal Field combo.

No one below level 601 could survive it. Anyone who wasn't a Superior Job didn't even have a chance, so this move instantly wiped out all the Dryfean high-ranks with Embryos we weren't aware of. We actually didn't expect that the Hell General would be affected by this combo too, so that was a really lucky break for our side.

King of Beasts' Leviathan had also been lured away from the battlefield by Shu.

And The Rabbit, whom we were pretty concerned about, showed no sign launching an attack. Tom had said that he had business with him, so perhaps he was keeping him occupied.

Regardless of what was going on elsewhere, right now the only Dryfeans we had to worry about were Claudiah and King of Beasts.

In other words, we were up against the most terrifying tian and Master the imperium had to offer.

The tremors caused by Shu and Leviathan's battle off in the distance shook the hall as both sides stood facing one another. One sudden movement would be enough to escalate things into an all-out battle. The lines had been drawn, and either side could make their move at any moment.

I was the one who challenged King of Beasts, so I could be the one to die first once the fight commenced in earnest.

“I won’t allow that,” Nemesis said telepathically. “Apex or not, I won’t allow her to kill you.”

Nemesis’ words were reassuring.

The Death Period and Lunar Society members around me were preparing for KoB’s next move.

Rook had already used his Union Jack to become the Liz-based Metal-Devil-Man, which ignored all physical attacks.

Marie had transformed Arc-en-Ciel into its ultimate skill form and loaded it.

B3 donned Magnum Colossus and prepared to use Heaven’s Weight, or her ultimate skill if necessary.

Tsukikage had vanished into the shadows, and the other Lunar Society members I didn’t recognize were also readying themselves for battle. A few of them were casting AoE buffs, so our stats were significantly boosted.

And finally, without so much as a word, Fuso herself had already made a move.

Using my Reveal skill, I could see that she’d switched her Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light from level to AGI.

Faint Light only affected stats, so it couldn’t limit bodily functions like the standard Lunar Divide Field had done to me or K&R... but dividing AGI by six still had a huge effect.

Between that and everything else, we were fully prepared for this.

As for myself, I was ready to use my fourth form and Shining Despair.

Our side couldn’t possibly be in better shape for this fight.

“Ugh...” And despite all of that... I still found myself breaking out in a cold sweat.

I’d fought many creatures a lot stronger than myself — Gardranda, Gouz-Maise, RSK, Monochrome, Gigaknight, and the pre-ancient civilization’s whale, to name a few. But despite that, I could tell that King of Beasts, even though she looked like nothing more than a cute little critter, was stronger than any of them.

Only a few seconds passed, but they felt like minutes as chills ran through my body and I looked for a chance to make my move.

These long seconds made me wonder about something: why wasn't KoB doing anything?

The answer to that question probably didn't have anything to do with her, but instead...

"Altimia! I have an idea!" Claudiah clapped her hands and said, breaking the tense silence of this 2 vs 87 face-off.

I almost launched into an attack at the sound of that clap, but I managed to stop myself.

"...What is it?" Azurite asked.

"If we stay here, we will only get in Behemot's way. Your Altarian Masters will also find it difficult to fight while protecting you, will they not? In addition, this will be our first fight in quite a while, and I do not want anyone to interfere. With all that in mind, how about the two of us take our battle elsewhere?"

She said all of this with a smile, leaving me almost completely flabbergasted for a moment.

I considered the possibility that this was nothing but a distraction to shift our attention away from KoB, but she herself was looking at Claudiah and barely moving.

Fuso shook her head and spoke against Claudiah's idea, "...No no no. Hold on. That's no good. You'll just lead her somewhere you can call in reinforcements and take her prisoner. It's such an obvious trap."

Her assumption was reasonable. We knew the extent of the Dryfean forces present here, but they also had two more Superiors — *that* Franklin and another one I'd never met before, Murdoch Martinez.

If either of them was lying in wait for Altimia, Altar would instantly lose.

"I did not solicit your opinion on the matter, but your concern is not unreasonable. Regardless, you need not worry," Claudiah said as she reached into her inventory and took out a large machine. "The stage of our battle will be visible to all, yet beyond their reach."

The object she'd removed from her inventory was *a jade green artificial horse*.

"That's..." Upon seeing that color, I recalled a certain name that Mario had mentioned back in Quartierlatin.

It was one of Grand Artificer Flagman's five Prism Steeds — the one that had been discovered in Dryfe.

The bicorn of the wind... Jade Storm.

"Let us fight to our hearts' content up in the sky, Altimia," Claudiah said, mounting the Prism Steed and spurring it high into the air.

Marie, B3, and Tsukikage tried to stop her, but King of Beasts blocked their way.

However, she didn't use this chance to attack us. Instead, she only looked at Azurite to see how she would respond.

"So that's her plan...!" I said as I gazed up at Claudiah. I immediately realized that she likely wanted to fight Azurite over 10,000 metels in the sky — the height at which I'd fought Monochrome. That was a height few living creatures could reach.

They *definitely* wouldn't be interrupted there.

Franklin's monsters wouldn't be able to go that high, King of Chariots fought with land-based tanks, and no matter how strong she was, I was pretty sure that King of Beasts wasn't capable of flying around freely. Well, maybe Franklin could conjure up some monster suited for high altitudes, but Azurite would likely make short work of any creature whose abilities were all focused on that one thing. No one said that their Truth Discernment was going off, so Claudiah had to have been completely honest about just wanting a real one-on-one with Azurite.

She obviously knew about the kingdom's SMPS production, too, since she'd assumed that Azurite was perfectly capable of fighting her all the way up there.

Though, she'd probably also considered the gap in power between Jade Storm — an original — and the mass-produced SMPS units.

"Kh...!" The worst thing about this was that if we didn't go after her, we would lose our only means of stopping the acts of terror currently happening at the capital. Since Claudiah was the only one with the power to call it off, we simply had to capture her.

If we didn't go after her, she would merely watch us from on high and wait for King of Beasts to defeat us. And if by some chance we emerged victorious, Claudiah could just make her escape back to Dryfe. Seeing how fast she flew upwards, it seemed like it would be difficult to catch up to her.

That meant that if we didn't chase her down, we would be unable to stop the terrorism at the capital regardless if we won against KoB or not.

"How cunning," said Nemesis telepathically. "Also, while fighting at that height, a single mistake could mean plummeting to your death. That almost happened to us when we fought Monochrome, after all."

I wondered if that was part of Claudiah's plan too, but I couldn't come to a conclusion about that. I'd managed to see through her manipulation once, but I couldn't keep up with her thought process all the time.

To me, Claudiah seemed more like some inhuman creature that merely *looked* like a human being.

This whole thing might've been a trap, but...

"...It seems I am left with no other choice."

...Azurite had already gathered her resolve.

Even if this was a trap, she had to follow. This was the only path left. To protect the kingdom and save her sisters back at the capital from deadly danger, she would face her dear friend at a precarious altitude few could survive.

"Azurite..."

There were only two things I could do for her now. First was to stay here and fight KoB. The second was...

"Silver!" My steed responded to my call and leaped out of my inventory.

"Ray?" said Azurite, turning towards me.

"If you're gonna go there, ride Silver. You can't really fight an original with an SMPS, right?"

Like Jade Storm, Zephyrus Silver was a proper Prism Steed. Although he wasn't one of the five famous originals, according to Mario, Flagman himself had worked on this one as well. He was either an unofficial prototype or an experimental model, but if Azurite was going to have a mounted battle against someone riding Jade Storm, Silver was no doubt a better pick than the obviously inferior SMPS.

"...Are you sure?"

"Yeah... I can't fight KoB while riding Silver, anyway."

The moment she took to the sky, our battle against KoB would truly begin.

And it would be best if Silver wasn't involved in it.

Therefore, handing him to Azurite would increase *both* our chances of victory.

"Oh yeah!" Fuso exclaimed as I handed Silver's reins to Azurite. "Why not have the princess ride an SMPS while you come with her on Silver? You'll win if it's two against one, right? Oh! I can join too. That'll make it three against one! Easy, right? Wait—maybe everyone with an SMPS can go! That'll make it a real piece of cake!"

Silence ensued. I was fairly confident that Azurite and everyone in Death Period, myself included, thought that Fuso's craftiness surpassed even Dryfe's.

"...solo," said KoB. It was just a single word, but it felt like she was saying, "Your princess is the only one who'll be going. Say something that stupid again and I'll totally lose it. Quit making me wait. Roar."

So there you had it.

Also, KoB didn't seem inclined to do anything to Azurite as she was leaving, but I couldn't tell whether she was just following her employer's orders or if she also wanted Claudiah to leave the scene of battle.

Was she trying to set up an environment where she could fight us without restraint...? A situation where she wouldn't have to worry about protecting anyone or be mindful of the one person she couldn't kill?

"Very well. I'll go alone," said Azurite before mounting Silver and looking at me. "I'll be borrowing him for a bit... Ray."

"Yeah. Let's meet again after the battle, all right?"

After that exchange, Azurite pulled on Silver's reins, turning him towards the sky, where Claudiah was waiting for her.

The moment she left the hall...

"set."

...King of Beasts moved like a monster finally freed from its chains.

In an instant, her silhouette transformed.

Vital areas, like the heart, were now covered by tile-like armor plating.

The hands and legs were covered by bands that looked like little pet socks.

Semi-transparent, crescent-shaped blades floated next to her forelegs.

There were rings around all four of her limbs.

And finally, there was a small cloth bag hanging around her neck.

A single look was enough for me to tell that they were all MVP special rewards or something on the same tier.

Also, the sudden change in gear made me realize that she'd used Clothing Switch. It was a skill used for costume changes in theater or switching from normal clothing to battle equipment in an instant. That meant that...

"All this time, she was wearing her 'normal clothing'..." She hadn't been taking us seriously so far, but now that she recognized us as actual *enemies,* she would face us with all her strongest equipment.

"...start." Following that single word, KoB vanished... and the wind began to swirl with blood.

What had once been human beings had become nothing more than shreds of flesh and bloody mist before turning into bits of light and disappearing.

The unfortunate victims were the members of Lunar Society, who were standing at the very back of our group.

The only thing showing us where King of Beasts was and what she was doing were the ones turning into blood mist as she killed them.

"She's fast! Gbwugh!"

"How?! Lady Tsukuyo should be lowering her AGI...! GHUH?!" I couldn't see KoB — all I could see were the results.

The screams and panic continued as KoB reaped through them one after the other.

They were all no doubt wearing Brooches, but it didn't seem to matter at all. Was she using a skill that nullified it somehow? Or was she attacking multiple times and I was just too slow to see it?

Regardless, KoB dashed through the bloodied air, the very embodiment of an unstoppable force.

"The Shades and Death, They Beckon — Erlkönig." The shadows under their legs wriggled and moved to attack KoB, but even I could clearly see that they weren't fast enough to catch up.

The Lunar Society members also had ultimate skills of their own, but they were hesitant to use them for fear of collateral damage.

"That doesn't matter. Use them," said Fuso.

And just like that, their hesitation was gone. Targeting their surroundings, they all used their ults or job ults.

Countless flashes and explosions followed, engulfing just about every Lunar Society member.

When it was over, none of them remained... and KoB alone stood there as if nothing happened.

"...clear," she said as she licked a wound on her front paw. She likely meant something like "Clean-up's done."

Her words, combined with the fact that she'd targeted only the lesser Lunar Society members while ignoring Death Period, Fuso, and Tsukikage helped me understand exactly what she'd done here.

She'd purposely paused her rampage only after we were the only ones left. My guess was that she'd eliminated the other Lunar Society members for the same reason why Fuso cleaned up all the Dryfean Masters — to get rid of unknown variables.

Fuso and Tsukikage were prominent figures, and both Marie and B3 were well-known PKs. Rook and I had also had our abilities exposed during Franklin's game and the Quartierlatin incident.

That was why she'd prioritized getting rid of the Lunar Society members, whom she knew nothing about.

"...Or it could be that she merely wants to save the cherry on top for last," said Nemesis telepathically. Seeing how KoB hadn't targeted Fuso, who was actively dividing her speed by six, that seemed even more likely. If all she wanted was a quick victory, Fuso would be her highest priority, and she wouldn't just be standing in place like she was doing now.

"Is she trying to show off how trivial all this is for her?" Nemesis wondered.

Perhaps, but she could have some other reason, I thought.

...Regardless, it was clear that to KoB, the battle against the Lunar Society members was but a way of adjusting the situation. She'd exterminated eighty veterans like it was child's play, and their retaliation had left only a single scratch on her.

Though they were all Masters, the gap between them and her was immense.

And I could see just *how* immense by using my Reveal skill.

Behemot.

Job: King of Beasts.

Level: 1156 (Total Level: 1656)

HP: 82015 (+23650050)

MP: 3350 (+0)

SP: 48980 (+0)
STR: 10050 (+216900)
AGI: 15315 (+210059) → 37563
END: 9980 (+232020)
DEX: 1502 (+1058)
LUK: 125 (+100)

The stats shown to me by Reveal were boosted by absurd numbers. Even her AGI, which had been cut to a sixth of its maximum by Faint Light, was still high enough to make her several times faster than the speed of sound.

The difference was so vast that it gave me chills.

This explosive increase in stats was also far above what any job could grant.

B3 had once told me the name of this phenomenon, and Shu had told me how it worked.

“So this is the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory in action...!”

◇◆◇

Altar-Dryfe border, mountainous area

There was a low, yet immense rumbling. The air itself seemed to vibrate over the expansive horizon.

The noise was like high-ordinance bombs blowing up over and over again.

It was definitely not caused by any explosives, however — they were actually the sounds of gigantic objects crashing into each other.

At a distance of over 10 kilometels from the assembly hall, two enormous silhouettes were clashing, causing booming impacts loud enough to drown out the nearby landslides.

One was a gigantic machine god.

With its entire frame focused on firepower, he was the pinnacle of weaponry. However, instead of using any of its many weapons, its wielder was using its fists like a master of the martial arts.

The figure’s name was Baldr, and it was the Superior Embryo of the King of Destruction, shifted into his full-offense mode.

The second silhouette was the Queen of Beasts.

She was akin to a gigantic dinosaur from the depths of prehistory. With porcupine-like spines growing out of her back and limbs that seemed to be all muscle, she was violence given form.

Her name was Leviathan, and she was the Superior Embryo of the King of Beasts, shifted to her solo-full power mode.

The two giants surpassing 100 metels in height were exchanging blows, destroying the mountains around them.

Baldr launched a fist at Leviathan. She caught it with her right hand, only to have it shatter; she then used her superior speed to retaliate with her left.

It was an all-out battle — a violent clash straight out of mythology, and it was immense enough to shake the entire visible horizon.

...I guessed as much, but it turns out she really is a match for me even by herself, huh? Shu thought, realizing that he'd made the right choice by separating her from King of Beasts.

The fact that Leviathan was a match for Shu and his Baldr truly said all that needed to be said about how absurdly powerful she was. After all, Baldr was now significantly stronger than it had been back when Gloria attacked.

When Shu used The Unmatched God of War — Baldr, the power of the resulting transformation was based on his STR.

Currently, Shu's base STR was about 180,000.

Because of this, even AGI — the stat that was buffed the least— was over 90,000, while his END reached 180,000 and his STR was doubled to become 360,000.

His HP also broke the 10,000,000 mark, and not even Mythicals could hold their own in a fistfight against him.

In fact, even the Hell General's fully buffed Mythical devil wouldn't be much of a threat to him.

Yet despite all that, Leviathan was fighting against Baldr as an equal... *and she was separated from her Master, while Baldr's had used his ult.*

"GGHRAAAAAAAAAAAGH!" Leviathan's violent assault made Baldr's armor creak, but Baldr fired back with a high kick — a kodachi — aimed straight at Leviathan's neck.

It was an attack that could knock someone's head from their shoulders, but Leviathan got away with only a bit of torn flesh.

The scale of this fight was the stuff of legends, but since they were equally matched, it seemed to them like a simple fistfight between two people.

...I used my ult and we're still just equal, Shu thought. *I guess this is 'cause of the direction she took as an Embryo.*

As Shu pondered, he came to understand the reason why this battle had no clear superior force.

Queen of Beasts, Leviathan was the Guardian who possessed the highest stats of all, and the reason for this was simple: she'd sacrificed everything else for it.

She had no skills besides her ult — which all Embryos possessed — and every ounce of her remaining Resources went to body size and physical stats: HP, STR, AGI, and END.

After all, that was the core of her Master's desire. She sought someone who could protect her and had enough sheer power to crush anything in her way.

That was what made Leviathan the apex.

Baldr might have surpassed her in STR, but she was above him in every single other stat. Her HP was over 20,000,000, while her STR, END, and AGI all broke 200,000.

She was an entity that could reduce entire countries to rubble merely by walking through them.

And she had become what she was through the hyper-focusing of Resources.

Endless buffing, forced debuffing, spatial manipulation... she had none of the unique abilities usually possessed by Superior Embryos. Instead she was specced solely into stats.

No other Guardian surpassed her in that regard.

That might seem contrary to the Maiden type's focus on "giant-slaying," but closer inspection would reveal that wasn't the case. This too, was a way to defeat those stronger than yourself — the ultimate manifestation of this one seemingly-unfair notion: *every giant will fall if you are simply bigger and stronger than they are.*

In fact, Baldr might have been the more impressive one in this scenario, simply because he was able to fight with her toe-to-toe.

KoD's Baldr's power wasn't as pure as Leviathan's. Wide-area firepower, ammo-production, dominance on both land and sea, an array of transformations... Dedicating all these Resources to this wide variety of functions left it with little left over for pure physical enhancement. Even after using its ultimate skill, its stats still couldn't match Leviathan's.

It was unheard of for an Embryo as versatile as Baldr to be a match for the manifestation of pure power that was Leviathan.

The abnormal thing here isn't actually the Embryo... but the Master, Leviathan thought as she fought.

She was genuinely impressed. She only knew two other entities that could match her like this.

My speed is higher, but he reads my movements and attacks me when he can minimize damage to himself. But these aren't mere tricks... he's just using his power in the most optimal way... I see... So this is what it's like to be awed...

Leviathan was surprised, but she also derived some enjoyment from this — in spite of the fact that she was taking more damage as a result.

As things are, I could probably win even as I am now. Shu had predicted the overall damage and thus the ultimate result of this fight.

When it came to stats, Baldr was below Leviathan. However, it made up for its lackluster AGI with its flair for battle and ability to read the enemy, letting it deliver attacks using its superior STR. Baldr wasn't exactly coming out of this unscathed, but Leviathan was the one who was suffering more.

Also, at certain points of this battle, Shu could use Baldr's various armaments to give himself an advantage, while Leviathan had absolutely no means of expanding her range of strategies. After all, she didn't have a single skill she could use on her own.

Leviathan may have had the highest stats among Embryos. However, it had to be said — that didn't mean that she was the *strongest*.

The true power of Embryos and UBMs lay in their unique skills. When faced with special abilities that warped the universe itself, pure stats would always fall short.

And without skills, all she could do was use physical attacks. She was like an RPG boss that had max stats but could only use the "Attack" command, and it wasn't hard to counter those.

Again, her immense stats didn't mean that she was — or ever would be — the true strongest.

“Gh...!” Despite that, and the fact that Leviathan was currently being overwhelmed, Shu was starting to panic.

From his perspective, he had to defeat Leviathan as soon as possible. He knew that if he didn’t, the consequences would be dire.

“Those left behind are worthless weaklings,” said the Queen of Beasts with a muffled voice. “But Behemot, like myself, couldn’t leave Gideon while we were busy keeping you there. I’m sure she is savoring her first taste of real freedom.”

“...That so?!” Shu replied as he punched with Baldr’s fist.

“I also haven’t had a chance to enjoy something like this for a long time... Let’s have fun while Behemot’s still playing around.” Leviathan smiled—injured, but still full of vigor.

The two displayed opposite emotions, but the reason behind them was the same.

King of Beasts, Behemot was the source of both Shu’s panic and Leviathan’s confidence.

Leviathan was in some senses the “greatest,” but she was not the “apex.” “The Physical Apex” was the title given to Leviathan and her Master as a duo, and the reason for this — what really elevated simple excellence to the level of absolute apex — was the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

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The build known as “Guardian-Jaguarman Theory” swept the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* back when it was leaving the early stages of its post-release phase. At that time, absurd Superior Embryos were almost non-existent and nearly no Master had attained the uncapped Superior Jobs. The dominant Masters were level 500s with high-rank Embryos.

It was a time when everyone still considered and sought power that *made sense*.

Most of the player activity went into theorycrafting about what might be the strongest possible build, and many people conjured up numerous configurations worthy of that title: Nobushi Ambusher OHKO Theory, Sacrifice MP-Spec Theory, and Gem Production-Spam Theory, to name a few. Many discussions were had both within *Infinite Dendrogram* and the communities outside of it.

And out of the many that were considered, the one that came out on top as the “strongest possible build” was the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

The jaguarman job grouping didn’t get much attention during the period when there were only tians. It had poor stat growth and only one skill. In that respect it was similar to Death Soldier, but not quite as absurd. Still, it wasn’t a job you’d pick if you wanted to get stronger. The only tians who selected it were members of certain Legendarian tribes with traditions surrounding the job.

Jaguarman’s only skill was Beastheart Possession, which gave the user a bonus to their stats based on the base stats of the monsters within their Minion Capacity.

The power of the bonus was based on the user’s skill level, but even at level 10 — the maximum allowed by the high-rank job in the grouping, Beast Ogre — Beastheart Possession only granted the user 60% of their monsters’ stats.

And despite having this as their only skill, the grouping gave a disproportionately small Minion Capacity. In order to employ the most useful monsters, you’d have to fill all your other job slots with options from the tamer grouping. However, doing that greatly limited the battle-focused skills you could take — so even if you used all your Minion Capacity on a Pure-Dragon, you end up with high stats and nothing else.

And “high” in this case was only 60% of a Pure-Dragon’s stats. Since Beastheart Possession only used the monster’s base stats, you couldn’t even benefit from tamer skills that buffed your monsters. There was also the fundamental problem that capturing powerful monsters like Pure-Dragons was difficult, and the amount of people from the jaguarman grouping that were using them in any case was smaller than one percent.

As a result, tian Jaguarmen could only ever aspire to be a hybrid between a mediocre vanguard and a mediocre tamer.

The one exception was the jaguarman grouping’s Superior Job, King of Beasts, which had a version of Beastheart Possession that gave a 100% bonus. Still, that didn’t mean much when Pure-Dragons were the strongest monsters they could use. Because most well-developed Superior Jobs surpassed the Pure-Dragons’ stats, King of Beasts was considered to be low-tier.

Even though it was a battle-focused Superior Job, no one believed it could ever be the strongest choice.

That all changed after Masters began growing in number.

One of the Masters researching builds once came a realization and made the following proposal: “Wouldn’t Jaguarman’s skill have crazy good synergy with Guardian type Embryos?”

The importance of this realization was not to be underestimated. After all, being Embryos, Guardians took *no Minion Capacity no matter how strong they were*, and it wasn’t uncommon for high-rank Guardians to surpass Pure-Dragons in power.

Unlike a tian, a Master with a Guardian Embryo wouldn’t have to worry about wasting job slots just to make Jaguarman work, and they wouldn’t need to go through any trouble to get powerful monsters. This meant that they could fill their slots with battle-focused jobs and use the jaguarman grouping for a pure stat boost. Even if they used their Jaguarman job as their main, they would still have access to utility battle skills and item-based active skills.

Once people realized that this would almost certainly create the strongest frontline fighter, the argument about strongest build was, for the time being, considered settled.

The Guardian-Jaguarman Theory spread as soon as it was presented on discussion boards.

Many Masters with battle-focused Guardians chose to go with this build. They left their mark on every country’s arena, displaying the build’s power and making it even more popular.

The reason for its quick adoption was that it was extremely powerful and you only needed two things for it — jaguarman grouping jobs and a Guardian Embryo.

During this time, if anyone appeared on forums or discussion boards saying something like, “I’m about to start. What’s a good way to be really powerful?” they would be met with, “Hope and pray that your Embryo’s a Guardian.”

Of course, there was an Embryo for each Master, and all of them were unique. Each individual Embryo synergized best with different jobs.

However, this was one of the easiest ways to become strong.

But even among those who adhered to the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory, some were working to improve their build even further. They wanted to follow this theory to its logical conclusion — to take the concept to the next level by finding the conditions to unlock King of Beasts and taking the job.

Unfortunately, the conditions were lost even to the tribes that traditionally used the jaguarman grouping jobs, so the Masters searching for them were faced with quite a challenge. Still, they pressed on, hoping to find the ultimate expression of this theory and claim the throne of "Physical Apex" as their own.

However, after nearly three *Infinite Dendrogram* years after Guardian-Jaguarman Theory had been uncovered, the Masters still using it were few and far between.

Of course, it was powerful enough to still see some use, but those who passionately searched for the best possible builds had cast it aside.

There were several reasons for this.

First was the increase in Superiors, who had powers so absurd that they made their Embryos look tame.

Second was the increase in the amount of Superior Jobs. The lack of level caps let those who had them grow stronger essentially without limit, so those who truly desired overwhelming power decided to search for SJs to take, even if they were unrelated to the jaguarman grouping.

Both were valid reasons, but they were not enough to truly kill Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

The third reason was almost a combination of the other two, which made it the most compelling reason to quit this build.

A Guardian Superior Embryo fully specced into stats, and King of Beasts — the jaguarman grouping Superior Job necessary to complete the theory. The ultimate goal of the idea — the throne of the "Apex."

That throne was already occupied.

Queen of Beasts, Leviathan and King of Beasts, Behemot — a Superior Embryo that was utterly devoted to stats, and a Superior Job that transferred all those stats to the user.

The throne of the King of Beasts had already been taken by the most suitable individual.

Thus, anyone seeking it had given up. They knew they couldn't surpass her as long as they walked the same path.

The "Apex" they were all heading towards had already been claimed, and the king would never relinquish it.

Some rerolled their build and began searching for other paths to power, while others lost all passion for the game and just quit altogether. Those who were serious about becoming stronger had long since left the theory behind, leaving only those who were satisfied with being *relatively* strong.

This was the ultimate end of the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

"Hmm hmm hmm..." Thanks to a skill that linked Behemot to Leviathan, Behemot could sense that her Embryo was having a great time.

Through this connection, she knew that Leviathan was truly enjoying her battle with Shu.

I also wanted to fight the bear... I mean, Shu, she thought. Thanks to information given to Dryfe by Zeta — information collected by Sechs himself — Behemot knew Shu's skills, including his ultimate. Therefore, she knew that Shu was the only Master Behemot and Leviathan could fight with all their strength.

Leviathan was fighting him by herself now, and the joy reaching her made it clear that the information was reliable.

...Levia and I became a little too strong. That thought was correct — even Mythical UBMs couldn't last long against them; humans didn't even stand a chance.

She could hold back, sure, but she found that extremely boring.

Her high AGI made the time she experienced far too drawn out, and her STR gave her limbs more power than she ever needed. People shattered if she as much as slowly caressed them, but she found it boring to move like that.

Regardless if they went all-out or not, there just weren't any enemies around that they could really have *fun* with.

Since Behemot became a Superior, she could count the beings that put up a fight on one hand.

When I think about that, Shu is a real rarity. She was convinced that he might've been the first Master she'd met who could withstand her full power.

It's not just battles, either... just talking and hanging out with him is kind *of fun.* Games and fights weren't worthwhile if they weren't between people who were on the same level.

Thus, to Behemot, Shu was in the truly precious category of "worthy opponent."

...He reminds me of dad a bit, though. That makes me feel sad at times. Behemot caught herself feeling a little down for a moment, but she quickly walked back that thought.

Also, I wouldn't expect any less of him... He went straight for our weakness.

Thanks to Beastheart Possession level EX, Behemot received the immense bonus of 100% of Leviathan's stats.

However, that also meant that Leviathan wasn't as strong as Behemot herself.

If Leviathan fell before her Master did, Behemot's stats would drop to normal levels.

Did he separate us because he didn't want us to have each other's backs, or because he has an idea what our ult might be? Regardless, Behemot couldn't join Leviathan's and Shu's battle yet. If the Altarian Masters were left to their own devices, they would go after Claudiah, like Tsukuyo had said they would.

Still, if Leviathan fell, beating Shu would be far more difficult.

To protect Claudiah, Behemot had to defeat all the Masters currently present before Shu defeated Leviathan, then go meet up with her Embryo.

...That's troubling, but...

"...fun." Her ultimate target here was Shu, but she thought that the battle she currently faced might be kind of enjoyable, too.

She particularly liked what Tsukuyo Fuso was doing. The High Priestess had lowered Behemot's AGI to a sixth of its total value.

This is really good. She'd initially intended to target Fuso last, and this debuff was just another reason to do it.

After all, thanks to being slowed down, there were now Masters that could actually keep up with her even if she moved at full speed: Eishiro, Marie, and one other.

Buffed by the Lunar Society members before they got the death penalty, the three could keep up with Behemot as long as Tsukuyo's debuff was active.

Though, it looks like the shadows from Tsukikage's ult aren't as fast as he is. I guess their speed doesn't scale with his AGI. That's some new info.

Still, if he used them to surround her — like he was doing now — the shadows could at least support the others' attacks.

Behemot looked around. Nine were left. She subtracted the three tian officials.

Among those left were Tsukuyo, Eishiro, Marie, and Barbaroy — four famed rankers and PKs.

Besides them, there's Rook Holmes, who beat Franklin's favorite... and Shu's little brother, Ray Starling... I know most of what they can do.

Behemot now had a full grasp of who she was facing and quickly began to analyze the situation.

There are three ways they can beat me. First, they could go for an instakill by targeting and destroying my vitals and leaving the injury-based debuff to finish me off. They probably already know my buffed total HP. I'm not wearing any status-hiding gear now, since showing it off makes for good intimidation. Anyway, if they know how high it is, I don't think they'll try to slowly chip away at it.

That was a DPS check the Altarians would easily fail.

Thus, they would probably target her neck, brain, or heart to destroy it and kill her via injury-based debuffs.

If their second duelist, Kashimiya, was here, they would've gone for my neck. I'd probably have to use different gear. The people who're actually here will probably aim to destroy some part of me using Ray's counterattack or the piercing and powerful laser... Shining Despair. Besides that, Adler could use Arc-en-Ciel to shoot me in the vitals. She's capable of using the Art of Vanishing to disappear and surprise me with a point-blank shot. I'll have to keep an eye out for her. If she vanishes, I'll prioritize moving around over attacking.

Behemot recalled everything she knew about the Altarian Masters and thoroughly considered how she would handle this battle.

Those are the only attacks I really have to watch out for. In terms of pure damage, there's also Burn's spam attack after using Emancipated Giant — Atlas, but knowing my defense, it wouldn't do much. Same as always. The only crits I need to avoid are the kind that use fixed damage, energy or magic damage, and anything that ignores defense. I considered that The

Lunar Society might use the fixed damage item spam tactic they used on Gloria, but that's impossible now that I've thinned out their numbers.

Behemot was deep in thought, considering her opponents' pasts and achievements.

The second thing to be wary of is the High Priestess using Faint Light to divide my HP and then casting her ultimate final skill to take me out in one hit. Looking at her current level and the HP I'd have after the division, she'd blow away about half of my entire body. If that took out a vital point, I'd die right then and there. Though I doubt she'd be quick to use a skill that costs all her levels. After all, unlike with Gloria, she wouldn't gain much from beating me.

She knew them and was wary of what they could do, but that was exactly why she thought this particular scenario was unlikely.

Also, if she tried that, I'd just kill her first. That skill has a cast time, so there'll surely be a chance for me to strike. Even if Tsukikage protected her in his shadows so she could chant there, her speed debuff would disappear. I would just kill Tsukikage, then kill Fuso when the shadows spat her out after. That would be the end of that. It would cost me my backup plan, but it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

She also thought of countermeasures for every scenario.

Behemot already knew the powerful aces up their sleeves, as well as their weaknesses.

The third thing to watch out for are debuffs. There's Holmes' Charm, Adler's Arc-en-Ciel specced in debuffs, and Tsukikage's fatal King of Assassins skill. Though, I've got MVP rewards that counter debuffs.

The rings on her limbs were Sufferward Bands, Bourdrim.

Its passive skill, Sufferward Prison, gave her resistance to poison-type, mental-type, curse-type, and limit-type debuffs, and the effect scaled with her END.

With Beastheart Possession active, her END was so high that it was hard to imagine her resistance ever being overcome.

...Though, there's the goblin that Ray can summon. The compressed debuff she used to beat the second Gigaknight in Quartierlatin might be able to break through my resistance. Same with Fuso. I never heard of her using compressed debuffs while Faint Light is active, but she might *be able to do it. I'll have to be really careful if she compresses the night.*

Despite being deep in thought, Behemot was alert. She wasn't about to be overconfident.

That's all I need to watch out for. Those are the only things that truly defeat me here, so I better do my best to avoid them.

"What is it?" Tsukuyo suddenly spoke up. "You're just standing in place and giving us a mocking glare. Are you really that confident you're going to win?"

Mocking glare? Confident? I'm pretty sure the time we experience is pretty different, but I guess I was lost in thought long enough for them to notice. They totally misread me, though.

Indeed. Behemot had merely analyzed the battle and identified any factors that could cause her defeat.

Shu, who was fighting Leviathan; the Altarians here, ready to face Behemot; the rankers that could potentially come to their aid... She had memorized everything she could about all of them.

During her stay in Gideon, she had properly investigated the Altarian rankers and what they were famous for.

You gotta know the meta... You gotta know how to counter your enemy. She gathered all the info she could find and thought of ways to deal with any situation. She was thorough when it came to this, and there was a solid reason for it.

I'm the King of Beasts, after all. I don't mean to brag, but I'm the strongest player in the three western countries... and that makes me the Master whose abilities are better known than anybody else's.

Behemot knew that the information about her MVP rewards and skills was more or less common knowledge.

The only exception was the accessory hanging over her neck.

Compatibility was an important part of battle. Some would say compatibility didn't matter if you were overpowered enough, but if the same could be said about your opponent, then that argument fell apart.

If my opponent knows me, I also have to gather info about them. Behemot knew that if she didn't do this, she would eventually be defeated.

Thus, this was the obvious course of action to her.

Despite being the strongest, she would fight weaklings with due care — and then some.

The phrase "Lions give their all when hunting rabbits" might come to mind for some, but that misrepresented the scale. This was more akin to a dragon analyzing an ant before challenging it to an all-out battle.

I don't wanna get the death penalty and be separated from Infinite Dendrogram for a whole day. Claudiah's clever, but reckless... and she's my friend. I have to do everything I can to protect her and what's important in my world.

Behemot looked up at the sky to see jade and silver lights drawing arcs between the clouds.

It seemed to her that Claudiah was having fun as well.

...Yeah. If Claudiah's enjoying herself, then I'll go and have a good time, too.

The unknown variables had been removed. She'd thoroughly considered all the ways she could lose.

This was how she began a battle that she intended to win.

Still, there were a few unknown factors.

Behemot only had the information that she had gathered. If anyone here had grown since she'd learned about them, there could be some unknown element at play that could potentially cause her defeat.

She knew and understood that well.

That was why she would enjoy herself... but never let her guard down.

She would enjoy this battle as a battle, this game as a game, and this world as a world while using *their* power to win against those standing in her way.

I will use my power to open up, create, and protect my world — the world I *like.*

She was King of Beasts, Behemot.

She was one of the "Apices" — The Physical Apex.

She was the imperium's strongest and its ultimate guardian.

And she was the first fang of the imperator.

"Ganking time. Rawr."

With that declaration to her enemies, she launched into battle.

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King of Beasts, Behemot was the embodiment of the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory, as well as its ultimate conclusion.

Her stats surpassed Leviathan’s, she employed her battle skills with supreme refinement, and she wielded countless MVP rewards from the UBMs that she’d crushed beneath her.

One thing was certain in this situation: Ray and his friends were about to face an enemy of unprecedented strength.

Chapter Eleven: The Black Mirror

Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

The instant Behemot made her move, three Altarian Masters — Eishiro, Marie, and Rook — also flew into action.

Just in terms of pure status, the strongest Altarian here was actually Rook.

This was because Babi's merging skill, Union Jack, allowed Rook to combine with her and a select monster under his command — in this case, Liz. Babi was a high-rank Embryo who'd used her Drain Learning to gather lots of stat-boosting skills from the monsters they'd defeated, while Liz was a slime that excelled in both speed and toughness. Obviously, merging these two together would have fearsome results.

Despite being only a high-rank, Rook in this form had the stats and the skill repertoire of a Superior Job.

The way it worked was almost like an off-shoot of the Guardian-Jaguarman Theory.

Thanks to the buffs put up by The Lunar Society, his AGI was now a match for Behemot's.

Despite this, the moment he saw Behemot move, Rook realized something that made him break out in a cold sweat.

Ohh... This is not good, Rook thought.

He knew that he would be her first target.

The extraordinary perception Rook boasted both in-game and in reality didn't work as well when faced with a non-humanoid like Behemot — but since that tiny body hosted a human mind, he could follow some of her thought processes by observing her actions. One thing he knew for certain was that she would try to defeat him first.

Most would have expected Behemot to go after the debuffer who was the only Superior here — Tsukuyo. Both Eishiro and Marie seemed deeply surprised to see Behemot charge straight at Rook, but he himself knew exactly why he was targeted.

It wasn't because of his stats. Though his were higher than those of the other Altarians here, Behemot wasn't the type to pick her targets based on such meager stat differences.

She was aiming for Rook first because she knew exactly what he was.

I suppose this was to be expected. If she really did eliminate The Lunar Society just to get rid of all uncertain variables, it only makes sense that she would target me for the exact same reason.

The skills Babylon had acquired through Drain Learning were numerous — easily surpassing the number of skills possessed by standard job builds. When fusing with her, Rook had access to all these skills, which would mesh well with his currently-insane stats. That made him an uncertain variable, and it was only natural that Behemot would see him as a threat.

However, the fact that he'd gotten Behemot's attention wasn't what really bothered Rook — it was something far worse.

The fact that she's targeting me means that King of Beasts knows what we've got up our sleeves... She even knows about mere high-ranks like me. How much does she really *know, then? Does she know all about our abilities and tactics?*

Moving as fast as Behemot, Rook retreated from her, occasionally winging his path.

He used this time to think.

Our strategy is based around King of Beasts attacking Ray and him surviving that attack. If she's only aware of our strategies that have already been exposed, she will likely stick to attacking... But if she knows about his skill... we might have to find some means to get Ray's damage counter up.

Rook observed their opponent and tried to deduce how much she knew about them based on her actions. He accelerated his thoughts and continued his examination, while the distance between him and Behemot was swiftly closing.

...Wait. From what I can tell, King of Beasts doesn't just want a simple victory here. She certainly wants to win, but unlike Franklin, she's not the type to go for victory at any cost. If that was the case, she would have attacked while we were still talking to Princess Claudiah, or included us in the rampage against The Lunar Society, or targeted Tsukuyo Fuso instead of me. She doesn't want to just win... she also wants to enjoy *this.*

As his thoughts kept speeding along, the distance between Rook and

Behemot kept closing.

They were more or less equal in speed — or rather, Rook was slightly faster. The reason King of Beasts was catching up was because her movements were just better.

Part of her objective here is to win only after *fighting with all her might. She wants to put herself into a situation where she can bring her full strength to bear while also letting her opponents go all-out. That must be the primary reason she's not targeting Tsukuyo Fuso. In that case, what I ought to do here is...*

Although Rook had trained for this, he hadn't had much field experience with the high-speed movement of Metal-Devil-Man. He still hadn't quite gotten the hang of actually controlling this human-devil-slime chimera body of his.

King of Beasts, on the other hand, had been in *Infinite Dendrogram* for nearly five years.

The reason the distance between them was growing smaller was that immense gap in their respective experience controlling bodies that were totally unlike their real life ones.

This was particularly obvious in the timing with which Rook changed his direction.

...From my perspective, I have only three seconds left until she catches up. The moment when the distance closed... when the beast's claws would dig into Rook's flesh... was swiftly approaching.

And then, Behemot was right next to him.

"Hm...?!" she exclaimed, noticing that something wasn't right. Rook had suddenly crossed his hands in front of his chest...

"Flash Eye."

...And the *artificial eyes created on his arms* released an intense burst of light.

"Hh...!" The dazzling flash stopped Behemot in her tracks for a moment.

This was a skill that Babylon had acquired with Drain Learning from a monster called "Floating Spark Eye."

The skill released a powerful flash of light from the user's eyes, dazzling the targets and inflicting the Blind debuff. Rook had used Liz's ability to create a number of artificial eyes on his arms before using the skill through them. Being a Mithril Arms Slime, Liz could change her shape — and he could now do the same thanks to Union Jack.

All this time, he'd been running away from Behemot in a winding pattern in order to get himself into a position where Flash Eye wouldn't affect any of his allies.

A brief dazzle. The first condition is cleared. This chance will not last, however.

Rook knew full well that, to someone like King of Beasts, this would just be a momentary distraction. She didn't even get the Blind status effect. The obvious conclusion was that at least one of the many MVP rewards she was wearing let her easily resist it.

Regardless, the intense light still briefly blocked out her line of sight. King of Beasts might've had something that helped her see in total darkness, but she wasn't equipped to handle an abundance of *light*, since that would be a hindrance in more circumstances than not.

Despite being unable to see, Behemot wasn't panicking one bit.

She couldn't properly gauge the distance between her and Rook, but sound and presence alone was enough for her to know that he was somewhere ahead of her.

Thus, she decided to use a skill that didn't care about a slight difference in distance.

Behemot swung her right hand. The arc of her swing created a claw-shaped shockwave that barreled straight forward.

The skill was called "Winged Ripper." It was a Claw Boxer active skill, and it created a shockwave with a range of a few dozen metels and had the same power as the user's regular attacks.

She'd used this skill in order to keep Rook in check.

However... it was exactly what he had been waiting for.

[Now!]

Rook shouted through his Telepathy Cuffs, while at the same time moving his slime tentacle with his Metal-Devil-Man body. He'd grown the tentacle at the same time he'd used Flash Eye, and now he yanked it back towards him, dragging along the thing it'd wrapped around in the process.

The thing in question... or rather, *the person*... was none other than Ray.

Rook had drawn his friend closer so he could use him as a shield. He'd been running away from Behemot while carefully positioning himself precisely so that he could bring Ray towards him like this.

Though this seemed like the heartless actions of a person who would sacrifice his friend to save his own skin, it was actually a necessary step towards victory.

"*Counter Absorption!*"

After all... the damage counter was the source of Ray and Nemesis' power. They had to be attacked by Behemot in order to use the damage taken as a Resource to power their own skills.

They had agreed ahead of time that Ray would use Counter Absorption the moment Rook signaled to him using Telepathy Cuffs.

And now, that barrier of light took the full brunt of the shockwave, adding the damage to Nemesis' counter.

The dazzling burst from earlier was nothing but a step towards luring Behemot into attacking Ray — it would've been much more difficult to direct her attacks to the proper target when she could see everything that was happening.

"Gh...!" After Ray had just barely survived the attack, Rook used his tentacle to fling him out of range.

That was all he could do here... for Behemot had already launched her follow-up attack.

Although she couldn't see, she'd realized that her attack had been blocked. That wasn't a problem for her, though. If one of her attacks failed, she only had charge and attack again.

The only problem for her now was deciding who to prioritize — Ray, who'd absorbed her immense damage, or Rook, her original target.

As she considered that question, Rook suddenly raised his voice. "Ray... *Prepare that skill! Use it to match her stats!*"

He actually exposed one of his friend's trump cards, revealing information about Ray's skills that Behemot likely didn't know.

This seemed like another betrayal, but again — it was not.

Rook merely did what he thought was optimal based on his assumptions regarding Behemot's personality.

His words drew her focus towards Ray... not out of caution, but more out of curiosity. Rook had noted this. He had deduced that since Behemot wanted not only to win, but to also go all-out and actually enjoy this battle, she would allow Ray to use a skill that made him stronger. That was why he'd emphasized that it wasn't a sure-kill attack, but a buff, leading her to make a decision that was ultimately beneficial to them.

If it was a skill like Tsukuyo's Ulfaria Eltram, which could instantly kill her, Behemot would have certainly attacked Ray to avoid defeat. Rook, however, had deduced that King of Beasts' desire to enjoy herself outweighed her desire to win at any cost, and that she would want to see what happened when Ray used his skill.

With Truth Discernment, it was even possible to tell that Rook wasn't bluffing about the skill's effects.

Rook saw clearly that Behemot was doing exactly what he expected her to do — her interest turned towards Ray and away from taking Rook down. He was also relieved to see that Ray would actually be able to use his skill... but then, Rook noticed that Behemot had gotten close enough to attack him.

"Hhaah..." he sighed, having expected this exact outcome.

Rook knew that he'd end up getting the death penalty the moment he realized that Behemot had investigated all of them and had decided he was an uncertain variable. Since he was currently a slime-man, he could withstand most physical attacks, but he wasn't optimistic enough to believe that he would survive here.

This is King of Beasts... the top of the Dryfean kill rankings. She must have at least as many MVP special rewards as Shu, and based on her equipment, she doesn't have any limitations as absurd as his costume-only restriction. I think it's fair to assume that she has one — or more likely a few items that let her break through resistances.

Rook's assumption was correct. The semi-transparent claws Behemot had equipped were a Mythical MVP reward called "Twin-Moon Carvers, Crescent Glissando."

It was an ethereal pair of weapons that *allowed the selection of damage type*.

One of its skills, Blood Moonrise, turned physical damage into *direct HP damage*. This damage was affected by the target's defense, but it ignored physical resistance skills, so even the fearsome Metal-Devil-Man couldn't stand up to it.

On top of this, Behemot was using the Claw Boxer's ultimate job skill, Tiger Scratch. This allowed her to follow up every single attack she made with two additional strikes that inherited the nature, element, and power of the first one.

Not even a slime with a Brooch could survive three powerful blows that ignored resistances and were powered by Behemot's immense stats.

Checkmate, I suppose... But I think I did everything I could. I helped Ray put some damage on his counter and gave him a chance to use that skill of his. All in all, I think I put up a good fight against her.

Calm and collected, he pondered the situation while staring straight at Behemot.

Then, he canceled his Union Jack so that he wouldn't lose Liz to the coming onslaught.

His stats dropped, and so did his speed. He could no longer even see Behemot's movements.

The next thing he knew, he'd been completely pulverized.

He didn't even have time to notice if his Brooch had activated or not.

Rook's resurrection period was shorter than the blink of an eye, but it was enough for one last thought: *This is the first time I've gotten the death penalty, isn't it...? I suppose that is a bit frustra—*

And with that, he dissolved into motes of light and vanished, leaving only five Altarian Masters.

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"one." After taking care of Rook, Behemot didn't stop even for a moment, because she'd noticed that Eishiro and Marie were nowhere in sight.

She realized that, during the Flash Eye, the former sunk into his shadow, while the latter must have used the Art of Vanishing. She also understood that they hadn't attacked her while Rook was still alive because they didn't want to interrupt Rook's plan to help Ray fill his damage counter and activate his skill. Now that Rook was gone, it was clear that the two would take the opportunity to strike, so Behemot kept moving to avoid any ambushes.

She was prioritizing evasion over offense, not targeting anyone she could currently see. After all, Behemot wanted to see this skill Ray supposedly had, and she'd long since decided that Tsukuyo would be her final target.

The last opponent in Behemot's field of view — Barbaroy — was an END build, and if she used Dragonscale Wards or sacrificed shields for Fatal Defender, it would be difficult to get rid of her quickly.

Even Tiger Scratch might not have been enough to take Barbaroy out, and if it wasn't, Behemot worried that might leave her open to counter attacks.

Barbaroy herself was assuming a defensive stance, which made it likely that was precisely her plan.

From Behemot's point of view, there were no viable targets in sight, but although Eishiro had no trouble hiding in the shadows, Marie's Art of Vanishing burned through her SP very quickly. Because of that, she'd likely reappear soon, so Behemot kept running, biding her time until that moment.

That was when Ray, who was behind her in experienced time, made his next move.

"...Rook!" he cried as he watched his friend's body dissolve into light. He understood that Rook had sacrificed himself solely to give Ray the chance to use his skill.

Ray's teeth clenched in rage. He knew exactly what he had to do now.

Rook had shown them the possibility of victory, and it was time for Ray and Nemesis to bring this new strategy to bear against the Physical Apex.

Thus, he turned to his companion.

"Let's do it, Nemesis... Fourth Form!"

"Certainly!" In response to his words, Nemesis canceled her greatsword form, melting into specks of darkness that floated to a point behind Ray and assumed a new shape.

"Form Shift... Black Mirror!"

And with that, Nemesis transformed into a round mirror with a frame shaped like a single wing.

Behemot, still wary of attacks from Eishiro or Marie, also witnessed this transformation.

Nemesis, now a mirror, was floating behind Ray. The surface of the mirror was like deep, black water, with no reflection at all...

"Designating target!" Nemesis declared. "Damage counter set! Designating stat... AGI!"

...But as Nemesis spoke those words, the mirror's surface began to undulate, and when the ripples subsided, it reflected none other than Behemot herself.

While Nemesis finished her preparations, Ray was taking action as well. He turned the Monochrome he was wearing into the cannon that would fire Shining Despair and equipped it on his left arm.

Once both were done, they shouted in unison, "Chaser from the Mirror!"

It was a declaration of the skill they'd developed upon evolving to high-rank... the skill meant to combat opponents far more powerful than they.

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A certain day in April, Death Soldier, Ray Starling

"I've evolved to my fourth form."

"...I see." Just like when she'd evolved to her third form, Nemesis simply told me about it shortly after I woke up at the inn.

This didn't come as a surprise, though — primarily because she'd had no appetite last night, just like right before she'd evolved to her third form.

Apparently, during her normal evolutions, Nemesis would lose her appetite, then evolve while sleeping. It wasn't a very flashy way to evolve, but as far as I knew all Embryos evolved differently, so... it was what it was. Her evolution from first to second form was the exception rather than the rule.

Though, I was told that her evolution to high-rank was a little more exciting... and I missed it because I was asleep.

"Anyway... Congratulations!" I said.

"Much appreciated! You can now count me among the high-ranks!" There was a time when Nemesis was really troubled by how slowly she'd evolved, so she looked pretty happy about it now.

"So, what changes did you get?" I asked. Well, one thing I could see for myself was that her clothing was different.

It seemed like something you could call "an upgrade" — her apparel was a bit more extravagant than before... Her body didn't seem to have changed, though.

"Well, first off, I feel like Counter Absorption is stronger now," Nemesis said. "I believe the damage limit now is 400,000."

Now *that* was a useful power-up. It was rare to face anyone who could break the previous limit of 300,000, but our battle against Monochrome was proof that it could happen, so I could definitely appreciate this change.

"The conditions for Payback seem to be easier to achieve, as well. Now any damage can be used to charge it — not just the damage accumulated in Black Shield form."

"Oh, now *that's* really good." That would make it possible to fight using the less tricky forms before switching over to use Payback. "Those are some good improvements already. Is there anything more?"

"Yes, I have not yet told you of the main change," she said before raising four of her fingers. "It gave me one more form... a fourth one."

So her evolutions continued to prioritize variety, huh?

That reminded me of Io. She also had an Arms-type with several forms, but unlike Nemesis, its high-rank evolution had only improved the forms it already possessed. Just like signs and times of evolution, those kinds of changes were different for each individual Embryo.

“So, what is it like?” I asked.

“Like this,” she answered, transforming into a weapon right before my eyes.

Scratch that... it wasn’t a weapon, but a dark mirror with a frame shaped like wings.

“...That’s not exactly what I was expecting,” I said.

“Well, my third form’s windmill was already pushing the definition of ‘weapon.’”

“And now it’s completely broken free of that definition, huh?”

“No. This is *also* a weapon. The wing-like frame can be removed.”

After saying that, the frame separated from the mirror and passed into my hands. Though slender and with a unique curved shape, the frame served as dual swords when detached.

“This form does not allow Counter Absorption, but it can use Vengeance, albeit a slightly different version.”

“Different how?”

“The accumulated damage is split between each blade. That means you can deliver Vengeance twice.”

“Ohh?” I really appreciated this one. There were situations where it would come in handy, such as battles against enemies with Brooches. It seemed to me that Black Blade was the way to go for giant monsters, while these dual blades were better against human opponents.

This had way better utility than the third form. Maybe that was just how high-rank forms worked?

“Hold it,” said Nemesis. “The blades are merely a bonus. If this form was only about striking twice, the mirror would serve no purpose.”

“Ah. Oh yeah.” She had a point.

“This mirror has a skill, as well... One that synergizes quite well with Vengeance from the twin blades.”

So, while the third form was split into two forms — α, which allowed Counter Absorption, and β, which allowed Payback — this one allowed the use of Vengeance and the new skill simultaneously, huh?

...This really was an “evolution,” wasn’t it? It built upon the principles of the previous form.

"And what's the mirror's effect?" I asked.

"Well, what it does is..."

Nemesis began describing what, exactly, she was now capable of...

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

The moment after Ray activated his skill, Behemot *lost sight of him*.

He hadn't exactly vanished, however — he'd simply left her line of sight.

...Did he speed up? she wondered before turning her head to catch sight of him again, moving so fast she actually had to focus just to keep track of him.

Ray was moving with unbelievable speed, especially considering that before using the skill, he wasn't even close to supersonic in spite of all his buffs.

In fact...

He's about as fast as... No... He's exactly *as fast as me,* Behemot thought, as she used Reveal on Ray and saw that his AGI matched hers. *The skill was called... "Chaser from the Mirror," right? I see...*

Based on Nemesis' unique traits as an Embryo, Behemot could guess what kind of skill this was — and what it cost.

It matches one of his stats to that of the last opponent who dealt damage to him. He probably has to expend the damage counter to do it.

She'd reached this conclusion based on Ray's current stats, Rook's statement, and the fact that Rook had made sure Ray got hit even if it meant using him as a shield.

That wasn't the entirety of her conjecture, though.

Does it take an amount of damage from the counter equal to the stat's value every second after activation...? No, that'd be way too expensive. It's probably every minute, then, and the amount depleted is likely equal to the amount that was added to his stat. I know for sure that it can't be a fixed number, MP, or SP, at least. It'd be too cheap.

Based on her experience, Behemot could surmise the nature of Nemesis' fourth form's skill.

Most frightening of all... *she was completely right*.

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Chaser from the Mirror.

This was a skill activated by selecting a stat of an opponent who had contributed to the damage counter, and it set Ray's corresponding stat to the same value as that of his opponent's. There were a few other things of note about it:

1. At the time of activation and every minute after that, it would subtract an amount equal to the opponent's selected stat from the damage counter.
2. If the damage accumulated on the counter dropped below the necessary amount, the skill would be automatically canceled.
3. If the target's stats changed while the skill was active, Ray's own stats would change, as well.
4. The stat affected by this skill couldn't be increased by any other effects or skills.

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Chaser from the Mirror was the power Nemesis had acquired by evolving to high-rank.

She and Ray had fought many battles against opponents who were simply *stronger* than them both, and as a result she developed a skill that enhanced Ray's stats... or more precisely, a skill that let him face foes who were far above him.

One of the reasons Ray had taken the Scout job was so he could use Reveal to see which stats were best for Chaser. *The job also gives Killing Intent Perception,* Behemot thought. *It helps prevent him from being taken out before he can use his skill.*

Naturally, this skill had far less utility and cost far more than it would have if Nemesis was an Embryo specializing in copying abilities or pure stat increases. As well, it could only target one stat at a time.

That didn't matter to Ray, however. After all... he already had the power to defeat his opponents. The only problem was catching up to them, and this skill addressed just that.

...I see. So he increased his speed so he could land a crit on me with Shining Despair.

Shining Despair was a concentrated laser cannon that would certainly kill almost anything in its path. It could burn through just about any creature's flesh. The only problem was that Ray couldn't possibly have actually hit with it at his base speed — but he'd solved that issue by using Chaser and acquiring AGI to match Behemot's.

Ohh, I see. So Holmes sacrificed himself to let Ray build up the damage counter and gave me all that info so I'd let him activate the skill... Not bad.

Behemot was actually aware of what Rook was doing and had willingly played along, but now that she'd seen Ray's ability, she was half-delighted and half-sweating. As he was now, The Unbreakable was certainly capable of taking her life, and that made her slightly restless.

You can counter this by waiting until his damage counter drops below the minimum needed to maintain the skill... or by taking out Fuso to cancel the AGI division. The cost to maintain the buff will become six times higher than it is now and force him to cancel it immediately... Those would both be pretty boring, though.

Countering the skill in that way wouldn't be any different from just not engaging her opponent's strategy at all. Behemot wanted to enjoy this battle, and doing that would be the opposite of fun.

Thus...

I'll fight him head-on. Behemot turned mid-sprint and faced Ray as he tried to fix his sights on her. Then, she dashed towards him, intending to pulverize his body with Tiger Scratch. She'd decided not to even give him a chance to fire.

However, Ray also flew into action.

"Hellish Miasma!" The moment those words left his lips, the right Miasmaflame Bracer — the one that hadn't been covered by Monochrome's cannon — spewed out an intense blast of deep purple miasma.

The triply-debilitating gas quickly permeated the entire hall.

...Debuffs that spread like this won't do anything to me in my current state, Behemot thought. *He probably knows that, so he's probably just trying to limit my vision, like that Flash Eye from before.*

Ray, his face covered by Storm Visage, had dropped down to the ground, hiding his body and the mirror behind him in the purple mist.

At the edge of Behemot's vision, she saw Tsukuyo drinking an elixir. The tian officials seemed to have been already evacuated, too, which made her realize that the use of the gas had been planned in advance.

He's wearing dark clothes, so it's easy for him to hide inside the similarly-colored miasma. But I should be able to figure out where he is if I just watch how it flows... Oh wait. They accounted for that too.

Behemot was about to watch for Ray's movements in the miasma and attack him that way, but then she realized the mist was hiding more than just Ray.

I now can't see Tsukikage's shadows, either. While I'm on that, Adler's Art of Vanishing lets her pass through objects, so I couldn't see her in the gas even if I tried.

Thanks to Ray's miasma shielding them from sight, Tsukikage and Marie now had a much better chance of landing a surprise attack on her.

They're so perfectly in sync. I think they actually assumed this formation the moment Holmes used Flash Eye... And they did all of this just to defeat me.

Behemot realized that everyone present had thoroughly prepared for this moment. They had developed several strategies specifically to take down an Apex, created new powers, and they had all moved as one to corner her.

They had been preparing for this battle since the moment they'd found out that the almighty King of Beasts would be attending the peace talks as a bodyguard on the Dryfean side.

That was why they were here *fighting* her. They weren't merely buying time until Shu defeated Leviathan — they were all struggling to overcome an Apex.

That was certainly true for the members of Death Period, at least.

"...fun." And that was her honest opinion on the situation.

She could barely remember the last time any Masters had faced her with the intention of actually beating her.

Logan often tooted his own horn, but he was constantly avoiding Behemot anyway.

Franklin seemed to be developing a countermeasure against her, but he was so careful that he'd be unlikely to attack her until it was complete.

No one ever challenged her. No one even dared to claim they could defeat her.

She'd actually fought a Superior during the Dryfean civil war, but he was only stalling, so it wasn't much of a fight.

Because of all that, this moment was incredibly exciting for her.

It had been more than a year since her gamer side had been this enthralled.

...Yeah, I really wanna win this before *Ray's boost runs out.* Her opponents were facing her with all their might, and it made Behemot so happy that she wanted to respond in kind.

But if I go for Ray, Tsukikage and Adler would take the chance to ambush me... Levia's the one who specializes in messy AoE attacks, so I can't do anything like that right now.

If Leviathan was here, she could end this by just leveling the whole hall, and all their speed and stealth wouldn't save them.

Behemot was stronger than Leviathan, but the differences in their frames made one better at some things than the other. Together they were nearly flawless, and that was exactly why they had been separated.

...No time to worry about that. I'll just finish Ray off, then deal with the other two if they ambush me. That should be doable.

Having decided that, Behemot charged towards Ray.

She had already located him by watching the movement of the miasma. After closing the distance in a blink of an eye, she prepared to strike him down just as he was putting his hands on the floor beneath him.

That was when she sensed two entities approaching from two different angles behind her.

Ray and those two presences now surrounded her on all sides.

I see. So Adler stopped using Art of Vanishing at some point and hid in the shadows with Tsukikage. I was wondering why she wasn't attacking me before her SP ran out. This explains that.

Behemot was well aware that Eishiro and Marie would launch a counter-attack the moment she attacked Ray. The two of them would use the opening to score a critical hit on her.

The chances that she'd survive the hits were high, but she didn't want to bet on that 20% or so chance that they'd deal serious damage.

Thus, Behemot called off her attack and instead tried to dive *behind* Ray, using her small frame to her advantage. With him in the way, landing a critical hit on her would become much more difficult.

I'll take Ray out with Tiger Scratch, then go for Tsukikage and Marie, in that order. That'll sort everything out.

With that in mind, Behemot prepared to finally go on the offensive... but then she saw *hands peeking out from beneath Ray.*

...Huh? For a moment, her mind went blank.

This was impossible, after all. She'd accounted for every single being present. She could clearly see all the still-surviving Altarian Masters. Ray was right in front of her, Eishiro and Marie had emerged from the shadows behind her, and Tsukuyo and Barbaroy were visibly standing some distance away.

She glanced around for just a moment... and that was all it took to understand what was *really* happening.

...Ah. Next to the wall, there stood a giant set of armor, assuming a defensive position.

This armor was *the* defining feature of Barbaroy Bad Burn — Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus.

However, when Behemot targeted that suit of armor with Reveal... she got absolutely nothing.

That could only mean one thing: *Magnum Colossus was completely empty*.

...They outplayed me! When Rook had used Flash Eye to blind Behemot, Barbaroy had discarded her armor and hidden herself somewhere.

And it was obvious where: *the shadows*.

"Heaven's Weight!" Barbaroy... or rather, B3 wasn't a match for her in AGI, but she'd managed to emerge from her hiding place and hit Behemot with her skill thanks to the element of surprise.

Alas, gravity multiplied a measly 500 times meant little to the King of Beasts affected by Beastheart Possession. She might as well have just dropped a blanket on Behemot's back.

However...

...What's with this weight? It turned out the added weight was actually enough to make her feel discomfort.

Wait, is this...? Behemot had an idea of what could be happening here... and what B3 was doing.

At the edge of her vision, she saw Tsukuyo, smiling broadly, and Behemot noticed another thing she hadn't anticipated.

Atlas' gravity field is stronger than I heard it was. With Beastheart Possession, Behemot's STR was over 220,000. An avatar's base STR — the STR of an average adult male from Earth — was about 10. That meant that she had the strength of over 20,000 men.

Therefore, 500 times greater gravity shouldn't have meant much to her.

And the Binding debuff that came with it would've stood no chance against her immense STR, not to mention the resistance from Bourdrim.

In spite of that, Behemot was actually having trouble moving.

At first, she'd thought that Tsukuyo must have switched the target of her Faint Light to STR, and based on how she felt right then, she suspected that was indeed the case. However, even having her STR divided by 6 shouldn't have been as limiting as this. That could only mean that this gravity field was different than the one Behemot was familiar with.

That was when she noticed that B3 was extending her hands towards Behemot and clenching her teeth.

To her knowledge, Heaven's Weight required neither a hand motion like that nor such immense focus.

This wasn't the regular Heaven's Weight skill B3 had always used before.

This was a new power she'd developed — by means other than evolution.

The person responsible for this — Tsukuyo Fuso — smiled as she remembered a certain exchange.

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April, 2025, Tokyo University

"Hey, B — you ever thought about how weird Territories are?" It was a perfectly ordinary day in the CID clubroom when Tsukuyo posed that question to Kozue.

"Where's that coming from?"

"Well, just hear me out. You know how most Embryos have a physical body, and their powers are tied to that body?" Tsukuyo continued her question.

Arms, Guardian, Chariot, Castle, and Territory — the five main categories of Embryos. Like Tsukuyo said, they generally had solid forms that were invested with various powers.

However...

"The Territory grouping is different from all the rest. It's just a formless *space*."

Territory type Embryos were composed solely of their skills and their resulting areas of effect.

The affected areas might physically change in appearance, but as long as the Embryo wasn't any other category, Territories had no such thing as a "body."

And even with hybrid Embryos, you had cases like Maidens and Apostles. Kaguya's body completely vanished when using her Territory powers, so she was scarcely different from a pure Territory.

"Doncha think you're missin' out?" Tsukuyo asked.

"No, I don't. Not having a body makes Territories hard to break. There are exceptions, like the Right of Destruction, but by default, Territories can't be damaged like other Embryos and become unusable as a result," Kozue said.

This reminded Kozue of her and Ray's recent encounter with Rosa on the way to Torne. Once Gashadokuro's body — her spear — was destroyed, Rosa was unable to use her Embryo skill despite still being perfectly capable of fighting herself.

Kozue's... B3's Atlas was basically nothing *but* the power it wielded, so she would basically never end up in a situation like that.

"True, true," Tsukuyo nodded before saying, "What if I told you that Territories have another advantage?"

"...I'm all ears."

“Nheheh. Log in to *Dendro,* then, and I’ll *show* you. I’ll be waiting at my base.”

Tsukuyo then casually hopped into bed, lay down, equipped the *Infinite Dendrogram* hardware, and logged in.

Kozue was slightly perplexed by how eager Tsukuyo was to get started, but she knew she had no choice but to join her.

She went to lock the clubroom’s door, then put on another piece of hardware before lying down on the sofa.

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The two met up in The Lunar Society’s headquarters.

Thanks to a recent attack by a certain mild-mannered meathead, the place was currently under repair and renovation.

They had even bought more of the surrounding land to expand the place, making changes that ranged from eye-catching to utterly staggering. As a result, Tsukuyo was dangerously low on funds, which had led to her causing the Hannya incident and ultimately becoming indebted to Azurite.

But that was irrelevant now. Tsukuyo was standing on the stage at the auditorium, while B3 was sitting in the audience. Aside from the two of them, there was only Kaguya, standing next to Tsukuyo with a faint smile on her face.

“You’re familiar with Kaguya’s Lunar Divider Field, right?”

“Yes.”

“Here, let me show you from the base form of the ‘night.’” When Tsukuyo said that, Kaguya transformed into her Territory form: the Lunar Divider Field.

It looked as though Kaguya had completely vanished, but actually, this shapeless space *was* her.

“Now comes the important part. First is the ‘swallow.’” Following those words, the ‘night’ vanished, and in its place there was a bluish-black mass that resembled both a swallow in flight and a crescent moon.

“And then there’s the Sunsleep Ink Shroud.” Then, Tsukuyo was wearing a blue-black coat that looked just like her ‘night,’ but compressed into a thin cloak.

Tsukuyo had used both the swallow and the shroud in her fight against

Figaro.

She was flying the swallow and wearing the shroud at the same time.

"And here's the 'night' again." Her surroundings were once again veiled in darkness, but Tsukuyo was still clad in her Sunsleep Ink Shroud. "And those are my skills. Did you notice anything?"

"...Don't you also have the ultimate skill and Faint Light?"

"Ohh. Yeah. I do have those, but the ult is kind of a bit special, while Faint Light requires all of Kaguya's processing power and can't be used along other skills, so that doesn't factor in here. Hmm... Maybe I should make it a little more clear."

Still wearing the shroud, Tsukuyo spread the 'night' again.

After that, she canceled the "night" to create the "swallow," then instead created something that looked much like Eishiro's shadow tentacles... although upon second inspection, it was closer to a "branch."

That was when B3 realized something.

"The combos... You can't use the 'night,' the 'swallow,' and the 'branch' together, is that it? But you *can* use any of them with the shroud."

"Exactly. Now, why do you think that is?"

"...Based on what you said, it's not *just* that they're incompatible, is it?"

"Yeah. Why don't I just tell you the answer?" she said as she canceled her skills. "The 'night,' the 'swallow,' and the 'branch' are all the same."

"The same?"

"They're all the same skill: Lunar Divider Field. They're not new skills, they're just different forms of the same thing. That's why I can't use the 'night' alongside the two compressed forms. I *can* use them with Sunsleep Ink Shroud because it's a different skill."

"Compressed forms..." B3 took in those words and thought about them deeply.

"It's simple," said Tsukuyo. "Pure Territories have no physical body—they're just a space where their power is active. That means that you can change their shape, just like how I compressed Kaguya's 'night' into a 'swallow' or 'branch.' And the best thing is — the more compressed it is, the stronger it becomes."

All of these seemingly different forms were just the same Lunar Divider Field effect. The 'swallow' and 'branch' were just the 'night' reshaped to focus their effect and make it more difficult to resist.

Territories had no physical body... but that meant that there was a degree of freedom to the form they could take.

"I only realized this myself after getting the Sunsleep Ink Shroud. I was like... 'Ah. If this skill gets stronger because the area it affects is condensed, wouldn't Lunar Divider Field also grow stronger if I compress it?'" she said as she spread out her hands and pushed them closer together. "It did take a lot of practice, though. Also, I talked to Kage and some others about it, and apparently there's Territory skills that aren't that well suited for form changing like this. Powers that stick to the surroundings, for example, like Type Rule. But I think your Weight ability would be just right for it."

Atlas' Heaven's Weight spread around B3 in a sphere, but if it was possible to concentrate it in a single direction, it seemed likely that its effect would indeed become stronger.

"Why are you telling me this now?" By joining CID, B3 had gained the right to access The Lunar Society's database, but there was nothing in there about what Tsukuyo had just told her.

This was in fact a hidden technique that Tsukuyo had constructed herself. Why, then, would she tell B3 about it now?

"Because you're fun to watch lately."

"Fun?"

"Yeah. You were always the kind of girl who cares about others, but you're *really* going the extra mile for Ray, aren't you? It moved me so much that I wanted to give you a helping hand."

B3 said nothing in response.

"Also, you and your clan are now crafting a strategy against KoB, aren't ya? Having an extra card to play won't hurt. If you start now, maybe you'll even learn how to do it in time."

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

After that, B3 used the limited time left until the peace talks to acquire this secret Territory technique that Tsukuyo had taught her.

She started by transforming her usual sphere into a semi-sphere, then halving it again, and again, and again... until finally the field was a tenth of its original size.

This feat required extreme concentration, and the fact that B3 had to clench her teeth so hard to maintain it spoke volumes. It also came with its own physical dangers. The force exerted by this kind of control made the bones of her hands creak and blood vessels burst.

Even so, she was successfully compressing her gravity field.

The skill that once covered 360 degrees all around her was now limited to just the 22.5 degrees directly in front of her. It covered only 1/16th of the original, and in spite of the output lost in the compression process... this field was more potent than any Behemot had encountered before.

The gravity produced in that small area was 5,000 times greater than the norm.

"Gh...!" To Behemot, a field of 500 times greater gravity was merely like having a blanket thrown over her, so even when that number became 5,000, it was only really like increasing that to ten blankets.

The gravity would instantly kill any normal person, but it didn't even cause Behemot any pain.

However, it is important to remember that *anyone* would be slowed down with ten blankets thrown over them.

On top of that, Tsukuyo was also dividing Behemot's STR by 6, meaning that she was now an entity with 3,600 times more STR than the average person fighting against 5,000 times greater gravity.

Here and now, for the first time, King of Beasts the Physical Apex collapsed to the ground.

This stillness was the chance at victory that B3... and Ray's entire group had been waiting for.

Ray turned to face Behemot, immobilized behind him.

"Shining..."

He leveled the cannon on his left arm towards her, and Monochrome began to shine a dazzling white.

Behemot's AGI had returned to its original value, but thanks to Chaser, Ray's AGI matched hers. Shining Despair would soon crack open her skull, killing her with all its various injury-based status effects.

Still, Behemot said nothing. Faced with the death penalty, she had nothing in her heart but honest praise.

They had acted as one to completely corner her. Just like Rook, they had never once given up on their collective victory even when faced with overwhelming violence.

Behemot found them profoundly dazzling, for it was a kind of strength she could never have.

After all, she was a person who'd chosen an animal avatar because it would let her get away with never properly talking to anyone.

I don't hate this side of myself, though. And yet, regardless of how she felt about it, this power that was so far beyond her had managed to reach her anyway.

That fact gave her nothing but joy.

She was beyond delighted to have faced opponents she could give her all against... enemies who could finally give her a good fight.

...I'm sorry.

That was exactly why she felt regret and silently apologized to them.

After all, it would soon be over.

...I'm sorry, Claudiah. Behemot also apologized to her friend fighting up in the sky. She'd have to break that promise she'd made to her.

Behemot was unable to escape the super-gravity, and the Shining Despair would soon be released. It wouldn't be long until the powerful and piercing concentrated laser would penetrate her head.

It was over.

Both Behemot's "fun time" and her "battle for victory" would now end. From now on, there would be only a "one-sided massacre" and "assured victory."

"DESPAIR!" Right before Ray's left hand unleashed the light that would bring down the Apex...

"Transformation... Soaring and Indomitable: Greatest Top!"

...The accessory hanging over Behemot's neck shimmered and released a golden shine.

Chapter Twelve: A Dear Friend

About the two girls

Six years ago, Altimia A. Altar the first princess of Altar was riding a dragon carriage to the imperium, en route to her stay as a transfer student there.

Back then, relations between Altar and Dryfe were so positive that cultural exchange between the royal families like this was a matter of course. Just a few years ago, Prince Hallon — the first son of the imperium's crown prince — had been a transfer student in the kingdom.

However, Altimia knew that there was more to this excursion than mere cultural exchange.

They are preparing to marry me off. Altar and Dryfe had been on good terms for a long time now, and the governing bodies of both nations had begun to consider forging an alliance or even merging the two countries through marriage.

Altimia was certain that this exchange was preparation for that. Her father, the king, hadn't actually said anything of the sort, but his trusted advisor, the Arch Sage, had implied as much.

The current imperator was growing old and his princes were nearly her father's age, so she assumed that she would be made to marry one of *their* sons, be it Prince Hallon or Prince Gaeczys — the second prince's firstborn.

Within the next six years or so, Altimia was certain she'd be the wife of one of them.

At this point, Altimia didn't think much of the situation. In this world, it was normal for princesses to have no say in who they married.

Though, if I marry outside of Altar, that will surely make Elizabeth cry, she thought. *Even my leaving for this exchange student period turned her into a blubbering mess.*

Altimia could not have guessed that her little sister would end up married off before she herself — and that she would be deeply involved.

...Ah, I just remembered that there was *another prince my age.* The third

prince also had a son of his own. He almost never showed himself in public, and the people who even realized he existed were few and far between.

The reason for this was that he'd been bedridden for a long time.

A few years ago, the third prince and his wife, son, and daughter had fallen victim to a terrorist bombing. The parents were both killed, while the son suffered severe injuries that left him with limited mobility, and he was now undergoing treatment in Marquis Barbaros' — his mother's family's — mansion. They kept him there because that act of terrorism was likely related to the ongoing struggle for the throne, so if they kept him in the capital, he would likely be targeted again.

Because of these circumstances, he hadn't had a public appearance in years. Apparently the family was now represented by his twin sister — the only one who had escaped the explosion mostly unharmed.

Barbaros, eh...?

Remembering what she'd learned before transferring, Altimia looked out the window of the dragon carriage.

What she saw was the land of Marquis Barbaros. On her way to the capital, the plan was that she would spend a few days at the Barbaros mansion.

Maybe I'll get to meet the third prince's children, she thought.

Several hours later, the dragon carriage arrived at the appointed place.

At the mansion, Altimia and her entourage were welcomed by the elderly Marquis Barbaros.

The princess was accompanied by a number of maids and some members of the Royal Guard, as well as their captain — Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria.

The reason she'd brought such powerful bodyguards was an attack that happened over twenty years ago, by a Mythical UBM named "Edelvalsa." The monster had completely destroyed one of Altar's diplomatic envoys, and they wanted to be prepared just in case something like that happened again.

A Mythical UBM would be a difficult opponent regardless, but Langley had possession of Gold Thunder the Prism Steed — so if worse came to worst, Altimia could at least escape. She had undergone training to ride it in case something happened.

Once out of the carriage, Altimia exchanged greetings and a bit of conversation with Marquis Barbaros before she was invited inside and led to the guest room where she would be staying for the next few days.

After getting comfortable, she began to wonder about something.

For some reason the marquis was acting very apologetic towards me... no... towards the kingdom itself. Even though there was nothing in his welcome that overtly suggested this, Altimia couldn’t help but feel that he’d acted like he had a guilty conscience. Altimia didn’t sense any malice in him, exactly, but his behavior somehow gave her that impression.

He did, in fact, have something to feel guilty about.

To their knowledge, Edelvalsa had killed everyone on the Altarian mission, but there actually was one single survivor — Emilio Quartierlatin. By sheer chance, he’d ended up with Edelvalsa’s Mythical MVP special reward, and such a weapon was so valuable that the imperator had ordered that Barbaros raise Emilio as his own.

This made him feel apologetic towards the kingdom and, more specifically, the princess.

When he’d learned that Altimia would be staying at his mansion, he even considered telling her the truth — but he was unable to do so while the current imperator was still alive. If he went against the imperators will, he would endanger not only his family, but his adopted son Emilio and the children of the third prince he was sheltering.

Feeling torn apart on the inside, he’d chosen to remain silent about all of this.

The marquis would go on to pass away five years later, shortly after seeing the new imperator take the throne. Chances were that the mental stress of keeping up that lie played a role in his death.

“...I see no point in thinking about this much longer. I will go train.”

Altimia could not understand why the marquis was behaving the way he was, so she chose to stop considering it and went to practice her combat skills for a change of pace. She had already asked where to find the mansion’s training grounds.

He gave me quite the strange look when I asked... After telling the Royal Guard where she was headed, Altimia took her leave.

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When she arrived at the training grounds, however, Altimia found there was someone there already.

A girl about her age was swinging around a spear only about 2 metels in length — probably meant for fighting in close quarters.

This wasn't all that strange to see — that was the purpose of the training grounds, after all .

The strange thing that caught Altimia's attention was that the girl's spearplay was *far* too perfect.

Her spear made no sound as she struck. She wasted no energy on "slicing at the wind"... parting the wall of air, so to speak.

Her movements were efficient, perfected, and utterly superb. It was as though the spear was flowing through the air without a single flawed motion. The placement of her fingers holding the shaft, her every single step, even the slightest shifts of her muscles and joints... not a single detail was out of place.

She had long blonde hair, but even the way her flowing locks danced with her movements didn't seem disordered. Altimia felt like she was watching the flow of wind or water.

It wasn't a mere dance, however — she was moving exactly the way she would have in a real battle.

Despite that, it was probably more beautiful than any martial dance.

As for Altimia's thoughts on what she was seeing, she had only one word for it...

"Mechanical..."

...And that word escaped her lips.

The spear-wielding girl abruptly stopped.

Altimia suddenly realized her blunder, but she knew that she couldn't take back what she'd said. It was her honest thoughts, after all. The girl's spear-dance lacked any flaws and looked as natural as nature itself... but Altimia could see no emotion behind it. Feelings, it seemed, would have only disturbed the girl's movements. The sight of it reminded Altimia of her music box with a spinning dancer doll on top, which Prince Hallon had given her during his visit to the kingdom.

Altimia couldn't help but feel that the spear-wielding girl was much like that mechanical dancer. It was beautiful enough to move the heart... But the girl herself seemed to put no heart into it.

Though, perhaps no one else would've shared Altimia's opinion on this sight.

Still frozen, the girl looked straight at Altimia. It was almost like she was evaluating her, but that wasn't quite the right word.

She was looking at Altimia as if to *analyze* her, just like a machine might.

The girl then glanced downward and noticed the training sword at Altimia's side.

"Care to spar?" she asked without any preface. Her tone was odd, as though she herself wasn't sure why she'd asked that.

"Certainly." Altimia instantly agreed. She knew that this girl wasn't merely venting her annoyance at Altimia's comment. Instead, she felt that the girl, as talented as she was, had most likely realized that Altimia was the Sacred Princess and possessed immense sword fighting talent.

Altimia, a born swordmaster.

This strange girl, the very incarnation of spear fighting talent.

Altimia didn't even know her name. However, the two were drawn together as if by gravity, and now stood facing each other, weapons in hand.

It was unclear who would make the initial attack, but this was the first time they crossed blades together.

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"...It seems like... I've lost," Altimia said through ragged breaths, leaning on the wall after a full hour of fighting.

The other girl hadn't won because she was just more talented than Altimia. While the girl with the spear was giving the match everything she had, Altimia hadn't even used half of true skill.

She didn't have her powers as Sacred Princess without Altar, and since the blade was the greatest of the kingdom's national treasures, she couldn't bring it to Dryfe. Also, Altar's techniques were based on its ability to cut anything, so they couldn't be used with any normal sword.

Instead, she chose to fight using the pirate sword fighting technique taught to her by Langley, but ultimately she couldn't land a single hit on the girl.

But even if I ignore that and compare only our raw talent... I cannot say *for certain that I would have won.* That was how abnormally gifted the girl was.

Both her defense and offense were flawless, and no movement was wasted. That was probably why, despite having fought for a whole hour, she wasn't even out of breath.

She might be stronger than my teacher... Altimia thought that the girl, despite her age, might've been even stronger than the person who'd taught her swordplay — Celestial Knight, Langley.

"No. I am still below the Celestial Knight," the girl said as though she'd read Altimia's mind.

"Huh?"

"The knight possesses a power that protects, while I merely possess the power to wield a spear. The comparison is not apt. Even if I could best him in sheer martial prowess, I would still be below him as an *entity*... My apologies. Give me a moment."

After saying all of that in a flat voice, she fell silent before *striking herself in the forehead with the shaft of her spear*.

"HUH?!" The sudden action shocked Altimia, but the girl just stood in place with the shaft still pressed against her forehead, not moving an inch.

The impact made such an intense noise that Altimia wondered if she'd damaged something inside her skull.

Blood flowed from her forehead, and about ten seconds later...

"...Apologies for the wait! Oh, and please excuse my rudeness thus far."

...The girl spoke up with a tone and voice quite different from before.

Her eyes sparkled as she rambled on and on.

"I tend to get a bit gloomy while training! It makes me come off as a little impolite... I am truly sorry for inviting you to spar without even saying hello!" She bowed her head, now brimming with the wasteful thing they called "emotion."

However, her movements were still as flawless as ever, so Altimia knew that this was the same girl as before.

"N-No need," Altimia said. "I should apologize for interrupting your training."

"Oh, it is nothing! In fact, I should thank you! Training with someone else makes for a better experience," the girl said with a full smile. "Also, this is the first time someone my age has given me such a rousing fight!

That makes me really happy!"

"...I see." Altimia could relate to that.

She had been born the Sacred Princess.

No one her age had been burdened with a fate like hers.

She had friends like Langley's daughter, Liliana, and the Arch Sage's favorite disciple, Integra, but despite this she was constantly troubled by a small degree of loneliness.

Altimia felt that this girl was much like her. Their fates might be completely different in character, but they carried the same kind of weight on their shoulders.

That was why they'd sparred before even introducing themselves.

"Ah! My apologies! I have still not given you my name..." said the girl.

"Neither have I, then. My name is Altimia A. Altar, First Princess of Altar. I will be staying here for five days or so."

"I know you! I am Claudiah R. Dryfe. My father was the third prince, so I am the lowest ranking member of the royal family!" Upon hearing that, Altimia discovered that this girl was one of the children of the late third prince... not the son who was still bedridden, but the daughter who handled their official business.

Something about her words made her curious, however.

"You know of me?"

"I do! I will be your 'tuner'... your attendant at school!"

"You...?" Altimia was curious why a princess would be given such a task. Were they just being considerate of Altimia, or were there other circumstances, either for Claudiah specifically or the imperium in general, that called for this?

"That means we will be able to spar regularly!" Claudiah said with nothing but joy, beaming brightly.

"We will...?" Altimia asked.

"Ah. M-My apologies... I should have asked if you would agree to something like that..."

Claudiah's tone had a hint of fear in it — something you could hardly expect from a young woman with such immense talent at spear-handling.

However, it made her look more like a girl her age, and Altimia found that endearing.

"No need to apologize. This makes me happy, too."

"Oh?"

"I would gladly fight you again. I hope we get along during the coming three years... Claudiah," Altimia said, extending her right hand.

She was offering to shake on becoming friends.

Claudiah spent a moment looking at the hand...

"...Certainly! I am sure we will, Altimia!"

...But then grasped it with a blinding smile.

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Over the next three years, they did indeed become close friends.

They'd spent their days together, on the training grounds as well as in their everyday lives.

They would worry about upcoming exams, recommend books to each other, go shopping together... and eventually, they'd stopped being a pair of royal heirs or the menacing duo of the Sacred Princess and The Ram. Instead, they were nothing but ordinary friends.

They'd even continued to keep in touch even after Altimia had returned to Altar.

However, that ended following the shifts in Dryfe's government and the ensuing war.

But on this day, during these peace talks, they'd met once again and fought to protect — or obtain — what they needed to.

Altimia now wielded the exalted blade she had never used in any of their previous duels, while Claudiah was armed with a mechanical body and countless MVP rewards.

This was their first fight in a long time... and it could be their last.

All of this was unfolding like a martial dance high up in the heavens.

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Altar-Dryfe border, the sky

Silver and jade winds drew circles in the air, clashing and separating over and over.

The silver wind was Zephyrus Silver, the Grand Artificer Flagman's Prism Steed unit that wasn't counted among the official five.

Astride it was the first princess of Altar — the Sacred Princess, Altimia A. Altar.

The jade wind was Jade Storm, the second of Flagman's official five Prism Steeds.

The one riding it was the little sister of the Imperator of Dryfe — The Ram, Claudiah L. Dryfe.

Zephyrus Silver galloped on condensed air, while Jade Storm flew through the sky by means of the wind ejected from its frame.

Their means of flight were wildly different, but the speed was more or less equal.

It was likely, though, that the riders were purposely matching their speeds so they could properly exchange blows.

They had clashed seven times since this fight began, but neither of them had suffered any damage yet.

However, that didn't mean that this was a true battle of equals.

By the seventh clash, the silver rider... Altimia... had broken out in a cold sweat.

She fended me off again...! Each of the seven attacks she'd launched at Claudiah had been deflected.

Perhaps this wouldn't have been surprising in an ordinary martial arts showdown. Claudiah was fully on the defensive, and some would say that meant Altimia had the upper hand.

But such reasonable thoughts didn't apply here.

After all, Altimia was wielding The Primeval Blade, Altar. This sword could cut through anything and everything, yet Claudiah was warding off all of her attacks.

Nothing — not even pure energy — could avoid being cut by this blade.

Deflecting its attacks should have been impossible, yet this supposedly impossible thing had happened *seven times* now.

She's knocking the sword aside by striking the flat of the blade...!

Altar's edge could cut through any defenses, but that ability obviously didn't extend to the *sides*.

That was how Claudiah could parry Altar — by applying force to these relatively harmless parts of the weapon.

This sort of parry was reasonable when dealing with any kind of sword —it could be considered a basic strategy, in fact.

However, even being able to *see* the energy-severing blade of Altar coming towards you while moving at nearly the speed of sound, and then deflecting it with a lance — all without letting the edge touch it — was an inhuman feat.

...She hasn't changed, I suppose. Altimia knew well that Claudiah's talent had long surpassed what was humanly possible.

She'd sparred against her friend many times, and she discovered something about Claudiah that would strike fear into anyone's heart.

It was related to the first sparring match they'd ever had.

Claudiah had completely bested Altimia back then... *despite having first picked up a spear only a month before*.

In a mere moon after taking up martial arts, she had become strong enough to overwhelm the well-trained Sacred Princess without even breaking a sweat.

She has not grown stronger, but neither has she grown weaker... Though, I suppose that is only natural — she had already peaked, after all.

As the person who knew Claudiah's skill better than anyone, Altimia was confident in her evaluation. Claudiah's technique was perfect, and anything that strayed from that would be rejected as a flaw.

Not even the giant lance she now wields seems to have affected her ability.

Masters had a saying along the lines of "a poor craftsman blames his tools."

Claudiah was the polar opposite of that proverbial "poor craftsman." Be it a spear or a lance — the tool didn't matter to her in the slightest. The girl was probably capable of acquiring a "The One"-type Superior Job for literally any weapon she'd picked up.

She was no doubt among the five most skilled people in the entire world.

If Altimia's ability was born from the blood of the Sacred King — the first Azurite — coursing through her veins, then Claudiah's must be a natural, divine talent.

No... that was insufficient to describe it.

She was no mere prodigy. You couldn't even call her *phenomenon* without feeling like the term was inadequate.

The abilities of Claudiah R. Dryfe were best described as *something that* *shouldn't possibly exist.*

Truly... she is so skilled that fighting her makes me doubt my sanity, Altimia thought. She had once labeled Claudiah's spearwork as "mechanical," and that was extremely apt.

After all, Claudiah had perfected her combat style as easily as one might install software on a computer.

The people of this world didn't worship any gods based on concepts, but if such beings existed, then Claudiah was the kind of machine a divine engineer might create.

But Claudiah... if I let fear of your immense skill paralyze me, I would not be worthy of being your friend.

Despite facing such a fearsome being, Altimia wasn't the least bit frightened.

Even if Claudiah had warded off her deadly sword seven times, it didn't mean that she'd defeated her. Altimia's blade, her hands grasping the hilt, the burning soul within her... none of these had been broken, so this battle was far from over.

"That's quite the face you're making, Altimia," Claudiah's voice rode the wind as they clashed for the eighth time. "You were always wonderful with a blade."

The words reached Altimia even after Claudiah was a good distance away from her. This was likely achieved by some function of Claudiah's Jade Storm.

"This is thanks to you. It's because you always faced me like this that I was able to keep myself from falling to loneliness."

Altimia remained silent.

"No one could keep up with me. They would give up the moment they realized the immense gap in talent."

This was something Claudiah had seen many times the day she'd first taken a spear in hand, as well as during her days in school... and the Dryfean civil war.

"But you were different. Even if you lost against me while sparring, your heart was never once broken. You never gave up in the face of my talents and you always thoroughly believed that you could win against me *next* time... And eventually, you did. Is that not true?"

"...I did," Altimia replied, and again, despite the distance or speed, her words had no trouble reaching Claudiah.

"I'm really quite fond of you, Altimia."

"And I of you. You are a dear friend."

The two spoke like this even as they clashed for the ninth time.

"Ah, Altimia... Have you noticed? Right now, I feel three emotions about you."

Altimia said nothing as they clashed for the tenth time.

"Friendship. You were my first friend, and one I will treasure for life."

Eleventh clash.

"Passion. As the spear of the imperium, I want to fight you more than anyone else."

Twelfth clash.

"And finally... love."

The thirteenth clash... ended without any weapons touching.

The words alone rode the wind to reach Altimia.

"I cherish you more than anything else in the world, and I want you to be mine. Were you aware I felt this way?"

"I was. I have known since our school days."

Altimia's immediate reply made Claudiah's eyes widen.

"...Eheheh. And despite that, you did not push me away?"

"Of course. That would be no reason to deny your friendship."

Altimia had indeed noticed her dear friend's intense feelings towards her about a year after they first became acquainted, but she had no intention of forsaking their friendship because of it. Claudiah had also never confessed her feelings like this, so Altimia had simply never brought them up either.

She wasn't merely stalling, however — Altimia had already known how she would respond.

"I have already prepared my words for when you eventually revealed your feelings to me like this," Altimia said, pulling Silver to a stop.

Claudiah did the same and waited for Altimia to continue.

"I am the blade of Altar and the representative of the royal family. We will be friends until the end, but I can never accept your love."

"...I knew you would say that." Claudiah had expected to receive such a response.

However, Altimia's next words made her eyes widen again.

"My answer is the same as it would have been back then: that is why I cannot *marry* you and rule both our nations by your side."

This wasn't a mere rejection — Altimia had just implied something that shocked Claudiah to the core.

"Altimia... you knew?"

"I did, Claudiah... or should I say..." Altimia said before pausing for a moment, then declared, "Imperator of the Dryfe Imperium, Claudiah *Reinhard* Dryfe."

Claudiah fell silent, not saying a thing in response.

Or more accurately, she *couldn't* say anything... because Altimia was completely right.

"You are not denying it. Though, there is no point in that, I suppose. My Truth Discernment would see right through you."

Silence was as good as confirmation here.

"...How long have you known?"

"Actually, this was all partially a trap. I was only half-certain of it, and only because of today's peace talks in any case."

"...Did you realize it when Ray Starling saw right through my plot?"

"No. It was some time before that." It happened shortly before Ray had uncovered the imperium's cunning plan... when they were adjusting the treaty to make it agreeable for both sides.

"Back then, when we were adding conditions and modifying the treaty, you never once contacted Vandelheim."

Claudiah was silent.

"I realize that you'd predicted all our conditions as though you could read our minds, but this was an international agreement. If there are changes to be made, it is customary to leave the assembly hall and inform the head of state. With my father gone, I am the acting ruler of Altar... but you are a mere *representative*. Your brother, the imperator, still outranks you."

Claudiah had full authority over the negotiations, but that did not mean she possessed the decision-making power of the imperium's actual ruler.

That was what made everything so suspicious.

"You used no communication magic, and the capital is too far for Telepathy Cuffs to reach. Even I brought a comms magic agent... but you had no one."

That could only mean that they had no intention of contacting the imperator in the first place.

"The reason for that is simple: you did not *need* to ask anyone."

Silence.

"After all, you yourself *are* the imperator. Right... Claudiah Reinhard?" Altimia said, using her friend's full name. "It is a Dryfean custom to give twins each others' first names as middle names, is it not? You told me that when I asked for Reinhard's name."

"...I remember that." Altimia had met Reinhard at school once. After that, she went on to ask Claudiah what his name was, and that was when she had informed her of this custom.

Altimia finally arrived at a certain conclusion.

"The real Reinhard died in the civil war, did he not?" If her friend held the throne, then that could only mean that the Reinhard she'd met was no longer with them.

"Men are usually inheritors in Dryfe, just as they are in the kingdom. You hid the death of Reinhard — the *true* imperator — while acting as the imperator yourself. You told me once that the current head of the military — Field Marshal Barbaros — is your uncle, while the head of government — Chancellor Vigoma — was your private tutor. You were able to keep the death a secret by surrounding yourself with people you trusted."

The chances of this secret being exposed by Reveal were actually quite low, for high-ranking families generally had potent anti-Reveal equipment. A famous example was Zifu Longmian, the mask used by Huang He's Draconic Emperor to hide his name, but even Altimia herself had often slipped outside while wearing similar gear.

If Claudiah possessed something like that, she could easily pretend to be her late brother.

"You were thoroughly alike even in your school years. With slight adjustments from someone with a Cosmeticist job, no one could tell you apart."

That was the entirety of Altimia's conjecture.

Claudiah was silent for a good moment before making a troubled face and saying, "You are seventy percent right."

"...Seventy percent?"

"You were completely right until about the midpoint, but then veered off the mark completely." That meant that Altimia was right about Claudiah being the imperator, but wrong about how she had acquired the throne.

As for how, exactly, she was wrong...

"My brother, Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe, did not die in the imperator accession civil war." Altimia instantly began to assume that he had merely been severely wounded and was still recovering...

"After all... he died in the terrorist attack *nine years ago*."

...But that idea was shot down by an explanation she had never expected.

"Huh...?" The idea that Reinhard had died nine years ago made no sense to her. He was supposedly alive and well during Altimia's days as a transfer student six years ago. In fact, she had met him herself.

While a storm of questions raged in Altimia's mind...

"Give me a moment... These talks are best left to my brother."

...Those were Claudiah's words as she put her lance against her forehead.

It was reminiscent of her strange actions on the day they'd met, but far less intense. Claudiah closed her eyes and froze for a few seconds before opening her eyes again...

"It has been quite a while."

...With a face that seemed wholly unlike the one she had mere moments ago.

She spoke with striking fluency and her expression was now doll-like — completely devoid of any emotion.

Now, she really was almost like a machine... just like the Claudiah Altimia had first met.

"I am the imperator... the 'elder brother, Reinhard.'" With the demeanor of an entirely different person, the entity that was once Claudiah introduced itself.

"Rein...hard...?"

"Indeed. I am Reinhard, the 'elder brother,' as well as the individual in charge of machines and governance."

Claudiah... no... the entity before Altimia once again referred to itself as Reinhard—and once again, *Truth Discernment did not trigger*.

This being most certainly saw itself as Reinhard and no one else.

"What is the meaning of this?" Altimia asked.

"Oh, where should I begin? Let us start with what we both know," Reinhard said, pointing at Claudiah's chest. "This person, Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe, is immensely talented."

"...That is true," Altimia agreed.

"One talent that you are quite familiar with is the ability to master any art." Unlike Masters, who usually had the aptitude for any job besides a few Superior Jobs, each tian was only suited for certain jobs. And in terms of this raw talent, Claudiah was head and shoulders above the rest of them.

"Claudiah could do anything she wanted and become whatever she desired. She merely happened to take up the spear and become The Ram; she could have taken many other Superior Jobs easily. The fact that this body also has King of Machines is proof of that."

Those words reminded Altimia of something. If Reinhard was Claudiah back when they'd met at school, then that meant that Claudiah was also King of Machines. Juggling both vanguard and crafting Superior Jobs at the same time was impossible for any ordinary tian.

"...You implied that you had other talents," said Altimia.

"Indeed. Claudiah did have another talent, and it is the reason I exist," Reinhard, indicating Claudiah's face. "It is the talent to *modify* herself."

"Modify...?"

"Claudiah was able to freely modify *her inner self* however she wanted. And in case you were wondering, the body modifications that you have seen were only begun a year ago."

"...Well, I am well aware that you didn't have strange hands that could move on their own after being severed."

They had shared a bath several times at the student dorm, and Altimia could clearly recall that Claudiah's body had been flesh and blood.

"Not even Claudiah could remain unharmed while facing Dryfe's SMTF and the Superior they'd hired. Though it did turn out to be a good opportunity to test the artificial arms we made based on Prism Person remains and data we discovered in some ruins," Reinhard said casually, moving the battle-ready artificial arm back and forth. "But back to the original matter... I, Reinhard, am a personality that Claudiah, driven by necessity, created by modifying herself," he declared without any hesitation. "I am what you might call a split personality... or more accurately, a *persona*. The only soul in this body is Claudiah's, and I am merely a personality that takes over when needed."

"...A persona."

"While Claudiah is heavily emotional, I discard emotion in favor of logic, and fulfill my role by crafting plots on behalf of Claudiah and the nation of Dryfe. Claudiah as she is now is simply not suited for such thoughts."

That meant that the entrapment written into today's peace treaty had actually been crafted by Reinhard — Claudiah's persona.

There were a few benefits to having multiple personas.

Certain conclusions were just beyond certain people due to their differences in thought processes and intelligence, and this was a way around that. Masters had a saying that went "Two heads are better than one," and Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe truly exemplified that.

"Claudiah's persona..." Altimia said as she pondered this. She wondered how creating a persona was even possible, but the mere thought of Claudiah's immense talents quickly did away with her doubts.

She couldn't begin to understand *how* Claudiah had done it, but she could accept that she had somehow done exactly that.

Also, based on what Reinhard had said, Altimia believed the methods behind this were a mystery even to them.

"Do you understand what I am now?" Reinhard asked.

"...I do. Do you call yourself 'Reinhard' because your personality is based on that of the late Reinhard?"

Altimia wondered why they would use that name. She guessed that it was to pay respects to her real elder brother...

"No, that is certainly not the case."

...But Reinhard denied that assumption.

"Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe was actually a normal child, very unlike Claudiah or myself as I am now. He was never a machine in human form like this."

That might've been self-derision or a jest on Reinhard's part, but the lack of emotion in his face or voice made it impossible to tell.

"Claudiah and Reinhard were also *fraternal* twins. They did look similar, but they were not completely indistinguishable. No one pointed that out, however. Everyone knew them as twins and had no doubts that they would grow up to have the same face. Though it probably helped that I first showed myself as 'Reinhard' a few years after the terrorist attack, before we had both gone through puberty."

Altimia herself had thought little of "Reinhard" having the exact same face as Claudiah, because their personalities and behavior were so radically different.

"Also, this body does not house the soul of the late Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe. There is nothing necromantic about it. This has even been confirmed by a specialist... King of Tartarus. There is only one soul here. Reinhard's seemed to be haunting the area where the terrorist attack occurred, so we had King of Tartarus take care of it."

The persona of "Reinhard" spoke of the real Reinhard with absolute disinterest.

"So... why 'Reinhard'?" Altimia asked.

"Are you asking about the source of the name... or the persona?"

"...Both."

The person in front of her nodded before continuing "The idea to pretend the real Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe was alive came from our grandfather on our mother's side — the previous Marquis Barbaros."

This didn't surprise Altimia in the slightest. Claudiah couldn't have acted as two public figures simultaneously on her own — she needed the help of someone close, and since she'd lost both her parents and her brother, her grandfather was the only candidate.

"He was thinking of Claudiah's safety," Reinhard said while pointing at Claudiah's body. "The conflict over the Dryfean throne had already begun at that point. I suppose you could call it a recommendation from our grandfather on our father's side... the previous imperator, in other words."

The first and second princes of Dryfe — Instead of naming either of them as a crown prince, the previous imperator had forced them to fight each other instead.

Xanafald was a man who did whatever he thought necessary to make sure Dryfe would flourish, even if that meant making his own family fight each other or appropriating Emilio Quartierlatin.

"The princes and their children were having a secret feud amongst themselves. And even though it was small in comparison, the third prince had his own faction as well. It involved Marquis Barbaros and his family, as well as several local noblemen."

The chances of the third prince taking the throne were minimal. It was likely that either the first or second princes would emerge the final victory, while the third prince would either be granted the title of duke or his son would inherit the Barbaros March from his mother's side of the family.

However, there was also the possibility that neither the first nor the second prince would actually emerge from this conflict alive — which would make the third prince the imperator by default. That was the reason he had supporters despite the fact that he would likely not win in open conflict.

"But then, that terrorist attack killed their father as well as his firstborn son, Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe. This was the final nail in the coffin for the third prince's faction. The marquis must have believed that if the truth were to come out, the remnants of the faction would somehow use the surviving sister to make themselves a place in the other factions."

That was what drove Marquis Barbaros to make his decision.

"That was why he claimed Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe was still alive, just recovering in the Barbaros mansion. This kept the third prince's faction from dissolving." By acting as if Reinhard was still alive, the marquis kept the faction's hope alive.

"...I am impressed he was able to hide it so well."

"It wasn't easy. Only a few people knew the real truth. Those who did not have Truth Discernment were fed false information from Claudiah, who disguised herself as bedridden Reinhard. They believed the lie to be true and went on to spread those lies to other people. For false information to avoid detection by Truth Discernment, those spreading our lies needed to believe it unconditionally. Though, after doing all this, grandfather had to lock himself up in the mansion to avoid anyone using Truth Discernment on *him*."

He had planned to keep the real truth hidden until the next imperator was decided. He would then go on to "reveal" that Reinhard had tragically succumbed to his condition and passed away, believing that Claudiah's safety would be ensured.

However, there was one problem.

"The lie survived for about four years, but then people began to wonder why Reinhard showed no signs of recovery and had barely interacted with the other royals ."

This was only to be expected. In fact, it was impressive that it had taken four years for that doubt to set in.

"It became necessary to prove to the others that Reinhard was, indeed, still alive."

"...To prove that a dead person was still alive?"

"That is why Claudiah ultimately needed to convince *herself*... to make herself believe unconditionally that she *is* Reinhard."

Ultimately, that was the reason behind it all.

"And that is why I, 'Reinhard' the 'elder brother,' exist now. I stood before the rest of the royal family and proved that 'I' was still alive by stating, in no uncertain terms, that I was Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe."

Altimia was speechless. This persona was so real that it even overcame Truth Discernment. The ability to artificially create something like that was far beyond any sort of hypnosis or suggestion that Altimia had ever seen.

"But you..."

"I know what you're going to ask. Back then, I wholeheartedly believed that I was Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe, but now I am aware that 'Reinhard' is a mere persona. The need to hide myself vanished once I became imperator, so Claudiah connected the two of us."

Reinhard matter-of-factly explained that he understood he was a constructed personality.

"But back when you and I met at school, I still believed myself to be the real Reinhard. I had not *been* Reinhard for long at that point, and lived a double life without even *myself* knowing about it."

Unlike Reinhard, Claudiah had always been aware of this arrangement, so she made certain to make sure he always had an alibi and clear up any confusion that arose. Most notably, she acted as Reinhard's "assistant" whenever he did work as King of Machines.

After all — they only had one body.

"What was not accounted for was the mechanic grouping."

"Mechanic grouping?"

"At some point, people began to believe that during his recovery, Reinhard underwent intense training as a Mechanic and became extremely capable at the job. It was but smoke without fire. For all we know, that was just a lie spread by another faction to make Reinhard look incompetent when the truth came out."

"You mean to tell me..."

"Yes. That is why I am King of Machines. It would be bothersome if the discrepancy between this rumor and reality lead to the *real* truth coming out, so I delved into the Mechanic grouping. By the time we met in school, I had fulfilled the conditions for the Superior Job and became King of Machines. Though, as you know, that led to me being left in charge of many chores."

Acquiring a Superior Job for a reason like that was downright absurd. On top of this, by becoming imperator, Reinhard (or rather, Claudiah *as* Reinhard) had also acquired the related Special Superior Job, Imperator Machina.

Altimia once again realized just how extraordinary Claudiah's talents were.

"That's the reason behind my name. As for the personality..."

Reinhard fell silent for a moment, making a troubled expression for the first time since the conversation had begun.

"To begin at the conclusion, my personality is similar to the *original* Claudiah's."

"Hm?" Altimia couldn't understand what he meant by that... Though one might say that she was the one person in the world who was *incapable* of understanding it

"How would you describe Claudiah — as a person?"

"An innocent girl, brimming with emotion. She can be a bit overbearing, but she makes up for it with boundless charm."

"You mean the Claudiah who talks like a typical noble girl, yes?"

"She has been that way since the day we met, no?"

Claudiah had acted somewhat different during their first sparring match, but after that, she'd always been the girl Altimia had always known.

In response to Altimia's question, Reinhard nodded and said, "Yes. *That very day, Claudiah modified herself to be that girl.*"

"...Huh?"

"Until sparring with you, Claudiah's personality was more or less exactly like mine. That changed when she met you."

Altimia had trouble understanding what she was hearing, but Reinhard continued speaking regardless.

"You were the first person she *wanted* to befriend, as well as someone she fell for at first sight. She was troubled by the fact that she was rude to you, and became afraid for the first time ever... *scared* that you might grow to hate her." Claudiah had never felt something like that before.

That was the first time she had ever experienced those fatal glitches of the brain... or more accurately, the soul... that were called "emotions," and that was exactly what made that moment so precious to her.

"Claudiah then went on to hit herself on the head and spent the next ten seconds reshaping her personality into the Claudiah you now know."

Altimia had no words.

"That personality was based on some noble girl who had tried to become Claudiah's friend before the terrorist attack. Not many people tried to get close to Claudiah, you see. In order to befriend you, she modified her personality by copying the girl's features and incorporating them into herself. It was the first time she ever tried to modify herself in this way, but it worked."

Up until then, Claudiah hadn't seen any purpose in such self-modifications. She knew that it was possible, but saw it as useless.

She passed her days living with a personality of a machine, detached even from the concept of gender.

But when she met Altimia, she *panicked* that she might become hated and for the first time *felt the need to change herself*.

Some would say that it was unease and fear that drove her, while others would claim that it was love.

"Since then, that became Claudiah's default personality. I, Reinhard, am nothing but a persona created based on her previous one, which she had grown accustomed to."

That explained why Reinhard reminded Altimia of Claudiah as she'd been on the first day they met. There was also the fact that, as far as Claudiah's personalities went, the 'elder brother,' Reinhard, was *old*.

The glitch-like stirrings of her heart had spurred Claudiah to reshape herself, and now she was making up for it by using her old, cold and calculating side as a persona.

Reinhard, the calm and collected support, and Claudiah, the maiden in love — both were simultaneously running within the single machine that was "Claudiah's body."

That was the best way to describe the entity known as the imperator, Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe.

“This is what we are,” said Reinhard. “Tell me your thoughts, Altimia.”

Altimia was silent for a moment, processing the monumental secret that had now been revealed to her, as well as the fact that she was the one responsible for such a drastic change within Claudiah.

Ultimately, she said, “I am relieved.”

These words surprised both Claudiah and Reinhard.

“...Huh?” As absurd as it seemed to them, Altimia was truly speaking from her heart.

Claudiah and Reinhard would be far less shocked if she was actually lying or reacted with disgust instead.

“...Relieved?”

“Yes. Relieved. I was feeling a bit overwhelmed when you began speaking as Reinhard, but I am now at ease.”

“Why would you feel that way...? Are you not afraid of... us...?” Reinhard asked with confusion and unease in his tone and demeanor.

“Not anymore. I cannot say I am even the least bit afraid. After all... *I now know full well that Claudiah is truly Claudiah,*” Altimia said with no hint of falsehood or hesitation in her voice. “You said that you modified yourself because you were afraid that I would hate you. A bold move, at first glance, but fearful at its core. That is very much like you, Claudiah.”

“What...? Also, I...”

“How long ago was it when you clung to me, only to jump away because you were worried that you reeked of oil?”

Silence.

“How long ago was it when you heard a frightening story from a minstrel and walked around my bed late at night, pillow in hand.”

More silence.

“You were so afraid of being hated, but you wanted to get along with me, and you always wanted to be closer. Always such a charming girl...” Altimia looked straight at Reinhard... or Claudiah... once again before continuing. “...and you are my dear friend. That is what you are now, and what you always will be to me.”

She said this without a shred of doubt. That was Altimia’s conclusion even now that she knew the whole truth.

None of these shocking revelations had changed the fact that they were close friends.

“...Huh?”
Suddenly, Reinhard... Claudiah... began to cry.

Whose tears were they? Which one of them wept?

...No, it didn't matter.

These were the honest tears of Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe.

Altimia gazed at her crying friend with a gentle look in her eyes.

That was when a particular question came to her mind.

"...I must say, I am surprised that you told me everything the way you did." Claudiah's Reinhard side had told Altimia what was perhaps the imperium's greatest secret — one known to only five people in Dryfe. "Why *did* you tell me everything?"

"...Because you asked," Reinhard timidly replied. "We *did not want* to lie to the girl we loved."

Reinhard seemed to be mustering all the emotions he could manage for that.

That answer made sense to Altimia.

She did not lie to me once in the peace talks, nor did she refuse to answer any of my questions, she thought.

"And we *have not* lied to you," Reinhard added.

"...I see." Altimia understood exactly what she was saying.

They had already bared their entire souls to each other.

"Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe became the imperator. As such, we must do whatever we can to keep the imperium alive, no matter how vile it may become. And besides that..." the imperator said, before facing Altimia. "...We will defeat you, take you away with us, and make you ours."

Reinhard repeated what Claudiah had already declared.

"As the imperator, we want to possess Altar... to help Dryfe survive. However, we want *you* out of pure selfishness. You are special to us, and we want you at our side until the end. That is the only selfish thought that dwells within this heart."

Separate from their plots to save the imperium, there was this sole bit of selfishness... this one desire.

"And like anyone driven by pure selfishness, we have no intention of stopping. Therefore..." Reinhard said before putting the lance to his forehead again. "...Let us fight! Let us fight until one of us falls! Until there is a clear victor! Let us fight for the moment that will grant us eternity!"

Now, she spoke as the ball of emotion known as "Claudiah."

"Of course," Altimia replied, just as she had the first time they met. "I will not lose. I have to win — both for my sisters as well as those fighting on the surface. I will give my all... and fight with the intention of *killing you*.”

All of Altimia’s attacks thus far had been deflected, but that wasn’t solely because of Claudiah’s immense skill.

Altar cut through all it touched. It could not hold back, so Altimia was making up for that by targeting only non-critical parts of her friend’s body.

She would no longer limit herself.

Her friend had revealed everything to her, so Altimia also wanted to give this battle her all.

And... she also believed that this dear friend of hers would survive in spite of that.

“So... don’t you dare die, CLAUDIAH!”

“Certainly! Let us deal in death as best as we can! ALTIMIA!”

The two swung into battle again.

Having bared their very souls to each other, they now bared their blades, fighting a battle in which there could be no surrender.

There was no more need for words. They no longer had anything to hide.

Their hearts were now as one — and they would fight until all was settled.

After many a mock battle, Claudiah and Altimia would finally have a true fight to the death.

Altimia and Claudiah made distance between them in perfect unison.

Not to retreat, of course — they needed the space to build momentum and spur their Prism Steeds to their maximum speed.

In mounted battles in the sky and on land alike, the speed depended not on the rider’s AGI, but the quality of the mount. Because of this, the standard *Dendro* mounted battles consisted mostly of trying to accelerate into an advantageous position before attacking the opponent using your own AGI.

Any attack that had any hope of defeating the target required the rider to accelerate to high speeds.

The fact that Claudiah had also prepared to do this meant that just like Altimia, she was also going on an all-out offensive, instead of merely deflecting Altimia’s attacks like she’d been doing so far.

Claudiah could never bring herself to kill Altimia, so why she would aim her lance at the princess was anyone's guess. Perhaps she simply believed in her ability?

Regardless, this would be the start of a truly two-sided battle between them.

Now, having created some distance, the Prism Steed riders rushed towards each other.

"Storm Acceleration." However, one steed was the fastest, and it was Jade Storm. The steed's engines roared at maximum capacity, releasing an intense jet of air from his pipes, propelling him to the highest speed he could possibly reach.

Jade instantly broke the sound barrier and approached Silver in a second.

This was exactly Jade Storm's specialty.

Flagman's five main Prism Steeds were created based on No. 1, Gold Thunder, but they were each given unique qualities.

No. 3, Ruby Ignition, was focused on offense.

No. 4, Sapphire Wave, was focused on defense.

No. 5, Obsidian Earth-Edge, was focused on ground-based battles.

And No. 2, Jade Storm, was focused on mobility.

His element was wind and he was designed to release intense gales and control the surrounding air currents, making him the fastest among the Prism Steeds.

Silver expressed what might be described as shock — he was decidedly slower than Jade.

That was to be expected — a unit outside of the main five, created with a focus on specific special qualities, couldn't hope to outrun the fastest Prism Steed of all, especially when he couldn't even use those qualities that made him special in the first place.

"Be left in my dust, youngest brother," Jade said as he made their difference in speed abundantly clear. His voice was produced with his trademark control over the wind, and it was exactly what had allowed Claudiah and Altimia to communicate all this time.

Proudly declaring his superiority to his sibling, Jade flipped sideways... he did a barrel roll, so to speak.

"Brace for my first attack!" Claudiah cried after positioning herself right above Altimia. She was high enough to be outside the reach of Altimia’s blade, but close enough to attack with her lance. Flipping herself upside down, Claudiah thrust her MVP special reward drill lance towards Altimia.

“*Hngh*!” the princess grunted, swinging Altar at the same time.

A lance that was already mid-attack couldn’t be used to parry, and not even a special reward could resist Altar’s all-rending blade.

Altimia swung the sword perpendicular to the tip of the lance.

But right before impact, the lance vanished... and struck at Altimia from a different angle.

“Ah...!” Altimia twisted her upper body to avoid it, but the lance just aimed for her lower body instead. Silver also moved to assist her evasion, but the lance still grazed Altimia’s left leg.

She felt the impact clearly.

“*Kh*!” After that exchange, the princesses made distance between them once again.

Altimia looked at her leg to assess the damage done.

“...Where is the wound?” She saw no injury — not even a drop of blood.

Claudiah’s hit had most certainly landed— Altimia had clearly felt that. She had felt no pain, but the fact that she was completely unscathed shocked her.

“...I... cannot move my leg at all.”

Altimia tried to move her left leg, but it wouldn’t budge. Everything below the knee was completely immobile. Even her toes were unresponsive.

It was as though she was afflicted by powerful paralysis.

“So this is the power of that special reward...”

This effect made Altimia realize two things.

First, she understood why Claudiah charged Altimia so violently, despite wanting to take her alive. Claudiah not only had faith in Altimia’s ability to survive any attack — she also was entirely certain that she wouldn’t kill her opponent.

And the reason behind her certainty was this drill lance MVP special reward.

Identification gave its name as “Vortex of Suppression, Drim Roeg.” The word “suppression” was enough to explain the state of Altimia’s left leg.

Despite its mechanical and destructive look, the special reward had skills that made it relatively non-lethal.

A special pre-ancient civilization golem built for riot suppression had gone out of control, but still maintained its essential non-violent nature. When classified as an UBM, it became the Frame of Suppression, Drim Roeg, which Claudiah had eventually defeated. After that, it had transformed into Vortex of Suppression, the lance she wielded now.

Its always-on passive skill, Drim Piercing, made the lance incapable of dealing any physical damage in exchange for putting the damaged body parts to sleep, with an effect based on the damage that would have been dealt if the skill wasn't active.

Enough attacks from this would completely paralyze the target.

"I am glad that she only hit my leg instead of anything else." If it had been her right hand, she would have dropped Altar.

If it had been her left hand, she would have let go of Silver's reins.

If it had been her head, she would have already lost the battle.

While she was mounted on Silver, having her leg paralyzed wasn't that much of a drawback. She could still hold on to his frame with her thighs.

Altimia was lucky that the battle hadn't ended with that single hit, and that she now knew the nature of Claudiah's special reward.

There was one more thing she'd learned thanks Claudiah's lance strike... and it filled her with dread.

"...The trajectory of the lance was *not* due to the properties of a special reward." The lance had disappeared when it began its attack, only to strike from a different angle.

If the lance's non-lethality was a special ability of the weapon itself, then the changing trajectory had to be something Claudiah herself had done.

Altimia's guess was correct.

The skill Claudiah had used was "Paradox Stinger." This was an ability she'd crafted as The Ram, and it allowed her to change the initial angle of an already-thrust spear.

The previous Ram, Ronaldo Barbaros, had a skill called "Distortion Pile," which focused the power and impact of a pile bunker onto the space ahead of it, increasing its range and length.

A job from another grouping, King of Destruction, also possessed a final skill that affected space itself — shattered it, to be exact.

It wasn't unheard of for Superior Jobs to have skills that used or modified space itself, and Paradox Stinger was one of those skills.

The moment the spear was thrust forward, this skill warped the positioning of space, making the attack be delivered from a completely unexpected angle. Claudiah was free to decide the direction of the warp, allowing her to almost guarantee a hit by attacking from where it was difficult for the opponents to protect themselves.

If she can freely choose the trajectory of her attacks, that makes it nearly impossible to evade even if you know the attack is coming, Altimia thought. It was a truly fearsome skill for anyone fighting at close range.

However, it wasn't without its flaws.

While Distortion Pile used by the previous Ram simply delivered the power and impact to the desired point in space, Paradox Stinger altered space more directly, meaning it used an enormous amount of MP and SP... especially the former.

Thus, not even The Ram could use it that frequently.

Though, that wasn't much of an issue for Claudiah.

"Here comes my second attack!" Claudiah declared, having flown in an arc behind Altimia and caught up with her.

Silver had once again lost to Jade's sheer speed.

"Is that so?" However, Silver wasn't without advantages of his own.

Since he was galloping on platforms of compressed air instead of flying, he was better at making midair turns. This allowed Altimia to quickly turn and launch a counterattack at Claudiah's torso with little effort.

Claudiah responded with a Paradox Stinger to Altimia's hand...

"I see!"

...But Altimia twisted her wrist, evading the tip of the spear before using that twist to direct Altar's blade towards the lance.

That was when the *third* Paradox Stinger struck.

The initial point of the thrust changed again, and the lance that Altar was about to cut simply vanished.

However, the lance yet again failed to strike Altimia.

This one did not come from a blind spot, she thought. For some reason — probably due to repeated use — Paradox Stinger hadn't made the thrust as difficult to avoid as the first one.

The lance appeared at the edge of Altimia's vision and she was thus able to evade it, however barely.

After that, the two riders passed each other and once again made some distance between them.

She used it so many times... It seems like it must be such a costly skill... Though, I suppose that matters not to the likes of Claudiah.

Most of Claudiah's unbelievable feats could be attributed to her immense talent, but not this.

The reason Claudiah was able to accomplish this was written into the very laws of the universe.

She is not just The Ram, after all... Claudiah was both The Ram *and* King of Machines. The latter was a mechanic grouping job, which had stat growths in MP and DEX.

Even if Claudiah was now The Ram and couldn't use skills associated with jobs from unrelated groupings... she still had the stats gained from King of Machines. That gave her more MP than most vanguards, which made it easy for her to use Paradox Stinger many times over.

I did learn some valuable information here, though. This exchange of attacks had allowed Altimia to realize something.

If I attack her at the same time as she attacks me, she will have no choice but to use the skill for defense instead. This was due to the difference between the weapons they'd brought to this battle.

The all-rending Altar against the non-lethal Drim Roeg — if both of them attacked and landed a hit at the same time, the former would be far more devastating than the latter.

It didn't matter that Claudiah was clad in machine armor — the blade would cut through it like a hot knife through butter and rend her flesh just as easily.

To win this, Claudiah had to avoid Altar's edge at all costs.

She had spent most of the battle so far focusing entirely on deflecting Altimia's attacks.

However, no matter how talented she was, that was impossible for her to do while attacking.

Now that she'd gone on the offensive, she was unable to deflect Altimia's blade like she'd been doing thus far, and if she did try doing that in the middle of an attack, she would only damage her lance more and more.

That was why Claudiah had switched to a kind of offensive defense.

She now targeted either Altimia's right hand or head. A hit on the former would force her to drop Altar, while a hit on the latter would make her faint. If Claudiah went for any other body part... even if her strike landed, Altimia would merely counterattack with Altar.

The situation was now essentially reversed from how it had been before all these revelations — now it was Claudiah who was forced to choose where to attack.

To win, Altimia had to outdo Claudiah during these exchanges and incapacitate her by cutting through either her body or her steed, Jade Storm.

I cannot actually win *that way, though,* Altimia thought. In a pure exchange of blows, Claudiah would eventually figure out every option Altimia had at her disposal, and Altimia knew well that she couldn't win once Claudiah had that information in her grasp.

I won scarcely a tenth of the duels we fought in school, but... But all of Altimia's victories came only when she'd exceeded Claudiah's expectations.

Thus, that was exactly what she had to do now.

That was the only way to seize an unlikely victory.

"I must say, that is quite the treasure you have there," said Claudiah.

"What do you mean?" Altimia asked.

"Your steed. If you had come with a mere SMPS, the battle would have already been decided."

A part of Altimia had considered the possibility that Claudiah had invited her to fight in the sky because of the difference between their mounts, and this all but confirmed it. Claudiah did want to have a proper fight against Altimia, but she also wanted to win — so it was only natural for her to make such preparations.

But now, Altimia was riding Silver — almost an equal to Claudiah's Jade — so the intended gap between them was almost non-existent. As the fastest Prism Steed, Jade Storm was no doubt the better mount for aerial fighting, but the difference between him and Silver wasn't great enough to make the situation hopeless for Altimia.

"Is it a gift from that Master... Ray Starling?"

"He lent it to me."

"I see... Altimia, if I may ask..." Claudiah said before pausing, then delivering her question. “Is Ray Starling your lover?”

Her question was nothing if not unexpected. It shocked Altimia to such a degree that she faltered and almost lost control of Silver.

For a moment, she thought that she made a fatal mistake and that Claudiah would take advantage of her surprise, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Claudiah merely circled on Jade Storm, waiting for Altimia’s response.

“...No.”

“So it remains one-sided, then.”

“...I have no idea what you mean.”

“Truth Discernment reacted to that, you know.”

“Hh...?!” Embarrassed by the skill she herself so often used, Altimia flushed beet-red.

“I could tell even without Truth Discernment, though. I myself am a maiden in love. I can easily see that you are developing feelings for someone, however faint they may be,” Claudiah explained, then paused for a moment before continuing. “Altimia. This battle is basically about who captures who... but if I win, why not come to the imperium *with* Ray Starling?”

“...What are you saying?” Altimia’s friend, who she thought she had figured out, had once again said something incomprehensible.

Claudiah’s response was very matter-of-fact. “I want to possess you, but I hardly mind if you have something for yourself. You and I both need offspring to continue our lineages anyhow. So I could simply take you as well as the man you love, and—”

“That is an insult I can scarcely tolerate, Claudiah.” Altimia cut her friend’s words short, clearly enraged by the idea she had presented. “I find that even more unforgivable than your attempt to kidnap me.”

“Oh, do you?”

“Yes. If you threaten his freedom, as well...” she said as she pointed the sacred blade towards her friend. “...Then Altar and I will sever those grasping hands of yours.”

“Aha! You make me green with envy, ALTIMIA!” shouted Claudiah, sounding strangely happy, before spurring Jade Storm onwards, even faster than before.

The third clash was imminent, and she was obviously ready to change the flow of this battle.

Altimia prepared to take her on.

“Silver, do you understand what I want to do?”

Silent as always, the steed replied with a nod.

“I see. Assist me with the timing, then.”

Altimia gathered her resolve and turned Silver to face Claudiah once more.

The distance between them quickly closed...

“CUT!”

...And Altimia swung Altar at the space in front of her. “Cut” was the unassuming name of one of Altar’s skills, and by using it, Altimia had declared that she would now *sever energy itself*.

This power cut apart the very heat within the space ahead.

At the same time, Silver, having sensed Altimia’s will through the reins, shifted the position of the compressed air platforms beneath his hooves and changed his trajectory, as though taking a step back.

A moment later, Jade Storm crashed into a *wall* in midair.

The “wall” was actually compressed air that had instantly dropped to absolute zero due to the sudden loss of heat energy.

Right before Altimia swung Altar, Silver created a wall of compressed air right in front of them.

Once the blade was in motion, the heat energy within that wall of compressed air was severed, and everything within it had frozen instantly. It was still merely compressed gas, but the loss of heat had made it into a wall of various gases *turned into ice*.

Even Jade Storm expressed shock at the wall’s sudden appearance. He was unable to dodge and crashed straight into it at the speed of sound.

Still, as one of the Grand Artificer’s Prism Steeds, he was prepared even for this — the wind barrier he had created allowed him to make it out mostly unscathed.

However, it did cost him some speed, and the shattered wall of ice became like diamond dust that briefly obstructed the view.

Altimia used this opportunity to attack the rival steed from below.

“...I would expect no less!” cried Claudiah, having noticed Altimia’s approach a moment too late.

Despite the delay, she was already launching a Paradox Stinger towards the space ahead. Drim Roeg would overcome the principles of space itself to attack Altimia from somewhere she could not expect.

"Sgh...!" However, the slow reaction made her aim sloppy.

Instead of hitting Altimia's right hand like she intended, Claudiah only grazed Altimia's right side, while Jade Storm had entered Altar's range.

Altimia swung her sacred blade before Claudiah could use her Paradox Stinger again.

Since she was below her, Altimia couldn't reach Claudiah herself, but she was able to slice through Jade Storm — as well as Claudiah's legs.

That would bring an end to this aerial battle, and without legs, Claudiah could not possibly continue the fight.

Altimia guessed that Claudiah would survive the fall thanks to the Lifesaving Brooch.

This single strike will turn the tide of battle! Altimia thought as she swung Altar... only to slice through empty space.

"...Huh?"

Which of them had voiced their confusion?

It could've been Altimia, who was no doubt taken aback — but Claudiah was just as surprised as her friend.

She was looking down in shock as Altimia had begun to *fall*, and the reason for this was immediately obvious — Silver had vanished.

Silver vanished... but... that means...! Altimia herself had said that she had been *lent* the steed.

The official owner was still Ray Starling, and *Infinite Dendrogram* had a rule that all of a Master's possessions would *vanish with them if they were given the death penalty*.

And with that realization, Altimia plummeted towards the surface.

Chapter Thirteen: Trails in the Sky

Quartierlatin County, ruins

This happened some time before Altimia's and Claudiah's duel began.

"The standards don't match," a man wearing shaded goggles groaned.

The man's name was Blue Screen. He was one of the few Altarian Masters who had the High Engineer and High Mechanic jobs, and he was hard at work completing quests here within this SMPS production plant within the ruins near Quartierlatin.

One of the quests was to produce more SMPS, but he had entrusted that to tian technicians he had trained a bit.

He was groaning because of the most difficult quest he had.

Placed on the work platform ahead of him, there was something reminiscent of a horse — one of the five Prism Steeds.

This particular steed had been broken in the previous war.

His remains had been left untouched for a long time, but once the SMPS production plant was discovered, some had suggested that he could be repaired using the relevant facilities.

The steed had since been moved here, and the few technicians Altar had — Blue Screen being foremost among them — were hard at work restoring him.

"So, how's it going?"

"Still about 80% done. There's ways in which this thing completely deviates from the SMPS standards."

Blue Screen was joined by Dum-Dum, his friend and the leader of their clan, Rising Sun. In his hands were containers of drinking water.

"Also, we already did some repairs using mass-production unit parts, so it already won't be as good as it used to be. It'll be like... 80% as good, at best."

Mid-repair, Prism Steed's appearance was different than it had been before he was broken.

The most notable change was the color. He used to be all gold, but since he had been repaired using SMPS parts, he was now steel-colored in places.

"So that's the situation, huh?"

"Well, my Embryo's machine-related, technically, but it specs in *stopping* machines. No matter how hard I try, I can't do as good a job as the Triangle of Wisdom guys who got ones that're all about *making* machines."

Triangle of Wisdom was a crafting clan that boasted many members who had knowledge of machines from real life.

Due to this, they had a number of members who had Embryos that could be used for machine production.

"I see, I see... By the way, this thing's worth a real fortune, you know."

"Dude, it's a national treasure. I don't wanna follow in the footsteps of the dumbass who stole some Caldinian treasure only to drop it."

There were several cases where Masters had stolen national treasures, and that particular incident was a well-known failure. The person had not only dropped the stolen treasure, but also got on every wanted list for doing so. It was downright comedic.

The criminal's name, incidentally, was Gerbera, and she was now moping in the gaol.

"But man, *Dendro* sure is somethin'. It's this kinda swords-and-fireballs magic fantasy land, but it's also got this sci-fi shit too."

"Hm..."

"What's up, Blue?"

"About that... You know how this was made by some 'Grand Artificer Flagman' from the pre-ancient civ?"

"Yeah. That's what it says when I use Identification on it."

"That guy made *way too much*."

"...Whaddya mean?" Dum-Dum said while tilting his head.

Blue Screen himself sounded quizzical as he continued "This ruin had records of the past, including some data about the history of the pre-ancient civ. Among them was uh... sort of a timeline for tech."

"What about it?"

"As I read it, I realized that pretty much everything we Masters find in ruins that makes us go 'whoa' — Flagman was behind all of it."

"Hm...?"

"There's tons of tech he wasn't *directly* involved in, but even those things have something that can be traced back to him. Besides that, there *is* tech that he didn't touch, but it's all low-quality."

"So...?"

"That means the pre-ancient civilization wasn't an advanced civ, but a civ that Flagman *made* advanced. Edison, Tesla, Bell... he did the work of many geniuses all by himself."

"...Man, what is it with *Dendro* and over-the-top NPCs?" Dum-Dum thought as he remembered what he heard of The Era of the Peerless Three. "I can't tell if it's really well thought out or if they're just making it all up as they go along."

Blue Screen then...

"...But it's not like you *can't* do what Flagman did."

...Went on to basically deny what he had just said.

"Huh? There's no way anybody could start a tech revolution that insane."

"Listen, the reason his tech revolution seems that insane is that—" Before he could present his hypothesis to Dum-Dum, a third voice reached their ears.

"Everyone! There's an emergency!" one of the technicians shouted as he opened the door. "We were just informed that negotiations at the Old Lunnings Duchy have broken down! Her Majesty Altimia and the Masters under her command are now fighting Dryfe's forces."

The officials accompanying Altimia had sent out the message, and it had now finally reached here.

The news made Dum-Dum furrow his brow.

"Whoa now, they're not gonna invade through Quartierlatin, are they?" Quartierlatin bordered Dryfe, so there was indeed a chance that they would attack that way. The quest income here was good, and both Dum-Dum and Blue Screen were planning on growing their clan soon, so they didn't like that scenario one bit.

What now? Dum-Dum thought. *If it comes to that, should we loot this treasure and some SMPS? Don't think anyone'd notice us during an invasion.*

As such outrageous thoughts were passing through Dum-Dum's head...

"...Huh?"

...Blue Screen was taken aback by a certain change before him.

"What's wrong...? Hmm?!" Dum-Dum followed his friend's gaze and noticed it as well.

The Prism Steed on the work platform had stood up.

It had been completely deactivated until now, but it was actually *moving*.

This wasn't the only change, either. The materials they'd left near the Prism Steed while repairing it were floating in the air around him.

This is... magnetism? Oh yeah... I was told that this one's lightning-element... It specializes in controlling electricity and magnetism.

The Prism Steed then went on to blast the floating parts with immense electricity from within his body.

The production plant was drowned in blinding light, but Blue Screen's shaded goggles allowed him to see exactly what was happening.

"Plasma cutting and spark machining... Is it re-constructing the parts to produce what's missing by *itself*? And machining using its own electricity?"

Within the blinding light, the material slowly began to change shape, assuming forms that fit perfectly into place. The Prism Steed had completely overcome the standardization problem that had had Blue Screen stumped.

The parts then gathered around the Prism Steed and joined with it.

Once the work was done, there was a complete — albeit multi-colored — Prism Steed standing there.

The sight had struck Blue Screen speechless.

The Prism Steed faced him... and gave him a slight nod of the head. It was as though he was thanking the engineer for restoring him to the point where he could move on his own.

A moment later, the Prism Steed looked up and released another burst of electricity.

The machinery in the facility reacted to the electromagnetic waves and opened up the retractable ceiling.

With that, the Prism Steed left, leaving behind only a trail of golden light and the still-open roof.

The Rising Sun members and the technicians were completely dumbfounded by what had just happened.

Eventually, Blue Screen asked, "...Am I responsible for this?"

"Let's give an honest explanation. Given what just happened, you might not get any flak for it."

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Altar-Dryfe border, sky

Caught in gravity’s inexorable grip, Altimia plummeted towards the surface.

The one thing dominating her thoughts was Ray’s current state. If Silver had truly vanished because Ray had received the death penalty, then Behemot had likely already turned the surface into a barren wasteland.

However, Altimia couldn’t believe that to be the case.

Ray would never just die for nothing...! She believed that even if he had gotten the death penalty, it was because that was what he had judged necessary.

And there were things Altimia had to do right now herself, so she could meet him again three days later.

“There she is...” As she fell with her back towards the ground, she saw Claudiah and her Jade Storm diving directly down towards her.

Claudiah wouldn’t allow her beloved to fall — but not because she wanted to save her.

At this rate, she will attack me with the lance and I will not be able to defend myself, Altimia thought. The attacks would put her to sleep, and Claudiah would then take her. If that were to happen, Ray’s struggle and death penalty would be for naught.

“...Not yet!” Still falling, Altimia reached into her inventory and took out the SMPS.

Even if Ray had vanished, it was too early to give up. He certainly wouldn’t have given up, if their positions were reversed.

Surrender was never an option as long as there was the will to resist.

“Come to me!” Flung into the air, the SMPS instantly moved according to Altimia’s will. It was slowed than Silver, but faster than Altimia’s falling speed, so it quickly caught up...

“Destruction Sky.”

...Only for it to be utterly pulverized by the tornado-like spell from above, leaving only destroyed remains that fell to the ground alongside Altimia.

“Ah...!” Altimia voiced her shock before clenching her teeth in frustration.

“Against my little brother, that attack would have only left us wide open...” said Jade Storm as he and Claudiah drew ever closer. “...But a mere imitation had no hope of evading it.”

Ray had made the right choice by lending Silver to Altimia. Otherwise, Altimia would’ve lost right away.

Although Jade Storm specialized in mobility, that didn’t mean that he had no offensive ability — he could use tornado magic that rivaled the ultimate job skills of high-rank jobs.

Released with superb precision and as fast as the wind itself, it was simply impossible for an SMPS to evade it.

Basically, only another original could hope to defeat Jade in an aerial battle.

“Ah...!” Claudiah was drawing closer.

Altimia was helpless, and her opponent would attack her until she fell unconscious.

“Not yet...!” However, once Claudiah was close enough to attack, Altimia’s blade would reach her too.

She was not defeated yet.

It was still too early to give up.

“Altimia! This is the end!”

“...Claudiah!” Eventually, the distance between them had shrunk to nearly nothing... but then, a golden light akin to a bolt of lightning sped from the eastern sky and struck Jade Storm.

“What is this?!” Claudiah exclaimed.

“Ah...!” Neither Claudiah nor Jade Storm saw it coming.

The former was laser-focused on dealing with Altimia’s counter attacks once she was close enough, while the latter couldn’t see it because the light was disguised by the remains of the destroyed SMPS.

Having slowed down Jade Storm with the impact, the golden light swooped to catch Altimia’s body.

“This is...!” Altimia instantly understood what this golden light truly was.

The feeling of mounting it was much like the feeling of mounting Silver.

It was a golden unit wreathed in lightning, with steel-colored spots here and there.

Its most notable feature was the single horn growing out of its forehead.

This was the item that she’d had Liliana deliver to Quartierlatin shortly before the Love-Duel Festival.

Altimia could never fail to recognize what it was, and thus spoke its... or rather, *his* name.

“Gold... Thunder!” This was Prism Steed No. 1 — the one on which all the others were based, as well as the trusted mount of the founding king of Altar, the first Azurite.

Having been destroyed once, this relic of the pre-ancient civilization had returned to the battlefield to protect his lady... the new queen.

The national treasure had been revived and now claimed the new Azurite as his owner.

“So you came after all... Gold.”

Altimia patted Gold Thunder’s back, just as she had done years ago.

The steed said nothing, responding only with a shake of his head. Despite being made of metal, he seemed very much like a real horse.

“Recognized a unit of the same type. It has been a while, elder brother.” Jade Storm addressed the sibling he hadn’t seen in over 2,000 years.

Gold Thunder’s response was only silence.

“Wait... Are you...?” Jade said, seemingly having realized something.

Before he could continue, Claudiah began to speak.

“So Gold Thunder has been mended...”

“It appears so,” Altimia replied. “Our technicians did a fine job. Thanks to them... I can still fight.”

Mounting Gold Thunder, Altimia brandished Altar once more.

“Let us start again, Claudiah.”

“And again we are equal, I see... In all honesty, I prefer it this way.”

Thus they resumed their aerial mounted battle.

However, things were different from before, and it wasn’t just the steed Altimia was riding.

“I understand what you mean. Though, let us make one thing clear,” Altimia said with an indomitable smile on her face. “For all of the kingdom’s recorded history, whenever Altar and Gold Thunder were together... they were never once defeated.”

This was the simple truth — as well as the main difference between the battle so far and the battle now.

The next moment, Altimia instantly closed the distance between them.

“Ah...?!” Claudiah gasped as she threw everything into her defense and deflected Altimia’s slash.

Alas, she was a bit too late, and Altar sliced off a bit of Drim Roeg’s side.

“Jade!”

“Storm Acceleration.” Responding to Claudiah, the steed charged forward as fast as possible.

They needed to increase the distance between them and buy time to recover.

Despite that, the golden steed that had once closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye *wasn’t* chasing them.

Well, he actually was... but not at the absurd speed he had displayed before.

Claudiah and Jade had known that it would play out like this.

Gold Thunder was Prism Steed No. 1 — the original model. Specialized in versatility, he was no match for Jade Storm when it came to mobility.

The moment he first closed the distance had been an exception.

“The Ram, this function you just saw was—”

“I know. That was Gold Thunder’s Rail Jump... This is the first time I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

Rail Jump. This was an acceleration skill installed in Gold Thunder, and its effect matched Jade’s Storm Acceleration. Via control over electromagnetism, it created a kind of linear rail in the atmosphere and a barrier around the rider before firing Gold Thunder forwards.

The speed he reached while using it was far above mach 1, and for that moment alone, he was the fastest of all Prism Steeds.

“...Combining that speed with Altar is fearsome indeed,” said Claudiah. “I can see why it has never been defeated.”

An all-rending slash, delivered at the speed of lightning... Some would say Claudiah was the most overpowered thing present, simply for being able to *survive* that onslaught.

“The function can only be used across short distances and requires a cooldown,” said Jade. “Using it expends an extremely high amount of calculation power.”

Using Rail Jump was akin to firing a live human with a railgun. With all the safety measures and countereffect management involved, it was only natural that it should use a high amount of processing power.

“I see. We can deal with it, then. What about his offensive skills?” Claudiah asked.

“They are no threat,” Jade responded. “Before release, the enemy unit’s Plasma Smasher creates a difference in electric potential in the surrounding atmosphere. This unit can sense that change and read the trajectory before release. Moreover...”

“Is there anything else?”

“No. All else irrelevant to assessing the threat he poses.”

“I see. Regardless, we should settle this soon,” Claudiah said as she shot a glance downward. From this height, the scene below looked like a gathering of dots, but Claudiah was able to see one thing very clearly.

In a clearing far below, Chrono had been defeated by Kashimiya.

Due to their immense speed, Claudiah wasn’t able to see the precise moment of his defeat, but the fact that Chrono was the only one left spoke volumes.

Kashimiya has the highest chance of victory against Behemot, Claudiah thought. *It would be different if she used her trump card, but... as things are, he could be able to defeat her.*

With Silver’s disappearance, Ray Starling’s death penalty had been all but confirmed.

However, Claudiah didn’t know what became of the rest of the peace conference entourage, including the two Superiors — Tsukuyo Fuso and Shu Starling.

If she didn’t end this battle in time, Behemot might very well lose, which would leave them all free to assist Altimia.

“Our next attack will end this. We will assume an advantageous position over Rail Jump and defeat Altimia with a counterattack.”

“Understood,” Jade replied. Claudiah’s statement was full of certainty, for she knew that they were fully capable of doing exactly what she’d just described.

She had thoroughly examined Jade Storm’s capabilities the moment she’d discovered him, and she’d also investigated the Altarian treasure Altimia was now riding.

Thus, Claudiah knew that Jade Storm was capable of countering Gold Thunder’s Rail Jump.

Waiting for the perfect time, the two riders flew while maintaining some distance between each other.

"Brother, I have a question for you," Jade spoke to Gold. "The Rail Jump you just used was somewhat slower than the speed written in the specifications. Your standard flight speed is also about 80% of what it should be."

Unlike their words thus far, these lines weren't riding the wind, but communicated to Gold directly using the comms function installed in all Prism Steeds.

The signal was separate from all others, well-compressed, and delivered at an extremely fast speed.

However, Gold Thunder said nothing in return.

"So you did indeed lose your communication function. I see that some of your parts have been replaced by imitations, as well. You cannot match a complete unit like myself in that state."

Silence.

"How disgraceful. As you are now, even the younger brother was a stronger foe."

Jade spoke of his brother with a contempt one would never expect from a machine.

He was not exactly wrong, either. Right now, Gold Thunder's speed was higher than that of an SMPS, but below that of Zephyrus Silver.

"...Ha!" Gold Thunder let out a strange sound. It might've been merely some noise produced by the complex machinery within his body, but to Jade Storm, it seemed like a response to his words — a chuckle.

Upon hearing what sounded like mockery, Jade revved up the machinery within his body, as though to represent his anger.

This feeling seemed to be mixed with a strong resolve to make certain his brother suffered a second obliteration.

He was fully intent on breaking through Gold's Rail Jump and using Destruction Sky to eliminate him once Claudiah defeated Altimia.

Jade waited for the opportunity, and it soon came.

This was accompanied by a distinct change in Gold Thunder's rider.

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While Claudiah caught a glimpse of Chrono’s defeat, Altimia also had her eyes on the surface.

From this altitude, she could see far and wide, and there on the horizon was the city of Altea, sending up smoke and fire like a lit candle.

That was all she needed to know that time was short, so she resolved to end the battle as quickly as possible... *even if it cost her everything*.

“You are the boundary.”

She began to weave a certain ritual prayer.

“The boundary between what was and what will be.”

These words were older than the era of the founding king—older, even, than the most distant of written history—and they were given only to those Altar saw as worthy.

“You divide all that exists. All things are either ‘before’ or ‘after’ you.”

These were words for the skill called “Release,” which unleashed the power hidden within the holy sword.

“Fire, water, wind, earth, life, death, time, space... None can escape you.”

This prayer was the password to unlock the second safety lock on Altar’s true form.

“Carve into creation.” It was the Sacred Princess’ ultimate job skill, passed down to her by the blade Altar itself.

“*The Primeval Boundary!*”

And Altimia had just invoked it.

■■■■■■■■■■!

A moment later, there was a rumble as though the world itself had begun to shriek, and Altar's blade vanished completely.

No... Not *completely*.

Altar had merely begun cutting *even the light that hit it*, making its blade impossible to perceive.

Without saying a word, Altimia moved the sword... and it cut through *space itself*.

But unlike with King of Destruction's World Breaker, the tears in space did not close up, but remained there. Once touched by Altar, the space that had been cut by the sword's edge became fixed that way, as though it was the true and natural state of the world.

There was no good or evil here — by merely existing, Altar now tore apart the universe itself, changing it on a fundamental level.

The Primeval Blade was often called sacred, but now it carried a power more fearsome than the most cursed of weapons. Its strength could not even be compared to the power of the "ordinary" Altar that Altimia had been wielding thus far. The princess hadn't used this final ability because it came at a cost that made the phrase "double-edged sword" seem lacking.

But she had been pushed into taking up this power to protect those she held dear.

"...Gh!"

Following the release, Altimia was overwhelmed by an intense dissipation of energy.

Her physical fatigue from the battle so far began to pale as Altar now consumed her magic, mental, and life forces — MP, SP, and HP — at an alarming rate.

Clenching her teeth to endure this life-rending side-effect, Altimia fixed her eyes on Claudiah.

"...Let us end this, Claudiah."

"...Yes! It almost seems a shame not to draw this out more, but I also intend to end this now!" Thus, the two riders and their steeds charged towards each other.

A moment later, Gold Thunder used Rail Jump once again.

Tearing apart the space she traveled through, Altimia moved into an advantageous position at a speed that was impossible to follow.

However, as though he had anticipated where their enemies would go, Jade Storm had evaded them with a blast of air.

"I see you!" he said. He could predict where they were going to go because of the many layers of wind he had placed around him.

Since Rail Jump essentially turned Gold and his rider into a bullet, it could only "shoot" them in a straight line. Because of this, Jade Storm was able to predict their final position by tracing their effects upon the many curtains of wind he had set up around them.

That allowed him to release a blast of air just in time to move himself slightly out of the way of Altimia and Gold's final position.

A sword had a shorter range than a lance, so this deadly attack became a perfect opportunity for a counter.

And so, Claudiah used Paradox Stinger to attack Altimia's head.

The word "victory" appeared in Jade Storm's processing circuitry, but then...

"You are exactly as the specifications stated, Jade."

...He heard those words on the Prism Steed comms channel.

"Your communication function is active...!" In the moment their riders clashed, the two steeds had this hyper-fast exchange.

"It is as you say," Gold continued. "While I am no longer exactly what I used to be, you have not changed since you were constructed."

"Of course. I was preserved perfectly, and not much time has passed since I was reactivated."

"And that is why... you have lost, Jade."

"What...?"

"2569 times. That is the greatest difference between you and I."

"Hm...?" Jade Storm didn't understand what Gold meant by that.

But that wasn't the only thing that had him confused.

The more pressing problem was that Gold Thunder *had vanished from right before him*.

And the next moment, Altimia appeared in an advantageous position yet again, ready to swing her blade.

"How...?!" Jade Storm's reading of the situation had returned only an error.

No one could blame him.

After all, the only possible explanation for what had just happened was that...

“...You used Rail Jump twice in a row?! Impossible! That cannot...!”

It was impossible indeed.

The intense calculations Rail Jump required made it impossible to use without a long cooldown.

Gold’s original specifications simply wouldn’t allow for something like this to happen.

However... Those specifications Jade Storm was familiar with were no longer accurate.

Gold Storm did indeed have a lower base ability due to the SMPS replacement parts all over him... *and he was more skilled than before due to the 2569 battles he had experienced*.

The latter was exactly what had allowed him to make this phenomenon a reality.

Prism Steed No. 1, Gold Thunder, was the oldest, the template for all other Prism Steeds, as well as the most battle-hardened of them all. As the national treasure of the royal family, he had fought many battles as the mount of Altar’s kings and their most loyal knights.

During it all, Gold Thunder had refined himself. He had improved his programming, sharpened his functions, and incorporated a strong intuition for battle into his calculations.

Eventually, he crafted techniques that allowed him to use Rail Jump without being influenced by his rider’s use of Altar, as well as the ability to use Rail Jump multiple times in a row.

That was the greatest difference between Gold Thunder and Jade Storm — an immense gap in battle experience.

“Ah...!” The second Rail Jump was unexpected, but Claudiah was quick to adjust.

She instantly noticed it happening and moved to counter Altimia’s attack with a second Paradox Stinger, but...

“...Ohh.”

...As she thrust Drim Roeg, she noticed that *it only had half of its tip*.

A moment later, the other half of Drim Roeg’s point fell from what had been the spear’s initial position.

“...I see what’s happening.” Paradox Stinger was a peerless technique that changed the initial point of a spear’s thrust by bending space itself.

Therefore, Altimia, who wielded a power even greater than that — a calamity in weapon form — was able to break through it.

She had cut both the lance itself and the space it occupied in the middle of the lightning-fast Rail Jump, never giving Claudiah a chance to deflect.

For one long moment, Claudiah stared at the remains of her weapon and the tip that had fallen far out of reach.

Her body trembled slightly.

Next to her, there was Altimia, whose blade had completed its arc.

“...So the battle was decided by the difference between the tools at our disposal,” the princess of Altar quietly said.

It might’ve been her way of consoling her friend.

“No... You are simply far more capable than me.” Claudiah contradicted her friend’s words, assuring Altimia that it was indeed her own ability that led to this outcome.

A moment later, Jade Storm’s head and Claudiah’s right artificial arm were severed, and a blade wound opened up on her right side.

“I... have been defeated.” Admitting that she had lost this battle, Claudiah plummeted towards the surface along with the now-headless Jade Storm.

Chapter From the Past: The First SUBM

2044, July

A year had passed since *Dendro* had released, which translated to three years within the game.

It was only by chance that Behemot encountered it in one of the most remote regions of the imperium.

She was out on a quest from her friend, Claudiah — more specifically, Claudiah's alternate persona, Reinhard. He had requested that she investigate an area in the northern reaches of the country.

Due to an immense drought and its proximity to Harshwinter Mountains, the climate was extremely cold there, and the change in environment had attracted powerful monsters that some years ago had driven out the people who lived in the area.

There were no towns here that would be occupied by monster-hunting Masters, so as a result, the far reaches of Dryfe had become essentially uninhabitable.

To make matters worse, this problem seemed to be spreading deeper into the imperium, and Reinhard believed that it would eventually envelop the entire country.

There were two reasons why he had sent Behemot there specifically.

One was to look into the causes of the drought. She was to gather soil from several designated places and bring it to him for study.

The other was to investigate some local ruins. An old text he had acquired from a particular source said that there were ruins somewhere in the area, and Behemot needed to confirm if that was true.

Dendro's one year anniversary event was also in progress. There were event monsters everywhere, so Behemot also saw this as an opportunity to go hunting in an area with no other players.

However, there were two things that neither Behemot nor Reinhard himself could have anticipated.

First was her encounter with a certain Master.

For reasons unknown to her, a vagrant Superior was occupying a destroyed village in the area.

And the other thing was... an SUBM.

It was a massive gargoyle, shining in a manner reminiscent of both gold and silver, and its name was “Lone Yet Unmatched, Greatest One.”

It had appeared here at the edge of Dryfe and advanced towards the center of the country.

This was not purely by coincidence. Most SUBMs were deployed away from any capital cities and moved towards the nearest one while fighting any Masters they encountered.

That was the standard, and out of the four that had come after Greatest One, only Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru was an exception.

Thus, Greatest One — the first SUBM — was deployed as part of the anniversary of *Dendro*’s release, and was meant to advance towards Vandelheim.

However, two Superiors were there to witness the deployment.

These two quickly understood that the SUBM was headed towards the capital, and at that point, they already knew what they had to do.

Behemot had no reason to ignore a colossal monster that would attack the city her friend inhabited, while the other Master had no reason *not* to stop a beast that would lay waste to anything in its path.

The two Superiors then cooperated to fight the Greatest One.

The battle was intense beyond description.

As the first SUBM, it was something of a test case. Greatest One was made out of a metal that could withstand any attack and surpassed even Mythical metal in toughness... a Superior metal.

It was also immune to temperature changes, as well as all kinds of offensive magic.

Its powers weren’t only defensive, of course. Its wings granted it the ability to break the yoke of gravity, its tail vibrated at a high frequency and pulverized all it touched, and its maw was a maser cannon that scorched any living creatures it touched.

Even The Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, said to be the strongest SUBM, could only win against Greatest One by using its enhanced Fatal Field.

While Gloria had taken the title of strongest thanks to its special characteristics, Greatest One was, well... the greatest of them all thanks to its pure combat ability.

Being such a powerful creature, it was an excellent method of testing the Dryfean Masters trying to stop it from destroying their country — perhaps spurring them to evolve into Superiors.

Greatest One could have become an even greater calamity to the imperium than Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick was to Granvaloa or Gloria was to Altar, maybe even destroying the country utterly.

However, this absurdly powerful creature wasn't recorded in history... for it had encountered *them*, and to make a long story short, following a battle that shook heaven and earth, Greatest One was defeated.

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"How fearsome. I can scarcely tell who the true monster is here," a half-sarcastic, half-honest voice spoke as the fragments of Greatest One dissolved into motes of light.

This was addressed to Behemot and Leviathan, who, now that the battle was over, had returned to her human form.

The speaker was a girl with purple hair. She had a slight build and wore a dress of ancient Grecian design as purple as her hair.

This was Behemot's comrade in arms... or rather, his Embryo.

"Hmm... both Master Dearest and the critter are the MVPs. I was not aware that there were UBMs that gave multiple." She chuckled as she listened to the announcement in her head.

Since this was the first SUBM ever encountered, these were the first Superior MVP special rewards ever received, as well as the first time there were multiple MVPs for the same UBM.

"Master Dearest" was how this Embryo referred to her Master — a gaunt man with deep dark circles under his eyes. For an avatar, he didn't seem to be in good health.

He looked at the reward he'd received before sighing in what seemed like disappointment and putting it away. Then, he turned away from the others and began looking around the completely destroyed, abandoned village, apparently searching for something.

"...That's quite the attitude for someone who only got MVP because of us," said Leviathan with a menacing tone, clearly irritated by both the

Embryo and her Master.

During the battle, Behemot and her Embryo dealt the vast majority of the damage to Greatest One, yet the MVP special reward was split between Behemot and the other Superior — a fact which greatly irked Leviathan.

“I am not sure I agree,” said the purple girl. “There is more to battle than fisticuffs. The little critter here seems to understand that. A beast of your size surely has a bigger brain capable of comprehending *much* more than she can, no?”

“You’re *dead*.” Leviathan bared her fangs and prepared to attack.

“Levia, stay,” said Behemot, stopping her Embryo in her tracks.

The porcupine Master actually agreed with the girl here. Behemot and Leviathan were no doubt the ones who’d pulverized Greatest One’s metal body using their ultimate skill, but the girl and her Master were the ones who’d dealt with all the other problems... the many abilities that the gargoyle possessed as an SUBM.

Thus, Behemot fully agreed with the MVP special reward split.

“We were able to defeat that before it could do any damage anyhow,” said the girl. “We also received a special reward each. Let us consider this done and do what we came here to do. Master Dearest and I are looking for something in this abandoned village, while you have to investigate the nearby ruins. Oh, by the way, the entrance to them is about three kilometels to the east. Although... Our intense battle here seems to have collapsed it.”

“...That’s supposed to be classified information for the imperium.”

“That means nothing to us. Classified information for the living is common knowledge for the dead. Hm? Oh, did you find it, Master Dearest? Let us take our leave, then. May we meet again, if the fates so decree.”

With their business done, the girl and her Master — the Superior — walked away from Behemot and Leviathan.

The threat of the walking calamity known as Greatest One ended before it could properly begin, with no one but two people even knowing it.

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However, Behemot was left with two problems.

First, she couldn’t actually investigate the ruins.

They did indeed exist, but just as the girl had said, the shockwaves from the battle against Greatest One had completely buried the underground passage leading inside. Trying to dig it out could have resulted in even more damage, so they had no choice but return to Vandelheim without investigating the ruins.

Delving into these ruins would require more people now, and since Reinhard needed time to gather them, the operations were postponed and only ended up happening once he became imperator. The ruins also ended up being the place where Jade Storm was discovered, but that is a story for another time.

Behemot faced the second problem once she reported the Greatest One incident to Reinhard.

Upon hearing the story, he spent a moment thinking about it until he said, “Please keep this secret.”

“Hm?”

“This special UBM... An ‘SUBM,’ was it? Similar entities are bound to appear again, and I believe that they would have the observers behind them.”

“The control AI?”

“Yes. This was likely what you Masters call ‘an event.’”

Behemot quickly understood what he meant. Raids against massive world bosses had yet to happen in *Infinite Dendrogram*, but they were common in most MMOs — though it was rather disturbing that something like that would be released on the first anniversary.

“However, based on our information, nothing like it appeared in other countries, so I believe that there will be some time in between their appearances.”

“I see.”

“There is no guarantee that they would appear in the same country twice in a row, though. In fact the probability of that is low. It is more likely that the other will appear in one of the other six nations.”

“So it’s like a rotation.”

“That is why revealing this information is disadvantageous to us. The ludo Masters would not appreciate missing a chance to participate in a hunt for a special UBM.”

“I see. You want them to believe that we haven’t gotten one yet and that it might come soon.”

“Indeed. That would help us maintain our power as a country.”

People would leave if they found out that such a highly anticipated event would not be occurring in Dryfe.

Due to the drought and the associated change in environment as well as increases in monsters, Masters were highly useful to the imperium, so it would be most undesirable if they left.

There was the chance that the other Superior or his Embryo would reveal it, but through their cooperation, Behemot knew that neither of them were the type. Regardless, Reinhard was considering meeting them in person when the time was right.

“Okay. So I shouldn’t use this special reward I got, right?”

“Indeed. You can use it against monsters, but please refrain from doing so where other people might see you.”

“All right. I promise I won’t use it, Claudiah.”

“Hm...? I am Reinhard.” Since this was before the personas shared information, Reinhard did not yet know that he and his “little sister” were one and the same.

“...My mistake. It’s a promise, Reinhard.”

Just like that, Behemot made a promise to Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe.

She kept it well, and there was never a need for her to break it.

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Time passed, and on the day of the peace talks between Altar and Dryfe, she was left with no choice but to do just that.

...I’m sorry, Claudiah, Behemot thought, gathering her resolve as she faced Ray Starling, who was about to release Monochrome’s concentrated laser from his left hand.

Not even she could survive an attack like this, and to avoid that, she could only use *that* special reward.

Thus, she resolved to break her promise.

After all, protecting Claudiah was more important than keeping the promise.

And so, right before Ray’s deadly strike was released...

“Transformation... Soaring and Indomitable: Greatest Top!”

...She unleashed her SUBM special reward.

Chapter Fourteen: Soaring and Indomitable

Altar-Dryfe border

The peace talks had gone awry, sparking a conflict between the kingdom and the imperium, and the people who had a solid grasp of all the simultaneous battles currently occurring were few and far between.

Those who were currently fighting had no attention to spare on the others, so the only ones who could observe them all were the spectators — Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin and King of Light, F.

Having been defeated by Ray, they now observed him from afar.

Their vision spanned the entire area around the assembly hall, so they saw the conclusion to the battle between the princesses, as well as the struggle against Behemot that had ended earlier.

Thus, they could understand the significance of both battles.

Although Altimia had defeated Claudiah, it had no bearing on whether she was ultimately victorious — even if Claudiah was defeated, it would mean nothing as long as The Physical Apex waiting for them on the surface wasn't also overcome.

Because of this, the Altarian Masters' fight would decide the true outcome of the battle in the sky... and it was already known that Ray Starling had fallen.

That had been confirmed the moment Silver vanished... or perhaps the very moment he had resolved to face The Physical Apex herself. Weaklings like him had no business fighting the strongest Masters that existed, let alone defeating them, so this outcome was only to be expected.

Even if challenging an apex meant that his death penalty was assured, though, it didn't mean that his resolve would ever be broken, or even bent.

After all, the conclusion to this conflict relied on more than just Behemot defeating Ray Starling.

Most people would only learn the true significance of this battle and its outcome in the not-so-distant future, but for now, it was only known to those select few who'd witnessed Ray's battle.

Let us now rewind time to see what transpired...

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

Ray's left hand, transformed into Monochrome's cannon, fired its Shining Despair at Behemot's forehead from point-blank range.

In terms of pure firepower, this was likely one of the strongest attacks that anyone present possessed. Their entire strategy revolved around this very attack, and Rook had even sacrificed himself to see it delivered.

"ND." Behemot spoke using her usual internet slang — this meant "no damage," and Behemot's current state clearly showed that she was correct — the attack had been blocked by something made of a metal reminiscent of both gold and silver.

"Wh-What...?!"

This metal appeared out of nowhere and seemingly *replaced* Behemot, but Ray's Reveal told him that she still stood before him.

The metal mass concealing Behemot's form had the head of a beast on the top, as well as wings and forelegs several times larger than her hind legs. At first glance, she now looked like a massive, top-heavy beast.

Behemot's transformation was reminiscent of equipment switching achieved via Instant Wear or the transformation caused by items like Kim-un-Kamuy.

Speculation as to the barrier's nature coursed through the minds of everyone who witnessed it, but one thing was obvious: *Shining Despair had failed to pierce the metal*.

The laser had struck the metal head, and despite the insane heat condensed into that single point, the beam hadn't so much as changed the metal's color. It was as though the barrier was completely immune to any changes in temperature.

This is actual immunity! And not just to light like Monochrome, but heat as well! Ray thought, remembering what B3 had told him about resistances.

He was right. The Superior special reward named "Sky Supremacy, Greatest Top" did indeed give Behemot immunity to heat—but there was more to it than that.

All special rewards reflected the UBM they dropped from; the reward Behemot had received from Greatest One featured its absolute immunity to changes in temperature.

Even in the depths of an active volcano or the freezing cold of the most desolate glacier, the comfortable warmth of the Greatest Top she was wearing would not change one bit.

“Gh!” Ray realized that Behemot did indeed know every card in their hand. That was why she switched to gear that could withstand his deadly Shining Despair. He was still channeling the laser, but it wasn’t inflicting even a single point of damage.

Still basking in the deadly light, Behemot moved to leave B3’s gravity field.

“No way,” someone muttered as they witnessed her actions. Behemot floated upwards using the wings she had grown using her special reward, seemingly ignoring the effect of the 5,000 times increased gravity. This was actually another effect she had inherited from Greatest One — the skill called “Nullgravity Wings,” which allowed her to forcefully reduce the surrounding gravity to zero, effectively letting her levitate.

No matter how powerful the pull of gravity was, these wings would never let her succumb to it.

Shining Despair and Heaven’s Weight.

By mere chance, Greatest Top had completely negated the combination that was supposed to annihilate Behemot.

But chance or not... the situation was now completely changed.

“Prez! Switch to AGI!” B3 shouted to Tsukuyo, realizing that gravity no longer held any meaning.

Nullgravity Wings, though potent, didn’t allow for particularly speedy flight — Behemot wasn’t even close to Mach 1.

However, the moment she escaped the gravity field, she could switch to moving with her own feet again—and her immense AGI, now undivided by Faint Light, would let her instantly slaughter everyone around her.

“I already did!” Tsukuyo shouted, fully aware of the danger.

At the same time, Marie and Eishiro prepared to attack Behemot.

Ray remained motionless, because Shining Despair was still firing, while B3 had to maintain her gravity field to buy more time.

The outcome of this battle would now be decided either after they regrouped once Behemot landed, or by Marie and Tsukikage's attacks before that.

That was what Ray's party thought, at least... but Behemot had different plans.

Still floating, she turned, and a portion of the metal head opened up towards Ray and B3, revealing and firing its *maser cannon*.

The cannon released a deadly wave that vaporized everything at the molecular level by vibrating the individual molecules until their structure broke down.

It sliced through the air, not even releasing any light as it destroyed even the water molecules in its path, the scenery refracting around the wave as it sped towards Ray and B3.

B3 gasped as the warped space made her realize what kind of attack this was—and that, now armorless, she couldn't withstand it.

In fact, even Magnum Colossus would be meaningless in the face of an attack like this.

I... won't survive this, B3 thought with certainty.

And thus, discarding her own chances of survival, she shoved Ray away with her left shoulder right before the maser beam hit.

Because of their difference in stats, pushing him was easy..

And the very next moment, the maser struck home.

"Ah—"

B3's body began to sizzle and break down as though being microwaved. Though she didn't feel pain, she acutely felt the sensation of her body boiling as her HP dropped to zero in a mere heartbeat.

Her Brooch was quickly shattered... and she received the death penalty.

"B3...!" Ray cried out. He was still alive thanks to her, but he wasn't exactly unscathed.

B3 had pushed him aside, but not enough for him to fully escape the maser beam.

His right arm had caught in it, and the vibration wave had literally melted his flesh. Next to where B3's body had vanished, he could see the steaming bones of his right hand — along with the Miasmaflame Bracer he'd been wearing.

"Gh...! Not yet!"

Monochrome had changed shape back into its usual coat form.

Shining Despair was no longer an effective option.

He had lost his trump card and a tactically important item.

Even so... just as he said, the battle wasn't over yet, and Behemot fully agreed.

"R2," she declared the start of round two. With B3 dead, the gravity field was gone, so she landed on all fours again before *instantly charging straight at Ray*.

"Ah!" he gasped before using his AGI — still boosted by Chaser From the Mirror — to back away from her.

Losing his right arm made it harder for him to balance himself, but for better or worse, he'd lived without an arm for nearly a month, so he had enough experience to compensate for the loss.

Since their speed was the same, Behemot could have caught up to him just like she'd caught up to Rook — but unlike Ray, she wasn't accustomed to her current form.

She had kept Greatest Top a secret ever since acquiring it.

With Franklin possibly having eyes everywhere in the form of surveillance monsters all across the imperium, Behemot almost never had the opportunity to actually use the special reward, so she didn't have the experience needed to fight at high speeds while equipped with it.

On top of that, Greatest Top's form made her forelegs larger than her back ones, which would have made it difficult to move even if she was used to it.

Ray vaguely understood this as well — during their strategy crafting, B3 had never once mentioned this form, which could only mean that she had no data about it.

Also, she's not flying anymore...! he thought. *Running is faster, so I guess that's the obvious thing to do. Her flying was more like floating, and it probably wasn't even close to sonic.*

Behemot's "flying" was mere levitation. Compared to running at supersonic speeds, it was so slow it was almost *boring*.

If she was able to fly as fast as she ran, the battle would have already been over.

But even taking all that into consideration...

This piece of gear is way too powerful... It's past even Mythical level, *so... is it a Superior special reward...? From the first...?*

Without Identification, Ray couldn't even see its name, but based on its power alone, he correctly assumed that it was an MVP special reward from the very first SUBM.

But it's too powerful even for a Superior reward! Fire immunity, gravity immunity, the heat ray, that defense...! It's way better than what Figaro and the others got...!

Gloria α — a sword with a powerful light beam.

Gloria β — a wand that instakilled certain targets.

Suling Yi — a dagger that possessed potent enhancement powers.

When compared to the three Superior rewards Ray knew about, Greatest Top clearly had too many abilities.

It was overpowered even when you considered that it took up multiple equipment slots.

It has to have some drawback. One serious enough to balance out the power it gives...!

Ray was right to assume that, for Greatest Top most certainly had a fatal flaw.

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I guess I'll start by getting rid of Ray... then chase the other two out of the shadows, Behemot thought.

She was actually in a hurry.

Thinking through the process that would lead her to victory, the porcupine said to herself, *I have 4 minutes and 10 seconds left*.

That was the time limit for Greatest Top, which *could only be worn for five minutes*.

The skill to equip it cost no MP or SP, but in exchange, it would be canceled the moment its duration ended.

And to make matters worse, it had a cooldown of *500 in-Dendro hours*.

That was another reason why she had always refrained from using it. Greatest Top essentially ensured her victory in whatever battle she was currently fighting, but if this flaw became widely known, it would be used against her in every battle that followed.

That was why Behemot intended to end this within 4 minutes and 10 seconds, even if that meant taking seemingly reckless actions that might put her in danger.

"...Levia," Behemot spoke in her mind.

"Behemot!" Leviathan replied.

The distance between them was too great for Master-Embryo telepathy, but that was not a problem. They communicated using the ultimate job skill of the King of Beasts. It was called "Beastheart, As One" and it allowed a direct exchange of will between all monsters under Beastheart Possession's effect.

It was fairly tame for the ultimate job skill of something like King of Beasts, the Physical Apex, but that was the jaguarman grouping for you — a grouping focused on cooperation with their monsters... their true partners.

"You're—!"

"I had to use Greatest Top. They're strong, and I'm having fun."

Leviathan was worried about her Master, but Behemot's response wasn't just a lie to calm her down. She'd been cornered... but that was a rarity these days, so she genuinely *enjoyed* it.

"Behemot..."

"I can't just sit back and enjoy this, though. I'll beat them all before Greatest Top's time runs out. Hang in there until then. Once I'm done, I'll come to you... and we'll beat Shu with our ult."

"...Understood." The conversation ended, and they focused on their individual battles, uncertain how things would end.

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Altar-Dryfe Border, mountains... or rather, a wasteland

How long had it been since their battle began?

Shu and Leviathan had been fighting longer than Behemot and Ray's group. The many clashes between these beasts of metal and flesh had leveled mountains, turning the area into a wasteland of dirt and rubble.

...She's still standing, Shu thought, making a bitter face. It would normally be hidden by his costume, but here in the cockpit, it was fully exposed.

Leviathan's vigor was the reason behind Shu's bitterness.

Both Shu and Leviathan knew full well that if this battle continued in this manner, Shu would emerge victorious. With Shu's stats, technique, and armaments, the chances of him losing to the kaiju were low.

However, there was a discrepancy in their predictions which showed that ultimately, Leviathan's estimate had been more accurate

Specifically, it was about the time until Leviathan would be defeated.

Based on Shu's assumptions, Leviathan should have already fallen by now — but she was still in relatively good health and even still had about half of her vast total HP.

There were three reasons why Shu had miscalculated.

First was the fact that he hadn't gotten a single chance to finish her off. Both of them were prioritizing offense, but Leviathan always backed away whenever it counted — in other words, just when Shu would prepare to do a finishing move.

The moment he prepared to use his final skill, the moment he tried to make an opening for a decisive strike using his armaments, or when he was about to mix some limb-destroying techniques into his normal attacks... During every pivotal moment, Leviathan would always make distance between her and Baldr.

She was able to do this partially due to her greater AGI, but also because of her beastly instincts.

Leviathan was a Guardian with almost no actual skills, but as a beast, she had a natural sense for danger. His experience and perception was more than matched by Leviathan's instinct, preventing him from delivering the deciding blow.

...What a pain, he thought.

The second reason was Leviathan's equipment.

Normally, she only equipped conceal-focused accessories and human gear, and only while camouflaged as human. However, there was gear that could be equipped by tamed creatures and Guardians. Legendaria was a notable source for such items, but Leviathan was far too large to wear anything they produced — and besides, no equipment would be able to withstand being worn by her.

But there was one exception...

"...I didn't know you had a special reward that gives you regeneration."

...The existence of an MVP special reward adjusted not for Behemot, but Leviathan herself.

The accessory was clinging to her immense frame, constantly restoring her HP.

"I wouldn't wear it if I wasn't fighting you. We're too strong to easily hide everything in our hand, but we'll still conceal anything we can."

"Makes sense." It was an obvious strategy for the pair to use, and because of this hidden piece of equipment, over half of the damage Shu had dealt had been restored by now.

I guess it periodically restores a portion of her HP, Shu thought. *Even if it's like 0.1% per second, her total HP is so high that ends up being like 20,000 per second... Also, I guess drinking that potion back in Gideon was basically a bluff, huh?*

He had to attack her at least once every ten seconds to actually make a significant dent in her health.

Honestly, it was impressive that he'd even been able to take away half of her 20,000,000+ HP.

It'd be fine if this was just a matter of giving this fight a little more time, but...

Wild instincts and a special reward. If these two things were the only problems, Shu could still win.

However, that was where the third problem came in.

"...You sure got passive," Shu commented. Leviathan said nothing in response. About when her HP dropped to 40%, Leviathan became significantly less aggressive.

No... in fact, she had clearly switched focus on *prolonging* this battle.

She attacked less and instead threw everything into defense, evasion, and healing.

...I guess I underestimated how clever she is, Shu thought. Leviathan had known from the start that she would lose against him, yet she still succumbed to her instinct for strife and fought with all she could... at least at the start.

Despite being beastlike and driven by instinct, Leviathan always put Behemot above all.

Nothing was more important to her than Behemot's orders and helping Behemot win.

Because of this, her top priority was to simply survive until Behemot's victory was assured — and her desire to enjoy the fight vanished by the time her HP had dropped to 40%.

She had also just communicated with her Master using Beastheart, As One, and this had made her even more cautious.

This is bad, Shu thought. Even with Baldr's ult, Shu had less AGI and END than Leviathan, so even he would have a hard time winning a prolonged battle against her.

At the very least, it was impossible to defeat her within these few precious minutes that she had bet everything on.

...What should I do? Shu had the option to ignore Leviathan and return to the assembly hall, but that was where he would find the King of Beasts, who was fighting her hardest for victory.

Their ult is probably like Rook's Union Jack... a fusion skill. That wasn't a rare kind of ult for Guardians. In fact, it was fairly common.

If the fusion skill just added their base stats together, it wouldn't be too different from Beastheart Possession; but if it was a skill that doubled the stats or added them together as they were pre-fusion, it would create a beast unlike any other and give hell to anyone who dared to face it.

It was only natural to expect an ult to be that potent — and with Leviathan being focused on stats, it was ludicrous to not consider this possibility.

After all, even the hyper-versatile Baldr had an ult that greatly boosted stats based on Shu's STR.

I drew Leviathan away from Behemot exactly because we expected their ult to be too much for us, but if she just keeps on stalling and Ray's party loses... Behemot will just chase us down and they'll still end up using the skill...

Shu was now faced with a choice.

He could fight a creature even stronger than Behemot, here or back at the assembly hall...

...Should I use γ?

...Or he could use everything he had to defeat Leviathan here and now, or to beat the result of her fusion with her Master, consequences be damned.

Shu silently pondered this.

If he used his ultimate weapon... the power that had brought down the King of Crime... he would definitely win against Leviathan alone.

Even if she merged with King of Beasts, he would still have about a

50% chance.

But if I do that and it turns out that Dryfe has something else waiting for us, Altar will stand no chance. If he used the power he was thinking of, Shu would have no more cards to play. In fact, he'd been holding back on using it because doing so would leave the others vulnerable.

I guess the worst thing is that this battle's being watched, Shu thought as he directed some of his sensors to the sky above.

They picked up the heat signature of a drone hidden by optical camouflage.

Looks like that King of Light guy that Ray beat up is watching this. That's not really a problem, though. He probably won't get involved, and Baldr and I are a bad matchup for him anyway. The real problem is...

Shu moved the sensors again, focusing them on a monster that was similar to an eye with wings looking down on this battlefield. This creature was somewhat familiar to him... one of the so-called "Broadcast Eyes."

The lab coat lunatic's recon monster... Honestly, I expected to see it here eventually. Shu was almost totally sure that Franklin had been the one to record Ray and Logan's battle in Quartierlatin, and there was next to no chance that someone like him wouldn't send his eyes to watch these peace talks for data on Shu, Behemot, and the rest of them.

Now, is it just his monsters... or is he hanging around somewhere himself, too? If Franklin was also present, the situation would become even worse. If Shu gave everything he had to defeat Leviathan or Behemot, the others would be left to face Franklin's monster army without him, and while completely fatigued on top of it all.

Without Shu's firepower, the Giga Professor's horde was a terrible menace to them, and there was no guarantee that he wouldn't send everything in right after Shu used the ace up his sleeve.

That was why he hadn't used it yet.

And now, with an amount of hesitation that was quite rare for him, he was very seriously considering it.

Time passed, and once he was forced to make a choice...

"Baldr, Gloria γ, activa—"

...He had almost resolved to use his ultimate weapon, but...

"I'm leaving this to you."

"You can count on me."

...He suddenly remembered the words he'd exchanged with his brother right before he left.

"Would you like to initialize the Fatal Engine, Gloria γ?" Baldr asked.

"...No. I would not." And so, Shu stopped himself from using his ultimate weapon... the Superior special reward.

"...Hahahah..." He laughed as though something was very funny before rethinking the situation.

Let's look at this the other way around, he thought, an option he had ignored so far immediately springing to mind. *They're not the ones keeping Behemot in check... I'm the one keeping Leviathan in check. And they* will *go on to defeat Behemot.*

Once that happened, Leviathan would vanish... and Shu would still have the power to fight.

Even if Franklin attacked right after Behemot's defeat, he would have no trouble facing him.

Altar had a path to victory, even in this hellish situation. Beyond that unlikely possibility lay the optimal outcome.

"Yeah. That's the best possible ending for all of this..." he said to himself, considering the situation from another angle. "All right then..."

Shu now focused his heart, mind, and body on the battle before him.

"...You seem rather calm," Leviathan said.

"Don't have a reason not to be. My li'l bro and his gang are gonna beat Behemot. All that matters here is that I don't let ya get in his way."

"...You really believe they can do that?" Leviathan asked, her voice filled with rage, as she charged at Shu.

"I can't *bear* to hear you dismiss my lil' bro!" Shu shouted with confidence and honesty as he shoved Baldr's metallic fist into Leviathan's stomach.

"Gh...! Your eventual despair will be payment enough for enduring your foolishness."

"Say what ya want! If he can't do it, I'll just have to try beary hard in his stead! That's what big bros are for!"

Thus, the battle between Shu and Leviathan continued.

It was a battle that wouldn't end until the struggle at the assembly hall was settled. Both sides were merely buying time.

Shu trusted that Ray would win, while Leviathan believed that Behemot would come out on top.

The actual outcome was soon to be revealed...

Chapter Fifteen: The Final Choice

Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

Having donned Greatest Top, Behemot had become even more fierce than before.

Chasing after Ray — the visible target — she occasionally fired her maser cannon towards the surrounding shadows in an attempt to drive out her two opponents in hiding.

In his remaining hand, Ray held one of the twin blades from Nemesis' fourth form — but instead of using it to attack, he was focusing on evasion. Though just barely, he was managing to evade both the attacks from her ethereal claws as well as the maser beams Behemot was firing at him.

Panic had started to creep into Ray's expression, and not only because of the onslaught.

"Ray! Three minutes since activation! The damage counter won't hold!" Nemesis told him telepathically.

Be more specific! Ray replied.

Chaser was a skill that subtracted an amount equal to the stat it copied from the damage counter.

With Counter Absorption, they had absorbed about 200,000 damage — but with Behemot's AGI being a whole 37,564 even under the effects of Faint Light, that wouldn't last very long. Ray losing his arm to the maser cannon had increased the damage counter by a little bit, but since his total HP was relatively low, it was only a drop in the ocean.

"There is only about 20,000 points of damage left in the pool! That won't be enough for the next check! Chaser will be canceled!"

Wait, that doesn't add up. 37,564 times 4 is 150,256... There should still be enough for one more check!

"Tsukuyo Fuso briefly switched the division target from AGI to STR, didn't she?! It seems that the stat reduction for that minute was increased to the average between the two stat totals, relative to the length of the switch! I was unaware that this would happen, since this is the first time we've fought someone whose stats change so drastically and so quickly!”

“Well... I guess that makes sense!” Ray replied out loud as he barely evaded another maser beam.

He was starting to get more and more worried at this point.

...I guess we have no choice but to take another hit and refill the counter!

“But her Tiger Scratch hits three times... Can you withstand all of that? I cannot use Counter Absorption in fourth form.” Unlike at the beginning of the battle, Ray couldn’t use Counter Absorption because that would mean canceling Chaser, which would immediately let Behemot catch up to him.

Thus, Ray chose a different approach.

...I’ll just take it with my Brooch.

“That is impossible! It will be shattered by the excess damage from the triple attack! Did you even consider the damage threshold?!” Ray’s current HP was a little under 20,000.With Behemot’s attacks dealing about 200,000 damage in total, the roll to break the Brooch would happen at least 10 times — so for Ray to withstand all the damage from the triple attack, he had to win a gamble on 10% a whole 20 times in a row.

The likelihood of the Brooch breaking before the third attack was over 87%, so it was obviously ludicrous for him to expect to come out on top here.

No... I’m only betting on two times, Ray thought back to Nemesis as he put the twin blade he was holding between his teeth.

“Ray?!” With his only hand freed, he then reached into his side.

Even as he did so, Behemot closed the distance between them. She was wary of his strange actions — but not enough to stop attacking him.

“Oh, so that is what you have in mind,” Nemesis thought as she understood Ray’s intentions. “But this also relies on chance.”

I know that. It’s luck-based and I won’t be able to do this again, but there’s no time like the present.

“Very well. I will say nothing more, then. This might be the optimal choice, given the situation. So you will let her attack you to increase the time for Chaser... With the time you secure, Brother Bear should be able to accomplish more, as well...”

Nemesis thought the damage they would add to their counter should be used to buy more time for Chaser, but Ray had another idea.

No, I'm sending the damage right back to her with an Impact Counter, he thought. Impact Counter was the technique Ray had developed — a Vengeance Is Mine counterattack he delivered the moment he received the necessary damage.

Naturally, it depleted his damage counter significantly.

"Ah...! I see..." Nemesis said. She was shocked by his words, but chose not to object. "But that won't be enough to defeat her. At most, you might crack that armor... but not fully destroy it."

That's fine. I mean, if she suddenly decides to get rid of Fuso instead, even 600,000 damage on the counter will only last us two or three minutes.

Behemot hadn't attacked Tsukuyo even after equipping Greatest Top.

The High Priestess was still dividing her AGI, so it wasn't clear why Behemot wasn't taking her out first. It could be that she was wary of some ace up Tsukuyo's sleeve — or it could be some other reason entirely.

Still, there was a chance that she would change her mind and target Tsukuyo at any moment. If that happened, only Ray would be able to keep up with Behemot, but even he would soon fall behind due to the increased cost for maintaining Chaser.

Because of this, Ray figured that the only path to victory was to attack Behemot immediately.

"What will you do after the Impact Counter?" Nemesis asked.

The fourth form's Vengeance is split between each sword — but with one hand, I can only attack with one sword at a time. I'll use the remaining damage counter to maintain Chaser and support Marie and Tsukikage.

"Understood... Don't die, Ray."

It's still too early for that. Chaser would soon be running another check, and they didn't have enough damage on the counter to pass it. Once that happened, Ray's speed would return to normal, and Behemot would become too fast for him to even see in spite of the AGI division.

However, Behemot closed the distance to Ray long before the check happened.

In response, Ray... *came to a halt right where he was*.

Behemot couldn't help but be surprised by this action, but that certainly didn't stop her.

She swung her right ethereal claw down towards Ray, and the two follow-up Tiger Scratch attacks were close on its heels.

And so, the moment the first hit landed...

"Hm...?"

...Behemot felt that it had somehow not had quite the effect she was hoping for.

The same happened with the second attack.

That was when Behemot realized that something definitely wasn't right. Knowing Ray's HP, the excess damage should've already shattered his Brooch, at least.

It didn't take long for the explanation to show itself.

Something fell from Ray's side. It seemed to be a shattered accessory... but not a Brooch.

It had the appearance of a dragon's scale, and Behemot obviously knew what it was.

A Dragonscale Ward, she thought. It was an accessory that shattered when the wearer took damage, reducing the incoming damage to one tenth of its total value.

Ray had used some of these items in his battle against the Demi-Drag Worm, and after that experience, he now carried them everywhere he went just like he always wore a Brooch.

Upon seeing two shattered Dragonscale Wards fall to the ground, Behemot realized what Ray had done.

He reduced the amount of rolls the Brooch will make...?

A tenth of 200,000 damage was only 20,000 damage. With Ray's HP, the Brooch would only be forced to roll for shattering twice.

Hitting a 10% chance 20 times in a row was ludicrous, but a mere 2 times was perfectly manageable.

So that movement was... When Ray had put his hand to his side, he was doing it to take out and equip the Ward. He'd had enough time to do that once before Behemot's attack.

But what about the other Ward? He couldn't have been wearing it from the start, because it would already have shattered from the shockwaves all over the battle, or the accumulated minor damage Ray had suffered so far.

And since that obviously wasn't the case, there could only be one explanation...

He used Instant Wear right before impact... He manually equipped one while using the utility skill to equip the other.

The moment Behemot figured out why Ray was wearing the Dragonscale Wards, the third attack finally hit him.

So far, he had only lost the Wards... his Brooch was still in perfectly good condition.

“UGHH!” he roared as he let the third attack hit him, negating the damage with the Brooch *while swinging the sword clutched between his teeth towards Behemot*.

“Ah!” she gasped.

Behemot knew that Ray’s strategy revolved around counterattacks, so she’d intended to end the battle with an attack from her other claw before he could retaliate.

“Vengeance...”

But if their speed was equal...

“...Is...”

...It was only reasonable...

“...MINE!”

...That Ray, whose blade was in motion the very instant he was hit, would deliver his counterattack faster than Behemot swung her left claw.

As Ray’s Brooch shattered from the excess damage, the Vengeance attack from his twin blade struck Behemot’s neck.

“Gh?!” The burst of fixed damage knocked Behemot’s whole body to the left. This wasn’t the first time Ray had used Vengeance while holding his sword with his mouth, so he was able to hit his target even though she was small.

Ray’s attack made Behemot’s left claw miss, slicing through the air where Ray’s right arm used to be.

However, despite taking a direct hit and losing her balance, Behemot was still in perfect shape.

“Gh...! It wasn’t enough!” Ray said, taking the sword out of his mouth.

“It seems so! The metal did not shatter! Half its power was not enough!” The three attacks added 600,000 to his damage counter, and the Vengeance just now dealt half of that multiplied by two — but that wasn’t enough to destroy Greatest Top.

There was a visible crack in the general area he hit, but Behemot was still fully armored.

This was the power of Superior metal — the strongest material in this world. It was the pinnacle of toughness... so hard that even Behemot and Leviathan had been forced to use their ult and pulverize it over and over until they finally broke through.

Even if Vengeance ignored defense, a mere few hundred thousands of fixed damage was far from enough to shatter it.

...But it *did* crack it.

"One more hit and it'll shatter," Ray said. There was still 300,000 damage left on the counter. Creating distance between him and Behemot, he switched to the twin blade which hadn't been depleted and, after passing Chaser's fourth check, he waited for an opening to deliver his next attack.

Repositioning herself, Behemot thought about the Impact Counter she had just weathered.

She knew that Ray had this technique — but despite knowing about it beforehand, she wasn't able to actually counter it.

Who could blame her? Ray was as fast as her and could begin his counterattacks *while* she was attacking him. Not even Behemot could handle something like that.

Or more accurately — she had never *had* to. Almost no one was as fast as she was, and even if they were, there was no way they could survive her triple attack.

But now, Ray — albeit thanks to Tsukuyo's stat division — had done just that with pure skill.

Experienced as Behemot was, she had never encountered anything like this before.

Should I assume this won't happen again because his Brooch is broken...? No... he can absolutely do this again.

Of course, Ray still had Last Command. Even if his HP was completely depleted, he could move his deceased body to deliver another Impact Counter.

Rosa had suggested that he pick up Death Soldier exactly because of this deadly — and *deathly* — combo.

...I didn't underestimate him, exactly, but he still surpassed my expectations. That's amazing. Behemot silently praised Ray for dealing her the most damage she'd ever experienced.

At the same time, Behemot considered her own situation.

Three minutes left... Though time was effectively slowed down because of her supersonic AGI, the limit for Greatest Top was drawing near. Behemot was running out of time. Keeping her MVP reward's flaw hidden was no longer her top priority — now, this battle could actually end with her defeat.

Thus...

I'll get rid of the insurance.

...She changed her strategy and turned Greatest Top's head towards Tsukuyo.

"Ah?!" Ray gasped in horror. That was something they desperately *didn't* want Behemot to do.

The main reason Ray's party was able to put up such a good fight against Behemot at all was that she had so far refrained from targeting Tsukuyo. If she did that, the course of battle would change drastically.

The head opened up and the maser cannon locked onto Tsukuyo.

But the moment the beam was fired...

"Please excuse me, Lady Tsukuyo."

...Eishiro leaped out of Behemot's shadow and did two things simultaneously.

He used his shadows to grab Tsukuyo and move her where the beam wouldn't touch her — and also used an ace up his sleeve that would ensure Behemot's defeat.

Eishiro flung away his black twin blades and exposed his bare hands.

Behemot instantly knew that meant he was preparing to use a particular skill.

...There it is.

King of Beasts, Behemot the Physical Apex was only truly afraid of one person here, and it was the King of Assassins, Eishiro Tsukikage.

She was afraid of him because he possessed the ability most likely to actually kill her.

The final skill of the King of Assassins, "Death and Murder," could instantly slay even Behemot. It killed any humanoid creature that the King of Assassins touched.

Although Behemot had the appearance of a quadruped animal, that was just the shape of her avatar as she'd made it during character creation. Despite her appearance, she still counted as a humanoid creature that would be affected by the skill, and his mere touch would result in her demise.

Bourdrim's Sufferward Prison lets me resist poison-type and curse-type fatal status effects, but if Death and Murder is neither of those, or if it's powerful enough to break through that resistance... I'm not sure what will happen.

She had heard of the skill from tians, but it had never been properly analyzed in all of tian history.

After all... *the cost for using it was the death of the user*, and it even prevented the effects of the priest grouping's resurrection magic.

Naturally, no tian in history had ever wanted to analyze a skill like that.

Perhaps The Lunar Society, which had the current King of Assassins who was also a Master, had details about it, but Behemot wouldn't know what they were.

No... They know about both Death and Murder as well as my Bourdrim. If they have all that knowledge and they're still using it... it means that they think it can kill me.

With that realization, Behemot was suddenly as cautious as she could be.

Eishiro faced her with empty hands.

To use Death and Murder, he had to use them to touch the target — and once he did so, both he and his target would die.

It was already known that he would get the death penalty for this, but he cared little about that. If Behemot remained alive, she would defeat Tsukuyo — preventing his lady's desire from being fulfilled.

Eishiro was ready to throw his life away just for that.

"Tch..." However, there was one problem that had to be dealt with before he could deliver his final blow.

To use Death and Murder, he had to touch his target's body, and that wasn't something he could do while Behemot was covered in a Superior metal.

He had to focus on dealing with that first.

"All I need is a single opening. Please shatter it," Eishiro said.

"Got it!"

"On it!"

Two voices responded to him.

One was Ray, while the other was Marie, who'd just jumped out of a shadow opposite of Tsukikage.

Ray had just cracked Greatest Top and still had a method of delivering more fixed damage at his disposal, so he would definitely be up to the task.

The surprising thing was that Marie had also implied she had a way to shatter the Superior metal protecting Behemot.

She was only a pre-Superior, but she claimed that she could break a substance that even the Physical Apex had struggled to damage.

Some would assume that she was just ignorant of what she was dealing with. Most would be sure that she wasn't capable of such a feat regardless.

However... Marie was not speaking in vain.

She believed... no, she was *confident* that she could break it.

Marie aimed Arc-en-Ciel at Behemot before transforming it into the large-barreled shape needed for the ultimate skill.

And then, she voiced the name of the ace up her sleeve... *the sure-kill bullet that used all six colors*.

◇◇◇

About a certain character.

When Marie's Arc-en-Ciel received its ultimate skill, she decided that it should fire the characters from her manga.

Red and black summoned Daisy Scarlet the Explosive.

Blue and white summoned Lady Shirahime the Poisoner.

Green and silver summoned Ulbetia the Piercer.

Blue, black, and white summoned Upas-Kamuy the Crusher.

Red, green, and silver summoned Fanatica the Annihilator.

Using this framework, she drew her characters... her children.

However, there was one character that she could draw, but couldn't fire.

It was none other than the protagonist of her manga and the character she role-played in *Infinite Dendrogram*... Marie Adler.

Even with all six colors, Arc-en-Ciel couldn't bring Marie to life.

No matter how many times she tried it, she'd always failed. Marie Adler, frozen in the drafts, couldn't even be spurred into motion by the power of an Embryo.

Marie figured that the protagonist of her manga wouldn't be truly given life until she found an answer for herself, and had given up.

This was like homework for her heart and mind — homework she had yet to finish.

However, she still had to prepare Arc-en-Ciel's ultimate trump card... the result of firing all six colors.

The problem was that these six colors were the ones she used for Marie Adler. No other character fit the palette.

As she'd turned the problem over and over in her mind, she'd returned to reality and re-read her work.

"...Ah." And in doing so, she found that there *was* actually someone who fit these colors perfectly.

Marie also understood why it had been so difficult for her to think of this character, but now that *she* had found her way back into her mind, Marie realized that she was almost certainly the best candidate for her six-color ultimate skill.

◇◆◇

Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

To both Arc-en-Ciel and Marie, there was no turning back once they'd used that six-color ult. Using it came at the cost of all the "paint" she had, rendering her unable to use her Embryo for a whole day afterwards.

However, it was also the ability that had once destroyed a Superior.

It was the strongest bullet... the strongest *character* available to her.

And her name was...

“Phantasmal Raingun — Arc-en-Ciel: La Gravelle the Godslayer!”

From the barrel emerged a woman with a greatsword made from the bones of beasts and eyes covered by green bandage.

Her name was La Gravelle the Godslayer, and she was the strongest hired killer in Marie’s manga. Said to surpass even the protagonist, she was the most powerful character in the setting — and she had never debuted, since the magazine had stopped publication.

Because of this, only Marie knew about her. And her power as mimicked by the ult was...

“Kill.”

...swinging her sword, just once.

This resulted in an attack both faster and stronger than Behemot, even as she was now.

The character’s basic concept was that she was “just super strong,” and dedicating the Resources of all six of the Embryo’s colors to this purpose alone resulted in a truly devastating strike.

Marie had almost never used this bullet.

In most cases, the attack would be taken by the target’s Brooch, leaving them alive to face Marie with her Embryo now unusable.

Even in this battle, Behemot’s HP was far too high even for La Gravelle, so Marie had been waiting for a chance to land a critical hit.

But now, she only had to shatter a part of Greatest Top. There was no better time to use La Gravelle than now.

And so, the Superior Killer had bet all that she had on this one single attack... and it shattered the Superior metal beautifully.

The part of Greatest Top that covered from the right side of Behemot’s head to the elbow of her right foreleg was now gone, exposing Behemot’s bare flesh.

It had already been cracked by Ray, yes — but Marie’s all-out attack had actually overcome the strongest metal that this world had to offer.

But as she bore witness to this victory... Marie’s head fell from her shoulder.

La Gravelle had also been sliced in two and vanished before her summoning had truly ended.

Upon realizing that Marie’s attack was inescapable, Behemot had given up on harm reduction and instead prioritized taking out both La Gravelle and Marie.

The Brooch... Oh, right. Tiger Scratch makes it meaningless, just like it did for Rook, Marie thought as her severed head hurtled through the air. *Well, it's not like I can do anything without my bullets anyway. I'm leaving the rest to you, KoA... and Ray.*

And so, her head turned to motes of light before it even hit the ground.

As Marie vanished, Eishiro hid in the shadows once again.

With Behemot now exposed, he could take her out using Death and Murder.

He's not a problem now... I think? Behemot thought. If this was a proper, chaotic brawl, it would've been difficult for her to escape Eishiro's hands, but the current state of the battle no longer allowed for that.

There were only three of them left. Ray would be easy to handle as long as she paid attention, while Tsukuyo wasn't much of a threat because she lacked direct offensive ability, so there was no one here that could reduce Behemot's chances of dealing with surprise attacks.

Even with her AGI divided, this was basically a one-on-one fight against Eishiro. And so, Behemot couldn't possibly lose.

At least, that was how it looked until a dark purple miasma flooded the area.

"Hm...?" Behemot was totally confused by the sight.

Ray lost his right arm, she thought. *He shouldn't be able to use his Hellish Miasm—... oh.*

That was when she remembered something.

Behemot had gathered data about everyone she could potentially be fighting, and Ray had something that had defeated one of her fellow Superiors.

There's one more... There were *four* left on their side, not three... and the fourth one *could* use this skill.

It didn't take long for Behemot to find *her*.

She stood behind Behemot, near where Ray's severed arm had fallen.

The bracer that exuded blood vapor was gone...

"Wearing one half of an SUBM... interesting."

...And in its place stood a gold-copper-skinned goblin girl — Gardranda.

Looking rather delighted, she eyed Behemot's Greatest Top while she used the right bracer to fill the hall with her miasma.

It leaked through the holes in the walls and ceiling, but there was still enough of it to cover the floor. This was obviously meant to be a smokescreen, because Behemot was immune to its debuffs. She had Bourdrim constantly active, so mist-based poison-type status effects were too unfocused to work on her.

The carpet of smoke would only serve to help Eishiro deliver his surprise attack.

In a way, the miasma hid the “shadow minefield” under it.

Behemot actually found this situation a bit troubling.

To ensure that she evaded Eishiro’s shadow ambush, she had to actually *see* the shadows, so she had to defeat Gardranda as soon as possible.

Using Nullgravity Wings to rise above the smoke might have seemed like a good option, but it actually would be a mistake. She would be far slower in the air than on the ground, which would make her an easy target for Tsukuyo’s compressed debuffs. In the worst case scenario, Tsukuyo might even divide her resistances and END by 6, which would leave her vulnerable to the miasma’s debuffs.

...She won’t be that hard to deal with, Behemot thought.

Gardranda wasn’t all that fast, comparatively. She could surpass the speed of sound, but she was slower than Behemot, Ray, and Tsukikage.

But getting too close to her is dangerous. Gardranda had assumed a stance where she focused miasma into her right hand and flame into her left. Behemot theorized that if she approached her, Gardranda would counterattack simply with concentrated miasma and flame.

The Apex was right in her assumption, for Gardranda was Ray’s right hand and thus had developed an excellent grasp of the art of counterattacking.

And if I focus too much on her counter... Tsukikage will use his final skill on me, Behemot thought. Gardranda’s appearance wasn’t her only problem, though — Greatest Top’s time limit was drawing ever closer.

Gardranda was also on a time limit, but Ray had expended all the MP stored in Gouz-Maise to summon her, resulting in a summon time of a whole 600 seconds. That was significantly more than the two and a half minutes left for Greatest Top, and if Behemot wasted any time at all, those two and a half minutes would expire.

With Greatest Top gone, Tsukikage would be able to target not just the sliver of flesh that Marie had exposed, but Behemot's entire body.

Behemot couldn't run or stall any longer... her only choice was to fight Gardranda.

In order to have a chance at victory, she had to go on the offensive.

Thus, she gathered her resolve and really looked at Gardranda... as well as her surroundings.

Fuso isn't doing anything... and I can't see Ray. Is he hiding like Adler did? Behemot thought.

Tsukuyo wasn't doing anything noteworthy, but Ray was nowhere in sight. Behemot guessed that he was hiding in one of Eishiro's shadows.

She hadn't witnessed the moment he slid into them or the moment he summoned Gardranda, so she assumed that he'd done all of that while Marie used her ult.

If Ray was also hiding in the shadows, it meant that she had two ambushes to anticipate.

I still don't have any other options... I'll just do it, Behemot thought as she gathered her resolve and charged at Gardranda.

She didn't use the maser cannon. Doing so would slightly limit her movements, and with Ray and Marie having cracked open a gap in Greatest Top, that would give Eishiro an opening he could take advantage of.

Behemot dashed towards Gardranda and attacked her with a Tiger Scratch from her left Crescent Glissando.

The deadly horizontal multi-attack wasn't something that Gardranda, being three times slower than Behemot, could possibly evade.

However, dodging wasn't Gardranda's intention.

Instead, she took a step forward, sacrificing her defense in favor of getting close enough to attack.

A moment later, her left hand lit up...

"Purgatorial Flames: Zero."

...And released immensely hot flames.

This was Gardranda's trump card — the skill that had once instantly destroyed a Legendary devil.

It could easily incinerate any flesh it came into contact with, and Gardranda was thrusting it right towards Behemot's exposed neck area.

This was a proper, unavoidable counterattack — just like the one her summoner had done in this very same battle.

But there was one difference now...

I knew she would do that.

...And that was the fact that Behemot had expected this the entire time.

Before Gardranda's attack connected, Behemot used her speed advantage to raise her right foreleg and block the strike.

Gardranda's face twisted in shock. Although the area around the right side of Behemot's the neck was exposed, the foreleg was still fully armored, and its perfect resistance to changes in temperature completely nullified the effects of Purgatorial Flames.

A moment later, Tiger Scratch hit Gardranda and cut her in half at the waist.

Her lower half was pulverized by the two follow-up attacks, while the upper half was knocked all the way into the opposite wall.

During the brief exchange, Behemot had easily dealt with Gardranda's counterattack and defeated her utterly.

However, she knew that this battle wasn't over yet.

There they are. A moment after her attack on Gardranda, Behemot sensed two entities move at the exact same time from different directions.

She was aware that Gardranda's counter was ultimately only a distraction meant to give the others a chance to ambush her. With the goblin gone, the miasma would disperse and expose Eishiro's shadows, greatly reducing the chances of their ambush succeeding.

Because of this, the best moment to strike was while Behemot was still re-orienting herself after the exchange with Gardranda.

But I've seen this happen so often that I'm totally sick of it! Eishiro and Marie had simultaneously ambushed her from the shadows many times now and it hadn't once worked.

One entity emerged from a shadow in front of her, while the other came out from between 4 and 5 o'clock.

The person standing before her was the now-familiar blond youth clad in black.

I'll deal with Ray later! I need to get rid of Tsukikage first...! Vengeance was a potent skill, but she could survive it as long as he didn't strike anything vital. Eishiro's attack, however, would mean instant death, so the order of precedence was easy to establish.

Because of this, Behemot quickly turned towards the other attacker and launched Winged Ripper shockwaves towards it.

She chose this attack over Tiger Scratch to keep him from getting too close. Winged Ripper was a ranged skill which allowed her to deal with the menace before he even reached her.

She'd thought this through from all angles, and this was obviously the right choice to make.

However, the one to be hit by the two shockwaves...

"Ugh..."

...Was indeed a blond youth clad in black — *Ray*.

Shock overcame Behemot. Her thoughts were too overwhelming to be put into words, but one thing was foremost in her mind: *They tricked me*.

She realized that she'd fallen into a trap.

When she looked back at the other attacker, she instead saw *Eishiro — who had just canceled his transformation into Ray Starling*.

Behemot simply wasn't in possession of all the facts.

Once, The Lunar Society had hunted down a UBM in Noz Forest. It was the same UBM that a particular member of the clan had told his step-son about.

The UBM was a strange goblin that could transform himself into a wolf or bat, among other things.

And it was a UBM *whose MVP special reward had gone to Eishiro*.

The reward allowed him to change his appearance, and though Reveal would instantly see through it, the forms he could take were nearly endless.

Thus, after he and Ray hid themselves in the shadows, he changed his appearance to Ray's and purposely charged at Behemot head-on, expecting her to assume the other person was Eishiro and prioritize him instead.

And that was exactly what happened.

Behemot gasped as Eishiro drew close. She didn't have the time to retaliate.

A moment before she could defeat him, he would already be in touch range.

Being a combat veteran, she instantly knew that this minor difference in timing meant that there was no hope for her.

"Death and Murder."

And so, Eishiro reached for the area where Behemot was exposed... *only to touch nothing but empty air*.

This was due to a difference of mere centimetels — a space about as big as the first two joints of a person's finger.

Eishiro hadn't misjudged the distance, nor was he too slow. Behemot had actually created this tiny distance herself.

She had *purposely canceled Greatest Top before its time ran out*.

The special reward could be equipped and unequipped in an instant, and by canceling it, she had lowered her height.

However slight, the difference was enough to decide the outcome.

Death and Murder failed to reach her... and a moment later, Eishiro flew by her.

This was the attack that would've landed had she not canceled Greatest Top.

The effects of Death and Murder killed Eishiro in an instant, and his body soon dissolved into light.

Marie's ultimate bullet. Ray's sacrifice, and Gardranda's.

They'd all given so much to make sure Eishiro's final skill was delivered... and it was all for nothing.

"...I won," Behemot whispered, with her own voice and in a human language.

Her tone made it obvious just how cornered she'd really been. Her heart was beating so fast it felt like it might jump straight out of her mouth.

In all her time as a Superior, she had never experienced such a desperate battle.

Behemot had once fought Dryfe's SMTF and a certain Superior. The possibility of Claudiah dying had really made her lose her composure back then, but this was the first time that she felt that way about her *own* life.

If she had been just a split-second late with canceling Greatest Top, she would've definitely died.

Being put in such a deadly situation had made her heart race at absurd speeds.

"Ohhh, dear. So it didn't work, huh?" Those words reached Behemot's ears.

They were spoken by Tsukuyo Fuso, the only Altarian left who was completely unharmed.

The High Priestess was now the only target Behemot had to deal with. She'd kept her around as insurance, but that was no longer necessary.

Tsukuyo was a Superior, but she was merely a support job, and there was no chance Behemot would give her the time to use her final skill in any case.

She would now defeat Tsukuyo to achieve her ultimate victory here in the hall, then meet up with Leviathan to defeat Shu; then, she could return to Claudiah.

If Claudiah had been defeated, Behemot would either face Altimia herself or take Claudiah and flee to safety.

"It's... too early... to say that..." Accompanied by the sound of moving rubble, she heard someone speak those words.

Shock overwhelmed Behemot's mind yet again. Though, this was something she had actually anticipated — she'd merely briefly forgotten it because of the life-and-death situation she'd just survived.

Behemot looked at the man standing there.

It was Ray, standing there with a massive wound in his chest. He looked like a shambling corpse.

Despite his awful state, he wasn't broken.

Last Command — the Death Soldier skill that allowed the user to move around after their HP hit zero.

This was the second time Behemot had faced someone with that skill, but it still surprised her.

After all... Ray shouldn't have been able to move. The hole in his chest had been opened by her Winged Ripper, and it had completely pulverized his left lung.

It was obviously a fatal wound.

...How? she thought, for this didn't make sense to her. Even if he didn't feel pain, losing a lung had to make it difficult for him to breathe... he should've been suffocating.

According to tian accounts, the Death Soldier slaves who were dealt enough damage to lose all their HP couldn't move properly, either because they suffered unbearable pain or their bodies were too mangled.

Last Command did nothing but prolong their deaths. The most they could usually do was lay in place and use a self-destruct ability.

This was why Last Command had always been seen as a useless skill.

Despite that... Ray was still standing.

Bearing an agony that would continue for perhaps dozens of seconds more, he stood before Behemot, looking at her with eyes devoid of resignation.

She silently stared back at him.

Behemot had the option to ignore him. Ray would die if she just kept her distance and waited for Last Command to expire.

If Tsukuyo tried to resurrect him, Behemot could just take her out.

Due to the fatal damage that had been dealt to him, Ray's Vengeance would now deal significantly more damage than before.

If it hit Behemot in the right place, it might even kill her.

At the moment, fighting Ray now was both risky and offered no advantage.

Some would even call it stupid.

Even so... Behemot chose to face him.

If she ignored the challenge of a dying... no... an *already dead* newbie, she would be undeserving of her status as The Physical Apex.

Thus, she refused to run from him.

Though there was nothing to gain from this battle, there was still meaning in it.

If she wanted to remain King of Beasts, the Physical Apex...

If she wanted to live in *Infinite Dendrogram* while being truly herself...

If she wanted to be someone who wouldn't embarrass her friend...

...This was a battle she could not avoid.

"I am the top of Dryfe Imperium's kill rankings, King of Beasts, Behemot," she said, in normal human words.

Ray fully understood why she introduced herself again.

He coughed up blood before responding the same way. "I am the leader... of the Kingdom of Altar's second highest-ranking clan... Death Period... Paladin, Ray Starling...!"

They re-introduced themselves as opponents in a *duel*.

The Masters then once again looked directly at each other...

"Bring it!"

...And shouted to one another before charging forward.

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Last Command had 45 seconds left.

Ray Starling the Unbreakable and Behemot the Physical Apex.
These two would now have their final clash.

Chapter Sixteen: The Conclusion

What was he to her...?

He was someone who always filled her with worry.

The very moment she was born and met him, he was tattered and covered in blood — and that was far from the only time.

Once, he'd almost died standing against a colossal undead abomination in the mountains.

Once, he'd almost died facing a monster that a Superior had created solely to defeat him.

Once, he'd almost died while bathed in the deadly light of a black star scorching the land beneath it.

Once, he'd almost died fighting another Superior and his devilish legions.

And now he... had *actually died* struggling against an apex.

In spite of that, he was still moving — and still fighting.

Even though a part of her wished this wasn't the case, neither the agony of a lost lung nor a body so battered it was difficult to look at were enough to stop him.

Perhaps some who saw him, struggling despite his gruesome state, would say that he had a strong heart.

She didn't share that opinion, however.

In fact, she would say that that was flat-out wrong.

From her perspective, most of his many, many desperate battles were just painful to watch. To see him constantly jump into such conflicts hurt her heart even more than his thorough defeat at the hands of Marie.

This was because she'd figured out his true nature.

His death to Marie was nothing but an accident... a death at the end of a battle where *his was the only life at stake*.

What she felt back then was the pain of loss and, as she had failed to protect him, the shame of her own powerlessness.

However, most of his other deadly battles, including the one in which they'd met, were fundamentally different from that one.

The first time she'd noticed that difference was when they had entered the dungeon in the bandit hideout... when Ray saw what had become of the innocent children that the vile necromancer had murdered and raised as undead.

She knew everything that was happening in his heart and mind, so she could truly understand just how badly that realization tore him apart.

When they'd first met, they had managed to rescue the one child he was trying to protect. But what they saw in the dungeon was the destruction of lives that no one had tried to save.

It broke his heart. His soul wept for them.

That was when she began to notice his true nature.

After the incident with the bandit gang, he fought to protect the people of Gideon. Later on, he fought to protect Torne and the boy he'd come to know.

Even later than that, he fought to protect the people of Quartierlatin.

His reasoning for doing so was always the same:

"I mean... it'd just leave a bad taste in my mouth."

Right now, she knew full well that those very words were the driving force behind his actions... the nature of his being.

From the moment she was born, she believed that at Ray's core, he was a simple young man with a kind heart who was always ready to protect someone... or someone who used pain as a motivation to advance forward.

Both were on the right track, but not completely correct.

She realized that Ray's nature was *to get himself hurt to protect others*.

It was too depressing to be called "kind," and too pitiful to describe someone who was always advancing forward.

He was simply incapable of ignoring any tragedies befalling innocent children, those he was close to, or just people he wanted to protect — for ignoring them would cause him immense pain. If given the choice between ignoring a tragedy and hurting himself to protect someone, he would *always* pick the latter.

In exchange for the wounds he suffered, he would be able to prevent tragedies that would shatter his heart.

His nature was also reflected in her existence — his Embryo.

She didn't believe that Ray was strong-hearted. Someone with a truly strong heart would be able to *endure* such tragedies.

That certainly wasn't the case with him. He merely chose bodily suffering over the *emotional* suffering he could not withstand.

He just couldn't bear seeing someone close to him suffer and fade away.

It might've actually been more accurate to say that Ray's heart was *weak*.

If it would prevent a tragedy, he would give everything he had and more, even if it meant he suffered severely. That was just how he was.

She knew full well that he wasn't doing this solely because his avatar's sense of pain could be turned off. In fact, she was sure that he would do the same even if he *could* feel the pain.

As far as she knew, even being in his real body wouldn't stop him.

Despite all of that... he wasn't anyone special.

He was not some messiah trying to save the world, nor was he some avenger on a mission to change it.

He was *just an ordinary person* following his heart and protecting those he cared about. Just a person struggling against the tragedies before him so that they would not become memories that would haunt him.

That was his nature, and that was why there was something that she would never say to him...

That being the words, "You may close your eyes, cover your ears, and run away."

That would have been the easiest path, as well as the one most people would pick, but she would never recommend it to him. Sometimes she might question if he was certain about what he was doing, but she would never urge him to run.

As one who knew him better than anyone else, she simply couldn't bring herself to do that.

She knew that his heart wouldn't allow him to take the easy path and abandon his loved ones and anyone he saw who was suffering.

It was always hard to watch him destroy himself, but she knew that if he didn't face the tragedies, the heartache would be worse than the wounds.

But that was exactly why he was so important to her.

He didn't have a strong heart that could withstand the pain of tragedy. He wasn't any more special than anyone else.

In fact, he had a delicate heart that was so easily hurt, yet he never ran away from tragedies, instead growing determined to face them head-on... and that was exactly what she loved about him.

That was why, here and now, she agreed to be a part of the only strategy he proposed that could perhaps lead them to victory, knowing full well what would become of his body... and *what she would have to do to him*.

She made her choice fully aware that it would once again lead to that feeling of powerlessness and the sadness of loss.

As a being born from Ray's heart, she was compelled to protect the sole desire etched into her from her very first breath.

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

Ray and Behemot charged straight at each other.

They were equal in speed and each of them was fully capable of killing the other.

Behemot's offensive ability had been demonstrated many times in this battle alone and she could deliver more than enough to damage Ray to the point of incapacitation, while Ray had enough in his damage counter to deliver a critical attack. If he hit a weak spot like the head, neck, or heart, the injury-based status effects would do the rest and finish Behemot off.

I'll aim for his left arm! Behemot thought, fully aware of the danger she was in.

The torso and head were no good. Ray couldn't die while Last Command was active; if she targeted those areas, he could still launch an Impact Counter at her with just his upper half — or even his headless body.

Therefore, she would aim for the arm that held Nemesis, for he couldn't deliver the counter without the weapon that had all the damage stocked.

She intended to tear off Ray's left arm, send his wing-blade flying, and finally pulverize the rest of him.

That was her full path to victory.

Of course, she wasn't the only one thinking about how she could win this. Ray was also considering what he had to do.

The both of them were combing through the possibilities that would lead to victory and then giving their all to seize those possibilities.

After weathering a storm of thoughts that still lasted less than a single second, the two arrived at the fated moment.

"Hh...!" Ray's reach was slightly longer, so he was the first to act.

The moment Behemot entered his range, he swung his wing-blade at her head.

He only needed to hit the general area. Even though Behemot had an absurd 20,000,000HP, his Vengeance would take out a whole 5% of it, and if that 5% was her brain or any other vital organ, victory would be his.

The wing-blade flew at speeds equal to Behemot's. She hadn't faced an attack this fast since she'd become a Superior.

However, it was a direct attack, rather than a counter, so...

"...I can see it."

...Behemot could use her immense experience to evade it.

As the blade shaved the fur on her cheek, she swung her left claw with the full might of Tiger Scratch.

The three attacks obliterated his left hand, turning it into a bloody mist, while the shockwave it created blasted the blade away with power that sent it crashing through the.

I wo—

... Wait, not yet!

Having taken away Ray's means of attack, Behemot briefly celebrated her victory, but then realized that that was a dangerous line of thinking.

Behemot knew about Ray's past battles. Even in this one, she'd seen him stand up despite losing a lung.

By now, she was fully aware that he wasn't someone who could be stopped by an injury like this.

"OOOAAAAAAAGH!" Behemot roared as she began to swing both her claws.

The right one blasted away part of his face — the right side of his chin.

The left one tore through his legs — the entire thigh area.

All of his limbs, as well as a part of his neck, were destroyed now.

He had been reduced to little more than a torso

With Last Command active, even this wasn't enough to finish him off — but now, just like the Death Soldiers of the past, he'd been rendered physically incapable of doing anything.

He couldn't even stand, let alone bite into his blade like he'd done before or kick it towards his target. Ray was completely incapacitated now.

Now I wo—

But the moment that Behemot became completely certain of her victory, *something touched the base of her neck.*

...Huh?

It didn't do any damage to her.

She was surprised, but whatever it was, it wasn't strong enough to surpass her END.

However, the damage wasn't what mattered here.

What mattered was the sheer fact that it touched her.

After all, it was something that could very well kill her — *one of Nemesis' blades*.

Behemot's mind was suddenly flooded with thoughts.

Impossible. I just sent it flying. Why is it touching me? Wait, more importantly... Why is the blade penetrating Ray's body?

The blade had been sent flying into the ceiling, but somehow, it was now emerging from Ray's chest.

The answer to that question was simple — it wasn't the same blade.

Nemesis' fourth form was a mirror and *twin* blades.

Even if one was gone, there was still the other.

Even so, who...?! Ray didn't have the second wing-blade. Having lost his arm to the first maser beam, he hadn't been able to wield it — and even if he could, he couldn't possibly have pierced his own body like that.

It was completely impossible... *unless someone had thrown it from behind him*.

Shock overcame Behemot as she noticed something beyond the curtain of gore in front of her.

It was Gardranda, her lower body entirely destroyed, now frozen in a position that suggested the follow-through of a throw.

She was still alive...?!

Though she had been torn apart and buried under rubble, the summon was still in effect.

And now, she had thrown the first wing-blade and hit Behemot *through* Ray.

Behemot hadn't seen any of this. Her body was small, so Ray's larger frame blocked out anything that was happening behind him.

It was as though this had been planned out.

D-Did he...? Assuming Ray had anticipated this... that *this* was the possibility he gambled everything on...

Did he use himself... as a decoy?! Ray, holding the wing-blade in his left hand, was nothing but a distraction and a sponge to increase the damage counter.

And while he was fulfilling that role, Gardranda had thrown the other wing-blade at him.

Ray was holding the blade he'd already depleted to crack Greatest Top. The one piercing through his chest was the main one, and the damage on its counter now, after being so fiercely torn apart by Behemot, was truly immense.

The moment his Last Command activated, he conjured up this desperate and precarious chance for victory. Swallowing his fear of being torn apart, he gambled everything to grasp for this tiny sliver of possibility that he could prevent a tragedy... and he reached it.

"Vengeance..." The skill didn't require Ray to hold Nemesis in his hand — it could be used as long as the two were touching.

That was why it had worked the two times he used it while holding her in his mouth... and why it would work now that she had been stabbed straight through his body.

"...Is... Mine."

Following Nemesis' words, spoken as though she was holding back tears, Vengeance was delivered upon Behemot.

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[Last Command expired]

[Resurrection period expired]

[Death Penalty: 24 hour Login Ban]

Chapter Seventeen: Aftermath

Altar-Dryfe border, wasteland

At that moment, Leviathan's actions changed drastically, and Shu instantly noticed the difference.

After trying to prolong this battle as long as she could, she was now trying to shake Shu off and charge straight towards the assembly hall.

Shu realized what that meant and immediately tried to stop her from leaving.

"Get out of my way!" the queen of kaiju shouted, swinging both her arms to shove Baldr away.

The machine god grabbed her and pulled her into an armlock to keep her in place.

"Not happening," Shu said. "Looks like they did a good job."

Behemot — Leviathan's Master — was in a state she could not ignore. Her sheer panic was proof of that. Also clear as day, as proven by Leviathan *still existing at all,* was the fact that Behemot was still...

"Ah...!" Suddenly, an alert rang out in Baldr's cockpit.

"What is it?"

"Warning. New hostile, 3 o'clock."

Suddenly, a portion of the screen showed an enemy *other* than Leviathan.

It was some kind of giant monster... one that certainly wasn't there a minute ago.

From the monster's mouth came an indescribable sound. It was about the size of Leviathan, but while her animal-like form was balanced and streamlined, this creature was a chaotic abomination.

Its limbs, torso, head... it was as though each of its parts had come from different sources, giving it an outlandish look.

Most unsettling of all was its dragon-like head, which was a deep blue color like lapis lazuli.

Anyone could tell that this was not a natural being — and it was now drawing closer.

That... ain't a UBM, which can only mean that... Shu thought, before looking up to see what Franklin's eyeball-like recon monster was doing.

It was fully focused on Baldr and Leviathan, not even sparing a glance for the new combatant.

That alone was enough to reveal its affiliation.

"So you came here yourself after all, huh... Franklin!" Shu realized that Franklin must have switched from observing to interfering because Ray's group had finally cornered Behemot.

This monster was one of his creations — one far more powerful the Legendaries Shu had destroyed during Franklin's game.

His instincts told him that this one was Mythical, if not above that.

"They now have a numerical advantage," said Baldr. "Continuing this battle in our current state will likely lead to defeat. Would you like to initialize the Fatal Engine?"

"...Only if it seems hopeless," Shu replied. Franklin had only sent one powerful monster in order to keep his mass-produced creatures in reserve. Since Shu was a wide-scale extermination type, getting rid of him would allow Franklin to suppress the assembly hall using overwhelming numbers.

Franklin most likely didn't know the details of Fatal Engine, Gloria γ, but he must've been confident that this giant monster was capable of defeating Baldr as he was now.

"I gotta keep Leviathan here *and* fight this damn thing. I also can't let either of them beat me and can't use γ... Man, what a situation this is."

The strongest Superior Embryo and a monster-creating Superior's strongest creation.

This was too much even for Shu and Baldr.

"They have it even harder at the hall, though. I can't throw in the towel before they do," he said with an indomitable smile as he resumed the battle against the two gargantuan beasts.

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Altar-Dryfe border, assembly hall

A mere moment had passed since Ray and Behemot's final clash.

The bloody mist that was once Ray had just become specks of light and vanished from the world.

"...Well, this went differently than I expected," said the sole witness to the conclusion — Tsukuyo Fuso.

In her mind, the plan to deliver Tsukikage's Death and Murder was their final chance at victory, and if that didn't work, she guessed that their last hope was the bear swooping in to deal with the situation.

If it was night, even she might've been able to contribute somehow, but in broad daylight she was largely powerless against Behemot.

That was why Tsukuyo had only watched.

She hadn't expected Ray to stand up, and the outcome of his actions surprised her.

Despite being torn apart, Ray had managed to reach Behemot with his blade and release the damage stored within it.

He then vanished as Last Command expired, leaving behind Tsukuyo... and Behemot.

Silence.

Behemot was maimed, but still alive. There was a sizable hole in her neck, but the more serious damage was in her forelegs: they had been completely blown away.

This was a result of her final decision in this battle.

Nemesis' final Vengeance aimed at her neck had enough damage to blow away her entire head.

Thus, at the very last moment, a moment so brief that she couldn't even knock the blade away, Behemot had chosen to *touch Nemesis with her claws, splitting the damage*.

Vengeance is Mine was a skill that destroyed the target's body based on the damage dealt and where the attack landed, so by making it touch her claws as well as her neck, she divided the damage to her head by a third.

In that final moment, she hadn't had enough time to push the blade away, but she had just enough presence of mind to think of this stratagem and put it into action.

"Cough..." Still, the damage was severe. The wound on her neck wasn't quite deep enough to reach her cervical vertebrae, but it was still difficult for her to breathe. And with her forelegs gone, she couldn't wield her weapons.

Her high END prevented most injury-based debuffs, but she was still

Bleeding fountains from all three of her major wounds.

It was the first time since becoming a Superior that she suffered such immense damage.

Still not saying a word, Behemot twisted her body to drop her custom-made, extra small inventory on the floor, then shatter it with a stomp of her foot.

A moment later, the space was full of potions and similar items. She began trampling over them and dousing herself in the contents or forcing it down her torn throat.

Her wounds began to release pale smoke as they healed and the Bleeding stopped, but her forelegs didn't regrow, and the hole in the throat didn't close.

Behemot didn't have anything potent enough to accomplish that.

Even with the Bleeding stopped, she was still heavily damaged. Either due to residual damage or because she wasn't used to being so incapacitated, she was still lying on the floor.

Tsukuyo looked at her, racking her brain for a way to defeat Behemot as she was now... and came up with nothing.

Even without her forelegs and despite all the damage she'd suffered, the Physical Apex was still capable of running Tsukuyo through by merely jumping straight towards her.

She considered suffocation, but that wouldn't work, either. Though she had trouble breathing, it didn't look like she was suffering from it, exactly. It was either the effect of Bourdrim's debuff resistance or that of some accessory she'd replaced Greatest Top with using Instant Wear. Regardless, it was clear that something was making the effects of suffocation easier for her.

Behemot could probably move around just fine even in her current state.

Things would've been different if Tsukuyo wasn't the sole survivor on her side, but that wasn't how it had turned out.

"We needed just one more card to play, huh?" If there was just one more thing they could do to finish off Behemot, Altar would've won.

They were defeated.

Still, as a show of defiance, Tsukuyo reached into her inventory and took out a Gem.

Between two and three minutes had passed since Behemot's last clash with Ray. In her own way, Tsukuyo resolved to challenge Behemot — but the apex wasn't even looking at her.

Instead, she was staring at the patch of sky visible through the hole in the wall... and *the jade-green trail* falling down to the ground.

Still not saying a word, Behemot appeared to be thinking very deeply about something.

A few seconds later, though, she began to move and destroyed another one of her inventories.

As she trampled it underfoot, several pieces of paper appeared around her.

"Hm?" Tsukuyo watched in confusion as Behemot picked one out and, since she didn't have the forelegs to hold it, bit into it before throwing it in Tsukuyo's direction.

The paper, lightly stained with Behemot's blood, fell somewhere between them, facing up. Tsukuyo could read it from where she was, but what it actually *said* made her tilt her head.

"...What is this?"

"A Contract." Presumably due to the effect of some accessory, Behemot could respond to Tsukuyo despite the hole in her throat.

Tsukuyo could tell with a glance that it was a Contract. What had her confused was the terms.

"...Are you serious?" To sum it up, the Contract said, "High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso will heal King of Beasts, Behemot, curing her status effects and restoring her HP. In exchange, Behemot, bearer of the King of Beasts job, as well as Queen of Beasts, Leviathan will not harm the kingdom's Masters or tians for 24 hours, *Infinite Dendrogram* time."

In exchange for being healed, Behemot and Leviathan would stop attacking Altarians altogether. The somewhat awkward phrasing of "bearer of the King of Beasts job" part was there to prevent Behemot from avoiding the Contract's terms by merely switching to a sub-job.

That meant that she was fully intent on stopping this battle completely.

"You didn't write this just now, did you? When did you prepare this?" Tsukuyo asked.

Behemot said nothing. She had actually prepared the Contract shortly after she found out that Tsukuyo would be participating in the peace talks.

The "insurance" that she'd had in mind for the battle was Tsukuyo's healing magic, though she'd expected to use this insurance on Claudiah or Altimia — the one Claudiah wanted to capture.

However, she'd also considered the possibility of fighting Shu and sustaining injuries so severe that she would be rendered unable to save Claudiah, so she'd also prepared a Contract for herself. That was the one she just presented to Tsukuyo.

"I never underestimated Shu or the others," Behemot finally said. "I knew I could be defeated or lose a limb or two, so I had this prepared just in case."

"...So that's the other reason why you didn't get rid of me first, eh?" With Behemot counting as a beast, the only thing Tsukuyo could do against her was Faint Light, and Behemot figured that she could put up with the debuff during the fight and try to have her sign the Contract afterwards.

Though, if Shu hadn't lured Leviathan away and Behemot had been forced to fight both him and Tsukuyo at the same time, she would've certainly thrown away the whole idea of insurance and gotten rid of the High Priestess as soon as possible.

However, once Shu was gone, she figured she could face the rest of her opponents and keep her insurance handy even with the debuff up — that was exactly what led to her grave injuries.

But it was hard to say that she had miscalculated, exactly. There was certainly a large enough gap in power between her and the Altarians.

Despite that, they had given their all and then some, completely obliterating Behemot's expectations.

Because of that, Behemot genuinely felt that she had been defeated.

If Eishiro's reach had been only slightly longer, or if Nemesis' blade was only a bit closer to her brain or spine, she would've had the death penalty by now.

Still... Behemot had indeed survived, and the best thing for her to do now was to heal her wounds and save Claudiah.

If Claudiah's battle had still been going, Behemot would have gotten rid of Tsukuyo even if it meant leaving herself injured, but the jade-green trail was a clear sign that the outcome of the royal clash had been decided. Since Claudiah wasn't contacting Behemot, it was a safe guess that the imperator had been defeated.

With the outcome more or less already determined, Behemot no longer wished to fight.

The original plan had been abandoned.

In case of Claudiah's defeat, Behemot would struggle to help her — to devastate the Altarian forces, defeat Altimia, and take them to Dryfe.

This would be unnecessary if Claudiah had won, but since she hadn't, it was up to Behemot to decide what to do next based on her assessment of the situation.

In emergencies like this, Claudiah had entrusted Behemot with all the decision-making power.

"So, will you sign it?" However, with that established, it was clear that if Tsukuyo refused, Behemot would do everything in her power to take her out and then target Altimia.

She was The Physical Apex even with only half her limbs, and her Superior Embryo, still in good health, was trying to reach her, as well.

Kaguya... How's it looking over there? Tsukuyo asked.

"Shu is now fighting not just Leviathan, but also some other gigantic monster." Those words made Tsukuyo fall silent and think.

Having become the night itself, Kaguya could look down on the world below her.

Baldr and Leviathan were fighting far outside of the skill's area of effect — but they were so large that she could still see them.

...What to do, what to do...? Tsukuyo wondered, briefly picturing the person who had more than likely sent the giant monster.

If she signed the Contract before her, both Behemot and Leviathan would be removed from the battle. They would still be able to take Claudiah and escape, but based on the terms of the Contract, they would no longer be able to attack or even kidnap anyone for twenty-four hours.

And with Leviathan out of the picture, Shu would be able to focus solely on the monster, and she was fairly certain that he would win that duel.

If she didn't sign, however, Tsukuyo would instantly receive the death penalty.

Then, Behemot would attack Altimia. Though dismembered, she was still King of Beasts, so it was still possible for her to defeat the princess and take her prisoner.

Shu would also be left fighting two opponents, decreasing his chances of victory. And if he were to fall, Altimia would have to face both Behemot *and* Leviathan, assuring Altar's defeat.

It was fairly obvious that refusing to sign this contract would make things worse for the kingdom.

One might wonder why Behemot would offer up a Contract like this, but the answer was simple — there was a chance that Claudiah, having been defeated, would now be *killed*.

Altar needed her to stop the terrorist attack on Altea, but if the situation was sufficiently desperate, they might opt to kill her instead.

Regardless of whether Altimia would ever do that, Behemot feared the possibility.

If she was in perfect health, she could easily help her friend — but right now, she was maimed. Also, Behemot knew well by now that her partner, Leviathan, was incapable of doing tasks that required any sort of finesse.

With Claudiah defeated and Behemot heavily injured, she wanted to promise their retreat in exchange for Claudiah's survival.

...I don't really have a choice here, Tsukuyo thought.

Signing the Contract was the safer choice for the kingdom, as well. She really didn't have any other reasonable options.

Therefore, the only thing left to do was see how far she could push the terms.

"This isn't quite enough," she said while waving the Contract in her hand. "You'll need to give us more."

"Hm?"

"*24 hours isn't enough.* You know that it'll take 72 hours in *Dendro* time for our victims to come back, right?"

"...Then I'll make it 72 hours."

"That's not enough, either. *720 hours or nothing.*"

Silence. Tsukuyo just demanded Behemot and Leviathan wouldn't attack Altarians for a whole month of *Dendro* time.

Behemot pondered this, but Tsukuyo refused to back down. Even if Dryfe retreated now, if they were to invade Altar again with Behemot leading the charge, the kingdom would surely fall.

That was why Tsukuyo wanted to secure as much time as was reasonably possible... Enough to ensure that not only those who had died here would be back, but also that Hannya and Figaro would have returned.

Though the punishment for breaking the Contract can't be a death *penalty now. That would actually be shorter. Guess I'll change it into a whole bunch of time-based status effects — ones that don't go away even if you die.*

While Tsukuyo was pondering these things, Behemot finished considering her terms and said, "I... accept."

"Good, good. Let me just rewrite this. Now, for more conditions..."

"...There's more?"

"Of *course* there is."

Trying to get a sense of how much Behemot would tolerate, Tsukuyo continued attempting to change the Contract.

"Your boss will have to call off the terrorist attack on Altea within one hour after I heal you."

"...All right." Behemot instantly accepted this, for she knew that in this situation, Claudiah would have already done so.

"In exchange, I want you to heal her too," Behemot added. "Claudiah can't call off the attack if she's unconscious."

"Ah. Well, that makes sense."

"Also... heal her old wounds, too." Behemot cared about Claudiah, so she used this opportunity to restore what her friend had lost in her previous battles. It was a bit of greediness on her part...

"I can do that, but you're still not giving me enough, so you'll have to throw in a little extra for it, too."

"A little extra?"

"5,000,000,000 lir."

...But Tsukuyo was far greedier than her.

"...f*ck." Conveniently bleeped profanity escaped Behemot's mouth, and who could really blame her?

"...Tsukuyo?" said Kaguya. Even her own Embryo was put off by this display of greed.

Hey now, Kaguya — we should take what we can. And this also will reduce their battle potential! It's all to help the kingdom!

Tsukuyo didn't seem to feel any guilt about this.

"Hm? What's wrong? You're the top of the kill rankings, and unlike the bear, you don't really use your wealth. You must have lots of money, right? Or, what... Is your money more important than your friends?"

"g2h" Behemot replied as she begrudgingly threw the inventory she used as a wallet towards Tsukuyo.

There was just enough power in the throw to keep the inventory from shattering, but also enough to break Tsukuyo's fingers as she caught it... though, that was a minor issue to her.

"It's a deal, then! Let's start the healiiiing!" Tsukuyo said with a wide smile as she began to treat Behemot's wounds.

As Kaguya looked down on the sight, she felt somewhat apologetic towards Ray, Nemesis, and all the others who'd given their all and then some to the fight against the Physical Apex.

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Altar-Dryfe border, grove

Right after the battle between the princesses ended with Jade Storm's deactivation, Claudiah plummeted towards the ground below.

After some time of feeling nothing but air rushing past her, a sudden shock wracked her body... and then was canceled.

Lying on the ground, she looked up at the sky and whispered, "...I am alive."

She realized that her Lifesaving Brooch had done its work and canceled the fatal damage from her impact with the ground. This meant that she just had a near-death experience, but on the other hand, if the damage *hadn't* been sufficient to activate the Brooch, she would be severely injured right now; so that was something to be glad about.

After she got up and looked around, she saw Jade Storm's head and body, lying separately where they'd fallen.

Aside from the obvious decapitation, it didn't seem too damaged. Flagman's designs wouldn't be destroyed by a mere fall.

Claudiah... or more accurately, Reinhard... concluded that Jade Storm could be fixed by merely replacing all the parts near the cut and letting the self-repair function do the rest.

"*This* is the real problem, though..."

On her side, there was a wound carved into her by Altar. However, it wasn't bleeding. Not because of anything The Primeval Blade had done, but because of the power suit she was wearing.

It was made using an MVP special reward material, and its name was

Hemocycler. It provided life support, and if Claudiah lost a part of her body or suffered severe injury, her blood and any other vital fluids would avoid the injured areas in favor of circulating through the power suit.

Because of that, she wasn't bleeding, and her life was not in immediate danger.

She'd crafted Hemocycler based on her near-death experiences during the civil war and wore it in her fight against Altimia because she correctly assumed that it would work against Altar's incurable wounds.

Still, that didn't change the fact that merely *having* an incurable wound was a bad situation to be in.

"It appears I shall have to replace even more of my body with machinery," she sighed.

Though she had already replaced her arms with prosthetics, she still had some degree of attachment to her flesh. There were things only a living body could feel, after all.

"Anyway..." Having finished checking on herself, she reached into her inventory and took out a comms device. It was a bit on the large side, but that was due to a unique design focusing on extending communication range and increasing its counter-jamming properties.

"Zeta. This is me."

"Confirmation. Since you're using this device, I assume there has been a failure?"

Claudiah received an instant response.

The person on the other line was Zeta — who was currently terrorizing the city of Altea.

"Yes. I lost. What is the situation on your side?"

"...Attempted. I found and confirmed the target you requested, but I am struggling to eliminate it. I thought I had it cornered, but it doesn't feel like my Embryo's attacks are even getting through."

"Oh, I see. So that really *is* how that works. I wanted to determine that, as well. What about your personal goal? Did you manage to steal it?"

"Refusal. I will not answer that."

"Very well."

"Order. Elimination is impossible and your situation is no longer favorable, so I'd like to know what to do now."

"We will now move on to Plan C. Please make the necessary preparations, then retreat from Altea."

"Commencing. Deliver the reward by the designated method. Then, and only then, will I give you information regarding the target."

Following that conversation, the call ended.

"That is done. Now..."

A moment later, something wove a path through the spaces between the trees and landed before her.

It was a golden Prism Steed and a girl with indigo hair... Altimia.

"So you lived," she said.

"Yes," Claudiah replied. "I am glad to see you alive, as well."

Altimia's words made sense, seeing as Claudiah had just fallen from the sky, but some might have wondered why Claudiah had responded in kind.

Unlike Claudiah, Altimia hadn't suffered any major injuries, but there was a reason why she was glad she had lived.

It was reflected in Altimia's long, indigo hair — a part of which had turned white.

"Claudiah, call off the—"

"I have already ordered the retreat." Claudiah had already done what Altimia would have requested her to do first and foremost, and Truth Discernment confirmed this.

"...Well, you are certainly fast."

"Of course I am. I lost the battle we wagered all of our desires on, and I knew full well that you would want this done as quickly as possible."

That was part of the reason why Claudiah hurried to order the retreat, but she also just didn't want Altimia to overhear her conversation with Zeta.

"...What of my sisters?"

"I was given no information about them, nor did I ask. But if they had been killed or captured, surely I would have been informed, no?"

"Hm..." This act of terrorism was meant to destabilize the kingdom, so the death or capture of the princesses was a sub-objective. If Zeta hadn't reported it on her own initiative, they must be fine.

Though, it was within the realm of possibility that Zeta simply didn't care whether the princesses were alive or dead.

"I must say... You paid quite an obvious price," Claudiah said, looking at Altimia's hair. Altimia said nothing in response at first. "Using that ultimate job skill eats away at your life, does it not?"

“...It does.” The Sacred Princess’ ultimate job skill, The Primeval Boundary, drained a great deal of things from the user. Besides obvious stats like HP, MP, and SP — life, magic, and mental forces — it also targeted her life itself... specifically, her *lifespan*.

Essentially, Altar was a double-edged sword — and not just because of its all-rending blade.

“I did not use it for long, though... My hair will return to normal sooner than later,” said Altimia.

“This time, at least. But you should refrain from using this power any further. You know his legend better than I do, no?”

The Sacred Princess was silent.

“The legend of the Sacred King... the first Azurite. He used this power to conquer The Evil from the previous era, which almost led to his death. No... some say that he actually did die once. However...”

“The Saint of that era sacrificed her own life to save his. This is the most famous of his legends.”

“But the current Altar does not have The Saint. That job was taken by Sechs Würfel. If you use that power too much, you will deplete your life... and die.”

“...I am well aware. That is why I will only use it when I feel it truly necessary.”

That meant Altimia felt her battle against Claudiah was something she absolutely had to win, even if it cost her a portion of her own life.

“...I am not sure whether to feel flattered or not.”

“You can figure that out later. I have some questions for you.”

“Such as?”

“Why did you set a trap for us in the peace contract and order an attack on the capital? Surely there must have been a better way for you to do this.” In exchange for a complete ceasefire, Altar had offered to give Dryfe the Old Lunnings Duchy and remove certain persons from the wanted list.

As evidenced by the fact that the Covenant had nearly been signed by both parties, those conditions were favorable for both countries.

Of course, Dryfe’s famine was severe, and there was also the matter of Caldina — but simply leaving the Covenant in its current state would have left plenty of room to solve those matters peacefully.

However, Claudiah had instead chosen to attack Altea and destroy Altar, and Altimia wanted to know why.

"I suppose the best answer is that the Covenant as it was would not fulfill all of my wishes."

"All of your wishes?"

"...There were three things I had to acquire at any cost." Claudiah had slowly begun giving her answer. "First is something that Dryfe needs... The Old Lunnings Duchy that would solve the imperium's famine."

Dryfe had effectively been controlling it since the previous war, and with these negotiations, they would've become its legal owners.

"The second thing is what I need... You, my dearest Altimia."

Acquiring her had proven to be difficult... but ultimately, they were to remain friends.

"And lastly... what *this world* needs." Claudiah strongly implied that this was the reason why she arranged an attack on Altea. However, it was hard for Altimia to picture something that could be important for *the world*, something supposedly bigger than either of their entire nations.

"Did you not tell me that the purpose of the assault on Altea and our battle here was to capture me and my sisters or take our lives to split the kingdom apart? That was no lie... was it?"

"That was part of it. After all, to acquire what is needed, it would help to have control of the kingdom... more specifically, its capital. Also, what we would receive from Altar would help immensely in preventing Caldina from doing anything... unnecessary."

"...Just what *is* this thing 'the world needs' that you speak of?"

Claudiah fell silent for a long moment before saying, "I have no wish to hide anything from or lie to you, but this is something I hesitate to speak of."

"What do you mean?" Altimia could tell that Claudiah wasn't merely avoiding the question — she was truly unsure if she was capable of describing whatever she had in mind.

"After all... *you might be erased by the supervisors*." In response to Altimia's question, she made it clear that she was refraining from speaking out of fear for her safety.

"...Supervisors?"

"Perhaps they would not eliminate key figures like you and I. I am aware of the thing in question, but I have not yet been neutralized.

However, if this spreads... they might change their stance. That fear keeps me from speaking it to anyone."

"But I do wish to hear it from you. I must know what made you go this far."

"I see... Then I will tell you as much as I can. Though, even that much may be dangerous," Claudiah added as she looked up at the sky and began to describe her reasons. "Do you not think that this world is odd?"

"Hm?"

"Does it not feel akin to some kind of game where the board and the pieces have been gathered from different boxes and mixed up? Do you not perceive this mismatch?"

Claudiah's words were hard for Altimia to understand, but for some reason, they reminded her of her father's statement that Masters were somehow special.

"*Originally*, there should have been only one set of pieces on the board, but due to intervention from the current supervisors, new pieces and mechanics have been added. The chaos and Resources in the world increased, and they are now trying to use it to fulfill their own desires."

She paused for a moment and confirmed that both she and Altimia were still alive before continuing.

"But they have only added new things. The thing leading to this world's original conclusion... *the calamity left behind by the previous supervisors* had not vanished. And yet... this era is simply too lacking."

"Claudiah... what are you talking about?"

"...The Saint was stolen, The Hero was murdered, The Vanguard is nowhere in sight, Titania and Conquest General are not what they used to be, while the Imperial Crown from the middle of the continent... Caldina... is lost. The Imperator Machina and Sacred Princess... you and I are the only ones who still stand tall."

Altimia understood that Claudiah was talking about the Special Superior Jobs associated with the various countries... themselves included.

...But why did she not mention Draconic Emperor? she wondered. That was Huang He's Special Superior Job, yet Claudiah hadn't included it in her list.

But before Altimia could ask about that, Claudiah resumed speaking.

"And many standard Superior Jobs no longer belong to tians. I am not certain that the tians who are currently alive can win against the coming calamity... The ‘DEMISE’... The ‘GAME OVER.’ Thus, I staged an attack on the capital, where it supposedly resided. I thought that doing so would ensure that I would *find* it...”

With that, Claudiah had finished explaining her reason.

However, she had said a great many things that Altimia didn’t understand. Perhaps Claudiah had purposely made her explanation hard to comprehend out of fear of these “supervisors” she’d alluded to.

Altimia understood that Claudiah was planning to fight against some kind of oncoming danger, though she failed to understand what she meant by “DEMISE” or “GAME OVER.”

With that in mind, there was something Altimia had to ask.

“Why are you not including Masters?”

Masters — especially Superiors — were extremely powerful. Many of them were more than a match for Special Superior Jobs like Altimia herself.

No matter who — or what — they faced, they would likely win with enough such powerful entities on their side. Claudiah herself had Behemot and many other powerful Masters as allies, so she should’ve been more than capable of getting them to fight for her.

“...That is impossible,” Claudiah replied as she shook her head. “After all, this is the one thing they are... thoroughly unrelated to.”

“Unrelated?”

“The GAME OVER pertains to this world’s original objective. That is why outsiders like the Masters are not fit for the purpose of fighting it. They cannot even take part in this. Otherwise, the supervisors wou—”

She stopped herself before she could finish that sentence, believing that she was about to say more than was safe. The look in Claudiah’s eyes told Altimia that she could say nothing further.

Altimia silently pondered what she had just been told. The information given to her was frankly beyond her understanding.

However, she could tell that it was important to this world and that there wasn’t a single lie in Claudiah’s words.

How did Claudiah know about “this world’s original objective” and this entity she had called the GAME OVER? And just what were they, anyway?

Altimia felt that the answers to those questions could be found in Altea... the Altarian capital which had just been the target of a terrorist attack.

“...Just *what* is supposed to be in Altea?” She looked to the horizon, in the direction of the city — but of course, from this far away she could see neither what happened nor what mysteries lurked there.

“Claudiah!” Suddenly, two people appeared before them — Behemot and Tsukuyo, both in perfect health.

Altimia stared at them in silence, noting the lack of the other Masters and the fact that Behemot looked freshly healed.

From that, she drew a particular conclusion.

“...So you betrayed us, you parasite.” She didn’t know how Tsukuyo had avoided the consequences of the Contract, but knowing her, Altimia concluded that she was a traitor.

Faced with Altimia’s bare killing intent, Tsukuyo hastily shook her head.

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong! I fought with Ray and the others and we won! We’re the only ones who survived, and we made a Contract that I heal Behemot in exchange for her promise to not move against us! She’s not a danger!”

These words made Altimia lower her sword.

One reason for that was Truth Discernment telling her that Tsukuyo wasn’t lying, but there was another...

“So... Ray really did die.” She had a hunch that might be the case when Silver vanished, but having it confirmed filled her with a sorrow that even she herself found strange.

“He’s a Master, though. He’ll be back soon enough,” Tsukuyo said.

“...That is true.” That made Altimia feel a bit relieved, but also reminded her of certain words Claudiah had said — words which she couldn’t fully understand right now. Something about Masters being outsiders that could not take part in matters concerning the GAME OVER...

“...So, what are the terms of the Contract you signed,” Altimia asked.

“The King of Beasts and her Embryo won’t be able to harm Altarian tians or Masters for an entire month. Also, your royal friend over there will have to stop the attack on the capital — though I’ll have to heal her in exchange.”

Tsukuyo didn’t mention the 5,000,000,000 lir she took as payment. Withholding information didn’t count as lying, after all.

“I see. Claudiah seems to have already put a stop to the terrorist attack... So now, you will heal her, and the two of them will run away, eh?”

Altimia wondered how that tiny body could possibly take Claudiah away from here, but perhaps that wasn't much of a problem for The Physical Apex.

It didn't seem like she could stop Behemot, either. Altimia was too drained from using her ultimate job skill.

"This seems like a draw to me. Anyway, time to heal," said Tsukuyo as she began to treat Claudiah.

In response to those words, Altimia whispered, "...This is not a draw."

The peace talks had ended in failure.

The meeting that was supposed to stop the war had instead become a battlefield, and even the capital had been caught in the crossfire. Even if Altimia and her sisters were unharmed and they forced Dryfe to retreat, it was fair to say that Altar had lost simply because their casualties were greater.

"Altimia," Claudiah spoke to her, ending her train of thought.

"We cannot back down yet. Now that we have confirmation, we have even more reason to take control of the kingdom."

Altimia listened intently.

"However, let us avoid an all-out war or any further human casualties." Saying that, Claudiah took something out of her inventory and tossed it to Altimia.

It seemed to be a rolled-up piece of paper.

"This is... a Covenant?" The most powerful form of Contract... used in agreements between entire countries.

"Indeed. This is our Plan C. Plan A fell apart when a certain someone saw right through it, while Plan B failed when I lost to you. Plan C is what we prepared in the event that happened."

"...What trickery have you set up this time?"

"None," Claudiah said while looking right into Altimia's eyes. "No tricks or lies... *This is a declaration of war.*"

As her Truth Discernment did not activate, Altimia looked down at the Covenant in her hand.

"But I understand that you do not want to lose any more tian lives," Claudiah continued. "And since we found what we'd come to find at the capital, there is no longer any reason for me to attack your people — so let us follow the terms the Covenant lays out."

She pointed at a part of the Covenant which said...

"'A war between Masters only'? What...?" The text greatly shocked Altimia.

"Yes. A war where we agree on a time, place, and rules, and let the Masters serving us fight it out... A war where no one has to die."

Silently, Altimia pondered. This seemed like a reasonable proposition. If Dryfe had no intention of calling off the war, this was a far more preferable shape for it to take.

Altar had fewer Masters than Dryfe, but this would still give them a higher chance of victory than an all-out war involving tians, and the overall casualties would be drastically reduced.

However, this made Altimia feel a certain sense of discomfort. Was it because this essentially meant they would be using Masters as tools of war...? The very thing her late father was strictly against?

"It would be like a contest," Claudiah said. "I imagine that Masters would have an easier time seeing it that way."

Upon hearing that, both Behemot and Tsukuyo thought similar things. As Masters of Maiden type Embryos, they both did not see *Infinite Dendrogram* as a game, but Claudiah's proposed war seemed extremely "game-like" to both of them.

Still, they both thought it was a decent idea.

"Also... both countries would wager *everything* on this war," Claudiah added.

"...This is not a decision I can make here and now."

"I understand. Take your time. We still have to set the rules and choose a location, anyway. We will figure out the details over the hotline at a later date."

And so, she stood up, fully restored. She'd fixed the wound Altar had made by cutting out the flesh around it and letting Tsukuyo do the rest. This wouldn't have been possible if the High Priestess wasn't there and if the wound was in a more vital area.

Her arms had also been restored.

"Ohh... It has been so long since I felt warmth with my fingertips," she said, picking up Behemot. She then set Behemot on her shoulders and took out a spare spear. "And the *spear feels just right*."

Those words made Altimia realize that it was possible Claudiah hadn't actually been fighting at her peak, due to her prosthetics.

"Altimia, it might be unfair to say it now... but you do not have to wait for the war. You may try to capture... or even kill me here and now."

Altimia would've been lying if she said that she hadn't considered capturing Claudiah.

It might've been difficult to prevent their escape, but it wasn't impossible. Though Claudiah had fully recovered, her Prism Steed was broken, and Behemot couldn't harm Altarians.

By contrast, Altimia was merely fatigued, while her Gold Thunder was ready for action, and Tsukuyo was completely unharmed. A conflict between the two sides could go either way.

"I will not do that," said Altimia.

There was no telling what Behemot would do if she were to do anything to Claudiah.

King of Beasts couldn't harm Altarians for a month, but if Claudiah was dead or captured by Altar, there was a chance that she would ravage the kingdom regardless. She would come back over and over and do it time and time again, without any consideration for international relations or what was beneficial to Dryfe.

Behemot had proven just how fearsome she was in the very conflict that had just ended. Despite being separated from her Embryo, she devastated a Superior and several other Altarian Masters.

If harm were to come to Claudiah, Dryfe also wouldn't put King of Beasts on the wanted list no matter how bad her rampage was.

In fact, it could even lead to an all-out war — the worst-case scenario that Altimia wanted to avoid with the peace talks.

Since that had failed, all she really had left was to win in the unique war Claudiah had just proposed.

...Oh. I am already thinking as though I've already accepted the Covenant.

Claudiah might've said all that she had precisely because she'd known that all along.

She was Altimia's friend, who loved her, as well as the imperator of Dryfe — and a cunning, cool-headed manipulator.

"Then I will take my leave, as befits a defeated foe..." Claudiah said before falling silent and looking at Altimia.

“What is it?”

“Oh, I merely wanted to burn your lovely image into my eyes. I imagine it will be quite a long time before we meet in person again.”

“I see.” Altimia had no response to that.

Though, if she were to say something, she would note that in that moment, Claudiah briefly seemed more like the girl she knew from their school days rather than the cunning imperator.

“Farewell, then,” Claudiah said before putting Jade Storm’s remains in her inventory and leaving alongside Behemot.

Altimia said nothing. Claudiah was a dear friend as well as a rival.

However, their next conflict would not be between them as combatants... but as rulers.

With that in mind, she watched them disappear into the horizon.

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Altar-Dryfe border, wasteland

Claudiah had ordered Franklin to stay at Vandelheim in case of any unforeseen circumstances.

Shu believed that Franklin had sent out his monster while hiding somewhere near the border.

However, he was neither at the capital nor anywhere outside.

“In a way, this is an expected outcome...” Franklin was actually *within the cockpit* of the giant monster he’d sent to fight Baldr, known as MGD — Mechanic God Dylan.

Franklin was acting on his own intuition and decisions.

He and King of Chariots, Colonel Murdoch Martinez had been ordered to stay at the capital in case other countries did something during the peace talks.

However, the countries in question *could not function* as though they were enemies right now.

Dryfe was surrounded by three countries: Altar to the south, Caldina to the east, and the seafaring Granvaloa to the north and west.

However, two of them, Caldina and Granvaloa, were in the middle of a conflict surrounding the Treasurebeast Orbs taken from Huang He.

Granvaloa had dispatched all of their Superiors that were capable of fighting on land, so the chances of them attacking Dryfe now were extremely low, while Caldina's forces were tied up in dealing with those Masters.

And since when it rains, it pours, the chaos in Caldina had led to even greater disorder. It had been confirmed that two major players from Legendaria had entered the country in search of the orbs.

One was a Superior and the leader of their top clan, YLNT Club.

He was a shotacon *and* a lolicon, as well as the pervert people often called "most Legendaria-like."

He was King of Curses, LS Ergo Sum the "Child's Play."

The other wasn't a Superior, but she was famous for having carved out a place in all three rankings.

Commanding enough power to match Superiors and a Master widely known as Legendaria's strongest pre-Superior, she was the Summon Princess, Yomiko Skydrag'in the "Duelist."

With the situation being what it was, it was hard to imagine that Caldina would have enough forces to spare for an attack on another country.

That was why Franklin had left Murdoch alone and traveled to this battlefield. He wanted to gather data through observation, but his main objective was to make his final adjustments to this ace up his sleeve — this monster.

It was why he'd agreed to stay at the capital rather than join the peace talks, and this battlefield he was on right now might've been the perfect place to test it.

Franklin hadn't actually intended to come out into the open like this, but the change in the situation had given him the perfect chance to do so.

And now, he and MGD were fighting Baldr.

"KoD's Baldr isn't a valid target for *Chimeratech Aubade*, while KoB's Leviathan is. It'd have been nice if it worked on Baldr, but, well... it's not an animal," he said, using the Analyzing Eye of Wisdom to check on MGD's state. "Now, I know that when the war comes, I'll have to avoid 1v1s against Baldr. I guess I should be glad that I came here and learned at least that much. Joining their 1v1 was about the only way for me to do the needed checks with *safety margins* in mind. I already learned that there were no problems with the upper limit back when I had MGD fight His Excellency's Zero Exceed."

All of this was less him talking to himself and more him verbalizing the results of his analysis.

But he seemed to be satisfied with what he'd found.

"If I came out right at the start, I'd have been attacked by Leviathan for getting in the way of her battle, but now she's desperately trying to go and help KoB. She won't make an enemy of me when I'm protecting he—whoa!"

Suddenly, MGD's cockpit began to shake.

"Hmm... I guess KoD not only has high stats, but is also absurdly skilled at fighting." He spoke casually, as though nothing special had happened, but this was right after MGD withstood an attack from Baldr in its ultimate form.

This was the reason why Franklin was inside MGD rather than on Pandemonium. He was absolutely certain that he was safer within his finest creation rather than his Embryo that could be hidden with optical camouflage.

Besides, if he was killed while hiding, his MGD would vanish as well, and he was thoroughly against such an absurd outcome.

However, since he was unable to keep up with MGD's and Baldr's battle speeds, he left all the fighting to his monster.

In fact, if the cockpit hadn't been designed with inertia reduction in mind, Franklin's frail body might've already been pulverized just by the shocks caused by MGD moving.

Not even AR-I-CA fights up close and personal at multiple times the speed of sound, he thought as MGD shook once more.

Wondering why these impacts had started occurring more frequently, Franklin looked around.

"...Hm? I just realized that Leviathan isn't moving much now. She's not attacking at all, in fact. KoD noticed that and is going after me now."

As though he only just caught up with what was happening, Franklin had developed a grasp of the situation.

Since he couldn't keep up with the speed of the battle, he wasn't able to see the super-supersonic movements of the two gigantic entities.

"I guess someone must've used a Contract that forced her to stop fighting." Franklin had seen Behemot do something at the assembly hall, but since he was observing that area from afar out of fear that Behemot would destroy it, he couldn't hear what was being said.

Still, Leviathan's actions were enough to guess what had happened.

"Now, how did all of that turn out...?" He carefully examined the information provided by his recon monsters and saw Claudiah and Behemot distance themselves from Altimia and Tsukuyo.

"Hmm... His Excellency and KoB are both out of the game. I guess it's time for me to retreat as well— whoa!"

Another shell, another shock. If MGD could defeat Baldr here, Franklin would've even been able to suppress the party of people at the assembly hall.

However, it was hard for him to guess just how well he would do in a 1v1 Leviathan didn't participate in.

"MGD does *win in terms of stats*, though. He endures Baldr's weapons even if it's his first time dealing with them... Man, what a troublesome enemy."

Remembering what happened back in Gideon, Franklin spoke with hate in his tone.

"Dylan, what's the current chance of victory?"

"Approximately 66%," said Dylan, the operational persona of MGD. "While damage dealt to us is increasing, the same can be said about our opponent. We have confirmed the loss of the left forearm and operational failures in the armaments. However, the percentage is based solely on known information. Anything that is hidden has not been considered."

"66%, eh? But this all depends on what kind of cards he holds in his hand... MGD can win against any creature that's all about power and nothing else."

If the fight kept going like this, they could win this, but then...

"Warning, Leviathan is leaving the effective range of Chimeratech Aubade."

"Ohh, now *that* is bad. As things are, we'd only get killed the moment she left."

The status quo of the fight had changed. One of the main conditions for the battle was about to leave.

When that happened their chances of victory would drop drastically.

"Well, we've shown ourselves enough. If they know that we still have something like this waiting for them, Altarians will hesitate to counterattack. Let's retreat too."

"Are you certain? Based on the state of the battle, retreating at this moment might allow the enemies to analyze the nature of Chimeratech Aubade."

"I'm certain. What are they going to find out just based on this one battle?" Franklin said with a grin. "Also, MGD's function is something that no one can really do anything about even if they know what it does. This encounter let me figure out that MGD might lose against Baldr, but we'll be fine against anyone else. Also..."

MGD's optical sensors focused on Leviathan.

"...Next time, Baldr will probably be dealing with the full-powered King of Beasts." That was how Franklin knew that he wouldn't have to fight KoD.

He would have to face some other Superior.

Also...

"But this is troubling... He went and died before I could crush him," Franklin said as he recalled the death of a certain newbie. "I recorded the whole thing, but there's really no point to dragging him down now, is there...?"

He had recorded not just Baldr and Leviathan's battle, but also the struggle at the assembly hall. It was hard to capture supersonic movements, but Franklin's monsters were up to the task. Though there were many sections where the camera was shaky, the recording still presented a general idea of what happened.

With a bit of judicious editing and comments, Franklin could greatly lower the boy's reputation, but he chose to refrain for now.

"All right. I'll praise Ray-boy to the sky. 'A Match for THE KoB!' is a title that'll get a *ton* of views."

As an idea formed in his mind, Franklin grinned.

"I'll elevate him as high as possible..."

And so...

"...Then drag him down to the abyss."

...He whispered these words, his grin widening all the while.

Interlude: Another Story

Altar-Dryfe border

King of Light, F had ended up doing nothing but watching the battles unfold. Unlike the other spectator, Franklin, he hadn't intervened even once during the entire fight.

That was partly due to each battle being engaging in its own right, and partly because he prioritized organizing his impressions and thoughts regarding Ray's battle.

Though, primarily, it was because he didn't have the *means* to intervene.

Even now after all the battles were over, he was busy penning down text in his notepad.

I was right to come here. There was immense value in seeing something directly rather than as a recording. It allowed the observation of many more honest emotions than some footage sullied by the technique, worldview, and editing of the one who did the recording.

This was especially clear in the comparison between the video of Ray's fight against Logan and the fight against King of Beasts he just witnessed. The real thing had made the recording seem tame by comparison.

All the battles ended while he was still writing down everything he needed.

All right. I suppose I'll now have to investigate what happened at the capital. F had actually figured out that the capital would be attacked a whole two days ago.

The reason for that was simple: he was invited to join the group behind it.

Specifically, the invitation had come from the infamous criminal clan, Illegal Frontier. "Ideas" claiming to serve the Soul Trader, La Crima, asked him if he would like to be a supporting member of the clan.

Long story short, the negotiations had failed.

The ones who tried to invite him instead attacked him, but he defeated them all, and among all the chaos, he learned of their plans to attack the capital.

It was difficult for him to choose which place to observe, but he opted for the assembly hall because Ray was there.

I'm sure I made the right choice because of the number of Superiors that were here too, but I'm still curious about the situation in Altea... Also, just how many of them did I.F. release into the city?

F hadn't intervened in the battles around the assembly hall like he had with the Love-Duel Festival. One reason for that was the fact that he prioritized filling his notebook... while the other was his lack of reserve fighting power.

After all... his Embryo, Zodiac, was almost completely depleted of light energy.

He had used it all against the Ideas that attacked him after their failed invitation.

F was Altar's strongest ranged pre-Superior, yet they had given him that much trouble.

And now, such creatures had been released into Altea.

Hm... Overcome by curiosity, he elevated the Zodiac he employed to spy on his surroundings.

Once high enough to see Altea, he made it face the horizon.

Of course, he couldn't normally see what was going on over there from this distance, but there was now an anomaly that was visible even to him.

In the center of the capital, *there was a colossal pillar of fire*.

It was an abnormality far larger and far taller than even Xunyu's Baolongba. And, again, it was rising from the center of the capital.

It almost seemed as though it was the city's final day.

"Hmm..." He had chosen to observe these battles instead of the assault on Altea, but he couldn't help but wonder what was happening there.

◇◆◇

Control AI no. 1's workspace

"...Hhaah." While the battles around the assembly hall were still commencing, Chrono Crown... no, control AI No. 12, Rabbit... returned to the avatar space with a somewhat uncomfortable expression.

His current avatar wasn't the one he had made to look like his late

Master — the one that had just been decapitated by Kashimiya — but the control AI he used to welcome new players.

This avatar was about what you would imagine a White Rabbit plush would be, clock and all. He was always in far too much of a hurry to welcome new players, but as the situation showed, there were times when he had occasion to use it.

“...So now there’s gonna be a war,” he said. “It’ll cost me some time... but I suppose there’s no way around it.”

War took his Resources and his freedom. He did all within his authority to prevent it, but as a result, he had died in a way that perfectly fit his role... to a Master in his sixth form.

He was aware that he’d gone too far and that Alice wouldn’t restore Chrono Crown for a while, so he could no longer stop the conflict.

At least he was able to witness the extraordinary boy known as Kashimiya and die to his impeccable technique, so he tried to at least be glad that he’d made a good memory to share with his Master.

“Hm...?” But then, he realized that something wasn’t right in this workspace.

He expected to have encountered his colleagues and gotten some stern talking-to by now, but they were all somewhere else.

He looked around a bit and found them gathered in a single place. Besides Cheshire — whom Rabbit had just fought — Bandersnatch — who was too big for the space — and Dormouse, everyone was here, in the monitor room they’d used when deploying Gloria to the kingdom.

“Did something happen?” he asked one of his colleagues — The Queen, who had the appearance of a carnivorous beast-woman.

“Welcome back, Rabbit... That avatar really is cute.”

“Shut up. Anyway, what happened?”

“There’s a bit of a disagreement about how to handle a certain situation. Mostly between Dormouse and Humpty.”

Rabbit looked and saw the two arguing over comms.

While they talked, they sent each other info and argued over simulations.

“Ohh? Now this is something.”

By that, Rabbit meant that it was rare for Dormouse to quarrel over anything.

Though, as colleagues who worked together for millennia, the control AIs rarely squabbled in general these days.

His own encounter with Cheshire was quite an exception, resulting mostly from Rabbit's relative lack of maturity — even though Cheshire was the youngest in terms of their numbering and interacted with people more often than most.

"What's the reason?"

"Is eliminating a risk worth it if it brings another risk."

"...That's not an explanation."

"Well, basically, there's a chance to destroy the seed of the next calamity *along with all of Altea,* and they're talking about what they should do." Rabbit had no words, but he instantly understood that something big was happening at the capital.

"...You could've told me that before the peace talks," he said as he realized that this could've prevented the war far more effectively.

He also understood that the incident surrounding the peace talks wasn't isolated to just the area around the assembly hall.

Thus, the story shifted to the capital, where there was no Ray, and none of Altar's Superiors.

This was far from over.

To Be Continued

Afterword

Bear: “Prebear yourselves for the Afterword! I am the Bear, Shu Starling!”

Fox: “And I’m the Fox, Tsukuyo Fusou! We’re the survivor duo, aren’t we?”

Bear: “...Hngh!”

Fox: “Hey?! What was that backhand for?! You’re taking this way too far!”

Bear: “This is the unbearable punishment that awaits those who casually make a killing in the main story.”

Fox: “I-I did, but that made KoB’s wallet thinner and damaged Dryfe’s econo—”

Bear: “No excuses! Kodachi!”

Fox: “Sunsleep Ink Shroud!”

In response to Shu’s kick, Tsukuyo donned the cloth of night.

Shu, however, didn’t miss a beat in his attack, figuring that he could break through it even if weakened by it.

But then, another layer... another wall of night was formed.

That was another one of the variations of the Lunar Divider Field — the “bowl.”

The wall of night that appeared between Shu and Tsukuyo was intended to surround him. If he tried to jump over it, she would surely attack him with her ranged “swallow” attack.

Despite that, Shu faced the wall closing in on him with an indomitable smile.

Then, after equipping the first form of his Embryo on his left hand, he—

Fox: “Hold on! This is an afterwooord! Stop stooop!”

Bear: “...Mrgh. We almost started a fantasy match-up that hasn’t even happened in the main story yet. That’d be beary bad.”

Fox: “How troublesome. You can be really over the top, you know that? Few people just burn down entire forests like you did.”

Bear: “I won’t bear such comments from someone who’s constantly greedy.”

Fox: “How ruuude. Ah. Look at that. While we were doing this, the time came for the author’s actual comments.”

Thank you for your purchase, dearest readers, I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Our world at large is still being ravaged by the coronavirus. Are you all doing well in spite of that?

Various events all over the country have been canceled, and *Dendro* was affected by it in some ways, as well, but I suppose that this truly is the time for perseverance.

I can only hope that our events will return to us next year or the one that will follow.

Anyway, this volume was about Ray’s first deadly encounter against an “Apex,” who also doubled as the strongest enemy he’s yet faced.

I will leave it up to you readers to decide whether the outcome was a victory or a defeat.

If there is something I can say as an author, it would be that Ray protected what he had to.

This is unrelated to the text within this book, but I would like to point out that both color pages in this volume show Nemesis as a high-rank Embryo — the change in clothes that came with the evolution, as well as her fourth form — The Black Mirror.

Taiki did a wonderful job on both pieces, and I cannot thank him enough for it.

14 volumes have been released over 4 years, and looking at Nemesis on the color pages made me really feel how much she’s grown.

Though, she hasn’t changed much on the inside...

Besides the main story, there is the side story, Crow Record, which recently completed its first major arc. In the newest release that just came out, there should be the start of a comical water survival arc with swimsuits included. I was quite tired of all the seriousness, so I will make this one as fun as I can.

The manga adaptation reached the end of Figaro and Xunyu's battle, paving the way for Franklin to enter the stage. There might be some enjoyment to be gained from reading his lines in Yoshitsugu Matsuoka's voice.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram* in the future.

With that in mind, volume 15 should be coming early-to-mid 2021.

Please look forward to seeing what happened during the battles around the assembly hall.

Sakon Kaidou

Fox: "He went and announced the next volume by himself!"

Bear: "Well, we both did it a bunch of times already. I can bear it... Speaking of which, where's Cheshire and Xunyu?"

Fox: "Cheshire couldn't come 'cause of some urgent business, while Xunyu told me that she's really busy with volume 15."

Bear: "...I'm gettin' some déjà vu here."

Fox: "Anyway, there weren't many people here this time, but just look forward to volume 15, okaay?"

Bear: "Get yer claws on it as soon as you can."

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 14
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2021

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
Infinite Dendrogram
15. GAME OVER

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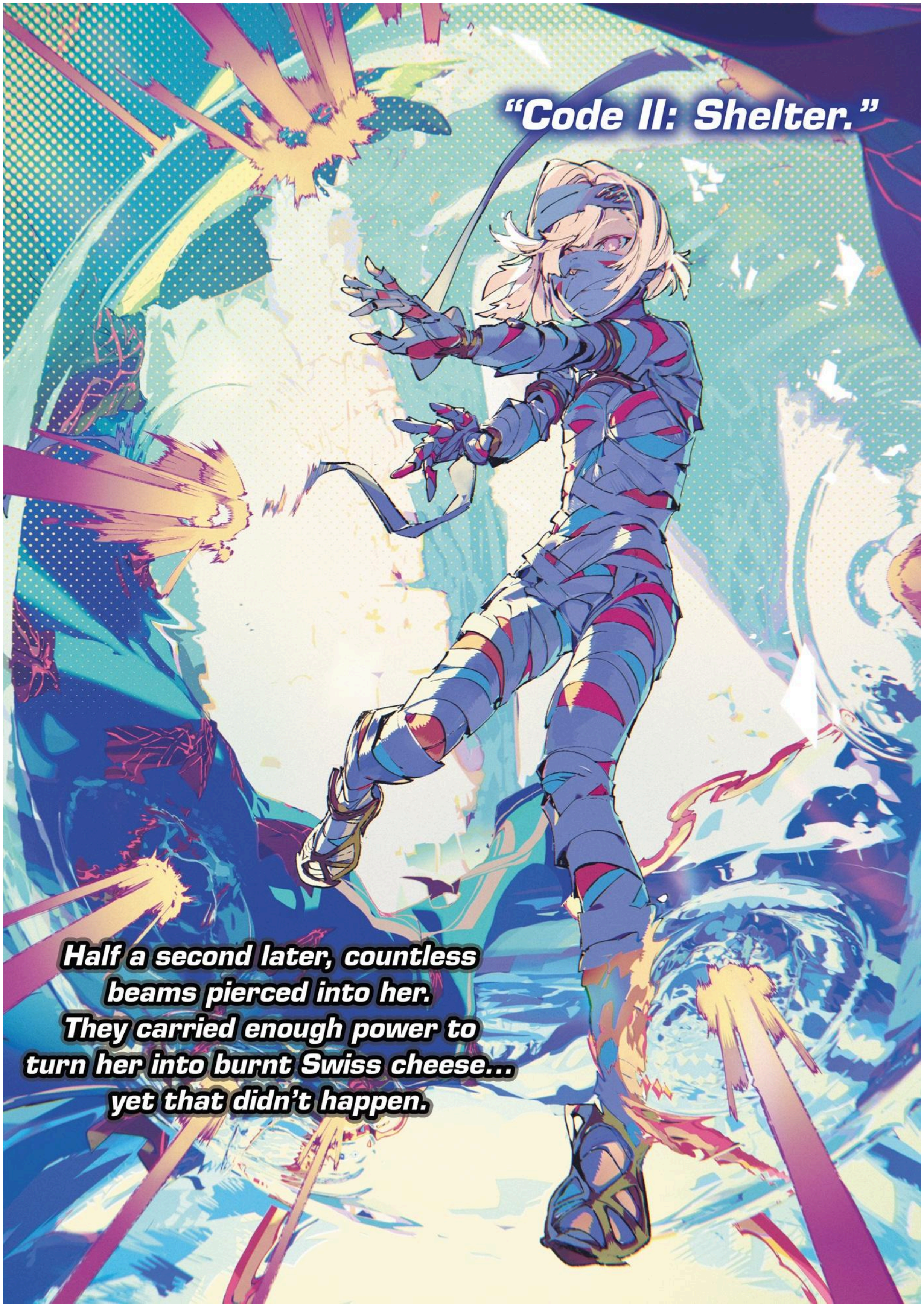

"Code II: Shelter."
Half a second later, countless beams pierced into her. They carried enough power to turn her into burnt Swiss cheese… yet that didn't happen.

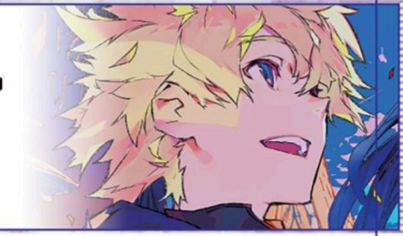
"Don't touch the... GAME OVER."

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

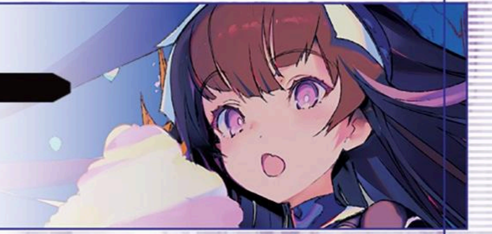
A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. He's generally a calm person, but he has a strong sense of justice that renders him unbreakable when striving to do what's right.



Nemesis

Nemesis

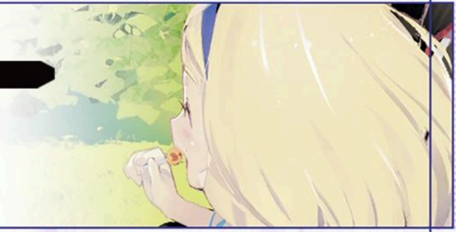
A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. In her base form, she was capable of transforming into a greatsword, but now she's capable of becoming a wide variety of weapons. She's a bit of a glutton.



Elizabeth

Elizabeth S. Altar

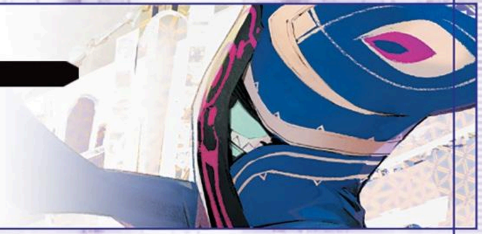
Second Princess of the Kingdom of Altar.
A carefree, tomboyish princess. She has a deep love for her sisters, even if they worry whenever she sneaks out of the castle.
Presently engaged to Canglong, Third Prince of Huang He.



Xunyu

Xunyu

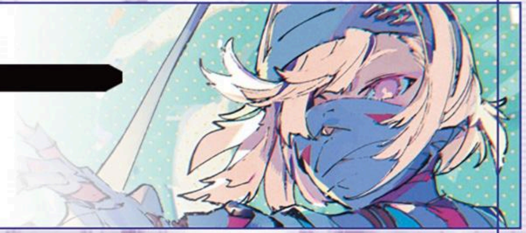
A Superior hailing from the Huang He Empire.
Presently assigned to protect Prince Canglong. Their duelist ranking is exceptionally high, and they once contributed to the death of a SUBM.



Zeta

Zeta

A member of Illegal Frontier, a heinous clan of criminals.
She's a Superior, and the King of Thieves.
At the Dryfe Empire's behest, she's presently leading a group of insurgents to attack Altar's royal capital.
She once held the top duelist ranking position in Dryfe, and has contributed to the death of a SUBM.



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Conjunction: The Game Board They Know as This World

The Gaol, Café "Dice"

Two figures were sitting in a café and playing a game of chess.

One was a black-haired man with a smile on his face, while the other was a tired-looking young woman.

"Board games are profoundly simple," said the man, moving his knight to take the lady's bishop. "Wouldn't you agree?"

This man was none other than King of Crime, Sechs Würfel — the proprietor of this establishment and the leader of the Illegal Frontier clan.

"...Not at all," the lady replied. "This is actually pretty hard for me..." She was Gerbera, a member of the aforementioned clan, as well as a freeloader here. As she played, her eyes were glazed over.

This was a slow business day, so the two had decided to pass the time with chess, but Gerbera was less than an amateur at the game. Even with handicaps, she was losing badly.

"Chess is simple," Sechs insisted as he took another one of Gerbera's pieces. "After all, there are only two factions on the board, and only one king for each of them to take. In reality, the number of factions can never be known, and there might be multiple kings that must fall in order to take each faction down. Also, there is a chance that the world itself — the game board, if you will — would bare its fangs, as well. I've seen it happen before."

"The world itself, huh...? You mean natural disasters like earthquakes? Oh, that reminds me — my dad told me about how he barely survived something like that back when he was a kid. Japan gets earthquakes all the time, doesn't it?"

Being half-Japanese and half-British, Gerbera had a certain degree of knowledge about Japan from her father. He always told her that the people there feared a few things: earthquakes, lightning, fire, and their fathers.

Would I also be afraid of my dad if I lived there? she wondered.

"Natural disasters... Well, I suppose you could call them that," said Sechs.

"...The way you're phrasing it is making me curious," Gerbera replied — as though Sechs's description of the world "baring its fangs" wasn't intriguing enough to begin with.

"It *was* certainly a disaster... But at the same time...I think it was the game board's 'king.'"

Sechs's words were truly bizarre — he seemed to be implying that the *world itself* was another player. That would be akin to the very chessboard they were using joining the game and playing against them.

...How would it move its pieces? Gerbera wondered, completely serious.

"Oh, right. I've yet to tell anyone in I.F. about that encounter. I'll have to distribute the information later."

"...Huh? You were talking about *this* world? Not reality...?" Gerbera asked in surprise.

"Yes," Sechs nodded. "Back then, I believe I saw the 'king-piece' of this world... Though, I suppose it's more fitting to call it *the final boss*."

Sechs casually stated something very shocking.

Gerbera's tired eyes and mouth went wide in surprise.

"...Am I reading too much into this, or did you just drop a bombshell on me? This game has a *final boss*? Seriously? Something above raid bosses like the SUBMs...?"

"Yes. The term 'final boss' suits this quite well, actually. Though, according to a friend of mine, it's the final boss of the world this game *used* to be. Observers like the Red King are the final bosses of the game this world is *now*."

Presenting information he'd gained from the most ancient monster of all — The Skydragon King — Sechs took a sip of his coffee.

"*...Dendro* isn't the first game in the series...? And...a 'friend' of yours? I... Are you sure you should be telling me this? I really wouldn't want to get a death penalty or something for knowing too much..."

"There's no need to worry about that. The control AIs would never do anything to affect the Masters irreversibly. Though, I suppose that doesn't apply to psychological damage."

"Hm?"

"I mean, the trauma from things like a tian friend of yours dying a horrible death."

"...Ohh. Well, there are lots of people who can't handle gore... But...where did you encounter this final boss, anyway? Some created dungeon...? Oh! I know! You're from Altar, so it's probably the Tomb Labyrinth, right?"

"I'm sorry, but no. It was in the capital, but not in that dungeon."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Sechs had just implied that the final boss was in the city of Altea itself, and Gerbera couldn't help but wonder how anyone could possibly run into something like that in such a mundane place.

"The final boss I met had a human form and led a human life," Sechs said with a smile on his face.

"...Wh-huuhh?" Her companion's words made Gerbera freeze up.

As he looked at her with amusement, Sechs remembered the latest report.

I believe today is the day Zeta will fulfill Dryfe's request and assault Altea, he thought. Zeta and La Crima — two core members of I.F. — had combined forces to attack the capital of the kingdom.

Dryfe's goal in this was to bring a certain entity out into the open and — if possible — finish it off.

Sechs was fairly certain that this "entity" was none other than the thing he'd seen back then.

I suppose I ended up talking about it because the memory was in the back of my mind... he thought.

Sechs believed that through this event, Dryfe would find out what he knew. That would cause a drastic shift in the world, much like it had during the war in which Sechs challenged Shu to a battle he couldn't refuse.

Does that mean it would also be stirred into motion? I'm far away from it all at the moment, though. It would be quite a bother if everything ended while I'm still stuck here, he thought as he looked outside, at the scenery of the gaol.

A false sky, a false horizon...a false world, built by Red King using walls of spatial fixation.

"I suppose it must be starting right about now," he muttered, looking out at the closed world — though he seemed to truly be seeing something far beyond its walls.

Chapter Eighteen: Values

The Royal Capital of Altea, City Quarter

Shortly after the peace talks at the border fell apart, Altea was thrown into a state of chaos when it found itself under attack by grotesque hybrids of bee and human — Apis Ideas.

They killed people using their poisonous, spear-like stingers — and upon death, their victims exploded violently, causing damage to anyone nearby. It would be accurate to call them murderous bioweapons. The guards and Masters inside the city fought back against them while attempting to get the inhabitants to safety, but each and every Apis Idea possessed stats that surpassed even Demi-Dragon-tier creatures. Of the Altarian tians, only the Royal Guard had any chance of fighting them one-on-one, so they were forced to face the monsters in groups.

Even Masters who could take on an Apis Idea each weren't having it easy.

"Riser! They're not just strong — they blow up too! We can't fight 'em close up!" shouted Lang, the hippogriff-mounted Gale Rider and member of the Babylonian Battlegroup.

"Tell the other members to fight with guns, bows, and magic. Anyone without a ranged attack can use the Gems in the clan's storage!"

"Roger that!" Lang was talking to a man riding a motorbike smuggled from Dryfe. Another Gale Rider, this man was Masked Riser, number six in the duel rankings, as well as the acting leader of the Babylonian Battlegroup. While he drove the bike through the streets and shot at the bee-men with a rifle, he used a magical comms device to talk to his clan members.

...Good thing I got Fuso to heal me, Masked Riser thought. Tsukuyo had healed all the wounds he'd sustained in his fight against Chrono Crown. With his Embryo damaged, he wasn't as powerful as he could be, but thanks to her healing abilities, he could at least still fight.

As a temporary replacement for Hermod, Masked Riser was using an

MP-powered motorbike that had been leaked from Dryfe.

Things really aren't looking so good right now though, he thought. At the moment, there were few combat-capable Masters in the capital.

Most of the duel rankers had been assassinated the day before yesterday and their death penalties had yet to expire, while The Lunar Society and Death Period — the first- and second-ranked clans — were at the peace talks. The third, K&R, was missing their two Superior Jobs.

And because The Lunar Society and K&R were both based in Altea, most of the other ranking clans had chosen to set up in other cities. Because of this, the only Masters around who were capable of fighting this wave of enemies were the members of the Babylonian Battlegroup, the rest of K&R besides Kashimiya and Rosa, and a handful of others.

As for the kill rankers... Most of them aren't here, but I guess there aren't many of them who can fight in a city. Like the very top ranker — King of Destruction, Shu Starling — most of the kill rankers possessed immense firepower that was best suited for taking on swarms of monsters. The majority of them would only be of limited use in this situation.

"Damn it! This is too much for us! It's like we're playing chess and our side hasn't got a queen!" Lang said, his thoughts running similar to Riser's.

In response, Riser swallowed his worries and said, "That still leaves the knights, the bishops, the rooks, and the pawns. Let's show them what we're made of."

"...All right!" Lang said, trying to pull himself together.

"I'll go east. You meet up with squad B and head west."

"Roger that!"

After about a minute of driving, Riser arrived at a barricade blocking the road.

Beyond it was one of Altea's several town halls; it seemed like it was being used as a shelter and the barricade was there to protect the people inside.

Near the roadblock stood several people, all of them dressed in the uniform of the city guard.

"You are...Masked Riser!" one of them said as Riser came close. His unique-looking mask and long history as a duel ranker made him well-known among the kingdom's tians.

"How's the situation here?" he asked, dismounting from the bike.

“We repelled the first and second wave, but we’ve suffered some casualties of our own...and a third wave might be on the way.”

“Are you saying that this place is being targeted specifically?”

“Yes. It’s not just here, though. They seem to be prioritizing locations where there are a lot of people.”

It looked as though the bee-men were attacking at random, but they were actually trying to be as efficient as possible — efficient at killing people, that is.

They had enough sentience to attack where they would do the most harm, and they exploded upon death to do even more damage.

“According to guards stationed elsewhere, these bee-men are coming in everywhere, even the rear entrances, and—”

“The bee-men have appeared at the national church’s shelter! The explosions are threatening the evacuees!”

“Damn it...!” the guard captain cursed. This wasn’t the first time today he’d received news like that.

Among the bee-men, some of them had been bee-men from the very beginning, and others had started out looking human.

The latter often blended in among the evacuating citizens to hide inside shelters before revealing their true forms in a fatal explosion.

Their efficiency at slaughter was as impressive as it was fearsome.

The shelters can’t refuse to take in the evacuees, but it’s difficult to tell them apart from the disguised bee-men... This is bad, Riser thought.

Not even Reveal could expose them. It only showed their names and a low job level that didn’t reflect their true stats, and unlike monsters, their names didn’t display above their heads. That latter fact made it extremely difficult to tell them apart from normal humans — and it was also proof that, despite their grotesque appearance, these bee creatures were also human.

“What are they, anyway?! Some Legendarian tribe?!” The guard captain’s words left Riser deep in thought.

If they’re not monsters, that’s the most obvious assumption...but that can’t be it. According to a Babylonian Battlegroup member who had a job from the researcher grouping, the post-transformation bee-men had the “insectoid” typing. That just wasn’t normal.

No matter how insect-like they looked, a humanoid tribe would always be of the “human” type. There were jobs that changed this, such as Lich, which turned the humanoid that had it into “undead,” and Ogre Samurai, which did the same with “Oni.” However, according to Reveal, the bee-men had no such jobs.

Even if it was some kind of job, it wouldn’t explain the transformation ability or why the stats don’t match their levels... Hold on, he thought to himself as he realized there was another possibility — that these might be humans who had been warped by Embryos or UBMs.

It was unlikely, though, that UBMs would commit such a complicated act of terrorism. Riser had been in this world a long time, but even he could only think of one such example — the Exodragon King that had schemed behind the scenes in Gideon.

But that would mean that these bee-men were created by a Master, and...how could anyone like that actually exist...? Riser didn’t want to believe that. If that were true, it would mean that there was a Master who turned tians into living weapons. He was a solid worlder and really didn’t want to accept that someone so callous really existed in *Dendro*.

“...Whatever the case, I have to stop these attacks on the shelter.” Even if the bee-men were transformed tians, he’d already resolved to stop them from harming any more innocent people.

What he needed right now was a means of telling evacuees and the bee-men apart, but his Babylonian Battlegroup didn’t have anyone with an Embryo that could help in that regard.

Right as Riser began to fear that the bee-men would retain the element of surprise all the way through...

“U-Um...!”

...a girl called out to him.

“Hm? You’re...” She seemed familiar to him.

This girl and Riser both knew Ray and had been in each other’s presence several times now.

“I’m Kasumi...from Death Period...” Kasumi was a member of Death Period who had been unable to participate in the peace talks due to real life circumstances. She was accompanied by Io and Fujinon, who also couldn’t join Ray for similar reasons.

“Yeah, I remember you. All of you,” said Riser. “So you stayed here in Altar, huh?”

"Y-Yes...! Umm... I have something...to say...!"

"You do?"

Kasumi nodded before showing Riser the board in her hands — her Embryo, Taijitu.

"My...my Taijitu can show the locations and levels of nearby Embryos...!" Before, it could only pinpoint the Masters themselves, but its recent ascension to a high-ranking Type Angel-Arms had expanded this ability to their Embryos as well.

Riser instantly understood what she was getting at.

"Those bee-men..." Kasumi said. "They're all marked as 'VII'...Superior Embryos...!" Taijitu was reacting to the fragments of a certain Embryo within the bee-men and displaying their locations.

"Superior... Wait, more importantly, you're saying that you can tell them apart from regular humans even when they're disguised?!"

"Yes...!" That was great news. The greatest threat right now were the bee-men blending in with the evacuees, so dealing with them would greatly reduce the casualties.

"Can you tell us where they are?" Riser asked.

"Yes...! I'll mark them...! So please...inform everyone else!" Kasumi said before looking into her Taijitu and touching its surface.

She traced her finger over the many "VII" signals it was displaying.

"Taijitu...Marking!" The moment she used that skill, their surroundings slightly changed.

A downward-pointing triangle, looking like something straight out of a GPS app, suddenly appeared above one of the evacuees heading to the nearby shelter.

That was it — the mark distinguishing the enemies blending in among the tians.

"...There's one!" Kasumi called.

"Got it!" Io and Fujinon quickly leaped into action. Fujinon — now a high-rank job, Geomancer — used earth magic to bind their target in place.

"BZzzZZzzZz..." The moment he was bound, the man instantly transformed into a grotesque human-bee hybrid.

However, a moment later, he was split in half by a giant axe — none other than Io's Embryo, Five-Ring.

It exploded as it died, but since there was no one nearby, the explosion did no further harm.

In fact, Five-Ring was so large and long that the explosion didn’t move it an inch, and Io was so far away that she almost didn’t feel the shock wave from the blast.

“A-A mark...? What *was* that...?” This sudden turn of events perplexed the guards, and Riser realized that the situation had now shifted in their favor.

Kasumi’s Marking skill didn’t contribute to the battle directly, but it allowed them to neutralize the bee-men hiding in shelters before they could do too much damage.

“...Can I assume that all the bee-men in the city are now marked?” Riser asked.

“Y-Yes! Taijitu covers the entire city... But the five ‘VII’s at the castle were too fast for me to touch...”

“The castle...” The bee-men were powerful, but not absurdly fast.

Does that mean that the “VII”s at the castle aren’t just these minion bee-men? Could they be actual Superiors...? No, I can’t focus on that right now...! Riser had many questions, but they were less important than the task before him.

He grabbed his comms magic device and said, “Attention, all members of the Babylonian Battlegroup: the tians with arrows above them are actually bee-men. Question and bind them just in case, and neutralize them if they expose themselves!”

With that, the members of the Babylonian Battlegroup scattered all over Altea now had the necessary information.

The guards at Riser’s side were also busy contacting their fellow guards all over the city.

“Thank you,” he said, turning to Kasumi. “You really turned the tide in our favor. Hm...?”

For some reason, the girl wasn’t listening to him. She was just staring at her Taijitu with her head tilted to the side.

“...Is something wrong?” Riser asked.

“L-Look...” she said, pointing at a particular location on the map, her finger shaking.

Riser, Io, and Fujinon all came to see what had made her so unsettled.

Kasumi was pointing to the fountain plaza at Altea’s southern main street — the place that functioned as the city's save point.

There were a large number of "VII"s clustered all around it. They were overlapping in a way that made them hard to count, but there couldn't be fewer than a hundred, at least. That was no doubt a much higher number of monsters than had been initially released.

"Th-They weren't there before..." Kasumi said.

"Hmm..." If they had been there from the start, Kasumi would've certainly noticed them when she was marking the others. That could only mean that they did indeed just appear suddenly, without warning.

If that save point was the place where the bee-men emerged from hiding...

"...That could very well be the source of the invasion." If they ignored this, the situation could become unsalvageable.

Riser made his decision. Then, he grabbed the comms device connecting him to his clan members.

"Attention, all members of the Babylonian Battlegroup! It's likely that the source of the bee-men is near the fountain in the southern part of Altea. Anyone who can move quickly, go straight there and prepare to fight. I'm heading over too!"

Riser then leaped back onto his motorbike and headed towards the fountain.

Upon seeing his swift departure, Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon looked at each other and nodded before jumping on their own Landwing mounts and spurring them towards the same destination.

A few minutes later, they all arrived at the fountain from the northern side of the main street.

The other Babylonian Battlegroup members were nowhere in sight, but if they were following Riser's instructions properly, they were surely moving to surround the source from every direction.

"What...?" said Riser, struck by the odd sight before him.

Over a hundred bee-men stood in an orderly fashion, like a well-trained army.

"Oh my. Oh me oh my. Ohohohoho!" The sound of laughter began to echo from somewhere beyond the line of soldiers. The sound was unpleasant — like a mix between a human voice and the buzzing of an insect. "Congratulations! You are the first humans in the whole city to have the honor of an audience with me. Oh, how splendid. Truly delightful!"

This speech was quite unlike the incoherent buzzing of the bee-men. Garbled though it was, it was still easily recognizable as human speech.

The owner of the voice was sitting elegantly on the edge of the fountain, surrounded by the bee-man army. "Sitting" might not even be the correct word for the figure's pose, as its body was terribly warped.

The speaker appeared to be a mixture of a well-proportioned human woman and *several* bees. The resulting discord in its form made it hard to tell if it was actually "sitting."

It even had a bee-like abdomen — or rather, *several* of them.

Compared to this creature, even the bee-men didn't look grotesque.

"What...who are you?!" Riser yelled.

"'Who?!' *That* is your first question when faced with such a beautiful being?! Oh my! Such ignorance!" The buzzing, mumbling voice made it difficult to read her emotions, but it was fairly obvious that the question had made the creature upset.

"But I will forgive you," it added. "This is the kingdom of Altar — a place so dreadfully unlike the wondrous fairyland I call home. I cannot fault you for not knowing me. Ignorance is not exactly a sin, after all."

"Fairyland...?" Riser didn't miss that word. There was only one country that it could apply to.

"Indeed. I am Eh Teln Pare! As the holder of the Insect General job, I once served Legendaria's army, but the foolish queen and those who follow her branded me a rebel and chased me out of the country!"

Riser had now obtained the enemy's name and job. However, that information was nothing compared to what it...*she* said next.

"And now, I serve I.F.! Especially La Crima, who recognized my beauty, saw that I was in the right, and granted me these new soldiers!"

"I.F....!" Riser knew of the clan — a group of Superior villains.

That was enough to be certain of who was behind this incident.

"And now...ohh, and now...!" Eh Teln Pare went on as though intoxicated, "I am Regina! Regina Apis Idea! The queen bee! And the true queen of fairyland!"

She proudly revealed the name she had been given as a modified human. "I will use this fight to grow stronger, then free my ancestral home from that misguided queen! I can't allow my beloved Legendaria to continue along its wayward course any longer...!" Eh Teln Pare practically sang out her true desires. "And you will be the first sacrifices towards achieving that end!" Finally, she unleashed her Apis Ideas onto Riser's group.

The ten Apis Ideas in the front of the formation were the first ones to attack. Ten was more than double the size of Riser's group, and the ones that remained were more than enough to protect Pare...or rather, Regina Apis Idea, the queen bee herself.

All of the Apis Ideas were affected by the Insect General job's skills: Insectoid Enhancement and its final skill, Even a Worm Will Burn.

At skill level EX, the former ability merely doubled all of their stats, while the effect of the latter was more complicated.

It was one of the few Superior Job final skills for which someone else, not the user, paid the price.

When an insectoid within the party died, the skill made them explode with a force proportional to their stats. The collective firepower carried by the Apis Ideas, all above Demi-Dragon-tier in stats, was simply immense — as evidenced by the many Masters they had already destroyed.

And now, all of this power was focused on Riser and the three girls.

"Ngh...!" Under normal circumstances, a high-ranking duelist like him might have been able to easily repel these Apis Ideas. However, his Embryo was still damaged, so he lacked the firepower needed to destroy them without a great deal of effort.

"Keep your distance from them! I'll slow them down!" Despite this setback, he still had means of fighting them — one of which was an inventory filled with high-rank offensive ultimate job skill Gems.

He reached into his inventory now and took out a stark white Gem before tossing it towards the ten Apis Ideas as they charged forward.

A moment later, the spherical area surrounding the Gem was flooded with white.

"BzZz... BzZ..." The ten Apis Ideas were instantly covered in frost, which greatly slowed them down.

The spell contained in the Gem was White Field, the ultimate job skill for Cryomancers. Though it was weaker than Crimson Sphere in the same tier, it had the effect of ridding an area of its thermal energy and inflicting the Frozen status.

Though the Apis Ideas had Demi-Dragon-tier stats, they were human-sized and possessed the insectoid weakness to low temperatures.

"Riser! Get down!" Io shouted, putting her Five-Ring under her arm and swinging it horizontally.

The heavy weapon, specialized in offense, easily split and pulverized the Frozen insectoids.

The Apis Ideas scattered and died...

"Huh?"

...but unlike the others, they didn't explode.

Their severed top and bottom halves *were still moving towards them*.

"Get back!" Riser shouted, and the girls immediately created distance between them and the Apis Ideas.

As they fled, Kasumi summoned a Balloon Golem to act as a shield, while Fujinon used her earth magic to create a barricade.

Both of them stopped the Apis Ideas in their tracks, and after ten seconds or so...they all exploded, as per usual.

It was as though *their deaths had been delayed*.

"I know this...!" As an experienced Master, Riser was familiar with one job that made this possible.

"They're Death Soldiers!" The Apis Ideas the queen had at her side — the ones she called the "Queen's Guard" — were different from the other bee-men in two ways.

First, they had their transformation ability removed in exchange for doubling their stats.

And second...all of them were Death Soldiers.

That was the job used by suicide troops in the wars several centuries ago. It was perfect for the purpose because of its Last Command skill, which allowed movement after death.

Having this job would make it impossible for the Apis Ideas to blend in among normal people, for skills like Reveal would instantly expose them. However, the Queen's Guard couldn't transform and thus had no need to blend in, so they lost nothing from becoming Death Soldiers.

This was the greatest advantage Apis Ideas had over ordinary monsters.

Being originally human, they had the ability to acquire jobs. They were still experimental creatures, and Death Soldier was the only job they seemed to utilize so far, but the future held the promise of amazing, fully optimized builds.

Their ability to take Death Soldier was terrifying enough, however. As long as Last Command was active, the Queen's Guard were able to charge at their enemies even if torn to pieces.

Additionally, since Last Command only allowed for the movement of parts still connected to the brain, the Queen's Guard overcame this limitation by having their central nervous system distributed around their body.

Of course, that made human-like thought impossible. Their intellect was arguably even lower than that of actual insects, but that didn't affect their ability to act as the Insect General's pawns. The morality of their creation aside, Apis Ideas were extremely potent soldiers under Regina's command.

"Oh? Ten wasn't enough? You're more skilled than I expected. How commendable," she said, nonchalantly releasing more Apis Ideas from her Jewel.

She seemed to think nothing of the ten former human beings she had just seen die. It was as though they were nothing more than actual insects to her.

"...Fiend!" Riser shouted, unable to restrain himself any longer.

The Apis Ideas were no doubt his enemies, and he was determined to protect Altea from them — but thinking about it from another perspective, they were the nauseating creations of a truly warped mind, and thus victims in their own right.

"Fiend? Certainly not," Regina said, clearly irritated. "Legendaria is the truly fiendish power here. I am fighting to *fix* it, so I cannot be in the wrong."

"What does Legendaria have to do with this?!" Riser raised his voice in anger. Even if she was right about Legendaria, it didn't make her any less of a fiend. There were many conflicts, past and present, where both sides were evil.

"My motherland is overcome by madness! The machinery has come undone, letting foolish ideas spread unchecked!" Regina continued, clearly ignoring what Riser was trying to say. "I had to right this wrong, even if it meant becoming a rebel and initiating a coup d'état! My will to do so has not wavered, even now that I have sworn loyalty to La Crima!"

Riser had heard rumors that there was a secret feud within Legendaria's ruling class, so he could only guess that Regina wanted to set things right.

Still, that was no excuse for her horrific actions.

“Indeed! I *had* to resist! I had no choice! My country has gone mad, and it is traveling down the wrong path!” Regina continued to bare her soul in a buzzing monologue — as if Riser and the others weren’t even there.

“Yes! Legendaria is making a grave mistake. After all, they...”

And so...

“*They revere Titania instead of me — the beautiful Pare!*”

...she revealed her ultimate motivation — one that only she herself could ever see as righteous.

Riser, Kasumi, Io, Fujinon...everyone present could barely comprehend what they’d just heard. They felt as though their ears were failing them.

After all, Regina had just said that she rebelled because people fawned over the queen of fairyland more than her.

To them, as well as to most other people, this motivation and the actions taken on behalf of it were completely incomprehensible.

“It just isn’t right, don’t you think?! *That* ugly creature — beautiful? Lovable?! Worthy of *idol-like adoration*?! Utter madness! The entire country has lost its mind!”

Riser was still at a loss for words. Images of Titania could be found all over *Infinite Dendrogram*, as well as on the internet in reality. Riser had seen them too, and remembering what she looked like, he thought, *If not finding her ugly is madness, then I guess I also need professional help.* The queen of the fairyland was just *that* beautiful.

It actually felt wrong to compare her to Regina — this monstrosity of warped insect flesh.

“I tried asserting my beauty, but nobody listened! If that isn’t madness, I don’t know what is!” Regina exclaimed.

“B-But...if your beauty was so important to you...why did you transform into this...?” Kasumi meekly asked.

Like the other Apis Ideas, Regina was marked on the Taijitu as a “VII.” It seemed as though she used to be human and had been transformed into what she was now, but...

“What do you mean?” Regina tilted her head in confusion. “My beautiful form wasn’t changed one bit.”

Her response made them even more perplexed.

“I specifically asked the one who gave me power and this army to let me keep the beautiful form I was born with. I was told that might limit how powerful I could be, but that didn't matter! Nothing in this world is more valuable than my beauty!"

Regina's words were laden with confidence in her righteousness.

Riser just looked at her, saying nothing. Everyone had different values. What was good in one's eyes was bad in another's, so in a way, Regina wasn't *completely* in the wrong.

"Anyone who suggests otherwise is misguided! And I will correct everyone who does!"

However, her greatest error was misjudging the outlook of the vast majority.

"Those who don't accept my beauty are the source of this terrible wrongness, and I will kill them all. I will free Legendaria and the rest of the world from their madness! I am beauty! I am justice!"

She was clearly insane, and yet she believed that everyone *else* was — and she never doubted this for even a second.

Kasumi had Truth Discernment, and the fact that Regina's words didn't trigger it sent a chill down her spine.

Regina truly believed that she was more beautiful than anyone else, and that she should be adored by everyone. If that wasn't how things were, she would rather destroy the world than let it continue in ignorance.

The powers she gained, the Apis Ideas she commanded, her repulsive appearance that she thought was beautiful...many things here could be called "monstrous," but none of them compared to her alien mind.

"...I see," said Riser. He realized that he was facing someone who would mow down everyone in her path for the sake of her own values...and if that wasn't evil, he didn't know what was.

With that in mind...

"Babylonian Battlegroup, attack!"

...he used his comms device to send out an order.

A moment later, the Babylonian Battlegroup members who were surrounding the fountain plaza showed themselves and charged towards Regina. They had assumed their positions and prepared for an ambush while Riser and the three girls distracted the bee queen.

Twelve Masters all attacked Regina from every direction.

No matter how modified, not even a Superior Job could withstand the combined might of that many ultimate high-rank jobs and Embryo skills.

And Regina herself had admitted that she wasn't as enhanced as she could be.

She fought back with her squad of Apis Ideas, but Babylonian Battlegroup's Masters, experienced as they were, easily broke through...and aimed their entire assault straight at Regina.

Multiple Masters all played their most powerful cards in their bid to defeat her.

...And a moment later, *explosions resounded from all across the city*.

Some of them were close at hand — a number of the Queen's Guard had blown up, taking several of the attacking Masters with them.

"Oh, what a surprise. There goes a hundred of them," said Regina — who, unlike the Masters, was completely unharmed.

It was as though the damage she should've sustained went somewhere else.

"What? This is..." Riser instantly understood what happened just now, and it was terrifying.

"...Lifelink!"

"Not exactly, but close enough," said Regina.

The skill she was using was called "Colony for One."

It was the Insect General's passive skill, and it made it so that any damage she suffered would instead be transferred to any in-range insectoids under her command. It had a far greater range than Lifelink and wasn't as restrictive about what types of minions it worked on.

As long as there were Apis Ideas within range, Regina wouldn't receive a single point of damage.

And since any damage to her was transmitted straight to her minions spread all over the capital...

"But that...that means that..."

"If we attack her, we'll just cause more explosions in the city?!"

...It meant that any attacks on Regina could result in disaster.

"Ohohoh! So, what will you do now? I wouldn't mind if you keep fighting me just as you have been. No one can sully my beauty!" Regina laughed, summoning more Apis Ideas, which instantly readied their poison stingers and aimed them at the Masters.

Regina couldn't be harmed — she held the capital hostage and could increase the size of her army as she wished.

Those facts made Riser realize that, Gloria aside, he was up against his most fearsome foe yet.

Chapter Nineteen: Hero

September, 2044

On that day, the Babylonian Battlegroup was fighting a UBM on a plateau near the city of Claymill.

The clan was a force to be reckoned with, and many powerful UBMs had already fallen to them. In most cases, the MVP special rewards for those victories went either to Foltesla — their leader and the third in Altar's duel rankings — or Shulka — the clan's sub-leader who formed the backbone of the group.

However, things were different with the UBM they fought this day — Jetdragon, Valcan.

This monster was a landdragon that had mutated and gained the ability to fly at supersonic speeds by releasing the energy within it to propel itself, much like a rocket. Valcan fought primarily by combining the tough body of a landdragon with immense speed, creating fearsome charge attacks.

Since arriving in the area surrounding Claymill, this UBM had caused tremendous damage to the local ecosystem and greatly affected the lives of the citizens. That was why the Babylonian Battlegroup had set out to vanquish it, but that turned out to be easier said than done.

After all, Valcan was a landdragon that could freely fly through the air. Foltesla and Shulka's attacks couldn't reach it, any power-focused skills always missed, and those with skills focused on accuracy couldn't penetrate its hard outer body.

Battles in *Infinite Dendrogram* were always strongly influenced by compatibility, and it seemed that the Babylonian Battlegroup as a whole stood no chance against Valcan...but there was one among them who was capable of battling the creature.

His name was Masked Riser.

His Embryo was still only in its fifth form, but its skills made it possible for Riser to briefly fly at supersonic speeds and deliver powerful attacks.

Because of that, the clan created a strategy centered around him, and the result was a resounding success.

Though the other members of the Babylonian Battlegroup were barely even able to touch the monster, they could still use their abilities to limit Valcan's movement enough for Riser, fully buffed by Shulka, to deliver an attack that brought it down to the ground. This created an opportunity for the rest of them. Shulka used Lahmu to bind Valcan before it could take to the sky again, letting the others lay into it with everything they had.

When it was defeated, Riser was chosen as the MVP.

He himself was perplexed by this, but everyone else — the leaders included — believed that he richly deserved the award, and that was the end of the battle against Valcan.

However, Riser then found himself perplexed by something else entirely.

His MVP special reward — the first he'd ever gotten — wasn't some powerful piece of gear, but a *material*.

"...What am I supposed to do with this?" he said, frowning beneath his mask. He was sitting in the lounge of his clan's headquarters and staring at the object placed on the table — the item called "Compressed Remains of Jetdragon, Valcan."

It was slightly larger than an adult man and looked like a statue of the dragon who had borne the same name.

Despite that, it was no doubt his MVP special reward: an MVP special *material*, to be precise.

The summoner grouping could use items of this kind as catalysts to summon weaker versions of the UBMs. The necromancer grouping could use them as remains to create undead. If any crafting jobs somehow managed to become MVPs, they could use the material in their production efforts.

As a result, this kind of MVP special reward often went to players with these kinds of jobs.

However, Riser was a fully battle-focused Master. Neither his build nor Embryo had any production capabilities, so there was nothing he could do with the Compressed Remains.

This was his first MVP special reward, but it was completely wasted on him.

"What's wrong, Riser?"

"Leader..." Suddenly, he was approached by Foltesla.

“Oh, that’s the MVP reward you got yesterday,” the clan leader said. “You still haven’t asked someone to work on it?”

“Yes, it’s the reward... Wait, what do you mean ‘ask someone to work on it?’” Riser said, not sure if he actually heard that right.

“Hm? You didn’t know?” the leader said. “Other people can work on MVP special materials, but only the MVP who received it can use the final product.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yeah. Totally battle-focused Masters only get material like this when they know someone who can work with it. I once got an MVP reward that could be turned into medicine and had my wife make it for me. I bet you know someone who can do something with this material too.”

“I see,” Riser said. A particular individual did indeed come to his mind immediately. “I’ll go and put in the request right away.”

“See you later, then,” said Foltesla. “Show me the final result, okay?”

The Fortress City of Claymill had been built several centuries ago as a defensive base. Because of that, it had a strong equipment production sector; supposedly, it had the most tians with crafting jobs of any city in Altar.

Riser brought the Compressed Remains to the workshop of one of the city’s most skilled craftsmen. He opened the door, looked at the many people hard at work, and said, “Excuse me, is Mr. Zola here?”

“Oh, well if it ain’t Riser! I’m here, laddie. What brings you in today? Your mask seems all right to me.”

An aging man polishing what looked like a piece of armor replied to Riser’s call. He was the exact person Riser had been looking for — High Armorsmith, Zola. The man was the owner of this workshop and spent day after day working alongside his apprentices there to fulfill many equipment requests from Masters and tians alike.

Riser had known Zola since shortly after he arrived at Claymill, which was more than two years ago by that point. The metal mask Riser was wearing right now — based on those worn by heroes from action-heavy tokusatsu shows — had been created by none other than Zola.

In the early days right after *Infinite Dendrogram’s* release, most Masters could only craft things based on designs that already existed. In order to create something that had no established recipe, one had to wait until exceptionally skilled craftsmen appeared or until some sort of technological innovation made the process easier.

The same principle applied to customization of existing designs. Even turning a standard full-face helm into a mask without compromising its stats required a skilled hand.

Creating an item that functioned like a metal full-face helm but *looked* like a mask worn by tokusatsu heroes was too challenging for the first wave of Masters, so Riser had no choice but to rely on a tian craftsman.

However, that came with its own problems.

In hindsight, Riser felt that he had been quite unreasonable back then.

I asked him to make me a hero mask when the concept of "tokusatsu" didn't even exist here, he thought. The word "hero" only makes most tians think of "The Hero," which was a Special Superior Job.

Because of that, he and Zola went through many clashes of opinion before they reached a mutual understanding and began making progress. After much experimentation based on Riser's poor drawings, they eventually created the mask Riser wore now.

As Riser leveled up, he also had Zola create improved versions of the same mask design using better materials. They even had a Recipe for it now, making it easy to create replacements in case the mask was destroyed.

Through their many interactions during all this, Riser and Zola had become such good friends that he was even welcome to join the smith's family and apprentices at his dinner table. There was no craftsman Riser trusted more, and he believed Zola was the perfect man for this job.

"I have a request," Riser said, presenting the Compressed Remains and asking Zola to make equipment out of it.

"Hrm..." However, Zola didn't seem too thrilled about it.

It looked like he was conflicted...even *hesitant* to accept this job.

"Lad... Wouldn't it be better to get someone else to do this?" he asked.

"Why?"

"This material's too much for me...simple as that," he said, placing a hand on the headpiece of the remains. "I've heard of UBM special materials before, but it's my first time seeing the real thing. Never worked with stuff this good. I'd be biting off more than I can chew."

"But..."

"And...I ain't a Superior Job," Zola said with a sigh. "I'm just an everyday craftsman who can't even reach max level. This is a one-of-a-kind material. Don't leave it with me. You're better off taking it to a Superior Job or a Master with an Embryo good for smithing."

Unlike Masters, tians had individual differences in talent that could cap their level below 500.

Zola was well aware of the limits of his abilities and tried to refuse Riser's request because he didn't consider himself good enough. An unskilled craftsman would only waste the rare material, after all.

However, looking into Zola's eyes, Riser also saw an artisan's desire to create something truly unique.

Fully understanding the smith's point, Riser...

"That doesn't matter to me. I want you to create it."

...refused to back down.

"I'm telling you — I'm not good enough..."

"Look at this mask," Riser said as he pointed at his face. "*You* made this. On the other side, I got in an accident and had to give up on my dream of being an actor. But thanks to this mask, I can still be a hero in this world."

At first, Riser's reasons for creating the mask were rather negative.

He wanted a reminder of the dream he'd lost and the possibilities that were now out of his reach.

However, that changed when he had finally donned the first mask that Zola had created for him. It had reflected his dream so strongly that he found it dazzling, and as he wore it, he realized that he now had superhuman stats, a trusty Embryo to take into battle...*and the face of a hero*.

Instead of becoming a reminder of what he'd lost, the mask whispered to him that his dream was now within his grasp.

Thus, he resolved to become someone worthy of that mask.

He put it on, requested that Zola create a suit to go with it, and went out to act as a hero.

He protected people by fighting monsters and bandits, even going on regular patrols.

Both Masters and tians alike saw him as a weirdo.

In time, however, he found friends in Bishmal — who liked Riser's style and joined him on his patrols — as well as Foltesla — who heard rumors about him and invited him to his clan.

And as he continued his activities, he eventually began to be called a hero.

Not "*The* Hero," but just a friendly neighborhood hero — a champion of Claymill.

The mask that was supposed to be just a reminder of a dream he'd lost had given birth to a hero known as Masked Riser. And that was why...

"You're the one I want to create the equipment I'll use when I wear this mask..."

"Lad..."

...Riser insisted that Zola accept this task.

Zola hesitated at his earnest request for a second before saying, "I can't say no to that! Just don't complain if it turns out bad!"

The aged smith had accepted.

"All right! We'll have to give it all we got! Lads! We're starting with a sketch! Gather here once you're all done with your tasks!"

"Got it, boss!" the apprentices replied, all with smiles on their faces. They also wanted to work on something made of MVP special material.

"Design comes first. That's what's most important for a hero, ain't it, lad?" Zola asked.

"Oh, feel free to make it in a way that's easier for you..."

"Don't be an idiot! It's gear for you and you alone! It's gotta be all hero-like!" Zola laughed, poking at Riser's chest. "Even though I dunno if we really understand what 'hero-like' means! We'll make a bunch of designs at the workshop, so you come and choose whichever you like, all right, lad?"

"Okay... I'll be looking forward to it!"

"You better!" And so, Zola and his apprentices took to designing the piece of equipment using Valcan's remains.

It was an arduous task that took almost a whole month.

The result was Valcan Air — armor designed to impart the traits of the Jetdragon to its wearer. It was intended to be used alongside Riser's Hermod and, perhaps most importantly, to look like the apparel of a hero.

In many aspects, it was the perfect armor for Riser...if it weren't for a single flaw.

"Sorry...we messed up."

The flaw was so big that Zola and his apprentices were crestfallen over it.

One of the skills the armor had was called “Destruction Resistance.”

MVP special rewards were supposed to have an auto-repair function that recreated them for the owner if they were destroyed, but Valcan Air was merely *resistant* to destruction.

That made it quite durable, of course, but it also meant that it couldn’t be repaired. It could even potentially be lost forever.

The remaining durability was actually displayed, so its limits were clearly visible. Once the durability was gone, it would break.

Some would say that this flaw alone made it far worse than any other items in its tier.

“I messed up the most important part...” Zola felt awful. If he’d been a better craftsman, he might’ve left behind a treasure that matched actual MVP special rewards — a power that could never be lost.

Riser’s reaction, however, wasn’t what Zola expected.

“No. This is perfect.”

“What...?”

“There are things that are precious *because* they may break someday.” Not everything lasted forever. There were some things that could break or be lost for all time. However, that also made those things all the more irreplaceable.

To Riser, this armor was as dazzling as the dream he’d lost.

“Lad... You like it?” Zola asked.

“I will treasure this armor...this suit of yours,” Riser replied without hesitation.

“...Ha ha hah!” After a brief silence, Zola laughed. “I see. Well, I’m glad the client likes it,” he said with a relieved expression and gave Riser a light hug. “All right, let’s celebrate a job well done with a party! Drinks are on me!”

His words were met with cheers from his apprentices.

“None of you mind if I bring along my wife and kids, right?”

“Of course not!” said Riser. All smiles, they went to call Zola’s family and set out into the evening-tinted city of Claymill.

They chatted and celebrated as they walked — the very picture of a simple, peaceful day-to-day life.

But that was then. Now...only one person from this image was still alive.

A month later, Claymill was attacked by the greatest calamity Altar had ever faced — Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

The people of Claymill, those that had loved Riser and called him a hero, were snuffed out by its devastating light.

◇

He'd lost his dream.

He'd lost people dear to him.

But there was still something he had.

It was...

◇◆◇

The Royal Capital of Altea, Fountain Plaza

"Ohohoh! Whatever is the matter? Your movements seem worse than before."

The battle against Regina Apis Idea was turning against the defenders.

Regina redirected any damage done to her towards the Apis Ideas spread all over Altea, making them burst in an explosion that could potentially cause a great deal of damage.

The Queen's Guard standing between them and Regina were a serious threat, as well. Having the Death Soldier job allowed them to move even after dying, giving them time to act before they finally exploded.

They used that time to either charge at Riser's group or run towards nearby buildings like suicide bombers.

It was like they were holding the entire capital hostage. The defenders couldn't recklessly attack Regina, so Riser's party had no choice but to stay on the defensive.

As the battle wore on, Riser tried to find a way to win this.

Maybe we should use some kind of debuff? he thought.

They did have the option of using debuffs instead of attacks, like the White Field Gem he'd used against the Queen's Guard. However, restricting Regina would probably change nothing. Even if she was Frozen or Petrified, the Apis Ideas would still move on their own and explode upon death.

There was even a chance that they would fight even more erratically and aggressively without an active leader, causing even more havoc inside the city. The Apis Ideas could only be stopped if Regina was defeated.

It might be possible to neutralize them with Charm...but not many people have that skill. Riser only knew of two people who used Charm: Catherine Kongou, the second in kill rankings, and Rook from Death Period.

He hadn't seen the former in a while, and Rook was at the peace conference.

Spells like Death Sentence can kill without dealing damage...but putting them into circulation as Gems is against Altarian law, so I doubt that anyone here has those. Their options were limited — and even those limited options weren't available. It seemed like they were completely powerless against this threat.

"R-Riser..." Kasumi whispered to him, Taijitu in hand. It seemed like she didn't want Regina to hear what she was about to say. "I-I noticed something about the explosions."

She pointed at the surface of the Taijitu and drew a circle before continuing.

"All the bee-men that exploded after the attack were within a radius of three kilometels from here...! The ones in the north were almost completely untouched."

"Really...?!" Riser looked at the map and saw that indeed, the distribution of the Apis Ideas was uneven. When he'd looked at it before going to the fountain plaza, they were spread out more or less randomly. Now, there was a donut-shaped area centered around Regina where the Apis Ideas were more sparse.

That was clearly because they had exploded due to Colony for One — meaning that this area of about three kilometels was the skill's active range.

It might have a long reach, but it was indeed limited. That knowledge alone was a blessing.

"We should be able to reduce the damage to Altea if we lure her away from here...!" said Kasumi. "But..."

"Thank you."

"...That would be diffi—huh?" Kasumi realized that Riser had cut her off and thanked her before she was even able to finish her sentence.

He knew what she was trying to say.

Kasumi wanted to suggest taking Regina out of Altea while avoiding the Apis Ideas and preventing her from giving the order to destroy the city.

That would be difficult, no doubt — but Riser saw hope in Kasumi's words.

He knew of something that would let him overcome this challenge. He still had an ace up his sleeve that would let him save the city.

All he had to do now...was gather his resolve and use it.

"...Zola," he said as he took out a little cube — an inventory dedicated solely to the most precious objects.

Inside it, there was something irreplaceable. Something he cherished dearly.

It was a memento of people that were gone forever — a piece of equipment that had been through many battles and was currently at its utmost limit.

Even so...

"I'll use this...one last time."

Even so, Riser decided to equip it.

"And this time...I *will* protect everyone."

He grasped the inventory and called its name out loud, even though he didn't have to.

"Instant Wear...Valcan Air."

A moment later, his gear changed.

He was now clad in armor reminiscent of a tokusatsu hero's suit.

The parts that resembled Jetdragon's propulsion truly gave him the appearance of a hero who had just assumed his powered-up form.

However, the suit was the opposite of pristine. Every armor piece was cracked, and several parts were missing, showing clearly just how many battles Valcan Air had survived.

"R-Riser!"

"Riser, you... That's the...!" Lang and the other Babylonian Battlegroup members raised their voices in shock. They all knew just how precious Valcan Air was to him.

However, they didn't stop him. It would surely break the next time it was used, but Riser equipped it regardless. As his long-time comrades, everyone present knew that he was truly resolved to end this.

"What is *that*? Such shabby armor! It isn't beautiful at all," Regina said, ridiculing Riser's crumbling suit. "How *dare* you try to fight me with such an ugly appearance?"

"I am Riser," he said. "Masked...Riser. A man who was called 'a hero' by those dear to him."

Riser told her exactly what he held most dear — the proof of his dream.

"The Hero? Ohohohoho! Reveal tells me that you aren't even a Superior Job. You could not be a worse liar if you tried...but even if you weren't, The Hero is a loser!"

He was killed by King of Plagues, after all, and the fact made her burst into laughter.

Riser also felt something upon hearing the word "loser."

He'd fallen against a mighty dragon without being able to protect the people he loved.

He'd run into an impassable wall in the arena rankings and then continually lost at the hands of those who outranked him.

He'd been slain during a battle which would decide the fate of Gideon, leaving more work for those who survived.

And just recently, he was defeated alongside his friend and Embryo before he could even go to the conference that would decide the fate of Altar.

He had many defeats to his name, and he felt powerless because of that.

Despite that, he had never once changed his attitude.

"So you truly believe that you can surpass someone as beautiful as me and an army as powerful as La Crima's?" Regina said, sneering. Riser, however, seemed unfazed.

"It doesn't matter who I am facing..."

He slowly increased the space between his legs.

"It doesn't matter that I am not a Superior Job..."

He lowered his center of mass.

"It doesn't matter how many times I am defeated..."

He moved his hands...

"I will never retreat."

...and assumed a stance.

"Because...I AM *THEIR* HERO!"

In that moment, as he roared out his challenge, he had the aura of a true champion.

He’d lost his dream.

He’d lost people dear to him.

But there was one thing he still had.

It was...*himself, the hero he knew he could be.*

The ally of justice, who was always ready to protect the weak from the ravages of evil, was still here.

“I see that you are nothing but a fool,” said Regina. “Get out of my sight, and take your brazen attitude with you!”

She sent the Queen’s Guard to surround him.

Riser wasn’t able to break out of their assault — and if he tried, he’d likely cause a chain explosion.

This situation meant certain death for Riser...

“BOOST!”

...but he escaped it by *flying away*.

“What?!” Regina exclaimed as she watched Riser with surprise in her eyes.

Multiple parts of Riser’s suit were releasing white smoke, propelling him through the air.

“Boost” was the main trait of the Jetdragon, Valcan. Valcan Air, designed to work in tandem with Hermod, had inherited this trait.

Even though it was reaching the limit of its durability, it was still as effective as the craftsmen designed it to be.

“A-Apis Ideas! Stop this man!” said Regina as she went on the defensive, knowing that she was Riser’s target.

She couldn’t avoid contact with him, but all damage done to her would be transferred to the Apis Ideas.

Even if he tried to take her away from the city, away from her minions, they would stand in his way and stop him.

Regina was surprised that Riser had suddenly taken to the air, but she was still certain that she couldn’t be killed here.

However, it didn’t take long for that illusion to be shattered.

After all...Riser wasn’t planning on taking her *outside* the city.

“OAARGH!”

“Egh! Gh...?!” With a short roar, Riser instantly closed the distance to Regina and sank his right foot into her stomach.

He then kicked off the ground and twisted his body...

“Valcan Air... FULL BOOOOOOOST!”

...and swung that same foot towards the sky.

A moment later, all the propulsion engines on Valcan Air roared to life; Riser was rocketed upwards, taking Regina with him. The gear built by people he cherished freed him from the chains of gravity and rocketed him up to the sky.

“...Ghhh?! Y-You... What are you *doing*?!” They were heading straight up into the sky, almost perpendicular to the ground.

This was the quickest and simplest path outside the range of Colony for One and the range from which Regina could control the Apis Ideas.

Riser intended to defeat Regina high in the sky.

“Y-You... Get your ugly leg off of me...RIGHT NOW!” Regina quickly realized where this was going. Riser was soaring upward at an overwhelming speed — in the first few seconds alone, many Apis Ideas were already outside the range of Colony for One and even the range of her control entirely.

Eventually, she wouldn’t be able to redistribute any of the damage done to her and would finally be the one to die.

“I-I’m too beautiful to die like this!” Despite the boot sinking into her stomach and propelling her upwards, Regina was able to take out her weapon — a spear made of Mythical metal, as poisonous as the stingers of the Apis Ideas. She wasted no time in thrusting it at Riser’s head.

He had no way of dodging, and the spear struck him straight in the face.

“I did it...!” Regina exclaimed — only to realize that something wasn’t right just a moment later. “...Wait, huh?”

The mask made by the craftsmen of Claymill began to crack...but Riser himself was completely unscathed.

The mask was far less tough than the spear, but it somehow protected its wearer.

It was like a miracle the late craftsmen had left behind them.

“OOOOAAARRRRRGGHHH!”

“Gh...?!” With part of his mask shattered, Riser roared once again. Valcan Air accelerated, driving his foot even deeper and taking them both even higher.

Suddenly, Regina felt an intense pain in her stomach, forcing her to drop her spear. The reason why she actually felt pain in that moment was simple

— they were now too far away from all her minions to distribute the damage to them.

"N-No! This...! Ghh...!" Spitting blood, Regina truly began to panic.

However, she wasn't the only one.

This isn't enough... We're not high enough! Riser thought.

Valcan Air was crumbling, unable to withstand the power of its own propulsion.

However, Regina was still alive.

Soon they would begin to lose altitude, bringing Regina back to the range of Colony for One.

If that happened, all damage done to her would once again be distributed to the Apis Ideas, and that would be the end of Altea.

He'd already used the ace up his sleeve, so there was nothing that could —

"...Not yet!"

No...there was still one more thing.

"Come...!" It was something that had been with him ever since he'd appeared in this world.

It had been with him through thick and thin.

It was...

"HERMOOOOOOOOD!" Riser called, and his Embryo answered.

Recently destroyed by Chrono Crown, it was awakened once again.

Though inorganic and silent, it heard the call and returned to its Master.

It seemed both miraculous and inevitable at the same time — a true display of everything that an Embryo was.

And so, Riser, his Embryo, and his armor all moved as one and resumed the acceleration.

It was the ultimate flight, sustained by the power of Hermod, the crumbling Valcan Air, and Riser himself.

Their acceleration was so immense it felt like the world was falling away behind them.

"RISEEEEEEEEERRR..." The air here was sparse, but since he still had just enough oxygen to speak, Riser used it to roar once more.

"SKYWAAAARRRD..." Delivering his final, strongest attack, he reached higher than ever before.

"KIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIICK!" And finally, like the true hero he was, he pierced straight through Regina’s body.

The rumbling of Hermod and Valcan Air were suddenly silenced as he left the world and its soundscape behind.

“No... No...”

Regina, however, was still within the realm of sound.

She had been split in two before she could reach that high.

None of her minions were close enough to prevent this fatal blow.

“Th-This is... I-I’m too beautiful to... Not here... Not now...” As her HP dropped to 0, there was a change in her body — it began to release a red light.

“Ahh... No... No...” She knew better than anyone what that meant.

It was the Insect General’s final skill, Even a Worm Will Burn.

She herself had been modified into an insectoid, so obviously it would work on her, as well.

“No... NO!” It was as though she was getting her just deserts for treating the once-human Apis Ideas like disposable objects.

“This... THIS CAN’T BE HAPPENING!” With that final scream, Regina Apis Idea detonated high in the Altarian sky.

Riser heard a faint explosion from far below him.

“...This time, I did protect them all,” the hero whispered right before his consciousness faded.

His face bore a pure expression of relief.

Chapter Twenty: The Fiery Dance of the Jiangshi and the Mummy

Royal Capital, Altea, Castle

While the city was thrown into chaos by the swarming Apis Ideas, the castle was facing an even greater threat — King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn, now known as “Ignis Idea.” He’d broken into the castle through the main gate and was currently drowning it in flame.

Besides him, there were two other Ideas — one spider-like, the other with the twisted form of a bat— that had broken in along Feuer and afterwards split up to kill the guards within. Tians like the Royal Guard fought back as best they could, but it was clear that they lacked the power to overcome this menace. Even the Masters that had rushed from the city to join the defense effort had been ultimately defeated by the three Ideas.

Things might’ve been different if Altimia had been there, or if the Celestial Knight or Arch Sage had still been alive — any of them might’ve been able to repel these attackers.

However, none of them were present, nor was anyone with a comparable level of power. The castle, at the very heart of the kingdom, was in real danger of falling.

Infiltration successful.

Using the chaos as cover, *someone* had infiltrated the castle.

It was none other than King of Thieves, Zeta.

Code III: Mirage is still active, she thought. *The system that would prevent skill activation has either been deactivated...or it was never there to begin with.*

She’d sneaked into the castle using a mix of a job skill that removed her presence and an Embryo skill that made her invisible to all mundane sight.

Normally, she would have triggered the castle’s magical defense system, but due to the assault from the three Ideas — most notably, the bat-like Idea’s attack on the magic distribution equipment — the system’s range was shot. That, combined with *visible* attackers drawing the guards' focus, had allowed her to enter the castle completely unnoticed.

They really are potent, Zeta thought as she considered the Ideas she had let loose and thought back to an event from several months ago — the very moment that La Crima had given her these Ideas.

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Soul Trader, La Crima was a well-known name in the business realm of society's underbelly, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the arms dealer known as The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx.

In truth, La Crima was actually a *pair* of people acting as one.

One of them was a lady in a wheelchair. The most notable thing about her appearance was her *paleness*. She was wearing a white hat with a wide brim, a white dress, and white bandages that covered the upper half of her face — eyes included. The exposed lower half had a shape that many would describe as "beautiful."

The other person was a man pushing the wheelchair. In stark contrast to the lady, he was noticeably *black*. Standing over two metels tall and completely covered in black leather belts, he looked like some kind of mummy.

One was a Master, while the other was most likely an Idea the Master controlled, but it was considered something of a taboo to ask which was which. Everyone who had found out was met with a grim fate.

As the Soul Trader, La Crima dealt in modified slaves.

Their Superior Embryo was "True Form Alteration, Idea." Its type was a mix of Chariot and Guardian called "Advanced Legion," and it was focused on humanoid modification. They modified countless tians and sold them off as high-quality slaves.

A certain clan member had once called them a "merchant of death," to which they responded, "A merchant of death? What a strange title to give me. What I do is uncover people's latent potential and give them a chance to live their lives to the fullest. Would it not be more apt to call me a merchant of *life*? -life?" La Crima talked in unison, with one of them falling slightly behind.

The person they were talking to at the time — Gerbera — would have laughed if it had only been a morbid joke, but the fact that La Crima was completely serious merely left her speechless. That, combined with their warped mindset and strange appearance, made them stand out even among the oddball criminals of Illegal Frontier.

However, few people had ever even laid eyes upon this bizarre duo. La Crima did business using their Idea subordinates as representatives, so not even their business partners knew what they looked like.

Despite being such a mysterious figure, they had been placed on wanted lists and had their supposed hideout in Caldina targeted by King of Termination and King of Revelry — only to somehow make it out alive and cross the strait to Tenchi.

There were only two types of people that knew that La Crima were two people acting as one. The first type was their comrades — the core members of I.F.

The second type was a select few “foundations.” Most of La Crima’s modifications were done remotely by having someone carry a piece of their Embryo to the target, but they always showed themselves to tians with Superior Jobs, who formed some of the most important “foundations” for their work.

That included four of the Ideas that would be released onto the capital, Regina Apis Idea being one of them.

Zeta, in fact, had met up with La Crima in person to acquire these Ideas.

“Question. I have something to ask you.”

They were at a port town in southern Huang He. Zeta was preparing to head west after having stolen a number of the Treasurebeast Orbs left behind by the Draconic Emperor that came before the previous one. La Crima was currently operating in Tenchi, and they had actually come all this way just to meet Zeta and give her the Jewel containing the four Ideas based on Superior Jobs. Included as well was the Jewel holding all the Apis Ideas that would serve Regina.

They also informed her that three other Ideas would meet up with her after finishing their tasks.

Those three Ideas would go on to be defeated by King of Light, F...but that was another story.

“What is it? -it?” One of La Crima’s voices again lagged very slightly behind the other.

“Explanation. Tell me the concepts behind the four Superior Job-based Ideas and how to use them.”

“That certainly does need explaining. -ning,” La Crima said as they both nodded. “Regina was designed to make the best use of her skills as Insect General. However, the majority of the modifications went into the Apis Ideas under her command. Regina herself was mostly untouched. I merely increased her ability to control the Apis Ideas, slightly buffed her stats, and changed her type into insectoid to make her own skills apply to her. -her.”

“Question. Why?”

“Because she refused any modifications to her appearance. Idea’s modifications work by redesigning the target’s physical body. Whether a slave is optimized for beauty or battle, the more they are modified, the more their appearance changes. If I cannot change the appearance, the modifications I can do are limited. -ted.”

“Another question. Why did you not ignore her refusal?”

“Because of a promise. -mise.”

“I see...” That answer was enough for Zeta.

She knew that despite having a warped sense of morality that made them unable to recognize true villainy, La Crima always fulfilled their promises. They did tell lies — as evidenced by the mystery of their true identity — but when they gave their word, they kept it.

After remembering something that related to La Crima, Zeta simply said, “Next.”

“Very well. -well,” said La Crima, seemingly unconcerned by Zeta’s brief silence. “Before the modification, Aranea had to use tools to deliver his potent poison and binding abilities. I spliced him with materials from an upper-Pure-Dragon-tier spider, allowing him to use these abilities by default and without limit. The materials needed are automatically created and provided by an inventory implanted into the body. -dy.”

And that was the genesis of King of Venom — Aranea Idea.

“Vespertilio had his sensory organs enhanced and was given the ability to avoid being spotted. By creating an unperceivable space, he can force himself to enter a state of invisibility. Like this, he has increased potential for ambushing and ability to continue fighting beyond that. He also has a magic-sensing function that lets him act as a radar for living creatures and magic installations. -tions.”

That was the description of King of Raids — Vespertilio Idea.

These Ideas were a few steps more powerful than they had been as tian Superior Jobs. The modifications given to them greatly improved the abilities they possessed.

It was as though these tians were granted Embryos that meshed perfectly with their builds.

Since tian Superior Jobs were often far above Masters in terms of battle technique, these two were truly fearsome foes.

They were below Regina in overall battle potential, but they were no doubt far above her as individual combatants.

However, neither of them were the strongest out of the tians La Crima had just given to Zeta.

“Ignis is actually my most powerful magic-based Idea yet. Out of all the Ideas, he’s behind only Ferrum and Cantus. -tus.”

That was La Crima’s evaluation of Ignis Idea — King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn.

“He was modified according to his own wishes. He asked for magic power that surpassed that of the Arch Sage. -Sage.”

“Confirmation. Was that even possible?”

“The method was quite simple, actually. -lly.” La Crima’s words seemed absurd on their face. How could surpassing the magic power of Altar’s legendary Arch Sage be “simple?” The answer lay in the words that followed.

“I merely used ten of the Sacrifice slaves I cultivated. -ted,” they said, as though this was nothing special. “I connected them to his heart and the core of his brain as MP sources. This was no different from implanting monster abilities. Though, I didn’t expect all the extra MP to be counted as part of Ignis’s own pool and actually *increase* his maximum. I removed the parts of the Sacrifices’ brains responsible for thinking, so I believe they might’ve been recognized not as individual people, but as Ignis’s own organs. The fact that this could be the case while they still maintained the Sacrifice job surprised even me. I did some experiments on tians with other jobs, and when I removed their ability to think, they either lost their jobs or simply didn’t have their stats merged with the subject who received them as implants. I believe that Ignis turned out the way he did due to the nature of the Sacrifice job. Also, though I was already using Idea to reduce the risk of transplanted organ rejection, I matched the implants' blood type to Ignis's to reduce the risk even further. Because of this, I'm currently short on Sacrifice slaves with blood type B and...ohh, that information is unnecessary. -ary."

Possibly feeling obligated to do so, La Crima gave Zeta a long-winded explanation. Even contemplating the acts they described would make some people nauseous, but they didn't seem to even think about that.

Though she'd never admit it, even Zeta found this side of La Crima to be truly unnerving.

In fiction, there were mad scientists that mistreated their guinea pigs to satisfy their sadistic tendencies, and Zeta felt that La Crima wouldn't be nearly as disturbing if they were anything like that — she'd merely write them off as "just that kind of person."

Their behavior just wasn't the same as that. If you got past the fact that La Crima were two people acting and speaking as one, you would note how serious and sincere their words were. It was as though they truly thought nothing of what they were saying, no matter how morbid it was.

Their leader — Sechs — was similar in that regard, but...

...No point in thinking about it too deeply right now, Zeta thought.

I.F. was a gathering of people like this. Everyone here had come to *Infinite Dendrogram* seeking things they couldn't find in reality. Sechs sought a goal. La Crima sought love. Gerbera would never say it, but she was seeking "a special version of herself."

Zeta was no exception. She was here because she was seeking something within *Infinite Dendrogram* — some would say that her goal was greater than that of the others.

Everyone had such goals, some bigger, some smaller, but the members of I.F. — the wanted Superiors — didn't hesitate to harm others for the sake of what they sought.

That was why they were wanted, and that was why I.F. was the way it was.

As a fellow member of this clan, I really can't say anything about La Crima's sense of morality, Zeta thought.

"Back to the matter of Ignis, the Sacrifice slaves were all modified to have more MP. I also used pre-ancient civilization MP-increasing items that were given to me by Rascal. As a result, Ignis has more MP than even spellcaster Superiors. -ors.”

La Crima instantly realized that they had misspoken.

“Oh, that doesn’t count The Earth, of course. -course.”

“Exception. You don’t have to tell me that his case is special.”

Not even UBMs could match The Earth when it came to MP.

“Number. How much MP does Ignis Idea actually have?” Zeta asked, to change the subject.

“98 million. -on,” La Crima said, again seemingly thinking nothing of it.

“...*What*?!” Not even Zeta could keep her composure upon hearing that.

There were high-level tian spellcasters with Superior Jobs that struggled to reach one million MP. Exceptions like The Earth aside, even Masters with MP growth boosted by Embryos would have only two or three times that, at most.

Yet Ignis Idea had *98 million MP* — clearly an insane number.

“Spell power isn’t directly proportional to max MP, but there is a correlation. Besides that, I also gave him more arms he may use to release his spells. -spells.”

Despite creating something so powerful, La Crima showed almost no excitement as they finished their explanation.

“Ignis is the most potent magic-output device besides The Earth. I am sure he will have no trouble burning down a castle. -tle.”

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Royal Capital, Altea, Castle

As she remembered that event, especially La Crima’s last line, Zeta heaved a silent sigh. It truly did seem like the castle might be burned to the ground.

It’s too early, she thought. Claudiah’s request would be easier to fulfill if Zeta just let that happen, but it would ultimately get in the way of her own goal.

I’m here for the ten orbs that were brought into Altar. Specifically, the Treasurebeast Orbs brought here alongside Canglong by the Huang He diplomatic mission. They had been a gift to Altar as part of the marriage-alliance deal between the ruling families of those two countries.

When Huang He opened their treasury to select the ten orbs they would *send as a gift, I was able to steal seven. Getting more than that was too hard even for me.*

The treasury was full of magic traps left behind by the fabled Draconic Emperor who had created the orbs, so stealing from it was a challenge even for King of Thieves herself.

That's why I'll be retrieving the orbs that were removed from the treasury the normal way. Zeta had many uses for these UBM orbs and the MVP special rewards they contained. She could hand them to fellow I.F. members based on their abilities, and she could give them to Logan as sacrifices for his devil summoning skills.

The orbs could also be used to simply spread chaos, just like they were already doing in Caldina.

Somewhere in this castle, there were ten UBMs whose abilities were known and that had been weakened by centuries of being sealed away. Their value was immense, and no one in I.F. could ignore them — especially not King of Thieves.

There was a high chance that they would be at the guest house, but I couldn't find them there. That leaves two options: they're either with the prince, or they've already been handed over to Altar.

Whichever it was, Canglong was bound to know.

With the castle in chaos, the royalty must be taking shelter somewhere. I'll find where it is and find out the orbs' location by taking the prince or his fiancée hostage.

With that decided, she began searching for Canglong. There was a hallway here leading deeper into the castle, shrouded in darkness since the magic distribution system had been cut. She prepared to take a step forward into it...*only to jump to the side*.

A split-second later, something golden moved at supersonic speeds and pierced the space where she was standing only a moment ago.

This is... The golden object made a quick turn and chased after her.

Zeta got a better look at it as she evaded the object — it was an *extending prosthetic arm*.

She followed it with her eyes to its source...a humanoid silhouette at the other side of the long, dark hallway.

Though, perhaps "humanoid" didn't quite describe what she saw.

The figure was tall enough to touch the high ceilings of this castle, and that was only one of its unnatural features.

The silhouette continued to freely attack Zeta with its golden arm — though, it was questionable if it was actually *targeting* her. Although the first attack seemed to be aimed directly at Zeta, the entity had lost sight of her right after, most likely due to Code III — Zeta's optical camouflage skill.

Still, the prosthetic covered an enormous area just by flailing about. It was entirely possible for the entity to land a hit on Zeta by accident.

Because of this, Zeta focused entirely on evasion, and had successfully dodged everything so far.

However, a number of *Fu tags* applied to the prosthetic arm suddenly blasted beams in every direction.

I can evade this too. But wait... This is...

Zeta evaded the fiery bolts — but the moment she did, she realized that they weren't meant to be an attack.

"There gOes your camouflAge. I can seE a bit of whAt ya can do nOw," the entity muttered, its voice distorted by some means.

Just like the figure had said, the skill that hid Zeta from view was expiring.

That was because the magical beams had lit the surroundings on fire and increased the temperature of the air.

Zeta's Embryo's abilities required extremely precise control, so she couldn't account for sudden changes in the environment fast enough. Code III actually required even more fine-tuning than any other skill, so perhaps it was inevitable that she wouldn't be able to keep up with the sharp increase in temperature.

Brought out by the flame, Zeta's outline became a visible distortion in the air.

I suppose she already has a good guess about my abilities, Zeta thought. The rumors surrounding her, as well as her fairly recent duel against Logan, had made it easy for this enemy to assume the nature of her Embryo.

Left with no real choice, she gave up and canceled the optical camouflage.

The entity also stepped into the light of the fire, making it obvious whom Zeta was facing.

"Master Jiangshi, Xunyu."

“And yoU’re King of Thieves, Zeta, arEn’t ya?” Zeta was now faced with the Huang He Superior that she recognized as the greatest threat among the Masters left at the capital.

Xunyu also recognized Zeta’s face from the brief period when she had been the top duelist in Dryfe.

And both of them knew full well just how dangerous the other was.

In that hallway, bathed in flame, the two combatants stared directly at each other.

As they both stood on guard, each watching for any movements the other made, Xunyu said, “Since you’rE here, I guess this whole attAck’s Dryfe’s doing? Man, they’rE just doin’ whatever they want nOw, huh?”

“Question. I won’t tell you whether your assumption is correct, but I have a question of my own... How did you notice me?”

Zeta couldn’t help but wonder how Xunyu spotted King of Thieves herself while she was hiding her physical form and even her very presence.

“Huh? I couldn’t feEl or see ya, but yoU *are* mOvin’ through space, arEn’t ya? I’m sensitivE to stuff like thAt.”

“...Understandable.” Though limited, Xunyu’s Superior Embryo had a skill that let it attack by teleporting through space itself. Because of that, Xunyu’s Fu were imbued with space-scanning magic. Such spells were the specialty of Onmyoji, but Master Jiangshi could perform them as well.

Xunyu had searched the castle’s interior and found Zeta exactly *because* she was moving at a slow pace — something you wouldn’t expect from a person inside a building under siege.

“Unexpected. I didn’t anticipate this. I thought you would go fight the Ideas.”

“You mean thE things makin’ a mess out frOnt? Did ya see what an entrAnce they made? You dOn’t have to be as keen as me to tell that it’s a distrAction. Well, no onE who’s meant to protEct the castle would leave those things bE...but that’s not my rOle.” Someone meant to guard the castle wouldn’t be so quick to set it on fire, after all, even if that was what it took to expose an enemy. “What I’m here fOr...is to protect Cang and thE others. Activate.”

With that word, all the Fu that Xunyu spread throughout the hallway with her prosthetic arms suddenly fired beams towards Zeta.

“Understandable.” Zeta saw this coming, though, and twisted her body quickly enough to evade the beams.

However, Xunyu reacted just as quickly to the evasion and moved her arms at supersonic speeds, tracing them across the sides of the hallway. Attached to the insides of her arms were countless offensive Fu, which joined the ones that she'd spread around the area to unleash a barrage of fiery blasts that became quite difficult to evade.

Unlike in the arena where she'd fought Figaro, the space here was limited. The net of beams she created left no space large enough for a person to slip through.

Zeta had nowhere to run...

"Code III: Shelter."

...so she simply *didn't.*

Half a second later, countless beams pierced into her.

They carried enough power to turn her into burnt Swiss cheese...yet that didn't happen.

The beams all stopped before they struck Zeta's body as though they had hit an invisible wall.

And after withstanding this attack, she went on the offensive.

"Code I: Forming. Code IV: Artillery."

"Ah...!" In the space of a moment, Xunyu wrapped herself in the left leg part of Tenaga-Ashinaga.

A split-second later, she was assaulted by attacks from every direction.

They all had enough power to pierce through steel, but not enough to damage a Superior Embryo like Tenaga-Ashinaga.

However, the lack of power wasn't the main issue...

...I can't see them, Xunyu thought. All the attacks aimed at her just now were completely transparent.

She could see *something,* but only if she strained her eyes. It seemed like a distortion in the air, something akin to a heat haze.

They're...projectiles made of air. There were Wind magic spells that compressed the air and fired pulverizing projectiles just like these.

But Zeta wasn't using magic — it was an Embryo skill.

That could only mean that her Embryo was...

"..., ...?" Xunyu tried to say her guess out loud, only to realize she couldn't make a sound.

I'm in a vacuum... The flames that had lit up the hallway had vanished, as well.

This place was completely devoid of air, besides the projectiles Zeta was using.

There also seemed to be a difference in pressure that prevented any new air from flowing in.

A barrage, followed by a truly nasty trick. I'm undead, so I can deal with not breathing, but I imagine that it'd be over for most people by now. As Master Jiangshi, Xunyu had all the positives of being undead without the negatives, letting her function normally even in a situation like this. Ignoring the vacuum around her, she continued attacking with her prosthetic arms.

Zeta evaded or deflected them using invisible walls.

"Change." Realizing that the vacuum had done nothing, Zeta switched to another tactic.

That switch was obvious even to Xunyu — all the metal lights and door ornaments began to rust at an absurd rate.

She increased the oxygen concentration in the air... Pure oxygen was an extremely potent natural oxidizing agent. It reacted with countless types of matter, creating various other compounds. Xunyu quickly realized that her equipment was being affected as well.

Oxygen also had strong inflammatory properties, making it dangerous to use fire magic. If Zeta hadn't snuffed out the flames with her vacuum, this place would now be burning as brightly as the main gate.

She's not wearing the bandages just for fashion... On their inside, there's gear that acts like space or diving suits, protecting her from the changes in air pressure and atmospheric composition.

The nature of Zeta's Superior Embryo was more or less obvious by now.

"Optical camoUflage, invisible walls, air projEctiles, vacuum, oxygen concentration cOntrol... Your Embryo has powEr over the air itsElf, dOesn't it?" Xunyu said, continuing to attack with her arms, defend with her legs, and dodge using fire attacks. "You get optical camouflAge by distorting the air. You insulatE yourself by creating multiple lAyers of vacuum and air. Your bArriers are just cOmpressed air. The wind projEctiles are exactly thAt. Then the vacuUm, and the opposIte with oxygen overcOncentration. It's too damn obvioUs."

Zeta said nothing in response, but there was a hint of surprise on her hidden face.

“AnyOne would figure it oUt if you used as much stuff on thEm as you did on me. But it’s nOt like it’s a big deal thAt I know it now, right?”

If Xunyu was right about Zeta’s Embryo’s abilities, Xunyu’s awareness of it wouldn’t be much of a disadvantage. After all, no living creature could survive without air. It was the opposite of Gerbera’s Alhazred, which lost half of its potential when the target merely knew of its existence.

Zeta’s Embryo was as strong as ever, even if the enemy knew exactly what it did.

“This Embryo isn’t limitEd to just basic control either. You can actually mess with the air’s cOmposition. There’s a whole lOt ya can do with somethin’ like that. Even the skills yoU’re using look the same, but are actUally pretty dAmn different.”

Xunyu was referring to the barrier that protected Zeta from the beams and the wall that was blocking her prosthetic arm attacks — the barriers that deflected physical attacks much like Silver’s compressed air walls. The barriers were actually so dense that they didn’t even allow light to pass, but she camouflaged them by making them transparent using Code III. Zeta had a wide array of abilities at her disposal and always used the right one for any situation. It was second nature to her.

“And evEn though you mEss with the air and its compositiOn, you’re not creating any poison gAs or anythin’ like thAt. You’re just cOntrolling the air thAt’s already there, aren’t yA?” Xunyu guessed that instead of “filling” the space with pure oxygen, Zeta had actually separated the oxygen from the other gases, which she was now using for her air barriers and projectiles.

That made Zeta’s abilities seem weaker, but it was important to remember that she could use the air around her to do *whatever she wanted*.

Zeta was a Superior so versatile that she could fight just about anyone.

Xunyu herself had lots of versatility, but it seemed that Zeta outshone even her.

Another notable aspect was just how *well* Zeta controlled these powers of hers. When Xunyu presented her guess regarding her powers, Zeta was slightly shaken, but that hadn’t affected her barriers or projectiles whatsoever. She was also constantly moving so that she wouldn’t be an easy target for Xunyu’s ultimate skill.

I guess I should be glad that she can't take me out with just this, Xunyu thought. Code IV — the skill Zeta used to fire the projectiles — wasn't strong enough to break through her defenses, while the air barriers weren't capable of completely deflecting her attacks.

Her versatility had come at the cost of output.

On top of that, the vacuum and corrosive air that would kill living creatures were powerless against an undead.

It seemed that Xunyu would win this damage race, but...

The Embryo is likely meant to support her actions and moves as a Thief. The outcome of this battle will be decided by something else.

It wouldn't be a true battle between Masters if it came down to their Embryos alone.

There's also King of Thieves' ultimate job skill...the one that lets her tear out the other guy's heart in that duel just by touching him. I can't let her get too close to me. Besides that, she has that Superior MVP reward I know nothing about.

Xunyu had read about King of Thieves' ultimate job skill. It was called "Absolute Steal," and it allowed the user to steal *anything* within the object they were touching.

If they used it on an inventory, they could take any item inside regardless of how steal-proof it was. If used on living creatures, it could easily remove their organs.

She can probably use her control over air to throw me off by creating a false image, then take advantage of that to close in and steal my heart. Hell, if I wasn't undead, she could've easily done that the moment she created the vacuum or made the air toxic.

That was exactly what had happened to Logan in their duel — Zeta had incapacitated him with toxic air and a localized vacuum before closing in and using Absolute Steal to take his heart.

She can easily create a pathway to a certain kill... Man, the more I think about it, the more it stuns me just how versatile this Embryo is. As usual, Xunyu speculated a little about what she could do against her enemies before crafting a strategy to corner and bring them down. She had stumbled against Figaro because she lacked information about his Embryo, but regardless, Xunyu no doubt had an eye for strategy and high adaptability. That was exactly what Xunyu was doing now — calmly analyzing what

Zeta could do with her Embryo, and how she could be defeated.

Zeta actually noticed that Xunyu was doing everything she could to keep her distance, and she couldn't help but say something "...Question. I thought you were still a child. How are you so knowledgeable, with such a sense for battle?"

"Ha! I've been herE for years! You think I wouldn't leArn a thing or two over all this timE?"

"Obvious. I suppose that makes sense. Spending time here makes your mental age advance beyond your body's age."

Though Logan's mind seems to be as old as he is, Zeta added mentally. It was uncertain which one of them was developing in a healthier manner.

"Interesting. The subject of whether children should outgrow their bodies would make for an interesting discussion."

"FOrget about mY mental age and stOp talking like that. It's annOying."

Silence descended. Having one aspect of her identity denied like that made Zeta's expression change slightly under the bandages.

She was known as a calm and collected person even by her clan members, but that didn't mean that she was emotionless — as evidenced by her surprise at La Crima's explanations and her reactions in this fight.

In fact, if her visage hadn't been hidden by bandages, she wouldn't have been able to maintain her customary poker face.

"...Stop. If you feel that way, then try and stop me."

"ThAt's the plAn!" Xunyu's extending right arm flew towards Zeta, who tried to block it with an air barrier at first, only to switch to evasion.

A moment later, Xunyu's arm smashed through the air barrier, gleaming brightly as it did. The shine wasn't from her claws, but the dagger clutched in them — Yinglong's Fang, Suling Yi.

This weapon had a trait that made it stronger the more MP was placed into it, as well as a power that let it pierce defenses. With that combination, it finally broke through Zeta's air barrier.

Xunyu hadn't used Suling Yi at first because of its MP drain, but she'd now decided to finish this battle as quickly as possible. If she didn't, she feared Zeta would've eventually broken the stalemate and killed her using Absolute Steal.

Needless to say, Zeta reacted to this as well. For a Superior, she had relatively low HP and END. The blade that Xunyu was flailing around would take her Brooch with the first hit, then her life with the second.

However, Xunyu hadn't gone completely on the offensive. Instead of just extending her arms towards her enemy, she retracted them when necessary, giving her enough space to deal with whatever Zeta decided to throw at her.

King of Thieves was at a clear disadvantage now. Even though her ultimate job skill could instantly kill Xunyu, her opponent's reach advantage made this difficult. Her chances of victory were slim.

Realizing this, Zeta decided to use the ace up her sleeve.

"...Three types."

"Hm?"

"Three types. Solo combat type, wide-scale suppression type, and wide-scale extermination type. These are the three main fighting styles, and I am all of them at once."

"...I can tEll." Zeta's words had seemingly come out of nowhere and Xunyu responded with suspicion. This was both to get information about her opponent...and to buy her enough time to prepare her ultimate skill.

While attacking with both arms and defending with her left leg, she prepared her right leg to use The Limbs Reach for the Horizon — Tenaga-Ashinaga.

"I actually nEver saw an Embryo as vErsatile as yoUrs. It doesn't surprIse me that you cAn do any combat stYle."

Zeta's Embryo's control over air gave it immense utility. The very fact that she could hold her own against Xunyu made it clear that she was a capable solo fighter, and she could easily suppress and exterminate larger groups simply by manipulating the air around them.

"Shared sentiment. Even I have only seen two Embryos that are more versatile than mine."

"...That's twO more than I expected."

"Below. There is little point in trying to compete in versatility against people who are reckless and inexhaustible," Zeta said, picturing the two I.F. members she had in mind. "Question. Back to what I was saying, which of these three battle styles..." she continued as she raised three of her fingers, "...do you think is my *actual* one?"

"Ah...!" Zeta presented this like a question, and Xunyu instantly understood what she was getting at — there was one battle style that Zeta was the *most* lethal at.

Her question, therefore, was more like a statement: “I will kill you with my *true* battle style.”

Combat, suppression, extermination...! She’s so versatile that I can’t even guess which one she’ll use! Xunyu thought. However, it was clear that whatever was coming, it would no doubt spell her doom.

Should she go on the defensive? Or should she retreat? Xunyu did not have the answer.

She’s probably a combat type if she comes close! And she’s one of the other two if she keeps her distance to avoid getting caught up in her own attack! If she’s a combat type, there’s a high chance that she’ll use her Absolute Steal! That was Zeta’s ultimate job skill, able to rip out hearts. To Xunyu’s knowledge, it was the most lethal skill she had, so she observed her enemy with all the caution she could muster.

A moment later, she noticed Zeta approaching her.

“SHaAH!” Xunyu tried to stop her, first by moving both hands as fast as possible, then blasting out her fire magic beams without concern for the high concentration of oxygen in the air.

However, the moment she fired them...she noticed something.

...The oxygen concentration is back to normal! It wasn’t a vacuum, nor was the area flooded with oxygen — the air composition was close to standard.

That moment, several of the beams hit Zeta, *only to pass through her like she was a mirage*.

No, not “like” a mirage — that was exactly what she was.

It’s a variation of her optical camouflage skill! That could only mean that Zeta herself was elsewhere.

As Xunyu prepared to use her spatial scan Fu, she felt a presence behind her.

“Gh...!” The moment she realized the presence behind her was Zeta, she released beams from the left leg that she had wrapped around herself.

Driven away by the blast, Zeta’s presence made distance between the two of them.

Xunyu didn’t feel like she had been touched or that she had lost any organs. By covering herself with Tenaga-Ashinaga, she was able to prevent Zeta from using Absolute Steal on her heart.

I blockEd it... I think. Despite that, Xunyu wasn't ready to relax just yet. Still wary of any follow-up attacks, Xunyu used her spatial scan Fu to search for Zeta...

"Where the hEll's she going?!"

...only to realize that she seemed to be heading *away* from Xunyu.

She had left Xunyu behind to focus on finding Canglong and Elizabeth.

"You goddAmn... I'll tear out your hEart!"

When she had initially used her spatial scan Fu and discovered Zeta's presence, Xunyu hadn't employed her ultimate skill because she wasn't sure if the presence was an enemy.

Things were different now. Xunyu *knew* that Zeta was an intruder — a foe to be taken down at any cost.

That meant that she could use her ultimate skill on Zeta, no matter where she was in the castle.

As she prepared to do just that, Xunyu noticed another change in the environment.

"Hm...?"

The air was different again. It wasn't a vacuum. Nor was it full of oxygen or some kind of poison gas.

Still, she could sense that something was different about it.

"It's...!" Another realization struck her.

She'd already considered it once. If Zeta made distance between them, it could only mean one thing.

"Activation. Absolute Dominion Over the Sky — Uranus."

Right after that voice echoed through the air, a part of the castle was drowned in dazzling light and temperatures reaching tens of thousands of degrees.

◇◆

"Cremated. It *is* tradition in Huang He to burn corpses, is it not?" Zeta whispered, standing some distance away from the scorched area of the castle.

Zeta's Embryo — Cry of Air, Uranus — was, as Xunyu had assumed, an Embryo that controlled the atmosphere. By changing its density, concentration, and composition, she was able to create optical camouflage, vacuums, oxygen-filled spaces, defensive barriers, and even air cannons.

Back at Granvaloa, she even used Uranus's air barriers on submarines.

However, this versatility came at a cost of output. If you could do many things, you either needed more external Resources, or the things you could do were simply weaker than they would be in the hands of a more focused individual.

This was a rule that applied to all Embryos, and Uranus was a latter case.

However, there were ways to circumvent such flaws, however briefly.

In Uranus's case, it was its ultimate skill: Absolute Dominion Over the Sky — Uranus.

This ability briefly increased its output, letting Zeta surpass the limits of its atmosphere control.

In her battle against the SUBM, she'd used it to push seawater away with walls of air and open up a giant hole in the ocean.

The scale of what she did in her battle against Xunyu was far smaller, but the action was far more complex. Normally, her control over the air didn't go beyond merely manipulating its constituent parts, but now, she was actually able to create *new atoms* based on the existing elements in the air.

Zeta had used Uranus to create deuterium and tritium, then used them to cause a nuclear fusion reaction.

This reaction produced helium and *immense* amounts of energy — in other words, she had made a hydrogen bomb, without nuclear warheads or any materials, and in average ambient temperatures.

As far as such explosions went, it was unusually clean. Since Zeta had held back a little, it was a small-scale reaction, and she even controlled the radiation to prevent it from leaking to the surroundings.

However, that didn't limit the energy that had been released. It was more than enough to demolish the hallway they were in, and Xunyu was at the epicenter of the explosion.

"Answer. I am mostly a wide-scale extermination type," Zeta said to the empty air.

She was currently alone, with no one else in sight — a Superior who possessed the power of a hydrogen bomb...of nuclear fusion.

Powerful as she was, though, this had made her break out in a cold sweat.

It was obvious why — in order to create this fusion reaction with her ultimate skill, she had to control everything *manually*.

These “Codes” were skills in their own right, functioning like macros that limited and automated the control of her atmospheric manipulation, but her ultimate skill’s fusion reaction had to be constructed manually. A single mistake could mean death by her own hands.

The fact that she used an ability that posed such a danger to herself just showed how cornered Zeta truly felt.

With Xunyu protecting herself against Absolute Steal and the environment being unsuitable for her Superior MVP reward, she had no choice but to use her ultimate skill.

“...Powerful. You are among the most powerful Masters I have ever fought, but it looks like not even *you* could withstand this.”

Nothing remotely human could withstand the explosion of a hydrogen bomb and live.

On top of that, Zeta had taken Xunyu’s only hope of survival. She had an accessory clutched tightly in her hand — a Lifesaving Brooch.

It belonged to Xunyu.

When Zeta had approached her, she used a particular skill. It was actually one of her most basic abilities as a Thief — Steal.

Its effect was simple — it gave her a chance to steal any item from an inventory or any piece of gear a target had equipped. As King of Thieves, Zeta’s Steal skill level was EX, which gave a 100% chance for her to Steal *any* unprotected item.

This was one of the strategies she specialized in — taking the enemy’s Brooch without their notice, then hitting them with a fatal attack.

With Xunyu not having any accessories that could protect her, her death penalty was all but certain.

“Confirmed. The Master Jiangshi job has high survivability, but I knew from her duel against Figaro that high heat can extinguish her without leaving a trace.”

Because of that, Zeta had made the right choice in using the fusion reaction.

Or at least, so she thought.

“Hm...?”

Suddenly, she heard something shatter. Looking down at her hand, she saw that the Brooch there was still intact.

The brooch that shattered was *the one she was wearing*.

Belatedly, she turned and saw Yinglong’s Fang, grasped by a metal arm and heading straight towards her spine.

"Gh...! Wait...!" Surprised, Zeta jumped away. But unlike before, the prosthetic arm didn't follow after her. As though rusty, it made a creaking sound before falling to the ground. It seemed as though the attack that shattered her Brooch was the most that arm could do at the moment.

"Hah...you finAlly...stopped talking...wEird..." Those words then reached Zeta's ears.

The speaker was none other than Xunyu — the very person who was supposed to have been burnt to ashes in the fusion reaction. But there she was, behind Zeta, in a state so awful that you couldn't tell where her clothes ended and her body began, extending only her right arm.

"You... How did you survive the explosion...?!"

"...I've alreAdy...been...evapOrated...once... I'd obviously...takE steps...to prevEnt it...hAppening again..." She'd learned from her loss against Figaro and had since weaved Fu of fire magic resistance into her clothes.

Thanks to this extra defense, she was able to avoid being completely annihilated.

Her defense obviously had not been perfect, though. She had been directly exposed to the heat of a small hydrogen bomb. It was more than enough to break through the fire resistance and scorch most of Xunyu's body.

The only reason she could even move was because Master Jiangshi were undead.

"Tch...thIs is it...fOr me..." And even the undead had their limits. Clicking her tongue, Xunyu began to literally fall apart.

"I leave thE rest...to..." Xunyu dissolved into motes of light before she could finish her sentence. Yinglong's Fang, which had almost killed Zeta, as well as the Tenaga-Ashinaga holding it, quickly followed their Master.

King of Thieves, Zeta and Master Jiangshi, Xunyu.

This conflict had ended in the former's victory.

"Hn..." Despite all of this, the face hidden by bandages didn't look pleased.

Her broach was destroyed right after she was certain she'd already won. Perhaps if this was a duel — where Brooches weren't allowed — Xunyu would've been victorious.

"You truly were a powerful enemy." Feeling both slightly defeated and impressed by Xunyu’s incredible fighting, Zeta returned to her task.

Chapter Twenty-One: The Blades and Shields of Altar

About a certain knight...

There were rumors that a Paladin of the Royal Guard, Theodore Lindos, held a disdain for Masters.

This was because he disliked when Masters got involved in the kingdom's affairs, and he made no effort to hide it. Behind his back, some of the Altarian nobility called him petty and small-minded — especially compared to Liliana Grandria, who was willing to cooperate with Masters even after one of them killed her father.

Of course, some would take Theodore's side, but the real problem was that they had all misunderstood his stance on the matter.

He didn't hate Masters — he hated *himself*.

Some time ago, the knights had been the true protectors of Altar, and standing above them all were the Paladins of the Royal Guard — an elite group often called a cornerstone of the kingdom. Theodore had looked up to them since childhood and had spent much of his life training to become a worthy Paladin.

However, soon after he had finally achieved his dream, the world drastically changed. Countless Masters entered the stage, and the balance of power was warped beyond recognition.

Powerful monsters that had once required an entire order of knights to bring down could now be crushed by a single Master.

The world was changing so fast it made him dizzy, and what disgusted Theodore the most was...his own weakness.

He simply didn't have the talent he so desperately needed. This might sound like nothing more than an excuse to give up, but in Theodore's case, it was anything but.

Theodore had truly reached his limit — the point he could never grow beyond, no matter how much effort he exerted.

This fact was represented by several cold, hard numbers: one high-rank job and three low-rank jobs for a total level of 250. That was where he was, and it was the point beyond which he could go no further.

Theodore had reached maximum level.

Unlike Masters, tians had clear-cut individual differences in talent, represented by level limits that most of the time fell below the maximum of 500. Though he had managed to become a Paladin, his lack of innate talent made it impossible for him to grow any stronger.

At first, he refused to accept that this was the full extent of his ability.

More and more Masters were appearing in Altar, some of which were criminals like the princess-snatching Sechs Würfel.

Theodore had to grow stronger to protect his kingdom — but no matter how much blood, sweat, and tears he put into it, he just couldn't raise his level beyond 250.

It took some time for him to accept the level limit, but once he did, he began directing his efforts towards other ways of becoming stronger.

Since his base power was inadequate, he chose to make himself more versatile by taking low-rank jobs that gave him more utility skills. Through that process, he even managed to gain the Paladin's Purifying Silverlight and Grand Cross abilities.

On top of that, he learned how to "stack" his Grand Crosses — in other words, to use them at the exact same time as his fellow Paladins.

He did indeed grow stronger this way, and soon it was time to put his strength to the test.

Altar had entered a war against Dryfe. To him...no, to all living knights of the kingdom...this was the first major conflict with an outside force they had ever experienced.

Despite that, he stood ready to protect his homeland.

The knight's power was the kingdom's blade, while the knight's body was its shield.

Every knight was taught those words, and with that oath in his heart, he stood on the battlefield...only to fall without contributing whatsoever.

The devils of the Hell General's army dealt him a grave injury shortly after the battle began, quickly rendering him unconscious. And by the time he woke up in a church back at the capital...it was already over. He hadn't been able to protect the king, join his commander on his fatal charge, or even guard the backs of his brothers-in-arms.

The war had taken a heavy toll on the Royal Guard. In fact, it had more or less been annihilated. Many of those who survived went on to retire. One might assume that they did this to avoid the shame of defeat, but Theodore knew painfully well that his fellow knights had left because the battle had made them realize how powerless they really were.

After all...he himself wanted to quit being a knight for that very reason.

He was overcome with despair. In his mind, a knight who failed to contribute to a battle would be nothing but a burden, no matter how much effort he put in.

Thus, like some other knights, Theodore was going through the process of early retirement. In two weeks, he would return home as his viscount father's heir and inherit his land.

While waiting for that time to come, he was tasked with patrolling the castle, now far emptier than he recalled.

One day during his patrols, he walked into the indoor garden. He might have come here by mere chance, but perhaps there was a part of him that wanted to see this place one last time before he left forever.

"It hasn't changed at all..." he muttered, recalling the times he had stood guard over the king and his daughters as they held a tea party in this very garden.

The gardener must've still been working even though the castle had lost its king — the rose bushes were still blooming with well-shaped, youthful blossoms.

Perhaps this place will never change, even when the kingdom falls and the castle itself has a new master, Theodore thought, and the notion made his heart ache with sorrow — for his country, which he was certain would collapse, and for himself, a knight preparing to abandon his protection of this doomed country.

"...I would not be able to do anything even if I stayed." He lacked the talent and power to be of much help even if he remained a knight, so he tried to convince himself that he had made the correct choice.

While this conflict raged within him, Theodore heard a noise at the entrance to the rose garden.

Someone had walked in, prompting Theodore to hide.

Even he wasn't sure why he reacted this way. Perhaps he simply didn't want anyone to see him struggling to justify running away.

Regardless, the person who entered soon approached the garden table.

They...or rather, *she* sat down on a chair next to it and stared at the roses nearby.

Theodore recognized her well.

That is...Her Highness Elizabeth? The person was none other than the daughter of the late king and the second princess of Altar, Elizabeth S. Altar.

She had come here all by her lonesome, but that wasn't unusual. She was known to be a wild, carefree girl with a tendency to run off and do things on her own.

However, in most such cases, she would have a cheerful expression on her face...definitely not the gloomy look she bore now.

...Perhaps I should call out to her. As a naturally diligent person, Theodore considered tossing aside his inner struggle and presenting himself to her. However, he stopped when he noticed a change in her expression — a single tear running down her cheek.

She was still looking at the roses that bloomed around the garden.

He knew well the significance of this place — it was where the royal family and anyone close to them would gather to enjoy each other's company, and where Elizabeth had made many memories with her sisters and father.

The reason for her weeping did not need to be stated.

"Nh... Sniff..." Like a dam that had burst open, she began to cry without stopping.

The sight left Theodore completely frozen, and as he stood still...

"Elizabeth..."

...the voice of another person reached his ears.

It was Theresia C. Altar — the third princess of the kingdom, as well as Elizabeth's little sister.

She wasn't riding the giant rodent right now, which was quite a rarity for her.

She had actually stood up on her own two feet to go and find her lost sister.

"Nh... Theresiaaa..." The younger sister instantly noticed the tears on Elizabeth's cheeks, which *made her change her expression*.

Perhaps due to her sickly constitution, Theresia wasn't the most expressive girl. In fact, her demeanor was almost doll-like.

Even she, however, couldn't remain unmoved while seeing her sister brought to tears by the memory of their father.

Theresia then approached Elizabeth and, without saying a word, gave her a hug.

Though there was still little emotion on her face, a tear could be seen running down the girl's cheek while Elizabeth simply continued crying as she had been.

They were both little children that had just lost their father. It was only natural for them to cry.

Upon seeing this, Theodore slowly and silently sneaked out of the garden through the entrance opposite the one the girls had used.

Not saying a word, he walked through the hallway, as though eager to put distance between himself and the garden.

And then, after making it to a place where he could be certain he was alone...he *bashed his head against the stone wall*.

A dull pain rang out through his body as blood flowed from the resulting gash in his skin, but that was far from enough to soothe his anger.

"You couldn't even protect their fragile little hearts! How *dare* you try to protect your own...?!" This anger was directed at himself, and it overwhelmed him.

After that, he rushed to retract his resignation.

He refused to run away just because of his own weakness, and instead resumed searching for ways he *could* contribute, with renewed intensity.

Even after Franklin's Game in Gideon, his resolution had not wavered. He knew his limits, acknowledged them — and yet he continued to move forward, certain that there were things he could do in spite of them.

And now, he had been caught up in the assault on Altea.

Once again, it was time for him to see if he truly could protect the kingdom — and the hearts of Altar's princesses.

◇◆◇

Castle, Innermost Hall

Over ten minutes had passed since Ignis Idea had broken through the main gate.

Twelve knights of the Royal Guard — Theodore among them — were defending the innermost hall on the first floor. Beyond it, there were stairs leading down to a bulky gate forged of Mythical metal.

This was the entrance to the castle's emergency shelter, so in a way, the hallway where the knights now stood was the castle's last line of defense.

"Sir Lindos! Mr. Lazburn...King of Blaze still hasn't been stopped! He's still moving forward!"

"I see..."

The identity of the intruder was now known to everyone in the castle, and the knights and guards alike were using all of the castle's equipment to mount a defense against him.

However, that turned out to be less than ideal.

"The castle's defensive mechanisms are operating at just below thirty percent!"

"We suspect this is due to all the personnel we lost in the previous incidents..."

As he listened to these reports, Theodore's expression soured. The castle had countless defensive installations, both from the time of its original construction and added more recently by the Arch Sage. Theoretically, the place should be impenetrable.

However, many of the devices had been rendered unusable. This was partially due to deliberate sabotage of the castle's magic distribution system by one of the intruders, but mostly it came down to a sheer lack of people.

The countless devices installed in the castle — especially the ones designed by the Arch Sage — were meant to be used by people who had at least a little bit of magical skill.

However, most of the magic experts of the castle — the Arch Sage's disciples — had died to Gloria a little over a year ago.

It was difficult to find qualified replacements. Regardless of whether they hired unaffiliated casters or recruited people who were already working for the nobles, they needed even more personnel to run the necessary background checks. The castle's security couldn't be entrusted to an unreliable party, after all.

The same problem came up even with security installations that weren't magical. Thus, the castle's defenses were currently woefully unprepared for the current assault.

There simply weren't enough people to properly protect this place, and they knew that all too well.

"How are Her Highness and the others?" Theodore asked.

"According to a message from Marquis Findle, they're making their way into the shelter without any trouble." Elizabeth, Canglong, and Milianne were currently being escorted to the shelter. They were accompanied by six members of the Royal Guard, a group of maids, and Marquis Findle, who was the head of intelligence as well as a capable manipulator of magic equipment — a skill necessary to make it past the shelter's defenses.

"...Have you heard anything from Lady Grandria?"

"No... Not yet." However, Liliana and Theresia weren't part of the group heading to the shelter.

Normally, Liliana would be the one commanding the Royal Guard here, but she wasn't present at the moment.

While the other children were being taken to the shelter, Theresia had been nowhere in sight. Liliana had left the command of the knights to Theodore and headed out to search for her.

She likely assumed that I would make a better leader at the moment than she would, he thought.

One of the low-rank jobs Theodore had was "Leader," which gave a small boost to the stats of all members of his party. Being talentless himself, he had chosen to contribute to his order and the kingdom by strengthening his fellow knights.

The high-rank version of the job, Commander, would grant a greater boost and have a wider range, but it wasn't an option for him because he could only have one high-rank job.

Even so, he would do what he could.

"Where is King of Blaze right now?"

"First floor. The second hallway in the south."

"The magic distribution in that area should still be active. There should also be a barrier device that can be activated without caster abilities. Contact the guards there and tell them to seal off the second hallway."

"Understood!" The subordinate quickly used comms magic to pass on the order, and a few dozen seconds later...

"Your idea was a success! King of Blaze has been sealed off!" The subordinate sounded overjoyed, but Theodore wouldn't allow himself to feel too relieved.

He melted the front gate, he thought. *Not even the Arch Sage's barriers will hold him for long.*

Theodore estimated that Lazburn would stay contained for ten minutes at most.

"Sir Lindos, I must say — I'm very impressed with your knowledge of the castle's magic distribution system and equipment."

"...The best thing someone without talent can do is gather knowledge. I suggest you also learn as much as you can about all the defense mechanisms and escape routes you are authorized to know about."

"I-I will."

"Also, it's far too early to relax. The barrier bought us some breathing room, but it is only a matter of time until he breaks out. Some magic channels have been broken, as well. We were able to activate that barrier, but much of our security equipment in other areas does not have enough power to function. This includes the surveillance network. And let us not forget that Her Highness Theresia has not been taken to the shelter yet. I assume I've said enough for you to understand our role here?"

"Yes... We must protect the gate leading underground until the Princess's safety is secured."

"Exactly," Theodore said with a nod.

A moment later, he glared at the only path leading to this final line of defense — the hallway that was closed off by a shutter.

"Sir Lindos?" the subordinate said, unsure why Theodore's expression changed.

"...*The box* is moving," he muttered with a stern look. "It is slow, though. It does not seem to be running away. That can only mean..."

"Fshh... fshh... fshh." A strange sound like someone breathing could be heard beyond the shutter... *which immediately melted*.

"What?!" a few subordinates exclaimed.

"Ready your weapons! The enemy is upon us!" Theodore exclaimed as he and the others prepared for a fight.

Something passed through what used to be a barricade, finally coming into full view of the knights.

It was a three-metel-tall figure with a form that was far from human.

"Fshh... Fshh... Oh my, what a strong-looking gate. Have I found it? Should I assume no, given how weak you all seem to be?"

The creature seemed to be an amalgam of spider and human, like a giant spider whose features had been twisted into a more humanoid appearance by having its four front legs replaced by a single set of human limbs. Needless to say, the result was sickening.

"Who are you?" Theodore asked the talking spider-monster.

"I am King of Venom, Allo Ulmill," the creature responded with a light bow. "I was once a member of The Death's leading assassin group, 'The Death's Thumb.' Now, I suppose I should go by 'Aranea Idea' — a supporting member of I.F., loyal to the clan and especially to La Crima."

The creature casually revealed information that surprised everyone listening.

"Ohh, and the reason I introduced myself in such detail is simple — everyone here is going to die. Fshfshfsh," Aranea said, his shoulders shaking. It was hard to tell, but it seemed that he was chuckling.

He was actually *laughing* as he declared that he was going to slaughter every member of the Royal Guard here.

"But all of that information is quite valuable by itself," Aranea said before pointing at the hallway behind him. "I am sure you would be doing a great service if you brought that information back."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but anyone who would crumble before a powerful foe has long left the order," Theodore said firmly, rejecting Aranea's invitation to flee.

All the knights who were afraid of facing formidable enemies or who feared their own weakness had run away from the order after the war. There were no potential deserters left in the Royal Guard, and you could tell just by looking at their expressions.

"How unfortunate," Aranea said, shaking his head. "I set all this up so that the cowards would die first."

A moment later, a purplish, burbling liquid flowed out of the hallway he had pointed towards.

"Poison..."

"Of course. What else would you expect from King of Venom? Fshfshfsh!" He laughed again after emphasizing the title of his Superior Job. "I must say, you are quite the bunch of weaklings. The highest level you could reach is only half of the maximum 500. The shields of Altar seem to be quite fragile, actually. I have two things I must do, so I wouldn't want to waste too much time on the likes of you."

"Two things?"

"Yes. I am quite a busy person. First on the agenda is sabotaging this castle."

Seemingly filled with joy for some unknown reason, Aranea readily revealed his first goal, but it wasn't anything surprising to the knights. Theodore could instantly tell that he was the same kind of opponent as King of Blaze who had destroyed the main gate.

"And my second task...is assassinating the second princess." These words made most of the Royal Guard react with open rage and ready their blades, but Theodore was able to keep himself together, albeit barely, and wring out a single question. "...Why target Her Highness?"

"I have been conveyed to La Crima by The Death himself. However, back when I still served The Death, I was in charge of instructing a lower branch. The Death's Pinky, they were called. They were talentless, though, and were effectively the lowest group under The Death's command."

"Hm...?"

Theodore and his companions didn't know this, but that was the name of the assassin group that had attempted to take Elizabeth's life on the request of Marquis Borozel, only to be destroyed by the Superior Killer — Marie.

She had solved the problem all by herself. No one had even realized that Elizabeth's life had been in jeopardy, and the incident faded away into obscurity.

However, the story didn't end there.

"It seems they were destroyed in their attempt to assassinate the second princess, so I figured that as their instructor, I would shoulder their duties and kill her myself."

He declared that he would assassinate Elizabeth as casually as someone might state that they were going to take out the trash.

"If you tell me where she is, I will let you all go for the moment. What do you say? I'm being honest this time."

The Royal Guards who had Truth Discernment could see the sincerity of Aranea's words.

Before responding, Theodore fell silent for a moment. And then...

"I see. Here's your answer, then... *We refuse*."

...he rejected the offer utterly.

They were standing against a talented monstrosity. In a world where humanoid...or at least tian powers were determined by the jobs they held, Aranea was a remarkable figure who had acquired a Superior Job.

Besides that, he had been modified by a Superior Embryo to become even more powerful.

Theodore, in contrast, could only acquire three low-rank and a single high-rank job — comparing them at all seemed like a foolish endeavor.

Despite outnumbering their foe, the knights' chances of victory were minuscule.

Theodore's decision would no doubt lead them all to their death.

Even so, he — *all of them* had chosen to defy the enemy before them.

"Our power...!" Theodore called.

"...Is the kingdom's blade!" the knights answered, brandishing their swords.

"Our bodies...!" Theodore called.

"...Are the kingdom's shields!" the knights answered as they raised their own shields.

"Royal Guard... Prepare for battle!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" They were fully prepared to fight Aranea.

Their will was one, and not one of them felt any fear.

They were the Royal Guard — those who *used* to be the true protectors of Altar.

"Fshfshfsh... You continue to struggle? Frail as you might be, you are still good prey. Fshfshfshfshfsh..." Aranea laughed, moving his spider-like mouth. "Do be careful, though. My poison is more fiendish than even that of your typical UBM. It will easily melt a limb or two. And this body of mine is far stronger than the one I possessed as a mere Superior Job and a member of The Death's Thumb. To be honest, this will barely qualify as a fight."

As much as these words were a threat, they were also the unvarnished truth.

Even so, they did nothing to shake the knights' resolve.

"Charge!" Theodore cried.

"As you command!" the knights answered. He didn't fall back, and neither did they.

And so, the Royal Guard faced down a foe that far outclassed them.

“Fshfsh... Fatal Mist.”

“Everyone! Take an Elixir!” Aranea had used King of Venom’s ultimate job skill right off the bat, prompting Theodore to order the Royal Guard to use the Elixirs they had been provided with.

This gave the Royal Guard the upper hand in this exchange.

Aranea’s Fatal Mist was a skill that allowed him to pick several of his ten poisons that give disease-based debuffs, and then create a mist based on those poisons without worrying about any chemical interactions between them. And as King of Venom, he also possessed the Toxification skill at EX level, which doubled any disease-based status effects he inflicted.

Being exposed to a mist carrying such potent poisons would normally be fatal to anyone.

Aranea’s Poison Resistance was also at EX level, allowing him to negate any and all disease-based debuffs. It wouldn’t have been unusual if he was the only one still standing the moment after he used Fatal Mist.

The only way the Royal Guard could avoid this powerful poison attack was by using Elixirs. With the exception of those from diseases the imbibers had acquired by ordinary means, Elixirs negated all disease-based status debuffs, and then granted immunity to them for the next three minutes.

By drinking these elixirs, the Royal Guard avoided instant death and now took no damage from Aranea’s greatest weapon.

It seemed as though King of Venom was rendered powerless now, but...

“Fshfsh! Elixirs! Excellent! I love this!”

...he actually reacted with *joy* when he saw the knights employ this defense.

It was no doubt eerie, but the Royal Guard still showed no fear.

“Three, two...Grand Cross!” Theodore called, giving a hand sign.

“GRAND CROSS!” the knights answered.

Grand Cross was the strongest attack in a Paladin’s arsenal. As an ultimate job skill, it was difficult to acquire, so the only ones actually using it were Theodore and just three other members of the Royal Guard.

However, all of them had learned the art of stacking.

Following their defeat against Franklin back in Gideon, many Royal

Guards had gone on to learn Grand Cross and do plenty of stacking practice, and you could see the fruits of their efforts in this four-stack strategy they used on Aranea.

Cross-shaped pillars of light rose up into the sky, delivering an immense blast of both holy and heat energy.

Not even Pure-Dragons could withstand this torrent of light.

"I see. Very impressive...though not very effective, I'm sorry to say," Aranea remarked.

Despite being the target of the pillar, Aranea still seemed perfectly fine.

"Fshfsh... This won't burn me. I have resistance to heat. If you saw my colleague, you should understand why."

Aranea was wearing multiple accessories that granted fire resistance. He'd originally equipped these to protect him from Ignis Idea's immense heat — but they proved effective against Grand Cross, as well.

"Exactly as I anticipated!" The moment the pillar of light vanished, all twelve of the Royal Guards charged Aranea in unison.

"Ohh?" Aranea voiced his surprise. He had expected them to be shaken by this, after all.

Theodore, however, had known all along that Grand Cross would have little effect on this creature.

One of the three low-rank jobs he had was Appraiser, which provided vision-based utility skills like Reveal, Identification, and See-Through Sight.

All of these were useful, but they often came as extras from other jobs, and their maximum skill level for Appraisers was below the generic low-rank limit of 5. Because of this, only a few people took the job. Theodore was one of these few, because he had a strict job limit and Appraiser allowed him to acquire all of these useful perception skills using only one of his allotted jobs.

He'd already used Identification to find out that Aranea was wearing accessories that granted heat resistance, and their Grand Cross attack had been nothing but a distraction.

That was the true meaning of the hand sign he had given before the Grand Cross — he was directing the knights to attack while the light was still active.

"OAAGH!" The Paladins of the Royal Guard roared as they thrust their blades, imbued with Knight skills, into Aranea's body.

"...This won't work," the creature simply said. None of their swords could penetrate any further than the outer layer of Aranea's carapace.

"Gh...! Is he *this* resilient...?!" Theodore said, shocked that his blade, aimed right for the chest, could pierce no deeper.

"Fshfsh. Identification helped you see my equipment, but it looks like Reveal didn't let you see *all* of my stats. I suppose it must be due to the level difference... Oh, in case you're wondering, my total level is 980." Reveal was a skill that showed the target's stats, but if the target had skills or gear that interfered with it, then differences in level could make it impossible to get concrete values. "Not that my stats as King of Venom mean much now anyway," Aranea added.

"What...?"

"Perhaps you could've pierced the frail flesh I used to have...but you can barely scratch my new body."

King of Venom held the Venomancer Superior Job, which was part of the alchemist grouping. As such, it offered high MP and DEX, but not much else. Normally, the Paladins here would've been far stronger than him, and their joint attack would've spelled his doom.

However, this was no longer King of Venom, Allo Ulmill, but rather Aranea Idea — a human modified by a Superior Embryo.

"This isn't a fragile human body any longer." An upper-Pure-Dragon-tier spider monster had been used as material in the operation that had transformed him, merging their flesh. Such human-monster hybrids were commonly employed by La Crima because they allowed the creation of Ideas that were physically more powerful than the average vanguard, but still maintained their rear guard or crafting skills.

Aranea was no different — all of his stats were far above those of a common Paladin.

"I'm superior to all of you combined *and* I have these amazing skills," he said, looking down on them like a human would look down upon ants. "You have spirit...but do you really think you can stand up to me?"

"...Not yet!"

In spite of everything, the Royal Guards decided to keep on fighting.

Their perfect joint attack had only managed to wound Aranea lightly, *but he was wounded nonetheless*.

Even the Grand Cross stack they'd released earlier hadn't been completely negated — minor burns were visible on Aranea's skin, and the heat pouring off him was tangible.

Maybe the attack had done less damage than a typical low-rank fire spell, but it had still *done damage*.

That meant that Aranea wasn't an unbeatable monster. He could certainly be overcome.

"The possibility exists!" Theodore roared.

There was once a creature that had completely crushed the Royal Guard.

It had a barrier that negated physical attacks, as well as a complete resistance to holy damage. Designed to be the ultimate foe of all Paladins, this unmatched creature had almost completely wiped out the Royal Guard.

However, it was actually defeated by a Paladin...a Master.

He'd brought down the very creature created to defeat people like him.

Theodore and the other Royal Knights had all borne witness to this triumph. They had all seen him raise up his right hand in victory.

That was why they could never allow themselves to give up, for they too were Paladins sworn to protect Altar.

"Attack! Keep fighting as long as your limbs can move...or until this creature falls!" Theodore called.

"SIR, YES, SIR!" the knights answered. They kept on moving. They imbibed more Elixir and continued to fight.

Not a single man among them gave up. Every single knight relentlessly sliced at Aranea's body, striking as though they expected their shallow cuts to chop off all his limbs.

Clearly irritated, Aranea said, "Fshfsh... How annoying!" Right as Theodore's sword pierced his chest again, the creature swung his spider arms. Backed by Pure-Dragon-tier power, the four arms sent four of the knights flying, but the other eight continued fighting regardless.

...An opening! Theodore thought. Aranea was strong — perhaps ten times as strong as they were.

On account of his hardy spider exoskeleton, Aranea even outclassed them in the Paladin's speciality — END. This Idea had an edge over them in AGI, as well, but since non-mounted Paladins were slow to begin with, this didn't mean he was all that fast — not even close to supersonic speeds, in fact.

And even if that gap between their AGI stats was immense, there was little difference in their actual speeds, which meant that Aranea couldn't just choose to kill them in the blink of an eye.

"You impertinent little...!"

There was a reason why Aranea's AGI was lower than one might expect.

The spider monster fused to his flesh had been far faster than him, but that was because it had a mastery over its arachnid form.

Allo Ulmill was ultimately human, so it was hard for him to move as a spider. He could have been given a fully arachnid body, but no one knew how long it would take him to learn to move in such a form. In the end, it had been more efficient to give Aranea a mostly humanoid form, even if that resulted in a lower AGI overall.

This could be considered a flaw of human-monster hybrids — END could be maintained, but AGI couldn't.

Unlike someone using a Guardian fusion skill, Aranea had been physically merged with a monster. Since parts of him were still human, he could never fully utilize the monster's power.

However, that also meant that he kept all the *advantages* of being human.

"Don't underestimate me!" Aranea once again moved the spider-arms, this time releasing countless webs through their tips.

"Huh?!" The webs quickly stuck to the surrounding knights, pinning them to the walls.

"Kh-agh...!" The impact knocked the wind from Theodore's lungs. He quickly caught his breath and tried to move, but the Binding effect from the webs had immobilized him.

"This is...!"

"Fshfsh... A web, as you can surely guess. You did manage to give me a bit of trouble, but that's all over now," Aranea said, continuing to flood the area with spider silk.

Perhaps it was obvious that a spider-man would be able to use both poison and webs, but Aranea had not been granted these powers by his fusion with a spider monster. Rather, it was the other way around — Allo Ulmill had mastered both of these things, and that was why he had been merged with a spider in the first place.

"Fshfsh... I always liked doing this," Aranea mused. "Can't use Elixirs when you're all wrapped up, can you?"

That was the reason why King of Venom had become a skilled user of thread-based binding techniques.

As mentioned before, Elixirs were his bane. He naturally needed to devise a counter to them, and this was that counter — binding his enemies so they couldn't drink them in the first place.

Skills that used threads as weapons were dependent on DEX, so his build worked well for this kind of attack, even as the frail King of Venom.

"Fshfsh... Now, there's nothing you can do but wait in terror for your Elixir's three-minute timer to expire."

Aside from being effective, this strategy also suited Aranea's taste.

This was why he'd actually been glad they'd all used Elixirs.

Just as he said, they'd given him some trouble, but this was the end.

All that was left for him was to watch as the Royal Guards here died in fear before heading down to kill the second princess.

With that in mind, Aranea looked at their faces...

"Ah..."

...and saw something he could scarcely believe.

Throughout his life, he had dealt out death to many. He'd bound and poisoned thousands of people exactly like this.

All of his victims, without exception, had shown despair as their inevitable death approached.

To Aranea, seeing that despair was a reassurance that he was the one who dealt out death to others, and it always filled him with a sense of relief.

By gaining this body, he had become even more skilled at killing. His body was tough enough that swords barely scratched him. He was powerful and his life had been extended. He could clearly feel death becoming a distant concept to him, and Aranea could honestly say that his life had never been better.

He was the death dealer. In turn, death would never come for him.

Since that was his outlook, Aranea felt *absolute terror* when he noticed that his prey, bound and out of options...remained stoic, brave, and unfaltering.

"Ngh..." Aranea let out a noise of distress as he took a step back.

"Target — below yourselves... GRAND CROSS!" Still bound, Theodore and the others who were able to do so used Grand Cross on the floor below

them.

The next moment, the Paladins burst into flame.

Embraced by searing heat, they lost great amounts of HP even with Paladin's Aegis protecting them. Still, they soldiered on through the pain.

The memory of one particular Paladin who had kept on using his flames even as they consumed him was still fresh in their minds.

He had been driven by his will to protect the people, and they would follow his example.

And as a reward for this self-destructive act...

"M-My webs... You burned them off...?!"

...the silk binding them was incinerated.

While Aranea himself had resistance to fire, that didn't apply to the webs he released. Like any organic material, the silk burned up in the searing light of Grand Cross.

"CHARGE!" Theodore called, and then he said something Aranea did not catch.

It mattered little, however. The more important fact was that the Royal Guard were still moving and attacking him.

"Y-Your struggle is futile!" Aranea swung his arms and sprayed out silk again, sending the knights flying once more.

However, there was something in the way this time — ten, or more, metallic steeds.

"What are these horses...?!" In fact, they were SMPS — Second Model Prism Steeds — the mass-produced units that had been given to the Royal Guard.

Mounted combat was impossible indoors, but since SMPS could create barriers, they were still useful as covers.

"Ghh... You're in the way!" Aranea destroyed the surrounding steeds with his webs and arms.

The steeds quickly shattered under the assault, but the knights thought nothing of it. They only needed the SMPS to buy time.

"Grand Cross!" two voices called.

"Hm...?!" Suddenly, a stacked Grand Cross manifested under Aranea.

This two-stack was weaker than the first four-stack, but it was still able to temporarily blind Aranea and burn away the webs he was releasing.

"Do you truly think this will be enough to defeat me...?!" Pressured by the torrent of light, he struggled to escape it. His accessories kept the damage low, so it would never actually kill him.

In his mind, this was just another desperate attempt at stalling from the Royal Guards, just like the horses.

And then, the pressure he felt from the flood of light was abruptly cut in half.

One of the users ran out of MP...! Aranea thought, based on his perception of the situation. Grand Cross was far from cheap to cast, so it wasn't surprising that it could quickly drain the user's MP reserves dry.

The pressure was now weak enough for him to easily escape.

"I'm ou—?!"

But as soon as he did so...

"OAAGH!"

...there was Theodore, lunging at him from close range with his sword.

Everything he had done so far was only a set-up for this one attack.

Theodore had deliberately stopped using Grand Cross so he could approach Aranea and thrust his sword straight through his chest.

He aimed for the same spot he'd attacked many times before. Worn down by the continuous assault of slashes and stabs, Aranea's tough skin finally gave way...and the blade sunk into his body.

Aranea made no sound. It was as though time had stopped.

Theodore, drained of both MP and SP, had delivered the strongest attack he could muster and seemed to be frozen in that position.

Aranea looked down at the sword that pierced his chest...

"Fshfsh... WHAT A SHAME!"

...and laughed before swinging his human arm to send Theodore flying.

"Ugh..." Theodore coughed up blood, likely from his shattered ribs piercing his internal organs.

"S-Sir Lindos!"

"Then we must fight without him...!" After their costly escape from the web and Aranea's many attacks, the knights were all heavily wounded. Many had even lost consciousness already.

They tried to keep fighting Aranea in spite of that...

"Cough... Th-This is...!"

...but then, they hit their time limit.

The effects of the second Elixir had begun to expire.

Most of the poison from the Fatal Mist had been neutralized by the many Grand Crosses, but the small amount that still remained began to affect the knights that still stood.

Now, hands were shaking too much for them to even take a third Elixir.

"Fsh, fsh, fsh... My, my...for such a frail bunch, you certainly gave me a lot of trouble. But as you can see, it was futile," Aranea said, pulling out the sword Theodore had stabbed into his chest. "You were probably aiming for my heart, but it's not there. Not like I would die if you actually did manage to pierce it anyway."

Except the brain, Aranea had multiples of every vital organ. He was designed to survive even if his insides were critically damaged.

"But your futile struggle really made an impression! I won't forget any of you! I'll even tell the second princess all about it when I kill her! She deserves to hear the tale of the weakling knights who gave everything they had just to stab me once! FSHFSHFSH!" Aranea laughed out loud and looked down at the knights, wounded and poisoned...when suddenly, he heard a strange noise *like a loud crack*.

"Hm...? What is that sound?" he asked, looking around.

Some seconds later, he was ready to assume that the sound had either been the knights' equipment breaking or the hall itself preparing to fall apart from the intense battle, but then...

"Yeah...stab you...just once."

...Theodore, still battered and lying against the wall, said those words.

"Oh? You can still speak? Aren't you more injured than anyone else here?"

"...I only gave you...a slight wound." His words seemed like incoherent muttering.

Perhaps Theodore's consciousness was simply wavering because of the poison and injuries, but for some reason, these seemingly meaningless words sent a chill down Aranea's spine.

"What about the woun— Hm?" Aranea tried to speak, but his words were cut off by that same crack-like sound. This time, it gave off an ominous feeling, like the noise that preceded a dam bursting.

"What is this sound...?"

"I...saw it... That is why...I kept...targeting it..."

"Speak, already! What were you targeting?!" Aranea shouted, clearly irritated by Theodore's mumbling.

"*The box,*" Theodore responded.

"What...?" The crack-like...no, the *cracking* sound reached Aranea again.

It wasn't reaching his ears through the outside air, but resonating within his very bones.

The Royal Guard had given everything they had, and then some, just to deliver a single stab wound.

Their target, however, was actually *inside the wound*.

Theodore had been focused on it even before Aranea had shown himself.

The Appraiser job possessed three utility skills: Reveal, Identification...and See-Through Sight.

This last skill gave the user a power similar to X-ray vision, or perhaps something more like the devices used in airport security checks. It was used to Identify items with special, multilayered structures or to detect dangerous objects.

Theodore normally used this skill in the course of his guard duties, and it had allowed him to see the object within Aranea's body before he even arrived.

"What are you talking ab— Ah?!"

Theodore had seen and targeted it from the start.

There was only one thing that could be making that sound — the *box-shaped inventory* inside Aranea's body, implanted to store the materials for his poisons and webs.

The cracking noise was now happening more and more frequently.

"Wait. Wait...!"

The existence of the inventory was only logical. Spreading poison and releasing webs required materials; despite that, Aranea was able to flood the hall with venom and turn the entire place into one giant spider web.

He couldn't possibly have fit all of that into his physical body, so he must have stored the materials somewhere.

However, Identification didn't show any inventories on him.

That was what made Theodore realize that the immense amount of material Aranea used had to have been kept within the box *inside* him, which he had spotted with See-Through Vision. Since the box was necessary for Aranea's survival, it had been implanted into him so that he could never lose it...but that came with one major flaw.

"Wait, wait, waitWAITWAITWAITWAAIT!" The repeated cracking sounds made Aranea lose his cool, his voice rising to a desperate scream.

The prospect of being on the receiving end of that which he had so often dealt out to others terrified him.

He didn't fear the sounds themselves, but the event they foretold — a minor law of this world.

Inventories could be destroyed from the outside.

And when they were...*they released all their contents*.

"WaAiT... ABGHAH?!" Following one brief final cry...Aranea was torn apart.

The items that overflowed within his tough body instantly pulverized his organs, and a few moments later, the sheer volume of them, far greater than his body could fit, burst forth. Aranea's body was ripped to pieces.

No matter how modified and improved, his body could not withstand this. The Idea who firmly believed that the modifications he'd undergone had allowed him to escape death forever...died precisely *because* of those modifications.

Theodore, though badly wounded, calmly watched the end of this fearsome foe.

"Heh..." He smiled for the first time since the war...as the flood of materials — poison included — washed over him.

Chapter From the Past: Memories of Fire

Fire

The Lazburn family was known to excel at fire magic.

Tian aptitudes and maximum levels differed from person to person, but the Lazburns were almost always adept at wielding fire spells and capable of reaching high levels. Though the most obvious examples of such talent inheritance were the inhabitants of Tenchi, the Lazburns were also an excellent demonstration of the principle.

Because of this, the Lazburns had devoted their lives to fire magic for generations.

In a world with jobs and levels, tians like the Lazburns, who clearly knew how to improve themselves, were fortunate indeed. He — Feuer Lazburn — was no different. He spent his years learning fire magic from his father — the previous King of Blaze.

One lesson that had been hammered into him went as such: “The three higher elemental Superior Jobs are The Atmos, The Earth, and The Ocean. They are only accessible to those with the aptitude for all the types of magic they employ. However vast their powers might be, though, they are shallow. We are a family of fire and fire alone, but that doesn’t mean that we are inferior to those who command all aspects of the atmosphere. When it comes to fire, the Kings of Blaze — who have all been Lazburns for generations now — are superior to The Atmos. And fire magic is the most powerful magic of all.”

What Feuer’s father had meant by that was that the Lazburns were the strongest casters in the world, and Feuer couldn’t help but feel that his father was absolutely right.

No one needed to command every kind of magic. You merely had to devote yourself to one thing and become the strongest at that. Since the Lazburn had mastered the arts of extreme heat, it was obvious what Feuer had to do.

From a young age, he had dedicated his mind and body to the study of fire magic. Even after his father died and he inherited the King of Blaze job, Feuer refused to stop. He gained the job's ultimate skill and even improved on it, always striving to grow stronger.

And when King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn became a well-known name throughout the kingdom, he sent a challenge letter to a particular person.

The person's name was...unknown.

No one knew his name. Not even royalty, and not even people who could use Reveal. He was a true enigma.

Despite that, he was respected as a pillar of the country. When everyone spoke of him, they all referred to him only by his job:

"Arch Sage."

◆

On that day four years ago, the central arena of Gideon the City of Duels was bustling with activity.

Almost every seat was taken, and among the guests of honor was King Eldor of Altar himself.

Since the first queen of the kingdom was an Over Gladiator born in Gideon, it was traditional for Altar's royalty to attend any important duels taking place in this city.

And what an important duel this was!

At the time, The Lynx, Tom Cat was still the duel champion and many newly arriving Masters were overtaking the rankings. The main event of this day, however, wasn't a duel between rankers at all.

It was a clash between legendary tians said to be the first and second strongest casters in the kingdom.

One was King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn "of the Embers" — a well-known wielder of flame magic.

The other was an advisor to the king, the living legend who was the "Magical Apex" at the time — Arch Sage.

As the Masters were still growing in power, this was a battle between the most powerful casters in Altar.

"It has been a while since I stood on a stage like this. Do go easy on me, Sir Lazburn," said the Arch Sage with a smile.

"...Sure," Feuer replied, his face stern.

The reason why this duel was even happening was the letter of challenge he'd sent, and his goal here was the Arch Sage's title, "Magical Apex."

The Lazburns believed themselves to be the strongest casters of all, and they devoted their lives to making that a fact.

However, the title of "Magical Apex" currently belonged to the Arch Sage, so Feuer had challenged him to make it his own.

He broke all limits in his own training, and now — while he was still in his prime, before age would begin to take its toll — he had sent the letter that had led to this duel.

Feuer had also made the challenge public, making it clear that if he didn't accept, the Arch Sage would be viewed as a weak coward for running away from the challenge.

The reactions to his actions were mixed.

Some praised Feuer for his bravery in challenging a true legend, but most were put off by his flagrant disrespect towards someone the country so revered.

Even so, he refused to retract the challenge. The title of "Magical Apex" was the Lazburns' ultimate desire.

His father had wanted it as well, but he was struck down by sickness before he could challenge the Arch Sage. He had died with this one heavy regret in his heart.

Feuer had been by his father's side as he passed, so he had made a promise to defeat the Arch Sage and reclaim the title of strongest caster for the Lazburn family. This challenge was the culmination of a life dedicated to training.

"You look terrifying," said the Arch Sage. "Have I wronged you in some way?"

"...No. I have nothing against you personally," Feuer replied. If he *had* to name one thing that bothered him, it would be the fact that he was the "Magical Apex" while also being the Arch Sage.

The high-rank job Sage was directly opposed to the Lazburn family's line of thinking.

"Sage" was a job that could only be taken by those who had an aptitude for all three higher elements. They could wield magic of the atmos, earth, and ocean. Some Sages could even cast healing spells.

However, this versatility often made them less powerful than the specialists of the elements.

Sages were a prime example of what Feuer's father called "vast, but shallow," and if it wasn't obvious already, Arch Sage was the Superior Job of the grouping. Thus, the very existence of an Arch Sage who was the "Magical Apex" flew in the face of everything the Lazburn family stood for.

For Feuer, that alone was enough of a reason to issue this challenge.

Facing the Arch Sage, Feuer contemplated the past — specifically, the words of his bedridden father.

"From what I've heard, the Arch Sage can use Crimson Spheres. That means that he has access to the ultimate skills of the high-rank jobs under the three higher elements. That is impressive indeed, but it also means that he can't reach the true depths of the fire element like King of Blaze can. A Lazburn can surely defeat him."

Even if the Arch Sage had ultimate skills from high-rank jobs under the higher element of the ocean, which could include defensive magic that worked by dampening energy, the ultimate skill of King of Blaze would deliver more than enough energy to overcome that.

"Apparently, he's also able to use dark-based hybrid magic that exterminates living beings on a large scale. That's impressive too. But since it attacks such a large area, it can't be used in the confines of a duel arena. In a one-on-one battle, he has no means of delivering more power than King of Blaze's Fixed Star."

Fixed Star was the name of the job's ultimate skill, and as the name suggested, it created an orb of burning plasma not dissimilar to the one that shone down upon the earth from on high.

In terms of sheer extermination potential, the Arch Sage's Imaginary Meteo was stronger, but against a single unit, Fixed Star came out on top.

That was why Feuer's father was confident that he would win. "I could've beaten him if it wasn't for this damned illness," he cursed.

However, Feuer's outlook was a bit different than his father's.

...I think that the Arch Sage can use the ultimate job skills of not just high-rank, but Superior Jobs as well, he thought. They were dealing with a prodigy who had lived for over a century and spent all that time honing his magic skills.

It would not be surprising for someone so talented to have reached that level.

Feuer fully believed that the power carried by his family was the strongest in all the world, but he didn't underestimate his enemy either.

And if the Arch Sage could use all the ultimate job skills of all elements, Feuer resolved to defeat him with something even greater than the Fixed Star spell he worked so hard to learn.

I will use something even more powerful than Fixed Star and bring home the title of Magical Apex. He had far fewer cards in his proverbial deck than the Arch Sage, so he planned to make the battle a quick one. He believed he had to channel his strongest magic from the moment the battle began and use it to instantly overwhelm his opponent.

Feuer would give his all — his entire family's many years of training — into his very first attack.

While Feuer was extremely serious about the upcoming battle, the Arch Sage seemed wholly composed.

He didn't even have to accept this challenge to begin with. He was one of the pillars of Altar, and no one would ever doubt someone who had been providing such a great service to the country for over a century. No one would call him a coward for refusing Lazburn's challenge. In fact, the general opinion would be that Lazburn simply wasn't worth his time.

Despite that, the Arch Sage had accepted. He even spoke to Count Gideon, convincing him to turn this battle into a major event held in the central arena.

"We both are powerful casters," he told him. "It is necessary for us to use Gideon's barrier equipment, just in case, and it would certainly draw a crowd you could profit from."

Though, with a depth and foresight that was too great for anyone but him to truly understand, it was hard to tell if his words expressed the true nature of his intentions.

Regardless, this duel had been set up with agreement from both combatants, and the time had come to commence the battle.

"BEGIN!" the moderator cried, instantly spurring Feuer into action.

"Burn! Burn! Burn! Mimic of heavenly light and scorcher of earth! Shining star that fits in the palm of my hand!" Channeling his magic into the spell, Feuer intoned the most intense Chant he had ever used.

"Chant" was a supplementary skill that increased the effectiveness of spells if the caster said something while casting them. The words differed from person to person, and his was one that was meant to light his very own soul on fire.

"You are the twins of ruination! The incarnation of binary stars!" As he spoke, Fixed Stars appeared in *both* of his hands.

This was the technique he'd developed — double-casting his ultimate job skill.

This was what lay beyond singular Fixed Stars, and it was the technique that Feuer alone had perfected. He wasn't the first who had tried, however. The technique was just so dangerous that all the past Kings of Blaze who had attempted it had lost control and burnt themselves to ash.

But Feuer had poured enough blood and sweat into his training to finally achieve it.

Not even a Superior Job's ultimate ocean-element skill could stand against this. Such a defensive skill's energy-damping effect would cancel-out one Fixed Star, but the other would still be more than enough to destroy his opponent. That was the very simple reason that Feuer had decided to use *two*.

With this, he would surely win this fight.

These stars will guide the Lazburn family to vict— he thought, before he saw something that shocked him.

The Arch Sage, who was standing on the ground until but a moment ago, was now floating in midair.

And surrounding him...there were *four* Fixed Stars.

"...Ahh... AHHH!" Feuer screamed as he realized that the Arch Sage had easily surpassed the pinnacle he'd worked so hard to reach.

A single Fixed Star cost over 300,000 MP. Using four would drain even Feuer's reserves — yet the Arch Sage seemed to be able to do this without breaking a sweat.

But more important than that was the fact that the Arch Sage had chosen to use Fixed Stars *after* seeing that Feuer was going to cast them.

That meant that, despite starting to cast them after he'd already begun, the Arch Sage had managed to prepare these four Fixed Stars before Feuer had even finished casting two.

That was proof that the Arch Sage's fire magic was superior to his, not just in pure volume, but in proficiency and speed.

If Feuer was an incapable fool, he could have chosen to blindly believe that his Fixed Stars were more powerful, or that the Arch Sage's four only *looked* menacing and that this was all nothing but a bluff.

Alas, he was a born genius of fire magic who'd dedicated his life to learning the ins and outs of the art.

That was why a single glance at Arch Sage's Fixed Stars was enough for him to know that they were equal to...no, *even greater* than his own.

But despite knowing that, he couldn't back down.

"FIXED STAAAAR!" he roared, releasing his orbs of plasma. "...Fixed Star," the Arch Sage responded. The outcome of this clash was already *clear as daylight*. Feuer understood that painfully well, but he couldn't let himself run from the conclusion of his many years of training.

The six Fixed Stars flew towards their targets.

The two launched by Feuer were consumed by two of the four launched by the Arch Sage, while the other two went on to incinerate him.

So ended the battle between the strongest tian casters — all in less than a minute.

◆

An old man sat on a tree stump in the mountains. His eyes were closed. Some would assume he was meditating, some would think he was sleeping, and still others would believe he was actually dead.

Three and a half years had passed since his — King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn's — duel against the Arch Sage, and he had retreated to a location in the mountains southwest of Altar.

He had previously lived in an urban mansion, but he had burned it down with his own hands before moving here.

Following the duel, the people's opinion of him had sunk appallingly low. To those who understood what had happened, Feuer was no doubt a remarkable caster. They knew that they'd witnessed an exchange of extremely potent magic.

But in the eyes of a layman, he had been crushed like an insect by magic twice as powerful as his own. They didn't even consider that he was the first King of Blaze to use multiple Fixed Stars at once — all they knew was that he was nothing before the Arch Sage.

Therefore, most people believed that he vanished to escape the shame.

In truth, he didn't care about their opinions one bit.

His mind had no room for such noise, for it was overwhelmed by the truth that he had been utterly defeated by his target.

He'd challenged the most well-versed caster in the world with the element that he'd dedicated his life to, and yet the Arch Sage had crushed him with that very same element.

All the training he'd gone through to prove himself the strongest — to surpass the Arch Sage — turned out to be for naught.

It was as though his entire life had been negated.

Ever since then, he'd been living as a hermit in the mountains.

He'd dedicated his existence to fire magic and fire magic alone. There was no one to care if he disappeared.

As he meditated, he was silent, but his surroundings certainly weren't.

They were filled with the crackling sound of flame, caused by the sixty-four balls of fire floating around him.

They were not Fixed Stars, of course, but low-rank Fireballs. Even so, very few were capable of controlling so many of them at the same time.

After losing to the Arch Sage in breadth, power, and speed, he took to honing his skills yet further and had achieved greater control and speed than he'd possessed during their duel.

By striving to improve himself even further, he was able to break more limits and achieve the result before him.

However, he knew that this was as far as he could possibly go.

"It's still not enough..." he whispered to himself, and the orbs vanished.

His goal was the same as ever — simultaneous control of multiple Fixed Stars. Currently, he might've been able to maintain as many as the Arch Sage had in their duel, if not more.

However, there was something that made it fundamentally impossible for him.

"I don't have enough magic..."

He simply didn't have the MP to release four Fixed Stars at once. Even when he drained his reserves dry, he could only call forth three of them at once.

Maximum MP could be increased by gaining more levels, but even those with Superior Jobs had limits to how high they could go.

The Arch Sage had lived and leveled for over a century. To match him, Feuer would need at least several decades more.

It wasn't certain if Feuer would even live long enough to catch up to the Arch Sage, and he would never overcome him even if he did.

The Arch Sage had chosen to use Feuer's own speciality against him, but he actually had access to spells of all elements. If he'd chosen to use magic that fire was weak against, not even having the same amount of MP or control would help him.

To defeat him with only a single element, merely equaling the Arch Sage wasn't enough — he had to surpass him.

That was exactly why he'd crafted the double Fixed Star technique.

"Tch..." Feuer immediately thought back to the day of the duel. Specifically, he remembered how the Arch Sage looked as he completely destroyed him.

His eyes were like those of a kindly adult looking at a child showing off a curious hunk of garbage he found.

To the Arch Sage, the power Feuer had given his whole life to earn was nothing but that — a child's worthless nonsense.

"...A child, eh?" Feuer understood that the Arch Sage was known mostly for his Imaginary Meteo because he'd washed his hands of Fixed Star many decades ago.

He'd stopped using it because he deemed it unfit for his purpose.

And Feuer had challenged him with a lesser version of this "unfit for his purpose" technique. *Of course he would be disappointed and look at me like I'm a child,* he thought in self-derision.

That was why he had to surpass the Arch Sage's fire magic.

Indeed — Feuer had *not* given up.

He became a hermit, meditated, and trained so he could challenge the Arch Sage once again.

He'd been completely defeated, but he was also so set in his ways that from now on, all he could do was dedicate himself to acquiring the "Magical Apex" title — or rather, to defeating the Arch Sage.

That was why he'd continued training even after the staggering defeat.

He didn't know that the title of "Magical Apex" now belonged to a Master known as "Fatoum," nor did he know that the Arch Sage had died in a war.

He'd isolated himself from society and focused solely on training.

Some would consider him insane, but he was of sound mind.

It was simply that his personal perspective and the world he lived in didn't allow for any other course of action.

However, one day, this life of his came to an end.

"...Who are you?" Feuer asked, his eyes still closed.

He wasn't speaking to himself or to any memory — he actually had a visitor.

"A pleasure to meet you. Feuer Lazburn, I assume? -sume?"

Two people stood among the trees and shrubs of the mountain grove.

Their voices were like a paired chorus. One was a pale woman in a wheelchair, while the other was a robust man in black pushing it.

Together, they were Soul Trader, La Crima.

"I am La Crima. A Master and the current Soul Trader. -der."

"A Master? I have heard of your kind. What do you want from me?"

"I came with an invitation. Would you like to join our clan as a supporting member? -ber?"

"Clan?"

"A clan known as 'I.F.,' which only allows the wanted. -ted."

"Criminals, eh? I don't recall being on any wanted list."

"...But you killed many, did you not? -not?" La Crima asked with certainty. "This mountain is very quiet. I sense no monsters or people here, yet I hear that this area is inhabited by high-level beings, making it an excellent spot for training. -ning."

"...What are you trying to say?"

"How many levels did you gain? -gain?" They were basically asking how many monsters *and tians* he had murdered to raise his level.

As certain people were aware, a portion of the Resources from dead monsters was used to create loot, so if one wanted only experience, tians were the better targets.

"It was wise of you to attack tians who hunt here instead of attacking settlements. -ments. No one would be surprised if they didn't return, and high-level tians give a lot of experience. -ence."

"...Heh." Feuer chuckled — not because of some sick joy, but because he was simply amused.

He actually agreed with what they said.

"You're not wrong. I didn't keep count, but I killed all of them to gain more magic," he said as though this was a normal thing to do.

It seemed insane, but again, he was of sound mind.

It was simply that his personal perspective and the world he lived in didn't allow for any other course of action.

His entire mindset was focused on becoming the world's greatest wielder of fire magic and proving that he was.

And the world he lived in was the microcosm of the Lazburn family. His goal was merely to become strong. The idea of using his power for the sake of others had never even crossed his mind.

That was why he thought nothing of killing actual people to gain levels.

"If what I hear about Tenchi inhabitants is true, you are much like them. -them."

"I can understand why you might think that. Anyway, you said something about me joining a criminal clan? Sorry, but since I must keep improving myself, I have no time to dedicate to anything else." He refused the strangers' offer, creating orbs of fire in each hand.

They weren't his earlier Fireballs, but the double Fixed Stars — his ultimate technique, surpassed by no one but the Arch Sage.

The one eye of the black La Crima — the only one between the two that was exposed — watched the blazing orbs as they spoke. "In exchange for joining, I will grant you a stronger self. -self."

"A stronger...self...?" Feuer said as he raised an eyebrow.

"If you accept my proposal, you can be certain that you will receive that. -that," they said as the white La Crima stuck out her hand like a devil looking to seal a pact.

In response...

"If you claim you can give me more power than I currently have, I want to see some proof first!"

...Feuer released his Fixed Stars.

This was the deadly magic that had evaporated any humans and monsters he'd encountered on this mountain.

However, La Crima just let it hit them.

The aftershocks alone were enough to scorch the surrounding trees and even Feuer's own small shelter.

La Crima was right at the center of this intense heat, and the two Fixed Stars...were now clutched tight in the hands of the dark man.

"...I see. I haven't been this shocked since my fight against the Arch Sage..." The strange man had let go of the wheelchair, stuck out his hands, and caught both Fixed Stars like they were nothing but rubber balls. The spell could melt even Mythical Metal, yet the man's hands were not incinerated — in fact, they didn't even seem damaged.

At some point, he'd also stopped looking human.

He was now larger, more warped, and covered in a luster like that of gold or silver.

On his metallic chest was emblazoned the name "Ferrum Idea."

"This is a sample of the stronger self I can grant you," the white La Crima said, with her voice alone. Following the transformation, the dark figure had become silent.

The white La Crima hadn't changed at all, and not even her clothes or skin seemed to have been affected by the intense heat.

For all anyone knew, perhaps the white La Crima wasn't the "real one" either.

"...I see you weren't lying," Feuer said as he looked at the dark La Crima, who had been completely unaffected by his greatest attack.

If they had made this power for themselves, then he could indeed trust them to make him stronger than he was.

"Allow me to introduce myself again," said the white La Crima, in a melodic voice. "I am La Crima, a Superior and an improver of people. Allow me to turn your tears into ones of joy. If you wish for power, I will make you far stronger than you are now. Is there anything specific you request?"

In response to the stranger's playful presentation...

"...Magic. I need enough magic to surpass the Arch Sage."

...Feuer found himself speaking as if he had already agreed.

This likely meant abandoning his humanity, but he did not care about that. To him, the most important thing was using fire magic to defeat the Arch Sage and proving that he was the strongest.

"Very well. I will make that part of the procedure," the white La Crima said, casually accepting Feuer's seemingly outrageous request.

He looked at her in silence. This person, he thought, could easily shatter the wall he was facing now.

Was this grace from above...

“...Are you some sort of demon?”

...or an unholy creature seducing him to the depths of hell?

In response to his honest question, La Crima said, with no jest in her tone, “Not at all. I believe I should be called ‘a merchant of life.’”

Chapter Twenty-Two: What Was Sought

Royal Castle, Second Floor, Hallway

"Your Highness! Your Highness Theresia! Where are you?!" Liliana, the vice-commander of the Royal Guard, was riding her SMPS through the castle's hallways, looking for the princess who'd gone missing shortly after the assault began.

So far, she had found not a trace of Theresia or the hamster she always rode.

Explosions were ringing out all over the castle, and Liliana was starting to fear that Theresia might be lost forever.

It's like this again... she thought, overcome by her own powerlessness. *I'm completely useless again...!*

This wasn't the first time she'd felt this way.

Liliana was close friends with Altimia and Integra.

Altimia was the first princess of Altar, the one chosen by The Primeval Blade to bear the title of Sacred Princess. Despite being younger than her, the girl also surpassed Liliana in swordfighting skill.

Integra was the Arch Sage's favorite disciple, and she possessed magical talents that were said to be even greater than his had been, as well as intellect that allowed her to instantly untangle difficult dilemmas that left Liliana stumped.

They were immensely talented...unlike her.

Liliana was the daughter of the Celestial Knight and had some talents of her own, but she wasn't nearly as special as her two friends.

She'd lost count of the number of times she'd wished to be as powerful as they were, and even becoming a Paladin had not changed that.

She'd joined the Royal Guard and proved she was more than worthy of that honor, but she still had yet to catch up to the achievements of her father and the more experienced knights. Even so, she'd continued striving onwards, hoping to one day gain enough power that she was satisfied.

However, the war had shown her just how far she still was from her goal. Her father and the other Paladins she looked up to, as well as many of the younger new recruits, had died while battling the devil army.

And after that, Liliana had become the vice-commander of the Royal Guard.

The position of commander was reserved for the Celestial Knight, and she was chosen for vice-commander because all of the Paladins stronger than her were gone.

She knew in her heart that she was unworthy of it, yet she had no choice but to take the post and lead the Royal Guard.

Her father and many of her comrades had died, leaving her with a heavy burden to bear. It was almost too much for her, but she refused to break under the strain.

She still had a now-fatherless little sister to look after.

She still had her comrades who had survived and were now overcome by immense grief.

She still had Altimia, a friend who knew the pain of losing a father just as well as she did.

And finally, she had the people of Altar, terrified of the prospect that the kingdom might fall.

As a knight, she *couldn't* allow herself to break.

To protect what she had to protect, she took on the role of vice-commander and tried her utmost to fulfill her duty.

But though her heart was ready, reality reminded her time and again that the power she possessed simply wasn't enough.

Liliana had been involved in many dangerous events since she became the leader of the Royal Guard — most notably the incident where her sister had almost been killed by countless worms and the now-infamous terrorist strike in Gideon.

Even the would-be tragedies happening right before her eyes were too much for her to handle alone.

As much as she wanted to protect what was dear to her, she was just not powerful enough to do it. This current assault was no different.

She had no means of defeating the attackers, nor could she easily locate the princess she had to protect.

Liliana dearly wished she had the power to at least do that much.

"If only Integra were here..." Her childhood friend was perhaps the smartest person in the kingdom. It was entirely possible that she could provide Liliana with some path to improvement.

"...No! I need to focus on what I can do right *now*...!" Liliana said, shaking her head. This was no time to be wishing for something that could never happen. Doing so would be nothing but escapism.

Liliana did her best to shake off those negative thoughts and give her all to the search.

As she galloped away, *one of the paintings in the hallway was watching her*.

◆◆◆

Royal Castle, Fourth Floor, Hallway

The fourth floor of the castle was the royal family's living quarters. Because of this, its hallway was decorated with fancy furniture, paintings, plants, and well-made suits of armor.

Standing among them, there was a single Idea.

That's thirteen. I'd say I took out most of the wiring, he thought.

He had blue-black skin and leathery wings, making him look like a hybrid of human and bat. He was Vespertilio Idea, otherwise known as King of Raids, Morter.

Having finished his job of disrupting the magic distribution network in order to sabotage the castle's defenses, he pulled his winged hands out of the wall. La Crima had given him the ability to sense magic, allowing him to easily find magic-based wiring even with his eyes closed.

With those old farts distracting the guards, this was a real piece of cake... Though, man — the security in this place isn't working properly, but it'd sure be excessive if it actually did. It's a good match for the ruins I worked in, he thought, reminiscing about the past.

Up until a few months ago, Morter had been pursuing treasure hunters in one of the ruins in Caldina. He actually made a living out of ambushing those who found any success there and taking their finds.

Morter always took his targets' lives and treasures before they even realized he was there, making it a more lucrative "career" choice than one might expect.

However, those days ended when one treasure hunter he targeted turned out to be the sub-leader of I.F.

The man incapacitated Morter as though he was no more threatening than a baby, and as he was cowering in fear, the sub-leader told him, “Choose: die right here and now, or give up your humanity. I recommend the former.”

In spite of his advice, Morter picked the latter.

In Morter’s mind, living was always better than not. Even if he became a lowly slave, there might still come an opportunity for escape.

The man then treated Morter’s wounds before handing him off to La Crima. She turned him into Vespertilio Idea, and now he was attacking the Altarian royal castle.

These powers I’ve got aren’t even half bad, he thought. *I’m even more satisfied than I was back when I was just King of Raids.*

Actually using his powers in this castle showed him that he’d made the right choice back then.

He had been freed from his limiting human shell, and now he had been granted a form that made him feel all-powerful. He saw things he couldn’t see before and did things that used to be beyond him. The feeling of emancipation he derived from that was exquisite.

But what are those *things, anyway...?*

However, his new sight also showed him questions he would never have known to ask before.

Morter could sense three major sources of magic in this castle.

One was obviously a fellow Idea — Ignis — but he had no clue what the others were.

One was weaker than Ignis, but more intense than a standard Superior Job, and it was simply standing in one place in the castle.

The other magical signal was fluctuating between strong and weak, and it was slowly moving through the castle’s fourth floor — the one Morter was on.

He’d informed Zeta about these signals before they assaulted the castle, and she’d told him to go towards the fluctuating one while dealing with the security systems.

“Hm...?” Morter’s train of thought stopped short as he looked down towards the first floor.

The spider guy is dead, huh? There’s weak magic signals all around *him... I guess someone broke the inventory inside his body. Well, that's what I would've done if I had to kill him.*

Fully grasping the nature of Aranea's death, Morter didn't show much of a reaction.

He also knew that Ignis was trapped, but he had no intention of going to help him.

Since he hadn't been discovered yet and wasn't actually ordered to help his fellow Ideas, such things were no skin off his nose.

And besides, Morter's top priority was survival, followed by freedom. If he saw a way to seize that freedom, he would ignore his orders to seek it.

Though right now, he was on a leash of swords. Becoming truly free seemed impossible at the moment.

Well, we're experimental animals, after all. There are flaws in our designs. This doesn't really apply to the dumb bee, but the flame guy... He's stronger than the rest of us, but with all the MP Boosters in him, he'll die in no time.

As someone who used to "work" at some ruins, Morter was very familiar with the equipment implanted in Ignis.

MP Boosters were pre-ancient civilization items that greatly increased magic at the cost of life span, and since Ignis...or rather, Feuer Lazburn cared about nothing but magic, he had several of them implanted into him.

Morter guessed that he didn't even have a year left — maybe a month, if he was lucky.

The item wasn't the only problem, after all.

That psycho La Crima can modify people however she wants, but she knows almost nothing about biology or medicine. She only uses her Embryo's powers to mix people with monsters and items. That's why there are limits to what she can do.

Idea, La Crima's Superior Embryo, allowed her to freely modify people as long as she had the materials. La Crima had no knowledge of the processes and techniques involved, but Idea did, and that allowed it to mass produce its hybrid monsters.

The Embryo could make La Crima's designs work even if they were flawed, which was both a positive and a negative.

The stronger the Idea...the more combat-capable they are...the greater the risk of them destroying themselves.

Because of that, Morter was very satisfied with his modifications.

The three main things he had been given were the magic-sensing ability, the power to create an unperceivable space, and a low-tier flying ability.

His modifications were minor compared to what the others had received, and because of this, he had yet to find a flaw in them.

I guess the only successes are me, the Ferrum that's with La Crima all the time, and Cantus, I guess...? Wait, can you really call them successes when — hm...?

Morter looked down once again.

What's that fiery old fart planning? He had noticed a change in King of Blaze's magic signal. Feuer Lazburn was doing something, despite being trapped in a barrier.

As Morter tried to guess what it was, the castle began to shake.

"...Tch." He clicked his tongue, making a sound for the first time since he had begun his job here.

Seriously, what the hell is he doing? Quiet though the click was, a moment after he did it, a sword was swung down at him.

"Hh...!" Morter jumped to dodge it, but he couldn't evade his own confusion.

What? There was nothing here. I didn't sense magic or see any knights. Is this like Zeta's optical camouflage? But I — what is that?

His high-speed questions and thoughts were cut off by what he saw in front of him.

It was something that he knew was there. He'd seen it even before the attack, which made him even more confused.

He was facing the *suit of armor decorating the hallway*.

The armor had moved on its own to swing its sword at Morter.

...Is it a golem? No way — it wasn't showing a single bit of magic. The armor had not only moved, it had also changed shape and increased in size.

And eventually, above its head appeared the words "Massacre Armor" — a monster name.

It was a phenomenon that Morter — no, *most of mankind* — had never seen before.

"...What the hell is this?!" Morter blurted out as he reflexively jumped away again.

A moment later, the *wall behind him* bit the empty space where he had just been standing.

The wall, its open maw filled with fangs, was now marked with the name “Bigmouth Wall.”

The changes didn’t end there.

The decorative plants transformed into twisted torture devices and received the title “Torture Plants.”

The framed paintings began to laugh and were named “Screaming Pictures.”

Mere objects that were never human or monster were transforming into malicious monsters and attacking him right before his eyes.

“...Man, this place is haunted as hell.” *This security feature is in really bad taste. Or is this some Embryo’s doing?* Morter thought as he prepared to battle the monsters.

It was a clash between unnatural beings, and a hidden lens on the ceiling was watching it all.

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Royal Castle, Underground Shelter

Beyond the last line of defense guarded by the Royal Guard, there lay the castle’s underground shelter.

Elizabeth and the others were heading deeper into it.

There were more than ten people in all, counting the bodyguards and maids, but that didn’t slow them down one bit. The passage was wide and tall enough to even let Magingears pass through without a problem.

In the lead was Marquis Findle — Altimia’s loyal confidant and the head of Altar’s intelligence department. Six of those with them were Royal Guards, who surrounded Elizabeth, Canglong, Milianne, and the maids to protect them.

“We’ve arrived,” said Findle. “For now, let us stay here and wait for our enemies to leave.”

He approached the large door at the end of the passage and operated the touch panel on the wall, causing the door to open up and reveal the deepest area of the palace...the royal shelter.

“This construction is quite durable,” Canglong noted, and rightfully so.

The place had been made by expanding a natural cavern, covering it in a thick layer of metal, and completely cutting it off from the surface. It also drew water from a source far beneath the castle and was equipped with a storage facility filled with a wealth of foods, all held in inventories that negated the effects of spoilage. Anyone in the shelter could survive for a very long time while waiting for rescue to finally arrive.

This was no doubt the safest place in the castle right now.

"I have never been here before," said Elizabeth.

"That is because it's only meant to be used in situations like this," said Findle. "The attackers are few in number, so I believe the Masters from the city will be able to take care of them. There is a chance, though, that we might have to wait here until those who went to the peace conference return."

Upon hearing his words, Elizabeth became downcast.

"A shelter... Where could Theresia be...?"

"Lady Grandria is looking for her right now. This shelter has observation equipment, so we will know when she brings Her Highness here and open the door for them."

"Will Liliana be okay...?" asked Milianne.

"Lady Grandria is the strongest knight in Altar. There is no need to worry about her." Despite his reassuring words, Marquis Findle was overcome with anxiety. The situation wasn't remotely favorable for them.

He had already been informed that one of the attackers was none other than King of Blaze himself. It was hard to be optimistic when dealing with a Superior Job, and Feuer had been given abilities that made him even more powerful than he had been before.

The Superiors and most of the rankers aren't around, he thought. *Mr. Figaro did not attend the peace conference, but neither has he returned yet. Lei-Lei and the new one, Hannya, haven't been sighted either... I suppose we should be grateful that we at least have Xunyu.*

Xunyu had separated herself from the children being escorted to the shelter so she could confront the intruders back on the surface.

At this very point in time, she was fighting her deadly battle against Zeta.

If only I had seen this coming... The fact that I did not merely highlights my shortcomings as head of intelligence. I will have to take responsibility for this once everything is over...

Findle's expression as he pondered this was stern. This assault had caught him off-guard, and now the princesses and an honored guest were exposed to danger while the lady of the castle, Altimia, was away. This filled him with immense guilt.

I will truly have to think about letting Masters into the intelligence department. Though, that may be my last action as head of that department... But for now, I must protect Her Highness and Prince Canglong, he thought as he approached the control panel and activated the climate control, among other things.

Canglong watched him work as he realized something.

"Did this place exist before the castle was built?" he asked.

"You can tell?" Findle replied.

"Yes. The castle's design has a focus on everyday convenience and aesthetics, while this place looks very unrefined. Also, for an Altarian facility that seems to be centuries old, this place has a lot of technology."

"Well observed. This underground area has been here before the first king even built the capital, and we have been using it since his time."

Hoping that some conversation might put the children at ease, Marquis Findle began to explain the history of this place.

"This land once belonged to a different country. Instead of Altea, there was an industrial city here which served as the capital of Adrasta — the expansionist nation led by Rockfell Adrasta."

That was the name of perhaps the most well-known conqueror in history. Bearing the job of King of Kings, he was the strongest tian ever recorded, and it was said that he commanded enough power to conquer the west side of the continent with ease.

"It is thought that this underground facility was built as part of the capital's fortifications in case of an attack, and since it was too difficult to dismantle, the first king of Altar chose to repurpose it instead, and he built a castle over it."

"So that is why there is so much technology here." With the exception of Legendaria, who were Adrasta's allies, the King of Kings had conquered the entire west side of the continent. Due to this, he had access to many ruins containing the kind of technology that Dryfe was famous for in the current time.

"A few years after building his capital, the King of Kings vanished from history. However, the city remained, and after Adrasta split into many countries again, it became a highly sought-after piece of land, making it the center of many conflicts.”

The time of the King of Kings, the Draconic Emperor, and The Lynx would later be known as The Era of the Peerless Three.

It was believed that after the King of Kings’ disappearance and the end of the Draconic Emperor’s long life, the world would finally know peace, but that turned out to be absurdly wrong — the grand war that split the continent in two was merely replaced by many smaller wars.

Following the Draconic Emperor’s death, Huang He to the east was thrown into a civil conflict over who would take the throne. The remnants of Adrasta to the west who had served the King of Kings went on to fight among themselves for every scrap of authority they could get their hands on.

To those who knew their Earth history, the situation might’ve reminded them of what happened after the death of Alexander the Great.

The civil war in the east had weakened Huang He quite a bit, while the chaos in the west split that area into many countries.

Many nations that existed in the current day — such as Granvaloa — were forged during this time, and many more had been founded and vanished from history.

And as though they believed that taking Adrasta’s capital would make them the true successors to the King of Kings, the leaders of that time had relentlessly attacked it, all of them looking to claim it as their own. Eventually, everything but the underground area lay in ruins.

“However, after many battles...this land was eventually taken and secured by a certain individual.”

“You mean...?”

“*The Evil*. This place was the final home of The Evil, who was defeated by the first king of Altar and his allies.”

Near the end of the conflicts that ravaged the land now called Altar, two new people appeared on the world stage.

One was Azurite — a young shepherd who happened to unearth The Primeval Blade and be compatible with it, allowing him to rise as the Sacred King.

The other was The Evil. Born with that job, it was a mysterious being that history barely remembered.

While the Sacred King was having adventures all over the continent, The Evil was also growing stronger.

It was a living disaster, creating otherworldly monsters which struck fear into the hearts of all who encountered them.

Ultimately, The Evil took control of this city and was challenged by the Sacred King and his party. The battle took a heavy toll, but Azurite emerged victorious. That was the most famous story in Altar — the story of how their founding king defeated The Evil.

"After defeating The Evil, the founding king created his country and set this city as its capital," Findle continued. "It's said that there were various political and geopolitical reasons behind the decision to found a country in a place with such an ominous history. By the time he defeated The Evil, the first king already held power over multiple city-states, such as his queen's hometown of Gideon and — if you don't mind me inserting some family history here — the land owned by my ancestors. Presumably, they discussed what location would be best for the capital, but the founding king left behind a single sentence that seems to be relevant to this."

"A...sentence?" Canglong asked.

After a brief silence, the marquis said, "'The bearers must not abandon the *god's remains*.'"

"God's remains...?" Canglong echoed as he tilted his head. "Does that have anything to do with The Evil?" he asked. He was referring to the fact that the Superior Job grouping "The One," which The Evil belonged to, was sometimes viewed as having god-like properties.

"What he meant by those words isn't fully understood. That wasn't passed down to us. However, there are records saying that the Tomb Labyrinth was created shortly after The Evil was defeated, so perhaps..."

"If 'the bearers' refers to the Altar bloodline — as in, the bearers of The Primeval Blade that defeated The Evil — then the old king's proclamation would imply that Altea was built so that they would keep watch over The Evil's grave... Is that what you wanted to say?"

"Yes. That is one of the theories."

"A grave...? That's terrifying..." said Milianne despite understanding them only partially.

"No need to worry," said Marquis Findle. "If The Evil's remains are in

Altea, they would certainly not be here in this shelter. This place has been examined countless times, and no one has ever found a single trace of any curse or grudge. We are completely safe here."

"Really? Phew..." Milianne said, thoroughly relieved.

"This is too complicated for me... You seem to understand it, though," said Elizabeth, glancing at Canglong.

"Umm, this story brings to mind a few things. And hailing from Huang He as I do, I cannot help but be intrigued by a place that is related to the King of Kings."

The Huang He Empire was the superpower that had stopped Adrasta's advance.

It had lost a lot of land during the civil war that followed The Era of the Peerless Three, but it was still an empire that had existed long before the era had even begun. Of all the current major countries, only Legendaria was more ancient than Huang He.

"The opposition between the Draconic Emperor and the King of Kings is an incredibly important part of history," Canglong said. The King of Kings from the west and the Draconic Emperor from the east...it was almost impossible to talk about one without mentioning the other.

"...That makes it all seem strange," Elizabeth commented.

"Makes *what* seem strange?"

"That you, a person from Huang He, and I, who lives where the King of Kings did, would ever be married." Canglong fell silent. Back when Elizabeth tried to address this during the Love-Duel Festival, he had chosen to avoid the question.

She'd thought of bringing it up during today's tea party, but the attack had interfered, so she'd decided to do it now.

"Cang...I've made my decision," she said. "I... I will become your wife."

Despite the current situation, Elizabeth made her intentions known.

Or perhaps she did it *because* of the situation — for all they knew, this could be her last chance.

"Your Highness..."

"But I still do not know you nearly well enough."

"...That is true."

"I never even loved anyone before..." Elizabeth wasn't yet ten years old. She was too young to have experienced anything like that. She got along very well with Canglong, but she never once felt anything “sweeter” for him. “But I still like having you as a friend. And since I do not dislike being with you, everything should turn out okay. I will eventually learn the things I do not know.”

Since she felt no hate for him, she could stay by his side. That should have made it possible for them to learn everything they needed.

Elizabeth’s sincere words filled Canglong’s heart with warmth *as well as pain*.

That was due to the profoundly heavy truth he was hiding from her.

Since it was something she would come to know the moment they arrived at the palace in Huang He, he thought that it would be best if he revealed it himself.

“...Your Highness, I...”

“Cang?”

“I am not actually hu...*not a prin*—” Before he could finish his sentence, though...

“Umm... Move away from the middle of the room. It’s dangerous.”

...Milianne cut him off.

“Hm? Milia? What do you mean? What’s dangerous?” Elizabeth asked.

“Umm... I don’t know. I just feel that it is. The middle of the room is dangerous.”

Her words made no apparent sense. She said it was dangerous, but nothing in the shelter seemed out of the ordinary.

However, they couldn’t bring themselves to ignore her warning, so they all walked to Milia’s side.

Canglong seemed to have something on his mind now.

Being interrupted didn’t bother him, but he couldn’t shake that there was something about Milia.

“Your Highness, who is this...?”

“I introduced her to you before the tea party. She is Liliana’s little sister and one of my friends.”

“Lady Grandria’s sister... Then she is... Could she be...?”

Canglong’s thoughts were cut off by a premonition of danger. He rushed to look at the middle of the room — specifically, the ceiling.

It had changed color, becoming visibly redder.

“An enemy!” A moment after Canglong cried out, the ceiling collapsed, and through the open hole rushed a flood of molten metal.

The maids yelped in fright, and the six Royal Guards stepped in the front to protect the rest.

As the sound and heat of boiling metal filled the shelter, a four-armed aberration descended through the hole.

“...Is this the place?” it muttered as it looked around. The creature was none other than Ignis Idea, otherwise known as King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn.

“I-Is that King of Blaze?! But he was supposed to be trapped in a separation barrier...!” Marquis Findle began to panic, and for good reason.

The four-sided magical barrier should’ve been a major obstacle even to Superior Jobs, and it should’ve kept Ignis sealed for a good while.

Why was he here, then?

The answer was simple — the barrier was *only* four-sided.

“A hole in the ceiling... Did he melt everything under the surface?!” Between the surface and this shelter, there was a thirty-metel-thick layer of a metal not quite as strong as Mythical, but strong nonetheless. Made by the King of Kings — or, more specifically, the designers and followers who feared him — this shelter was the finest work of an era rife with war.

However, Ignis was able to melt through all of that merely by concentrating his firepower.

This completely unexpected break-in instantly transformed the shelter into a deadly prison.

This is bad...! Findle thought with a stern expression on his face. *I need to make sure Her Highness, the prince, and Lady Grandria’s sister can escape!* Ignis was surrounded by the Royal Guards, but he barely seemed to care about that. Instead, he looked around once again and said, “Where is the Arch Sage?”

It was a question that no one present would have expected to hear.

“What...?” Findle asked, thoroughly confused.

“Where is the Arch Sage?” Ignis repeated himself as though that was the only thing on his mind.

That was exactly the case, in fact — he had attacked the castle in search of the Arch Sage in the first place. The only reason he was even here in this shelter was because he’d sensed its presence and thought he might have finally found his target.

"You are well aware that he is already dead!" Findle angrily shouted. *If the Arch Sage was alive, things wouldn't have gotten this bad!* he added, silently.

Despite Findle's words, Ignis didn't back down.

"I know. I heard of his supposed death even before I got this body. And I also heard that someone else now holds the title of 'Magical Apex.'"

He hadn't known that back when he'd met La Crima as a hermit, but once he'd returned to human civilization, the information was unavoidable.

As he was now, Ignis was fully aware of what happened in the world while he was away.

"But none of that matters."

Even so, the flame remained unfazed.

"The Arch Sage *is* here. Defeating him will be proof that I am the 'Magical Apex.' I have no interest in Masters with that title. His death and succession is faked. I know he would go that far. He is alive somewhere. He is here. Thus, I will find him, defeat him, and prove what I must."

He had no intention of listening to them. In his mind, the Arch Sage still being alive was pure fact — and even if it wasn't, Feuer would not stop until he found his target despite that.

It seemed like madness, but it was not. This was simply the logical end point of the thought processes of someone who'd dedicated his entire life to defeating and surpassing the Arch Sage.

He'd decided upon his reason for existence, and for the sake of that reason, he wouldn't bend, change, or limit himself.

He was a man who'd killed people just to gain the levels he needed to be that much closer to the Arch Sage.

He was a man who'd abandoned his humanity just to gain vast reserves of magic.

That was normal for him, and his entire system of values revolved around it.

At this point, he wasn't able to stop until he defeated the Arch Sage.

"...Is that one of Altar's princesses?" For the first time, Ignis said something that had nothing to do with the Arch Sage.

He was obviously pointing at Elizabeth.

"The Arch Sage is the kingdom's chief adviser. If I kill her, that should bring him here, shouldn't it? I feel like someone told me that. Was it Zeta?

La Crima? Or...who was it, again?”

“You wretch...!” Findle shouted, overcome by rage. “I won’t let you touch her! With the ruler absent, it is our duty to protect the princesses of Altar!”

“Then *call the Arch Sage*.”

“I cannot call the deceased! But I will call something that can defeat you!” Marquis Findle declared as he manipulated the control panel on the wall. “I will show you why I accompanied everyone to this shelter, and why this place is called the safest in the castle!”

With those words, he pressed the “activate” button on the keyboard.

A moment later, a coffin rose up from a part of the floor.

Nearly ten metels tall, it almost reached the ceiling of the shelter, and when it opened up, a metallic leg colored red and gold stepped out of it.

It belonged to a giant golem.

“O creation of my ancestor, King of Colossi, Emet Findle I! O guardian idol of the royal family! The time has come for you to awaken! Stand tall and protect your princess and your kingdom!” This creature was security “equipment” installed into this shelter. Dating back to before the city was known as Altea, this weapon had even been deployed during the battle in which the Sacred King defeated The Evil.

Created by the first Azurite’s brother-in-arms, King of Colossi, this was a legendary golem that had pulverized many monsters and weathered many blows as the primary tank in the Sacred King’s party.

Made of the Mythical metal, Hihi’irokane, this was the Golem Bellcross.

It was the kingdom’s strongest magic weapon, entrusted to the descendants of Emet Findle I and permitted to be used only when the castle was under attack. This golem could easily be called the castle’s final defender.

Not saying a word, Ignis briefly glanced at the majestic construct.

“Target set! Bellcross, attack!” Findle ordered, and the metal giant charged.

When it came close to Ignis, Bellcross swung its enormous, hammer-like fist. A moment later, there was the sound of a fluid landing on the surface of the shelter.

It sounded as though Ignis had been crushed and pulverized, his blood splattering the walls...

"Piece of scrap. Don't get in my way."

...but that wasn't the case at all.

The splattering sound was actually the sound of *the drops of Bellcross's molten arm falling down to the floor*.

Ignis was holding up one of his four arms.

And on each of its fingers, there was an orb of light.

These five balls of immense flame created enough heat to melt the Mythical metal.

"Wh...what...?!" Seeing the arm of the strongest golem in the world — his heritage — be melted away with such ease left Findle dumbfounded, but it didn't end there.

After making the orbs on his fingers vanish, Ignis raised all four of his arms to the sky.

His pose made it look like he was going to begin some kind of juggling act, but instead, new orbs of light began to coalesce in his hands.

They appeared, then multiplied — from one, to two, to four, to eight...

"A-Are those...? They cannot be!" The orbs, each of which carried unfathomable amounts of heat, were *all* the ultimate skill of King of Blaze — Fixed Star.

It was the same skill that had completely failed him back when he used it against the Arch Sage.

However, he had been able to summon far, far fewer back then.

A grand total of *sixty-four* Fixed Stars now floated around Ignis, and this absurd number didn't even make a dent in his total power.

Following his crushing defeat, Feuer had polished his ability to control many of these Fixed Stars at the same time. The only thing he'd needed to achieve this was greater magic reserves, and he now had more than any tian could dream of.

Because of that, the number and power of his Fixed Stars far exceeded what he had been capable of before. It was almost not worth comparing.

"Fixed Star Rain." The miniature suns fell like a meteor shower.

The surrounding space was drowned in white light, the air itself warped, and after a momentary flash, Bellcross disappeared without a trace.

Altar's ultimate guardian, older than the country itself, had vanished, and its enemy had barely even exerted any effort.

"I'll ask again." Ignis thought nothing of the immense power he just displayed or the object he just melted into nothing. “Where is the Arch Sage?” The strongest wielder of fire magic just repeated his desire once more.

“Marquis Findle! Take the young ones!”

“We will buy time!” The moment Bellcross melted, the six Royal Guards rushed to action.

They faced Ignis to protect Elizabeth and the others, knowing full well that they had no chance against a creature that had melted a golem made of Mythical metal.

Still, they believed that they could give the others more time to run away, even if it was just for a moment.

“Noble knights...forgive me.” With these words, Findle overcame the shock of seeing Bellcross destroyed and rushed to the panel to open up the shelter’s door. They had fled here for safety, but now, this chamber held nothing but death. Their only hope was to return to the surface.

But if the defense on the surface fell... No, you cannot think about that! No matter what state the surface was in, it was better than staying here and burning to death.

The heavy door of the shelter began to open, but Ignis noticed that they were trying to escape and pointed his four arms straight at Findle.

“We will not allow that!” a Royal Guard shouted, rushing to prevent his attack by slicing at Ignis’ arms.

The blades didn’t penetrate past the tough skin, but they did leave shallow cuts.

We aren’t powerless against him! If he can be hurt, then... the knights thought, believing that they actually had a chance, however slim.

In that way, they were like their fellow Royal Guards who faced Aranea on the surface.

However, there was a major difference between Aranea and Ignis.

“Prominence Aura,” Ignis said, causing the air surrounding him to heat up rapidly.

At that moment, the Paladins who were close to Ignis saw their blades melt away before their eyes. Their armor liquefied on their bodies, fusing with their skin.

“GHAAAAAGHHH!” Even if they tried to continue fighting, any weapons they brought close to Ignis melted away like snow.

Prominence Aura was a skill that created a superheated territory around the caster that acted as defensive-offensive armor strong enough to melt metal, but dealt no damage to the caster himself. For someone who could control sixty-four Fixed Stars at once, managing this much heat was no challenge whatsoever.

While Aranea's poison could be negated with Elixirs, merely approaching Ignis meant death. Even fighting from a distance wasn't an option since the immense heat would vaporize any projectiles and magics coming towards him.

A walking Sun that matched Superiors, a being that moved towards his objective and burned everything in his wake.

This was Ignis Idea.

"Your Highness...please run!"

"Marquis Findle! Forget about us! Please flee this place!"

"...Very well!" As the shelter's door opened up, Marquis Findle pressed something on the control panel.

He activated the sprinkler system. It had been installed in case of fires caused by cooking and other such activities.

Once it was on, its programming quickly reacted to the immense heat.

Nozzles emerged all over the shelter and sprayed at Ignis, causing a loud, roaring steam explosion.

All the water instantly vaporized and spread at a rapid rate, blowing everything away.

Neither Ignis nor the knights could possibly remain unscathed by the searing water vapor. The pressure of the explosion limited their movements, while the steam flooding the air made it difficult to see.

"Your Highness! Prince Canglong! Hurry...!" Findle used the opportunity to rush the children through the door.

But when they tried to go...

"Elizabeth!"

...Canglong called his fiancée by name for the first time ever, and then shoved her away with a desperate look on his face.

A split second later, a beam fired out of the wall of steam and pierced his chest.

The sound of flesh evaporating echoed throughout the shelter, followed by the thud of the young boy collapsing to the floor.

“Cang...?” His fiancée’s voice was drowned out by the roar of flames. This tragedy was observed by a device hidden among the sprinklers.

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Humanoid Irregularity

A letter

To the one who reads this:

I do not know your name. I will never see your face.

You will never see mine either.

But that is simply how we are.

As long as I exist, you cannot, and by the time you come into being, I will be gone.

And because this is how we are, I write down these words to be imparted to you in this letter.

If the current or succeeding emperor considers my will, it should eventually arrive in your hands.

There are two things you must know.

We are not human. We *cannot* be human.

This is an important truth.

This world is dominated by the relation between humans, jobs, and monsters, but we are an exception in this system.

We are the incarnation of an abnormality our ancestors etched onto the world in the distant past.

Because of this, we might eventually disappear due to the world's autopurification activity.

However, if you are reading this, it did not happen in either of our generations.

You might be at a loss of what to make of the power you were born with.

I once felt the same way as you.

Perhaps, though, that was only because I was born at an inopportune time and was frequently compared to my predecessor.

My predecessor likely utilized this power better than any one of us so far.

I was unable to match him. Perhaps you will. Regardless, know that there is no need to strive for that.

Our power is vast. We receive it by merely being chosen, without any effort on our part. We have exceptional power without ever having to gather it like others do.

Because of this, you might make grave mistakes in your youth.

You might have been born bathed in blood.

That would be a harsh reality that cannot be changed. Our power might be vast, but we have no means of bringing back those who are lost. Not even my predecessor was capable of that.

That is why I hope that you who are reading this will possess both power and will.

Do not be bound by sins hailing from a time before you.

Be aware of your power and carry a will of your own.

Our nature is affirmed when we use our power according to our own will.

It does not have to be for the protection of this country.

That is a choice we can make, but are not forced to.

Perhaps someone told you that you are a hero who will dedicate his life to protecting the country, but know that that is wrong.

I dedicated my life to protecting the country because I wished to make up for the civil war that I caused, and because I myself could not abandon the nation.

Thus, there is no need for you to follow this same path.

You are not obligated to do as you are ordered.

You should live the way you find suitable.

We are not human. We cannot be human.

Therefore, you cannot be bound.

Protect what you wish to protect.

Accomplish what you believe you must.

Do not be afraid to do as you will.

No one can ever bind you.

The power and talent you have exists only for the future you desire.

◇◆◇

Royal Castle, Underground Shelter

There was a large hole in the prince’s chest.

Burned by unfathomable heat, the wound had instantly cauterized. However, it was clear that the beam had taken his heart, making his fate obvious.

“Cang... CANG!” With tears in her eyes, Elizabeth shook Canglong’s body, but the boy wasn’t even bleeding, let alone breathing.

It seemed like all signs of life had left him.

“Did I hit something? I can’t see,” said a faint voice from within the steam. “I’ll just keep doing this.”

Like a moment earlier, beams fired in all directions, devastating the shelter and scattering people and objects alike, nozzles included.

Screams echoed throughout the premises as Ignis continued firing his searing beams indiscriminately. The sounds of melting, sounds of evaporation, sounds of flesh being burned, and the shrieks of the maids overwhelmed the soundscape.

Eventually, most of the nozzles were destroyed, freeing Ignis from his cage of steam explosions. It didn’t seem like he had been hurt all that much.

“Such destruction... You wretch!” Findle barked as he glared at Ignis. A beam had taken his right arm.

Only two people remained unhurt — Elizabeth, who was clinging to Canglong’s body, and Milianne, who just happened to be in the right spot to avoid the beams.

Everyone else was injured to various extents. Many were no longer even capable of movement.

As things were, Findle couldn’t even take Elizabeth and escape.

“Where is the Arch Sage?” asked Ignis. His words hadn’t changed even after causing all this devastation.

He was seeking the Arch Sage like a broken machine, making him seem barely human.

He began to approach Elizabeth.

“Your Highness! Please run! Save yourself at least...!” someone shouted, but Elizabeth remained by Canglong’s side.

Eventually, Ignis was right in front of her.

“Where is the Arch Sage? If he doesn’t show himself, I will kill the princess.” Voicing his warped, yet unbending desire, the Idea reached towards Elizabeth with his hand, hot as a soldering iron.

Shrieks and roars of anger filled the crumbling room, but there was no one left to stop him.

The moment Ignis touched Elizabeth...*never came, for another hand grabbed his.*

“Hm...?” For the first time since he gained this inhuman form, Ignis displayed something that seemed to be confusion.

The hand that had grabbed his arm was burning. Ignis was clad in searing armor, and it set the offending limb on fire.

Despite that, it didn’t let go. Just how much power was held within this tiny hand? It was tearing through his hardened skin, his wounds leaking blood which was promptly evaporated by his own heat.

Faced with this strange sight, Ignis asked, “...What are you?”

“...Cang?” Elizabeth opened her mouth at the same time.

The owner of the small hand was none other than Canglong himself — the boy who should’ve been killed by the hole in his chest.

Still lying down, he had raised his right hand and grabbed Ignis by the arm before it could reach Elizabeth.

But there was another thing that confused Ignis.

What is happening to his magic? It’s as vast as the Arch Sage’s... No... It might rival even mine... Ignis had dedicated all his power and talent to fire magic, rendering him unable to use Reveal, but as an experienced caster, he could sense Canglong’s power nonetheless.

However, if he did have Reveal, he would have seen a truly bizarre sight — the boy’s level and stats growing at a terrifying rate.

And the changes weren’t just limited to the numbers.

“...Don’t you dare touch Elizabeth.” The boy who was presumed dead said these words as he rose to his feet.

He was now between Ignis and Elizabeth, ready to protect her.

There was still a hole in his chest, but it seemed to have mostly closed.

His evaporated heart and lungs were regenerating at an extreme speed. The hand that was holding Ignis's arm was also restoring itself as it burned, letting it maintain its form.

However, the black bandages that had been tied on him had been reduced to ashes.

"...My Self-Sealing Wraps have burned away. I suppose I will not be able to seal this away until they regenerate," he whispered as he looked down at the burning black bandages. They were an MVP special reward that he had picked from Huang He's treasury, and when worn, they *limited the wearer's own stats and skills*.

The item that he had worn to hide his true identity from the locals and Caldinians while in Altar...was now broken.

"No... I will not seal it away." Right now, he didn't actually mind that. What he needed now was not to hide it, but to *use* it.

"It" being the power he possessed...and his true self.

"Cang...are you okay?" Elizabeth asked. Rather than being confused by the oddity of the situation, she seemed to merely be happy that a friend she thought was dead was actually alive.

Canglong looked back at her and smiled before turning back to Ignis.

"Elizabeth... Let me finish what I wanted to say earlier."

With his back to her so she couldn't see his expression, Canglong spoke.

"I am not a prince. I do not have the right to inherit the throne of Huang He. I do not qualify for that." He continued his statement from before. "And...*I am not even human.*"

He revealed to her the secret that he had been keeping hidden for so long.

A moment later, his bones creaked and his limbs grew.

His height and width...his entire frame transformed into something that was entirely unlike a young boy.

Muscles grew under his skin, while scales sprouted over it.

Ultimately, he was transformed into a creature that seemed to be a mix of dragon and man.

"Cang...?" He did not reply to her. Canglong now looked more like the Idea he was facing. His appearance could easily be called "monstrous," and it was one he didn’t want to show anyone...especially not Elizabeth.

Before he left Huang He, his father — the emperor — strictly forbade him from showing this true form.

Despite that, he chose to reveal it now.

By his own will, he chose to do this so he could protect those whom he wanted to protect.

“You’re—” Just as Ignis opened his mouth to speak, the dragon-man swung his arm, flinging Ignis’s body into the wall opposite Elizabeth.

“Gh-ogh...” Overcome by shock far greater than the one from the steam explosions, Ignis coughed blood.

Looking at him, the thing that was Canglong began walking to a particular place — the spot where Golem Bellcross was destroyed. There, he reached for the floor and touched the metal giant’s molten Mythical metal remains.

In his hand, it quickly changed shape to form a mask.

“Zifu Longmian,” he said in a voice quite unlike the one he had spoken with before his transformation.

Meaning “word-hiding dragon mask,” this was the name of a mask that a certain Special Superior Job would wear for important occasions.

As the person who knew what that meant better than anyone else, he placed the mask upon his own warped face.

“What *are* you...?” Most of those present here also wanted to hear the answer to Ignis’s question.

The being standing before them was by no means a human boy.

He was not the slender young prince of Huang He.

He was a creature with a robust, draconic body, and a mask over his monstrous face.

However, if anyone here was from Huang He, they would recognize him at a single glance.

Over there, this creature was akin to a god.

Indeed, he was the strongest gulong ren — the ancient dragon kin.

“Draconic Emperor, Canglong Renyue.”

With a name that meant “blue dragon, beyond mankind,” he was the humanoid Irregularity — the Draconic Emperor.

Ignis was quick to action. It wasn’t clear how well Ignis understood the gravity of Canglong’s declaration, but the power behind it was more than enough for him.

For the first time since coming to the shelter — no, since arriving at the castle — Ignis truly prepared for battle.

He judged that the entity before him was far above Bellcross and everyone else that stood in his way along the path to the Arch Sage. Canglong was not merely an obstruction for him, but an *enemy* that matched, if not surpassed, his target.

"Crimson Sphere!" Ignis started out with a *distraction* that took the form of over ten high-rank ultimate job skills.

Ignis had witnessed Canglong regenerate even his heart, but no matter how powerful his regeneration was, it should've been impossible for him to do so with his entire body reduced to nothing. This distraction wasn't something Canglong could ignore or evade.

The Crimson Spheres sped towards Elizabeth and the rest of their immobilized entourage. If Canglong wanted to protect them, he had no choice but to use himself as a shield.

And while he was busy doing that or regenerating the damage he sustained from it, Ignis would shower him in another Fixed Star Rain, leaving nothing behind.

However, faced with the Crimson Spheres, Canglong merely set his feet wider, assumed a strong stance, and *repeatedly punched the air, creating shock waves that dispersed every single ball of flame*.

That was over double the amount of Crimson Spheres that had melted the castle's main gate, yet they had just been snuffed out like the fires on a match.

The absurd sight left Marquis Findle and the royal knights speechless, but Ignis understood what had happened.

He released magic along with his punches... Ignis thought. Indeed — Canglong had extinguished the flames using his MP.

The punches were imbued with an amount of magic several times greater than in the Crimson Spheres, forcefully pulverizing the magical structure that composed them.

A means to release magic that doesn't involve spells... I did hear that Huang He possessed something like that... There existed a skill grouping called "Fa jin." The strikes of this skill grouping were normally used to drive magic *into* the target, creating shock waves that pulverized the insides regardless of how tough the outsides were.

However, that wasn't what Canglong had done — he had instead pulverized the airborne spells directly using his vast magical power.

That was a fundamentally different action, even if the movements he used to do it were similar.

No normal person would be able to release that much magic at once. In fact, even caster Superior Jobs would struggle with it.

This absurd amount of magical power rivals even mine... Is this the strength of the Draconic Emperor? Wait...the magic he released isn't quite like normal magic...

Ignis did not understand the true nature of Draconic Emperor as a job.

He had no idea if it was focused on stats, or what kind of skills it had.

In Huang He, the Draconic Emperor was considered a mystical entity akin to a living god, and even an experienced caster like Ignis knew next to nothing about him. The Draconic Emperor was the top of the duel rankings there, but the means by which he reached and kept the throne were a mystery.

Without saying a word, Canglong walked towards Ignis.

His movements were flawlessly graceful and his center of gravity was perfectly stable, making it clear that he had mastered the martial arts.

Why is he not running? Is his AGI low? Or is he moving in a way that will let him protect the princess and the others however he needs? Ignis tried to guess Canglong's intentions while weaving a spell in preparation, but before he could finish, Canglong's massive frame loomed right in front of him.

Supersonic speed?! The difference in speed between his walking and his movement just now was too great for any ordinary person to perceive, let alone counter.

But despite his shock, Ignis was able to react to it by reflex.

Battle casters who fought solo had to have the ability to stand their own against vanguards, who were generally faster than them; as one who'd walked that path for decades, Feuer Lazburn was able to weave a spell against Canglong as easily as he breathed.

He supplemented his Prominence Aura with Fixed Stars maintained on the tips of his fingers — the same technique he'd used to melt Bellcross's arm.

Canglong swung with his left fist, but entering Prominence Aura caused his entire body to catch fire.

That wasn't all — his fist flew right into Ignis's Fixed Stars like a moth to the flame.

Unlike before, he couldn't disperse it with magic, so his hand evaporated in an instant.

However, the hand was restored in a *split second* and immediately crushed the limb that held the Fixed Stars.

"Ghuh! Hhuh?!" Having lost one of his arms, Ignis let out a cry of pain and shock.

The impossibility of what was happening before his eyes made it difficult to to even speak coherently.

The Draconic Emperor had tried to punch him and had his arm evaporated — only to instantly regenerate it and use that momentum to finish the strike.

It seemed simple, but it was clearly impossible.

Absurdly fast regeneration...? No, it simply cannot *be this fast! It matches the Hierophant's Mercy of the Holy! How can he regenerate this quickly without even calling out a skill...?!* Ignis hastily backed away and began to shoot countless balls of fire in every direction. It wasn't an attack on Canglong or an act of desperation — he was actually trying to finish off the immobilized Altarians.

Canglong said nothing, his expression hidden by the mask, but his very aura made it obvious that his face had twisted with emotion.

Instead of following Ignis, he rushed to protect the others, just as he had before.

Ignis had done all of this solely to limit Canglong's actions and prepare for another assault.

The self-restoration function La Crima gave me can fix my arm to a certain extent...but the result will not be as good and will not come as quickly. Clearly, he is the outlier here.

Ignis was even more confused about the nature of the Draconic Emperor job than before. He could cancel magic, move at supersonic speeds, and regenerate just as fast, and his frame was rippling with muscles that let him easily pulverize even Ignis's enhanced body.

It was so well-rounded that it was impossible to guess what, exactly, the job was focused on.

...No, wait. Could it be?

Ignis's many years of combat experience and honed senses led him to believe that he *did* have an answer.

...I know something like this, do I not...?

The train of thought moved...

The power to neutralize magic...to negate attacks. Draconic Emperor... Draconic... Dragon?

It led him to a certain guess...

...Dragon King Aura?

A power possessed by a certain kind of monster.

Is the Draconic Emperor actually...? Treating this guess as a definite answer, Ignis's brain connected the dots.

The power to negate weak attacks, stats that could not be achieved by humans, extreme regeneration...

These features would remind some of certain entities faced by a select few champions. The strongest warriors of Altar might recall the great three-headed dragon.

Indeed, Draconic Emperor could only be...

"A human bearing the power of dragons and their kings?" Ignis guessed that Canglong was a humanoid with the abilities of the strongest monsters.

Canglong said nothing in response, focused on protecting the Altarians.

However, in his mind, he gave an answer.

Close, but not quite.

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The Draconic Emperors were the descendant of gulong — ancient dragons — as well as gulong themselves. "Gulong" was another name for the strongest Pure-Dragons on the eastern side of the continent.

While the Border Mountain Belt in the west was inhabited by western-style skydragons, the ancient dragons of the east were more like the serpentine beasts from Chinese mythology in the real world.

Dragons with a similar appearance still lived in Tenchi, but the gulong were on an entirely different level. They were extremely intelligent and well-versed in the arts, and had lived alongside humans since ancient times as guardians or rulers. The gulong ren — ancient dragon kin — that still existed to this day were the descendants of gulong-human hybrids; back then, the gulong used them as representatives of their rule.

The gulong were monsters that had existed since the very first stages of the world. Thus the name *ancient* dragons, which they used to refer to themselves as well as being called this by others.

You could say that the previous observers had put them on this world to act as part of the world's system — as both tyrants and refiners of mankind. They understood the truth behind this world and were aware of multiple ways of managing this *game*.

As a result of all this, the people of the east saw them as wise and fearsome sovereigns of the land.

However, things had changed two thousand years ago, when the Incarnations attacked.

Back then, it quickly became clear that the gulong *knew things too well*.

The Incarnations had abilities far outside the norm for the world, as well as vast amounts of Resources to support them. The dragons immediately understood that they could not win against the men.

That was why they chose to take their leave *without* fighting.

They ran away, fearing the ultimate end they would face if they stood up to the Incarnations, and began searching for a way to survive into the future — to continue to exist.

What they arrived upon was one of the ways to control the very world — the ability to influence the job-managing Archetype System.

They quickly manipulated the Archetype System and disappeared, leaving behind only the gulong ren born from the union of dragons and humans — and the being known as the "Draconic Emperor."

This was a job that appeared only after the gulong vanished, which was because *the Draconic Emperor job and the gulong were one and the same*.

The gulong had turned their very existence into a job and left it to their future descendants.

Jobs couldn't be destroyed — they would exist for as long as this world did.

What mattered to the gulong wasn't their awareness or life, but their mere *existence*.

The Draconic Emperor was the aggregation of everything that made up the monsters known as gulong. It was their remains, their continued existence, taking the *shape* of a job.

And those born with this job had two special skills.

The first was “Gulong Cells.” It gave the bearer of the job an ancient dragon body said to be tougher than even that of dragon kings.

Being the aggregate of all the gulong, the Draconic Emperor had life force that matched them...if not surpassed them.

Because of this, the Draconic Emperor was nigh-invulnerable. Wounds that would be fatal to anyone else were mere scratches to them. If a crushed heart or a burnt body was enough to kill the Draconic Emperor, then first in Huang He’s duel rankings would’ve been Xunyu, not Canglong.

This immortality had been demonstrated even in this battle against Ignis.

Additionally, as a side-effect of Gulong Cells, the bearer’s body was “dragonized,” turning him into a Dragon King.

With their genetic makeup and resistances rivaling those of the highest-tier dragons, they were able to turn their magic into the defensive aura characteristic of Dragon Kings, simply called “Dragon King Aura.”

The nigh-immortal Draconic Emperor himself scarcely needed it, but as Canglong had demonstrated with Elizabeth and the other Altarians here, it could be used for support.

Gulong Cells was an immensely powerful skill even just on its own.

However, what made Draconic Emperors truly a force to be reckoned with was their *other* special skill.

This skill was the reason why those who knew the nature of the job would call the Draconic Emperor an abnormality. Its name was “Draconic Heritage.”

The gulong had created Draconic Emperor as a vessel — it was a job, yet not a job, for it didn’t fully adhere to the world’s rules.

Unlike other Superior Jobs, the Resources gathered for it were not emptied for the next inheritor — meaning that *Draconic Emperors were born with the levels and stats of their predecessors.*

The job’s stat growth was uniform, and thanks to this skill, there was no limit to how high its stats could grow.

The magic that nearly matched Ignis Idea, the AGI that let him move at supersonic speeds, the STR that let him shatter Ignis’s enhanced arm, and even the vast reserves of HP — all were the result of the levels Canglong had inherited.

The Draconic Emperor that had come before Canglong's predecessor was considered the strongest one ever, but that was because he exercised incredible control over his own powers.

In terms of pure stats, the current one — Canglong — was the strongest by far.

His level easily surpassed *3,000*.

This was the Draconic Emperor — a shapeless, abnormal vessel created by the gulong from their own existence in order to escape extinction at the hands of the Incarnations.

It was the humanoid Irregularity they had etched onto the world.

Born transcendental, the bearers of this abnormal job were human, and yet not.

They *could not* be human.

That was why the names given to them — Renwai, Renchao, or Renyue — had meanings like "inhuman" or "above man."

Chapter Twenty-Four: Don’t Touch the GAME OVER

Royal Castle, Fourth Floor, Hallway

Damn it, what’s going on? Morter thought, sensing the sudden appearance of a vast concentration of magic below.

It was different from the one he was chasing and the one that wasn’t moving — a fourth source of magic.

Power-wise, it’s up there with that fiery old geezer’s. What’s the deal with this castle?

The magic he’d sensed belonged to Draconic Emperor, Canglong, but since Morter couldn’t know that, he was greatly perplexed.

Is this place actually haunted or something? He recognized this stray thought of his as the truth.

It accurately described his current situation.

Even now, he was being attacked by monsters. These obviously abnormal creatures chased after him, and he fought them all back, but he was immediately confronted with a new problem.

None of the monsters he’d defeated dissolved into light.

Upon death, they simply left the remains of what they had been: broken armor, shattered walls, collapsed flowers, torn paintings, and the like.

It was as though they had never been monsters at all — that they were nothing but objects that had gone out of control. No motes of light, no turning into loot... Something about them was different.

Morter didn’t even feel like he’d received any XP or anything when he killed them — something that would never happen if they were normal monsters.

An illusionist’s trick...? No way. Such illusions might’ve worked on someone else, but as Vespertilio Idea, who could move freely while remaining unperceived, he was nearly immune to illusions.

There *were* monsters here, even if they didn’t obey the relevant laws.

...And then there's the biggest problem of all. Standing in front of a door, Morter glared at the magic he sensed on the other side.

There was the third abnormality — a fairly powerful magic signature.

The cause of all this weird shit could be on the other side, eh? The magic signature that had been moving through the fourth floor was now in front of him, behind this one single door.

It was as though it was waiting for something.

I got a bad feeling about this... I'd run if I could...but I can't.

Morter resented the fragment of Idea within him — the very thing that kept him from running away.

That piece was what maintained the bodies of the people modified by the Embryo — the Ideas.

It was also a leash that would take control of his body away from him if he acted against his orders. Once under control, Morter's body would be forced to do as he was bidden, but his movements would be far more awkward and less skilled than normal.

That would almost certainly lead to his death, so Morter had no choice but to obey.

Try to remove it and die, defy it and meet your end... This fucking setup, I swear...

He did like the powers he gained as an Idea, but the negatives had turned out to outweigh the positives.

I gotta do as Zeta told me and attack whoever this magic belongs to, he thought in resignation as he recalled the conversation.

"Important. The most important part of this request is to attack any strange person."

"Strange? You know that if you include Masters, there's strange people everywhere, right?"

"Aware. I know that. That's why the entire city needs to be attacked."

"...Huh?"

"Directive. I order Regina Apis Idea to destroy the city. The other three will assault the castle. You will sabotage the castle and attack anyone suspicious. It doesn't matter if they survive or not."

"...Are you insane?"

"Sane. I am of sound mind. This is part of the request we accepted, and chaos will help me achieve my own goal as well."

"Is everything all right with your and the client's wiring...?"

"Uncertain. I don't know if either of our mental states are stable. However, for the client, this might be an important enough matter to ignore the resulting sacrifices."

"...Man, if something's important enough to call for *that*, I don't even wanna know what it is."

"Agreed. With that in mind, I want you to do this job."

They had gone on to assault the castle, and Morter had followed an extremely suspicious magic signature.

Whatever's behind this door is obviously something pretty weird... Did I hit the jackpot?

The moment that door was opened, the victor would be decided. Morter knew that full well, so he considered how he would go about this.

I'll kick the door and activate the Darkness Boundary. They'll lose sight of me, giving me a chance to end it all with Sudden Death.

Darkness Boundary was a function La Crima had implanted in him. It briefly absorbed the visible light in a certain range, robbing anyone in the affected area of their sight.

Sudden Death was King of Raids' ultimate job skill.

It could only be used while undetected by the target, and it delivered a triple damage attack which ignored defense, endurance, and resistances. It also prevented the activation of the Brooches many people relied on to survive massive damage, and it was affected by the raider grouping's basic skill, Sneak Raid, which tripled the damage done while undetected.

Modified as he was now, he could deliver Sudden Deaths powerful enough to utterly obliterate his targets.

Even when dealing with high HP opponents, he could still instantly kill them by targeting vital areas.

"Hm..." Even though he had figured out all of this in his head, Morter's intuition and experience made him hesitate. He felt as though what waited for him behind the door was a bottomless pit.

But if he let fear hold him back, the Idea within him would forcefully take control, making him watch as his body headed to its death.

And even aside from that, there was the possibility of whoever was on the other side striking first.

Thus, Morter had only one choice here.

...Well, I guess I just gotta have faith. I'm a Superior Job — one of the few who rose above the rest. And even with all the dumb shit that came with it, I was given a crazy good body.

And so...

"Hh...!"

...he gathered his resolve and kicked open the door.

At the same moment, he activated the Darkness Boundary, drowning the surroundings in pitch black.

Even though he was also now plunged into darkness, being mixed with a bat-like Pure-Dragon-tier creature had granted him hearing good enough to perceive his enemy.

There's two of them...?! I see...so one's riding the other! Since they were so close together, he'd mistaken them for a single magic signature — assuming both of them had one, of course.

Below is a four-legged monster, above is...a really small human! The moment his hearing allowed him to grasp this, Morter instantly selected his target.

I'll go for the one on top! Following Zeta's order, he kicked off the floor and ceiling several times before approaching the strange, short person on the monster's back.

Sudden Death! He spoke the skill name in his mind before swinging his blade-like claws down towards the back of the tiny figure's neck.

Morter's attack, backed by the power of a lethal skill, struck the tiny target.

"...What?" he muttered, and he stared at his claws, thoroughly confused.

The attack that was supposed to end a life *didn't even break through the skin*.

It wasn't just that — it seemed like the target wasn't even affected by the attack at all.

Soon after, the effects of the Darkness Boundary expired, bringing light back to the world.

The moment his perception switched from sonar to visual...

"...HOW?!"

...he was overcome by immense shock.

His target — who had been unharmed by his deadly swing — turned out to be nothing but a little girl.

Mounted upon a four-legged beast, she looked at him with a disinterested expression and eyes that held no emotion.

I know she seemed small, but...an actual child?! A child was just hit by my ultimate skill and felt...nothing?!

Morter quickly used Reveal to find out more about her.

Theresia Celestite Altar

Job: None

Level: 0 (Total Level: 0)

The info he was given only made him realize that she had no jobs at all.

The only thing he'd learned was that according to her name, she was none other than the Third Princess of Altar.

"No... There's no way!" Faced with this impossible reality, Morter rejected the facts he had just been given.

There's no way this girl is powerless! She's not just a princess. "Strange" doesn't even begin to describe her... She has to be the most abnormal thing in the entire world!

Zeta's order flashed back into his mind. Theresia now disturbed him far more than any of the I.F. members or his fellow Ideas had ever done.

"There's nothing strange about this," Theresia said, as though she had read his mind. Morter instantly jumped back to put some distance between them. "I survived because of my Brooch. There aren't any fragments around because the Brooch just happened to not break. Your attack really scared me."

Theresia described the situation in a way that made her seem like a normal child. Morter didn't have Truth Discernment, but he didn't need it to know that she was lying.

After all, *Sudden Death was a skill that couldn't be negated by Brooches*.

In his mind, it would've been far better if the Brooch *had* activated for some reason.

He also felt that just like Reveal had failed him with her, Truth Discernment would also mean nothing against this girl even if he had possessed the skill.

"You followed the magic, didn't you? You must've felt Dor, then. I mean, he's my protector. He's very strong...strong enough to destroy the world," Theresia said as she pet the beast — Dormouse.

Perhaps she was right that Morter felt Dormouse's magic, but despite that — or perhaps because of it — he found the girl herself so abnormal that the magic signature meant nothing, no matter how vast it was.

"I'm just a normal girl, and Dor is my very strong protector. Your attack just happened to be blocked by my Brooch. There's nothing here that your leader would want. That's a reasonable explanation for all of this, but..." Theresia said as she looked at Morter with unreadable eyes, "...you won't just accept it and leave, will you?"

The little girl's aura was so overwhelmingly powerful that it might just be enough to make any ordinary person lose their minds or even die.

"Huh... Gh..." Morter couldn't even bring himself to respond.

"...Very well. If you want information, then you can bring this back."

Before he could say anything, the girl's tone became more mature as she continued to speak.

"I am... ■■■ ■■■■."

Her words, however, failed to reach him.

Or, more precisely, they reached him as nothing but meaningless noise.

"You probably couldn't hear that. My job as ■■■ ■■■■ is camouflaged, and I can't say the name to anyone myself. Though, I'll still tell you what I know. You might not hear certain bits, but I want to convey it to you as is. The general meaning should still get through to you. This assault was orchestrated by someone who wants me eliminated, so the capital was attacked so that they could find out *who I am*. I'll give you the answer, and that info by itself should satisfy them."

"Wa—" Morter wanted to say "Wait," but Theresia continued before he could finish.

"Also, it'd be troublesome if you died this close to me. Progression is slowed down thanks to Dor *handling it*, but if there are too many deaths nearby, some of it will get through. Also, the amount absorbed is the greatest when I or ■■ ■■■■■■■■■■ do the killing directly, and Dor doesn't have the authority to eliminate you because of the Embryo you've been mixed with. Not many people die in the castle, and the barrier prevents ■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■■■ from the outside, so this would be inconvenient. ■■■ ■■■■■■'s appearance would be pushed forward."

Morter couldn't understand — or even hear — a lot of what she said.

"Dor can destroy the world, but the ■■■■ ■■■■ would ■■■■ it."

Morter’s very cells understood that he was just too insignificant to hear her words.

They were meant for those far more special than him.

He felt as though hearing this alien information would rob him of everything, even the prospect of a normal death.

Why must I hear this? Morter thought with the remaining fragments of his sanity.

“That’s why I want you to stop attacking me. Otherwise, more safety functions will be activated. The more danger I am in, the more of them are freed. Like how ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■ was unlocked because of Sechs.”

She spoke the name of the leader of I.F. — the one who outranked even those who had defeated him, modified him, and used him — but Morter was in no state to acknowledge that. But for some reason, he felt that some of the words he couldn’t hear had something to do with the bizarre monsters he faced back in the hallway.

“Back when Gloria attacked, I thought that I could end it all by taking it down with me. You just aren’t enough to deal with me... And now that I think about it, Gloria was modified too, so maybe not even that monster could’ve touched me.”

Theresia’s expression slightly changed.

“My safety functions are automatic. They’re activated to eliminate any threats and to keep me alive. You can see it in the ■■■■■■■■■■ that attacked you. You can’t hurt me because you’ve been mixed with a foreign object, but it still reacts to your attacks and skills. The reaction is weak because they caused no damage, but if you keep this up...it will surely be released. Eventually, ■■■ ■■■■■■ will show about half of its face...and that’s *terrifying*.”

She said that last word with a truly worried expression.

She was terrified not of Morter’s attacks...but of something within herself — the automatic defensive reaction of the power lying dormant inside her, ready to create unnatural monsters and whatever else it took every time she was attacked or put in danger.

This scared her like nothing else.

“I don’t want to release more of this power. I might kill my sister with it. So please...don’t touch me,” she said. With that, she had finished giving

Morter his information and laid a hand on her chest. “...Don’t touch the GAME OVER.”

An ultimatum, delivered calmly.

Chapter From the Past: What is Untouchable, What Shouldn’t be Touched

5XX years ago

Deep under the ruins of the industrial city, there was a cavern even larger than the shelter.

Its ceiling easily surpassed a hundred metels in height.

And yet, there was something large enough to take up the majority of this vast space.

Possessing both humanoid and beastial features...it seemed to be a corpse of some kind.

However, through its fossil-like exterior, a pulse could be sensed.

These pulses carried enough energy that it almost seemed as though the corpse might stand up at any moment and wreak havoc upon the world — but then it suddenly stopped. Everything became deathly still.

“...Con...firmed. On the surface...the current...The Evil...died. That made...The Demise...The GAME OVER...go dormant...”

“Good grief... I guess this trouble’s finally dealt with, eeh...?”

The gloomy-looking woman received a response from a youth with a cat perched on his head.

The other people there with them looked up at the *thing*.

Perhaps “people” wasn’t the right word. Many of them had a human appearance, but there were a few who did not.

“This is the first time we’ve found the true body, and I suppose this thing works similarly to Jabberwock...Evolution,” said the entity made up of four floating orbs, which from some angles looked somewhat like a *caterpillar*.

“The Evil that the Sacred King and his brethren defeated must be this thing’s brain-frame. This time, the brain-frame died before this combat-frame, preventing it from waking up. Or perhaps our activities have made it so it lacks the Resources required for activation.”

“Based on the measured valuuues, we were preeetty close to the limit!” A pair of twins — a spectacled boy and a girl with headphones — gave their analysis.

“If the retrieved texts are correct, the last time it was activated was before we arrived. Back then, the forces were adequate. We had difficulty subduing just The Evil this time, but they didn’t have much of a problem even with this.”

“Hmm... That means it was weaker last tiiime! I mean, we eeaasily wiped out the ‘adequate’ forces they used! This time, it was probably stronger than each of uuus! Ohh, Bandersnatch is an exception, of coouurse!”

“Does that mean that it spent the last millennium — and more — reconstructing itself and growing stronger?” asked a slender, fussy-looking youth.

“Likely. Now, Red King...attack it with your Space Fracture.”

“Understood.” The slender youth quickly used his power on the fossil-like object.

A moment later, the world was split in two along a straight line, and a colorless void peered out from beyond it.

A few seconds later, it closed, splitting everything in its path...except for the fossil-like object.

It was right in the center of this immense destructive power...and it wasn’t affected whatsoever.

“...Same as it was with The Evil, huh?” said the youth with a cat on his head and distress on his face. “If not even Space Fracture can hurt it... This is baaad.”

“Indeed. Space Fracture destroys objects and phenomena regardless of toughness, yet it did nothing here.”

“Ah ha haaa! It’s *sooo* bad! Should we try calling Bandersnatch?”

“Let’s not... In the worst-case scenario, everything we’ve done so far might go to waaaste,” the youth rejected the headphone-wearing girl’s suggestion.

“So those who defeated it last time had offensive powers greater than Red King’s Space Fracture? Maybe it would be possible with the Sacred King’s blade...” said the caterpillar.

“No, this is a matter of fundamental mechanics. As those who came from the *outside*, we cannot affect this thing in any way. It's the same as with The Evil. This is probably a safety function of this world's system itself," said the spectacled boy.

"...So this thing can only be harmed by tians, eeeh?" said the youth with a cat on his head. "What about UBMs?"

"They probably couldn't harm it either. In fact, I doubt any monster actually could. Queen gave them all the item transformation function."

"Ah ha haaa! We reeeally messed up there!" the headphone girl laughed, but no one else found it funny.

"Wait. The Evil was defeated by the Sacred King, right? Isn't The Primeval Blade an Irregularity? As in, a UBM?"

"When it comes to the phenomenon of 'severance,' that thing can do anything, no matter how ridiculous. It probably negates even The Evil's defensive functions. It also shows just how absurd something needs to be to get past them... From the looks of it, even the Masters we will eventually welcome will be powerless against it."

"That much is obvious. There is nothing we or any other Embryos can do against it."

"What do we do now? What will become of our plans if something like this remains here...?"

"We can only hope that by the time it activates again, our goals will already be achieved," said the caterpillar. It seemed as though all of them were truly troubled by the difficult problem before them.

"Why...does this...exist...anyway?" asked the gloomy woman.

"It's a trial," said the four-legged beast that had been silent until just now.

"Dormouse..."

"The environment we are creating is meant to nurture Superior Embryos, and to that end, Jabberwock is gathering SUBMs. If this land was meant to nurture strength through jobs, this might be intended to fill a similar role — a powerful force to test them."

"But...something like this...would destroy...the world..."

"'Surpass this trial or be destroyed.' That might've been the idea behind it."

"...Such short-tempered...creators..."

"Is that conjecture, Dormouse?" asked the spectacled boy.

"It is. This is a conclusion I reached by using all of my processing power... Though, it incorporates some of my intuition."

"Animalistic intuition is something we do not have. The idea is worth considering," the spectacled boy — one of the twins who had the greatest machine-like calculating power among everyone present — said in agreement.

"Based on the data we've gathered so far, it seems that the brain-frame's rebirth happens not far from the main body. The Evil who was just defeated was also born in the city right above us."

"So it's likely that the next one will be here too?"

"We should keep an eye on it, then, and when The Evil appears, we should just deleeeete it! Like we did the previous tiiimes!" said the headphone girl.

The beings present knew of The Evil and The Demise — this fossil-like object — from the writings of the pre-ancient civilization. They had decided that these creatures would surely ruin their plans, and thus had made an effort to prevent The Demise from appearing by defeating The Evil every time.

Having discovered The Demise this time made them all the more certain that they had done the right thing.

"But this is the last time we can use our previous method... Employing tians, I mean," said Dormouse, looking sour.

"...Yeaaah. We overused the makeshift solution," said the youth with a cat on his head and a bitter expression on his face.

"So far, we've managed to lead tians into beating The Evil after discovering it early..." Since their own attacks wouldn't work on The Evil, they hired or otherwise enlisted powerful tians to defeat it on their behalf; however, this was the last time that would work for them.

"The Evil returns stronger every time. This one was so powerful that even as a child, he was able to automatically counter the Superior Job we sent after him. As an adult, we led the most powerful tians we could find against him...and it was still a Pyrrhic victory."

"...It won't work at all next time." The Evil that would come after this would be too strong for any tian to kill.

In fact, careless contact with it would only accelerate its functions.

After all, the deaths caused by The Evil or the monsters it created —

monsters called “dependants” — gave it more Resources than any other deaths, accelerating its leveling and the arrival of The Demise.

“We will change our approach,” said Dormouse.

“What do you mean?”

“From now on, when we find The Evil, I will stay by its side and absorb the Resources meant for it. At the same time, I will slow down their activation by protecting them and keeping them away from danger.”

“We have no data supporting this idea, so I cannot say much about it... But if it works well, there is the possibility that The Evil will die a natural death before The Demise is activated.”

“But what if it happens after we welcome the Earth’s Masters? There will no doubt be a great deal of turmoil, and the amount of Resources flowing to The Evil will increase dramatically. Not even you can absorb that much, can you?” asked the caterpillar.

Dormouse thought about it for a few moments before saying, “...We can only pray that we achieve our goal before that happens.”

The words made the rest of them grin wryly.

“‘Pray,’ huh? I find it hard to comment on that.”

“...The ones who destroyed religion in this world are now clinging to a divine hope to protect the world from a doom mentioned by those veeeeery same religions. It’s so ironic that it’s not even funny.”

Despite the comments, they all knew that this was the only hope they had.

“Very well. That will be our approach. No one objects, I assume...?” the spectacled boy asked, and the others all nodded. “So we now have the approval of myself, Dee, Red King, Caterpillar, Duchess, Dormouse, Cheshire...and Alice — she just gave it to me through the avatar. That is a majority, so it’s decided.”

“Well, it’s not like those who *aren’t* here would say nooo... If you ignore the big tin can, anyway,” said the youth with the cat on his head — Cheshire.

“...Bandersnatch is very stubborn, after all. If there are enemies, crushing them is the only option for him. That’s the only job he can do too, since he can’t even have an avatar,” said the fussy-looking youth — Red King.

Their massive, mighty, and mad colleague always had to be taken into account.

“Now, we need to conceal not just The Evil itself, but this thing too. Caterpillar, place a save point somewhere on this land and begin adjusting the environment,” ordered the spectacled boy — Tweedledum.

“A save point? As in, an environment maintenance marker? But I’ve already removed them from this area once,” said the gathering of orbs — Caterpillar.

“I am aware. I will have you make the arrangements, Cheshire. Needless to say, Dee and I will also help by using DIN to spread info.”

“What are you planning?”

“We will create a narrative that the death of The Evil at the hands of the Sacred King has blessed this land. People will flock to build a city here. The more people we have close to this thing, the higher the chances that The Evil will be born here, making them easier to observe. Also, the save point here will be given a resource absorption function.”

“I see. That would help,” said Dormouse.

“Additionally, Red King, I will have you reconstruct the space here to keep people away from this thing,” Tweedledum said as he pointed at The Demise.

“How?”

“Create multiple layers of extra dimensions, making it impossible to arrive at this place by simply digging down. In fact, let us make an entire created dungeon. It will seem unnatural if it’s *just* a reconstructed space. We will use DIN to spread the idea that this phenomenon was caused by the death of The Evil. You help too, Duchess; I will be counting on you to convince Queen.”

“Very...well...” said the gloomy woman — Duchess.

“A created dungeon... We only have the Overlord job change dungeons left behind by the previous manageerrs. This’ll be our first time making ooone.”

“This one will be more difficult than the others. I will talk to Jabberwock about that. We will use the UBMs he retrieved as guard dogs — Extinction Dragon King and the like will do just fine.”

“I seeee! Oh yeah! What about the dungeon’s naaame?” asked the headphone girl — Tweedledee.

Tweedledum looked up at The Demise — those fossil-like divine remains — and said, “The dungeon will be called...the ‘Tomb Labyrinth.’”

Following this, the Royal Capital, Altea, was constructed, along with the created dungeon known as the Tomb Labyrinth.

Various myths and legends sprung up about it, but most of them were eventually lost or forgotten. The truth behind it remained hidden, even as the city and dungeon both stood for centuries, surviving even into the present day.

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About her...

She has been lying since the day she was born.

Theresia C. Altar was the third princess of the kingdom.

She’d lost her mother soon after birth, and she herself was born sickly.

Likely because of those tragedies, her father and sisters had showered Theresia with love for her entire life.

Even if all of that hadn’t been the case, then the doctor’s statement that she wouldn’t live into adulthood would’ve been more than enough reason for them to cherish her.

Within her cradle, surrounded by love and sadness, Theresia thought, *So this is the life I was born into this time.*

Even back as an infant, she already had a functional mind and an awareness of the world.

It was as though the brain inside her head wasn’t the only thing that stored her thoughts and memories.

In fact, there actually was a *vessel* that fulfilled that function — the Special Superior Job, The Evil.

This job served to prime, rouse, and stimulate The Demise — the other half of the world-ending god.

It was part of The System left behind by the previous observers, who’d created it to test this world.

Because of this, The Evil was equipped with functions that made it truly unique among jobs — a whole five of these functions, in fact.

First, The Evil possessed the memories of the job’s previous holders, and the job itself served the role of the user’s brain in producing thoughts.

Second, The Evil automatically leveled up by absorbing Resources from dead people all over the world.

Third, the information regarding the job was completely hidden until The Evil reached a certain level.

Fourth, The Evil was completely immune to all “outsiders” that didn’t exist within the realm of The System.

Fifth, the newest The Evil had greater stats and stronger skills than the one that had come before.

I was just born, but I already feel tired of life. For Theresia, the greatest problem was the first point — the memories she had. The Evils didn’t inherit the natures of the previous ones, so her personality was her own, but memory and personality weren’t completely separate.

Because she possessed the memories of every previous person who had held the job, Theresia already had a great deal of knowledge as a mere baby. This had forced her to mature mentally far past her actual age. If the memories and capabilities she had as The Evil didn’t come with a mental safeguard, her mind would’ve shattered moments after she was born.

Still, having multiple memories of her own death made her mentally exhausted.

But at the same, she understood that The Evil was an entity that would eventually have to die.

If The Evil lived, The Demise would arrive, likely causing the end of the world.

The problem with that was that The Evils couldn’t kill or hurt themselves, and if exposed to danger, their job skills would automatically react to it.

By merely existing and maturing, Theresia would bring harm to the world, so she would eventually be killed.

Among The Evils of the past, there were those who had just silently awaited their end, as well as those who had bared their fangs at the world. Her ancestor had killed one of the latter kind; she herself was the former.

In spite of their similar memories, their approach was different, which must’ve been due to the difference between their souls.

Theresia understood that she would eventually be exposed and killed. Having just been born, she decided to simply wait for the end.

But until she was exposed...she chose to lie.

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When Theresia was about a year old, she had an understanding of her surroundings.

Altimia is the Sacred Princess. While my level is still low, she could easily lop off my head.

She looked back through the memories of The Evils' previous deaths and came to that conclusion.

The Primeval Blade was now a UBM, but despite having been mixed with some foreign substances, it had still been able to cut through The Evil's impenetrable defenses.

In fact, the sword was exactly like The Evil in one key way — it had been specially prepared by the creators of this world. If they had made it to cut through anything, then that quality would remain even if its very nature was tampered with.

This much was evident from the picture book read to her in the cradle — Altar's most famous legend.

The bearers must not abandon the god's remains... Azurite knew that The Evil would reincarnate here and said that so that the bearer of The Primeval Blade would quickly kill them. Though, I can't imagine that he expected The Evil to be his own descendant.

The god's remains... In other words, the main body of The Demise lay dormant underneath the capital.

It was unknown if the Sacred King of that era knew that The Evil would be born close to The Demise, but he had still happened upon the correct approach.

The most effective way to deal with The Evil was to use The Primeval Blade to lop off their head while they were still young.

The more they matured, the more defensive potential their skills provided. Eventually, there could come a point where even the current bearer of The Primeval Blade would have to struggle as much as, if not more than, the first Azurite to defeat their opponent.

The level growth is...slow. Leveling for Theresia was harder now than it used to be when she was born.

The reason for that was the sterilization barrier that had been placed on the castle for her sake.

Though it wasn’t created with the purpose of blocking the Resources coming to her from all over the world, it did protect against curse-type status effects, which effectively shut out most of the Resources she should have been absorbing.

That isn’t a problem, since the Resources just return to nature instead... Well, actually, my leveling speed was slower than for the previous The Evils even before the barrier came up — which I guess is obvious, given that this isn’t an age of war.

Theresia had no way of knowing this, but Altea’s save point was also equipped with the function of absorbing stray Resources. The control AI had built it that way to counter The Evil, and it was slowing down her leveling speed.

...Not that I mind it. It will all be over when my level rises too high, so the slowness is welcome...even if it doesn’t change much in the end.

The Evils of the past were all put in mortal danger before turning five, activating their safety measures and forcing them to undergo their first awakening. If this ever happened to Theresia, it would become obvious that she was The Evil even if that fact had been hidden from skills like Reveal. When that happened, she would be killed.

Since that’s the way things are, I think I’ll just enjoy this lavish life, she thought with nothing but sincerity.

Though Theresia knew that Altimia would kill her one day, she still loved her, as well as their father and Elizabeth.

None of The Evils that had existed in the past had been as blessed as her.

This reminds me that the last one was from a poor family. Born in the ruined ex-capital of Adrasta, Theresia’s predecessor was from a household that had been forced to sell their children in order to survive through the winter. He’d had siblings, but they were sold off and he never saw them again and...

...Wait, is that really how it was? Theresia had almost remembered something, but couldn’t quite grasp it.

Though this wasn’t true for all of The Evils, the memories they had of their past lives tended to become more hazy as they aged. Perhaps this was just how the job handled the memories of The Evils who became insane enough to break the limits of their mental safeguard.

Regardless, The Evils who had a happy life were few and far between.

At best, they simply understood their nature and eventually accepted their death.

That was why, in her unnaturally mature mind, Theresia had decided to enjoy life as a princess until her time came — to maintain the lie that she was nothing but a sickly young girl.

I'll be exposed in a few years, anyway...

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Nearly four years had passed since then. Almost five years old now, Theresia looked at the scenery outside and whispered, "...I'm *too* blessed."

As a princess — a sickly one, at that — she was given perhaps the warmest upbringing possible in this world. The concept of danger was almost alien to her.

"I didn't expect this..." She thought that she would have certainly been revealed as The Evil by now.

Normally, that happened when The Evil was exposed to things like monster attacks or war, activating their safety measures and unlocking parts of their power. For most of The Evils so far, that had occurred in their early years, leading to their death soon after.

However, Theresia was a princess who was kept inside all the time, shielding her from any danger that would activate those safety measures and expose her true nature.

No one in this world — not even those actively looking for The Evil — had any inkling that she was the one.

I can't hurt or kill myself, and no one would believe me if I told them... They wouldn't even listen to me, actually.

Theresia's status as The Evil was not only hidden from skills like Reveal, but censored when she tried to say it herself. "The Evil" would come out as some different word or gibberish — and given her age, it would just be written off as childish baby talk.

And for some reason, the stories regarding The Evil were extremely simplified, with large gaps in the information they conveyed, so as a result it was likely that anyone she explained it to wouldn't understand anyway.

It's not impossible that The Evil will actually reach its final state like this... But at my current leveling rate, that would probably take decades.

Theresia could actually *feel* her level.

Since the time of The Evil several generations before her, the world had begun displaying detail and stat windows. Before then, people had to rely on particular skills and intuition, but now, everyone was able to bring them up at will.

However, her status as The Evil as well as her true stats were hidden even from her, forcing her to figure out her true level using her own sense of it.

And based on that feeling, she believed that she wasn't even level 30 yet.

Her leveling speed might've actually been the slowest among all The Evils that had ever existed. It wasn't out of the question that she would actually die of old age or disease before she became complete.

Imagining that scenario filled her heart and cheeks with warmth, for that would no doubt be the best death she could hope for.

"Is anything the matter, Your Highness?" asked the maid by her side.

"No. I'm just a bit warm," she replied with a lie.

"It has been rather sunny recently." As the person tasked to accompany Theresia, the maid actually had Truth Discernment, but she didn't realize that the princess was lying.

This was also because of her status as The Evil.

Just like she was protected from Reveal, she was immune to the effects of Truth Discernment.

In a world where lies were limited by skills, Theresia could lie with complete freedom.

The lie she had told just now, though, did not even begin to compare to the one that had existed since her very birth.

"I want to go to my room and nap," she said.

"As you wish," the maid replied before helping Theresia into her sizable carriage and pushing it to her room.

Since she was believed to be frail — which wasn't true due to her stats as The Evil — she was advised against traveling any longer distance on foot.

That was one of her few complaints in life. Despite actually being less than five years old, with her immense knowledge and long memory, the girl couldn't help but wonder if there was a more dignified way for her to travel.

"If you need me, I will be in the neighboring room."

"Thank you."

Following that exchange, Theresia was left in her chambers alone.

The room was as fancy as one might expect for a princess, but was also noticeably clean and hygienic.

In the canopy bed, there were the adorable plush toys she'd received from her sisters.

Next to the bed, there was a bell she could use to call the maid in the other room.

Among all the things of note, Theresia was focused on...the space between her and the bed.

She opened her mouth...

"Who are you?"

...and spoke to the empty space.

However...

"I did not expect to be addressed before I addressed you."

...the empty space replied in an unfamiliar, masculine voice.

A moment later, a green cloak appeared in the empty space.

The person wearing it took it off without a sound before giving Theresia a bow.

"My name is Sechs Würfel," the black-haired, plain-looking man introduced himself. "I am here to take you away," he added, in the tone of an actor on stage.

"What a wonderful line. I would love to hear it when I'm ten years older," Theresia replied, unfazed by the potential kidnapper in front of her.

Sechs was at a loss for words and his eyes opened wide in surprise — a sight which would no doubt shock those who would come to know him.

After observing her for a good few moments, he said, "Pardon this question, but are you truly the third princess of Altar?"

"I am. Why are you asking?"

"Because you just made me feel like I'm looking at some sort of aberration."

"...What a dreadful thing to say to a lady."

"That is true. My apologies."

Though Theresia's replies were calm, her heart was beating faster than ever before in her life so far.

Does he know I'm The Evil? How? Who is this man, anyway...? She looked him over to figure out what she was dealing with and noticed a crest on the back of his left hand.

It was a symbol in the shape of a droplet — a simple thing, signifying water and its ability to change into anything.

"Are you a Master?"

"Yes. I started last month."

Theresia was aware that since about a month ago, more and more Masters had begun to appear.

She saw these beings somewhat differently than other tians.

So he's like The Lynx... One of her predecessors had fought a Master bearing that job. The Lynx fought using an Embryo that allowed him to multiply, but The Evil remained undamaged no matter how many of his doubles attacked.

Theresia knew that was due to one of The Evil's characteristics — immunity to anything *foreign*.

Masters are foreign to The System. They can't hurt me no matter what. Why would one of them establish contact with The Evil?

The situation was so strange that Theresia couldn't help talking to him to get more information.

"Was that your Embryo you were just wearing?"

"No. It was an MVP special reward. Originally, it was an Epic chameleon named...'The False Tone, Soundcolorless,' I believe. I don't know for sure, because our encounter was sudden and *began with a devouring*."

The smile on the man's face as he casually mentioned being killed and eaten by a monster gave Theresia the feeling that he wasn't exactly normal.

"And that's why he's now my special reward."

"Hm...?"

"I have a question for you, as well... How did you know I was here?"

Theresia said nothing at first. Given that he had been hidden by a special reward, it was only natural that she would spot him.

What Sechs's reward did was make him blend into the surroundings to both the eye and ear. Its effectiveness was proven by the fact that he'd snuck into her room completely unnoticed. Of course, there were security elements that could sense him in other ways, but he must've dealt with them, as well.

Regardless, as potent as the special reward was, it was an item derived from a UBM — creatures with powers considered foreign — meaning that The Evil, Theresia, was immune to its effects.

She'd actually *seen* Sechs standing in her room as if he wasn't camouflaged at all.

"That's because..." she said before losing herself in thought for a moment, "...I am ■■■ ■■■■."

"Hm?"

Theresia had revealed what she was, but the words didn't reach him.

So it works against Masters too. Then why did he call me an aberration? Not just that — if he doesn't even know that I'm The Evil, why is he here in the first place...?

One of her questions had been answered, leaving even more behind.

That was why she went ahead and just asked, "Why are you kidnapping me?"

In response...

"Because it's one of the greatest crimes you can commit in this country."

...Sechs readily revealed his motive, if it could even be called that.

"...Huh?"

"I am committing grievous crimes to become a villain, and one of the most grievous ones I could think of was kidnapping you. That is why I am here."

To become a sinner, he would commit a crime. If Sechs truly meant what he said, his goals and the means to achieve it were one and the same — he wanted to commit crimes, with no expectation of reward, to become a criminal.

Neither Theresia nor any of her predecessors had ever met someone as strange as him.

Perhaps this is just how Masters are... Odd as he was, however, he was still someone who'd made it past the castle's tight security and arrived in her room, meaning that he couldn't be taken lightly.

Masters are foreign. They can't hurt or kill me. But still, I...

She couldn't just ignore him, but if she were to raise her voice, the maid would rush in from the neighboring room, and Sechs would most likely kill her.

As she wondered how to go about this...

...she heard Sechs's voice *from right behind her*, and a wet cloth was pressed against her mouth.

"Huh...?" After a single breath, her consciousness began to fade.

Before she completely fell unconscious, Theresia saw the Sechs she had been talking to until this very moment...as well as the one who put the cloth on her mouth.

The man was in two places at once.

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"Ah...!" Theresia woke up about two hours after she had lost consciousness.

Moments after she recovered, she realized that she'd been put to sleep by some drug.

She was now somewhere she didn't recognize.

It looked like a wooden cabin, and she could see the forest outside. As a princess who had lived her whole life in a castle, Theresia had never seen something like this before, but the memories of her predecessors made her assume that this must be a lumberjack's cabin.

She realized that after she'd been put to sleep, she had been taken to this cabin and locked inside it, and that she was likely in the Noz Forest near the capital.

Theresia wondered how she — The Evil — had been put to sleep by a Master, but she quickly realized what had happened.

...Ohh. There was that one exception, she thought.

As a rule, what was foreign couldn't harm The Evil, but there were three ways to get around this.

The first way was using things like The Primeval Blade, which bent the laws governing The Evil's existence.

The second way was to gain influence over the very system in which The Evil's foundations lay...to take control over the entire world, basically.

The third and the simplest one...was to use consumables made by tians.

The drug Sechs used to put Theresia to sleep, offensive magic Gems, anything like that...as long as it had been created by tians, even Masters could use such consumables to harm The Evil.

Due to the monster-loot transformation system, this didn't work if the consumables were made using items or materials gained from monsters, but the drug that Sechs used happened to be made entirely from natural ingredients.

It probably wouldn't have worked if my level as The Evil was higher, but since it's so low and I don't have any safety measures unlocked... It makes sense that it put me to sleep.

Another notable thing was that the safety measures had *remained* locked.

Her body was unharmed, making it clear that, at the very least, her kidnapper hadn't hurt her.

Sechs was nowhere in sight. Perhaps he, like a proper criminal, had gone to the castle to declare the kidnapping and make his demands.

Theresia also had a question regarding him.

She wanted to know why she'd seen *two* of Sechs before losing consciousness.

Multiples of the same person... If it wasn't an identical twin, it could only be the effect of some skill he has. The fact that I saw it means that the other person was real, not an illusion. I guess it was either the effect of his Embryo or a skill like Art of Shadow Clones. I mean, it's not like he just split himself in two like a slime...

At this point, she had no way of knowing that this was, in fact, exactly the case.

As she continued to wonder how Sechs had accomplished that feat, she realized something.

"...It went up."

Her senses told her that there had been a change in her true level. It had been stagnating for a good while now, but she realized that it had gone up while she was asleep.

This was only natural. She was not only outside the castle's protective barrier, but the capital itself — away from the save point designed to absorb Resources.

Though close to the city, she was still out in nature, allowing her to gather the Resources of the dead just as The Evil normally would.

Every second she spent out here shaved more and more time off her limited life span.

Though, so far, leveling had only raised her stats. She still had no skills.

If she was exposed to danger now, the safety measures would be activated, unlocking her true power — her skills — as The Evil.

The first skill that would be unlocked was Dependent Transformation, which changed the nature of the surrounding matter. It responded to any apparent danger by automatically turning surrounding objects, such as rocks and trees, into monsters...her “dependents” that would leap to her defense.

When that happened, she would be exposed, and her death would quickly follow.

She wasn’t against that. In her mind, it was far better than the world being destroyed.

She had a faint hope of living out a full life, but if that turned out to be impossible, then there was no way around it.

The problem is that Altimia is studying in Dryfe right now. Can my automatic defenses be broken without The Primeval Blade...? Can they really kill me?

Worrying about whoever would have to kill her, Theresia let out a sigh of resignation.

It was likely that many people would die.

Right now, the best thing she could do to avoid that was merely staying in this cabin.

She was capable of destroying it even with her current stats, but she would not be able to return to the castle without encountering any danger.

Even ignoring Sechs himself, the area here was full of monsters ready to attack her on sight.

Though her stats and their status as outsiders made them harmless to her, they would still be recognized as a threat and activate the safety measures.

Sechs seemed to know nothing about Theresia’s situation, but this shabby cabin in the woods turned out to act as The Evil’s cage.

...If only there was someone who could escort me safely back to the castle, she thought before silently chuckling at herself. Someone that convenient wouldn’t just appear out of nowhere.

Suddenly, she noticed a faint sound.

“...Rain?”

It was the sound of rain droplets hitting the wooden roof. It grew in frequency and intensity, but stopped before becoming too intense.

She focused on listening to the sound.

"...I never thought much about the weather." The sickly girl had always stayed inside the castle. That had been all she ever knew, and since she'd only inherited the memories of the outside world from her predecessors, she'd never truly cared about it.

That was why this was the first time she experienced rain so close at hand.

It's noisy, but somehow a bit soothing too... I wonder why? She closed her eyes and strained her ears.

Did she stay like that for a minute? A few? Or perhaps longer?

An uncertain amount of time passed by, and then...

"...He's here."

...she heard footsteps mixed with the rain.

Sechs is back... I wonder what will happen now.

Would he exchange her for a ransom? Would he hand her over to some people outside her family? Or did he intend to kill her to add another grievous crime to his name?

If he'd kidnapped her just for the sake of committing any crime at all, Theresia believed that this lunatic might also kill her to make his transgression even worse.

Whether or not that was indeed his intention, based on Theresia's impression of him, she wouldn't be surprised if it was.

Sechs can't kill me, but he can still activate the safety measures. I guess I only have minutes left until my life as a princess is over.

The lie that had lived with her since the moment she was born was now coming to an end.

After this, she would The Evil — nothing but a threat to the world.

Even if they wouldn't be able to defeat her, it was impossible that she would be able to live as she had until now.

Still...I lived a better life than The Evils so far, she thought, as if to console herself.

However, despite her preparation and resignation...Sechs wasn't entering the cabin.

In fact, he seemed to be struggling with something in front of the door. She heard metallic sounds that made her assume that he was trying to unlock the lock.

Sechs was the one who locked it. He should have the key. Did he drop it...?

As the sounds continued, she realized something.

Is this actually...? Before she could finish that thought...

"GRRRRR! I CAN'T BEAR IT ANY LONGER!"

...she heard the lock break, accompanied by a somewhat-comical, angry voice.

A moment later, the door opened with a creak, and a large silhouette walked in.

"I just wanted some shelter from the rain. Why's it locked? The old lumberjack said that he doesn't lock it since there's nothin' here worth gettin' your paws on. What happened to tha— Hm?"

Silence. The person who had just entered was a man in a dog — or wolf — costume, who for some reason was using bear puns.

He was all black with the exception of his back, which was red.

Needless to say, it wasn't Sechs.

"What's a little cub doin' in a place like this?"

"...Who are you?" The fact that he spoke human language and had no name over his head made it clear that he wasn't a monster. However, she still had no idea who or what he was.

In response...

"I'm Shu. A Master, thank you beary much... I mean, woof!"

...the Master introduced himself as "Shu" and finally seemed to realize that his bear puns didn't make sense at the moment, switching instead to simple barking.

"Are you a dog? Or a bear?"

"A human. In a dog suit, as you can see. I used to rock a bear suit not long ago, and I still haven't managed to kick the bear pun habit. I can't *bear* to part with them... I mean, woof."

"...Heh." Theresia chuckled at the strange person before her and also at the realization that he was just a passerby who had nothing to do with Sechs.

"If it made you laugh, then mixing up my quirks was worth it. And what's your name, li'l lady?"

"I'm..." Theresia said before thinking for a moment. "I'm Tee. I don't know how I got here."

She chose to give him a fake name.

If she'd used "Theresia," he might've realized that she was a princess, and that might've negatively influenced his actions even if he had nothing to do with Sechs.

Giving a fake name seemed like the best option.

I'm The Evil. It's not like he'll realize I'm lying— "Hmm? And what's your *real* name? It's hard to contact your parents if I don't have it. Woof."

"Huh?" She was more shocked by those words than anything else she'd experienced since she was born. Not even facing Sechs had surprised her as much as this.

"Wh-Why...do you think...I'm lying? Truth Discernment should..."

"Don't have that. Woof."

"Then how...?" Not even the highest level Truth Discernment could see past The Evil's lies.

Theresia was so perplexed that she couldn't help but ask how he'd figured it out.

"It's easy to tell that you have no attachment to that name. You glanced around and paused before saying it. Woof."

"Ah...!"

It wasn't even the effect of some skill.

It was actually a *sense*. Shu's own power, born of his experience and intuition, had done what the most powerful Truth Discernment could not.

The lie of The Evil, which avoided all orthodox skills and was protected from everything the world had, was easily exposed by Shu's perception.

"Well, I get that it ain't easy to trust some guy in a costume you just met. You said you don't know how you got here, and I want to take you back home. Woof."

Silence. Theresia wondered how to process Shu's words.

She didn't have Truth Discernment herself, so she didn't know whether he was being honest or not.

But ultimately, she...

"My... My real name is...Theresia."

...chose to reveal the truth.

Shu had seen through her lie, so she decided to give him the truth this time.

"Theresia Celestite Altar."

“That name...” That was enough for Shu to realize who she truly was.

“Mr. Costume...I have a request,” Theresia continued.

Her request was related to a path she’d given up on only moments ago — one that could let her continue to live life with her family as The Third Princess of Altar, Theresia.

The possibility of a hopeful conclusion.

“I’m listening.”

“I’m a princess...and it’s very dangerous to have me around...”

“Mhm...”

“Could you... Could you take me back home to the castle?”

“I’m not going back on what I said. I’ll bring you back home. You can beary much count on that.”

Shu’s reply came quickly and without any hesitation.

He understood that she was a princess and suspected that there was something more to it than that, but he still declared that he would take the girl back home.

[Quest Received: Escort — Theresia C. Altar, Difficulty 7.]

[Confirm the quest details in the quest window.]

Thus, a message announced the start of a quest.

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“...Odd.”

“What is it, Dormouse?”

“There’s something strange about the movement of Resources around Noz Forest.”

“Noz Forest? Speaking of which, I just had to set the difficulty for a strange quest over there.”

“A strange quest?”

“A quest to escort the kidnapped third princess to the castle. I set the difficulty to 7, since the kidnapper is still in the zone and a fierce UBM currently roams the area.”

“Hm...”

“Are you curious?”

“Mhm. I will check on it. Perhaps...I will find the one we are looking for.”

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That incident would come to be known as the Third Princess’s Kidnapping.

It was the first meeting between Theresia and those who would eventually learn her secret.

The kidnapper, who would later be dubbed King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

The savior, who would come to be called King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

And the control AI who would be tasked to stay by her side and protect her, Dormouse.

This was the beginning of an important series of events that created a number of strange connections between people, some of them completely unrelated to The Evil at the center of it all.

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Incarnation of Maelstroms

About him...

Morter Cortana was born to a distinguished family in Caldina.

One day, though, his parents both died and he was separated from his sister, quickly bringing his smooth and easy life to a screeching halt.

He was forced to join a gang of thieving street urchins in order to survive, and his life quickly became one of crime. He continued stealing even after he grew up and found legitimate employment, and after he got his Superior Job, he took to making a living by hunting treasure hunters in ruins.

Not even he himself fully understood why he went down this path.

Perhaps, as someone who once had everything but had lost it all, he had some negative emotions towards those who were in the opposite situation — those who started with nothing and gained a great deal.

Regardless, this way of life had led to his defeat at the hands of Rascal and eventually, his transformation into an Idea.

And now, he was facing a creature no one should ever have to face.

In this situation, he couldn't help but wonder why his life was going *so* wrong.

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Royal Castle, Fourth Floor

After hearing the final warning, Morter reached the greatest depths of despair. His own cells told him that Theresia wasn't joking; everything would be over for him if he didn't turn back.

If it had been possible, he would've fled already. The reason he was panicking now was that he found he *couldn't*.

Ahh...damn it... Why is this happening...? His life began to flash before his eyes in disjointed moments... The moment he chose to become an Idea, the moment he attacked the sub-leader of I.F., the time period where he made his living assaulting treasure hunters, the time he lived among the criminal street urchins, the time he lost all his worldly possessions and was left alone....

Damn it...! Why is my life so...! He lamented the many bad choices he'd made at all of the most critical moments in his life.

However, this moment was different. Right now, it was like the time it all began to go wrong for him — the very instant when he had lost everything he had.

Here, in this moment, Morter didn't even have the right to choose.

"I can't back down...even if I want to..."

"Hm?"

"My body won't respect my desire." He spoke the truth — he was being forced to do something against his will. "There's an Embryo...in my body. If I go against my orders...my body will...damn it!"

While he spoke, his body began to act on its own.

"Damn it! La Crima, you...!" This was accomplished by the piece of La Crima's Embryo implanted inside of him. What he just revealed was meant to be a secret, and Idea decided that Morter had violated his orders enough to justify taking control of his body.

And, with movements far less precise than his natural ones, the Embryo made Morter's body charge towards this overwhelming force.

Even a moth flying directly into a flame would have higher chances of survival than him.

"I don't wanna die...! Not like...not like this...!" Vespertilio screamed as Idea forced him to attack something he could never hope to defeat.

Theresia looked at him with emotionless eyes before suddenly putting her hands together.

A moment later, giant arms sprouted from the floor at an incredible speed and moved in sync with her movements to crush Morter.

"Ghuh..." His body was shattered and immobilized, but he was still alive.

"...Dear me. I'm even stronger than before. My level really *is* growing."

The damage done was greater than Theresia expected, and this seemed to trouble her.

The stone arms that grew from the ground were her dependents — the monsters just like the ones Morter had fought earlier.

However, while those had appeared automatically as a response to danger, these were deliberately created by Theresia, making them far faster and more precise.

In fact, they would even be a match for Legendary-tier creatures.

The attack itself turned out to be overkill, but what mattered was that it stopped Morter's body from moving.

"Dor." She said only a single word, but Dormouse instantly understood what she wanted and brought her closer to Morter.

Theresia then slowly reached towards him...

"...This must be it."

...and tore out the piece of Idea from his body.

"Ah...?!" Shock appeared on Morter's dying face. Theresia had just taken the Idea that had been completely merged with his body right out of him, as easily as plucking a caterpillar from a leaf.

Ignoring him, Theresia then took the starfish-like creature in hand...and crushed it like a piece of fruit.

"Huh...? Ah..."

At that moment, Morter was set free.

However, before he could rejoice, an overwhelming pain assaulted his body.

"Gh... AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH...?!"

"...I took it away. Can you leave now?" Theresia asked casually.

"Theresia. He and that Embryo were linked. Obviously, if you take it out of him, he's going to fall apart. It's like opening a huge hole inside his body."

"Oh. That makes sense. Sorry. I didn't realize."

Theresia apologized, but Morter was in no state to even acknowledge it.

"With the Embryo gone, I can finish him off," said Dormouse. "That will minimize the Resource absorption... Hm...? Is there something on your mind?"

"...So he needs something to bind him together?"

"Indeed."

"Dor. I have an idea."

"Hm?"

"Remember the insurance we talked about? It would be difficult with just us, would it not?"

"Well, mostly because my avatar is not humanoid."

"That is why I believe we need an adult. Shu knows about us, but we cannot rely on him more than necessary."

"I do think that he would help if asked."

"...That is the problem. I need to *prepare*."

"Prepare...? Do you actually intend to do it?"

"Is it possible?"

"...If you believe it is."

"Thank you." On the brink of death, Morter couldn't hear most of what they were saying.

"Hey, you," Theresia said as she looked him in the eyes. "If given a choice between dying here and now or giving up your humanity...which would you pick?"

That was a choice much like the one he'd been given back then.

Morter's response was quick.

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Once the choice was made, only Theresia and Dormouse were left in the room.

"He has been taken care of. I suppose I should go meet up with Liliana now. She's looking for me." Though there was still no emotion on her face, she did give the impression that she'd done away with something troublesome.

She knew that Liliana was looking for her, but if Theresia was with someone during such an emergency, Dependent Transformation could lead to them finding out what she was — or even worse, it might hurt someone. That was why Theresia had run off on her own — if you didn't count Dormouse, anyway. Liliana was her elder sister's friend and her friend's elder sister, so Theresia really didn't want her to die.

Though she'd been found out by Morter, she was able to *silence* him.

"Theresia, there is something I must ask," said Dormouse.

"What is it?"

"Why did you reveal your secret to him?" Even though she'd gone on to silence him, Theresia had told him what she was of her own accord. The important words were filtered, but the information Morter had heard was enough to fully expose her if he brought it back to a person who was actively looking for The Evil.

The many twists and turns of her life so far had led to her beginning to awaken as The Evil, but thanks to Shu and Dormouse, she was still able to live on as the third princess.

However, what she had done just now...was almost destroy the last thing that allowed her to be herself.

She'd told Dormouse not to do or say anything, but when Theresia had begun to explain the situation, he was actually fairly perplexed.

In response to his reasonable question, Theresia said, all without changing her emotionless expression, "Some people can see through lies even without Truth Discernment. That is why it is best to just be honest. And there was a chance that the man would retreat upon gaining the necessary information, which would have been acceptable in its own right."

"What do you mean?"

"That would have given me the time I needed to run far, far away. I am immune to your colleagues' abilities, so I can only move by walking. If I am to run, I need the time."

"Time to run?"

"Tell me, Dor — what is the worst-case scenario for me and for your group?"

"...The activation of the GAME OVER."

"Exactly. Preventing that is more important than my current lifestyle or even my life itself. Nothing would be worse than me becoming complete and that *thing* awakening. However, that is not directly linked to whether or not my secret is known."

"Hm...?"

"Even if someone finds out that I am ■■■ ■■■■ (The Evil), I can simply leave Altar and hide somewhere else. As long as you are with me, we do not need the barrier to slow down ■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■■■ (Resource absorption). And as long as we are not facing Masters or Embryos, you would also deal with any dangers that came along, would you not? Your most important task is to prevent that thing from awakening until your goal is fulfilled."

Dormouse saw Theresia’s point. With The Evil’s masking function, she would be fully protected from search-oriented job skills, and with information organizations like DIN belonging to the control AIs, they could easily find a good destination to escape to.

“I feel like the idea relies too much on me personally, but...are you certain about this?” Dormouse asked. Could Theresia truly abandon the country and family she’d grown up with?

“I am. I believe it would be better for both sides,” she replied, her expression determined.

Dormouse didn’t really understand whom she meant by “both sides,” but chose not to ask.

“...Well, now I’m glad it did not have to happen,” he said. Theresia was able to silence Morter, so the truth regarding her was safe.

“As am I... Though, it does seem like the time is close.”

“Indeed. Someone is looking for The Evil, so the limit is no doubt drawing near.”

“Here in Altar, the menace of ■■■ ■■■■ (The Evil) is seen as a thing of the distant past, but it seems that it is not so everywhere. Or perhaps we’re simply seeing our first High-End tian in centuries. The extremely talented High-Ends are provided information regarding us and even ■■■ ■■■■■■ (The Demise) by the Archetype System...the job-managing system itself. It would not be unexpected if they were to try to find and kill me.”

“The world is full of those who do things they should not.”

“You were the ones doing just that until the time of my last predecessor, were you not?”

“...I cannot deny that. I am ashamed,” Dormouse said, glancing down. With their makeshift solution of getting The Evils killed whenever they were discovered, the control AIs had only made The Evils grow in strength at a faster rate than normal.

“I am not angry. I feel bad for my predecessors, but it is you and your colleagues I have to thank for being able to live as I am.”

“...It is good to hear that the measures we took are effective. Though, it is regrettable that we did not find you before release.”

“We met after I encountered Shu and Sechs, after all.”

“...Having welcomed the Masters from Earth, we are now one...no, perhaps two steps away from fulfilling our ultimate goal. It would be especially troubling to get a game over now.”

Though it didn’t show on his hamster-like face, Dormouse’s tone made it clear that he was deeply troubled.

A moment later, he seemed to remember something and said, “I can imagine a certain someone saying ‘Online games can be shut down, but they don’t have game overs.’”

“‘A certain someone?’”

“...Oh, never mind.” Dormouse simply ended the brief exchange, and Theresia didn’t push him to keep talking.

“We were lucky this time,” he said instead. “We faced a unique kind of opponent and ended the exchange without much issue.”

If they faced tians, monsters, or mechanical weapons, they could’ve silenced them by simply destroying them, just as Tom had done in the ruins when he’d destroyed Prism Soldiers.

They also had special means of dealing with Masters, as well.

However, a tian-Embryo hybrid was a unique case that had caught them off guard. In light of that, the final outcome was actually fairly positive.

“...Duchess, are there any Masters who saw the fight or heard what was said?” Dormouse addressed those words to someone who wasn’t there.

[No...there weren’t. As far as...I can observe...there are no Masters...who acquired any knowledge...of the happenings...conversations...or phenomena...that happened there... The Embryo fragment also...wasn’t constantly linked...to the main unit.]

The response came to him in the form of a window that suddenly popped up in front of his eyes.

“That is good to hear.” The message had been from control AI no. 7, Duchess, who was responsible for the vision of all Masters as well as information windows. She was the entity tasked with implementing whichever of the three visual styles the Masters chose while also processing the information they saw or heard, as well as assisting the control AIs in managing the situation.

By Dormouse’s request, she was now focused on the Masters in Altea so she could tell him if any of them were close to discovering Theresia’s secret.

If she said that none of them were aware of what happened here, it could only be the truth.

“...If you have such a surveillance network, could you not have used it to prevent this attack from happening in the first place?” Theresia asked.

“We are prevented from limiting the freedom of Masters, and Duchess’s observation network is not *that* thorough. Most of her processing power is dedicated to producing the visuals, so she cannot gather information from too many people on top of that.”

This begged the question of how much counted as “not too many people” by his standards, but Theresia once again realized that even the godlike observers of *Infinite Dendrogram* had their limitations.

“Well, you also could not eliminate the person we just dealt with... You seem to have some truly inconvenient restrictions.”

“The control AIs that have the right to attack Embryos and Masters are few. In fact, we have a colleague who must be restricted in this way even if it means restricting us, as well,” Dormouse said, recalling the most short-tempered and aggressive control AI.

Theresia said nothing in response. They had a lot of information, but not all of it, and though they had authority, they had limitations, making their measures less than perfect. In her eyes, this made the control AIs seem less like machines and more like living beings.

[Dormouse...a moment...please.]

Suddenly, Duchess sent a new message.

“What is it?”

[One is coming...towards you... Oh...she’s preparing...to attack.]

“What?”

A moment later, the room they were in was blown away.

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“...Confirmed. The fusion reaction from ‘Absolute Dominion Over the Sky — Uranus’ has hit something.”

The speaker was the bandaged King of Thieves, Zeta, who stood on the roof above the fourth floor of the castle.

She had confirmed the signatures of three of the four Ideas she’d let loose upon the capital — Regina Apis, Aranea, and Vespertilio — had already been extinguished.

Claudiah’s request for Zeta went as such: “Indiscriminately attack any unusual persons in Altea and discover who has an odd reaction to these attacks. Eliminate them if possible; if not, stop attacking them and observe."

The target of the request was so vague that she'd entrusted the role to the Ideas.

She'd sent Vespertilio after the most unusual signature; the way that his own signature had vanished had struck Zeta as suspicious, so she stopped her search for Treasurebeast Orbs and chose to investigate instead.

She discovered the room where the fight had occurred, used information provided by Uranus to confirm that Vespertilio's opponent was still inside...and used her ultimate skill against them.

...Based on the fact that she said "if possible," she must be almost certain that the target cannot be killed, Zeta thought, reviewing the request. She hadn't been told what she would be dealing with, but she knew enough to understand that the target was either really strong or had some unique qualities.

There would be a problem if the one I attacked just now was the target and, in spite of her assumption, they actually died just now. If they completely vanished without showing any odd reactions to the attack, I would be unable to confirm if they were truly the target.

She worried that completing the task would be impossible then, but...

"...They're...alive?"

...unfortunately, the target withstood the immense heat Zeta had created.

The hellish fusion reaction that would kill any animal and evaporate any material hadn't been enough to kill the target.

However, Zeta couldn't figure out what kind of creature had survived her blast, for she saw nothing but a jet-black vortex.

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"A nuclear attack. How nostalgic. I have not felt one of those since the war all those years ago," Dormouse whispered from within the vortex, which completely drowned out his voice.

His form had completely changed. He was no longer the round, adorable creature with short limbs, but a dreadful beast straight out of a Japanese yokai picture scroll. His entire body was enveloped in a dark force field and he stood in the center of a surging vortex, a storm in which he was the eye.

The vortex had consumed all the heat and electromagnetic waves created by the nuclear fusion reaction.

That wasn’t all — it also quickly drained the surroundings of all warmth, freezing them at an incredible rate. Since it consumed even light coming from the outside, seeing what lay within the vortex was impossible.

It was as though it consumed all and any energy coming towards it.

Perched on Dormouse’s back, Theresia remained silent and expressionless.

Though she was just within a nuclear explosion, her safety mechanism hadn’t activated.

As The Evil, she wouldn’t have suffered any damage from it to begin with, but that wasn’t the reason why her defenses remained inactive — it was because she knew that there was no safer place than Dormouse’s back when he donned his black vortex.

[A message... The kingdom is winning...the battle at the border... It might...end soon... It’s possible...that the castle attackers...will also retreat...]

“That means that we only have to bear this a little while longer. The seventh form’s output should be enough for that. Though I have to suppress my body size, so this feels a bit cramped.”

Dormouse responded to Duchess and cracked a warped grin. He couldn’t have used this against a special case like Morter, but Masters were a different story.

“I cannot attack Masters, but there are no rules against protecting or hiding something from them.”

Thus, Dormouse went on the defensive.

Zeta tried to use her all-powerful Uranus to disperse the unidentified black vortex.

However, her efforts were futile.

He was control AI no. 8, tasked with dealing with hazards and someone who had eliminated countless Irregularities.

Consuming all heat energy, he was the being who stood above all in the art of extermination, as well as an impenetrable defense.

He was Type Infinite Fortress — Infinite Conversion, Schwarzer Tod.

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The Incarnations that had attacked the pre-ancient civilization two thousand years ago were beings far above what anyone had ever seen — even The Demise they'd brought down before was weak in comparison.

There was the Incarnation of Blasphemy, which created countless puppets that carried the power of their deceased champions.

There was the Incarnation of Scales, which turned creatures into dust and vice versa.

There was the Incarnation of Nature, which could bring forth calamities like plagues, heat waves, droughts, and cold snaps.

There was the Incarnation of Cages, which couldn't be reached or escaped.

There was the Incarnation of Dreams, which rid various creatures of their reality.

There was the Incarnation of Armaments, which used thousands upon thousands of Legendary weapons as though they were nothing.

There was the Incarnation of Influence, which rendered any and all tactics completely meaningless as though it could see the future.

There was the Incarnation of Seconds, which could instantly slice through anything regardless of speed or toughness.

There was the Incarnation of Beasts, which could multiply to the point that it was capable of covering the entire landscape in itself.

However, there were three Incarnations which were more feared than the others:

The Incarnation of Mortar, which could effortlessly grind entire mountain ranges.

The Incarnation of Evolution, which grew more powerful without limit the more it fought.

The Incarnation of Death, which simply had countless inconceivably powerful abilities at its disposal.

Those were twelve of the thirteen Incarnations besides the Extra-Continental Vessel.

The last one was the Incarnation of Maelstroms — Infinite Conversion, Schwarzer Tod.

It wasn't the strongest, toughest, or the most destructive among them.

It didn't have the greatest ability to destroy, nor did it have the greatest potential for use in war.

In terms of sheer battle capacity, it likely did not have a single area where it was not surpassed by another Incarnation.

But despite that, both the pre-ancient civilization and his fellow Incarnations alike believed that despite its relative lack of strength, the Incarnation of Maelstroms was no doubt the most troublesome of them all.

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Zeta was thoroughly troubled by the unexpectedly difficult opponent she had stumbled upon.

...Nothing I do is working, she thought. The room had been melted by Uranus's ultimate skill, yet the black vortex remained.

She tried firing air-bullets and using any weapons she had, but they all seemed to be negated by the vortex. Upon touching it, everything lost its kinetic energy and latent heat; they would stop, freeze, and fall to the floor as inert objects devoid of energy.

She tried to create a vacuum or poison gas within the vortex, but it was actually cutting off her very ability to control the air.

...This isn't even a case of bad compatibility. Compatibility meant nothing against an opponent that absorbed all energy and rendered it useless.

I suppose the only exception would be people with skills that can attack whoever's inside without interacting with the vortex at all. Curiously enough, Xunyu — whom Zeta had just defeated — was one of those people. It would have been difficult even for her, though. The slightest targeting mistake and her prosthetic limbs would touch the vortex, which would instantly consume them.

The vortex is a wall that completely separates the outside and the inside. Not even light or sound can reach through it... That means that they shouldn't be able to see me either.

Zeta guessed that the vortex remained stationary in the ruined room because whoever was creating it also could not see what was happening outside.

It seems to be a defensive barrier, but it's abnormally powerful. It seems like the energy-damping ability of the ocean element taken to an extreme, but I have never seen anything that drains energy to this extent.

The fact that it was able to negate the heat from Uranus's ultimate skill — a nuclear explosion — made it clear that it had enough power to match Superior Embryos.

Also, if it isn't damping the energy, but absorbing it...it's possible that they may also be able to repurpose the energy for some kind of attack. Zeta knew that she had to be wary of counter-attacks like the ones Ray Starling had used to defeat her pupil, Logan.

Also, it was clear that whatever this was had defeated Vespertilio Idea, meaning that it was immune to surprise attacks. That meant one couldn't be too careful.

Thus, for the time being, she chose to stop attacking and see what they would do next.

Besides the one about Morter, Zeta's assumptions were actually correct. This black vortex was actually Infinite Conversion's energy absorption ability, Infection Citadel.

Everything that touched it *had all of its energy drained from it*.

Fire would lose its heat, sound, and light, while anything living would lose its warmth, kinetic energy, and even the electrical impulses running through the nervous system. All energy-based attacks would be nullified, while all living beings who touched it would die. The energy absorbed would be used to maintain the skill and make it grow.

Resistance against it was not only futile — it made it grow stronger. There was nothing one could do against the approaching *maelstrom*. Like the Black Death, the wielder's namesake, this vortex was feared by countless beings all over.

However, that wasn't the full story of this creature. The energy absorption of Infection Citadel was actually related to its ultimate skill, Schwarzer Tod, which was as terrifying as the name suggested.

Dormouse, though, had no intention of using it this time.

To him, this was solely a defensive battle. He didn't have the right to attack Masters.

"The absorption has weakened. The attacker must have stopped to observe what we will do next."

While spreading Infection Citadel in every direction, Dormouse was unable to see what was happening outside, but he could still tell if he was being attacked based on the amount of energy he had left.

"Duchess. How is the situation...?"

[...King of Beasts...has stopped fighting... She's negotiating...with the High Priestess... King of Thieves...the one who's attacking you...has also stopped...]

Following the message, the window began showing him Zeta's perspective. He couldn't see outside the vortex himself, but he had Duchess conveying the situation to him.

Her ability didn't adhere to any ordinary laws of physics, so it wasn't blocked by the vortex. On their own, the control AIs had flaws, but their experience had taught them that most of them could be made up for through cooperation.

In fact, under normal circumstances, merely keeping up Infection Citadel would require copious amounts of energy.

It wouldn't be a problem if there was energy to absorb — but if there wasn't, he would have to use his own until there was nothing external left. While this wouldn't matter if he was using his original body, as an Infinite Embryo in his seventh form as he was now, he couldn't keep it up for long without an outside supply.

However, this flaw was irrelevant now. With most of the castle's barriers having been deactivated, more Resources were free to flow towards The Evil, but Dormouse was absorbing them and using them as energy for Infection Citadel.

As long as he kept the vortex up, Dormouse was akin to an impenetrable fortress for Theresia.

[However...the kingdom's...what was it, again...? The Royal Guard knightess...is coming closer... She's with...K&R Masters...that entered the castle...]

"Liliana is coming?" *That's not good,* Dormouse thought.

It was impossible to guess how she would react to this situation. There was the chance that her arrival would accelerate The Evil's awakening, so he wanted to deal with this situation before that happened.

The attacker is still observing us because their goal is to gather information, so it's possible that they will not leave until they find out exactly what we are... That would prolong this until Zeta chose to leave, and that was risky for him.

That was why he chose to, as an exception, rely on a fellow control AI.

"Duchess, are you able to use your Invitation to the Second World — Daydream? Even limited use of it would suffice."

[Yes. I can use it anytime...*and on anyone*.]

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Zeta had no means of breaking through the vortex-fortress before her.

...I'm just not good against these kinds of outliers, she thought. Uranus's control didn't extend to the inside of the vortex, and phenomena from the outside couldn't break through it. She considered covering the outside in a

vacuum to suffocate whoever was within, but since she couldn't influence the inside, this could easily be countered by a simple inventory filled with air. Having such inventories was common practice in Granvaloa, and there was no way that someone with an omnidirectional, long-lasting defense ability wouldn't have prepared something similar.

Perhaps Zeta's skills as King of Thieves would've worked better than her Embryo abilities, but she couldn't use them without coming close to whoever was inside within the vortex. Merely extending her hand to touch them and take their heart would mean going through the vortex, and that was certain death.

She also had a third ace up her sleeve — the Superior MVP special reward, Moby Dick Left — but there was no viable way to employ it in this situation.

Zeta was well-rounded, but if nothing that she had worked, then that was it.

But if I retreat now, I would not have enough information for the task... I need to at least see their face...!

The moment she thought that, a part of the vortex vanished.

Perhaps from lack of energy, the dark maelstrom was undone, exposing the person within.

"Ah...!" Zeta didn't miss the opportunity to etch the person's appearance into her mind.

She also assumed an offensive stance and prepared to take out a camera, but before she could, the seam in the vortex was fixed, once again hiding the person from view.

...Was that a failure on their part or an intentional trap? That much isn't clear, but I now have enough to report.

There was no doubt that, as requested, she had discovered and confirmed the existence of a "strange person" inside that vortex. *Perhaps I can retreat and focus on stealing the orbs again,* she thought, when suddenly...

"Zeta. It's me."

...she heard her client — Claudiah — call to her through the comms device inside her bandages.

The fact that Claudiah had called her at all definitely indicated something, but since she couldn't ignore her, Zeta replied with, "Acknowledged. Since you are using this device, I assume that your efforts ended in failure?"

"Yes. We lost. What about you?"

"...Incomplete. As per your request, I have discovered the target and confirmed their identity, but elimination is proving difficult. I thought I'd finished them off, but it doesn't seem like any of my Embryo attacks are reaching them."

"Oh, so that really *is* how it works. I wanted to confirm that as well."

Hearing that, Zeta realized that Claudiah had made her request while fully aware that Zeta's attacks would be futile.

"What about your own goal? Were you able to steal them?"

Zeta had to stop herself from saying "I would've been well on my way to stealing them right now if you didn't call me." Instead, she said, "Rejection. I refuse to answer."

"I see." Despite having asked, Claudiah didn't seem to be terribly interested in the topic.

It was clear to Zeta that Claudiah cared mostly about the black vortex before her.

Though, the information Zeta had on the vortex wasn't quite what Claudiah had in mind when she'd made the request.

"Directive. Since elimination is impossible and your situation isn't favorable, I request that you give me a new order."

"We are moving on to plan C. Make the preparations we discussed and retreat from Altea."

Zeta had actually forgotten about that particular plan until Claudiah mentioned it. It was only meant to be executed if Dryfe lost at both the negotiations and the battle, so she had pushed it deep into a corner of her mind.

Zeta did remember what it entailed, however, so she readily agreed.

"Commencing. Present the reward using the designated method. That is when I will provide you with information on the target."

Zeta then cut the comm and faced the vortex again.

Anyhow, I am done with this. I'll execute plan C while moving underground. Perhaps the ones who have the orbs are taking shelter there.

She had her next job and her own goal. Thinking that she could still accomplish them both, she began to create distance between her and the vortex. Then, she quickly accelerated down the outer wall, following a path leading downwards.

Speaking of underground, that's where Ignis went. He seems to have done that by melting the bulkheads from the first floor, so maybe I should follow him...?

With that in mind, she proceeded along when suddenly, a chill ran down her spine.

Then, with a strange uneasiness in her heart, she took out a device given to her by La Crima — the one that displayed the status of the four Ideas.

Three of them were inactive, while the fourth one — Ignis Idea — was not only active, but *becoming more active*.

The body temperature data displayed was far too high even for a wielder of flame magic.

"Question. What is happening?"

Cold sweat soaked through her bandages as she realized that something unexpected was happening again.

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"...She seems to have retreated."

[Yes. She left...and went...underground... It doesn't seem like...she'll come back...]

Upon hearing Duchess's words, Dormouse canceled the vortex.

"I have not used Infection Citadel to its fullest for quite a while. That was tiring."

[...Tiring?]

"Apologies. I am fairly sure I am not nearly as tired as you are."

The apology was earnest. Duchess was tasked with the arduous duty of managing every Master's visuals. She had been operating at full capacity every waking hour for over four years now. Dormouse with his single battle couldn't even begin to compare.

"Dor," said Theresia. "I am aware that if Liliana finds us in a room that seems to have been a battlefield, explaining that to her would be difficult."

"We need to move to somewhere less destroyed. Duchess, lead the way so they do not find us before we arrive," said Dormouse.

However, Duchess didn't respond.

“Duchess, I truly am sorry for my careless words. Please forgive me.”

Dormouse apologized again...

[Dormouse...take The Evil...and leave Altea...immediately.]

...but in response, he got a warning, spoken with all possible urgency.

“...What happened?”

[...You don’t know? Ohh...you aren’t in the...control room... In that case...I will say it...]

And so, Duchess...

[In a few more minutes...

the castle will be...

blown apart.]

...announced an approaching calamity.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Supernova

Fire

While fighting Canglong, Ignis Idea...or rather, Feuer Lazburn, became certain that he could not win.

His long years of training and fighting as a Lazburn Pyromancer and his staggering defeat at the hands of the Arch Sage had given him enough experience to know that he would almost certainly die here.

It was only obvious. His fire couldn’t hurt Canglong — the Draconic Emperor would instantly regenerate even if the majority of his body was blown away.

In fact, it didn’t seem out of the question that he could come back even if he was reduced to a single scrap of dragon-flesh.

Canglong, on the other hand, had more than enough strength to bring about Feuer’s demise.

...How long will I last, I wonder? Half-giving up, he was buying time by firing spells at the people all around.

This couldn’t continue forever, though. The Altarians who could still walk were slowly helping the immobilized leave the area.

Once everyone Canglong had to protect was gone, he would be able to kill Feuer with little effort.

How did it come to this...? he wondered.

Why was he in a place like this, fighting such a foe?

He had yet to find the Arch Sage, whom he was sure was here in this castle, yet he was now facing an enemy who was likely even worse than him.

And now, he would die without having even encountered his target.

This was a battle he couldn’t win, nor could he retreat from it. The Idea-piece implanted in his body wouldn’t allow him to run. It was part of the contract that had given him his warped body and vast reserves of magic.

He wouldn’t have run even if he was able — retreating with such obscene amounts of magic at his disposal would have been a defeat in and of itself, the ultimate proof that he could not win even after exceeding his limitations.

For one who wanted to prove that Lazburn magic was strongest, retreating was not an option.

For what purpose did I...? Feuer Lazburn looked back at his life — or perhaps it was flashing before his eyes just like many others who were near death had experienced.

The many days of training, his father’s death, the fight against the Arch Sage, the heavy defeat by his hand, the days that followed, the contract with La Crima — it all passed him by in a brief moment that felt like an eternity...

“Hm...?”

...but it stopped when it reached the matter of his life’s goal.

At its core, this goal was simple — to prove that he was the strongest. Specifically, he wanted to show the world that no magic was greater than fire, and prove that the Lazburns, who dedicated their minds and bodies to fire magic alone, were the most powerful casters of all.

To that end, he and his father had made it their goal to defeat the Magical Apex — the Arch Sage.

However, his father expired before he could even challenge him, while Feuer himself had been effortlessly defeated.

Since then, he had been reborn and had once again attempted to seek out the Arch Sage in order to prove that he was the strongest.

Indeed — the Arch Sage’s defeat was *nothing but a means to an end, not the end itself.*

Feuer didn’t *have* to defeat him.

“Heh heh...ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Hm?” Feuer’s sudden laughter made Canglong and the Altarians who were still in the shelter stare at him with confusion in their eyes.

The laughter wasn’t a sign of the man losing his mind.

He was merely laughing at *himself* for taking this long to realize his error.

“I lived my whole life for the sole purpose of becoming the strongest and proving that fact.” Indeed — he had been misguided, mistaken...just plain *wrong*.

Perhaps Feuer was this way because his father was mistaken before him.

His final words might've carried more weight with Feuer than they had deserved.

The Lazburns' ultimate goal wasn't to defeat the Arch Sage.

Bringing down the Magical Apex was but a means to prove his own strength.

The Lazburns merely wanted to claim the Arch Sage's title as evidence of their absolute power.

That meant that he could achieve his goal of proving his power using other means.

This realization cleared his mind, in spite of his rapidly approaching demise.

"...What are you planning?" Canglong asked, confused by Feuer's change in demeanor.

To some, the Idea was now more fear-inspiring than he had been when he was firing flame spells in all directions, so Canglong couldn't help but ask this simple question.

In response, Feuer said, "The Parting Sea between Tenchi and Huang He, the great desert of Caldina... The wounds etched onto this very continent are evidence of the existence of those who inflicted them."

These words barely made sense at first, but it didn't take long for Canglong to realize their meaning.

The separation of Tenchi from the continent at the hands of the Incarnations, the exclusion zones created as a result of the fights between one of Canglong's predecessors and the King of Kings, the contaminated areas left behind by Huang He's civil war... Such scars on the land were there because those capable of creating them had actually *done that*.

They were evidence that those who held immense power had changed the very lay of the land.

So, what Feuer Lazburn intended was...

"I will use this land itself as proof... Proof that the strongest spellcaster of all was once here!"

...to prove his magic was strongest by using it to change the shape of this landscape beyond recognition.

Canglong approached, intent on stopping him — but before he could, Feuer's warped body began releasing waves of intense heat in all directions.

Hot enough to make people evaporate in an instant, these waves rushed towards the Altarians who had yet to escape.

"Kh...! Please, run...!" Canglong said before spreading out his Dragon King Aura.

This rendered him immobile, but it was the only way for him to prevent the Altarians from dying in an instant. The aura acted as a wall, protecting them as they rushed out of the shelter.

"All restrictions...abolished. Supercritical transformation...all magic into heat. Heat escalation...activate."

While Canglong was holding him off, Feuer began crafting his spell.

The magic unleashed thus far was only the beginning. The true spell would follow soon.

Or, more precisely, would be *created* soon.

What he was about to use was a spell he was crafting from scratch at this very moment.

"Exchange loss...cause is bodily structure...incinerating cells to enhance magic flow." He disregarded control in favor of pure power. Conjuring this spell even started to harm his own body.

This was a self-destructive effort, and it would surely wipe him out with it...but Feuer didn't care.

He had already realized that to achieve his true goal, his life was a small price to pay.

Did I want the glory and fame that came with proving that I am the Magical Apex? Did I want society to sing my praises after I defeated the Arch Sage? No. That certainly wasn't the case. His only goal in life was to prove he was the strongest; he didn't seek to live a life where he was *revered* for that.

The battle and his own feelings were all distant — all that mattered to him now was the culmination of his obsession.

"Question. Ignis, what are you d—?" Zeta, realizing that something was happening, tried to question him, only to be cut off.

"Be silent," Ignis said as he tore out the comms device in his ear, ripping out some of his own flesh in the process.

At this moment, he sought nothing but the spell he was crafting. His fixation on the Arch Sage and even the deal with La Crima had lost all meaning to him.

Once complete, this spell he was creating would destroy the castle, scorch the capital, and render the entire area a wasteland of molten ruins.

"Ha ha ha ha! HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!" The Lazburns sought nothing more in life than firepower, so his very blood was set ablaze by the mere thought of the magical might he would soon exhibit. He couldn't help but laugh.

One of his four arms fell to the floor. The brains implanted in his body, which provided his magical power reserves, were boiling. Even the Idea-fragment couldn't withstand the heat and died.

The very cells of his face began to melt, his vision washed red, his eardrums burst; the collapse of his already barely stable body was fast approaching.

None of that is of any consequence now. All that matters is that I cast this final spell.

He didn't care what he would lose. His life was already fleeting. Dying a bit sooner meant nothing.

He would construct this spell even if he gave all that he had to give.

"This will be the last spell of my life, and it will incinerate the entire capital."

This would be King of Blaze's new final attack, never before seen or heard of.

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About the dragons of the east...

Draconic Emperor, Canglong Renyue, had no recollection of his birth.

Just like anyone else, he had no memories of the time when he was still a baby. Even being the Draconic Emperor didn't change that.

His earliest memory was a moment where his vision was completely drowned in *red*.

He didn't even know what it was he had seen — he didn't understand the meaning of the color.

When he grew old enough to understand the world around him, he realized that he was being shunned by his siblings and father.

Even in the Imperial Court, the fact that he was the Draconic Emperor was kept secret. The only ones who knew were the emperor, his children, and a few of the closest aides.

The clueless retainers gave Canglong the respect a third prince deserved, while the nursing mother who'd raised him treated him well despite knowing what he truly was.

However, his family was different. They almost seemed to look at him like he was their enemy.

Canglong didn't understand why. He had been taught that Draconic Emperor was a Special Superior Job that, to Huang He, matched or perhaps even surpassed the emperor himself in importance.

That was why, one day after he had matured enough to wonder this, Canglong approached his father and asked him directly, "Why do you shun me?"

What he saw next was the emperor's face twisting into an expression Canglong had never seen him make before throwing his fist at the boy.

Because of the insurmountable gap in stats between the two of them, only the emperor himself was injured.

Despite that, he — Canglong's own father — had attacked him.

Then, as though to release everything he had been keeping inside until now, he screamed, "*Because you took the life of my beloved!*"

At first, Canglong almost saw his point, but then became confused.

He knew that his mother died while giving birth to him. However, it wasn't unheard of for mothers to die during childbirth.

Canglong did understand that the treatment of children born in such circumstances could vary, but it didn't seem like enough of a reason for the emperor to loathe him as he did. The man had never shown even a hint of love for Canglong.

The emperor's attitude towards Canglong was far, far different from how anyone might expect a parent to treat their child. Rather than his own son, the emperor treated Canglong like a callous murderer who had brutally slaughtered the person he'd cherished most in the world.

"...Ah."

And just like that, Canglong found the answer.

His mother had died at the moment of his — or rather, the Draconic Emperor's — birth.

Draconic Emperors inherited the levels of their predecessors, granting them stats that far exceeded even those of specialized Superior Jobs *from the moment of their birth*.

That was both the cause of the emperor's rage and the answer to Canglong's question.

Canglong's mother didn't die from a fever or any other common risk of childbirth — he had actually torn her apart.

While still inside his mother's womb, the baby Draconic Emperor had struggled and writhed...and in the process, his excessive power had destroyed her.

That was the reason why his father and his siblings shunned him so.

They might have even seen the infant Canglong tear the emperor's wife — his children's mother — to shreds. That would have been reason enough to make them loathe the sight of him.

Not even human, Canglong was an Irregularity — a monstrous creature since birth.

But at the same time, he was also a symbol of Huang He and the strongest being in the country, making it impossible to get rid of him even if they wanted to.

They must've been bottling up their rage for quite some time, and Canglong's careless question had set his father off.

For all he knew, the emperor might've attacked him fully prepared to die, thinking that this monstrous being who'd taken his wife would now take him too.

However, the emperor was Canglong's father, whom he didn't have the slightest intention of killing.

He also hadn't intended to kill his mother merely by being born, but he had done it regardless.

On that day, however, neither Canglong nor the emperor died.

However, Canglong's relationship with his family became unsalvageable.

After that moment, Canglong continued life as both a prince and the Draconic Emperor. He participated in festivals and ceremonies in his warped, dragon-like form with his face hidden behind a mask. He also received education befitting a prince and fulfilled his duties as such.

However, he never once spent any time with his family.

Canglong had "siblings" who were raised alongside him and nursed by the same mother, but his blood relatives completely stopped interacting with him the day after his father struck him.

There was no violence between them, but nor were there any words. Their relationship never went beyond the bare minimum conversations required for official purposes.

Canglong also made no effort to interact with them in return. Since his power was so vast, he believed that he could unwittingly kill them just as he'd killed his mother.

If it weren't for the nursing mother who'd raised him well in spite of knowing what he was, or Meihai who looked out for him while unaware of his secret, he might never have grown to know love and friendship.

However, he was terrified of even touching them.

The only times he allowed himself to touch anyone without reserve were during the duels that were protected by the barriers.

He'd dueled to prove the power of the imperial family and the Draconic Emperor. The arenas, where anyone who was broken would emerge unscathed, were the only places a born monster like him wouldn't kill anyone.

He had a robust stature and a dragon-like appearance, so when his face was hidden by the mask, no one could tell that he was the young third prince of Huang He.

By fighting in the duels again and again, he effortlessly became the duel champion of Huang He, showing everyone the glory of the imperial family and the power of the empire's great symbol.

However, his family never once praised him for any of that.

Through his duels, he even learned to control his power, but he still made no attempt to touch anyone.

One day, he read the letter left for him by Honglong Renchao — the Draconic Emperor that had come before him.

The text gave Canglong the impression that his predecessor had known what would become of him. He even guessed that Honglong had perhaps gone through something similar himself.

The letter said, "Do not be bound by your sins," but Canglong felt that that would be difficult.

The sin of matricide bound his life like a chain.

However, his life changed somewhat when many more Masters began appearing in the world.

Masters were immortal beings bearing unique powers — the kin of The

Lynx that one of his predecessors had faced.

For the first time, he began to meet abnormal entities besides himself, and in great numbers.

Eventually, he dueled one such abnormality — Xunyu.

Canglong won, of course, but it was the first time he'd ever met anyone who could compete with him — someone he could treat as an equal.

Because of that, he quickly became attached to this particular Master, for he had always wanted an adult who would coddle him like the little boy he was.

That only made it all the more shocking, though, when he learned that Xunyu was actually a girl about his age.

In this year, Canglong's father, the emperor, gave him an official order to travel to Altar and meet the girl he would most likely have to marry.

Canglong didn't understand why he picked the shunned son instead of one of his brothers for the marriage, but he had no intention of refusing either.

To hide his true form and power while in foreign territory, he picked an appropriate Treasurebeast Orb left behind by one of his predecessors, defeated the UBM inside, and assumed the form of a powerless child.

Then, with Xunyu as a bodyguard, he went to the kingdom.

He then caught the local epidemic, but things had gone smoothly otherwise.

And not too long ago, he had met his fiancée, Elizabeth, for the first time.

She was a naive, simple girl who smiled and laughed a lot. He was a prince, and she a princess, yet he couldn't help but feel that despite their similar positions, they were vastly different.

Her smile, however, had vanished — and he was the cause.

Elizabeth's sister had told her that she would have to marry Canglong and move to Huang He.

Part of the reason why the sister had resolved to do this was to protect Elizabeth from the flames of war that could soon engulf the kingdom.

But Elizabeth stood against it. She didn't want to flee Altar and leave her sisters behind.

The sisters argued, but any onlookers would know that they did so because they all wanted what was best for each other.

Canglong quickly understood that this was the difference between them — the existence of a loving family.

He had no family he loved or family that loved him. The relationship the princesses had was dazzling to him, and it hurt his heart that he'd caused them to argue...and because he would ultimately take Elizabeth away to the loveless court of Huang He.

That was why, on the morning that followed, he visited Elizabeth and apologized.

The very same day, thanks to Xunyu's planning, the two went on a Love-Duel Festival date. This came as a surprise to him, but it was true that he wanted to learn more about Elizabeth, so he didn't refuse it.

The two walked through the lively city of Gideon until they found a festival stall selling various masks.

One of those masks was made to look like the Zifu Longmian he usually wore.

His masks were created by forcing magic into metal to change its shape, so the crafted mask in the stall actually looked more presentable than the ones he crafted for himself.

"Did you find something, Canglong? Hm... That one is a bit scary." Upon hearing that, Canglong didn't know what to say. If even the mask meant to hide his warped face was scary to her, what would she think of his actual face? Would she be able to accept him?

He also wondered if it was right for him to take her as a wife and bring her back to Huang He without revealing how monstrous he truly was.

But at the same time, he couldn't deny that he was more and more drawn to this incredible girl.

During the date, he became exhausted and had to rest.

Normally, the very idea of him running out of stamina would be absurd, but the Self-Sealing Wraps he was wearing had given him the attributes of an ordinary child.

During this break, however, Elizabeth had noticed the Self-Sealing Wraps underneath his clothes.

"Are you hurt or sick?"

"...I suppose you may call it an illness. These bandages are a measure to hold back a certain handicap I was born with."

It wasn't exactly a lie.

The bandages were there to seal away the power of the Draconic Emperor — the handicap preventing him from living as a human.

Canglong had never once been glad to be born as he was — the revered and blessed job was a burden to him.

"...I'm sorry," Canglong apologized. "I didn't mean to let you see something so unsightly."

"Don't apologize! What's so unsightly about that?! So what if you were born with an illness?! If you think *that* bothers me, you're sorely mistaken!" Hearing that made Canglong's heart ache, for he realized that Elizabeth wouldn't find him unsightly even if he had suffered from some kind of sickness.

It made him hope that he could reveal himself and she would accept him as he was.

However, he still hesitated enough to stop himself from telling the truth.

Elizabeth then told him how she felt about her sisters and that if it meant protecting them, she would readily leave for Huang He.

But before she could promise that, Canglong asked for a postponement. He felt that he also needed to gather the resolve to tell her the truth.

The truth that he was the monstrous being known as the Draconic Emperor.

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And now, tongues of flame had engulfed the both of them, forcing Canglong to reveal his true nature before he could properly tell her.

He was still frightened of Elizabeth finding out what kind of abomination he was. However, he hadn't hesitated to reveal himself, nor did he regret doing it — for it was the only way to protect her.

"Protect what you wish to protect."

"Accomplish what you believe you must."

"Do not be afraid to do as you will."

The words left behind by his predecessor came back to him as he resolved to protect and fight for the girl that had captured his heart.

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Royal Castle, Underground Shelter

As Feuer crafted his spell, the flames grew ever stronger.

Their heat began to overcome even Canglong's Dragon King Aura and reach his scales.

Such magic and heat... There will be an explosion even if he dies now...! Canglong thought. The spell's activation and the explosion caused by the caster's death were the exact same thing.

If that volume of heat was released, the entire shelter would melt in a split second. Not even those who fled would survive. The heat waves were so intense that they would instantly kill even someone equipped with a Brooch.

The castle, as well as Altea as a whole, would be absolutely devastated by this heat.

To prevent that, Canglong had only two options — either he could take Feuer somewhere else or somehow dampen the heat that was being released.

The former wasn't possible because they were deep underground, but the latter also held its own problems.

Will my Dragon King Aura be enough...? Canglong wondered. The legendary Draconic Emperor that had come before his predecessor had possessed countless techniques he could use to counter this situation, but the techniques had died with him. Neither Honglong that came after him, nor Canglong, the title's current holder, could use them.

The most he could do with his latent Dragon King Aura was to stop the preliminary heat waves.

Because of his Gulong Cells skill, the Draconic Emperor himself could focus on defense and survive even if he was at the heart of the explosion, but everyone else would die.

If I do not prevent this, then the city...and Elizabeth would...!

There were limits, but he had to surpass them.

...I will transform my life force into magic to enhance my Dragon King Aura.

He resolved to do this, even if it cost him his life.

Ready and prepared, he faced the burning Idea — when suddenly...

"Ah...!"

...he felt a presence behind him. Most of the people had already left the shelter, but there was still one person behind him.

"Cang..."

It was the very girl he wanted to protect more than anyone else.

"Elizabeth! Why are you still here?!" Despite his Dragon King Aura, the heat in the surroundings was growing ever higher. It wouldn't take long for it to become powerful enough to incinerate someone — even before the explosion actually occurred.

Despite that, Elizabeth was standing behind him.

"Cang...run away with us!" Those words were enough for him to understand that she'd returned because she was *worried* about him, left alone in the flames.

She was concerned about Canglong, even after seeing him exposed as the monstrous entity that he was.

That fact almost made his heart waver, but he kept it steady by clenching his teeth.

He then took off his mask and looked at her.

Neither human nor dragon — his was a face as distorted as that of the Idea he was fighting.

And he was now baring it to her.

"I am the Draconic Emperor...an abomination," he said. "*This* is what I am — nothing like you. So please, run..."

His words were those of rejection...

"*You are not an abomination*!"

...but they were rejected in turn.

She raised her voice as though to blow away his self-loathing and low opinion of himself.

"You are my friend..." she said. Draconic Emperor or not, they *were* still friends. "You are also my fiancé... *And you will be my family*!"

Shock overcame Canglong. She just said that, in spite of it all, she still saw him as one she would spend her life with.

"So, please...! There are still so many things...I want to talk to you about...and ask! So...please...! Let us..." Whether it was due to the feelings in her heart or the fear of the oncoming flames, she was crying too much to finish her sentence properly.

However, he clearly heard her say, "Let us live together."

It didn't need to be voiced to reach him.

In silence, Canglong looked away from her and put on the mask again.

As he did, a tear running down his cheek disappeared in the coming heat. However, in his heart, there was now something that could never vanish.

“Your Highness! Your Highness Elizabeth!” Marquis Findle cried as he rushed into the shelter. Upon seeing the princess, he rushed to her and took her in his remaining arm.

“Marquis Findle, take care of Elizabeth.”

“...Of course!” Canglong entrusted Elizabeth to the man and faced the flame once more.

“Cang...!” Elizabeth called.

“...I *will* come back to you. So please, leave this to me.”

“...Very well!” With that promise made, he listened to them leave behind him.

As the sound of them going up the steps faded, he began to speak.

“...King of Blaze.” He was talking to Feuer Lazburn — the Idea slowly turning into a roiling mass of flame. “Up until moments ago, I intended to stop you even if it cost me my life.”

Canglong had planned to subdue the explosion using all his magic as well as his own life force.

“I would never do that now. I cannot give you my life. It belongs to her. I will stop your flames *and* keep myself alive. I apologize if that seems greedy, but I cannot give up on anything!”

He was now resolved to protect his life...for the sake of the promise he’d made to the one he loved and their future together.

“That...*is what I have decided!*”

With that, he faced the all-consuming flame of destruction.

The fire said nothing in response. With his eyes and ears gone, he probably hadn’t even heard what Canglong had said.

However, he felt *something*, and it was enough for him to warp his nearly destroyed mouth into a grin and...

“Supernova.”

...speak the name of the completed final attack.

Supernova was the pinnacle of fire magic — a school focused on turning magic into pure heat.

It was in many ways the direct opposite of the ultimate job skill of King of Blaze, Fixed Star.

While Fixed Star was focused on concentrating and controlling immense amounts of magic to create an all-melting orb of fire, Supernova had no such concentration or control.

None of the magic used was directed towards managing the power involved, and since the MP needed to manage spells was proportional to the MP used by the spell itself, this allowed him to release all of his magic at once.

Since there was no control, the vast amount of magic that would normally be used for that purpose would all become heat instead.

Indeed — Supernova was nothing but a skill that merely put layer upon layer of heat escalation and then released it all. It was omnidirectional and indiscriminate, harming even the user.

It was a self-destruct skill, and that was exactly what made it impossible to deal with.

Feuer now had absurd amounts of magic even compared to Superior Jobs, and since he was converting it all into heat...stopping him was impossible.

Canglong himself knew that well.

Despite that, he hadn't given up. To do so would be to give up on his own life and that of his beloved. Even if it took him past his limits, he would protect everything he could.

After Canglong gathered his resolve, Feuer activated his final attack, turning him into what looked like a human-sized sun.

A moment later, heat that turned everything into ash before evaporating even that began to push in all directions.

If it was released, it would not only scorch the passage Elizabeth was in, but also turn the entire city into a burning hell.

"*OOAAAGHH*!"

Thus, Canglong gave his all to spread out his Dragon King Aura and enhance its mitigating effect. The effort was such that it affected even his gulong body.

He released vast amounts of Dragon King Aura in order to envelop Feuer and his exploding flames.

The heat and the aura clashed, sending the temperature around them roaring up to three thousand degrees Celsius. The shelter now looked like the inside of a furnace, but thanks to the Dragon King Aura, the effect was mostly confined to the immediate area.

"Gh...!" Smoke began to rise from Canglong's scales and flesh, but he didn't weaken his aura one bit.

His fight against the heat was like sealing away a small star. Even the Draconic Emperor's absurd power was pushed to the limits with this task.

He threw his hands, along with the Dragon King Aura, right towards the heat, suppressing it.

The knowledge that weakening his aura could mean his beloved's death stopped him from even *thinking* of doing so.

He was immovable, but the coming heat was unstoppable. It was still anyone's battle.

"Ah...!" At the core of the heat he was suppressing, the sun-like orb was growing more luminous...and larger.

Despite the immense heat, the sight sent a chill down his spine.

Even this immense heat was only the beginning...? Like an earthquake, there were fast, weaker advance waves, followed by intense, slower waves.

The weak waves so far already carried more heat than the Fixed Star Rain that had melted Golem Bellcross. The heat of the true Supernova was far above what Canglong had expected.

"Even so...!"

Even so, he wouldn't run or move, for he *had* to push this heat back.

He was the Draconic Emperor — perhaps the strongest tian of these times — as well as a boy who had found a girl he loved.

Thus, he resolved to stay here and continue subduing the heat.

Would Canglong burn first, or would the overflowing heat consume the castle and the city while he still stood?

Or perhaps there would be some miracle that would let him claim victory?

It was as though his fate depended on a dice roll by some heavenly *observers* far greater than even him...

"Need a hand?"

...but then someone else came, taking the dice in their own hand.

A person was standing in this furnace-like space, talking to Canglong.

He had no idea how long they had been there, but someone was right behind him.

The presence of a person in this room that he'd thought contained only him and the flame filled Canglong with shock.

The person asking that question seemed to have appeared from thin air.

"Oh wait. 'Need a hand?' isn't the right thing to say in this case. I don't want this castle blown away, so I won't accept your refusal. 'Please let me help' is more apt. Neither you alone nor I alone are capable of dealing with this magic anyway."

The unfamiliar voice belonged to a *young woman*, but Canglong didn't even have the capacity to ask her who she was.

This space would instantly burn any normal person to death. Yet she appeared here as though she'd planned it — which she had — and talked to Canglong with an unfittingly casual tone.

"Oh, if you don't mind me saying, the Dragon King Aura you're using now isn't suited to phenomena like this. The standard Dragon King Aura is a defensive function that mitigates both physical and magic attacks. If you're using it against a single phenomenon, the magic-mitigation effectiveness isn't that great. With something like this, it would be more effective to use an aura focused *solely* on heat mitigation. I would like you to shift to that, please."

"Huh?" Not only was she speaking casually — she sounded like a laid-back professor.

"Ohh. Well, one of your predecessors was...*apparently* very good at such fine-tuning of the aura, but you aren't at that level, I assume? Sorry for demanding something you can't deliver. Oh, and sorry for giving you a lecture before even introducing myself. You are the current Draconic Emperor... 'Prince Canglong,' was it? Sorry if I seem rude. Unfortunately, back when I was a girl, I swore that I wouldn't use polite language with anyone but my late teacher. I do keep my letters formal sometimes, but I'm actually quite stubborn about this."

Canglong was on the verge of just directly asking what she was, and the woman could sense that.

In response, smiling in spite of the situation, she said, "Ha ha hah! You must wonder who I am. Well, I'm basically the one King of Blaze was looking for."

"Ah...!" Shock overcame Canglong. He could scarcely believe it.

"Though, with his eyes and ears melted, I don't think he even has the ability to acknowledge me. Still, here’s an introduction.”

The person faced the Draconic Emperor — as well as Feuer behind him.

“I am the one who inherited everything from my teacher.” She then folded her arms, put a finger over the rim of her monocle, and said...

“Arch Sage, Integra.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Life of Fire

Royal Castle, Fourth Floor

“...Now *this* is truly troublesome.”

It was the moment after Feuer Lazburn had activated Supernova. Upon hearing that it was possible that the explosion underground could blow away the entire capital, Dormouse prepared to take Theresia away from the site of the blast.

Infection Citadel could absorb the great amounts of Supernova’s heat and protect Theresia, but if she was found unscathed within a crater left by an explosion that obliterated the city, it would become far too difficult for them to operate in the future.

If Dormouse went there to stop the explosion from even happening, the same questions would arise.

That meant that Duchess’s suggestion — running away from the explosion — was the most reasonable one, and he intended to follow it.

“Wait, Dormouse. No need to evacuate. Stay where you are.”

However, he was stopped by another colleague addressing him.

It was Humpty Dumpty — the one in charge of Embryos. While Duchess used message windows, Humpty talked directly to Dormouse’s mind.

“What is your business, Dumpty? What do you mean there is no need to evacuate?”

“The signature of the Embryo within the tian who is trying to blow himself up has vanished. Now — at least in theory — he is nothing but a tian.”

“What does that matter?”

“Don’t you understand? A tian’s attack would work on The Evil, wouldn’t it?”

“Ah...! Humpty, you...!”

Dormouse instantly understood what Humpty intended. The Evil would no longer recognize Feuer Lazburn as a foreign entity, so she was suggesting that they should just let his explosion take Theresia.

Saying nothing, Dormouse thought of the girl sitting silently on his back.

If The Evil died, it would take quite a while for a new The Evil to achieve completion.

The time span depended greatly on the previous The Evil's level of completion upon death, but it was certain that if Theresia died now...the next The Evil would not arrive before their plans were complete.

The Evil and The Demise — the greatest problems the control AIs had. Letting Feuer's explosion blow them away was nothing but a good thing for them.

"Humpty, that is..."

However, Dormouse hesitated to follow her advice.

"Oh? What's the delay?"

"...If I continue observing her as I am, the likelihood of her becoming complete as The Evil is low. In fact, by letting her get caught in the explosion, we might activate her safety measures and suffer unforeseen consequences..."

Dormouse argued against Humpty's idea, but his words came off as mere excuses.

"I see. Unforeseen consequences or total erasure...which do you think is more likely?"

"I..."

"Dormouse... You're just being sentimental, aren't you?"

Dormouse was unable to say that he wasn't.

In fact, she was completely right. It was his job to protect The Evil, Theresia, but he hadn't exactly remained emotionally detached from his job.

In fact, his relationship with Theresia was no longer just about the role to him.

"The Evil of this era is like your Master, so you're just making up emotion-based reasons for protecting her. It's not rational."

Dormouse was shocked by the truth of those words. When he was but an Embryo, his Master had been a sickly little girl — a frail child who would surely die without help.

Perhaps his power to protect, as well as his plague-like true power, came about because he had been born from her.

He and his power had grown for the purpose of protection, eventually making him a Superior Embryo; then, they had allowed him to pass the final test and become an Infinite Embryo.

And the girl that was his Master, having grown into a woman by then, was there to watch him reach that point. Relieved that he could now live without a Master, she had then gone on to pass away.

It would be a lie to claim that Dormouse didn't see his late Master in Theresia — a sickly girl who needed his protection.

"But all of that is meaningless, Dormouse. Regardless of whether The Evil lives or dies, when the project is over, *Infinite Dendrogram* will—"

"I understand! I just...!"

"You seem to be quite troubled. I suppose that is an expression of your feelings for your Master?"

As she spoke, Humpty's words seemed cold.

"Sorry, but *I just can't relate*."

Perhaps Cheshire, Rabbit, or some other control AIs would've been moved by Dormouse's words. However, he knew well that that could never happen with Humpty.

He knew that she could never have any strong emotion towards her Master...and that very quality was why she was in charge of Embryos.

"*A philosophical zombie* like you would never understand..."

"Oh? But Dormouse, insulting me like that seems like you're expressing a wish to die." Humpty wasn't even present, but her words carried true murderous intent.

Dormouse knew well that Humpty was one of the few who could break through his absolute physical and chemical defense. Once called the Incarnation of Death, she was a being that no Infinite Embryo could defeat by themselves.

In spite of the threat, Dormouse refused to back down. He was preparing to say something back when...

[Stop...right there.]

...Duchess stopped them.

[You can no longer...run away in time...regardless. So, Dormouse...stay there...and decide...whether to protect or not...when the time comes...]

"...Very well." Dormouse nodded.

Humpty had already cut the comms line.

“Your Highness! Your Highness Theresia!” Shortly after that, a voice calling for Theresia rang out through the fourth floor. It belonged to Liliana, who’d been looking for the princess all this time. She was accompanied by the K&R Masters, who’d rushed here after seeing the explosion at the castle.

They quickly found Theresia and Dormouse and rushed over to them.

“Your Highness... I am so glad you are well...!”

“I’m glad you’re okay too...” Finding Theresia filled the search party with relief.

However, Dormouse realized that this made it nearly impossible for them to leave the capital.

“Let us head to the underground shelter, then. Your sister and the others are already there...”

Going there would be really bad, Dormouse thought. Liliana had yet to be informed that the underground shelter was perhaps the least safe place in the entire castle.

As Dormouse wondered how to convey that information...

“Huh?”

...a message window suddenly appeared before them.

No, this wasn’t a semitransparent, board-like message window, and it certainly hadn’t been summoned by Duchess.

It was actually a hologram created using illusion magic, and it said, “Refrain from approaching the area. I am currently below, dealing with explosive material. Stay away from the underground shelter and *the walls*.”

Behind the hologram, there was a wall that seemed to be made using ocean magic. Circular in shape, it covered a part of the fourth floor, and if the inside was empty, it could be described as a cylinder.

It was likely that it continued all the way down to the first floor, if not lower.

The barrier felt like the border of a construction site, or perhaps *something* that was aimed towards the sky.

“Who could have created this... Oh?” Confused, Liliana continued reading the message, and she quickly saw the text saying “Arch Sage, Integra.”

“Integra?! When did she come back?!” Seeing the name of an old friend surprised Liliana, but Dormouse didn’t know much about her. All he knew was that she was the Arch Sage's disciple as well as apparently the creator of the barrier around the castle.

What mattered here was that she was doing something about King of Blaze's explosion.

He didn't know if she would be successful or if the city would be blown away in spite of her efforts. But if she wasn't able to...if the explosion actually happened...not even Dormouse himself knew if he would decide to protect Theresia or not.

Even the processing power of an Infinite Embryo wasn't enough for him to fully understand his own heart and mind.

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Royal Castle, Underground Shelter

Upon hearing the girl introduce herself as the Arch Sage, the star that was the core of the heat seemed to tremble slightly.

It was strange, considering that his eyes, ears, body, and even his brain must've been completely obliterated by now.

"I am the Arch Sage you've been waiting for, Feuer Lazburn. If you wanted a duel against my teacher, I'm here to inherit that too. Oh, and even if you no longer need it, let me tell you that I'm not one to let go of what I've rightfully inherited."

As though his soul was still present somehow, the Supernova that was the remains of King of Blaze was reacting to her words — the words of the Arch Sage.

"Let's continue where we left off, shall we? This time, instead of doing what my teacher did, I will win against you in the most effective and relentless way I can think of. This was my teacher's response, and it will be our final offering to you."

Integra — the new Arch Sage — cracked a confident grin.

There was little time left until the Supernova detonated.

The only thing they could do was rely on Canglong's Dragon King Aura and Integra's magic.

As the Arch Sage, Integra could cast a wide array of spells belonging to the greater elements of atmos, earth, and ocean, as well as spells outside of that framework. She'd used teleportation to suddenly appear in this shelter, and she could even use the grand dark magic composite spell of Imaginary Meteo that her teacher had perfected.

However, that was the limit of her power. Armed with only a normal tian's magic, she would have to face heat even greater than that of Gloria's Overdrive. It was reckless to even attempt something like this.

It was likely that she couldn't withstand King of Blaze's onslaught even if she cast her strongest defensive spells or barriers specialized against heat.

That was just how intensely hot the Supernova was.

And it was why they needed a bit of trickery.

"Now, young Canglong. Sorry, but can you keep your Dragon King Aura running at full capacity for about two more minutes? Definitely no more than that."

In response, the Draconic Emperor nodded.

The Arch Sage of Altar. Canglong had heard of such a person, and he had heard them called the strongest caster of the west. The Arch Sage had been described as an old man, but since she spoke of inheritance, it was easy to guess that this woman was simply the new holder of the title.

Canglong found it strange that she'd suddenly appeared at such a time, but more than that, he appreciated the reinforcement.

And if she had a means of overcoming this predicament, his only real choice was to do as she asked.

"Well, it will all end in two minutes, anyway. That's about when the capital will be blown away."

"Huh?!" The shock from her words was such that Canglong almost weakened his Dragon King Aura.

"Well, I'm not saying that that's how long we'll last or that the spell's peak is coming in two minutes... Two minutes is just about how long it'll take for the walls to melt and the underground water to pour in."

Canglong already knew that this underground shelter was designed for long-term stays and thus included a water supply. That meant that this place was linked to an underground water main.

And if the water so much as touched Feuer as he was now, there would be a violent steam explosion that would flip the city upside down.

"Honestly, it's already pretty bad with the heat that's being conducted alone. We need to hurry and do something...by which I mean removing his heat from here."

Those words reminded Canglong of the moment Integra had appeared.

She'd probably achieved this by short-distance teleportation, which in this world was some of the rarest magic, usable only by a select few.

He guessed that she intended to take Feuer out of here using the same means, but...

"Oh, and by 'removing,' I don't mean teleportation. I can't do that. The spell only works on me, and it can't cover a great distance. And even if I could use it on other people, I'd burn up the moment I touched that thing. That's why the method I'm thinking of is simpler...and more basic," she said as he raised a hand up. "Though, it required some difficult preparation. Oh, and forgive me if it seems like I'm talking too much," she added as she winked with the eye that didn't have a monocle over it. "After all, all I've said so far was a *Chant* for this spell... High-End Heat Resist wall, ultra-multilayered expansion."

The moment she said that, nothing happened in their immediate vicinity — but up above at the castle, reaching up to the fourth floor, holograms appeared with a message on them, as well as something circular...or cylindrical.

It was a tube-like barrier spell that reached from the first floor all the way to its top and beyond.

The caster could freely choose the words used in a Chant, but Integra had used such a long spiel as a Chant that no one could guess that it was, and the enhancement from it was now used on this barrier spell.

A magic barrier of the ocean element, meant specifically to shut out heat, covering a long distance and composed of hundreds of layers, immediately activated.

The barrier felt like the edge of a construction site, or perhaps *a chimney* that was aimed towards the sky.

This was Integra's simple and basic counter against Supernova.

"Now, young Canglong, are you familiar with the principles behind the composition of fire spells like Crimson Sphere?"

"Huh...?"

"Thanks to the Archetype System, they can be used as job skills, so if you have the level, you can cast them without even knowing how they work. However, they can be broken down into three components," she Chanted as if giving him a lecture. "The transformation of magic into heat energy, the control to prevent unnecessary spread, and direction, which grants the attack a vector. You can use job skills without considering these things, but like King of Blaze before us did, if you understand the structure, you can construct your *own* spells. What he did was disregard everything but the transformation of magic into heat energy."

Canglong listened, saying nothing.

"Whether you can create original spells depends on whether you have the intelligence and talent to look past the simplification used by jobs and delve into the actual workings of the magic itself. Oh, and even though Draconic Emperor isn't a caster job, I remem...read that the one from two generations before yours excelled at this technique."

Casually mentioning the Draconic Emperor who had surpassed all others, she pushed up her monocle...

"And if I wasn't able to do all of that...I wouldn't even have inherited this job."

...and activated her own modified Crimson Sphere.

"Well, that was another long-winded speech, but this is about all I can do." She had crafted this spell while removing one of the three factors making the sphere the fireball it was supposed to be.

It was control. Controlling the extent of a spell required more magic than the actual magic-heat transformation, so if she focused on the transformation alone while facing someone who had greater magic than her, not even someone of her caliber would be able to insert the control factor.

However, the situation was different with direction. Supernova was a magic-heat transformation spell without regard for control of any kind.

In other words, it was nothing but a release of heat without direction.

That was why Integra wove a spell that was effectively the *opposite* of Supernova — a spell that gave the heat direction.

She was warding off Feuer's final attack by influencing it from the outside and giving its heat a specific vector.

And the only direction...is up, she thought. They were underground. Focusing it in any other direction would cause the ground around it to melt, increasing casualties on the surface.

And in the worst case scenario, the heat would make contact with the underground water main and completely destroy the whole city.

That was why she could only release the heat upwards — towards the distant sky.

It was something like adding a chimney to an active furnace.

And I've already prepared the chimney. She'd set up the insulation barrier to make sure that the castle wasn't incinerated as Supernova's heat traveled up.

If it was directed upwards without this barrier, it would no doubt burn the castle down. However, now that the insulation barrier was complete, the heat would travel up without causing much harm...at least, according to her calculations.

"Young Canglong, focus your Dragon King Aura upwards. And when I give the sign, increase your output. Can I count on you for that?"

"...Yes!"

Following Integra's order, Canglong modified his Dragon King Aura. At the same time, Integra activated the heat-vector spell.

Now...let's see how this goes. With the Dragon King Aura that had once contained it now gone and its direction set, the heat of Supernova began to flow upwards. The searing heat melted the reinforced walls of the shelter, reached the surface, and passed through the insulation barrier to flow towards the sky while piercing through every floor of the castle.

The heat made the clouds in Altea's sky begin to evaporate.

It was a cataclysmic sight, but it was done with the precision of a laboratory experiment. Its scale was actually a bit subdued, given the context.

Success...so far. The heat was following the path set out for it, and the chimney-like insulation barrier seemed to be holding.

The temperature increase inside the shelter also began to slow down, and so far they seemed to have spared the walls leading to the underground water main.

According to my calculations, this should be good enough, Integra thought. However, it was still uncertain if this would be enough to contain the true explosion...if all that heat would actually escape to the sky.

Could the insulation barrier bear the heat that would accompany that blast? And would they be able to protect themselves from the inferno raging at the heart of the explosion?

Even if most of the heat escaped to the sky, it would still be the most powerful where the two of them stood, next to Feuer.

If the insulation barrier Integra had created and Canglong's Dragon King Aura weren't enough, the capital would be leveled by the steam explosion that would result when the heat touched the water main. The chimney wouldn't help with that.

Approximately twenty percent of the total heat will not escape through the chimney. Twenty percent of a temperature that can destroy the capital... Considering the water main, this might not be good. Will we be able to block the real explosion? If not, then all I inherited from my teacher and those before him would be lost. All because of me.

Integra had remained calm while talking with Canglong, but on the inside, she was worried. A cold sweat, caused by tension and terror, joined with the sweat running down her face from the intense heat.

"Ngh...!" However, Integra slapped her own cheek, banishing her worry.

Though she was afraid, she wouldn't admit it. She knew that fear was something she could not afford to have.

She was certain that the magic she'd been taught wasn't weak enough to lose to some last-ditch spell woven and cast at the cost of a mere single life.

Thus, she focused and waited for the right moment.

When the explosion came, she would add her own insulation barrier.

Beyond the Dragon King Aura, she saw the Supernova — the remains of King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn. It was still growing and would reach its full extent in less than a minute.

That moment would be like a fork in the road for both her and her predecessors — and before it split, she looked back at the past. Specifically, she remembered the time the previous Arch Sage had dueled King of Blaze, taking his specialized spell and showing just how much difference there was between them.

Perhaps if the Arch Sage hadn't used fire magic back then, it wouldn't have come to this.

However, Integra knew the two reasons why her teacher did what he'd done.

First, he wanted to show the power and presence of the Arch Sage. Masters had begun to increase in number since that fateful duel. An all-rounded caster crushing a specialized caster at his own forte — this had shown his unmatched power to the world, which resulted in certain developments later.

Second, he wanted to make King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn, better himself. By showing what lay beyond the magic Feuer wielded, the Arch Sage had urged him to seek it.

If that had broken him, the Arch Sage would have deemed Feuer useless.

However, everything had turned out exactly as the Arch Sage had intended, but in some ways completely different than he imagined.

Feuer Lazburn hadn't been broken, and he had indeed renewed his vigor for training to become stronger.

However, in the course of this, he'd also become an Idea — a being that could completely destroy the Arch Sage's plans.

The Arch Sage could not have anticipated something like this.

And that's why I need to fix my teacher's mistake. King of Blaze had been inspired by the last Arch Sage, and as a result had become an obstacle. As the inheritor of all of this, Integra was resolved to settle things once and for all.

Finally, the time came.

The star-like orb of fire pulsated, signifying that it was reaching its limit.

"Dragon King Aura! Full power! Now!"

"OOAAGHH!" In response to Integra's order, Canglong created an intense aura that used even his own life force as fuel. At the same time, Integra activated the greatest insulation magic she'd ever prepared.

"Hundred-fold insulation barrier...activate!" Flat barriers, twenty in number for each direction, surrounded Feuer like a box.

The barriers hid away the star inside, and the Dragon King Aura enveloped it.

Then came the fateful moment...and the space was filled with a light so intense it seemed like it might swallow up the whole world.

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Fire

How many people have learned the meaning of their life only at the very final moments of it?

It was perhaps impossible to know the exact number. No one could truly know what someone else was thinking right as their spark was snuffed out.

Why were they born? For what purpose had they lived? And did they leave this life with a feeling of satisfaction?

Only the person in question could come to know the meaning behind their birth...or they vanished without ever learning it at all.

Feuer Lazburn's life was a flame — a life dedicated solely to fire.

He'd sacrificed his time, way of life, morals, and even his body to that flame.

His life was lit by fire and had been consumed by it.

And ultimately, he'd transformed his very body into flame itself.

He understood that he'd given everything he had to create the strongest fire of all — to prove that his kind of magic was the strongest.

However...the meaning was still lost to him.

His life had been dedicated to fire, but for what purpose?

He recalled that his reason for trying to defeat the Arch Sage was to prove that fire magic reigned supreme. He'd taken on his family's goal and trained from a young age to prove the power of fire.

But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find a *reason* for delivering that proof.

He lived to prove he was strongest, but what would that proof accomplish? While he dedicated himself to pursuing that proof, he couldn't think of any reason for it.

Feuer Lazburn was like a fire himself.

A spark caught and burned, shone for a moment, and then was reduced to ash.

His life had been one of light and heat, and it left behind nothing of consequence.

And if he wasn't even able to prove that he was the strongest, it would all be even more meaningless.

He wouldn't even leave a corpse, and his entire life would be...

"I'm...alive. Well...that was some intense magic..."

As the mind Feuer Lazburn had used to comprehend meaning gradually slipped away, he suddenly perceived a voice praising him.

With his eyes, ears, and flesh lost, Feuer still somehow felt the voice of a woman.

It was his first time hearing it, for when she'd first spoken, his ears were already gone.

The voice belonged to Integra...who had survived his flame.

She was still standing in the shelter.

Their surroundings had completely changed. The walls between them and the water main that supplied the castle had melted away, creating a small river on the floor.

It was evaporating as it touched the heated walls and floor of the shelter, but the reaction wasn't intense enough to cause a steam explosion. The walls had only superficially melted away, and the source of the heat — Supernova — was already dissipating.

Now, the water main was slowly cooling all it passed by.

Beside Integra, who was standing near the center of the shelter, there was Canglong, lying down on the wet floor, but still breathing.

The destruction of the capital had been prevented, and the ones responsible for this feat were still alive.

There was now a hole piercing everything from the shelter to the top of the castle, but the castle itself was still intact.

That meant that Feuer Lazburn's final spell had been prevented from demonstrating its immense destructive power to the entire world.

"The hundred-fold insulation barrier, the Dragon King Aura of the strongest Draconic Emperor so far, and this fire damage-cutting accessory made by my teacher himself...and I'm still coming out of it like this." Integra was in an awful state. Her entire body was covered in burns; some parts of her had serious injury-based status effects. Her heat resistant clothes were now nothing but burnt rags.

"My eyes and ears aren't working either. The barrier only stopped heat, so light and sound still passed through. My eyes were burned away even though they were closed, and my ear drums were ruptured too. Honestly, I'm talking here, but I don't even know if anyone can hear me. Or maybe I died and I'm just a spirit now. No — my entire body hurts really bad, so I've got to be alive."

Perhaps Integra was speaking in spite of her heavy wounds because she wanted to convince herself that she wasn't actually dead. That was just how much of a close call this was.

"You might've already burned up completely, but let me tell you just one thing, Feuer Lazburn." Integra continued to address the man before her, who now had no proper shape or shadow.

Would she berate him for harming her so severely, or would she mock him for being a fool?

What she actually said...

“I am the Arch Sage and the inheritor of two thousand years’ worth of knowledge.”

...was neither of those things.

“As such, I assure you that your fire magic is by far the strongest in this entire era. No one alive has mastered the flame like you.”

She actually praised his power.

And these words of hers actually reached his lingering soul.

“Your magic won’t be forgotten. We remember *all* spells, and we will never forget yours.”

Hearing that about the magic he’d woven, Feuer Lazburn found that his life had, indeed, held some kind of purpose...and was satisfied with it.

I see... In that case...there was meaning to it all...

A moment after that, the soul vanished as though it had no grudges or regrets.

The man who’d lived a life of fire...burned away.

Epilogue

Royal Capital, Altea

Riser woke up due to a slight warmth on his cheek.

He blinked to fix his hazy sight. Slowly, his focus returned.

When his vision became clear, he found himself looking down at the capital from high above it, watching an immense amount of heat rise to the air.

He could feel the heat, but it wasn't great enough to harm him all the way up here.

"That's..."

"Ah! Riser! You're awake!" The voice belonged to a fellow member of the Babylonian Battlegroup, Lang. That was when Riser realized that he was being carried on the back of Lang's hippogriff.

"...What happened since I was out?"

"You beat the leader of the bee-men. That made the other bee-men stop moving, so I flew up into the sky, saw you fall, and went to catch you."

"And that pillar of fire?"

"I don't know. It just appeared a bit ago... But the people at the castle seem to be fine."

"...I see." Realizing that everything would work out, Riser was relieved.

Shortly after, the hippogriff landed in the fountain plaza where they had first encountered Regina Apis Idea.

After dismounting, Riser looked around and confirmed that little had changed since he took to the sky.

Having seen them land, everyone he'd left behind started to approach him.

"Mr. Riser, I'm glad you're...o...kay...?" Kasumi said, only to tilt her head in confusion mid-sentence.

Io and Fujinon also seemed puzzled.

"What's the matter?" Riser asked.

"You *are* Riser...aren't you?"

“Yes. Why ask— Hm?”

That was when he realized that something wasn’t right about his head.

Touching his head in several places, he realized what it was.

“Oh, right. I lost my mask.”

The full-face mask that defined him had been broken during the midair fight, so his (or rather, his avatar’s) face was now completely exposed.

It was the sort of face one might see on twentieth century tokusatsu heroes before they transformed. It wasn’t all that special, but the very fact that you could see his face at all shocked everyone present, including Babylonian Battlegroup members.

“So that’s Riser’s face... First time seeing it.”

“That guy had a face...?”

What did you think *I was?* Riser thought in response.

“Mr. Lang doesn’t seem surprised, though...” noted Kasumi. Lang was the one who picked up the maskless Riser, but he didn’t seem the least bit shaken by the sight.

“Yeah. I actually saw his face when we took a bath together.”

“A bath,” the three girls said in perfect unison.

Oh yeah, that happened, Riser thought. It was back when he and Lang had visited Quartierlatin and went to the large bath at the inn. He wasn’t unreasonable enough to wear a mask in a situation like that.

Actually, Riser only wore a mask as a matter of personal pride. The fact that his face was almost completely unknown was merely a side effect.

“Bathing...together,” said Kasumi.

“Two men, completely nude,” said Fujinon.

“Very nice! Thank you very much!” said Io.

“‘...Nice?’” Riser and Lang tilted their heads in unison. The next moment, Fujinon threw a body blow into Io’s side.

“Ghh...?! Th-That’s not fair...! Yours was pretty bad too...!”

“Yours was too blatant.”

“Nnh...! But your collection is *way* worse than...”

“That’s a declaration of war.”

“Awhawha... Y-You two...stop it...” The girls’ exchange made Riser smile wryly, and some of the others around them began to laugh.

He looked around and saw both Masters and tians here.

This moment of calm after the storm made Riser once again realize something.

"...I protected them this time." He repeated the words he'd spoken before he'd lost consciousness, as though to confirm that they were indeed true.

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Royal Castle, Underground Shelter

After Feuer Lazburn's Supernova was prevented from destroying the castle or the capital, only the sound of running water remained in the underground.

Elizabeth and the Altarians had evacuated, Feuer had vanished, Canglong had fainted, and Integra, though heavily injured, had carried him away, leaving the place empty.

The water from the main was pouring into the shelter through a hole in the wall; through the hole melted into the ceiling by Supernova, sunlight streamed in from several dozen metels above.

Suddenly, a bandaged woman appeared in this previously vacant space.

"Close. This place almost collapsed before the next plan could succeed," she whispered as she waded through waist-deep water.

Feuer...the Idea La Crima gave him had gone out of control. Because of that, Claudiah's plan C had almost fallen apart before it could even begin.

Saying nothing, Zeta privately questioned La Crima's ability.

Besides the mass-produced Apis Ideas, the hybrids she'd deployed here had all been modified while maintaining their personalities. That was good if you wanted to make the best use of the tians' combat experience, and it was especially important if they were meant to operate independently.

La Crima could also make Ideas without any remnants of past personality, but they couldn't function without operating towers such as La Crima herself or Regina Apis Idea.

To I.F., which was far harder to fill than most clans, the Ideas were precious firepower. Logan could provide incidental firepower by summoning devils, but overall they lacked the pieces needed to play on this ever-growing board.

However, if these Ideas could go out of control, Zeta felt that they might be more trouble than they were worth. If they often did as Ignis Idea had and decided to destroy themselves using the very magic they'd been granted, ultimately they'd be nothing but a problem.

I will have to file a report to La Crima about this. Even if he'd caused trouble, though, Ignis Idea had only been capable of crafting a spell this powerful exactly because he still had his mind. It seemed like managing the positives and negatives of Idea creation would be a difficult and dangerous task.

To them, however, the fact that the "material" involved was *tians* was neither a positive nor negative.

"Commencing. Moving over to prepare for plan C."

Zeta walked through the shelter towards the hole in the wall. As she took out a white whale-like accessory, she looked down at the flowing water.

"...Abundance. This place has a wealth of water and air," she whispered, touching the water in which her lower body was submerged.

That was what she'd said back when she'd first appeared in Granvaloa.

Her real self couldn't even imagine having enough water to get this wet.

That was also the reason why she'd picked Granvaloa as her starting country.

"...I'm jealous." She let her honest feelings show for once. The world of *Infinite Dendrogram* was full of water and air, and she couldn't help but be jealous of that — as well as loathe it.

It was the sentiment of the have-not. To some, *Infinite Dendrogram* was a means of escapism...a shelter from reality...and she knew that better than anyone else.

And exactly because she *could escape* into this world, she understood that it couldn't be just a game.

Zeta slowly looked upwards.

The ceiling blocked the view of the sky, but she could still picture it clearly in her mind — both the sky and *even what lay beyond it*.

"...I imagine that no one here has ever reached for a world beyond what their hands could touch..." She spoke words that reached no other ears.

And suddenly, her vision was lost.

She'd been thrown into a pitch-black darkness, akin to a starless night. She couldn't even guess which direction was which.

What is this? A darkness where she was blind even with her eyes wide open... Zeta hurriedly tried to use Uranus to create a defensive barrier of compressed air, but before she could, a slight shock ran through her body.

The darkness then vanished, and her vision returned.

She then looked down to see a warped hand sticking out of her chest...and holding her heart.

For a moment, she thought of Xunyu, whom she'd defeated, but it couldn't be her. This wasn't a metal prosthetic, but the arm of a living creature.

Before even looking back, she tried to attack behind herself using Uranus's compressed air bullets, but the owner of the dark hand pulled out his arm and quickly backed away.

Having lost her heart, Zeta almost collapsed, but she used air control to keep herself upright.

The wound was fatal. The attack had taken her by surprise, and her Brooch had already been destroyed by Xunyu.

Before she fell, she gazed at the one who gave her this wound.

"Vesper...tilio..." It was Vespertilio Idea, otherwise known as Morter Cortana, whom she'd thought was dead because the signature of his Idea-fragment had vanished.

The darkness that took her sight had been caused by his Darkness Boundary.

But this just didn't make sense. The Idea-fragment that was keeping his modified body together was gone.

And yet, Morter's body was still intact.

No... As a living creature, he was actually more refined *now* than he was back when the Idea had been connected to him.

He looked like a human that hosted a devil, like something out of a certain famous manga series.

His agility just now, as well as the ability that allowed him to tear out Zeta's heart without even being noticed...

This was a different Morter than the one she knew.

Saying nothing more, Zeta lost all of her HP and collapsed into the water before beginning to sink.

As her avatar vanished, she thought, *I'll really have to complain to La Crima.*

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He watched as Zeta disappeared in the water.

He even checked that the disappearance wasn't some optical trick using echolocation.

Then, he spoke without even opening his mouth.

"It's me. I took care of the previous owner."

"...I see. I will call you if I have need of you again, so stay in the capital for the time being."

"...All right." With that, he cut the telepathic exchange between him and the girl that now owned him.

Morter's life was now supported by Theresia.

Given the choice to live or die, Morter had once again chosen to live.

It was entirely possible that living on, in this case, would be worse than death.

However, he also couldn't help but think that he didn't want his life to end here... After all, he had yet to do anything with it.

He was completely unlike his ex-colleague, King of Blaze. While Ignis had died to find purpose in his life, Morter was still unsatisfied and unfulfilled, so he chose to extend his.

Thus, he took on The Evil's Dependent Transformation and was once again reborn.

He was now neither man nor monster.

Losing his humanity had made him lose all his jobs — King of Raids included — but he still had enough power to make up for that loss.

He was even stronger as a Dependent than he'd been as an Idea.

However, he didn't intend to get comfortable with this power or wallow in it.

In his mind, there was only one question.

"I didn't make the wrong choice again...did I?"

The man who'd abandoned humanity to become an Idea, then abandoned that state to become a Dependent of The Evil herself, vocalized exactly what was on his mind.

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Royal Castle, Medical Office

On the castle's first floor, there was an infirmary equipped with various medicines.

Since it was built right after an era of war and the struggle against The Evil, this place was well-equipped for long stays during sieges and similar situations.

The attack had destroyed most of the castle's equipment, but since the only magic used in the medical office was for preserving medicines, it could still function as normal.

In this room was Liliana.

Around her lay several coffins, each one containing a person.

The abundance of coffins made the place seem like a morgue, but they were actually filled with Lesser Elixirs and other liquid medicines, and the people inside were none other than Theodore and the other ten or so Paladins who had fought with him.

They were still alive, but they couldn't leave the coffins.

This was the result of their fight against Aranea Idea.

They were able to destroy the creature, but the price they paid for that victory was great. They had all touched the poison Aranea released while alive, as well as those he'd spread upon death.

The poisons weren't temporary, and because they'd absorbed as much of them as they did, their cells had actually begun to mutate. As a result, they were now in a critical state that mere medicine couldn't fully cure.

Thus, they were now kept in coffins full of Lesser Elixir to slow down the progression of the disease; additionally, they were subjected to sleeping magic so they did not have to suffer through pain. Magic had been used to put them under instead of conventional drugs, in order to avoid any potential reactions with the Lesser Elixir.

Liliana stood in the room, looking at her subordinates...her fellow knights.

Suddenly, someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey, don't look so gloomy. I mean, you're gorgeous, so a poignant expression really suits you, but here it just makes it look like you're about to hold a mass funeral."

This unfunny joke was spoken by...

"Integra...!"

"It's been a while. We haven't seen each other since I left on the journey to broaden my horizons, which was...two years ago?"

"So it was that long already...?"

The speaker was Liliana's childhood friend — Arch Sage, Integra.

"...Thanks for what you did down there. That *was* your doing, right? And thanks for taking care of the poison on the first floor too."

"Yeah. I came back to the capital a short while ago, and I sensed some serious magic downstairs. And when I went there, I found King of Blaze ready to blow. I knew I had to hurry up and do *something*. The poison was just a bonus."

After the Royal Guard was overcome by the poison, Integra had gone to them, cleansed the poison, and done what she could to keep them alive. The timing of her arrival made it seem as though she'd been observing the whole thing and had only gone to clean up once it was over, but no one had questioned it.

Integra had also suffered heavy injuries during the Supernova explosion, but she now had no noticeable wounds. She had treated herself using healing magic and a few precious items she possessed.

"Back to your sad face, though. Is it because of these knights sleeping here?" Integra asked.

"...Yes. Once again...I was powerless..."

"Hmm? But I heard that you were looking for the lost princess."

"I was. But while they fought a deadly battle, I...the current leader of the knights...went through this entire ordeal without facing any danger. That's why, I—"

"You just prioritized what you had to. It is what it is." While consoling her friend so casually, Integra thought, *Not like* she *needed to be found, or any protection for that matter.*

Integra knew that Theresia was The Evil and that Dormouse was related to the Incarnations.

During the kidnapping where Theresia had encountered Shu and Sechs, the previous Arch Sage had confirmed that all of this was true.

The records clearly show that the Incarnations erased all The Evils so far. And since they can no longer kill them with tians, they're now trying to delay The Evil's completion by protecting her. Even a battle-focused Superior Job was nothing to her.

Integra considered this, as though she had actually seen Morter try to attack Theresia.

The only real danger was from King of Blaze's final attack. If they'd decided that the explosion would be enough to kill her, there's no telling how they'd act.

The Incarnation accompanying Theresia had neither retreated from the castle nor tried to stop King of Blaze. Integra had actually gone down herself because she'd considered it just that dangerous.

There's been no activity from their side since then. They didn't even get in the way when I was preventing the explosion. Does that mean that their goal wasn't to eliminate The Evil no matter what, but to eliminate it if possible*? I can't tell. I have two thousand years' worth of records describing their actions, but I still don't truly understand them... Not that I* want *to understand this invasive species.*

She cut her somewhat dark thoughts short, focusing once again on the conversation with Liliana.

Integra had thought about a lot of things, but her entire thought process hadn't lasted even a second of actual time. High-speed thinking was a basic technique of all skilled casters.

Not noticing even a fraction of what was going on inside Integra's head, Liliana vocalized her worries. "I...I can't ever save anyone by myself... Over and over again, I'm the one being saved."

"Hey, don't worry about it. These guys are thankfully still alive. Once Altimia...I mean, Her Majesty is back with that High Priestess who's supposedly with her, I'm sure she'll heal them with her magic."

"That is true... The idea does put me at ease."

Even as she consoled her friend, Integra's thoughts were turning dark.

Altimia's accompanied by Masters, eh...? Unlike the previous king, my teacher didn't mess with her outlook on this. I guess her conclusion is different despite the king's influence.

Regardless, Altar was already open to cooperation with Masters, so she had no intention of objecting. Instead, she'd decided to observe the situation between Altar and Dryfe as they both joined forces with Masters.

Perhaps I should get some information from these Masters too? In that case, I should focus on the strongest among them — the ones they call Superiors. Or perhaps the specific one responsible for Altimia's change of heart...

While considering her next move, Integra searched Liliana's face.

Integra had been sincere when she tried to cheer Liliana up, but it seemed like the knight's regret and sadness weren't so easy to disperse.

She was distressed about the current situation, certainly, but the core of her sadness was a hatred of her own weakness.

This sentiment had been building up inside her for quite some time. She was weaker than the princess she was charged to protect, and she had only barely contributed to solving the many problems facing Altar.

All of that combined was more than enough to justify her gloomy expression.

Integra was good enough friends with Liliana and Altimia to notice all of this. At the same time, though, she felt a bit bad about their intrinsic difference in position.

"If it bothers you that much that you weren't able to fight, there's nothing I can do about that — but if it's your weakness that's the problem, I may be able to help."

"Huh?"

That was why, Integra felt she needed to bring this up, as a friend.

"Out of all the things I've learned, I think there's a way to make you stronger. If you can achieve this, you will no doubt become a great deal more powerful than you are now."

That just happened to be exactly what Liliana wanted in her moment of weakness.

"And that would be...?"

Looking up at her taller friend's eyes, Integra...

"Wanna try becoming the Celestial Knight?"

...spoke the name of the Superior Job that had belonged to her late father.

◇◇◇

Royal Castle, Guest Room

Canglong woke up to find himself on a canopy bed.

He tried to get up, but there was a slight weight on his left hand.

Glancing at his right one, he realized that he had a human body again.

He then looked at his heavy left hand...

"Zzz... Zzz..."

...and saw Elizabeth, clutching at his hand in her sleep.

A glance at the window made it clear that it was already dark outside. A few hours had passed since the battle underground, and he could only guess that Elizabeth had been holding his hand the entire time.

He scanned the surroundings for any presences and sensed one that belonged to a knight beyond the door.

Canglong and Elizabeth were alone in this room, and it was all because she had asked for this.

He'd lost consciousness during the explosion underground, and the next thing he knew, he was here.

All that was certain to him was that both he and Elizabeth had survived.

Canglong slowly raised himself, reached for her head...and after some hesitation, caressed it.

"Mnh..." She moved a bit, but continued to sleep as peacefully as before.

"A lot has happened. You must be tired..." What had happened underground, the attack itself...many things were still unclear to Canglong.

However, for now, he just wanted to enjoy the fact that they were both still alive.

"Let us talk when you wake up... There are many things I must tell you, as well as things I *want* to tell you..." he said before caressing her head again.

Some time after Canglong woke up, there was a knock on the door — so silent and subdued that it did not even wake Elizabeth.

"Come in," said Canglong. The door opened, and he saw the face of a giant rodent.

"Pardon the intrusion." The giant rodent — Dormouse — entered the room, and Theresia, who was perched on his back, apologized while being careful not to wake her sister.

"Your Highness?" Canglong wondered why she'd come here. Since it was a bit late to pay him a visit, he guessed that she was here for her sister, but then...

"Sorry for leaving the tea party early."

"Huh? Ohh..."

Theresia's words instantly reminded Canglong of the tea party they'd held earlier today.

Elizabeth had arranged the party. She'd resolved to leave for Huang He, and she wanted Theresia to meet Canglong before she left. Elizabeth wanted to show her sister the person she would spend her life with and to introduce Canglong to the family that she so treasured.

The two had ended up barely talking during the tea party and had been entirely separated once the assault began.

Now that everything had subsided, they were finally together.

“Dor.” With just that one word, Dormouse placed Theresia on the floor and walked out of the room.

Now it was just Canglong, Theresia, and Elizabeth, who was still sleeping. Between them, there was nothing but a silence that felt both unbearably long and far too short.

Canglong said nothing and merely waited for Theresia to speak.

Theresia briefly exchanged glances with him before looking down at her sister, still clutching Canglong’s left hand.

Then, she caressed Elizabeth’s head like Canglong had done and...

“Protect her for me...”

...said only four words.

Theresia’s real emotions were hard to read, but Canglong was certain that those words came straight from her heart.

She had come all the way here just to say that.

For all that anyone knew, perhaps she’d actually been gathering her resolve and waiting for the chance to say this even back during the tea party.

After all, these words were a goodbye. Her sister would soon leave for a distant land, and with these words Theresia had entrusted her sister to him.

Canglong understood that.

“I will... No matter what.”

And that was why he swore this with his very soul.

No matter from what or from whom...he would protect Elizabeth.

Thus, Canglong and Theresia — Draconic Emperor and The Evil — exchanged a promise.

◆◆◆

The Gaol, Café “Dice”

On that day, Dice ended up not receiving a single customer.

You couldn't even hear any voices outside.

The gaol was a rowdy place full of commotion, so this was an abnormally peaceful day.

With her head on the table, Gerbera turned the pages of some documents, lost in thought.

She wouldn't say it out loud, but she felt that her clan leader, Sechs, wasn't quite himself today.

After talking about the final boss, his peaceful, hard-to-define aura became more like...uh...the pressure of a beast sharpening its claws? Well, I don't really know how to describe it...

All that she knew was that Sechs was different than usual.

I guess I'm weird for noticing this in the first place. Wait, I guess it's the other way around. If he seems dangerous enough that even I'm picking it up... That explains why we didn't get any guests today.

She nodded to herself in understanding before resuming her scan of the documents.

These documents contained data that the other I.F. members sent Sechs in reality. He memorized it all and wrote it down here by hand for Gerbera.

This wouldn't have been necessary if they could just send an email to Gerbera's real-world self, as well, but she hadn't shared her address with the other members. In spite of how she acted in *Dendro*, Gerbera — or Kikuko — was actually fairly internet-literate.

I mean, I can't just give my email to people who do Dendro *crimes all day...though I guess I'm not in any position to say something like that.* Boredom was making her feel even more down than usual, but she continued skimming through the documents nonetheless.

"Hmm... Ignis, Aranea, Vespertilio, and Regina Apis... They sound like real villains."

She was currently going through the info regarding the assault on Altea and the Ideas that had been used for it.

What they're doing is pretty awful too... Being here almost makes me forget this fact, but we're a real group of bad guys, aren't we?

As Gerbera thought that, the bell on the café's door rang.

"Welcome! Oh? It's been quite a while."

"Helloooo! Everyone's favorite GOD is heeere!"

A voice that sounded like candy mixed with honey, fruit syrup, and artificial sweetener resounded through the café. It was so sweet it felt like it might melt your teeth away.

The person was wearing a dress styled like a heavily decorated cake with as many frills as possible, as well as small plush toys. It swayed as the figure came to sit at the counter.

“Sechsy and Gerby! It’s been soooo long! Ah, one caramel macchiato, pleeease!” The painfully sweet voice that suited its apparel all too well spoke to Sechs and Gerbera with notable familiarity. Their drink order was just as painfully sweet — Sechs had created this drink based on recipes from real-world coffee shops.

“Egh... Candy.” Gerbera spoke the visitor’s name, her mood dropping even further down. “Like always...you gross me out.”

“Ahhh! Gerby! That’s sooo mean! I’m gonna shake my head at you!”

“I’m not in the mood for this...” Legitimately starting to become nauseous, Gerbera stared at the newcomer.

She’d first met this person in the gaol, and the times they’d interacted were few...but they were more than enough to leave a mark on her memory.

...The makeup’s even better than before. If you ignore the absurd appearance and voice, you can almost feel like you’re looking at a pretty girl... After reluctantly praising the person’s appearance, she quietly added, “...Yet he’s a guy.”

“Tch tch tch! So naive! Lil’ Candy is a *god* who’s totally above gender!” the person replied, apparently not the least bit offended.

His name was Candy Carnage. By all appearances he was a girl, but as far as Gerbera knew, his avatar and real body were both male.

She also knew things besides his unusual appearance and personality that made him stand out... Knew them *too* well, actually.

“This is *Dendro*, where a *god* can be a *god*, so I will forgive your little act of disrespect, but if you push it, I might have to destroy yoouu!”

“...I know.” Even Gerbera could tell that despite the joking tone, that was an actual warning.

After all, he was already *doing his thing*.

He was one of the Superiors locked up in this gaol — the worst and most far-reaching wide-scale extermination-suppression types of all.

He’d destroyed a city-state, massacred over a hundred thousands tians, and killed even The Hero.

The tian genocider. The "Legionkiller."

King of Plagues, Candy Carnage.

Gerbera knew that she couldn't win against someone like him.

Perhaps she might have a chance in such close quarters, but if Candy wanted to fight with all his might, he would be a complete calamity.

Our leader and Hannya beat this guy up, though... The Superior Killer too... Dendro *really is all about compatibility...and about how broken and insane you are in real life.*

Realizing the crushing gap in compatibility and power between them, Gerbera once again laid her head on the table.

"...By the way, the city is pretty quiet, considering you're outside."

Gerbera had met Candy once in a created dungeon and twice in town. *I died in that dungeon before even seeing him, though.* However, the two times she'd met Candy out in town, the locals had been panicking and running around as if he was some kind of natural disaster.

That was why Gerbera found it strange how quiet it'd been the whole day.

"That's because I killed everyone outside! Some ignoramus laughed at my *god*-ly clothes! I kinda snapped and did a little cleaning in town!"

"...Well, that explains the silence." *Man, he's powered up, hasn't he? He spread his infection so fast that they didn't even have time to escape,* Gerbera thought listlessly.

"Oh, but I made sure to leave the café untouched! Praise me!"

"Ah, sure, sure. Good job. Very nice."

"*Two* praises! That's enough to forgive the disrespect from before!"

...He hadn't forgiven me before that? I was in some serious danger. Gerbera knew well that Candy was hard to deal with even for a resident of the gaol.

Though feared by many, Sechs was tolerant and gentle in demeanor, so she had no problem with him. Hannya was also fine as long as you didn't set her off by being lovey-dovey with someone or bad mouthing Figaro.

Fu'uta would destroy you without question if you came close, but he never left his one spot, so he was no trouble either.

However, it was never clear how to deal with Candy. He came into town on a whim, approached her as he wished, and it was never clear what would set him off. Once he *was* set off, he would always go to extremes.

He's such a pain. I really don't wanna deal with him right now... Ignoring him was one of the things that usually displeased him, so Gerbera had no choice but to interact with him.

Maybe I should log out for the day, she wondered right as Sechs presented Candy the caramel macchiato and began to speak to him.

"So, Candy, what brought you here today?"

"Oh yeah! I have some grreeat news!"

"Great news...? Ohh, so you're done?"

"*Slurp slurp*... I knew you'd ask!" Candy sipped his drink through a straw and puffed out his chest. "I finally...*finally* did it! Lil' Candy has defeated the Disaster Bioweapon!"

"That is good to hear."

What Candy had just said was simply staggering.

The gaol had a created dungeon, but it also had a special area where a certain UBM was kept.

Called the Disaster Bioweapon, this creature was beyond even Mythical in power, with level well over 100 and the status of an Irregularity. Many Masters here had attempted to defeat it and take its MVP special reward, but all of them had been completely powerless against it.

Candy was one of the Masters that had challenged it, only to be defeated like all the others. However, he had been certain that he would eventually bring it down.

And today, after many attempts, he had finally succeeded.

Here, in the gaol, Candy Carnage had actually destroyed an Irregularity, all by himself.

"My determination was unswerving... I forgot how many times I tried, though!"

"...Oh, I'll praise you for real this time. That's actually amazing."

"Now I can...probably be super proud. But besides that, I can leave the gaol, so..." Candy smiled like a flower over-blooming. "...I can finally get back at that tasteless, black-clad hitwoman..." His face as he said that was, for the first time since he came, one of pure anger.

...He's seriously mad about getting PK'd. Gerbera herself nursed a grudge — or perhaps an antagonism or even a *vengeance* — towards Rook, so she felt a tiny bit of sympathy for Candy. "'Tasteless,' though? I really don't think the Superior Killer wants to hear that from you..."

"She wears masculine clothing despite being a woman. That alone makes it clear that our tastes don't match." *You sure that's not just a hatred for your own kind?* Gerbera thought, but didn't say out loud.

"This seems like a good time," said Sechs. "Your business here is done, and Gerbera is improving fast. With that in mind, Candy — about what we discussed..."

"Okaaay! This will delay my revenge, but I'll join I.F.'s care for a year!"

Upon hearing that, Gerbera made a face that said both "I wasn't informed of this" and "Are you serious?" but neither Sechs nor Candy noticed.

"Excellent... I would've preferred to have Fu'uta join us, as well, but he will likely walk his own path."

"But...do you really think it's possible?"

"Yes. Based on Hannya's attempts, it used to be about seventy-percent doable, but thanks to Gerbera here, we will no doubt be successful."

"Huh? Huh?"

The incomprehensible conversation continued, leaving Gerbera far behind. Her head was surrounded by question marks — more so than on any other moment today, even.

Paying her no heed, Sechs went on to say the most important part of the conversation.

"It is time for us to break out of this gaol."

The king of criminals was finally ready to abandon his temporary home.

The Final Epilogue: Him, Her, and...

Paladin, Ray Starling

The place I appeared once I logged in after my death penalty expired was the same one I'd logged into after the first time I'd died — the fountain at the capital.

There were two differences, though. First was that the sun was still high up, and...

"Nemesis..."

...Nemesis wasn't out of the crest.

I was well aware of the reason.

At the final moment of the battle against Behemot, I'd made her pierce through my body.

I knew Nemesis well enough by now.

She always accompanied me on my endeavors, but she also worried about me more than I did.

And yet, I'd asked her to stab me.

I wasn't so inconsiderate that I hadn't considered how hard that must have been for her.

"Sorry, Nemesis..."

"Mhm..." Nemesis replied, agreeing.

This was unlike the first time, when my apology was met with "No need." That made me realize that I'd actually done something that warranted an apology.

"...My bad."

"You say that...but it is not like you would ever limit what you do in pursuit of your possibilities, right?"

"...I wouldn't," I replied, with nothing but honesty.

"There is no helping it, then. That is how you are, and it is my duty to help you."

Following those words, she left her crest.

Her eyes were slightly red.

"You always do absurd things without considering yourself. You are always tattered... Look, even the armor B3 gifted to you is gone."

"True... I'll have to apologize to her." The armor had been completely destroyed by King of Beasts' attacks. I still had the casual clothes I wore in town, but I would clearly need a replacement sooner than later.

"But bear this in mind, Ray," Nemesis said as she turned away. "You ended up in this tattered state because you protected those things you needed to protect... That surely means that the anguish I felt while obeying your order...was also not without meaning."

"Nemesis..." I couldn't see her expression as she said that. She'd probably looked away to prevent just that.

I thought of what to say to her...and came upon two sentences.

"Nemesis."

The first was just her name.

In response, she said, "What is it?" without even turning back to me.

The second sentence contained what I wanted to convey to her.

It wasn't a "Sorry" nor a "Thank you."

Her tiny back made it feel that she could disappear at any moment, so...

"Stay by my side."

...that was what I was compelled to say.

Nemesis still didn't turn around. With her back still towards me, she wasn't moving an inch.

No... She was actually shaking a little.

"...I-I'm your Embryo... Of course I'll stay by your side..."

"I don't want you by my side because you're an Embryo born from me. I want you to stay with me because you're Nemesis."

I wanted her to be with me not because the Master-Embryo system made it inevitable, but because she wanted to as her own person. She knew me better than anyone else and had always been there for me.

"Heheheh... Of course! I *am* the greatest Embryo, after all!"

"Yeah. You're the best, Nemesis."

"Nhm...?!" My honest reply froze her in place.

"Nemesis?"

"D-Do not mind this! It is nothing... I-I am going back to my crest! Farewell!" And so, with her face still covered, Nemesis returned to the back of my hand.

I didn’t fully understand her attitude, but it seemed that she would stay by my side.

I walked through the capital, but I was still unable to meet up with my fellow Death Period members who got the death penalty before me. From what I’d seen, they weren’t even online yet. In real time, the time between our deaths wasn’t that great, so I supposed that I’d just happened to log in first because I had been waiting for the penalty to expire.

And according to Shu, who’d contacted me in real life, Azurite and the others had yet to return to the capital.

The reason for that was Azurite herself — she was in bad shape.

Apparently, the battle against The Ram had been extremely draining. Well, I was told she’d also talked to Claudiah right after the battle, and once Dryfe retreated, the relief of all that tension made her collapse like a loose marionette.

The reason for her fatigue was the ultimate job skill she’d used...and Shu’d told me that she’d been immobilized for two whole days.

According to him, she’d recently said, “I never expected to be nursed by the parasite...such humiliation.” Regardless of whether or not she was serious, I saw that as a sign that she was recovering.

They’d departed yesterday in *Dendro* time, and they were on course to come back here by evening today.

Before meeting up with my clan members and Azurite, I decided to check on the situation at the castle. I passed the main street near the fountain and headed towards my destination.

“Hey, that’s...” I was in my casual clothing, so there were fewer people that recognized me.

However, there were some who knew my face, and I could hear them speak.

“That’s The Unbreakable...”

“The guy who matched KoB...”

...We were hardly *matched*, and it certainly wasn’t just my doing.

Fuso had lowered KoB’s stats, Rook gave me a chance to fill up my damage counter, B3 and I cornered her together, Marie and Tsukikage broke her Superior item — and in spite of all that, we weren’t able to finish her off.

If Fuso hadn’t been there to strike a deal and get Dryfe to retreat, all of those efforts would've been for naught.

However, there were rumors that I had fought KoB head-on and even ended it with a draw.

Their source was a certain video on the internet.

I didn't know how or from where it was taken, but it seemed to be hidden camera footage of our battle.

Additionally, it was cleverly edited in a way that was only apparent if you'd been at the scene yourself, and the purpose of that editing seemed to be elevating me...and Death Period.

That actually kinda creeped me out, for some reason.

I passed the gate to the noble district and arrived at the castle. Azurite had already given me permission to enter, and the guards who knew me let me into the castle without any trouble.

"...It's burnt," I muttered as I passed the gate. It seemed to have been broken...melted by some intense fire.

That was far from all of it — there were also holes in the walls as well as broken and scorched spires. Just how intense of a battle did this castle go through?

Were Liliana and the others okay? The state of the castle filled me with unease, but then...

"I was just informed that they will return in about two hours."

"I'm happy that I'll get to meet Her Highness again... Wait, she's Her Majesty now, isn't she?"

...I heard a familiar voice and turned towards it.

There, I saw Liliana, slightly injured but in one piece.

"Liliana!"

"Huh...? Ray!" Upon hearing me call out, she turned to me and ran over.

"I am glad you are well!" she said.

"That's my line. What about Milianne and the princesses?"

"...They are well... Though, there are some issues."

"Like...?"

"Hello, hello! A pleasure to meet you! So *you* are Ray Starling!" Before I got Liliana's response, an unfamiliar voice intruded on the conversation and called my name.

"Who are you...?" I asked. She was the person Liliana had just been talking to.

She was about as small as Nemesis, if not smaller, but she didn't *seem* all that young. Her tiny frame was swallowed by a wizard's robe straight out of a picture book, and on her head there was a pointy hat of the type you'd expect to see on a generic witch.

"I've been wanting to meet you! The one who brought down enemy Superiors in Gideon and Quartierlatin and thus saved the kingdom twice! No, now it's *thrice*!" Saying all this with a cheerful voice, she took my hand and shook it up and down.

Her voice and attitude both were brimming with friendliness. But for some reason — no idea why — I felt like there was nothing friendly about those eyes that were looking at me.

Was there a shine in them akin to that of a carnivorous beast that had found its prey...?

No... Her gaze was more like that of an insect that had found a cadaver it had to deal with.

"Whoops! Where are my manners? I haven't introduced myself! I am..." She let go of my hand, spun around, and gave me a slight bow before beginning the introduction. "I am the favored disciple of the previous Arch Sage, and now I am the current Arch Sage..."

Hearing the job alone filled me with surprise...

"My name is...Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman."

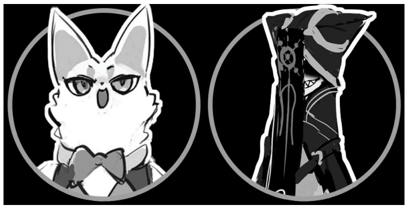
...but before it could subside, she gave a name that was even more surprising.

"Pleased to meet your acquaintance...Unbreakable Hero."

As I looked at her, still bowing, I felt uneasy...as if something had just been set in motion.

To Be Continued...

Afterword



Cat: "It's time for the afterwooord! I'm the 'Cat,' Cheshiiire!"
Xun: "And I'm XunYu. 'Xun' for shOrt. We'rE in this aftErword 'causE we weren't in the lAst one."
Cat: "You worked hard even in the volume itself, didn't yaaa?"
Xun: "Yeah. It was mY first battle in a goOd while... Since volUme 3, actually."
Cat: "Nice fighting back theeere. Though, I gotta ask... Are all of your battles gonna end with you getting burnt to a crisp?"
Xun: "It's gottA be 'cause I'm undeAd. EveryOne and their mOm just wants to cremAte the corpse."
Cat: "I can't blame theeem. Just keep in mind that you certainly weren't the only one struggling in this voluuume. Even the author was attacked by his greatest enemyyy."
Xun: "What enEmy is thAt?"
Cat: "Page count. This volume is so large that putting it all together for printing was a real challenge."
Xun: "Well, I guess evEryone was fIghting theIr own battles hEre."
Cat: "Ray barely appears in it, but the battle count is probably the highest yet."
Xun: "The author mUst have it hArd. Though, I'm glAd I got my first illUstration in a while."
Cat: (...Doesn't it only show your arm?)
Xun: "By the wAy, with so many pagEs, there's barelY any parts that weren't in thE web novel, right?"
Cat: "Yes. But to make up for it, the author is working hard on an original

short story that should be released during a twitter campaign on the official twitter account around volume 15's release. I believe it will be rather large."
Xun: "'Rather largE?'"
Cat: "...It's not finished at the point of writing this afterwooord... It's currently January, by the way."
Xun: "JanuarY..."
Cat: "The author usually gets work requests before January breaks, so he tends to be busy during the end and beginning of the year. Anyway, it's time for the author's serious comments."

Dearest readers — thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaido.

The number of people infected by COVID-19 has been growing, heavy snowfall has hit parts of the country... This has been quite an eventful time.

The snow has affected even yours truly, at times making it difficult for me to get around.

However, my dog found nothing but joy in the snow, charging into it at full speed and burying his head in it. He's a Pomeranian mix who's supposed to be an indoor pet, but he has as much energy as any big dog. Silly as he is at times, there's no denying that he's cute.

Oh, another volume of the manga adaptation should've come out shortly before this volume of the novel. It once again includes the shenanigans of the Pomera — I mean, Lobohta — in the form of a short story, so please take a look at it.

Now, about this volume of the novel... It marks the end of the events surrounding the peace conference that began in volume 13. We see what was happening behind the scenes while Ray was fighting, and we are introduced to something very close to the core of the *Infinite Dendrogram* setting... The Evil and The Demise.

Their relationship with the control AIs is a relationship between "a self-destruct device installed into an incomplete product" and "those who modified the incomplete product to complete it in a different way." They cannot possibly co-exist.

There are many such conspirators with incompatible goals and ideas, and their plots intertwine and compound each other seemingly without end.

The control AIs, The Evil, Flagman, the imperator, Caldina, and others...

The world of *Infinite Dendrogram* has no shortage of schemers or their grand designs.

Please do pay attention to how the story of Ray and his group will go while they are caught up in this web.

The focus on Ray will have to wait until a later volume, though. The next book will shift the attention away from Altar and onto Caldina in the east, bringing the story back to the other Master-Maiden pair of Hugo and Cyco.

You'll have their encounters with new Superiors to look forward to.

Thank you for continuing to support *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Sakon Kaido

Xun: "...The guy wEnt on about his dog fOr a moment there."

Cat: "Why not a caaat?! The author isn't a cat persooon?!"

Xun: "You reallY gonna be jealous aboUt that? Oh and VOLUME 16'S SET TO COME OUT IN JUNE, 2021! By the wAy, why's it jUst the two of us this time?"

Cat: "Well, the Fox Lady wasn't in this voluume, while Brother Bear only appeared in a flaaashback."

Xun: "Yeah, I dunnO about these vagUe exclusions based on thE volume content..."

Six: "Then I suppose I can come out for a moment."

Cat and Xun: "HUH?!"

Six: "Hello. I am 'Six,' Sechs Würfel. I make a brief appearance in the tenth chapter of the Crow Record manga, and just like this volume, members of I.F. will have the spotlight in the following one. Do take a look at it if you're so inclined, and goodbye for now." *Sounds of leaving*

Xun: "The guy just sAid what he wanted and gOt the hell out..."

Cat: "...D-Did he do that just to assert that he was in the volume too?"

Xun: "...You'd think thAt a leader of a criminAl clan wouldn't hAve so much tIme on his hands."

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 15
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2021

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Infinite Dendrogram
16. The Tartarean Possibilities

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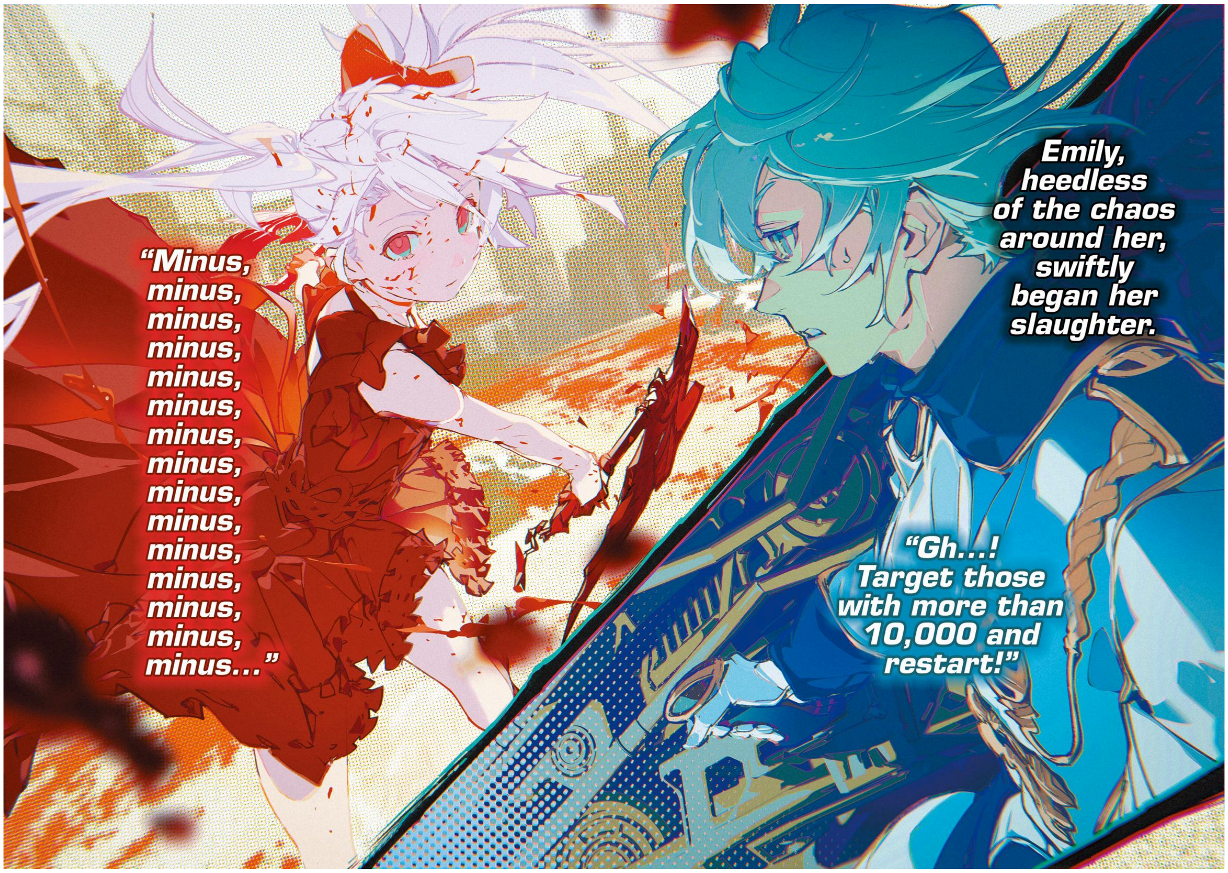
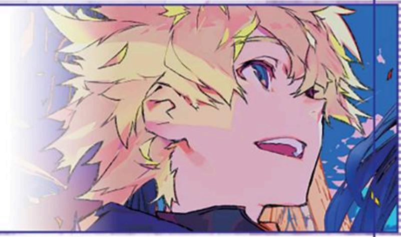

Emily, heedless of the chaos around her, swiftly began her slaughter.
"Minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus…"
"Gh…! Target those with more than 10,000 and restart!"

Character

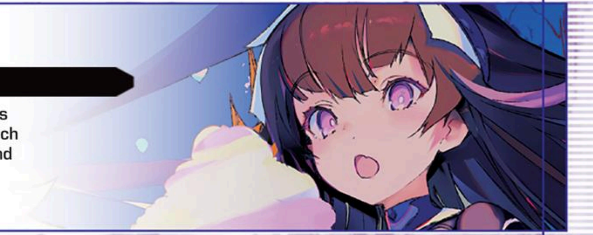
Ray



Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

A college freshman who gets caught up in various incidents within Infinite Dendrogram. Though he is generally mild-mannered, he has a strong will that causes him to fight for his goals and never give up on them.

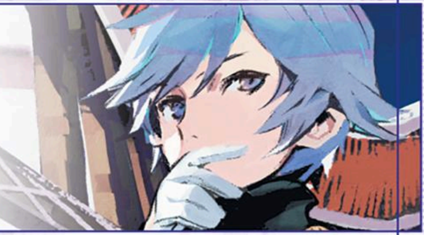
Nemesis



Nemesis

Ray's Embryo manifested as this girl. Nemesis acts as Ray's weapon by taking up the form of armaments such as a greatsword, halberd, shield, pinwheel, mirror, and twin swords. She is also a notable glutton.

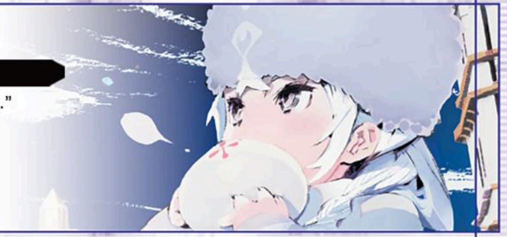
Hugo Lesseps



Hugo Lesseps/Yuri Gautier

An ex-Dryfean Master. He left the country and went on a journey, during which he happened to be caught by Ace, AR-I-CA and was forced to become her disciple. A girl in real life, she is also Franklin's younger sister.

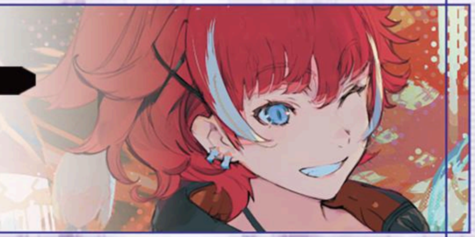
Cyco



Cyco

Hugo's Embryo, officially known as "Palefrost Maiden, Cocytus." She is all white in appearance and has strange eating habits, never touching any food that isn't also pure white. Her face rarely shows any emotion, but she has a tendency to be verbally abusive.

AR-I-CA



AR-I-CA

A Caldinan Superior, also known as the "Blue Sky Songstress." She has an artificial eye Embryo that lets her see danger and holds the Superior Job, Ace, which she uses to ride her flying, singing Magingear, Blue Opera. AR-I-CA swings both ways and never misses a chance to make a play at anyone she finds attractive.

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Prologue: Another Started Game

March, 2044, ???

With my exam season over, I finally got the chance to start playing *Infinite Dendrogram*.

The game came out while I was in my third year of high school. All my friends who really wanted to pass, including me, weren't exactly crazy about the timing.

To make it worse, all of our friends who'd already given up on exams or were set to inherit their family businesses regardless had picked up the game right away — and they had plenty of fun stories of their time in-game to bother us with.

Determined to play only *after* I'd passed, I fought the urge. I focused solely on my studies, finished the exams...and then, I finally got the gear I back-ordered and logged in for the first time today.

"It really *is* realistic... The wind is so hot."

For my starting point, I chose the country called "Caldina."

It was a merchant nation in the desert. The dry winds rolling in from the dunes tickled my skin with such detail that it felt real, even though I'd never been to a desert before.

The city I appeared in was a "City of Commerce" called "Cortana."

The main thoroughfare had many stalls lined up on both sides, all filled with merchants enthusiastically hawking their wares.

As big and populous as this city was, though, it wasn't actually the capital of the country.

The cat that had helped me with character creation told me that new Caldinian players started in Cortana instead of the capital because the strength of the monsters around the capital tended to fluctuate a lot, for various reasons.

That seemed to make sense. Right now, I was level 0 without a single job. If they dumped me right into an area swarming with powerful monsters, I'd be softlocked.

Speaking of which, I really needed to choose a job and start leveling up already.

The "Embryo" I was told about still hadn't hatched, though, so I decided to leave the job-picking for later and just enjoy the sights for now.

Cortana had a very *Arabian Nights* feel to it, reminiscent of various picture books and animated movies I'd watched when I was little.

The bazaar was as lively as it was colorful, and among the goods on display were many magic items that caught my eye. Unfortunately, the five pieces of silver given to me by the receptionist cat — 5,000 lir, apparently — weren't nearly enough to buy even a single one of those.

All I could afford was the food, so I got myself some skewered meat of unknown origin, along with some fried snacks.

The taste was about as real as it could get, and though I personally would've preferred if it was all a bit sweeter, it was perfectly fine for eating while walking.

Doing this made me feel less like I was playing a game and more like I was actually touring a foreign country.

...Honestly, I still had trouble believing that this really *was* a game — even after being online for a whole hour.

The environment I perceived with all five of my senses and the merchants who sold me that food all seemed like the real thing.

When did technology advance *this* far?

"...Huh?"

I suddenly realized that I'd wandered into an empty part of the city as I was lost in thought.

Desolate and silent, this place was nothing like the lively road I was just strolling down. Looking around, I saw nothing but decrepit buildings cramped together as close as possible.

It was astounding how different two sections of the same city could be.

"Hm...?" As I walked around, I caught something out of the corner of my eye.

In the tight space between two buildings near the entrance, there was a little girl sitting with her back against the wall.

Just at a glance, I could tell that she was abnormally thin. In fact, even the refugee children I saw on the news some time ago looked healthier than she did.

There was no one nearby — no family or anyone else.

She was just sitting with her back against the wall.

Without a word, without any sound at all, she turned her head slightly to look at me.

No — not at me, but at the bag of snacks in my hand.

I'd found those snacks rather bland... But oh, how the mere sight of them seemed to draw her hungry gaze.

She raised her twiglike arm and reached towards me. But she lacked the strength to even get up, and the way her little hand shook made it clear just how empty that movement was.

That tiny gesture, her fragile little action, made my heart want to burst out of my chest. It was a tight, emotional kind of pain.

"I-I'm so sorry! P-Please, take them!" Those words escaped my mouth as I approached her.

That girl was the most tragic thing I'd ever seen in my life. I tried to think about her, this situation, about what I was doing right now or should've been doing — but my thoughts were nowhere, letting my words and body take charge.

I was unable to ignore her, to leave her like this, so I approached and presented the bag of snacks.

She reached for it and tried to put her hand inside, but she missed every time she fumbled for it.

"I'll feed it to you. Here..." I took a snack and gently brought it close to her face.

She slowly opened her mouth. She tried to chew. And then, she fell still.

"...Huh?" The snack fell out from between my fingers and rolled across the ground.

Sensing that something wasn't right, I hesitantly reached for her cheek.

And that was enough for her malnourished body to slowly collapse to the side...and she made no attempt to get up again.

"...Huh?" She wasn't moving. Not an inch.

She'd just fallen asleep, I rationalized. Surely that was it.

But her eyes were open.

The light had just gone out of them.

Grains of sand blew along the ground, but not a single grain near her mouth or nose was moving.

I stood there and stared in disbelief...and before long, an ant crawled along her face, to no reaction whatsoever.

“Ah... Ah...?” I touched her withered wrist...and felt no pulse.

This complete stranger. This innocent little girl... She had starved, faded...and died right before my eyes.

Chapter One: The Poisonous Oasis

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Early August, 2045.

A month of *Dendro* time had passed since I moved away from my sister and friends in my starting country of Dryfe. Three weeks had passed since Teach — Ace, AR-I-CA — got me involved in her quest to find the Treasurebeast Orbs.

Since then, I'd done some desert crossing and ruin raiding; since I'd maxed out High Pilot, I had switched jobs to Armored Pilot.

And now, having retrieved the first Orb in Hermine, we'd moved to the City of Commerce, Cortana, where we would supposedly find the second one.

The title of this city was well deserved. Full of shops and bazaars, it was quite wealthy even by Caldina's standards. It was as though Gideon's fourth district had been spread out to the size of a city.

"Well, I suppose it wouldn't be weird for strange objects like the Orbs to end up in a city like this...but imagine what kind of trouble it'd bring." I vocalized my worries as I gazed at the street outside the café's terrace.

Then again, there probably aren't many places in this world that are free of trouble, I thought.

"You're not gonna eat that?" asked Cyco.

"Oh, I will. I just had something on my mind."

Having done some shopping in the morning, we were now taking a lunch break while waiting for Teach.

Cyco was eating vanilla ice cream...or what was left of it.

Here in the desert, ice cream melted extremely fast. She'd tried to finish it before it melted completely, but eventually resigned herself to eating its milkshake-like remains as if it were a soup.

She seemed satisfied, though. I could only guess that the state of the food didn't bother her as long as it was white.

"Good thing you found the right parts, huh?" Cyco said with a white stain around her mouth.

She was referring to the Magingear parts I'd bought at a store before coming here.

Custom Magingears like my White Rose or Teach's Blue Opera had two general types of parts.

First were the new, custom parts that my sister had produced specifically for White Rose. They were costly, but they came with an auto-repair function similar to those found on original Prism Steeds.

The other type of parts were the standard, ready-made ones. Those were used in Marshall IIs, and they had to be replaced through maintenance every now and then.

Blue Rose didn't fully auto-repair, which was probably due to a technical flaw.

It just highlighted the fact that even if you built mechs using real-life knowledge like The Triangle of Wisdom, you'd never reach the level of Flagman, the Grand Artificer of the pre-ancient civilization.

Anyway, I had to replace the parts that I'd lost, but being away from Dryfe had made that rather difficult for most people.

Thankfully, among the grand total of *three* good things Teach had taught me, one of those had been the means of finding quality Magingear parts in Caldina, so I had no trouble getting what I needed.

The other two good things, by the way, were some piloting tricks and the location of the ruins with a crystal for the pilot job grouping.

I still had part of the money I got for assisting the fight against Gouz-Maise, so I could pay for the parts no problem, but...

"...When Caldina's stores sell wholesale parts made for the Dryfean army, you *know* something isn't right." *Just how did they end up here,* I wondered, finding myself a bit awed by Caldina's distribution channels. That was probably something that bothered every country, not just Dryfe.

"I gotta say, she's really late," said Cyco.

"...She is." Teach was the one who'd told us to wait for her here.

Last evening, she'd said that she was going to search for the Orb and headed straight to the mansion of Cortana's mayor. And if she didn't return the same day, we'd agreed to meet up here in the morning or at noon.

Since she was nowhere to be seen in the morning, we'd gone out and bought the parts we needed, but she wasn't here even now when we returned. It was now noon.

"Is Teach just bad at keeping time or did something happen?"

"Hmm... Both?"

Yeah, knowing her, that's probably the correct answer, I thought. She was an ace pilot, but you really couldn't trust her on many things. *It probably isn't even trouble that's keeping her. I fully expect her to come back and say that she was busy messing around with some girls.*

"Heyoo! Yu and Cy! Sorry for the wait!"

"Teach! Oh..."

She came in right as I was thinking about all of that and, well...

"The investigation dragged on a bit," she said. "Yeah, that's it."

"Is that so? By the way, Teach..."

"Yeess?"

"Your neck."

My words made her flash me an awkward smile and rush to cover a spot on her neck.

The spot, by the way, was clearly a hickey.

"I see you had some fun at the mayor's place," I said.

"There was this baby-faced maid with a nice body! I flirted with her a bit and we talked straight until dawn!"

Yeah — pillow-*talked,* I thought.

"I hope you die."

"Cy! That's way too harsh! I actually got the info!" So the little chat with the maid hadn't distracted her from her job after all.

"So, guilty or not?" I asked.

Teach had gone to the mayor's place to find out where the Orb might be. At first, I'd thought she'd solicit the mayor's help directly, but while she was away, I'd realized that probably wasn't the case.

It had been the same way back at the casino. In situations like these, Teach *already knew* where the Orb could be, so she'd likely gone to the mayor's mansion because that was probably the place.

"Heh heh heh. I see you're startin' to catch on. And yeah, he's obviously hidin' the Orb somewhere. If he wasn't, he wouldn't try to assassinate me or get a maid to spike my drink with poison."

A slight shock came over me as I asked, "...They tried to poison you?"

"Yeah. I didn't drink any and came on to that same maid instead. She was sooo cute and lewd!"

"Teach, why are you so...?" How could someone be so carefree when they'd almost gotten poisoned...?

Well, Teach's Superior Embryo, Cassandra, saw not "the future," but "danger," so poison was perhaps the most useless method of assassination to employ against her.

Then again, everyone could counter poison with an Elixir, so maybe this "attempted assassination" was nothing but a warning from the mayor.

"I *know* that he's hidin' the Orb," Teach continued. "If the info I already have on it is true, everyone with wealth and power would want to have it more than anything else!"

"You already know the Orb's...um, the UBM's abilities?"

"Yep. Some of the leaked Orbs also had their powers leaked too, and this is one of them. They say that it 'gives the user a healthy life, and then a new life eternal.'"

A healthy life and a new life eternal.

Well, it was true that those who already had wealth and power might fear death more than other people. They would be afraid of losing their riches to age or illness, so it was no exaggeration to say that they'd want eternal life more than anything else.

"And it seems like it actually works. Hell, the mayor is using it himself!"

"Hm?"

"This is the mayor's photo from the documents I brought." She showed me a picture of an obese, jaundiced man with rough skin and bags under his eyes. If intemperance and bad health was a person, this would be him. "And *this* is a picture I secretly took of him last night. His age, by the way? Seventy years."

"*...Huh*?!" This photo clearly showed a middle-aged man no older than fifty. He looked vigorous, his skin was smooth, and overall he seemed to be brimming with life.

I could hardly believe that this was the same person as in the first picture. I'd say he was rejuvenated, but that would feel like an understatement.

"You can see why he'd act like he doesn't even know about the Orb," Teach said. "For all we know, he might change back if he loses it."

"...But you're Sefirot, aren't you? Can he really lie to you like that?" Sefirot was a clan that had nine Superiors, making it the strongest clan in all of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

At the same time, it was the greatest force serving Madam President La Place Phantasma herself.

Teach had told me that Sefirot could only do quests that might lead to international problems — such as this very Orb-hunt — after the president had given them her explicit approval.

Although Teach was officially acting on the request made by the head of a certain company, the person behind this quest was the president herself.

The Orb in Hermine was in the hands of a foreign mafia, so I could understand the lack of cooperation there, but the mayor of Cortana was a member of the congress, so I'd really thought that he'd help us in finishing this quest.

"Ah ha haa! You still don't really understand Caldina, do you?" Teach said, showing me a map of the country. "This nation is a union of city-states. Some have elections, some have a hereditary system, but each city is its own country, and the mayor is its king."

The city-state union of Caldina was an assembly of small individual nations, run by a congress where the mayor of every city-state held a seat. This made it the only major country with a "proper" government.

...Yeah, I didn't count Tenchi. A land of constant civil war seemed less than "proper" to me.

"...So, Caldinian laws don't fully apply to the cities themselves?" I asked.

"Not exactly," Teach said. "There are Caldina-wide laws you'd be penalized for breaking, but the mayor of this city thinks he's above them, and he's not exactly wrong."

"Hm?"

"Yu, where did you log in when you started in Dryfe?"

"Well... Vandelheim?" It seemed obvious to me. You picked a country, you appeared in its capital.

"Yeah. Same here. But in Caldina, the starting city is right here in Cortana."

"Huh?"

"Drag-Nomad, Caldina's capital and seat of congress, *moves* from place to place. The level ranges of the monsters around it constantly change, so it's not a good place for newbies."

"The capital...moves?" What did she mean by that?

"We'll visit it someday, so I'll tell you the details then. It'll be a surprise!"

"Okay...?"

"Well, anyway, Cortana is Caldina's second major city, its heart of commerce, and the starting point for its Masters. It's extremely important... So much so, in fact, that it's hard to levy any penalties against it."

"..." The president controlled the actual capital, but the mayor of Cortana held the capital city in every sense but its name. Both cities were actually tiny nations, so if you ignored their stated political roles within the union, they were both essentially kings.

And if anyone tried to do something against this particular king, it could negatively impact the country as a whole.

"So what will you do?" I asked.

"I could just tell the prez that I know he's hidin' the Orb somewhere, but that seems lazy...so I'll obviously go and take it!"

"Huh? But..."

"Listen, Yu. The mayor told me that he 'doesn't know about any Orb' and that 'there's no way it's in this city.' So..." she said as she cracked a smile. "...He won't be able to complain if something he 'doesn't know of' and 'isn't here' just disappears. Will he?"

That was basically a declaration that she would *steal* the Orb.

"Ughh..." a sigh escaped my mouth.

Her face looked just like it had back when we went into the Huang He mafia's casino in Hermine.

We'd spent enough time together for me to understand that despite having an Embryo that let her sense danger better than anyone else, she definitely had a taste for those exact same dangers.

She was the opposite of my sister, who could never have enough safety nets or secondary plans.

Perhaps those two had become friends exactly because they were so different? They *did* have a similar vibe, though, even if Fran's was more RP-oriented.

"Hold on. Yu, are you thinking that I'm gonna do something rough just for the thrill and the laughs?"

"...Am I wrong?"

"Nope! But that's not all of it."

"Hm?"

"I mean, we're on a time limit. If we just report it to the boss, someone else'll come and take it."

Time limit? Someone else? I wondered.

"Yu. About this Orb-hunt quest...it's not just some grand little adventure with just the two of us."

"...You dragged me into this, you know."

"Yeah yeah, just accept it already. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that we have rivals on this quest."

"Rivals?"

"Remember how I told you that some of the orbs' powers are already known?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's also people in the world who'd love to take these powers for themselves."

"Those people being...?"

"Well, there's some evidence that Granvaloa's makin' moves to grab the Orb that turns water into land, while Legendaria's degenerates are comin' after the one that Anthropomorphizes monsters.”

“Ah!” That meant that this Orb-hunt was also a *race*...and that Teach probably wouldn’t be the only Superior that would get involved in it.

And, perhaps most importantly...

“So we’re not the only ones after the Orb in this city?” I asked.

“That’s very likely.” Well, an orb that “gives the user a healthy life, and then a new life eternal” certainly did seem like something a lot of people would want. “Whatever’s comin’, you better hope for the best, but expect the worst. Boy, I suuure wouldn’t like to run into anyone like *that*,” she said, sounding somewhat joyful.

I had a really bad feeling about this.

The chill running down my spine told me that I should prepare for a battle more intense than the one back in Gideon.

◆◆◆

City of Commerce, Cortana

Cortana was the second largest city in Caldina, and it was built around a giant oasis somewhere in the middle of The Great Desert.

Defying the searing heat, the waters flowing up to form the oasis lake were almost unnaturally pure, making the land around it more than fertile enough to support such a city.

With the exception of the capital of Drag-Nomad, all the cities of this desert country were built around these welcoming patches of land in an otherwise treacherous desert. Even the Gambling City of Hermine was no exception.

Many wondered why the vast scorching desert, home to ferocious giant worms, even had such oases of safety.

There were various theories about this phenomenon, but the most popular one proposed that it was due to the influence of save points.

Currently, save points were best known as the points through which Masters moved to and from a different world, but people had been aware of their existence for a long time.

In fact, save points had actually existed before there were any cities built around them.

As strange as it was, the environments around save points were very conducive to human survival, as though someone was intentionally adjusting them to be that way.

But no matter what the reasons for it were, people were attracted by the safety that save points provided. Over the many centuries, grand cities had been built around them.

Even places that weren't known to be save points at first eventually came to be called that.

The name of whoever had first used the term "save point," though, had been completely lost to history.

As mentioned earlier, Cortana, the City of Commerce, was Caldina's second most important city — though some would argue it was the first. This desert jewel of water and coin was notably affluent even for a Caldinian city.

However, that didn't mean that it was free of the nation's ever-present heat. The oasis made the city slightly cooler than the barren dunes, but compared to the climate in other countries, the temperatures were still unbearably high. Even those used to it would find themselves sweating, while visitors from other countries were in serious danger of suffering heatstroke.

This applied to one of the two people walking in this searing heat — the little girl trudging through the sands. Clad in a red dress, wearing childish boots, and sporting a large ribbon in her hair, she walked while sweating waterfalls.

"Nnh... It's sho hot. I'm gonna melt..."

Though she looked at least ten years old, her manner of speaking made her sound several years younger than that. However, most of those hearing her speech from up close would have the impression that this wasn't an affectation — she simply wasn't very good at talking.

"I wanna go to Dryfe. There's lots of snow there... Or maybe to Granvaloa on the sea... Ah..."

Suffering the heat, she looked up at the person walking beside her and holding her hand — a man who seemed to be in his thirties.

"Mr. Zhan, can I swim in that oasis?" the girl asked.

The man shook his head and said, "You're not allowed to swim in most of Caldina's oases. People get their drinking water from there."

"I see... I guess I won't be swimming then..."

Instead of throwing a tantrum, the girl gave up and continued to trudge along.

“...That café over there sells fruit juice. Want to take a break there?”

“Can I?! Do they have ice scream?”

“They might, but it would melt really fast.”

“Then I’ll eat it fast!” the girl said as she hurried to the café.

Watching her from behind, the man — Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi — said, “...It really is so hard to believe it. I know it’s true, but still...”

At that moment, he was reminded of something that happened a week ago, when he had taken on his current job.

◆◆◆

A Week Before, a Certain Place in Caldina

Zhang, the head of the Caldinian branch of the Huang He mafia called “Mirage,” was having a nightmare.

In it, he saw his battle against a flying blue robot.

He saw how it destroyed the five dragons that were his namesake as well as the crystallization of all his power and technique.

Even after giving it everything he had, he was unable to harm the robot — while the robot’s weaponry blew off his right arm.

“...Ah!”

That was when he woke up.

The nightmare had left him sweating all over. He tried to get up and wipe the sweat from his body, but...

“What is this?”

...he found himself bound to the bed he was lying on.

He then examined the state of his body.

His skin was covered in wounds. Most were marks left by his many days of fighting, but some were completely new to him.

And most importantly, his right arm was missing from the elbow down.

“...I see. So that was no dream.” Zhang realized then that he’d somehow survived his staggering defeat against The Blue Sky Songstress.

Most of his newer wounds showed signs of treatment with Potions or healing magic, but it seemed like whoever had taken care of him had no means of restoring his arm.

He then looked around to examine his surroundings.

He was in a small but hygienic room, highly reminiscent of a hospital. If you ignored the fact that he was bound to the bed, it was a fitting place for someone in his current state.

However, he didn't recognize the room at all.

If this is a sickroom...who is it that helped me? he wondered. At first, Zhang thought it must have been one of his subordinates, but that was impossible. If he had been defeated by AR-I-CA, the others must've suffered the same fate.

It also couldn't be another criminal organization. Zhang had often used his combat-capable status to exercise authority over the other criminal leaders in Hermine. If they found him on the verge of death, they would not have helped him — they would gladly finish him off instead.

A kindly citizen, then...? No, that's the least likely thing of all, he thought before chuckling in self-derision.

His life was definitely not one of virtue. There was no way fate would grace him with salvation at the hands of a benevolent stranger.

In the end, he failed to guess who saved him, and eventually...

"Yo. You awake, Zhang Zangqi?"

...someone entered the room, calling his name.

It was a man, and at first glance it was obvious that he was part of the societal underworld.

First of all, he was clad in a fashionable gray suit. There was no country in *Infinite Dendrogram* where such suits were worn by upstanding individuals. This kind of clothing only existed in this world because certain Masters had them custom-made.

Over the suit, he wore a trench coat in a strange style, suggesting to Zhang that it was a UBM MVP reward.

And finally, there was a gangster-like hat on top of his head.

All of this combined would make it obvious that he engaged in illegal acts.

At a glance, he wasn't very tall — about 160 centimetels — and he had a young face that made him look no older than twenty, but that only made his threatening aura more intense by contrast.

The crest on the back of his left hand, showing interlocking gears, was proof that he was a Master.

As he observed him, Zhang also realized something else about the newcomer.

This man...is far stronger than I...and perhaps even The Blue Sky Songstress.

In his current state, he wasn't even able to determine the extent of this Master's power.

"Can ya talk?" he asked.

"...I can," Zhang answered.

"That so? Let's start with names, then. I'm Rascal the Bloodonyx. Though, I guess 'The Weapon' works better for you."

"Ah?!" The name filled Zhang with shock.

Everyone in Caldina's criminal underworld knew this name.

The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx — the Superior who made a living exploring ruins and selling the items he discovered. He was especially well-known for his weapons, with some of his finds having made it into the hands of truly infamous criminal organizations.

He was especially well-known for destroying ruins after he was done with them. That was a crime in every country, and he was already on every wanted list for it...but no one had defeated him so far.

Besides that...

"Now, as ya probably know, I'm the sub-leader of the clan known as 'IF.'"

...he was also a core member of the clan whose membership consisted solely of wanted Superiors. With the leader, King of Crime, currently in the gaol, Rascal here was functionally at the top of it.

"IF..."

"Yeah. The clan that was supposed to take the UBM treasure Orb from Huang He off ya hands."

Indeed, that had been the plan. Zhang's role had been to receive the Orb from the main branch in Huang He and give it to IF to create a bond between their groups.

He wasn't told what the groups would do afterwards, but...

"...I am sorry."

"Hm?"

"The Orb was taken from me... I cannot complete the exchange." Zhang had used the Orb during the battle against The Blue Sky Songstress, but he'd been defeated by her regardless, resulting in the loss of both his arm and the Orb. "But...please! Take my life if you must, but please consider making another deal with Mirage!"

Zhang believed that he couldn't let his failure be the cause of a conflict between IF and the organization to which he'd dedicated his life. Mirage was the greatest criminal organization in Huang He, but having faced a Superior himself, he now knew too well that Mirage stood no chance against an entire group of them.

Thus, he tried to prevent that by offering up his own life.

"I see... I'll just get right to the point and say that we can't make deals with Mirage anymore."

Rascal's words almost sent Zhang into despair, but...

"That's 'cause Mirage doesn't exist anymore."

...he then said something Zhang couldn't even understand.

Rascal then began telling Zhang about what happened over the two weeks he'd spent unconscious.

He told him about how Huang He had gotten serious about dismantling Mirage.

About how Dancing Princess, Huili and her Huili Yuminjun — Huili's Army of Fools — had destroyed every Mirage base in Huang He.

About how even the strongest among them, including The Fang, had been either killed or arrested, and their leader had been captured as well.

And about how, by this point, the prosecutions and executions must've already finished.

Zhang's first reaction was silence. Then, having been freed from the bed, he covered his face with his still-healthy left arm...and wept.

He wept from sadness over the destruction of the organization he had given his life to, his own powerlessness to do anything about it, and his guilt over the possibility that things might have turned out differently if he hadn't lost against The Blue Sky Songstress.

"Zhang Zangqi... I know you're having a moment, but can I keep talking?" Rascal asked.

"...Yes," Zhang said, looking at him with reddened eyes. "You saved my life. It would be more fitting for me to listen to your words than to lament my foolishness."

“Actually, I ain’t the one that saved ya. It was the other sub-leader — the one who was gonna make the trade with you. She picked ya up and told me to look after ya.”

The sub-leader in question — King of Thieves, Zeta — was no longer in Caldina. She’d left the country to get involved in the conflict between Altar and Dryfe to the west.

“I see... But that doesn’t change the fact that I am indebted to you,” said Zhang.

“Well, it’s fine if ya think that way. Anyhow, to get to the point, we saved ya because we want ya to join us.”

“...What?” That was so out of the blue that Zhang couldn’t believe his ears.

“Not as an official member, though,” Rascal continued. “In IF, we only take Superiors who are on wanted lists. It’s part of the ‘brand,’ so to speak... Even with that limit, we’ve got dumbasses who misuse their damn powers, though. Haah...” He let out a fatigued sigh as he thought about something.

Zhang didn’t have the slightest idea what it was that Rascal found so draining.

“Sorry about that,” Rascal said. “Anyway, back to the point — I want ya to be a ‘supporting member’ for the clan. You won’t be an official part of it, but you’ll have to assist us with this and that. Most of these supporting members are tians, and we got a pretty good number of them.”

“...But right now, I have nothing. I’ve lost my organization and my subordinates.”

“Your technique and level haven’t gone anywhere. There’s exceptions, sure, but Masters are generally below tians when it comes to technique. We want you, yourself.”

Having been defeated by The Blue Sky Songstress and seen his organization destroyed, Zhang had lost all confidence in his abilities — and yet Rascal sincerely solicited his aid.

“...If you just want my Superior Job, I can take my life. You will know exactly when Great Soul Daoshi can be taken again, giving IF the advantage in the ensuing race to find it.”

“No, that wouldn’t be good for us. We’ve got no one who can take the job, so if ya die, it’ll probably go to some other Master. If that happens, we’ll never have it again. That’ll be no good at all.”

Rascal was basically saying that if they had a Master who could fulfill the job's conditions, they might've already let Zhang die, but that didn't really bother him.

"So, what will become of me? Should I just be locked up until you find someone who can take Great Soul Daoshi?"

"That'd be a waste of human resources. Like I said, our group wants *you*. We can always use people."

"Why? Why would a group made up of Superiors insist on hiring a mere tian?"

"...Yeah. I suppose I should've opened up about that," Rascal said, looking Zhang straight in the eye.

Then, he slowly began revealing the very foundation of the Illegal Frontier.

"Our goal as IF is to..."

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Ten minutes later, Rascal finished telling Zhang all about their intentions.

"And that's what we're planning to do." Zhang silently processed what he had been told...and it all added up to him.

He also understood why IF had tried to make a deal with Mirage.

I see. It does make sense. This explains the actions of both Mirage and IF, he thought.

Through his line of work, Zhang had maxed out Truth Discernment, so he knew that Rascal wasn't lying.

In fact, he didn't even need the skill to know that. The experience gained from dealing with scores of crooks was enough for him to know that Rascal was saying nothing but the truth.

"...I see." From IF's perspective, Mirage's plot was nothing but one of the many options they had for fulfilling their goal, but Zhang could at least understand that they did indeed wish to cooperate with Mirage.

It just so happened that he had been defeated and Mirage had been wiped out by Huang He before the partnership could bear fruit.

"That's how it is. We'd like to have you with us."

"...I have a question."

"Go ahead."

"Which is the next most likely place?"

"Tenchi," Rascal replied in an instant.

"I see..." Zhang said as he closed his eyes.

And when he opened them again, they gleamed with determination.

"In that case, when you face Huang He, put me on the front line. If you can promise me this, I will accept your offer."

"I promise."

The determination in those eyes was also a blazing urge to fight Huang He.

However, it wasn't the dark flame of vengeance.

...Heh. I always thought that Mirage's long-term goal of destroying Huang He was unrealistic... But I suppose that I am a member of Mirage to the core.

He'd dedicated his life to that organization, and now, as its last living member, he was given a chance to do the deed they'd failed to do.

For this, he resolved to live on as a supporting member of IF.

"Don't think you can go off and die just 'cause I put you on the front line, though. It'd be a waste of human resources."

"Yes. I am well aware," Zhang said as he took the hand of Rascal — his new associate. "I will work for you and IF, Mr. Bloodonyx."

"That sounds way too stiff. You're older than me. Just 'Rascal' is fine."

"Well...I suppose I should respect the wishes of my superior. 'Rascal' it is." Zhang considered calling him "Sir" instead, but he thought that might also sound too "stiff" for him.

"Hmph. This ain't about me. I just wanted ya to use something more comfortable. Anyway, thanks for joining us. Can we do the Contract now?"

"Of course."

Rascal then took out a Contract.

This was common practice in the societal underworld. Contracts that forbid actions such as betrayal or leaking secret information were, in a way, the very first step towards earning someone's trust.

However, from what Zhang could tell, IF's contract conditions were unusually relaxed.

The only conditions written on it were "until the time comes, Zhang Zangqi must not talk about IF's goals without the permission of an official member of IF," and "unless the situation is such that Zhang Zangqi deems that there is a high chance he will die, he must obey the orders of the official members of IF."

"Is this really good enough?" On a Contract for the entry to Mirage, the second condition would be more like "if a higher-up tells you to die, you die," and that would be just one condition out of far more than just two. IF's conditions seemed almost lax in comparison.

"Yeah. Knowing what may happen in the future, a contract that's too strict might do more harm than good."

"I see," Zhang said, signing the Contract with his left hand.

And so, the ex-member of Mirage became a supporting member of IF.

"I know you just joined and all, but I already have a job for ya. It'll be your role for the time being."

"That is fine by me. What would this job be?"

My first job in service of the Illegal Frontier, he thought. *What kind of trial am I about to be put through, I wonder...? Whatever it is, I will overcome it.*

His resolve firm, Zhang waited for Rascal to speak.

And after a brief silence, he...

"I need ya to do some babysitting."

...said something so absurd that almost all of Zhang's resolve dissipated immediately.

A deafening silence followed. Babysitting? As his first job for IF? The idea was enough to make Zhang freeze.

"Sorry about that," said Rascal. "I worded it wrong."

"Oh, no need to apologize..." *So he merely misspoke,* Zhang thought as he readied himself for his first mission once again.

The words that followed...

"Babysitting's just part of it. There's more to do besides that."

"Babysitting is *part* of it?!"

...made Zhang raise his voice, completely dispersing the tense atmosphere.

Naturally, he found it hard to simply accept such an unfitting job.

"Are you being serious?!" he asked.

"I'm good at manipulating people, but I don't lie or hide anything. Yeah, we need a babysitter."

Unfortunately, Zhang's Truth Discernment didn't react to anything Rascal was saying.

That meant that, sadly, Rascal was speaking the truth.

"No, wait! What does babysitting have to do with IF?!" Zhang could not see any possible reason that a clan of infamous criminals would need a babysitter.

Do they run a preschool as a subsidiary business? Zhang wondered, when suddenly...

"Is the talking over?"

...the door to the sickroom opened, and a childish voice that sounded quite out of place reached their ears.

Zhang looked at the door and saw a little girl looking in.

She looked no older than ten years old and, likely because of someone else's tastes, was wearing a frilly red dress that wouldn't be out of place in a piano recital.

And on the back of her left hand, there was an Embryo crest showing two crossed axes.

A girl... Is she the one that Rascal wants me to babysi... Hm?! Zhang's thought was cut short by the realization that Rascal's aura had completely changed.

He still looked calm on the surface, but he was clearly extremely tense on the inside, like he was standing right next to a bomb that could explode at the slightest wrong touch.

"Ah. Mister! Are you the new 'support' guy?" the girl asked Zhang, seemingly oblivious to Rascal's state.

"Y-Yes. I just signed the contract."

"I see. Nice to meet you."

"Yes... You too." Still not sure what to make of the situation, Zhang returned the greeting.

He took her extended hand and, careful not to be rough, shook it.

That made the girl happier than one might expect, and she put on a broad, innocent smile.

"You're a good person, mister! *A plus! Not an enemy!*"

"Hm...?" Zhang didn't understand what she was saying, but also couldn't help but wonder why Rascal relaxed and let out a sigh of relief.

"I'm Emi-ee Killingshton! Call me Emi-ee!"

“Zhang Zangqi. Let’s get along, Emmie.”

“No! Not Emmie! Emi-ee!”

“Hm...?” Zhang tilted his head in confusion. Rascal, growing tense again for some reason, came to his aid.

“...This here’s Emily Killingston. She’s still not good at saying her name.”

“Hey! I can say it fine! Don’t bully me, Rashcal!”

“...Can’t imagine how long it’ll take until you can properly say mine.” Listening to them, Zhang understood the problem of the name and spoke again.

“Sorry about that, ‘Emily.’ Is that better?”

“Yeah!” Emily seemed very satisfied that Zhang had said her name correctly.

“Emily, we’re not done talking, so go play elsewhere. My Machina can keep ya company, can’t she?”

“Huh? But Machinya’s a very bad player. I made the whole Oshello board black!”

“...That dumbass can’t even win a game of Othello against a child?” Rascal heaved a fatigued sigh.

Though they’d barely just met, Zhang already felt that Rascal was dealing with a greater share of problems than most others in IF.

Regardless, he soon sent Emily away.

“Later, mister!”

“L-Later.” Right after the door closed with Emily on the other side...

“Phew...”

...Rascal let out a sigh of relief as if all the tension instantly left his body.

Zhang then asked, “Rascal... Do you want me to ‘babysit’ Emily?”

“Yes. Until now, it’s been me, the other sub-leader, La Crima...and a certain *dumbass* who got herself jailed who’ve been taking turns looking after her — but now, I’d like to put her in your hands. For the time being, anyway.”

The fact that he mentioned La Crima — a criminal infamous even in Caldina — made Zhang understand that Emily was being cared for by IF’s official members, which said all that needed to be said about her importance.

However, there was something he didn’t get.

Why was Rascal so tense while Emily was here? There was another thing that had him confused: for some reason, Rascal's tension was directed at Zhang as well.

It was as though Rascal had been worried that he would do something to Emily.

That seems like a sign that he doesn't trust me yet, but...

There was something strange about it all.

Rascal did indeed dedicate a bit of his focus to Zhang, but it felt more like he was preparing to jump in to *protect him*.

That didn't make much sense to him.

"Rascal, what *is* that girl...?"

"...Hmm." He couldn't exactly come to a conclusion just by thinking about it, and since this was related to his job, Zhang elected to just ask.

And Rascal, being the type who didn't lie or hide anything, readily answered.

"Zhang Zangqi... You didn't use Reveal on her?"

"I didn't..."

"Good move... You might've been a *minus* if you did."

"Hm?" Zhang couldn't help but note the emphasis on "minus."

It reminded him of how Emily herself called him a "plus." It didn't take much to connect the two terms.

"But...didn't you realize who she is after just hearing her name? As far as we IF members go, she's better known than me, La Crima...and maybe even the leader in some places."

"What? I... Hmm... Ah?!" Zhang tried to remember if he had ever heard the name "Emily," and after a few moments, he did recall something.

He knew the name, but Zhang could hardly connect it to the girl he just met.

Who could blame him? There was no logical way to link *that name* to a little girl who could barely speak.

"Let's keep talking, Zhang Zangqi," Rascal said as he put a hand on Zhang's shoulder.

"V-Very well..." Zhang replied, still shaken.

"Your first job is to be Emily's babysitter...or 'a supporter for her job.' Though, keep in mind that the job isn't unrelated to you." Rascal, noticing Zhang's state, decided to change the subject. "So, about that UBM Orb that

Mirage was supposed to give us... Including that one, there's actually six of them spread out across Caldina. Lots of Superiors the world over, as well as tough guys from the underworld, are coming after them."

"The Orbs...?" The Orb he'd obtained by the order of Mirage's main branch contained a UBM called "Thundershield Beast, Dangai."

It was a very potent weapon, and the idea that there were *five more* in this country made Zhang quite nervous.

"So you want me to join the competition for the Orbs and take them?"

"No. I mean, it's fine if you do get them, but that's not the top priority."

"What *is*, then?"

"I want you to observe who's seeking the Orbs. Find out their abilities, goals, personalities, dispositions...and if they'd be open to having a chat and joining us," Rascal said before looking Zhang right in the eye. "We're not after UBMs or MVP rewards, but the human resources they attract."

Those words made Zhang realize something.

Using the Orbs as bait seemed inefficient while they'd been spread across Caldina, but if you looked at it another way...

"...Let me ask something."

"Sure. Ask away."

Gathering his determination, Zhang asked, "Is IF behind spreading the Orbs into Caldina?"

"Yes. The other sub-leader stole seven orbs from Huang He's treasury and spread six of them across this country."

Zhang had actually expected Rascal to dance around this question. After all, one of those Orbs had been the reason why he'd fought The Blue Sky Songstress and lost his right arm.

However, Rascal answered truthfully, still adhering to his creed of never lying or hiding anything.

"...I see. So you made a deal with Mirage to get back something you let go of just so you could use it as bait for human resources?"

"That's only half of it."

"Half?"

"We planned to collaborate with Mirage and execute our plan within Huang He, but with us being as infamous as we are, it'd be hard to trust us if we just approached ya and asked to join forces, wouldn't it?"

"Hm..." In such a case, Mirage would have no doubt assumed that IF had ulterior motives, leaving no room for trust.

"Now, imagine if ya had something really valuable, like a national treasure of Huang He, and solicited our cooperation with that... What happens then?"

"...At the very least, we would understand your motives better. It would put our minds at ease much more than if we'd gotten your trust for free."

"Exactly. There's no such thing as a free lunch, and nobody in the underworld believes in uncompensated kindness. My plan was to gain your trust by first letting ya get your hands on something that could act as a vector for it."

Zhang completely understood Rascal's perspective.

"...Though, that's not to say that I know exactly what she was thinking while going through with the plan," Rascal said, thinking of Zeta. Zhang noticed that Rascal occasionally described his actual feelings, rather than conveying facts, though he couldn't tell whether that was because of Rascal's creed to not lie or hide anything, or if the words merely escaped his mouth on their own.

"I know exactly where some of the Orbs are, and I'll tell ya. You'll go to the closest one from here and get cracking."

Zhang nodded in response before a question from earlier came back to him.

"I understand my job now, but there is one more thing I need to confirm."

"Emily, right?"

"Yes. Is she...truly *that* Emily?"

"She is." Truth Discernment didn't trigger yet again.

Zhang didn't actually need to ask — he already knew it was the truth.

It was just that he found it so difficult to link the stories he'd heard to the girl he'd seen.

"But as you can tell, she's still a child. We can't just throw her into the desert by herself. We need some human resources by her side... This reminds me of when Zeta said that 'the girl is a whole ten years old, she can travel across the countries and do proper work.' The hell was that about? There's no damn way she can do that. She ain't some prodigy. Child wonders like that probably don't even exist," Rascal trailed off again, but he soon had himself back on track. "Anyway, there's really only one thing I can say to someone who's gonna act as Emily's support."

"And that...would be?"

"Don't become her 'enemy.'"

"'Enemy?'"

"Act like her guardian. Scold and admonish her when you must. But don't disparage her without a purpose. Don't hurt her for no reason. Don't treat her with disdain. Don't flip her 'switch.' Otherwise..."

"Otherwise...?"

"You'll end up seeing her true nature for yourself." Rascal said that with more gravity than he had anything else so far.

That was when Zhang realized that Rascal had been tense because he was worried that Zhang would do something that Emily disliked, letting him see her "true nature" then and there.

"...I will keep this warning in mind."

"I can understand if it's hard to understand and believe, but it won't be long before you do," Rascal said as he gave Zhang a paper with the job details, opened up a map, and pointed to a location. "You'll know when you make it to the location of your first job...Cortana, the City of Commerce."

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City of Commerce, Cortana

A week had passed since then, and both Emily and Zhang had made it to Cortana.

It was worth noting that while Emily was struggling with the heat now, it wasn't a problem for her while traveling on the sands. At that time, they'd been on a small sandboat provided by Rascal.

It was air conditioned, and Emily spent most of her time there, reading picture books and such.

Zhang dealt with the occasional worm, turning them into jiangshi before putting them in Jewels.

During all this time, Emily had not shown even a glimpse of her "true nature," so he still had trouble believing that she was the same Emily that he'd heard so much about.

...But Rascal wasn't lying. There must be something more to her. I just have not seen it yet.

As that thought was running through his mind, Emily, standing at the front of the café, called out to him.

"Mr. Zhan! Are you coming?" The way she did it made her look like a normal child, which brought a bit of a smile to Zhang's face.

Zhang and Emily both were currently wearing accessories that hid their true appearances. This was because Emily, as a member of IF, was a wanted criminal, while Zhang could be targeted due to his ties to Mirage.

The accessories, provided by Rascal, were highly potent. Even the highest levels of Reveal would have trouble with them. First the ship, then these trinkets... Rascal was an absurdly well-prepared man.

In the eyes of passersby, Zhang and Emily likely looked like a normal family or at least close enough to it.

With his right arm being a prosthetic made of Fu, though, he might've stood out at just a bit.

"Yes. I will be there in a moment," Zhang said as he began walking towards Emily...but then something rendered him speechless.

...Why is she...here? The café's windows were large, so you could easily see inside.

And what Zhang saw was The Blue Sky Songstress, sitting at a table and chatting casually.

Indeed — this café they were about to enter was actually the exact location where Hugo had been waiting for AR-I-CA.

She's after the Orbs too, so I guess it makes sense to run into her here, but... To Zhang, this woman was first and foremost the person who had destroyed his organization and taken his right arm. It was safe to call her a sworn enemy.

What do I do...? My job here is reconnaissance... Rascal told me to gather info about the people who come after the Orbs. If I get into trouble here, I might be exposed, and that would make my job harder...

Zhang was actually thinking about his role and how he would execute it. Despite being a man of the underworld, he was rather like a diligent, hardworking citizen.

"Emily, why don't we go to another—?"

"Yay! It says 'ice cream!'" In Zhang's mind, the optimal course of action was to go to another café, but that course of action was shut down by Emily, who read the menu and beamed.

And needless to say, he couldn’t just leave her here.

“Ugh... Come what may.” So, Zhang and Emily both entered the café.

“Oh, we are sorry, but there are no open tables,” an employee said.

“Ahh, now that is unfortunate,” Zhang said, regaining the hope that they could go somewhere else.

“We will have to seat you alongside some other customers.”

Zhang was at a loss for words.

Why? Because the six-person table they were led to was the very one occupied by The Blue Sky Songstress and her group...

“Yaay!”

...and Emily had already taken a seat there.

In silence, the Great Soul Daoshi — the peak of Huang Hean necromancy — prayed for his own bliss in the afterlife.

Chapter Two: Minus

A Certain Place in Caldina

While Zhang was in Cortana, suffering through his unexpected encounter with The Blue Sky Songstress, Rascal was sailing on a boat, heading out to do business with someone in the Gambling City of Hermine.

The boat was cutting through the desert dunes as though they were ocean waves. Caldina had access to technologies from all over the world, and sandboats such as this one were a hybrid technology created by mixing Granvaloan shipwrighting, Dryfean magitech, and magic items from Huang He.

In a way, these boats were some of the most advanced creations in the world, but they actually didn't see all that much use.

The reason for this was that the engine sounds could attract the worms that lived underground, making the journey far more treacherous. These worm monsters were often Demi-Dragon-tier or above, so tians, who naturally wanted to avoid them, preferred to use dragon carriages as they had in the old days.

If they *did* end up using sandboats, they would opt for the quieter, smaller kind, like the one used by Zhang and Emily.

However, the one carrying Rascal certainly wasn't that kind of ship.

Instead, it was a massive construct that rode the dunes while exterminating any worms that dared attack it. The creatures, attracted by the engine sounds, were instantly shot to bits by the cannons installed all over the hull, quickly turning them into bits of light. It didn't matter if they were Demi-Dragon-Worms or Pure-Dragon-tier Dragon-Worms — they all broke before this giant battleship.

Boasting an overwhelming power, this giant vessel sliced through the dunes while thoroughly negating the great menace of the desert worms. It was an outlandish scene, but it made sense the moment one learned that this ship was the headquarters of IF.

Its name was "The Tetragrammaton."

It was constructed using a three-hundred-metel-long prototype battleship from Granvaloa as a base. A vessel with a dark history, it had been sunk by the SUBM, Twin Moby Dick, during its test run.

Having been sent to the depths of the sea, it was considered unsalvageable; but Zeta — a Granvaloan Superior at the time — knew where it was resting. After joining IF, she suggested to Rascal that they retrieve it, and with a bit of cooperation and the help of one of Rascal's Superior Embryo skills, they went on to do just that.

Since then, Rascal had repaired and improved the ship many times, using pre-ancient civilization technology to turn it into a fearsome battle cruiser capable of dominating both land and sea.

Now, the vessel served as the mobile headquarters of IF.

"...There sure are a lot of them today," Rascal said, glancing through the thick window.

What he saw beyond it were the dunes of Caldina — as well as the ship's mechanical arms, retrieving the loot dropped by the worms.

He was currently the only human on this ship, but he wasn't the one controlling it.

The Tetragrammaton had an autopilot mode, so Rascal, the only actual person on board, could just stay in his room and prepare for the negotiations.

This ship had many rooms, among which was the sickroom where Zhang had awakened two weeks ago. The group's prisoners and members alike had their own living spaces here.

"...That dumbass is the heavier ordnance. It could give away our position to Caldina. I'm not in the mood to sneak through the desert on foot again."

Powerful as it was, The Tetragrammaton wouldn't be enough for Rascal to take on Caldinian Superiors like The Earth by himself. Luckily, his Superior Embryo had a skill that let him store it away, allowing him to hide and log out.

"Master! I brought tea!" someone cried as they entered the room, carrying a tray with a teapot and cup balanced on it.

Dressed in a maid's uniform and sporting green, fluffy hair, the newcomer looked like a beautiful girl in her late teens at first glance. A closer look, however, would show that she wasn't even human.

Most of her body was covered with glossy skin, but her left arm was bare of flesh from the shoulder down, showing its metallic interior. Her well-defined face also seemed to be damaged. There was a large black bandage over the right eye, and her forehead showed signs of something having been removed from it.

She was very obviously a female android — a gynoid — straight out of a sci-fi novel.

Her name was Machina, and she was the Superior Embryo of The Weapon, Rascal the Blackonyx.

"...Machina, turn down the sound and power while exterminating the worms."

"Okaay! More importantly, do you think Emily and Zhang have made it to Cortana yet?!" The way she so casually swept aside her Master's order made Rascal sigh before answering.

"...Yeah. As long as they didn't run into a Superior or some Mythical, they should be there by now. If they get into that kinda trouble, though... Worst-case scenario, Zhang will die and I'll know that through his Contract. They're fine."

He said all of this as though the prospect of little Emily running into Superiors or Mythicals didn't worry him one bit.

"Good to hear! I still need to get back at Emily for beating me at Othello fifty times in a row!"

"Machina... Don't ya think that's way too much?"

"I'm using most of my processing power on other things! If I want to win, I need to rely on *your* strategy! That goes for Othello too! I won't win if you don't stand behind me and tell me what to do!"

"...What's the point of you playing when I'm making all the moves?"

"I might be able to win by myself with some optimization! I would only need about a hundred more games!"

"...That so?" Rascal whispered as though tired, taking a sip of the tea Machina had brought.

Then, not speaking a word, he slowly set the cup back on the tray before saying, "Hey, you dumb hunk of scrap...what did you use as the water for this?"

"Elixir! You're tired, so I poured a whole five bottles!"

"That so...? Drop down and give me five hundred push-ups."

"Why?!" After giving that order, Rascal picked up the cup of tea again. As awful as it tasted, it *was* made using five Elixirs — each one costing 100,000 lir. It would be a waste to throw it out, so he drank it properly, all the while making a bitter face.

Boiling the Elixirs had made them lose their effects, so dealing with this only made him feel more tired than he was before.

As his idiot maid began doing her push-ups, he began looking over a certain set of documents.

"My frame...my frame is creaking... Ah, what're you looking at, Master?"

"This here has info about recent sightings of independent Superiors and pre-Superiors. I bought it at the DIN in that town we stopped by yesterday. I haven't gotten the chance to look at it yet."

"Ohh?"

"It's way easier to bring in those who aren't already working for any faction. Zeta was able to take the Hell General away from Dryfe, though. First she stole the Orbs from Huang He, then did this... It's damn impressive."

Rascal couldn't help but respect Zeta's ability. As a capable Superior, the Hell General must've been heavily supported by Dryfe. Rascal honestly had no idea how Zeta had been able to convince him to join IF.

He couldn't possibly have guessed that she merely broke the Hell General's underdeveloped mind in a duel, then persuaded him to join by enticing him with various things he needed.

"Wasn't Gerbera the one you recruited?! And the both of you are sub-leaders! Zeta really *is* capable!"

Being reminded of the now-jailed problem child made Rascal hurt inside — or perhaps that was just all the boiled medicine starting to take its toll.

"...I know I might be responsible for hiring Gerbera, but saying we're both the same rank makes me look kinda bad, don't ya think?"

"I'm not putting you down, but you *should* feel guilty! Yep!" Machina said, puffing out her chest.

"That so...? Then, with a guilty heart, I order my Embryo to do five hundred *more* push-ups."

"Ugh?! Why are you so sadistic to me?! You're nice to other people!"

"...I wouldn't be this way if you got your shit together," Rascal sighed as he resumed reading the documents. Machina was a natural at putting her Master in a foul mood.

Upon reaching a certain page, though, Rascal stopped.

"...I see. So that one's near Cortana now. They might bump into each other."

"Who do you mean by 'that one?'"

"Someone you know. We fought in the desert and the nearby ruins were destroyed before we could completely empty them."

"Oh yeah! Ace, right?!"

"We had a similar encounter with her, but we're talking about independents here! It's the *other* one!"

"Other one...other one...ohh..." With that, Machina recalled who Rascal was talking about and nodded to herself, doing her push-ups all the while. "Huh? Wait, isn't Cortana the place where Emily went?" she then asked.

"Yeah. I guess I should inform Zhang, just in case... But, man, this is interesting. As a Master, I'd like to see how Zhang and Emily would handle 'em. If at all."

"Okay! Changing course to Cortana right now!"

Following those words, with a low hum, the room — or, rather, the entirety of The Tetragrammaton itself — began to shake as it turned.

Machina's mere thought was enough to move this giant battle cruiser.

However, that wasn't unexpected. The Tetragrammaton's autopilot functioned because Machina, as Rascal's Superior Embryo, was controlling it. As foolish as she appeared to be, she served as the ship's helmsman as well as its central computer.

"Don't! I told you, I've got negotiations in Hermine!"

"I get it! You're just *pretending* to have negotiations! You *actually* don't want me to change course at all!"

"I see... Looks like I'll have to take off your defective ears and clean them real good!"

"Yaay! Master's gonna clean my ears! What a rewa— OW OW OW! Don't pull on them! That hurts!"

As they argued, the entire vessel shook, but they were soon back on course towards their business in Hermine.

All of this, however, had rather made them forget to inform Zhang and Emily of the coming storm.

◇◇

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

A little while after Teach told me about the location of Cortana’s Orb, we were asked to share the table with a pair of other customers.

“Ice creeeam! Ice creeeam!” Clearly excited to eat some ice cream, one of these customers — a little girl — sat down while singing that song, all smiles.

The other person was a man who looked to be in his thirties, and he sat by the girl’s side wearing a somewhat exhausted expression.

He seemed like her guardian, so at first I assumed they were father and child, but then I noticed the crest on the girl’s hand — and the lack of a similar crest on the man’s. This marked her as a Master and him as a tian.

Personally, I didn’t feel that it was that strange for tians and Masters to associate. Even The Triangle of Wisdom had tian employees like Lufia.

“Hngh... Nh?” Cyco suddenly let out a quiet groan while tilting her head to the side.

I looked at her face and noticed that she didn’t seem too well.

“What’s wrong, Cyco?”

“I feel kinda...*chilly*.” Chilly? In this weather? Was it because of the ice cream? It was so hot that it was more like a milkshake than ice cream right now, though...

“I’m going back in for a bit,” she said before returning to the crest on my left hand.

That made the little girl’s eyes go wide with surprise.

“Wow! She was a ‘Mayden!’” she said, flashing a childish smile brimming with wonder and joy. “Mister, you’re a ‘Mastar’ too!”

“Yeah. I am.”

“Wow! Wow! That’s sooo nice! I never saw a ‘Mayden’ before!”

“Huh? Ohh, right...” I was a Master with a Maiden Embryo and knew other people like me, so I tended to forget that Maidens were actually pretty rare.

This girl surely wasn’t the only one who had never seen a Maiden.

“Umm! The ones I saw were, uh...a slimey, a buggy, a thingy you can’t see...and another thingy you can’t see!” A slime guardian, a bug-like guardian, and two Embryos she couldn’t see... Territory types without any visual effects, maybe?

A part of me noted that she probably couldn't say that she "saw" those Embryos if she "couldn't see them," but this was just how conversations with children went — nuanced in a very strange way.

Also, the girl really wasn't very good at speaking. She looked about ten, but her actual age might've been even lower. Many people on the younger side created avatars older than themselves. I myself was one of them...

The tian man accompanying her might've seemed anxious exactly *because* this girl was so childish. It seemed likely that, since the girl was so young, her actual guardians had gotten a trustworthy tian to look after her.

"Ah. There's Machinya too!" she said.

"'Machinya?'"

"Machinya is very very clumsy and very very bad at Oshello! Rashcal always gets mad at her! But we are friends!" Based on the flow of the conversation, this "Machinya" was an Embryo as well as her friend. Since she said she'd never seen a Maiden, it must've been a humanlike Guardian instead, like that one succubus.

"Hm...?" Feeling that something wasn't right, I turned to Teach.

She hadn't said a single word since we'd been joined by the girl and the man. Her expression hadn't changed, but the atmosphere around her was different somehow.

Most notably, the iris of her right eye — her Superior Embryo — was changing intensely, like a kaleidoscope.

Also, for some reason the tian man accompanying the girl was sweating profusely, and it didn't feel like it was because of the heat.

"Mr. Zhan, you're swetting a lot. Are you okay?"

"Yes... No need to worry."

"Really? But talking so much made me very swetty too! It's *sho* hot! Your clothes look very hot too, mister!"

"Ah. Yeah. But I'm used to wearing this in the desert."

I was curious about Teach and the tian man, but I couldn't just ignore the girl.

"I never get this hot over there, so it makes me very tired."

"'Over there?'"

"Outside of Dendrogryam!"

"Ohh. Well, it's hard to feel heat like this if you don't live somewhere that's hot."

"Yeah! And I'm always in a bed inside a white room with air-condishonining, so I only feel hot or cold when I'm here!" *A bed inside a white room...a hospital, I assume?*

I vaguely remembered reading an internet article that talked about hospitalized children who go on trips inside *Infinite Dendrogram*. The monsters, though, made it necessary for them to be accompanied by skilled attendants. It always reminded me of the adventurer guild quests from low-level Masters looking for bodyguards who would escort them to scenic locations.

"Your ice cream, little lady," a waitress said as she brought the girl's order in.

"Yaay!" the girl cheered.

Just like Cyco's, the ice cream instantly began to melt, but...

"Wow, it looks so tasty! Thank you very much, it was *delishus*!"

...it all vanished in the blink of an eye, leaving the cup empty.

"...Huh?" The sudden change left me perplexed. The tian employee who brought the ice cream also tilted her head in confusion, whispering, "It was just there, wasn't it?"

However, Teach and the tian man had different reactions.

The tian man seemed surprised by something, while Teach...was smiling.

"Little lady, did you really have to eat the ice cream at *supersonic speed*?"

"Huh? But it would melt if I didn't..."

"Ha ha hah! That's true! It wouldn't be ice cream if it melted! With the weather like this, I guess it makes sense to eat it before it melts! Well, your experienced time is still the same, so maybe it really *is* better." While Teach laughed, the girl used her spoon to eat what little remained of the ice cream.

The peaceful scene did nothing to change the meaning of their exchange.

Teach had just said that this little girl moved at supersonic speeds — an impressive feat available only to a select group of individuals, most of them battle-focused.

"...W-Well, you got your ice cream, so let's go, shall we?" the tian man, still somewhat shocked, said as he laid down the payment and stood up in such a hurry that it seemed awkward. “Okaay! Bye-bye, mister and miss!”

The two then left the café, leaving me and Teach behind.

“Yu, follow those two.”

“Huh?”

“While I go retrieve the Orb, you keep an eye on those two. If something happens, use La Porte de l’Enfer to suppress them. It’s a hard counter to them, I’m sure of it.”

“Teach, what do you...?!”

“If I explain, they’ll get away. Act now. I’ll give you the details through Telepathy Cuffs.”

That was when I realized she was completely serious.

She’d kept her composure even when fighting the Huang He mafia back in Hermine, yet all of that was completely gone now.

I also realized that to her, that exchange with the girl was about more than just the supersonic speed.

“All right...” I’d ask for details later. For now, I stood up and went out to search for the pair.

“‘Machina’ and ‘Rascal’... Haven’t heard those names in a while,” I heard Teach say behind me, her tone dense with displeasure. “A girl Master who says those names like they’re friends... If she’s who I think she is, then things might get *really* bad.”

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City of Commerce, Cortana

Overcome with unease, Zhang rushed through the streets of Cortana with Emily beside him. *That conversation...her eyes and aura... There is no mistaking that she knows,* he thought.

Not even Zhang expected Emily to reveal IF-related information so casually.

The Master that was with The Blue Sky Songstress seemed clueless, but she herself suspected us from the moment we sat down, and those suspicions were confirmed when Emily spoke Rascal’s name.

And to top it all off, Emily performed the absurd feat of eating ice cream at supersonic speed.

Zhang hadn’t even known that she was capable of that, and he certainly didn't expect her to do it in front of someone who could be one of their enemies.

With that, the disguises given to them by their accessories became completely pointless.

"Emily, why were you so incautious in front of our enemies?" Zhang asked.

"Huh? Enemies? Who?"

"The Blue Sky Songstress and the other Master. We were sitting with them," Zhang answered, still holding Emily's hand.

"But the mister and miss weren't enemies..." The girl tilted her head in confusion. "I mean, they weren't *minuses*. Also..."

"Also...what?" Zhang already heard the word "minus" before, so he was more curious about what she had to say beyond that.

However, before Emily could answer...

"Whoa, would ya lookit that. Travelers? In a place like this?"

"Heh heh heh heh heh. What brought ya to our alley? Lookin' for somethin'?"

...a bunch of men — clearly not respectable individuals — stepped out in front of them and blocked their path.

Armed and with malicious grins on their faces, they moved to surround the pair.

...I made a grave mistake. I was so focused on getting away from the café that I chose the wrong turn, Zhang thought.

He was deeply familiar with their type. They targeted those weaker than themselves and took their valuables or even lives. While in charge of the Huang He mafia in Hermine, he used to suppress these kinds of people every time they overstepped their boundaries.

Another thing he knew about them was that *they were often terrible at gauging their targets' power*.

"Wow, the brat's a damn Master."

"Heh! I'm not gonna be scared of a little girl just 'cause of that."

"Hey, you two — if ya don't wanna get hurt, ya better start layin' down your cash."

The thugs hadn't the slightest clue that Zhang was a Superior Job or that Emily was part of Illegal Frontier. They didn't even entertain the idea that they were the weaklings here — they assumed that these two were no different than their usual victims.

In this particular scenario, Zhang and Emily's disguise accessories were actually a drawback. If they revealed their true powers, those who came to Cortana in search of the Orb would be wary of them, so the accessories were set to make them look non-threatening. Even Reveal would show fake stats that made them look like common folk, so perhaps it was hard to blame the men for thinking they were easy targets.

Though, in a way, the criminals' mistakes weren't quite fatal yet. Perhaps if they felt an instinct or something warning them to run, this encounter wouldn't escalate any further.

After all, *they were still in her gray zone*.

But then, they sealed their own doom.

"You gonna just stand there or what?!" The largest man among them stuck out his weapon...

"Fork over the money! *I'll kill ya!*"

...and said those words — the greatest mistake of his life.

"...Minus." Two sounds followed, and Zhang needed a moment to figure out their source.

The first sound was a voice as cold as ice, and Zhang just barely realized that it belonged to Emily.

The second sound only lasted for a split second, making it extremely hard to guess what it was.

It took Zhang a long moment to figure out that it was the sound of a blade *splitting the man from the top of his head to his groin*.

The blade in question was a reddish-black axe that shone with a faint luster like dried blood. Its overall shape was similar to a tomahawk, but the blade was styled like the spread wing of a raptor.

That detail made the blade look like decoration, but any doubts about its ability to cut were dispersed by the fact that it had just severed a human in half.

And the one holding this blade...was Emily.

The blade that had just brutalized a man was clutched in her right hand, but she held another one just like it — though still unbloodied — in her left. She was facing away from Zhang, and though the appearance of the axes was the only thing that had changed about her physically, her aura was completely different.

“Emi...ly?” Zhang hesitantly called out, but the girl didn’t turn to him.

This made it impossible for him to see her expression. Somehow, he doubted that it even looked human.

However, from the angle of her neck, he could at least guess what she was looking at.

She was looking at the men who were still alive — and who had just witnessed one of their own be split in half, his entrails spilling onto the ground and starting to reek in the sweltering heat. They could barely process what was happening.

“Huh...ah? Huhh?”

“H-Howard? Huh? B-But he’s a...high-rank...” They stared at the man’s remains in disbelief.

But then they noticed Emily...looking right at them.

“AIEEEE?!”

“A-AHHHHHHHHH!”

Just what was it that they’d seen in her gaze?

Whatever it was made them flee in abject terror, some tripping over themselves.

However, one remained, practically popping a blood vessel as he glared back at her with his face twisted in rage.

“My bro... YOU FUCKIN’ DEMON!” The man raised up his two-handed sword, but the moment he did that, Emily threw the axe in her left hand.

Spinning wildly, it flew into the man’s raised arms and severed them at the elbows...

But then it flew back like a boomerang...and decapitated him.

When the axe returned to her, there were now two bodies on the ground — one without a head and one split in half.

Upon seeing this, the remaining men screamed again and fled with even more fervor. However, Emily merely watched them run away, showing no intent to follow.

Throughout it all, Zhang wasn’t moving a muscle.

It wasn’t fear that had immobilized him — he hesitated to move because for all he knew, that could set her off.

Once the men were completely out of her sight, Emily began to do something else.

She stuck an axe into each of the remains.

At first, it seemed like she was getting rid of the bodies, but that wasn't her aim.

The axes began absorbing the remains as though they were drinking water. The corpses dried up at an immense speed — and soon enough, the water within them as well as each and every cell they had were completely gone.

Then...*they turned into motes of light*.

Tians were supposed to leave behind corpses, yet here, they had turned into light and vanished like monsters and Masters.

The motes soon mixed with the passing desert wind and were completely gone out of sight.

Once that was done, Emily turned back to Zhang.

"Mr. Zhan? What's wrong?"

Emily's curious eyes as she gazed at Zhang were all innocence. They were pure — certainly not the eyes of someone who'd just committed a brutal murder.

This perplexed Zhang, making it hard for him to respond.

But eventually...

"Emily..."

"Yes? What is it?"

"...What were you going to say?"

...he spoke up, but didn't ask about what happened just now.

Perhaps he simply needed a moment to collect himself before asking about the brutality he'd just witnessed.

Regardless...he certainly didn't know that he would get his answer immediately.

"When?"

"You said 'They weren't minuses. Also...' You were about to say something, right?"

"Oh! I remember!" Emily said. "I was saying that if they were enemies, *they'd just go away somewhere*. That's why that mister and miss weren't enemies!"

Cryptic words, spoken with an innocent smile.

"'Go away somewhere?'"

"Yep! People who become enemies hate me, so they *get away* from me.

I wonder where they go...”

As terrifying as it was, Zhang’s Truth Discernment didn’t go off.

The one flaw the skill had was that it didn’t react to words that the speaker honestly believed were true.

This meant that Emily actually thought that people who became her enemies simply *went away* from her...when the reality was that she killed them. Every last one of them.

So this...is her “true nature,” huh? Zhang now fully understood what Rascal had meant.

When faced with someone she saw as an enemy, Emily was like a machine that instantly sliced them apart. However, she didn’t actually remember any of these murders.

If Zhang somehow became her enemy, she would instantly kill him and not even recall the event.

Just...how? How does a person like her come to be? Zhang had been through a lot and seen all manner of people, yet the true nature of the little girl before him sent chills down his spine.

At the same time, however, he now understood that this Emily was the same Emily that he’d heard rumors about.

She was the holder of the Superior Job “Murder Princess,” which was unlocked by killing at least ten thousand people using melee weapons.

She was the bearer of the Superior Embryo, “Soul-Eating Axes, Youaltepuztli” — a pair of blood-colored hatchets.

She was the most infamous serial killer among all Superiors...Emily Killingston, “the Kill Leader.”

Chapter Three: The Gaunt Man

The Tetragrammaton

"Yeah, that's right. It's likely that that one's in Cortana too... Huh? The Blue Sky Songstress? I did consider it, but it looks like Caldina really is plannin' to gather everything."

In his own room aboard The Tetragrammaton, Rascal was talking into a magic comms item. On the other end of the line was Zhang; the purpose of this call was to inform him about the Superior that was sighted in Caldina, but Zhang responded by saying that he'd run into AR-I-CA and that she most likely knew who they were.

"First of all, use those accessories to change your appearance again. Yeah. Like I said before, just twist the knob to choose between five different disguises. It'll buy ya time, at least," Rascal said, explaining what he thought was the current optimal approach to Zhang. "Your top priority is survival. Data gatherin' is secondary, and gettin' the Orb is tertiary. And don't worry about Emily. If a massacre breaks out, just wait in a safe place before pickin' her up. Yeah, that'll be fine... All right, then, keep it up."

Having said all he needed to, Rascal cut the call. Machina was still doing push-ups at his side, and he set the comms device on her head.

Supporting herself with just her left arm, she used her right to move the bandage over her right eye slightly, prompting the device to smoothly roll into the gap between her eye and the bandage *and be stored within*.

The device was as big as a palm, yet it had no trouble fitting into that seemingly small space.

Rascal was quite familiar with the workings behind this, so he didn't even comment on it.

"Zhang didn't ask why it was okay to leave Emily. I guess he finally discovered her true nature." Based on Zhang's words and tone, Rascal could tell that the two of them had already been caught up in some trouble that had exposed Emily's true nature, just as he'd expected.

"Well, Caldina's cities *are* full of people she'd see as enemies," he added.

“Up, down, up, down... Master, I always wondered... What do you actually think about Emily’s thing?” Machina asked, still doing her push-ups.

“By ‘thing,’ you mean...?”

“The Emilynation Mode, of course!”

“...Oh, that was the name the dumbass gave it before she headed out to Altar,” Rascal noted, remembering Gerbera’s smug face as she said it to him. “I can’t *believe* how proud she was of that one. ‘It’s like elimination, but it has her name!’ she said, grinnin’ obnoxiously and puffing out her chest...not like she’s got anything to puff out.”

“How lecherous of you to stare at a lady’s pa— I mean, chest-armor! Also, you’re not one to talk! You’re the one who named this ship!”

“What’s wrong with ‘Tetragrammaton?’”

“...Wow! That’s a serious face!”

Rascal was indeed the one who had named this ship. At the time the vehicle was restored, Illegal Frontier had four members, each with an Embryo related to gods. So, he’d chosen “Tetragrammaton,” which referred to “the four letters of God.”

Another reason for the name, though, was the fact that Machina would be the one controlling it.

“...Back to the topic of Emily,” said Rascal. “After she does the switch, her mind and actions are fixed on the sole purpose of killing anyone she sees as an enemy. And as you know, she forgets it all once it’s done. That’s how her ‘thing’ works.”

The people she saw as enemies were the ones her brain personally judged as “minuses.” Based on Rascal’s experience, he believed that Emily remembered absolutely everything other people did to her. She remembered who was a plus or a minus to her — and if they were the latter, she would deem them an enemy and slaughter them.

Because of this, she was most dangerous during her first impression of a person, when they were neither a plus nor a minus.

If someone she just met raised a weapon against her or threatened to kill her, she would see them as enemies immediately and kill them even if the threats were empty ones. There was even a chance that it would develop into a “chain.”

That was the reason why Rascal was so tense when Zhang and Emily first met. If Zhang had done something “minus”-like, she might’ve killed him right there.

It also meant that she would never murder a fellow member of IF.

As long as the plus-minus system inside her head was functional, it was difficult for her to ever view her friends at IF — who had many pluses in her book — as enemies.

That dumbass almost managed it, though, Rascal thought, thinking of Gerbera. Emily had grown very attached to her since then, however, for reasons unknown to Rascal.

When Rascal had asked, Gerbera seemed to be just as ignorant of the reason; Emily on the other hand had only said, “It was very very tasty!”

Back then, the question of what had caused them to become so close had bothered him to no end.

The answer to that question turned out to be a chance encounter where Emily had walked in on Gerbera while she was making sweets. Gerbera had casually offered some to Emily, and they were so delicious that the girl had instantly become attached to her.

Back then, Emily was the only IF member who had any idea that Gerbera’s sweet-making skills were extraordinary. Not even Gerbera herself was truly aware of it.

“But Emily is human, isn’t she? Why is it that she can basically become a killing machine?” Machina asked.

“...This is just my outlook, but I think it’s a kind of mental illness.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s basically an alternate personality focused on nothin’ but murder... Though, I’m not sure if it can even be called a ‘personality.’ She just kills her enemies, then watches out for any *more* enemies, then goes on to kill those enemies, repeating this loop until they’re all gone.”

“Hmm... That reminds me of the robots we find in the ruins.”

“Yeah. Like you said, it’s almost mechanical... It’s like she boots up some sort of murder program. Though, knowing her real life, it’s not that weird for her to develop these kinds of symptoms. ‘Reality is stranger than fiction,’ as they say.”

Rascal wasn’t as uninvested in this as he initially appeared.

For certain reasons, he knew of Emily’s situation in real life. He was aware that the Emily here was no different from the Emily on the other side...her true nature included.

Thankfully, her real self was never in any situations that would call for her to switch to murder mode.

Or more accurately, *it was no longer possible for that to happen*.

I guess we can only hope that her condition subsides as she matures, Rascal casually thought. *Good thing it's not a big deal if you kill people here. Between that and the tripled time, I'd say this is a pretty good environment for her.*

"Master! Why are you so quiet?! Is all the sweat from these push-ups highlighting my curves *that* well?! Feel free to come and *get some*, in that case!"

"Like hell, ya piece of scrap. And you don't even have the glands. You can't sweat."

"Not with that attitude!" Machina said before letting out a war cry and speeding up her push-ups.

Needless to say, not a drop of sweat resulted.

"Oh yeah! I just remembered something!"

"What?"

"I asked Zeta the same thing before! She gave me a different answer! She's the correct one, right?!"

"...Why are ya so confident I'm below Zeta?" Rascal said with a sigh before shifting to the topic of Zeta's outlook. "Yeah, Zeta has a different opinion on Emily. She thinks that Emily's still conscious after she switches, and later uses extreme autosuggestion to make herself believe she didn't do anythin'. I'm not convinced you can fool Truth Discernment like that, but I guess it's not impossible."

Part of Rascal thought that such distinction meant nothing to post-switch Emily.

"Hmm? Which one of you is right, then?" Machina asked.

"To find that out, you'd have ta look directly into Emily's mind. And with the player protection system in place, that's not happenin'. Even if ya bring a Superior Embryo."

Rascal believed that Emily's killing mode was a symptom of mental illness, while Zeta thought it was all acting and autosuggestion. At this point, no one could know which one of them was right, for not even Rascal knew of any Embryos that could interfere with the minds of Masters.

"Regardless, the result will be the same. There's no point thinkin' about it."

"Result of what?"

"With The Blue Sky Songstress, Emily, and that one we talked about, Cortana's Orb has three Superiors gathered around it. It's gonna get ugly."

The city was on the verge of becoming a battlefield. The explosives were set, and now all it needed was a spark to set it off.

However...

"No matter what, Emily'll be the last one standing. That's gonna be the result, and it ever ain't gonna change."

Regardless what kind of battle ensued, The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx, was absolutely certain that Emily would never fall.

"That *is* true!" nodded his Embryo.

Everyone else in IF who knew Emily would have surely agreed with them.

They all knew how extreme Emily's abilities truly were.

"Her job is to observe, though. The other two'll fight before she gets involved... But I don't think she'll stop at just 'observin',"' Rascal said as he gazed out the window, in the direction of Cortana.

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City of Commerce, Cortana

After leaving the café, AR-I-CA went to a particularly gaudy mansion here in Cortana — the mayor's residence.

With her back against the mansion's walls, she was communicating with Hugo.

"I'm sorry, Teach," he said. "I lost them."

He'd combed through the café's surroundings but failed to find the pair they'd shared a table with. While searching, he'd passed by a bunch of terrified men — but besides that, he'd found nothing of note.

"Yeah, they probably changed their appearances," AR-I-CA said. "There's accessories that give you multiple disguises to choose from." The face Emily "wore" at the café was different than the one in her wanted photo, so AR-I-CA was fairly certain about this. "Her appearance and stats might be fake, but her actions will be all too real. If she's really who I think she is, then she'll definitely do *something*. You just go wherever there's any sign of trouble."

"...All right."

"Anyway, I'll go grab the Orb off the mayor. Byeee!" AR-I-CA said before ending the call.

Okay, I'll leave the girl to Yu for now and just get this over with, she thought. She'd already told Hugo about the Murder Princess. There was still no guarantee that the girl was really her —but you could never be too careful.

The atrocities committed by the Murder Princess were many and well-known. It was said that she'd even slaughtered each and every single member of the Pentagon Caravan — the 469-strong clan that was second in Caldina's rankings.

We know her job, but we don't know much about her Embryo. That's bad. The details of the Murder Princess job were well-known even among tians, but the details of her Embryo, Youaltepuztli, were a mystery even to Sefirot.

All that they really knew about it was that it was focused not on large-scale destruction, but rather on lengthy battles against many enemies.

Remembering a fellow Sefirot member who was focused on endurance battles, AR-I-CA tried speculating about the Murder Princess. *Is she like our boy Carl? If your defense is broken, you can take out lots of people one by one. But man...I'm glad I had Yu and Cyco with me when she came. Going by Cyco's reaction, it should work real good.*

AR-I-CA had a good guess about what caused Cyco to change.

Embryos with skills based on certain numbers had some sort of sensitivity to those same numbers. Ray Starling's Nemesis, for example, had an innate counter that tracked the amount of damage Ray suffered.

Similarly, Cyco could just *feel* how much of a kinslayer someone was.

Faced with the Murder Princess's obscenely high kill count of her own kind, Cyco, understandably, had found her senses overwhelmed.

However, that also meant that...

They're probably the Murder Princess's greatest enemy.

...she would be extremely susceptible to the effects of Cyco's La Porte de l'Enfer.

The skill Froze targets based on the amount of their own kind they'd killed. If Hugo could just activate it, the Murder Princess — whose kill count far exceeded a hundred — would Freeze without a doubt.

That skill alone should end the battle, and White Rose should be able to hold out until Yu can use it... Fran made that thing really tough.

MGFX 002 White Rose — the unit that Mr. Franklin of The Triangle of Wisdom gifted to his little sibling, Hugo. Its multilayered armor, Fleur d'Hiver, was created with extremely sturdy material as well as having its defense enhanced with skills. If AR-I-CA's assumption was correct, the surface armor was actually made of the Mythical metal — the scarlet Hihi'irokane. It was just a different color, either because adding the self-repair function had changed the metal's properties or because Franklin had just made it white somehow.

Regardless, it was clear that no Magingear in this world was sturdier than White Rose. It could no doubt withstand even the Murder Princess's attacks.

It probably cost several times more than Opera. It has crazy stats too... Looks like Fran intends to keep the promise she made to me. I dunno about the "entrusting to Yu" part, though...

AR-I-CA cracked a smile as she recalled the promise she'd shared with her dear friend before leaving The Triangle of Wisdom.

"I guess that promise will have to wait until Yu's grown some more," she whispered to herself before switching gears.

Now, she would infiltrate the mayor's mansion.

AR-I-CA could sense danger, so it wasn't difficult for her to sneak past the security. If she could acquire the Orb just like that, everything would be fine — and if the mayor had it on his person, she'd set up an ambush and take it using Blue Opera's supersonic speed.

Killing him could destabilize the city, so she was planning to just take the Orb and get out. If that caused any political problems, she'd just leave them to her sponsor — the president.

"Let's-a go then! Wait, huh?" As she psyched herself up to cross the wall and start the operation, she noticed something happening at the main gates.

"ARE YOU MESSING WITH US?!"

"..."

It was a conversation. One side could be heard easily, but distance made it hard to hear the other.

AR-I-CA considered the situation.

An incident at the front gates would act as a good distraction for her operation. However, her woman's intuition — a force separate from Cassandra — told her that things could be bad if she didn't figure out exactly what was happening.

With that in mind, she leaped over the wall and entered the mansion's garden before making her way closer to the gate, keeping concealed behind trees and greenery all the while.

Of course, she was there in no time.

At the gates, there was a group of ten men. Or more accurately, a group of nine men and one lone man.

The nine were brawny tians who, based on the results of Reveal, were all over level 300 — very impressive for Caldinians. That, combined with their high-grade equipment, led AR-I-CA to assume that they were members of the private army tasked to protect the mayor's mansion.

Tians were still seen as better full-time guards than Masters. People who had a tendency to suddenly disappear were obviously unfit to provide security for anyone.

The person facing these tians seemed to be the exact opposite of them.

He had a gaunt face and a body so thin a strong wind could blow him away. Not even his loose robe could hide just how lean the man was. If someone said that he'd just recovered from a serious illness, no one would doubt them for a second.

AR-I-CA's Reveal told her that his stats were far below those of the men, but...

...They're fake, she thought. Her instincts told her that the man *wasn't* weak, but had only made himself *seem* that way.

"What's yer deal, anyway?! Ya think ya can just waltz in here and see the mayor just like that...?!"

"I'm sorry... I just need to talk to him. But if I told you why...it wouldn't be good for him."

"And ya expect us to understand ya?! Ya got any clue how shady ya look right now?! There's no damn way we can let ya see 'im!"

"I suppose you're right... Ohh, how should I put it...?"

The man hung his head and put his left hand over his forehead, revealing a crest depicting “a woman holding a skull.”

The lone man facing the tough private soldiers was a Master.

“Ohh. I see, I see. This much can be said, I think...”

“What?! Say it!”

“Please pass this message on, from me to him: ‘Please show me the Orb’ and ‘I heard about this from Fria’...”

The representative of the soldiers pondered this for a moment.

The gaunt man was no doubt suspicious, but he was also a Master, making it possible that he had good reasons for being here. They’d had a visit from a Superior just yesterday, and perhaps this man was somehow related to that.

“Wait here!” the representative said before returning to the mansion.

A few minutes later, he returned, accompanied by the Mayor of Cortana, Douglas Coin. His complexion was as good as it was when AR-I-CA saw him yesterday, but his expression was laden with profound distress.

“Are you the Master who sent the message?” he asked.

“Yes,” the gaunt man replied. “I came here to look at the UBM Orb you have.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about!” the mayor insisted. *I knew it! A robber seeking the Orb of De Vermis!* he thought, panicking.

The mayor was secretly keeping the Orb containing an Ancient Legendary UBM called “The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis.”

Just some time ago, he’d used it to make himself younger.

Some Orbs could only be used if you knew exactly how to use them, but De Vermis was different. Anyone who possessed it and merely desired its power would quickly be granted healthy bodies.

After wishing upon the Orb, the mayor had actually regained his youth *overnight*.

De Vermis was also particularly loyal. The day after the mayor became healthy, the Orb began talking directly to his mind, telling him how to perform a ritual that would grant him “a new life eternal.”

He was actually working on that even now.

I only need three more days... Then I will finally be immortal!

Having gained immense wealth and power even for a Caldinian elite, just like many others before him, he now craved immortality.

De Vermis had told him that “a new life eternal” would not only be impervious to death, but also grant him immense amounts of power.

When that happens, I will no longer need to fear the congress or any Superior! That is why I simply cannot let them take De Vermis!

That was why he'd ordered his maid to assassinate AR-I-CA last night. Doing so would buy him the time he needed to finally become immortal and gain the power to resist those who would judge him for it.

Most would see his line of thinking as extremely narrow-minded, but the mayor couldn't understand that perspective. He was so close to the impossible goal of achieving immortality, after all.

"But...Fria is telling me that you have it..." Though the mayor denied it, the gaunt man weakly, but with certainty, claimed otherwise.

"That is what I came to ask! Why do you know about Fria...?! What is your relationship with her?! Speak!"

For some reason, the man's words had driven the mayor into a panic. Neither the personal soldiers nor AR-I-CA could understand why.

However, the gaunt man could.

"...'Speak'? Do you *really* want me to?" the man asked as he looked around. It was hard to tell if he was looking at the mayor's soldiers, AR-I-CA, both, or neither.

"Yes! Do it! After all, she could not possibly have told you about any Orb! It's impossible!"

"Impossible because...*she died years before you even had it?*" the man asked, looking straight at the mayor.

No, not *at* him, but...

"But it *was* Fria who told me about the Orb. And she did so just minutes ago, actually. After all..."

"Fria...the same Fria that you tortured and killed...is right over there," he said, pointing *behind* the mayor.

"Wh-What...?" The mayor hesitantly turned around, but there was nothing there.

He wasn't the only one confused. The soldiers and AR-I-CA also didn't see anything.

However, anyone with Truth Discernment saw that it wasn't a lie, and the man's eyes were focused on the space as if there was truly something there.

"She's saying that she's the wife of your political opponent and that you brought them down and killed them."

"W-Wait..."

"And...Fria is far from the only one who's buried underneath this mansion. Ohh... I was wondering why there aren't any dead children in *this city's* streets. You were gathering them up... Wait, some died *after* you got the Orb... A total of a hundred and ninety-eight, it seems. And most died as slaves..."

"Wait! What are you saying?!" the mayor shouted, thoroughly confused.

It wasn't because the man was speaking nonsense. Quite the opposite, in fact — he had a full grasp of the deeds the mayor had committed under his mansion, *right down to the number of people involved*.

To complete the ritual to gain "a new life eternal," he'd secretly gathered corpses and even killed slaves, but the gaunt man knew it all.

He even knew of the sins the mayor had committed long before he even knew of the ritual.

"Ohh... I'm sorry," the man said. "I happen to have this skill, Soul Sight...which, well, lets me see souls. That includes people who are no longer with us. I can talk to them and even negotiate with them. Fria actually told me about your crimes in exchange for doing her a certain favor."

Upon hearing those words, the mayor was overcome by shock.

He was well aware of the skill this man had just named.

"Soul Sight...! Th-That... That is the ultimate job skill of the necromancer grouping...!"

"...Huh? Ohh... I'm sorry... I haven't introduced myself yet."

The man put his hand to his chest...

"My name is Benetnasch. My job is...King of Tartarus."

...and declared himself transcendent.

"King of...King of Tartarus?!" the mayor exclaimed in a panic, backing away. The mayor's soldiers all stepped in front of him, but their expressions were stern, clearly showing their fear of Benetnasch.

Unlike Masters, who had well-rounded avatars crafted by the control AIs, tians were born with sets of talents that prohibited all but a few of them from ever acquiring Superior Jobs. This made them acutely aware of just how powerful the bearers of these jobs were.

"So, let me ask again... May we talk about that Orb you have?" Benetnasch asked.

"Y-You're planning to take it from me...!" said the mayor, showing no intention of hiding the truth any longer. It was obviously futile by this point — if Benetnasch's stats as they appeared to Reveal were indeed fake and he was actually the King of Tartarus, then it was fair to assume he had accessories with skills like Truth Discernment.

The mayor also used a magic item to activate a barrier around the mansion that would prevent people from noticing whatever happened inside it.

After all, if someone were to hear the sins Benetnasch had alluded to, not even his position as a mayor would save him from severe punishment.

"For now, I just want to see it," said Benetnasch. "I still don't know if it has the power I seek. If it doesn't, I'll back off..."

"And what if it does?!" the mayor exclaimed.

"If it happens to have the power I want...I would like to have it. Through a trade, of course."

"A trade...?" the mayor asked.

Benetnasch nodded before replying, "The souls here told me about many of your crimes...but I won't report any of them to the Caldinian congress if you have what I want. Oh, but if it *isn't* what I want, I'll report it regardless. It's what I promised to your victims."

"Guh...!" the mayor winced. Burglary was a crime that could get you on a wanted list. Because of this, Benetnasch wanted to get the Orb with a trade instead of just taking it — but to the mayor, this was no better than blackmail.

The courts of *Infinite Dendrogram* used Truth Discernment without restriction, so verbal testimonies had as much gravity as physical evidence. Even if that hadn't been the case, a search of the mayor's mansion would turn up plenty of proof.

This might not have been a problem immediately, since this city was still in the palm of his hand. However, if his memory served him well, the capital of Drag-Nomad was currently about a day away by dragon carriage. It would take only two days for Benetnasch to report his crimes to the congress and return here with government officials in tow — perhaps even less if Benetnasch had any faster means of travel.

The Mayor of Cortana was powerful even among the Caldinian elite, but the sins he'd committed were so numerous and severe that even he would be made to face judgment.

He would lose his title as mayor as well as the Orb itself before the ritual's completion in three days.

I have not yet accomplished all that is needed to become immortal! It is too early for me to be caught! the mayor thought in distress. For a moment, he considered refusing Benetnasch's offer and just fleeing Cortana the moment his crimes were reported.

After all, the mayor didn't *have* to perform the ritual in his mansion. He could put the necessary corpses in an inventory, find a safe and secret spot outside Cortana, and complete it there. However, before he could resolve to do that...

"T-h-a-t...i-s...n-o-g-o-o-d."

...he heard a voice in his head — the fluent, but not flowing, words of De Vermis, the Orb that served him.

Wh-Why? the Mayor asked.

"L-e-a-v-i-n-g...t-h-e c-i-t-y...m-e-a-n-s...m-u-r-d-e-r," the Orb replied. Its words made the mayor gasp.

The reason Benetnasch wanted to obtain the Orb through a trade instead of by force was because there were many potential witnesses here. The King of Tartarus had yet to be put on the wanted list, but if he tried to steal the Orb from the mansion of the mayor himself, he would certainly be branded a criminal. That was why he was taking the soft approach.

But if I leave Cortana and find a place where no one would find me...

"Y-o-u-w-o-u-l-d-b-e-k-i-l-l-e-d." De Vermis cut the thought short.

The mayor hadn't considered that angle. Away from prying eyes, Benetnasch could kill him and take the Orb without anyone noticing.

There was no guarantee that was indeed the King of Tartarus's plan, but the idea still filled the mayor with fear, urging him to take a step back.

"I see. So he would leave to report me...and then kill... In that case..." the mayor mumbled, covered in sweat and hanging his head.

"Hm...? Is something wrong? Are you talking to someone? Wait... Now that I look at it... Your body... The soul inside is..." Benetnasch said, looking at him with a worried expression.

His gaze was directed not at the mayor's face, but at something deep below the surface — something only he could see.

This is my only chance...! If I dispose of him now...!

"...T-h-e-n-y-o-u-w-i-l-l-h-a-v-e-a-n-e-w-l-i-f-e-e-t-e-r-n-a-l." De Vermis finished the mayor's thought for him. Murdered Masters didn't come back for three whole days. If killed here, Benetnasch wouldn't be able to report him before the mayor had finished his ritual and become immortal.

Normally, challenging a Superior Job — as well as a Master with a Superior Embryo — would be sheer recklessness. However, King of Tartarus was a job that commanded the undead.

Undead were monsters without living bodies. This gave them nigh inexhaustible fortitude, but in exchange they were vulnerable to many things — sunlight, fire, and holy attacks, to name a few.

It was noon right now, and a searing hot one, at that. In an environment like this, any undead were bound to wither away in mere moments.

That meant that Benetnasch couldn't employ any of his monsters, leaving only his own frail self.

The mayor knew well that rear guard casters had low physical stats, and this was enough information to convince him that he could win this battle.

His decision firm, the mayor raised his head and held up his right hand, displaying his Jewel.

"*Call*! Flame Dragon! Saint Dragon!" He raised his voice to activate a skill and summon two of the Pure-Dragons he'd acquired using his vast wealth. Both were of the skydragon kind, but one was a red-scaled fire dragon, while the other was a white-scaled dragon of the holy element.

"Mayor?!" the soldiers exclaimed, shocked that he would go on the offensive against a Superior.

"Kill him! He cannot wield his undead now!" the mayor urged them.

“And keep in mind that if my crimes are laid bare, you will be judged along with me!”

“Ah!” The soldiers all voiced their shock. They had acted as the mayor’s hand for a long time, assisting him in committing many foul deeds. Even before he’d begun the preparations for the ritual, they’d done many terrible things on his behalf.

For them, the great payment made it worth it, but there was no denying that they were as guilty as the mayor.

With that in mind, they gathered their resolve and faced Benetnasch.

“I...really can’t recommend using force,” Benetnasch said, still apparently trying to be considerate of everyone present. “If you use violence against me, I will be legally permitted to fight back.”

Fights between Masters were completely outside of tian law, but that wasn’t the case for conflicts between tians and Masters. Masters who killed tians would be placed on wanted lists, while Masters who were attacked by tians would become legally able to retaliate...in self-defense.

Benetnasch knew this well, and that was exactly why he showed concern — or perhaps *pity* — for these people who raised a hand against him.

“I really think you should reconsider,” he said. “I’m speaking to you Pure-Dragons, as well. Please refrain. You will surely die if you don’t.”

He showed extra sympathy to the two dragons summoned by the mayor. However, the great beasts only chuckled in response.

These intelligent creatures could feel the aura of death about Benetnasch, so they knew well that he was a necromancer. In broad daylight, he couldn’t even hope to match these wielders of fire and holy power.

Thus, Benetnasch’s warnings fell on deaf ears.

“Kill him!” the mayor ordered, prompting the two dragons to ready their breath attacks...

“Awaken Undead — Aragorn.”

...only for their heads to be severed a moment later.

Separated from their bodies, the large dragon heads rose into the air before falling to the ground. A drizzle of flame and holy radiance escaped from their opened throats before their entire bodies dissolved into specks of light and vanished.

“Huh... Ah?” The mayor and his soldiers were struck dumb — partially because the two dragons had died in a flash, but even more because of the *giant object* that had appeared before their eyes.

It was an entire massive skeleton, and one that possessed the majesty of a four-legged dinosaur fossil enshrined in a prestigious museum. There was a faint glow in its empty eye sockets, and its tail was a blade whose edge shone sharper than any sword of legend — no doubt the very weapon that rid the dragons of their heads.

“...Over-tamed and overfed. Too much flesh and fat on those bones. They were more swine than dragon,” the skeleton said in an imposing voice, its disdain for the dragons all too obvious.

Referring to this creature as merely a “skeleton,” though, did not convey the truth. Actually, it was a “High-End King-Edge Skeleton Dragon” and its — or rather, his — true name was Aragorn.

Once an Ancient Legendary UBM called “Bladedragon King, Drag-Edge,” he’d been defeated and as a result had become Benetnasch’s MVP special reward in the form of “Full-Body Skeleton of the Bladedragon.” Now, Benetnasch had revived him using Necromancy.

“...And there it is,” said Benetnasch with a sigh. “Those Pure-Dragons seemed like the type you’d dislike. I knew you wouldn’t hold back against them.”

“It is a grievous sin to debase a strong life. Thus, dragons must never fall as far as they have.”

It was worth noting that Benetnasch had actually summoned Aragorn using an impressive technique that combined the Instant Release function of the inventory where he’d stored Aragorn’s skeleton with a perfectly timed cast of Awaken Undead.

“...I’ll salvage their souls, at least,” Benetnasch said, removing a crystal-like object from his robe.

It looked like a Crystal of Resentment, the kind used to unlock the King of Corpses job — but unlike that stone, it was shining with all sorts of colors.

Once he was done, there was slightly more red and white in it than before.

“H-How...?!” the mayor exclaimed, having somewhat recovered from the shock. “We are in *broad daylight*! Why is this undead unaffected...?!”

"My Embryo has a passive skill that nullifies the sunlight- and fire-related vulnerabilities of all undead in my party. That lets them function just fine even within daylight."

This was an outright negation of the one thing that had led the mayor to believe he would win.

He'd ignored the existence of Embryos — arguably the thing that defined Masters — and it had led to his staggering defeat. But that didn't matter anymore.

All that mattered was the result.

"This is now a situation where I wouldn't be punished if I hurt you, just like I warned it would be," said Benetnasch, and he was right. The mayor had just attacked him with intent to kill.

This was a world full of violent bandits and other humanoid dangers, so self-defense laws were far more lax than they were in real life. Because of this, Benetnasch could now kill the mayor outright without facing punishment.

"I'll ask one more time... May I see the Orb?" he said as he extended his right hand.

"Ghhnh..." The mayor let out a moan. Having lost the dragons he'd been counting on, he felt like he could barely move. His soldiers were slowly backing away as well.

All of them could feel the sheer difference in power between them and Aragorn. They were neither stupid nor courageous enough to challenge a creature they couldn't hope to defeat even if they gave their lives for it.

What do I do...?! What can *I do...?!* the mayor thought in a panic, but no answer came to him. If Benetnasch willed it, Aragorn could lop off his head just like he'd decapitated those dragons.

That fear made the mayor reach for the Orb in his pocket when suddenly...

"G-o-t-o-t-h-e-u-n-d-e-r-g-r-o-u-n-d."

...he heard De Vermis's voice again.

"...What?" the mayor asked.

"I-t-i-s-a-b-i-t-e-a-r-l-y-b-u-t-w-e-w-i-l-l-p-e-r-f-o-r-m-t-h-e-r-i-t-u-a-l."

"You can do that?!"

"N-o-t-p-e-r-f-e-c-t-l-y. N-o-t-e-n-o-u-g-h. B-u-t-i-t-i-s-p-o-s-s-i-b-l-e," said De Vermis.

This was nothing but good news for the mayor. Even if it wasn't perfect, gaining some degree of immortality and power would rescue him from his current situation.

Gathering his resolve, he turned back and ran towards his mansion.

"Ah. Wai—"

"I will sever his legs." Before Benetnasch could tell *someone* to wait, Aragorn made his move and swung his blade-tail.

It easily sliced off the mayor's legs...

"OWWAAAHHHHHHH...! AAAHHHHHHHH!"

...but he *continued running in spite of that*.

"...What?" Aragorn muttered as he watched it happen. The spark in his eye sockets shook, like he couldn't believe his nonexistent eyes.

No blood came from the mayor's severed legs. Instead, something deathly white flooded from the wound and quickly assumed the form of replacement legs.

To Benetnasch and Aragorn, the white mass seemed like *a swarm of maggots*, and the mayor used those maggot-legs to run into the mansion.

Benetnasch watched him disappear inside, his expression a bit darker than before.

"...My friend," Aragorn said. "That does not seem like the item you seek."

"...Yeah. Chances are that it isn't." Benetnasch let out a tired sigh... It wasn't an expression of despair, but a slight sense of wasted effort and resignation to an arduous future. This particular endeavor had been for naught, but there were others awaiting him.

"But I should still confirm it, just in case," Benetnasch added. "And even if it turns out it isn't what I want, I may still be able to trade it for an Orb with the right power."

"Truly?"

"I mean, I already got the Orb that turns water into land. If I got one more, I'd have two things I could tra— Necro Aura." Benetnasch cut his words short and gave Aragorn a stat buff.

The next moment, a melodic engine sound rang out, followed by a rain of artillery.

"RRHHOOAAAGHH!" Aragorn roared as he rushed to cover Benetnasch with his blade-tail.

The sturdy skeleton deflected the shells, and the King of Tartarus didn't suffer any damage at all.

When the rain of artillery paused, Benetnasch and Aragorn looked up at their attacker high in the sky.

There, they saw a singing, azure Magingear — Blue Opera.

It could only belong to Ace, AR-I-CA the "Blue Sky Songstress" of Sefirot, Caldina's top clan.

And, indeed, that was exactly who had just attacked him.

"...Honestly, I thought of just watching this play out, but if you've got an Orb too, then I can't possibly ignore you!" AR-I-CA spoke through the machine's speakers.

Those were AR-I-CA's honest thoughts at the moment. Her best-case scenario was one where the Orb turned out to be something Benetnasch didn't want, causing him to leave it behind. She planned to settle things with the mayor after that.

But Benetnasch already had an Orb of his own and was planning to take the mayor's regardless of its use to him. That made him another target and a competitor.

AR-I-CA herself hadn't been expecting this fight, but she couldn't miss this opportunity.

...There's the Murder Princess too, she thought. *If she causes trouble, this guy'll probably get away. That'll make it hard to get his Orb. I gotta end this here and now.*

She'd decided to defeat Benetnasch, take his Orb, then pursue the mayor and take his.

She also believed that this was *her only chance* to fight Benetnasch.

"A blue Magingear... Sefirot's AR-I-CA, right?" Benetnasch said. "I've heard...certain rumors."

"I've heard 'bout you too," AR-I-CA replied. "Like the fact that you always have a pretty purple-haired little Maiden at your side. She hates being in the crest, right? Wait a minuuute. I'm not seeing her anywheeere."

Her tone casual, she said this before looking around. Benetnasch kept looking up at her, not responding.

"I know 'bout your skills too," she continued. "You can use your undead-protection skill from any distance, but *you need her at your side to use your absolutely broken ult*." Those words made the necromancer's eyes widen. “So... Let’s dance, shall we? Just the two of us.”

The truth in her statement slightly rattled Benetnasch.

A moment later, Blue Opera resumed its attacks, intent on finishing this while Benetnasch’s Superior Embryo was elsewhere.

Chapter Four: The Chain

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

After ending the call with Teach, we continued the search for the Murder Princess and the tian with her.

I had actually been aware of the Murder Princess before that conversation.

She was rather famous among wanted criminals, and I'd heard about her a good number of times while I was still in Dryfe as a member of The Triangle of Wisdom.

Honestly, I had trouble believing that girl and the infamous Murder Princess were one and the same. Though maybe a bit immature for her age, she seemed like a normal kid.

Still, I knew I had to do something. If it turned out that she really *was* the Murder Princess, the situation could get really bad.

"Can you feel something?" I asked Cyco.

"Hmm... She's not nearby." Cyco could sense any kinslayers in her immediate surroundings — specifically, within the effective range of La Porte de l'Enfer.

The girl's appearance and stats were concealed, making Cyco's skill the best way to search for her, but Cortana was quite a large city. Built around a lake, it was doughnut-shaped — but even taking that into account, it covered a massive area.

The range of Cyco's senses would be only a small dot on the map.

"Compared to this city...my power is minuscule."

Oh... She's a bit sad about it, I thought.

"It's like your chest in real life," she continued.

...But not sad enough to be nice, I thought again. *And it's not* that *small... I'm still growing!*

"Anyway, we need to keep combing the city," I said. "If something happens, it'll be too late."

"Yeah," Cyco replied. "You should also consider that they might attack you."

"...That *is* true," I nodded. They now knew my face, and Teach's face too. If they realized that she was part of Sefirot, it was possible that they would launch some assault against us.

I couldn't just ride White Rose around town, but I could at least prepare to take it out of my Instant Release inventory.

Several dozen minutes of searching later, we arrived at a bazaar full of people doing business while seated on carpets. Some were even selling wares that were on the larger side — I could see caged monsters in the distance. Careful not to be swept up by the crowd, I entered a relatively empty alleyway.

"Ohh? Well if it isn't a Maiden I have seen before," someone suddenly said — clearly addressing us.

"Hm?" I looked around, but I couldn't see anybody. "Who's there?" I asked.

The "Maiden" mentioned by the voice could only be Cyco, but that didn't make sense.

To prevent the Murder Princess and the tian with her from gathering too much information about us, I had Cyco use Crest Disguise, just like I had back when we first met Ray.

However, the voice seemed certain that Cyco was indeed a Maiden.

The fact that they had also "seen her before" implied that the voice didn't belong to a stranger, but there wasn't a familiar face anywhere in sight.

"To fail to recognize me *this* badly... You should know that even my feelings can be hurt," the voice said.

"Hugo. Down," snapped Cyco.

"Huh?" I said and looked down, where I saw a mop of purple hair that didn't even reach my waist.

Apparently, the person talking to us was so small that I had completely overlooked them.

...My avatar was way taller than my real height, so I had trouble acting my size.

"I called out to an acquaintance only to have that same acquaintance imply that I am tiny... How disappointing..." the person — a girl smaller than even Cyco — said, covering her face.

I couldn’t see her expression, but I could see that her small body was covered in an ancient Grecian-style dress that left one of her shoulders exposed. Just like her hair, it was purple, and the predominance of this color helped me remember who she was.

“...Are you Persephone?” I asked.

“Oh? You *do* remember? I was worried, seeing as we barely talked when we met at The Triangle of Wisdom...but you seem to have a good memory!” she said, standing on her toes and slapping my shoulder a couple times.

“Though, Franklin told us a great deal about you. For example, you are the clan’s rising star — and a Maiden’s Master, just like my Master Dearest! ‘Hugo’ and ‘Cuckoo,’ was it?”

“...I’m Cyco.”

“Oh, I got it wrong! My apologies!”

“Well, you look like some kind of colorful baby bird, so it’s not surprising that you’d have the memory of a bird too. It’s fine.”

“This is the first time we have even talked! Why are you so mean?!” the girl exclaimed.

Anyway, I did indeed know who she was.

She was Persephone — a Maiden Embryo, just like Cyco. The one she referred to as “Master Dearest” was...well, her Master — King of Tartarus, Benetnasch. He’d once helped my sis with some particular research projects.

“Now, why is a member of The Triangle of Wisdom here in Caldina? Traveling, I presume?” Persephone asked.

“More or less...and since you’re here, that means that...”

“Indeed. Master Dearest is in the city, as well. Ohh, he is currently at the mayor’s residence, facing a Magingear. A metal giant with a sky blue color,” she casually said with one eye closed.

“Huh...?!” I exclaimed. If she was telling the truth, then Teach was currently fighting Benetnasch.

I spent a moment wondering how it could have come to that and remembered what Teach said at the café.

“Is he here...to get the Orb?” I asked.

“You know about it? Impressive. Wait, are you after it as well? What a coincidence!” Persephone said.

Teach had mentioned that other Superiors were after the Orbs, but I never would’ve guessed that the King of Tartarus was one of them...

“Why is he after it...?”

“Ohh, saying that would infringe on Master Dearest’s privacy. I cannot give you the details, but I can give you the rough outline.”

"Huh?"

"Basically, he is chasing an unreachable dream. He is searching for something that would let him achieve an impossible task. Though, assuming it *is* possible, his best bet is to take me to the next stage," she explained.

I looked at her in silence. Her description was abstract and I could barely understand the details.

However, one thing was fairly obvious.

Persephone was a Superior Embryo — one in her seventh form — and Benetnasch was after something that required "taking her to the next stage," as in making her evolve to the eighth form, something that wasn't even confirmed to exist.

There was a chance that the Orb in Cortana, which was said to "grant a new life eternal," could help him achieve whatever it was he was after, so he was now fighting Teach for it.

"Personally, I wish he would focus on the main objective instead of getting sidetracked by these futile wastes of time... And how am I supposed to feel if he achieves his goal without me?"

"...Oh. I see," said Cyco, noticing something. "So that's why you're not helping him fight AR-I-CA."

"More like not helping him hunt the Orbs at all. I am boycotting this meaningless endeavor!" she claimed.

...So Persephone was walking around here instead of helping her Master because she was fundamentally against what he was doing. That must've been part of the reason why she revealed some information about her Master's goal. It wasn't uncommon for Maidens and humanoid Guardians to act on their own will, but Persephone seemed to take it a little far.

"Wait, if Master Dearest is fighting a Magingear pilot... Is it an acquaintance of yours?" she asked.

"...What if it is?" I countered.

"I pray that they do manage to take away the Orb! It is a nuisance! A revolting one, at that! I do not even *want* him to have it!"

...This is the first time I've seen an Embryo actually wish for her own Master to lose, I thought in surprise. *What does she mean by "revolting," though?*

"So there! I will not involve myself in the fight... So don't even *think* of harming me!"

...Pardon? I thought, eyebrow raised.

"Do not attack me thinking it would help your pilot friend!" she explained.

Well, I suppose it wasn't out of the question that we'd decide to do something like that. Persephone was Benetnasch's Embryo, and though she wasn't helping him now, there was no guarantee that wouldn't change if he was close to getting the death penalty.

We did have the option of beating her just to raise Teach's chances.

"Wh-What is that look in your eyes supposed to mean?! Just so you know, I am frail and weak! Even a low-rank Guardian would leave me beaten and crying! So don't attack me! And no looking at me with those eyes! I know what is currently going through your head! You are thinking 'What nonsense is that? You're a Superior Embryo,' are you not?!"

What nonsense is that? You're a Superior Embryo, I thought.

"The idea that every Superior Embryo is strong is a myth! And I am so specialized on one thing that I am *especially* weak! I cannot even be compared to that Pandemonium your clan leader has! That is a monster factory first and foremost, but it is plenty strong even when used to just trample — plus, it has camouflage! I am not *nearly* as versatile!" The Superior Embryo continued to desperately assert her weakness, leaving me unsure how to react.

Honestly, I felt like it was best to just leave her be, though that didn't change the fact that Benetnasch and Teach were fighting. That was something that I couldn't ignore.

But there was still the matter of the Murder Princess. What was I to do in this situation...?

"By the way, Hugo," Cyco asked telepathically.

What is it? I replied in thought.

"Persephone is a bit like Nemesis, isn't she? A bit smaller than even her, though."

...Yeah, I thought that too.

Their appearances and mannerisms weren't exactly the same, but they were alike in many ways.

I had no idea why, though.

It wasn't like Embryos had siblings, after all.

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City of Commerce, Cortana, The Mayor's Mansion

During Hugo's encounter with Persephone, the two Superiors at the mansion were still fighting.

Blue Opera danced in the air at supersonic speeds, raining down bombs and artillery that quickly turned the mansion's garden into a devastated wasteland.

Despite that, Benetnasch was unharmed.

"Necro Aura, Necro Repair." He cast his skills as he stood.

"This is the third time... Goddamn, you're tough!" AR-I-CA spat out. The necromancer was protected by Aragorn — an ex-Dragon King specialized in STR and END.

The King of Tartarus's combat style could be summarized with the phrase "tank and caster."

He used sturdy undead like Aragorn as vanguards while staying back and buffing them, debuffing the enemies, or casting offensive magic. It was a configuration that was focused on defense first and foremost.

It was hard to break through even for a Superior — especially one like AR-I-CA, whose offensive abilities were lower than the average Superior.

No matter how intensely she attacked, Aragorn only lost an insignificant amount of HP. That was quickly healed by Necro Repair — a regeneration buff — leaving the bone dragon completely unharmed.

On the other hand, Benetnasch and Aragorn had yet to land a single hit on AR-I-CA.

"Such an irritating assault," Aragorn said with a growl. "Friend, my blade just cannot reach her."

"And she's out of the range of my spells..." Benetnasch added.

Aragorn's attacks were purely physical, limited by the range of his skeletal frame. He could leap extremely high, but even that wouldn't have helped him harm AR-I-CA, who had far more maneuverability and could use Cassandra to avoid danger.

In fact, trying to attack her in that way would leave Benetnasch vulnerable to her artillery, which would quickly result in a death penalty for him.

Benetnasch himself couldn't attack her either. At the very least, she was outside the range of his curse-based debuffs.

His main alternative to that was his equivalent of the Lich's Deadly Mixer — the High Necromancer's ultimate job skill called "Deadly Explosion."

This skill made grudge combust to create an explosion. That might reach her, but chances were that she would evade it.

With the amount of grudge that saturated the mayor's mansion, the whole place was like powder keg. Deadly Explosion would no doubt level everything in the area. That did make the explosion *potentially* powerful enough to reach AR-I-CA.

However, Benetnasch had refrained from using it so far because it would kill so many innocent people. Even ignoring the mayor, who was on the verge of losing his last shreds of humanity, there were still servants and similar individuals who would no doubt die in the explosion.

"Well, with how much grudge there is around here, I'll have to burn it down anyway," Benetnasch said.

"Indeed," Aragorn agreed. "The grudge here is abnormally dense. Were I a grudge-based undead, I would have no doubt been affected."

The dragon was undead, but he wasn't powered by grudge.

This was a result of the manner in which he had been created.

The necromancer grouping powered their undead using either grudge or their own magic. Maise, the Lich of the Gouz-Maise Gang that Hugo once fought, had used grudge. Benetnasch, on the other hand, used magic.

Grudge-based undead weren't taxing on the caster, but they were never intelligent and came with the risk of escaping the caster's control.

Magic-based undead were the opposite, eating away at the caster's magic in exchange for creating an undead monster like Aragorn, which retained the soul and mind they had in life.

Another flaw of magic-based undead was that they had enough free will to disobey the one who had resurrected them, but Benetnasch had forged a relationship of mutual trust with his undead — Aragorn included — so that wasn't a problem for him.

The army of the dead he commanded — his company — was no doubt a force to be reckoned with, but he had no allies who could counter Blue Opera.

"It seems like I really should've gotten someone who can fly," Benetnasch said. “But undead skydragons lose a lot of the flying ability they had in life... That’s not the case with Dragon Spirits, but you can’t ride those.”

It was worth noting that undead avians could fly as well in death as they could in life, but Benetnasch did not have command of such a beast. The reason for that was that Aragorn unconditionally hated all avians, which showed that not even death could cure a landdragon’s natural prejudice.

“I could’ve done something if Persephone was here, though...” he said with a sigh. He recalled how, right as they’d arrived at Cortana, Persephone had said, “I am not helping you look for any Orb, you cheater!” and walked away from him.

At any rate, this battle was a stalemate. AR-I-CA’s attacks were all blocked by Aragorn, while Benetnasch’s attacks couldn’t reach her.

This will never end, huh? AR-I-CA thought and sighed. *I guess this is still better than dealin’ with Carl’s broken defense.*

Neither of them had any moves that could quickly conclude this battle.

AR-I-CA had her ultimate skill — the one she’d used to break through Dangai’s electrical defense.

Benetnasch also had an ace up his sleeve that he could use without Persephone present, and it would likely be enough to defeat AR-I-CA.

However, neither of them intended to use these for two reasons: first, they were extremely costly, and second, they had to consider the possibility of additional enemies.

The mayor’s mansion was already being targeted by King of Tartarus and Ace — two powerful Superiors. Neither of them were stupid or optimistic enough to believe that they would be the only ones who might get involved in the struggle for this Orb. This was doubly true for AR-I-CA, who knew that the Murder Princess was in this city.

Man... What to do? What to dooo? AR-I-CA thought. If this continued, Benetnasch would definitely gain the upper hand.

In battle, Magingears quickly drained the pilot’s MP. With Blue Opera being more advanced and power-intensive than the usual Magingear, as well as with all the skills AR-I-CA was using, her MP wouldn’t hold forever. Her Superior Job, Ace, provided her with vast MP reserves, but there was still a limit to how long she could fight.

Benetnasch’s Aragorn, on the other hand, was undead. That meant that there was no limit to his health, while the amount of MP the necromancer was using on skills was no doubt less than AR-I-CA's.

If this battle continued for an hour or two, Benetnasch would eventually come out on top.

Looks like that's his plan too, she thought. *Well, the boney boy has the endurance for it. It looks like it was made using material from...an Ancient Legendary dragon king. It actually looks like something Fran'd make. For a girl, she really likes dragons and reptiles and stuff.*

Remembering her friend, AR-I-CA smiled to herself.

Oh well. The situation won't get any better for me, so I guess I'll have to use the quest item, she thought, taking an object out.

It was the Orb containing Thundershield Beast, Dangai — the very same one that she'd taken off of Zhang Zangqi in Hermine.

Taking on the will of its new wielder, the lightning-clad UBM unleashed its power, quickly enveloping Blue Opera's armor in lightning — but not even scratching it.

The lightning then focused on the rifle in the unit's hands...

"BANG!"

...and imbued the shell it fired.

The charged projectile cut the air and landed straight on Aragorn.

"Ah...!"

"This is...!"

Both Benetnasch and Aragorn were overcome by shock at what happened next — the impact shattered one of the dragon's ribs.

Thundershield Beast, Dangai possessed the power of lightning, and he also controlled it to a minute degree.

AR-I-CA had covered her bullet in this lightning in an attempt to enhance its power, and it had been entirely successful.

Unlike her previous attacks, which had all been deflected by Aragorn's sturdy frame, this shell clearly injured him.

There were multiple reasons why it was so effective.

Being undead, Aragorn had high physical defense and nigh inexhaustible fortitude — but in exchange, he'd lost many of the qualities he'd had in life. This included defensive skills like Dragon King Aura as well as all of the elemental resistances dragons tended to have.

Because of this, the storm of lightning shells shaved away his HP at a rate so high that Necro Repair couldn't keep up.

Additionally, since the lightning had come from Dangai from within the Orb, it didn't drain any more of AR-I-CA's MP.

"Albeit weak, I sense the power of a fellow Ancient Legendary," said Aragorn. "My friend, it does not seem that we can wait until our adversary exhausts her magic."

A quick analysis of the situation was enough for him to realize that his HP would run out faster than AR-I-CA would run out of fuel.

In response, Benetnasch spent a moment thinking before giving a nod and saying, "...All right, I'll do something."

With the stalemate broken, he gathered his resolve to use the ace up his sleeve.

"I can't use Persephone's ultimate...so I'll use this," he said, pulling out the pendant hanging over his neck.

It looked like the lower half of a gargoyle, but it was made of a strange metal. At first glance it seemed to be silver, but it had a luster that proved it was anything but.

"...You will awaken it?" Aragorn asked.

"This will no doubt withstand her attacks. And while it protects me, you can go on the offensive."

"But my blade cannot—"

"I don't mean attacking *her*. I want you to chase after the mayor and secure the Orb. Once you get back, we'll leave this place, go pick up Persephone, and then escape the city."

"I see. Very well."

"All right... Here I go. Awaken, Standing and Indomi—"

Right as he was about to pull out the ace up his sleeve...

"...Huh? Persephone?"

"Hm...? Yu?"

...both he and AR-I-CA received messages from their companions in some other part of the city. A moment later, screams rang out from somewhere in Cortana.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps.

"The Murder Princess might be in this city? Good grief, we've got quite the crowd of walking disasters here!" said Persephone.

I'd ended up explaining our goal to her as well. Or more accurately, she asked and I just answered.

"But...Murder Princess, eh? I see..." she said, smiling for some reason. "Heh heh. That makes this city a true crucible of death. One who *transcends* death, one who *mass-produces* death, one who *changes the meaning* of death... Certainly this is not the result of deliberate meddling, but it is no doubt interesting."

"Hm?" I raised an eyebrow, not sure what she was talking about.

"So, I assume you wish to both keep me from going to assist Master Dearest, while also maintaining the search for the Murder Princesss?" she asked.

"...You could say that, yeah," I said.

"How greedy of you. But...very well. I will help you in your search."

"Huh?"

"For better or worse, I have nothing better to do, and this will likely be more productive for me and Master Dearest than fooling around with some Orbs."

"Productive? In what way?"

"I cannot say that, but rest assured that it will not be detrimental to you as you are now," she said before walking away. "Come. Let us go. You wish to find her quickly, do you not?"

"...Yeah," I said, and Cyco and I followed after her.

I intended to search for the Murder Princess while keeping an eye on Persephone, but she was the one who took charge.

She was so lively that it was hard to believe she was the same girl who had just recently been reduced to tears, whining about how weak she was.

With her in the lead, we walked deeper into the bazaar.

But suddenly, she turned around.

"Oh! If we will be together for the time being, why don't we have a conversation?" she said.

"Like...?" I asked.

"Well, I may answer your questions. Is there anything you wish to ask?"

"Your clothes leave your shoulder exposed... How can you handle this heat?" Cyco asked.

...Is that really the thing you're most curious about? I asked her in thought.

"Heh heh heh. Quite easily, actually," Persephone chuckled. "I have a passive skill called 'Kálypsi ton Nekrón.' It gives undead enough sunlight and heat resistance to let them operate at full capacity even in broad daylight! I can use it on myself too, so I will never be sunburned."

"...That sounds so nice," Cyco said with a jealous expression.

I could tell by her expression that this made her wish she had a higher level of control over ice, which she'd use to keep her ice cream from melting.

"What about you? Any questions?" Persephone asked.

"...Yeah," I said before posing a question that had been bothering me for a while. "It's about The Triangle of Wisdom's grudge engine research. Why did your Master help with that?"

At one point in the past, the clan...or rather, my sister had an idea for engines that ran on grudge. Magingears were MP hogs, and she thought she could fix this issue by giving them the ability to convert any surrounding grudge into usable energy.

That was *her* reason for investing into this research. For all I knew, she might've even planned to use the results to overcome the White Rose's greatest flaw.

However, Benetnasch didn't seem to have any obvious motive for helping. I'd thought that he might've cooperated in exchange for money, items, or some other reward, but he didn't seem like the type of person who'd be convinced by that kind of thing.

That was why I just directly asked Persephone about it.

Her answer...

"Because it would make cleaning up easier."

...was a bit hard to understand.

"...Cleaning up?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Ohh, not the mop and bucket kind of cleanup, of course. Master Dearest takes care of that himself. I mean the cleaning up of grudge."

"Hm?"

"Explaining what I mean requires explaining the nature of grudge and souls... Hmm... Give me one moment," Persephone said before heading off to a nearby bazaar stand.

She came back with a cup full of juice, complete with large chunks of ice.

"Thirsty?" asked Cyco.

"No. This is for the explanation," she said as she used the straw to point to the cup, ice, and then the juice. "So, here are the parallels. Assuming that the cup is the body and the ice floating in it is the soul, then the juice filling it is what you might call the 'mind' or the 'heart.'"

Flesh, soul, mind or heart... I thought.

"Master Dearest and myself can see souls, so we know that there are ghosts who do not count as monsters," she continued.

I was aware of graveyard- and dungeon-dwelling undead like Spirits and Wraiths, but she was obviously talking about something different.

"Imagine if the cup — the body — is lost, leaving the ice — the soul — exposed. Ghosts would then be like the remnants of juice — the mind — that still cling to the ice. If these remnants vanish, the pure soul also vanishes. In fact, it vanishes in the process of any normal bodily death. The remnants are what some might call 'regrets' and without them, the soul merely vanishes in peace."

Hearing this made me wonder if there were any real world religions with a similar outlook on death, but that line of thought was a bit too much for a girl who'd just turned fifteen.

"And grudge is...akin to boiling water," she continued.

"Boiling water?"

"A fraction of mind that has had its nature changed. Minds that die while harboring great resentment or dread boil especially well. Of course, you can feel such things while alive...but they are not much of a problem then. At most, you will generate an apparition or some negative emotional energy," Persephone explained.

...I could understand that. Ray's Grudge-Soaked Greaves turned grudge into MP and SP, but they could feed just fine on the negative emotions of living people.

"But matters are different when death is involved. As a corrupted form of the mind, grudge can greatly affect the bodies and souls of the dead," she continued before downing all the juice in the cup. "Phew... For example, if you fill an empty cup with boiling water, it will be difficult to touch that cup with your bare hands. In this analogy, that is an undead monster —

albeit a kind quite unlike Master Dearest's magic-based undead. Oh, and I suppose it needs to be mentioned that grudge-defiled items may become cursed."

Persephone then paused for a moment, then took a piece of ice in the cup.

"Now, what would happen to the soul of a dead person — this piece of ice — If it were to fall into boiling water?" she asked.

"...It would melt and disappear," I answered.

"Exactly. If the water is lukewarm, a soul may remain in some cases, usually as undead like Spirits, but *boiling* water... Truly deep grudge melts souls completely and turns them into more grudge. After that, nothing is left. At the very least, the soul would not vanish peacefully," she explained.

The idea that grudge literally melted souls made a light chill run down my spine.

"The souls of villains are especially susceptible. Exposed to the grudge of others throughout their lives, they are already partially melted. Prime for the crucible."

Those words reminded me of the Gouz-Maise Gang.

They were fiends in life and became an undead monster in death. That UBM — Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise — seemed to be exactly what she was talking about — a monster born from the molten grudge of many vile souls.

If that was the case, it would explain why the damage Nemesis had accumulated while fighting Maise could be used for a Vengeance on the UBM he became a part of.

"On the journey to achieve his goal, Master Dearest had made a point to disperse any grudge that could melt away pure souls, but since there is so much of it in this world, continually replenished by the vices of man, he cannot disperse it all no matter how hard he may try. It is such a threat to souls, however, he could not simply ignore it either. That is why he cooperated with Franklin."

She'd finally reached the part that I wanted to hear about.

"If they were able to create a mechanism that absorbs grudge and turns it into energy, there would certainly be far less of it in the world, especially if the technology spread across the land. Master Dearest would have less work to do, and the pure souls he wished to save would vanish far less often," Persephone explained before her expression became somewhat saddened. “Though as you are well aware, they only created engines that lost more and more control the more grudge they gathered. They were essentially machines that automatically moved towards creating more grudge — the exact *opposite* of what Master Dearest wanted.”

I didn’t know what to say here, but my expression seemed to be response enough.

“Do not make such a face. The Triangle of Wisdom is not at fault. This merely proved that there is a limit to how much control technology can have over the realm of souls. Magic or science — the result is the same,” she said.

She had a point. Sis tampered with grudge using science, while Maise the Lich took the magical approach, but the result was the same — complete lack of control.

Perhaps this meant this wasn’t something people should have been meddling with in the first place.

“Because of that, Master Dearest still continues his ‘treatments.’ He has a core goal to achieve, yet he still makes certain to disperse any gatherings of grudge. Good grief... He burdened himself with far too much,” Persephone sighed.

Her expression seemed far beyond her apparent age.

Also, what she’d said so far made me curious about something else.

“...May I ask two more questions?” I asked.

“You may.”

“Everything you said makes it sound like your Master is very busy... How long does he usually stay logged in?”

“Converting to the other side’s time, about *twenty-two hours per day*. He never forgets to eat, relieve himself, and bathe, but any time not doing those things is spent *here*.”

I was at a loss for words. What she just said made me all the more curious about the answer to the third question I had.

It pertained to King of Tartarus’s motivations.

What Persephone said so far was enough for me to understand what he was doing. It might’ve been a slip of the tongue, but she’d said, “the pure souls he wished to save would vanish far less often,” and I felt that that was the heart of it.

He wanted to save souls. He was probably after Cortana's Orb for the same reason — he thought that its power to grant "a new life eternal" could be used to that end.

He cooperated with The Triangle of Wisdom, purified grudge the land over, and now worked to gather these Orbs, putting in obscene amounts of effort...all to save souls.

But...I didn't know his *reasons* for doing this.

He certainly wasn't the kind of person to save the dead just for the sense of accomplishment. I'd seen him a few times while he was at The Triangle of Wisdom, but I'd never once seen him having a good time.

He always looked tired, worn out — and like he was feeling responsible for something.

And now I just found out that he was even sacrificing his real life to keep doing what he was doing here.

Basically...*he wasn't enjoying Infinite Dendrogram at all*.

I was a Maiden Master myself, and I didn't think of this world as a mere game. However, I would never be able to sacrifice my real life to save the dead of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

This world and reality — they were both worlds I lived in and belonged to.

For Benetnasch, though, this world had far more weight than the other one.

"Why does he go so far...?" I asked. He'd sacrificed his real life and was now traversing this scorching desert. What was he actually seeking here? Why was he trying to save these souls?

In response, Persephone...

"...I see I said too much. I cannot answer that."

...didn't give me an answer.

"And even if I did say it, you would not fully comprehend it. Your nature is different from his."

"What do you mean...?"

"I believe the only ones who could understand it are Masters who have already pulverized their minds and hearts for the sake of this world, yet still *cannot break*. Though I do doubt there are any besides Master Dearest."

Persephone's words brought the image of a certain friend's face to the forefront of my mind.

Perhaps *he* could understand it?

The moment that thought passed through my mind...

"Ah...! Hugo!"

"Seems like this conversation is over. Hmm... So this is the Murder Princess? What a curious presence she has."

...the two Maidens said all of that, putting me on edge.

At the same time, I heard something shatter, followed by the roar of a beast.

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City of Commerce, Cortana, Bazaar, A Short While Ago

Meanwhile, Zhang and Emily were actually in the very same bazaar as Hugo's group. The pair had already used their accessories to change their appearances, this time making both Zhang *and* Emily look like harmless tians.

Zhang had one of his eyes covered up, overawed by what he was seeing.

So that is the zenith of western necromancy... King of Tartarus the "Indestructible," he thought. "Indestructible" was the *least* threatening of Benetnasch's multiple nicknames.

Zhang was watching the events at the mayor's mansion using the vision of a bird jiangshi under his command. Having been informed by Rascal that King of Tartarus was in Cortana, he'd sent the creature to do some recon around the mansion.

Although jiangshi were undead that ran on magic rather than grudge, they had no will of their own, instead moving like machines controlled by the Fu that acted as a substitute brain. Additional Fu could be used to do things such as lessen the negative effects of sunlight, making them quite versatile as far as undead went.

The problem with them was that they could only operate based on set patterns imprinted on the Fu, but that usually presented no obstacle with a simple task like observation.

His undead are far superior to mine. A fight against him would be nearly hopeless even when I still had my Wuxing Jilong, he thought, looking at Aragorn.

Even with the five Pure-Dragon jiangshi that had been his namesake, at best Zhang could have hoped for an outcome where both he and Benetnasch were defeated.

To have even the slightest chance of winning the battle alive, he'd have to still possess Dangai's Orb and give it everything he had. That was how wide the gap was between him and Benetnasch.

I see that powerful people have indeed gathered here...just as Rascal expected. This fact made Zhang feel uneasy.

The one Orb here in Cortana had attracted the Indestructible and The Blue Sky Songstress. Since there were several more Orbs spread out across Caldina, what other people of great power would they attract, and how fierce would their battles be?

...Perhaps what happens here will be merely the prologue, he thought, bracing himself.

His job right now was to support Emily and gather data on the major players here, and that was what he would focus on.

At the same time, Emily was looking up at a giant cage in the bazaar. Inside it, there was a horned, lionlike creature of the upper-Pure-Dragon tier — a Taurus Leo.

It was lying on its belly in its own filth, and the reek made many people keep their distance.

However, some were still actually lining up in front of it.

"Mr. Zhan! Why is that in a cage and not a Jewel?" Emily asked, pointing at the cage and tilting her head.

Normally, tamed monsters were sold through Jewels. Even when let out for a proper examination, they would never be put in cages.

Still, some monsters were sold in this state for a reason.

"Because the monster is not tamed yet," said Zhang — and indeed, the creature inside was still wild.

When the traders didn't have Tamers capable of taming the monsters they'd captured, the creatures would sometimes be carried around in cages instead. Of course, such trade was highly regulated, obligating the traders to keep their "products" sedated using drugs or other means and to make sure to keep them in cages strong enough to contain them. Naturally, appropriate measures had to be taken if they had fire breathing or other special skills.

Many believed that it would be easier to just put in a request at the appropriate guild to find a Tamer capable of subduing the monsters, but if the beast was particularly valuable, there was always the chance that any Tamer they hired would just take it and run.

There were already several cases of Masters doing something like this. They had save points in other countries and didn't mind getting the death penalty, so they readily signed Contracts and took their punishment — as well as their place on the wanted list — just so they could keep a precious monster all for themselves.

"The monster is cheaper than normal because the buyers would have to do the taming themselves," Zhang said. "Or rather, what they're selling isn't the monster, exactly, but the right to attempt taming it."

This was especially evident when considering the fact that instead of a number of chances, the seller gave the buyer ten minutes to complete the taming.

"And if they can't do it?" Emily asked.

"They do not get their money back," Zhang answered.

"Hmm... So the seller doesn't *want* the buyers to tame it," Emily said with unexpected frankness, at which Zhang gave a slight nod.

According to the sign next to the cage, no one had succeeded at taming this monster for weeks now.

In a way, that was to be expected. Zhang could tell that in addition to sedatives, the monster was also under the influence of mind-impairing items that interfered with the taming process.

However, the Tamer who had just stepped up to subdue it this time seemed to be utterly unaware of this fact. Confident that he would succeed, the man was smiling as he envisioned the moment he would make the Taurus Leo his own.

"He will not succeed," Zhang noted. The Tamer's repeated attempts were failures, only making the Taurus Leo squirm. Panic began to creep into his expression.

"It's moving around a lot," said Emily.

"Unsuccessful taming attempts can make monsters go berserk," said Zhang. "Though, thanks to the cage and drugs, that should not be a problem."

"Ohh. This *is* dangerous, then."

"Hm...?" Zhang raised an eyebrow, unsure what she was talking about. Emily pointed inside the cage and said, "The drug's gone. It's only pretending.”

“What?”

“And it’s moving around ’cause it’s preparing. It’s gonna crash into the cage,” she explained.

Zhang wondered how she knew that, but was forced to set that thought aside as *the Taurus Leo got up and began throwing itself against the cage.*

But the cage is supposed to be designed to contain it... Wait, no! Zhang panicked as he began to notice the dents in the bars.

Apparently, the lower half of the cage had rusted through, and the stench surrounding it explained why.

...Feces and urine! The monster used them to degrade the cage over time and wait for a chance to break out of it!

Not every monster lacked intelligence.

Caged monsters were valued as products based on thorough examination of their stats and abilities using Reveal or other skills, but none of this could gauge how cunning the monster was.

This one was smart enough to pretend to be affected by the drugs its captors employed and to use its own waste to ruin the cage containing it.

Because the seller had used anti-tame items on the Taurus Leo, preventing any buyers from actually taming it, the monster had had ample time to slowly rust away the cage.

“BRROOAAAAAARRRGGHHHHHHHHH!”

And now, with a mighty roar, it shattered its prison and leapt out into the bazaar.

It started by killing and devouring the tamer in front, then attacking the workers at the stand who had been selling the rights to taming attempts.

It was as though the monster was finally venting all the anger that it had built up over its long imprisonment.

...What do I do? I could subdue it using the Drag-Worm Jiangshi I’m keeping outside the city, but if we make ourselves stand out, we might attract the attention of The Blue Sky Songstress and her companions... While that thought ran through Zhang’s head, the Taurus Leo finished off the workers.

It had stained the area around it in blood, yet it still wanted more.

Its next targets, however, weren’t Zhang and Emily, but a little girl and her parents who were trying to flee the scene.

"BRRGHAAAAAARRH!" With another roar, the Taurus Leo rushed towards its prey, fully intent on consuming them to fuel its own flesh and bone.

The girl began to wail in fear as the beast approached, while the parents wrapped themselves around her, hoping to at least save their daughter.

However, their fragile bodies would not be nearly enough to stop the terrible creature. They would quickly become its sustenance.

But just before that could happen, a small figure appeared in the beast's path.

Shock overcame Zhang. The girl that had just been right next to him had moved at supersonic speed to stand before the Taurus Leo.

"BROOOAAAAARRGHHHH!"

Obviously, the beast saw her as just more prey and tried to attack her...

"Minus."

...but Emily switched into her killing mode and swiftly dismembered and decapitated the creature, destroying it instantly.

The beast didn't even have time to realize what happened. The destruction of its body was so intense that it immediately began turning into motes of light and vanishing, leaving behind only its loot...and Emily, covered in its blood.

"...Emily," Zhang whispered in confusion.

Why had Emily rushed out like that?

Before she stood in front of the Taurus Leo, she hadn't been in her killing state, which could only mean that it was the *standard* Emily who was trying to protect the family.

Zhang didn't understand why she would help a group of strangers...and decided to wait until the girl had stopped being a killing machine to ask her.

However, before that could happen...

"Hey! Are you the one who killed my monster?!"

...a portly man — or an obese one, depending upon who you asked — appeared, practically dripping in gold and gems. Behind him stood several burly men.

The fat man seemed to be the merchant who owned the stall that sold attempts to tame the Taurus Leo. However, based on his attitude, it didn't seem like he'd come to thank Emily for stopping the beast's rampage.

"How dare you destroy my merchandise like that! I'll have you pay for it in full!” he shouted.

Zhang and the rest of the onlookers were united in their feeling that the merchant was being absurd. Between the neglect of the cage, the misuse of drugs, and the way he’d interfered with the monster’s ability to be tamed at all, the merchant was no doubt the one at fault here. And yet, he wanted Emily to pay for essentially preventing any more casualties.

“Wait,” Zhang said. “That is just unreasonable. This was a—”

“Are you her guardian?! You better take responsibility and pay up! It’s ninety million lir!” the merchant said, cutting Zhang off and naming an insanely high price.

He wouldn’t be nearly as confident if he’d known Zhang’s and Emily’s true identities, but they were both disguised as normal tians.

“I have the backing of the mayor, Douglas Coin himself! I can have you arrested and condemned to slavery!” the merchant claimed.

Hearing those words filled Zhang with fatigue. He’d lived in Hermine for years, which was long enough for him to know that Caldina was full of people like this.

With money deciding so much of what went on there, most of the wealthy were also exceptionally greedy. Some even tried to get more money using illegal means — like those hooligans back at that alley.

Things weren’t as bad in places that had some degree of “self-regulating” activity, but the current mayor of Cortana was one of the lowest among the low. This merchant who was supposedly backed by him was obviously cut from the same cloth. He had no doubt used his wealth and power against many people.

With corruption here being so obvious, I would have expected the mayor would have been voted out by now, Zhang thought. *Wait...if I recall correctly, in the election five years ago, every candidate besides the mayor dropped out of the race.*

There was clearly something happening behind the scenes, but if the mayor had extended his power over the entire justice system, no one would be able to do anything about it.

With various countries funding the casino industry of Hermine, we actually struck a balance that made for a fairly clean government in comparison... Though, anyone who stood against casinos had no chance of winning.

The irony made Zhang sigh, and apparently the merchant didn't like that.

"Tch! You don't have the money, do you?! Hey! Seize them!" he cried. The bodyguards behind him made ready to capture Zhang and Emily.

"Hey! Hold on!"

"That girl stopped the monster's rampage!"

"Yeah! People died!" The onlookers could no longer stand idly by and began to protest this obvious injustice.

"Huh? The only ones who died were my workers and the customer who signed a Contract saying that he will not hold us liable for anything that happens. That means that the only *actual* problem here is that my monster died. Or what, do you wanna pay for them too?" the merchant said, making the people fall silent.

Ninety million lir is a lot of money... Much more than the monster is worth, but still, Zhang thought. *Is it best for us to just pay him using the money Rascal gave us? Or should we simply run away?*

The Blue Sky Songstress and the Indestructible were still fighting at the moment, but there was no telling how long it would last.

From what Zhang had seen through the bird jiangshi's vision, their battle had actually paused. If they'd settled their differences and were intending to come here next, Zhang wanted to get away as soon as possible.

However, this line of thinking was fundamentally flawed.

In Zhang's estimation, the time limit on their current situation was up the moment either of the two Superiors arrived here, but it was actually *much closer than that*.

"Just grab them!" the merchant said, ordering his bodyguards to take Zhang and Emily.

"Wait. I'll—"

"Minus."

"...pay... What?" The girl's single word cut his sentence in half. Zhang looked to the side *and saw nobody*.

"Khh...?" A confused gargle reached his ears — one of the bodyguards that tried to take them had had his throat and chest torn open by an axe.

Needless to say, the one wielding the weapon was Emily.

In confusion, the injured man tried to examine his state, only for Emily to swing her other axe and cleave his head in two. By the time Youaltepuztli had drained him and transformed him into bits of light, Emily had already sunk her axe into the other bodyguard's side and split him in half.

Once the brutality was over, the onlookers finally realized what was happening.

"AAAAHHHHHHH!"

"M-Murder...!" They shrieked and scattered in a panic, creating a chaotic scene that was no better than when Taurus Leo broke out.

"Y-You monstrous brat! Hey! Just kill her already!" the merchant yelled, unaware that these would be his last words.

"Minus," Emily said as she threw an axe at the man's saggy cheek, slicing off the upper half of his head and instantly killing him.

The remaining bodyguards also readied their weapons, but they died as easily as the others.

And just like that, the merchant and his bodyguards were all dead.

The disaster left Zhang at a loss for words.

I was too careless. I underestimated how easily Emily could deem someone an enemy. It is not merely a matter of pointing weapons and threatening her, he thought.

Regardless, the situation was taking a bad turn for them. They had to hurry out of here before things got any worse.

However, before they could, three Masters ran up to Emily.

"That's enough," a woman said. "Please put those down and relax!"

"We saw what happened," a man said. "I understand why you resisted, but there's no need for any more violence."

"We'll vouch for you when the guards get here," another man said. "So let's settle this peacefully, okay...?" They seemed to have good intentions and were acting to get the situation under control.

Zhang wondered how to get away from them, when suddenly...

"Minus, minus, minus."

...Emily swung her axes thrice.

Two lost their HP and died instantly, while the third one — the woman — survived thanks to her Lifesaving Brooch.

"Huh?" she said, confused, as Emily began repeatedly maiming her with the twin axes. "Wha—? S-Stop...!" she begged, but Emily ignored her, pulverizing her until she was nothing more than a hunk of flesh, then tiny motes of light.

“...What is happening?” Zhang said in confusion.

He couldn’t believe what Emily was doing.

The Masters had all approached her with good intentions, showing no desire to harm her, yet she had judged them as minuses and instantly killed them.

In fact, it was also strange that she’d murdered the bodyguards who had intended to merely capture her. Unlike the hooligans from that alley or the Taurus Leo, they hadn’t threatened her life at all.

The bar that those bodyguards and the Masters had to pass to be deemed as “enemies” seemed to be significantly lower.

“Is she actually...?” Zhang muttered as an idea came into his head that made his blood run cold.

While that was happening, the situation was only escalating.

“Stop that girl!”

“The stats Reveal gives you are fake! She’s not what she seems!”

Drawn by the commotion, other Masters had gathered here, some of them ready to face Emily.

Upon seeing them...

“Minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus, minus...”

...Emily repeated the same word over and over.

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Normally, Emily was an innocent little girl who was generally friendly and usually liked the people she met, rather than disliking them. Because of this, there weren’t many things she recognized as enemies, making her switches to killing mode rather uncommon.

However, things were different once she’d already made the switch. While she was in her killing mode, the bar for her to judge someone as an enemy was much, *much* lower.

Those trying to restrain her, those trying to make her put down her weapons, those who simply approached her and happened to be powerful...

As long as they weren’t Zhang or other people from IF — essentially anyone she’d already recognized as a friend — her killing mode would see anyone who came too close as enemies.

Even trying to stop her would make you an enemy, making the number of targets increase endlessly.

Rascal and the other members of IF referred to this as a “chain.”

This was the phenomenon that devastated the massive Pentagon Caravan clan, led to the death of every fighter in a whole city, and drove a species of worms to extinction.

It was the murderous stampede that continued until all possible enemies were gone from her sight.

And it had now begun here in Cortana.

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Emily dashed towards a group of Masters that had come to defeat her.

She covered a distance of fifty metels with a single step and swung her axes at the same time, removing the head of one of the Masters.

“Ah! Supersonic speed?!”

“EEYAAHH! STORM STINGEERRR!”

Right after the decapitated Master vanished, the Gale Lancer nearby used his ultimate job skill on Emily. She was wide open, and the supersonic attack was too fast for her to evade. It was a direct hit, *but all of it was nearly negated by the defense of her skin*.

The lance only barely hurt her.

“How...? Ghuh?!” the lancer exclaimed as Emily gave him the death penalty a mere split second later.

While this was happening, a Gunner Master fired his Embryo bullets, only for them to be repelled like it was nothing.

“What’s with her?!” one of the Masters said.

“She’s way too tough...! There’s no way she’s a tian! She’s probably a Master with an Embryo focused on phys-def!” said another, analyzing their enemy.

“Guess it’s a job for me, then!” a robed Master — a Pyromancer — said as he took a step forward.

Emily quickly faced and charged at him...

“Instant Charge! Crimson Sphere!”

...but the Pyromancer, who had an Embryo specialized in high-speed spellcasting, quickly cast his ultimate job skill on her.

Emily's vision was drowned in crimson, and her whole body was covered in flame.

"I did i— Guhh?" the Master said as, a moment later, Emily's tiny arm reached out from the ball of fire, grabbed his neck, and snapped it like a dry, withered twig.

The flame soon expired, leaving only Emily, completely unharmed.

However, the same couldn't be said for her equipment. Her custom-made dress was resistant to fire and had withstood the Crimson Sphere's flame, but the accessory that maintained her disguise had melted away. Now she stood there not as a harmless tian, but as herself.

Her face was clearly visible, exactly as it appeared on the wanted list.

"...No way," murmured a Master as they stared at her unmasked stats.

Emily Killingston
Job: Murder Princess
Level: 528
(Total Level: 928)
HP: 8,056 (+36,550)
MP: 350 (+36,550)
SP: 1,980 (+36,550)
STR: 3,050 (+36,550)
AGI: 4,356 (+36,550)
END: 1,680 (+36,550)
DEX: 687 (+36,550)
LUC: 100 (+36,550)

Everyone present was perplexed by Emily's stats. They were abnormal — simultaneously too low for an SJ, as well as too *high* with the bonus.

However, this was only to be expected. The bonus was created by the very skill that made the Murder Princess such a fearsome job.

This skill's name was "Kill Leader," and it had actually given Emily her nickname.

It was the Murder Princess's *passive* ultimate job skill that made the job what it was.

Its effect was simply "give a bonus to all stats equal to the amount of *humans killed*."

Indeed, the total number of people she'd killed, tian or human, was 36,550 — and each of them had added a point to her stats.

The more Emily killed, the stronger she became.

Chapter Five: The Machine Knight of Ice and Roses

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

By the time we arrived at the source of the screams, we found a scene of absolute mayhem.

People were fleeing in all directions while countless Masters engaged in fighting something that turned them into bits of light one after the other.

My low AGI made it hard to see it, but there was definitely something moving around at an incredible speed.

The first time I did manage to see anything properly was when it used an axe to split open a Master’s head.

The figure was a girl, wearing a dress so drenched in crimson blood that I couldn’t tell the original color.

With her disguise gone, her face was different, but I was certain that this was the very same girl I’d met at that café.

“The Murder Princess,” said Persephone. “This is my first time laying eyes on her, but she is truly something. I can see why she is in the same clan as The Weapon... She is clearly on a rampage, but she’s killing them one by one.”

“What now, Hugo?” Cyco asked.

I knew why she was asking me that question.

She wanted to know what *I, myself,* would do now.

I closed my eyes and pondered. Teach had told me to suppress the Murder Princess using La Porte de l’Enfer. I was reluctant to use it against a little girl, but I couldn’t just sit by and let the casualties pile up.

More than that, I felt that I had to stop the girl from doing this for her own sake.

Neither Yuri nor Hugo could tolerate the disaster before them.

“Cyco... Let’s do this!” I shouted.

“Roger that!” she responded. I used Instant Release to take out my

White Rose, summoning a pure white Magingear into the bazaar.

The scene attracted many eyes...including Emily's.

Under the gaze of all present, I rushed to enter White Rose.

It only took me a few seconds, but that was a long time when dealing with someone who moved at supersonic speeds. As I put my hand on the edge of the cockpit, the Murder Princess fixed her eyes directly on me.

I looked right into them and saw...tranquility.

Despite the violence she was committing, her eyes were as still as a calm lake.

She's gonna kill me, I thought.

She had plenty of time to reap my life while I boarded the cockpit.

I expected her blade to reach for me next...

"..."

...but she did nothing.

She allowed me to enter my Magingear. It was as though she *didn't see me as an enemy*.

She then looked away from me and resumed moving at supersonic speed, disappearing from my sight.

While that was happening, I finished boarding White Rose.

"Cyco!" I called, ordering Cyco to merge with White Rose and become its frozen armor.

"La Porte de l'Enfer!" she shouted the moment the fusion was complete.

This was a skill that Froze X% of any targeted creatures' bodies with a probability of X%, where X equaled their kill count of their own kind.

It activated the moment it was used, then ticked every thirteen seconds afterwards.

Because of this, anyone that had killed a hundred or more of their own kind would instantly freeze solid, just like the dozens of Masters I'd faced in Gideon.

"Wh-Whoa...!" a Master voiced his surprise.

"What the hell...? Is this one of her skills?" another one asked. I was in too much of a hurry to set the skill's target, so I ended up just using it indiscriminately. As a result, many other Masters had their bodies partially or completely frozen.

That wasn't what truly mattered here, though.

"...What became of *her*?!" I asked. Moving at supersonic speed, she was too fast for me to follow, so I didn't know where she was or if she had even been affected by my skill.

I knew the extent of La Porte de l'Enfer's power.

I'd used it against skilled Masters back in Gideon and even tested its viability against Superiors with Fran.

However, I'd never once used it against a combat-focused Superior. If it didn't work because of, say, the sheer difference in power output of our Embryos, then I would have no means of stopping her.

As such worries flickered through my mind, I looked around as I suddenly heard a voice.

"H-Hey! The Murder Princess... She's Frozen!"

Looking for the source of the voice, I moved White Rose's camera-eye.

There, I saw an ice statue of a girl holding two axes.

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City of Commerce, Cortana

With Emily neutralized by La Porte de l'Enfer, the situation was brought under control.

One could say that this positive result was pure coincidence.

Normally, Hugo would've been instantly killed while he was boarding White Rose. In her killing mode, Emily rushed towards and murdered anyone she deemed an enemy.

However...Hugo had chatted with her *before* she'd entered her killing mode.

Although briefly, they'd had a pleasant exchange back at the café. Emily remembered it, and that was enough for her to recognize him as a friend even in the heat of battle.

While killing mode made it far easier for her to see *strangers* as enemies, those that normal Emily had already deemed to be friends would still be hard-pressed to become her targets.

That was what had made it possible for Hugo to enter his Magingear and activate his skill without interruption.

And the ultimate result of that was his act of giant-slaying — a high-rank Master subduing a Superior one.

The onlookers were filled with shock.

This included the many Masters that had been battling Emily...as well as Zhang Zangqi — Emily's only real ally in this city.

"Wh-What...?" he stammered as he observed Emily's Frozen form through the vision of a bird jiangshi.

When La Porte de l'Enfer was activated, Zhang had been nowhere near her. After Emily had begun her "chain," Zhang had obeyed Rascal's words to the letter — "If a massacre breaks out, just wait it out in a safe place before pickin' her up."

Emily's rampage was no doubt something that would attract the other Superiors.

It was an unusual situation, but Zhang's primary objective was to survive, and his secondary objective was to collect information. He was hesitant to leave Emily, but he did so anyway to fulfill these two objectives.

Thankfully, he'd gone far enough to leave the range of La Porte de l'Enfer.

If he had been nearby, he'd have been turned into an ice statue just like Emily.

However, he was in no state of mind to appreciate the danger that he'd narrowly evaded.

Emily...someone so powerful Froze in an instant... he thought, stressed. *I must save her. Rascal said that I should not, but with the situation being what it is, I need to retrieve her no matter the cost. I doubt even he'd expected that she'd be neutralized like this.*

As things were, Emily's Frozen body would either be shattered or locked away, and both of those things would lead to her being sent to the gaol.

With that in mind, Zhang rushed to Emily's aid...

"Ah...!"

...but the *very moment* he stepped into La Porte de l'Enfer's range, the skill had another thirteen-second tick, which instantly Froze his right leg.

If he had been just a couple seconds later, he would've been an ice statue; he was lucky to get away with just a leg.

"I am not sure how this works, exactly...but I see that I cannot enter either," he said. However, his observational jiangshi were untouched by the ice, which told him that jiangshi were unaffected by whatever this was.

Zhang came to the conclusion that he might be able to use his jiangshi to approach and retrieve Emily.

"Drag-Worm Jiangshi, move!" he said. "Will they make it in time, though?" Positioned outside and moving through the ground, Drag-Worm Jiangshi weren't fast monsters. They couldn't even be compared to the High Dragon Jiangshi he'd possessed in Huang He and Hermine.

Zhang was worried that they wouldn't make it to his location before Emily was shattered.

If it had been Rascal in his place, however, he wouldn't have been the least bit anxious. Instead of calling for reinforcements, Rascal would've merely resumed his hunt for information.

"No matter what, Emily'll be the last one standing. That's the result, and it ain't ever gonna change."

Rascal had said those words a mere hour ago.

He hadn't said that for any reason as simple as Emily's Kill Leader skill and the immense stat boosts it gave her.

No. The true value of the Murder Princess lay elsewhere.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

"Cancel La Porte de l'Enfer..." I said.

"Okay," Cyco replied and did as told.

At the same time, she thawed everyone out besides the girl.

"Whoa... I'm back."

"So this was the Magingear guy's skill. Damn, he completely stopped the Murder Princess."

"I feel like I've seen this skill before..." I heard such voices around me, but I had something more important to focus on.

Hurriedly, I established a comms line with Teach's Blue Opera.

"Teach, can you come here right away?" I asked.

"Kay kay," she replied. "Ya met the Murder Princess, didn' cha?"

"Yes... I neutralized her with La Porte de l'Enfer."

"Niiice one!" She gave me an impressed whistle.

"...What do I do now?" I asked.

"Just wait there. Oh, but she had a friend, so watch out for him too, okay?" she said.

That much was true. Back at the café, the girl had been accompanied by a man with the air of a guardian. If he was actually with her, then he certainly wouldn't ignore a situation like this.

"All right," I said.

"Okay then. I'll head there after I'm done talkin' here. I won't be long," Teach said before cutting the call.

She must've been talking to King of Tartarus, Benetnasch.

"Persephone, is your Master... Hm?"

I called out to his Embryo using the unit's speaker, but I got no response.

I looked for her using the cockpit's monitors, but she was nowhere in sight.

Well, she had said that she couldn't fight, so it would make sense for her to flee the scene.

Regardless, I had more important matters to attend to.

"Cyco, stay alert," I said. "The man who was with the Murder Princess might come to retrieve her."

"Roger that."

I had to keep an eye on my surroundings until Teach showed up. However, when I started looking around, I noticed that there were a bunch of Masters around White Rose.

One of them — a man with a mohawk — spoke to me.

"Thanks for that. You're the one who Froze her, right?" he asked.

I responded with a nod of White Rose's headpiece and, trying to be Hugo-like, said, "This is one of my Embryo's skills. She will remain Frozen for quite some time."

"Good to know... Should we break her now?"

"...No. My companion will be here soon. She is part of Sefirot. Ace, AR-I-CA."

"The Blue Sky Songstress, huh...? Yeah, it's probably safer to wait, then. For all we know, shatterin' her might just activate her Lifesavin' Brooch and basically just...free her."

...I actually hadn't considered that, I thought. What happened to fully Frozen enemies who had Brooches equipped if their ice was shattered? I hadn't tested that.

"...I will prepare to use the skill again, just in case."

"Good to know. Thanks. Without you here, we'd be... Wait, I haven't introduced myself yet. My name's Mohawk Rock, and I'm part of the local Mohawk League branch."

...I'd guessed as much based on the mohawk alone. For some reason, that clan had branches in every country. Dryfe was no exception.

"I am Hugo Lesseps," I replied. "I am currently independent, but I used to be a member of The Triangle of Wisdom."

"Aha, so you were. Your Magingear's like none I've ever seen, so I guessed you'd have ties there."

"I see... Oh, there is one thing you should know. The Murder Princess did not come here alone. Her companion might come to retrieve her. Could you help me keep an eye out for him?"

"Sure thing. Leave it to us," Rock said before calling out to some other Masters and explaining the situation to them. They soon began looking around for anyone suspicious. He then turned back to me and said, "They are all from our clan. Though, they're hidin' their mohawks. For reasons."

...What is the significance of them hiding their mohawks? I wondered.

"By the way, why's The Blue Sky Songstress here in Cortana? She's part of Sefirot, right? Is it somethin' to do with the mayor?" he asked.

"...I am not at liberty to say, but why are you asking?" I returned. It actually *was* related to the mayor, but I couldn't exactly say that.

However, I couldn't help but wonder why Rock had posed the question.

"Well, if it's somethin' to do with the stuff the mayor's pullin', I thought that maybe she could help us out. Sefirot is on the president's side, right?"

"Hm?"

"We Mohawk League were asked by Caldina's Administration of Justice to investigate Mayor Douglas Coin. He apparently did lots of really bad stuff, but there was no solid proof for any of it. At least, until some time ago, when someone submitted a letter to the administration describin' a bunch of his crimes in detail. We came here to confirm that... Though, one of our leads — the merchant with ties to the mayor — was just killed by the Murder Princess."

Apparently, the mayor was involved in far worse things than just keeping the Orb for himself.

...And they were hiding their mohawks to be discreet while investigating, huh? I thought.

Well, a bunch of Masters with mohawks would certainly stand out too much. Though Rock, the apparent leader of this group, had kept his mohawk on.

...I really wasn't sure if that was a good idea.

"At the very least, I can tell you that we are *not* with the mayor, so we might be able to assist." I said. "Though, I would have to discuss it with Tea — I mean, AR-I-CA."

"Well, that'd be great if you do."

"By the way, who was it that submitted the letter?" I asked.

"Oh, that would be my Master Dearest." A third voice joined our conversation. It was Persephone, who'd at some point approached my White Rose without me noticing her at all.

"Persephone, Hugo's thinking 'she's so small I didn't even notice her,'" said Cyco.

"Gngh... Am I truly *that* tiny...?!" Persephone groaned in chagrin with her hands on her head.

Well, it was less about her size and more about her being in the camera's blind spot...

"I just didn't see you anywhere. Where were you?" I asked.

"I went to retrieve something."

Retrieve? I wondered.

"So, lady, you said that you know who submitted the letter?" asked Rock.

"Indeed I do. It was my Master, King of Tartarus, Benetnasch," she answered as if it was nothing special.

"King of... Damn, so there's three Superiors here? What's going on in this city? Maybe we should've gotten Sec-Gen Omega to come here too?" Rock muttered, saying something quite worrying.

I'd heard that Secretary-General Omega was the Mohawk League's leader and another Superior... Bringing him here would only make things more chaotic than they already were.

Putting that aside, I faced Persephone and asked, "Why did he make the submission?"

"Well, as I already told you, Master Dearest can see ghosts. He gathered information from the spirits of the mayor's victims in exchange for assisting in the exposure of his crimes."

...So that's the situation, I thought.

“He also used the information he acquired to blackmail the mayor,” she added. “‘Please give me the Orb or I’ll report you to the congress’ and all that.”

“...Huh? But he’d already submitted the letter...” Cyco noted.

“To the Administration of Justice, yes...but not the congress.”

...Not lying, but not telling the truth either. This conversational trick was often used to avoid Truth Discernment. My sister was a fan of it too.

Anyway, this meant that the mayor’s misdeeds would be exposed whether or not he gave away the Orb. This Benetnasch seemed to be quite a character...

“Looking at all the grudge in this city, the mayor has gone far beyond all reason,” Persephone continued. “He did not have much time left regardless. The rest of his life will be spent behind bars...assuming he even survives,” she said as she looked in the direction of the mayor’s mansion. “Now, your companion and my Master Dearest should be... Oh dear. This is bad.”

She spoke the last line while looking at the still-Frozen Murder Princess.

A moment later, the twin axes *broke out of the ice and flew through the air*.

“What?!” A cry of shock escaped my lips. The deadly weapons decapitated two Masters in their path and began to spin around the area.

“It’s an Arms-type Embryo!” a Master exclaimed.

“Tch! They can move around even when she’s Frozen?!” said another. I looked and noticed that the ice statue’s arms were shattered.

This was the price she’d paid to move those axes.

However, the owner’s wounds seemed to matter little to the weapons. They flew around until...

“...Huh?”

...they crashed into the girl’s Frozen frame, *shattering it to pieces*.

The shards of ice sparkled within the sunlight.

Among those shards were motes of light that were her mortal remains.

Emily had used her own Embryo to give herself the death penalty.

“Sh-She killed herself...?” one Master wondered.

“I guess it’s better than letting us take her out?” said another. “Also, death penalties from losing HP make you drop less stuff than death penalties from using the suicide system.”

With the resurrection timer expired, she’d become bits of light and could no longer be brought back.

"...Oh no," I muttered. I hadn't expected this outcome.

It's in Infinite Dendrogram, sure, but I just pushed a little girl into committing suicide... I'm not sure if I'll be able to sleep tonight, I thought.

...At least this whole problem was solved now.

This was the end of my encounter with the Murder Princess...

"Minus."

...or so I thought.

A moment after I heard a voice speak the word, I heard a powerful sound of something breaking.

I looked around for its source and I soon found it. The Master near me — Rock — now had an axe instead of a head.

It was clearly a fatal wound, and with his head and trademark mohawk destroyed, he quickly dissolved into bits of light.

In his place, there was now only a blood-colored axe, which soon spun and flew to return to the hand of a particular person.

After catching the weapon, *she* looked around.

It was her. The very same girl who had just received the death penalty — Murder Princess, Emily.

She wasn't Frozen, and she even had the hands she'd lost when her axes had flown away from her.

She stood, unharmed and ready for battle.

"Wh-What's going on?!" a Master shouted.

"D-Did someone use a rez item on her?!" a second Master asked.

"Like hell! You can't use those after the rez timer runs out and they turn into light! And that's what happened to her! There's no way she should've been able to come back from that!" a third one exclaimed.

Indeed, this was impossible.

Reasonably, there's no way this could've happened.

However, I knew things that others here might've not.

I knew of a Master that merged with a kaiju of immense stats.

I knew of a Master that could rewrite the effects of skills to make them far stronger.

I knew of a Master who could see a future others couldn't.

And I knew a Master who could create armies of tens of thousands all by herself.

They...the Superiors could go beyond what was reasonable and make real what should've been impossible.

Knowing this, I understood what was happening here.

"This is the Murder Princess's...*her* Superior Embryo's power...!"

She could die, only to live again.

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About Youaltepuztli

In *Infinite Dendrogram* there was a concept referred to as "Resources." It could be described as a kind of "energy" possessed by jobs, monsters, items, nature, and Embryos.

Resource exchanges came in many forms.

When a creature defeated another creature, the latter became experience points that raised the former's level.

Items used the Resources stored within them to activate various skills.

Upon death, monsters had most of their Resources converted into items.

When Masters or monsters died, the Resources that didn't become EXP or items were quickly retrieved by the control AI, and the Resource-less bodies instantly became bits of light.

The Resources retrieved by the AI were used in various ways.

Control AI No. 1, Alice — the one in charge of avatars — used the Resources of destroyed Master avatars to restore them.

Control AI No. 9, Caterpillar — the one in charge of environments — used Resources to fix this or that biome, or to improve the areas around save points.

One could say that all life in *Infinite Dendrogram* depended on the concentration, distribution, depletion, and growth of Resources.

Naturally, there were also Embryos that used Resources.

King of Destruction's War God Ship, Baldr, and Giga Professor's Magic Beast Factory, Pandemonium, used item Resources to produce ammo or monsters.

King of Crimes' Primordial Shifting, Nu, acquired physical resistance and its well-rounded nature by taking most of the Resources meant for its Master's job.

Emily Killingston's Soul-Eating Axes, Youaltepuztli, was a Superior

Embryo that used Resources far more *directly* than others.

Their power was simply to *reap and store Resources*.

Most of the Resources that would have originally become her EXP had actually gone into the axes instead.

Because of this, Emily's level was lower than it should've been, but considering Youaltepuztli's power, that mattered little.

The axes could turn even tian corpses into light and absorb them. The numbers were estimates, but by fully absorbing a level 100 tian, Youaltepuztli would receive 100 resources. Even a normal murder would give at least half of that.

With Youaltepuztli being a deity as well as a demonic figure in Aztec mythology known to consume souls, one could say that this was a fitting power.

However, that was only the first part of what made it such a fearsome Embryo.

Youaltepuztli could use the stored resources to *resurrect* Emily.

That was the effect of its passive skill, "Survival of the Fittest."

When Emily died, her resurrection timer expired, and her Resource stocks were scattered and drained, they would automatically be refilled to bring her back.

Like the blood of sacrifices made to god, the stored Resources would be used to recreate her avatar the moment she turned into bits of light. Whether it was death by external wounds or the result of some status effect didn't matter at all — Emily would always come back with full health.

One could say that she was doing Control AI No. 1's job for herself, except instantly and without the need to log out.

That alone made her a fearsome foe, but those fighting her would have an even bigger problem...a fatal one, in fact.

Though the process drained the stored Resources...*there was no limit to how many times she could come back*.

If Emily was level 100, she could come back by draining 100 Resources.

With her now being level 928, the Resource cost for resurrection had increased.

In a way, that meant there was functionally a limit — she couldn't come back once her Resources were depleted.

However, including those she'd just killed, Emily had murdered a total of 36,587 people.

That didn’t even include monsters such as worms.

This was what made this skill such a fatal problem for her opponents.

Just how vast were her stores of Resources? And how many times could she use them to come back?

Even if someone was able to drain her Resources by repeatedly killing her, Emily could replenish her stocks simply by killing any living creature.

This meant that she would never fall before her enemy did.

This was the true meaning behind Rascal’s words.

Murder Princess, Emily Killingston was an *immortal* Master.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Death was the end of life — the inevitable fate that loomed large over everything that existed. No matter how good or bad, all things ended the moment death arrived.

Infinite Dendrogram had these so-called “undead,” but those were really just a different form of life — not something that came after a truly final death.

Everything was destined to die, and death was something that could never be reversed.

My unwavering belief in this fact was probably the reason why my Embryo, Cyco, was born with the power to punish those who inflicted death upon others.

However, things seemed to be different for Emily. She’d become bits of light, only to return a moment later.

This girl was clearly above even the temporary death that we Masters had been granted.

Emily...was unstoppable.

“Wh...What...?” said someone nearby. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who was dumbfounded by this.

The Masters who had been surrounding Emily, keeping a close watch out for anyone who might try to help her, seemed to be barely moving even to someone as slow as me.

The absurdity of what was happening had essentially left us frozen in place.

Emily, of course, didn’t care about any of that. Instead, she instantly renewed the slaughter.

A transcendental entity who possessed immense stats and could instantly revive from death... She was easily among the strongest Masters I knew. Even Teach was below her, and on top of that, Emily gave off a threatening aura that rivaled the King of Destruction.

“Ngh...! Target those with more than 10,000 and restart!” I shouted out.

“Roger that,” said Cyco.

It only took me a few seconds to activate La Porte de l’Enfer again, but that was enough for nearly ten Masters to die. She was moving at supersonic speeds, cleaving through them one by one.

I could only see the afterimages left by her attacks, but I could tell that she was committing a massacre.

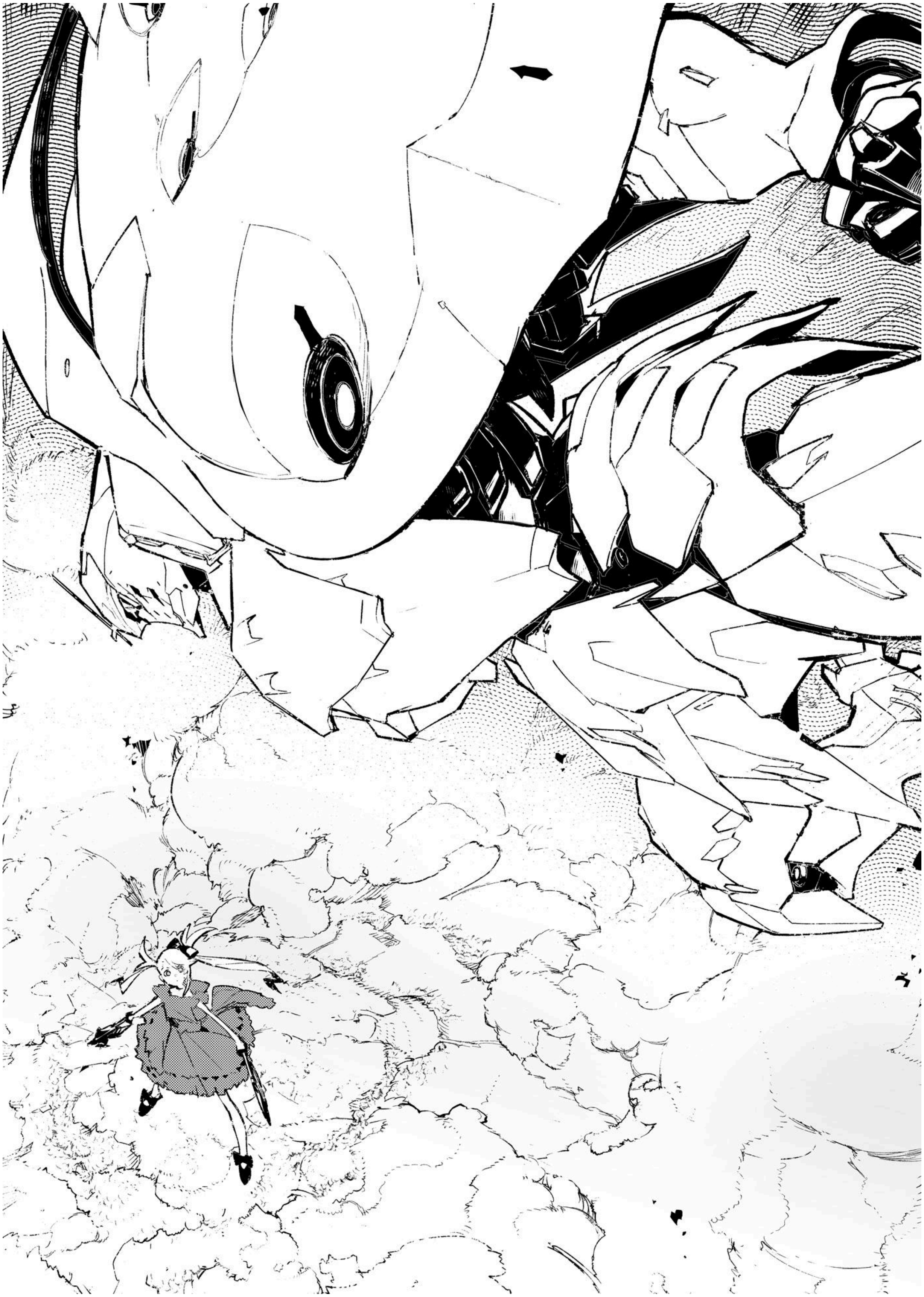
And, for a split second, I felt a chill go down my spine.

Seeing this made me understand that I was a target as well — that she now saw me as an enemy, just like the others.

“La Porte de l’En...?!” I tried to resume La Porte de l’Enfer when I heard the sound of White Rose’s armor being struck, followed by a shock that reached me here in the cockpit.

All the armor made my unit extremely heavy, yet the attack sent it flying backwards, knocking it completely off balance.

“Ugh...!” I used the momentum from that strike to jump and create some distance.



After a moment of floating through the air, the cockpit was shaken by the shock of landing, powerful enough that White Rose couldn't fully absorb it.

"...Ngh."

"Cyco?!"

"I'm...okay. She only threw an axe... It shattered part of me, but stopped at the armor before returning to her," she said.

Thanks to a damage reduction skill, Cyco's frost armor, and the unit's own armor, White Rose, actually boasted the strongest defense of any Magingear.

However, that single thrown axe carried enough power to penetrate it regardless.

"What's the damage on the armor...?" I asked.

"A small dent; that's it," Cyco answered.

That's still damage, I thought.

Still, the Mythical alloy armor that my sister built hadn't been destroyed.

Fran's creation could still stand for now, but it wouldn't last long if Emily decided to focus on it until she tore it apart.

"Where's Emily...?!"

"...There. Frozen," Cyco said. We'd successfully activated La Porte de l'Enfer, Freezing her once again.

However, the axe flew out once more, shattering and reviving her yet again.

Strange as it seemed, she didn't attack me this time either, instead targeting other Masters.

It seemed that she was in a state similar to the one granted by berserk-type skills. I couldn't see any reason or logic behind her attacks.

There was no clear order for whom she targeted either. I was the one Freezing her, but she ignored me in favor of slaughtering other Masters, seemingly at random.

...Maybe it was all about distance and level?

I was relatively low-level and was further away from her than the others, so that might explain why I wasn't high on her list of priorities.

"Minus... Minus..." She massacred Masters, repeatedly reviving herself after either being Frozen by La Porte de l'Enfer or suffering deadly damage from some other Master's ult.

The scene was downright hellish.

"There's no end to this..." I said.

"Do you have any ideas?" Cyco asked.

"...All that comes to mind is destroying those axes."

Those two instruments of slaughter must've been Emily's Superior Embryo. Without those, she wouldn't be able to revive herself.

"...But destroying those is impossible," I added. Just now, one of the Masters had used an ult on one of her axes, clearly aiming to break it, but the weapon hadn't even been scratched. Moments later, it killed that same Master.

Damaging an Arms-type Superior Embryo was extremely difficult. I knew this quite well after seeing how not even Xunyu managed to destroy Figaro's Embryo; Figaro himself could only harm Xunyu's after enhancing the effects of his own Embryo.

It was obvious that White Rose's firepower wouldn't be nearly enough to destroy those axes. That was probably true for Teach too.

Altar's King of Destruction could probably do it...but we didn't even have a prayer of getting his help right now.

"There's nothing we can do..." I said. Ray and that Rook guy could probably find a way to victory in this situation, but not me.

I'm not good enough to stop the girl's killing spree... I thought, with self-derision.

"...And that's acceptable to you?" Cyco asked.

"Of course not! But I..." *There's nothing I can do anymore... I can't do anything here that would possibly help.*

"Hugo... 'A knight who protects women,'" Cyco silently said.

"...Huh?" I asked, hearing her words clearly. It seemed like her response against my inner whining.

"Cyco? Where did that come from...?"

"That's what you wanted 'Hugo' to be, right?"

"That's..." I said, before trailing off as I pondered her words. That was *definitely* what I wanted out of Hugo.

I wanted him to be a knight who protected women and defeated any threats to their happiness — the thorn for every beautiful flower. The Machine Knight of Ice and Roses.

That was the image I had for Hugo and the role I played — the hope I had entrusted to him.

"She won't stop no matter what," Cyco said. "She will kill many people, including those you wanted to protect." I listened to her intently as she spoke. "I was born from your desires. Because of this, I will protect you and your wishes," she continued.

Her words made me feel like the frozen armor covering White Rose was actually embracing me.

"Trust me to protect everything. Don't turn your back and give up. Don't look away from your wish."

"Cyco..."

She was named after the frozen hell, but what she'd said warmed my heart like few things could. Her words had reached my very heart, and they had helped me remember a different set of words I'd once heard.

"Stop wallowing in doubt, young lady."

I'd heard that said back when I was so full of doubt that I could neither move forward nor turn back.

It had been spoken by one of Ray's friends — the sharp-tongued boy I hated more than anyone in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

However, I knew full well that his words had hurt me so much because he was exposing the truth I had been trying so hard to avoid.

Those words had come back to me because I was fully aware of that fact. Even as they hurt me so deeply, his words now served to spur me onwards.

This had also reminded me of a particular scene — the memory of a Master facing an enemy far greater than himself, yet without even thinking of backing down.

"...Don't turn your back, Hugo," I said to myself. *Choose your path and move forward, no matter how powerful the enemy may be. Those two would've never backed down in this situation, and neither should you.*

"...It's time to choose, Hugo," I reinforced to myself.

Also, right now the circumstances were completely different from what they had been at that time. Back at Gideon, I had been forced to choose between standing against my sister or letting a tragedy happen.

The thing that had filled my heart with doubt was entirely in the past. This time, I only had to choose between fighting or giving up.

When I thought about it like that, it became very obvious what Hugo

Lesseps had to do!

"...All right, Cyco," I said. "Neither I...nor Hugo...will give up!"

"Yeah. Do your best," said Cyco.

I decided to keep moving forward and face this threat. Since that was my decision, I had to reexamine my options here.

"Hmm..."

Back when facing Fran, Ray had supposedly told her something like this: *"It means that not even you — a Superior — were able to create a monster that was invincible just because."*

That was exactly it — not even Superiors were unbeatable.

Even if they *seemed* invincible, they must have a weakness of some kind.

Think, Hugo. Her immortality has to have a flaw, I thought.

"...Wait." And then, it finally hit me.

Currently, Emily Froze every thirteen seconds, then used her axes to shatter herself and return from the dead.

The important thing to note was that...*she wasn't actually immune to Freezing*.

Though she could kill herself to come back from it, La Porte de l'Enfer was still effective at neutralizing her.

"Another thing I've observed is that the power of the flying axes can vary widely..."

Emily's axe-throws were significantly stronger than the flying attacks the axes did on their own. I could only guess that her throws were empowered by Emily's STR, while the axes themselves weren't.

White Rose's armor couldn't withstand the former, but it was strong enough to hold against the latter.

"...Also, her actions after Freezing have already become like a routine." Once Frozen, Emily herself couldn't move, so the axes instantly broke off her hands and flew.

If they were in flight the moment she Froze, they would stop attacking and focus on shattering her. It seemed as though they would do this even if they were close to killing their targets.

That meant that the axes would automatically move to kill and revive Emily the moment she was incapacitated. They *had* to do that.

"...And if they didn't shatter her, she would still be Frozen."

Her revival needed a trigger — *her death*. She couldn't come back if she hadn't actually been turned into bits of light.

Emily was *immortal because of her deaths*.

In that case...!

"Cyco! Use White Rose's second battle mode."

"...The anti-artillery defense thing? You know it's costly, right?"

"My MP wouldn't last long regardless!"

White Rose was a heavy unit with always-active defense skills, making it a real MP sink. The drain on my reserves was even bigger when La Porte de l'Enfer was active.

This was White Rose's greatest flaw, even mentioned in the manual Fran had given to me — it was built for endurance battles but could only be used for a short while.

It was like a tank that quickly ran out of gas.

This could also be said about its synergy with Cyco.

Anyone who'd killed a hundred or more of their own kind would instantly be defeated by La Porte de l'Enfer, but anyone with a smaller number of kills — like that Rook person — would be drawn into a war of attrition.

White Rose's ideal position was that of a unit that defended against the enemy's attacks while slowly suppressing them with La Porte de l'Enfer.

But with my high-rank MP reserves, it couldn't be used for long; unlike Ray with his Grudge-Soaked Greaves, I had no way to make up for this shortcoming.

This was a design flaw of White Rose that I couldn't address at this point, and the second battle mode that I was about to use was only going to make it worse.

I couldn't even keep that battle mode up for five minutes...but it let me do things I couldn't do otherwise.

"In this situation, it's our only choice...!" I said.

"Okay," Cyco replied. I input something into the console to the side of the piloting gear and waited for the right moment.

Emily was currently slaughtering Masters even as she was Frozen and shattered by her axe every thirteen seconds.

There were at most two seconds between the moment Emily was Frozen and the moment she was revived.

Those two seconds would decide everything.

"Cyco! Count down until the next tick!" I barked out an order.

"Eleven, ten, nine...!" She did as told.

However, the next moment...

"Minus."

"Ah...!"

...Emily, still barely visible to me, launched an attack against us in earnest.

I looked around and realized that most of the Masters were already dead.

"Looks like *we* are her targets now... But...!"

Emily had thrown both of her axes.

They spun in the air as they attacked the other Masters still standing. Emily herself was attacking White Rose with her bare hands.

"Aghh...?!" Her blows were powerful, throwing my unit off balance. They were even more intense than Rook's Demi-Dragon's attacks, and White Rose's frame was starting to creak in agony. This was especially baffling because this unit was far stronger than the one I'd had back then. That meant that Emily's bare fists were worlds above even Demi-Dragon charges.

"Damage on external armor. A crack has formed," Cyco said.

Emily was actually *breaking* the Mythical alloy armor with nothing but her hands.

"My body too..." she added.

"Cyco, are you all right?!"

"Don't worry...!"

Cyco and White Rose were still somehow withstanding this onslaught.

"We're not...giving up yet!" I declared. We waited out this several-second-long barrage that felt like it lasted minutes, and survived to see the moment come.

"Three, two, one...!"

Cyco finished the countdown to La Porte de l'Enfer's next tick — and once it came, Emily instantly Froze yet again.

"White Rose, purge all armor! Second battle mode!" I shouted. A moment later, all the armor that Emily had cracked and bent was removed.

This wasn't due to her attacks, however — I had done this purposefully.

Cyco quickly transformed into armor to replace the pieces that were detached.

"Axes incoming!" she cried. They had instantly switched from attacking the Masters and were now returning to Emily to shatter her.

However, before that happened, I activated White Rose's final trick.

"Boucliers Planetes!" The axes were on their way to kill and release their Master.

Just like before, they approached Emily — but unlike before, *they were reflected by White Rose's armor, now floating around her Frozen body*.

The axes couldn't reach her.

"Hugo!"

"We...did it!"

This was White Rose's second defense mode — Boucliers Planetes or "shield planets."

These were floating shields that protected the target from a distance. They were remote-controlled armor-pieces originally designed to protect White Rose from artillery and magic while maintaining distance, preventing the damage from leaking to the main frame.

I had a degree of control over it as well as some automation settings, giving me multiple ways to protect White Rose...or anything else I wanted. *Even the enemy*.

Emily's axes crashed into the armor over and over again, but without her stats empowering them, they couldn't damage the Mythical alloy, which was just as I'd expected.

They seemed to be automatically prioritizing Emily's destruction, showing no intention of actually attacking White Rose itself. The weapons only continued to repeatedly crash into my shields, unable to break through and kill their Master.

"This...is checkmate," I said.

This was the only way I could win this.

I'd protected her from her flying axes, preventing her death — and with it, her revival.

Ironically, protecting her was the only way to defeat her.

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"...Cancel La Porte de l'Enfer," I said. "I'll focus my MP into maintaining Boucliers Planetes.”

“Roger.”

“You get some rest, Cyco.”

“...Okay. I’ll take a break.”

I canceled La Porte de l’Enfer while Cyco, completely drained, transformed from her armor form back into a Maiden.

I didn’t intend to move the unit or use any skills from now on. The MP cost of Boucliers Planetes alone could be recovered using MP consumables.

The Freezing debuff of La Porte de l’Enfer continued even if the skill was canceled. The length of the effect actually scaled with the amount of their own kind the target killed, so as long as no one shattered her, the Murder Princess would be Frozen for days.

She would probably have to log off before it expired, but the Frozen debuff prevented people from logging out.

This meant that she would have to use the suicide system in order to actually disconnect from the game.

Or perhaps her family would start to get worried that she’d been logged in so long and try to remove the headgear, forcefully activating the suicide system.

...At least, I was pretty sure that was how it worked.

Regardless, the suicide system would obviously override her resurrection ability. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have had to use her axes to kill herself, and she would’ve already been revived by now anyway.

That made it clear that this battle was over.

I watched the axes continue their futile attempts at breaking through the shields and killing their Master — their other half.

“...Why?” I peeked at her through the Boucliers Planetes and thought, *Why did she massacre all these people?*

Of course, I knew that not everyone was a Maiden’s Master like myself.

There were those like Dryfe’s Hell General — people who only saw this world as a game and thought that tians were just NPCs whom they were free to break like any other object.

The Murder Princess’s fighting style was pretty “game-like” too.

Fighting her made me feel like I wasn’t actually facing another human. What I felt was instead the shortsightedness of primitive AI enemies from old games, as well as the calculating coldness of an emotionless machine.

Many had died here, and my surroundings were far more empty than they had been before.

The tians who had populated this bazaar had all run away, while the Masters that had survived didn’t even amount to twenty.

Besides them, there were the tian corpses...or what was left of them, anyway.

This horrific sight made me understand why she was wanted in every country, and why she was one of the most infamous Masters in the world.

“...Why?” I muttered. The girl I’d met at the café didn’t seem like the type of person who was capable of something like this. She’d spoken of other people’s Embryos like they were friends, all smiles.

She had been like a normal, purehearted little girl.

“How did you end up becoming the Murder Princess...?” I asked — but of course, the ice statue didn’t answer.

The battle was over, and the only sound left in the bazaar was the metallic clang of the axes striking Boucliers Planetes.

Chapter Six: The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis

A Certain Place in the City of Commerce, Cortana

Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi was overcome with panic.

Through his jiangshi, he'd witnessed everything that had happened to Emily. Upon seeing her break free of the ice for the first time, he'd thought that his worries were over — but when Hugo completely sealed her away, Zhang's fear grew to even greater heights.

But that wasn't the only reason for his distress.

Zhang had placed Drag-Worm Jiangshi on standby outside the city. He'd already sent them to Emily's aid, and under normal circumstances, they'd have already rescued her.

"...No good," he said. As it turned out, the jiangshi had all been intercepted and destroyed before they could fulfill their objective. Through their vision, Zhang saw exactly what had been responsible for this — a soaring Magingear with blue armor.

Luck was against him this time.

The local Drag-Worms were creatures of the dunes, made to travel beneath the dry sands. Because of this, they couldn't reach their top speeds while burrowing through the rich soil around Cortana's oasis, forcing Zhang to make them move above ground for a swifter rescue.

Unfortunately for him, AR-I-CA was heading towards the bazaar at the same time as the jiangshi were approaching. She spotted them immediately and wiped them all out using charged artillery fire from her Blue Opera.

"That must have been achieved by the Dangai Orb I once possessed," Zhang said. "It is a reliable power to wield, but a frustrating one to face."

At the very least, the Drag-Worm Jiangshi were able to keep AR-I-CA from reaching Emily as quickly, so their deaths might've not been *completely* in vain.

That meant little, however, if she would still make it there first.

Regardless, Zhang had lost the jiangshi he'd planned to fight with, and thus he had next to no chance of saving Emily now.

Despite this, he had no intention of giving up. After all, if Emily was kept locked in stasis as she was, it would be a heavy blow to the organization he now served.

"I must rescue her no matter the cost," Zhang said. He might have lost his jiangshi, but he still had himself.

He'd lost against AR-I-CA even with his Wuxing Jilong and Dangai, so now he didn't even have a hope of defeating her; but he could bring Emily back by merely removing the shields protecting her and letting Youaltepuztli do the rest.

"I will free her even if it costs me my life," he declared before taking a step into the zone where his leg had been Frozen earlier, confirming that the effect had been deactivated. He'd expected as much based on what he'd seen through his jiangshi while watching Hugo's White Rose.

That skill is now inactive, he thought. *I suppose it can only be used with that armor.*

Knowing that La Porte de l'Enfer wouldn't interfere, Zhang instantly broke into a sprint. He cut a path through the alleyways, rushing towards the bazaar where Emily still stood.

If only something would happen to distract them, he hoped, knowing full well how impossible that was.

Through the eyes of the jiangshi he'd sent to the mayor's mansion, he'd witnessed AR-I-CA and Benetnasch strike some sort of deal, and the necromancer had handed over the Orb he possessed. Zhang couldn't hear their conversation, but he guessed that Benetnasch gave her his Orb in exchange for AR-I-CA letting him take the mayor's.

The Indestructible is far more powerful than the mayor. He will have no trouble taking the Orb, so there is no chance it would cause any kind of worthwhile distraction.

Since AR-I-CA was in a hurry to aid her companion, she'd accepted the deal, but Zhang could tell that she did intend to ultimately take the mayor's Orb away from Benetnasch.

Perhaps if I wait until then... No, even if The Blue Sky Songstress and the Indestructible resume their battle, more Masters would have arrived here by then, Zhang thought. Being a member of Sefirot, AR-I-CA could use the influence of the congress and the president to send requests to the guilds. This would make it easy to find more Masters who could protect Emily until she finally took the death penalty using the suicide system. Some of these Masters would surely have defensive abilities or items better than Boucliers Planetes.

In the worst case scenario, The Earth — another Sefirot member — could come and bury Emily thousands of metels underground.

Zhang would be out of options then, unable to do anything to save her.

I must do something before that happens... What? As that thought crossed his mind, he suddenly stopped running.

This was because his senses as the Great Soul Daoshi picked up something unusual.

"...Grudge? Souls? No...what *is* this feeling?" Great Soul Daoshi was a job that dealt with death, but Zhang's necromancy was quite different from that of the west.

The jiangshi that he usually used were little more than corpses animated by magic that followed the instructions written onto their Fu. The Fu acted as a kind of replacement soul, so unlike the King of Tartarus or a Lich, he didn't have to deal with souls directly.

But he was a necromancer still, and as such, he could sense souls just like the rest of them.

However, what he sensed now was unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

"...A lamentation?" A souls' lament — a deathly wail that cannot even be classified as an expression of grudge.

It was as though someone was crying out in horror as they watched something happen that could not possibly be undone.

It reached Zhang from the mayor's mansion — the same place where he'd thought nothing more would happen.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

"Heyyy! Good job, Yu!" said Teach, flying in with her Blue Opera. Only a few minutes had passed since I'd trapped Emily. "Whoa. She's locked up gooood. What's with the shields, though? And the axes hammerin' 'em?"

In response to that question, I recalled what had transpired and explained everything to her, along with a description of what Emily's Superior Embryo could do.

"...Endless auto-revives? You gotta be jokin'." she said in shock. "Man, I knew this already, but there sure are a lotta broken Superior Embryos, huh?"

You can basically see slightly into the future. You're not one to talk, I thought.

"Even our Albert can only do that seven times... Though, I guess the revival is more like a bonus for him," she added.

"Teach?"

"Oh, sorry, got a bit off track there."

"So, how were things on your end?" I asked.

"I let KoT have his turn with the mayor's Orb. He said he'll pass it to me if it turns out he doesn't need it. Though, if he *does* end up needing it, I'll just go and take it from him." Knowing her, none of that was surprising. "Oh, and he gave me a li'l somethin' in exchange," she added.

"That being?"

"The Orb he had. The one that turns water into land. He didn't really seem to need it, so he went and gave it to me, just like that."

Based on what I heard about him from Persephone, I could understand why. The Orb had nothing to do with souls or life, so it made sense that it wouldn't be worth much to him.

Still...an Orb was an Orb. It was Huang He's national treasure and a potent negotiation piece.

"You make it seem like he doesn't gain anything from the exchange," I said.

"Hmm, we agreed that if he passes the mayor's Orb to me, I'll have to do something he wants... Oh no! What if he asks for something lewd?!"

"...You'd probably like that, wouldn't you?" I said. There was no helping this woman.

"So, what're ya gonna do now?" she asked.

"I'll try to keep this girl Frozen until she uses the suicide system to log out," I answered. "With her kill count, she'll probably stay like this for more than a full real life day... We still have to worry about that person who was with her, though."

My words made Teach fall silent for a moment and think.

"I beat some worms on my way here. They might've been with that guy, and there might be more," she said.

I guess we can't exactly sit here and wait, I thought, before pointing at the axes and asking, "Can you break the Embryo, Teach?"

"Nope. As far as Superiors go, I don't have much firepower. And from what I can tell, those axes put toughness above sharpness. You need somethin' *very* strong to break 'em."

If not even Teach could do it, then there wasn't much we could do here.

For a moment, I considered asking for KoT's help...

"Hm...?"

...but when I looked around, I realized that Persephone was nowhere in sight.

"But...man, this is bad," said Teach. "I don't think the guys who sent her over expected her to get into a situation like this. We might get actual IF members comin' to save her."

"'IF'...?"

"A criminal clan Sefirot scraps with every now and again. Little Murder Princess here is one of them," she explained.

This reminded me of the times I'd heard of the clan while I was still in The Triangle of Wisdom. The rumors about Emily were most of what I'd heard, though.

"The problem is that all official members of the clan are Superiors who'd easily break her out of your ice." That certainly *was* a problem. "Sechs the 'Dark Core' is in the slammer, so we won't be seein' him, but La Crima the 'Error Source' has the army to do it, while Rascal the 'Ruiner of Legacy' can destroy her along with the entire city."

...Teach, might I ask who thought of those nicknames? It's like they were trying *to sound like bad news,* I thought.

"Just so you know, these nicknames are straight out of DIN articles. They make Emily's 'Kill Leader' look so simple, don't they?"

...You think so?

"Anyway, since keepin' her here is a bad idea, and we can't have anyone break her out..." Teach said before stopping to think for a moment. "All right. Let's just *throw her out* then."

"Huh?" I said. I had just heard her say something I couldn't ignore.

"There's a huge patch of quicksand a little bit to the southwest."

“Huh? Umm... Teach?”

“If I dump her there, anyone comin’ to help her won’t be much of a threat, and breakin’ her out while she’s in sand will be kinda hard. It’ll keep her in place even after she’s revived! It’s perfect!”

“Perfect?! Teach, are you listening to yourself?!” I raised my voice. *I know I’m the one who froze her, but throwing a girl into quicksand...?!*

“So yeah, see ya later!”

“Ah, wai—!” I tried to call out, but she picked up Emily and flew away before I could finish.

The two axes followed after them, but their speed was far below Blue Opera’s and they quickly fell behind.

I could do nothing but stand behind and watch as they disappeared. I’d spent a good while racking my head about Emily and how to deal with her, but now I felt like Teach had rendered it all meaningless.

“...There there,” Cyco said as she consoled me with a pat on my head — though she was still tired and barely able to move.

“Truly, nothing is beyond her. How terrifying,” said a voice coming from behind us.

I turned around and saw Persephone.

“Persephone?” I asked. “When did—? No, *where* were you?”

“Hmm... In hiding.”

“From Emily?”

“No. From Ace, more like.”

From Teach? I thought.

“From what I could tell, that woman would have murdered me on sight purely to make it easier to take the Orb from Master Dearest,” she explained.

Oh no... After seeing Teach grab Emily and fly away, I could easily see her doing just that.

“So, you finally showed yourself because she left?” I asked. “I’m pretty sure she’ll come back soon.”

“I understand that, but I feel that I must give you a warning.” *...A warning?* “Well, the matter of the Murder Princess is solved now, but...” she said with a tired shake of the head. “*Something worse* will soon show itself.”

Those words were laden with certainty.

"Huh?" *Something worse than Emily?* "Persephone, what are you talking about?"

"Hm..." She gave no proper response to my question. Instead, she merely looked off into the distance — in the direction of the mayor's manor.

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City of Commerce, Cortana, Mayor's Mansion

"Aieee...hieee...!" Douglas Coin, the mayor of Cortana, was running frantically through his mansion.

"Sir, what is the matt— AAAAAHHHHHHH?!" The maids that saw him shrieked in terror as their eyes fell on his legs, severed by Aragorn and now replaced by countless writhing maggots.

However, he ignored them and continued running, as though unaware of his own state. His destination was the mansion's dungeon — the place where many homeless people and slaves had met their ends, turned to corpses for the mayor's dark ritual.

"I-I just need...to finish the ritual...!" The fear of incoming death made him lose his mind, as well as gave him the strength to keep running.

He didn't want to die.

That was the mayor's main motive, as well as the reason why he now wanted to carry out the ritual of the Orb of De Vermis. This motive, however, had its roots in a time before he'd acquired the Orb at all.

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About a year ago, his body had been overcome by severe illness. His old age and the many years he'd spent living large had begun to take their toll on his vital organs and overall health. Life became difficult for him, and the idea that he might die soon became an obsession.

Perhaps because death felt so close, the Mayor had begun seeing visions of the many people he'd tortured and killed in life.

Dying would have meant losing everything he'd attained, and it wasn't clear what would happen after that. Many stories of old said that those who incurred the grudge of others in life would suffer immensely after death.

This had been all but confirmed by the observations of various necromancers.

The mayor had once laughed these stories off, but that amusement had turned into fear as his death drew closer and closer.

After illness had taken hold of him, the mayor's nights had become filled with teeth-chattering terror. He buried himself deep under his sheets, because otherwise he would see things he didn't want to see: his own disease-stricken, dying visage, *as well as Fria — the wife of one of his political opponents*.

During the mayoral election some years ago, he'd ruined a couple who opposed him by having the man accused of crimes he did not commit. Following that, he took Fria as a slave and eventually murdered her...but now, her face was coming back to haunt him. It was as though she was waiting for him to finally die.

That was far from the only misdeed he'd committed. He'd done many vile things as both a merchant and a politician. He'd even accepted money from the Gouz-Maise Gang that had operated on the border with Altar, keeping the Altarian army at bay and supplying them with magic items in exchange for their payment.

Many children and the people who'd tried to rescue them died as a direct result of his actions, but Douglas didn't care as long as his wealth continued to increase.

He'd been committing such crimes for decades now.

However, as death drew near, he'd begun to selfishly fear the retribution he could face.

These days had seemed endless.

"No... I don't want to die... No... Nooo..." Crying like a child, the mayor had continued to panic over the prospect of his impending death.

He felt that if he strained his ears, he could hear his subordinates and servants talking about what they would do once he was dead.

"I-I... I can't die yet... I don't want to die...!" He'd begun life as a merchant, become a politician, and eventually rose to become mayor of the second most important — if not *the* most important — city in Caldina. His word in congress carried more weight than anyone's save maybe the president. It would have been accurate to call him the "vice-king" of the union.

However, all the wealth, glory, and power he'd gathered would all vanish the moment he died.

And beyond the grave, there would be nothing waiting for him but the vengeful victims he'd murdered for his own ends.

"Aaaahhhh... Huh?" As the idea of such a future paralyzed him with terror, something moved the sheet that he had pulled over him.

It was the wind flowing into the room.

The window was open for some reason, letting in the night breeze.

"...Ugh!" For a moment, he considered calling a servant to close it, but he didn't want anyone to see him crying, so he decided to do it himself.

His limbs shaking, he took his cane and slowly walked up to the window...and then noticed something odd on the floor.

"...What is this?"

It was a crystalline Orb. Below it, there was a piece of paper saying, "Present. This is what you seek. Place the Orb under the pillow, wish for health and youth, and they shall be yours again."

He looked at the Orb in suspicion, closed the window...and picked it up.

His suspicion was no match for the temptation presented by the Orb and the mysterious letter.

Someone had clearly left the Orb after breaking into his room, but he felt that doing as the letter said was the correct course of action. So, he placed the Orb under his pillow.

"A healthy body...and youth... Heh heh... What am I hoping for...from this thing...?"

He chuckled in self-derision at his own actions, but he still went to sleep with the Orb beneath his head.

And when he woke up the next day, he was so healthy that it would have been hard to recognize him.

The shadow of death that had hung over the mayor before had all but vanished. His face was full of life, and there wasn't a hint of pain or trembling in any part of his body.

The mayor felt freer that day than he had in decades.

"Ha...hah hah hah," he laughed in disbelief. "What...? What is this...?!"

"I-h-a-v-e-m-e-n-d-e-d-y-o-u-r-b-o-d-y-w-h-i-l-e-k-e-e-p-i-n-g-i-t-s-s-h-a-p-e."

"Ah?!" The mayor jumped as an unfamiliar voice rang out in his head.

It wasn't an auditory hallucination. It seemed more like someone nearby was talking to him.

"Wh-Who is there...?! Where are you?!"

"I-a-m-D-e-V-e-r-m-i-s. T-h-e-o-n-e-s-e-a-l-e-d-w-i-t-h-i-n-t-h-e-O-r-b-y-o-u-p-o-s-s-e-s-s."

"What...?"

De Vermis then began speaking about itself.

It revealed that it was a UBM that had been sealed away in the Orb by the Draconic Emperor over six hundred years ago, and that someone had taken it from Huang He and brought it here.

Perplexed by those words, the mayor looked at the letter.

Who, exactly, had left him a national treasure of the Huang He Empire?

He wondered what their goal could've been, and guessed that by giving it to a powerful Caldinian, they intended to spark a war with Huang He.

The idea made him shiver. He wondered if it was best to return it, but De Vermis told him that if he were to let go of the Orb, his body would not stay mended. Without the Orb in his possession, the mayor would revert to his sickly, aging state once again.

Upon hearing that, the mayor remembered the fear he'd felt every night, and he couldn't bring himself to give the Orb up. Ultimately, he decided to keep it himself and hide it from everyone else.

Afterwards, he had some slight trouble proving who he was to his servants. He ended up telling them that he'd "used a special item" — which wasn't the full explanation, but also not a lie in the eyes of Truth Discernment.

After a day of particularly good health, De Vermis spoke to him once more.

"M-e-n-d-i-n-g-y-o-u-i-s-n-o-t-m-y-o-n-l-y-p-o-w-e-r."

"What...?"

"M-y-p-o-w-e-r-i-s-w-h-a-t-y-o-u-c-a-l-l-i-m-m-o-r-t-a-l-i-t-y."

"*What*?!"

De Vermis then told him of the ritual for immortality.

First, it needed between a hundred and two hundred dead bodies. And second, after they'd been killed, the bodies had to be kept in one place for a certain amount of time.

With that, the preparations for the rite of immortality would be done.

It would come at a cost of many lives, but with the mayor's wealth and power, this was easy to accomplish without anyone being the wiser, especially if he only targeted vagrants and slaves.

"I-b-e-l-i-e-v-e-I-c-a-n-p-e-r-f-o-r-m-t-h-e-r-i-t-u-a-l-w-i-t-h-y-o-u-r-a-i-d. W-i-l-l-y-o-u-a-s-s-i-s-t-m-e?"

"If I do...?"

"Y-o-u-w-i-l-l-a-l-s-o-b-e-c-o-m-e-i-m-m-o-r-t-a-l." Magic and necromancy were real in the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*; this was a wicked and suspicious offer.

However, the mayor accepted it, mostly because De Vermis had already demonstrated its power on the mayor's own body.

"Immortality... If I become immortal..." If he became immune to death itself, he would never again have to feel the fear he'd experienced when facing the prospect of his own demise.

And there was nothing he wanted more than that.

He accepted De Vermis's offer and began doing whatever was necessary to become immortal.

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The one who'd given him the Orb was none other than the sub-leader of IF, Zeta.

She believed that a greedy, influential politician who was on the verge of death would use the Orb in a way that would attract many powerful figures to the city.

In some sense, it went exactly as she'd expected.

But whether the ultimate outcome was something she'd accounted for was another matter entirely.

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And so, the mayor arrived at the dungeon — the place of the ritual.

"Hee...heeeee... I am here! I lost them, and I made it!" he said out loud. The dungeon was full of bodies — all belonging to the nearly two hundred people he'd killed.

Despite that, the place did not smell badly at all, strangely enough.

All the corpses looked fresh, and even the wounds that had caused their deaths had stayed as clean holes in their flesh.

The mayor took out the Orb of De Vermis and said, “Now! Start the ritual!”

“T-h-a-t-I-w-i-l-l.”

A moment later, *the mayor’s hand moved against his will and threw the Orb to the floor, shattering it*.

“...Huh?” The mayor had no intention of doing that, but he had thrown the Orb on the ground as though spurred on by some unknown force inside him.

The UBM-sealing Orbs, created by the greatest Draconic Emperor in history, were potent treasures that allowed the holders to wield the powers of the UBMs within, but that didn’t mean that the orbs themselves were difficult to break. Just a few years ago, an Orb in a certain land was shattered, releasing the UBM within.

And here, it had just happened once again. The Orb shattered, releasing the sealed UBM — a small fly.

It seemed hard to believe that this pitifully small creature possessed immense power, but it was undoubtedly an Ancient Legendary UBM — The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis.

“This is the first time we have faced each other like this, is it not, Douglas?” De Vermis spoke to the mayor with a voice far clearer than it ever had before.

The mayor, however, said nothing in response. He did not even move from where he was standing, for he was too shaken and overcome by terror.

“E-Eek...!”

All their exchanges thus far were based on the premise that De Vermis was sealed in the Orb and could thus be controlled.

But now it had been released.

A tian facing an unbound UBM was a death sentence.

Thinking that he’d been simply manipulated into freeing the UBM, the mayor almost despaired...

“Please do not be afraid. I have no intention of harming you.”

...but De Vermis spoke to him in a gentle tone.

“What...?” the mayor said.

“As I said, I will now perform the rite of immortality. As a friend, you will be part of it. Let us live together, eternally."

There was no hint of malice or deceit in that voice. De Vermis just saw the mayor as a friend and wished to grant him immortality.

Realizing that the UBM had nothing but good intentions, the mayor relaxed.

"I-I see! Then let us complete it before King of Tartarus comes."

"That would be for the best. Let us begin."

A moment after De Vermis said that, the corpses lying in this room began to move.

The remains of the slaves and beggars killed by Douglas's private soldiers began to rise, with bodies so healthy-looking it was impossible to believe they were actually dead.

"The corpses...!" the mayor cried.

"They are not corpses. They are alive," De Vermis insisted.

"...What?"

"Oh, I suppose I should explain. The *fragment* that I created when I mended your body had a limited ability to speak, so I could not convey all of the information to you. I will tell you about it now while I create the immortal body."

De Vermis's words raised some questions in the back of the mayor's mind, but before he could ask them, the UBM began explaining its abilities.

"My power is called 'Reinvigorating Rebirth.' It is a skill that targets flesh, bones, and organs damaged by wounds or illnesses and *replaces them with fragments of myself*."

"Hm...?"

"The fragments act exactly as the organs they replace, and they also improve anything that passes through them. Blood, for example. Additionally, since they have the power to grant vitality, anything that has part of its body replaced by my fragments becomes even healthier than they were before. This reinvigoration is perpetual and does not degrade with time, making eternal life possible. Even if ninety-nine percent of such a body is destroyed or burned, the damaged cells can be replaced. Oh, and since your entire body was so decayed, a very large amount of you was replaced, which greatly improved the effect and made you look far younger."

"Wait, what are you saying? I..."

"To put it simply, I use the failing parts of others' bodies to create fragments of myself. Those fragments then make their bodies healthy." With that simplified explanation, the mayor finally understood how De Vermis's power worked.

However, he now had another question.

"What do you mean by 'fragment?'" he asked.

The best answer to that question was no doubt the mayor's own legs, replaced by countless maggots.

However, De Vermis didn't point that out. Instead, the mayor looked at the walking dead surrounding him.

The corpses that the UBM had said were alive gathered together in one place and began to collapse there. As they fell, they looked unnaturally limp, as though they had no skeletons or joints.

And from the many holes all over those bodies, innumerable amounts of maggots began to pour out.

"Those are my fragments," said De Vermis. Upon seeing that, as well as noticing the maggot-legs he now possessed, the mayor was completely unable to speak.

However, De Vermis continued talking, ignoring the mayor's emotional state.

"The bodies of people dying from heart and lung failure are the optimal bases for the creation of my fragments. First the killing wound, then the dying brain cells, then the decaying body... I can replace them in that order."

The UBM was speaking as though none of this was remotely out of the ordinary.

"I would have preferred to keep replacing parts for a few more days and increase the number of fragments, but now that there is someone who would take my power away from you, this seems to be the best I will be able to do." The maggots overflowing the pile of bodies were now leaving behind the parts they hadn't replaced — the cells that were still alive — like food they hadn't had time to eat. The writhing mass then began to gather into a single place.

These maggots born from human bodies might've been made of human cells, but they were clearly *not* human.

The maggots abandoned their original form as disparate parts of many corpses and began to gather and assume a different form.

Maggots born from certain corpses became fingers, others became toes, and the majority of the creatures merged together into a most fitting shape — a maggot.

Born from nearly two hundred corpses, the writhing bugs created a freakish form akin to a giant maggot with multiple sets of human limbs — a sight most ordinary humans could scarcely bear to look at.

Perhaps if it were some sort of artificial creation, it wouldn't weigh so heavily on an onlooker's sanity. However...it was alive. It pulsated as a single creature.

The maggots born from the corpses became a new shape...*a new life-form*.

The sight was unbearably repulsive. If the wicked dead were given a choice between this and hell, most would certainly pick the latter.

Perhaps if Ray Starling or Hugo Lesseps had been there, this creature would remind them of the great manifestation of grudge — The Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

However, the essence of this creature was nothing like that at all. In fact, it was completely the opposite.

Gouz-Maise was an undead — a mass of corpses animated by grudge — while this was a creature whose living cells had turned into maggots that kept them *alive*.

Sooner rather than later, the tiny fly that was the heart of De Vermis approached the mass of maggots.

It welcomed their father and entrusted the entire body to it. Then, the giant gathering of nearly two hundred corpses-turned-maggots were now De Vermis's body.

"...Ah, ahh...ahhh?" As the mayor stared at this bizarre scene, he felt something tickle the inside of his ear.

He put a trembling finger inside, and when he pulled it out, there was a single maggot on it.

"...Ah? Ah...?! AAAAAAHHHHHH?!" Just like that, the mayor realized that the voice of De Vermis had not been actually ringing inside his mind — *this maggot was whispering it directly to his eardrum*.

"I used my fragments to make your body accustomed to me." De Vermis spoke calmly, ignoring the mayor's disgusted writhing on the stone floor.

"Unlike other flesh, you will live with me until your final cell vanishes. I have you to thank for being outside again and for helping me create a body so swiftly. You have my endless gratitude."

And so, with pride, confidence, sincerity, and a gentle tone...

"So...*let us live a life eternal*."

...De Vermis spoke these words.

"Y-You mean that...you...?" the mayor muttered in disbelief.

What terrified the mayor the most was that De Vermis was no doubt expressing its genuine goodwill and gratitude. It truly wanted to live a life eternal with the mayor, because it wanted nothing but the best for him.

However, "life" in De Vermis's mind was a thoroughly inhuman existence.

To this being, "life" was transforming human cells, so they would be reborn and kept alive forever.

Thus, The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis's power, was exactly as it was rumored to be.

It did indeed give the user "a healthy life, and then a new life eternal."

What the description did not convey was that this "new life eternal"...was a life as a maggot.

"Aaahhh! AAAAAAAAAAGH!"

The mayor finally realized that the thing being created here wouldn't be anything as simple as a flesh golem.

It would be a mass of maggots that would not even be capable of dying.

"Please relax. You will feel no pain. It might be bewildering at first, but I am sure it will please you," said De Vermis with nothing but honesty in its voice.

However, the mayor shook his head and wailed.

"NO! THIS IS NOT WHAT I...!"

The lives of the living and undead were different. The lives of multicellular and unicellular organisms were different.

The mayor hadn't thought for a moment that the immortality he would be granted would be as different from human life as that.

Where would the soul go when one became a part of such an undying body?

What if it became forever sealed away, trapped and unable to escape?

The mayor looked at the mass of maggots, hoping to see at least one silver lining, but there wasn't even a hint of humanity in any of the human-born maggots forever crawling within it.

And *that* was the mayor’s future.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Upon realizing this, the mayor lost his mind and began to wail and tried to escape the dungeon. In his mind, even capital punishment was better than this.

However, it was too late. With most of his body replaced by De Vermis’s maggots, the UBM was able to force him to turn around and walk towards the wriggling mass.

Starting from his fingers, his body was slowly disassembled. Slowly, he was made part of the whole.

“NO! NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Overcome by despair, he wailed again and again as De Vermis took him in.

Right before he was consumed...

“I beg...you...please...kill...meee...”

...his final words were truly ironic for a man who had clung to life so fiercely.

With the mayor assimilated, The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis was complete. It broke the restricting ceiling above and began rising to the surface. After all, it had been formed earlier than planned. It still needed to find more bodies to bring into the fold.

Chapter Seven: Standing and Indomitable

City of Commerce, Cortana, Mayor’s Mansion

Benetnasch noticed the anomaly soon after he finished negotiating with AR-I-CA.

He possessed skills that gave him sight of the surrounding souls and grudge. Walls and similar kinds of barriers meant nothing before those skills, allowing him to clearly see the souls beneath the mansion.

That made it easy for him to understand that the nearly two hundred souls gathered here were now wailing. The sensation froze him in place.

“What troubles you, my friend?” Aragorn asked as he was busy breaking through the mansion’s many walls.

“...This is really bad,” Benetnasch said with a shake of his head and with frustration that was quite out of character for him.

A moment later, a gigantic pale arm broke through the floor in front of them, soon followed by five more. These limbs then flailed about, grasping at any piece of the mansion they touched. Under the creature’s immense weight, the building quickly began to collapse.

“In me, my friend!” Aragorn called.

“...Yeah,” Benetnasch said, jumping inside the skeletal dragon’s ribcage. Aragorn then rushed back to the garden, pulverizing any walls and pillars on the way. By the time they were out, the mansion had collapsed completely.

Benetnasch gazed at the dust-shrouded remains, saying not a word. One didn’t have to see souls to know the fate of the servants who were still inside.

“Below!” Aragorn said right before the six arms that destroyed the building pulled on the rubble, lifting up and revealing the creature’s full form — that of a maggot with human limbs.

The maggot was larger in size than even Pure-Dragons; it possessed six long arms and so many legs that they were hard to count. Every inch of it was made of tiny maggots.

It was so disgusting that the sight alone would break weaker minds.

Still, it wasn't difficult for Benetnasch to understand what he was looking at.

"My friend, is this...?"

"It looks like the sealed UBM has been released."

"The Orb held this enormous mass of maggots? How repulsive."

"No," Benetnasch said with a shake of his head. "This body is made of living humans."

"...What?" Aragorn asked in shock. The necromancer hadn't witnessed the moment De Vermis's current form was created, but he could see souls, and he saw *the many souls trapped within the maggots that composed the creature*.

While talking to Hugo, Persephone had explained the relationship between souls, minds, and bodies using ice, fluid, and a cup as their respective parallels. She had primarily focused on the effect that boiling grudge had on souls and bodies, but that wasn't the only way the relationship could go sour — the flesh could affect the soul and mind, as well.

When put in a repulsive vessel far unlike the original, souls and minds would be tainted just as drinks poured into lead cups became poisonous.

In this case, De Vermis was the lead cup.

Though the people used in its creation had had their cells replaced by maggots, *they were still alive*. They had died once, but their souls were trapped inside their bodies. Since they still lived, they couldn't even be melted away by grudge and vanish.

Because of this, to be one with De Vermis was a fate worse than undeath.

"Truly, this is not enough," said De Vermis. "Eternity requires more power and volume."

The human-maggot mass then used one of its six arms to pick up the corpse of a maid who had died in the mansion's collapse *and crushed the body with its hand*, mangling the flesh both inside and out.

Starting with the damaged cells, the destroyed corpse then began transforming into writhing maggots, all of which were absorbed by De

Vermis to make it grow in size.

"My friend, this creature..." said Aragorn.

"I thought it was strange when I saw the mayor grow those 'legs,'" Benetnasch replied. "Even if that UBM could use its powers from within the Orb, it couldn't have possibly gotten its egg-laying organs outside to infest the mayor like that. It makes sense now. The maggots weren't born..."

"...but transformed," Aragorn finished the sentence. "So it used a skill to turn the body of that lowlife into maggots."

"...That is probably how it made him healthy too," Benetnasch added. "I guess maggot therapy exists in real life, but this is just..."

Disgusting, he finished in his head.

That judgment wasn't just based on its appearance or nature — it was the fact that it trapped souls.

The transformed cells continued to live as maggots, and as living creatures, they bound the souls they had once possessed as human beings to them. Forced into such a form, these once-human souls and minds would eventually become those of maggots.

Benetnasch had already noticed such changes begin to take root in the mayor when he'd met him at the entrance. Merging with De Vermis had only accelerated the process, and that was exactly why Benetnasch called it "really bad."

The souls trapped within were wailing, lamenting the fact that they had been made inhuman and could no longer die as people.

"...Deadly Explosion." Benetnasch unleashed a spell. With everyone in the palace now dead, he didn't have to worry about killing anyone, so he decided to use the High Necromancer's ultimate job skill on the immense amounts of grudge accumulated by the mayor's deeds.

The heart of the explosion was the basement, where the grudge was densest, and the fires produced easily consumed all of the mansion's rubble. The blast even tore out the trees in the garden, sending a giant pillar of flame into the sky.

The firepower of this attack matched that of the Baolongba once used by Master Jiangshi, Xunyu.

"My friend..."

"...I'm seeing it myself. No need to say anything."

Even the immense flames of the Deadly Explosion couldn't burn up De

Vermis.

The spell would've surely scorched even Pure-Dragons with high fire resistances, but the mass of maggots came out of it unharmed.

Great amounts of its body were left Charred, but the blackened bits quickly became white again as they were replaced by new, healthy maggots.

This was what made De Vermis's Reinvigorating Rebirth so terrifying.

What this power did was replace damaged cells with maggots — its fragments — which made it possible for De Vermis to fully heal itself by simply replacing its *own* damaged cells with writhing new growth.

"UBMs are always such unreasonable foes..." said Benetnasch.

"Truly," Aragorn agreed.

"...You should know that you weren't any better."

Though the Charred bits were quickly healed, the Deadly Explosion had actually *completely blown away* a portion of De Vermis's total size, cells and all, which manifested as damage dealt to it.

However, that hadn't accounted for even a tenth of its total HP.

"I do not suppose you can use that again?" Aragorn asked.

"Nope. That blew away all of the grudge around the mansion," Benetnasch replied. Deadly Explosion was a spell that transformed grudge into firepower, making it a one-time spell that could only be used on large accumulations of grudge.

If he'd carried around Crystals of Resentment like Gouz-Maise the Lich, that would have been a different story, but those items were directly opposed to Benetnasch's goals. Obviously, he would never carry any.

"The only way to defeat it is to destroy it utterly, with not a trace left," said Aragorn. "What a menacing creature. It must be near-Mythical."

"An upper-Ancient-Legendary-tier, then..." said Benetnasch. "Wouldn't that make it stronger than you, though?"

"I am confident I was a match for it in sheer status, though compatibility is so heavily against me that I could never defeat it," Aragorn concluded, after spending a moment analyzing his own powers compared to those of his opponents.

"...Well, slicing probably wouldn't do much to it," Benetnasch agreed.

While they were having this exchange, Masters from all over the city were starting to gather, likely to investigate the source of the flame pillar.

Upon seeing the words "The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis" over the large maggot's head, they all recognized it as a UBM and mobilized to destroy it.

Some were shocked by Aragorn's appearance and prepared to fight him as well, but they quickly realized he was a Master's undead minion and immediately shifted their attention back to De Vermis.

"Hmm... For a city of such a scale, few enough Masters have gathered here," Aragorn observed.

"Based on what Persephone told me, the Murder Princess caused some trouble at the bazaar... I imagine that many got the death penalty trying to deal with her."

"The girl who shares a clan with that tomb raider? Well, I cannot imagine any ordinary Master being a match for her."

"...I hope she isn't as fearsome as Rascal, at least." While their conversation continued, more and more Masters gathered and focused their fire on De Vermis. The UBM had no proper defenses or resistances, so all the spells, slashes, and debuffs hit it with full effect...only for it to recover from them moments later.

Any part burnt by a spell was fixed in the same way as the parts of its body Charred by the Deadly Explosion.

The weapon attacks only briefly parted the wriggling mass, and any individual maggots that were severed were quickly regenerated.

And then, the maggots afflicted by the debuffs were instantly replaced by new, healthy ones.

No matter what was done to it, De Vermis instantly regenerated itself back to a state of perfect health.

Those with Reveal would notice one other thing — the UBM's SP did not decrease no matter how many times it restored itself.

This was the second thing that made Reinvigorating Rebirth so fearsome.

It was a skill that not only didn't cost SP — it continuously *increased* its SP reserves.

De Vermis could heal itself countless times and never feel fatigued because of it.

In fact, the fatigue could actually worsen the "cells," causing Reinvigorating Rebirth to replace them yet again.

The skill kept De Vermis in good health *forever, no matter what*.

Its lack of defenses or resistances was not really a problem for it — any damaged parts would simply be replaced.

“Its HP is measured by volume, like that of a slime. And it can regenerate...no...*rebirth* itself without limit,” said Aragorn.

“That reminds me of what Persephone said about the Murder Princess,” said Benetnasch. “Apparently, she can revive herself over and over again... She should’ve been here to fight De Vermis.”

“...That would no doubt have been a sight most hellish.” As De Vermis healed all and any wounds inflicted upon it, unrest spread among the Masters.

Some had actually used ults that matched or even surpassed Deadly Explosion, but the UBM had recovered even from those.

And once it was done weathering all of the attacks, De Vermis went on the offensive.

It held the palms of its six arms towards its surroundings.

“Initiating parallel offensive magic. Firing,” it said, releasing countless offensive spells.

Lightning, fireballs, ice lances, wind-blades, earth spears, and light rays rained down on the surrounding Masters.

They were all spells known by the owners of the bodies that now composed De Vermis. Since most of them had been slaves and vagrants, this magic was obviously very basic. Their power was minimal individually, and though the UBM could release them as a barrage, they merely scratched the veteran Masters here.

But that wasn’t a problem, *for a scratch was all that it needed*.

“Heh! That barely qualifies as damage!”

“Looks like this UBM’s hard focused on health and regeneration. It doesn’t look any weaker than before, but if we keep going— hm...?”

The Masters fighting De Vermis suddenly realized that something wasn’t right.

Parts of their bodies were itchy, as though something small was crawling on their skin.

They looked at the source of that sensation — the minimal damage done by the creature’s spells — *and saw countless wriggling maggots*.

“A-AHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

The Masters’ screams resounded throughout the area. Who could blame them? This was an event that defied logic.

The crawling maggots used their tiny mouths to bite into their flesh, which then turned into more maggots.

"You little...! Damn it! I'll smash you all!"

Some crushed the maggots crawling over them, while others killed them with fire, but the crushed or burned maggots were quickly reborn into healthy ones.

Even worse, the wounds they inflicted upon themselves in the process only became more maggots.

This was the third factor that made Reinvigorating Rebirth so fearsome, and it was no doubt the most terrible thing about it.

It allowed *any wounds* within a radius of three hundred metels to be turned into maggots.

The Masters present screamed in disgust and fear at the sight.

Even the falls and crashes caused by the panic created minor wounds that quickly became sources of even more maggots.

"Fresh maggots out of its own wounds as well as out of the wounds of others. Its volume cannot be reduced by harming it, yet it can turn its opponents into itself," Aragorn noted.

The Masters were unable to fight it any longer.

Even through the pain they were experiencing, they could still feel the maggots crawling all over them, slowly conquering more and more territory in their bodies. A single wound was enough for Reinvigorating Rebirth to create a swarm that would encroach over the body for as long as De Vermis was within range.

Some Masters almost instantly used the suicide system, but no one could blame them for that.

"It is best for you to avoid any attacks at all, my friend," said Aragorn. "Use me as your shield and do not stop channeling your Necro Effect."

"I understand," said Benetnasch. Aragorn was tough, but he couldn't prevent any and all damage from reaching his necromancer. The wounds Benetnasch received were slowly being replaced by maggots, *all of which died a moment later*.

This was because of a buff available to the necromancer grouping, Necro Effect.

It created a weak contact-based instant kill effect which killed all maggots on Benetnasch as soon as they appeared.

Its flaw was that it only worked on the weakest of creatures — but fortunately, the maggots were exactly that.

“...By the way, are you affected by this? You’re all bones.” Benetnasch asked.

“I believe it only replaces parts that receive damage or are afflicted by disease. It seems it does nothing to flawless bone. I do not rot, after all.”

“...Then I guess zombies wouldn’t be very useful here. And the parts where you’re damaged *are* actually being replaced... I guess there is the possibility that it can replace any creature even if they have no flesh *or* bones.”

Benetnasch and Aragorn had been calmly conversing and analyzing De Vermis ever since it appeared.

Even when their surroundings were flooded with panicked screams, their minds remained as serene as the surface of a still lake.

This didn’t mean that either of them — or at least just Benetnasch — had superhuman mental fortitude though. *He was merely used to such hellish battles*.

“Anyway, we have enough grudge again, so...there you are,” Benetnasch said. Still using Soul Sight, he looked at the mass of maggots and found the soul of De Vermis’s main body.

He then used his skill as King of Tartarus to focus the grudge created by the trapped souls and the terrified Masters into a single spot...

“Deadly Explosion.”

...and incinerated the fly that was the original De Vermis.

With it gone, De Vermis froze in place...

“Did it work?”

“...Doesn’t look like it.”

...only to resume moving a moment later.

The fly was the main body, but not the core.

Even with that initial fly-body gone, De Vermis as it was now was *a gathering of maggots*. The only way to win against it was to destroy it completely.

“It doesn’t seem to *have* a physical core. The soul is still there,” said Benetnasch.

“So the only way to defeat it is to annihilate the entire mass outright,” said Aragorn. "I see we shall have to work our fingers to the bone."

"...Is that a joke?" Benetnasch asked, his face serious. "Anyway, I can see why Huanglong...*that* Draconic Emperor sealed it away. It seems easier to do that than to actually destroy it."

While saying that, he considered another possibility.

Or maybe he thought that it was better to seal it away in order to later release it in enemy lands as a bioweapon? I mean, if he could seal it, he probably could've overcome it a second time.

Ironically, it had been stolen by a third party and had now been released in a major city of a potential enemy country.

"To my knowledge, the only dragons that can conquer this foe are the king of all skydragons and the long-missing Extinction Dragon King...as well as the Gloria whose name I have heard spoken in rumors," said Aragorn.

All three were Mythical or higher in status and excelled at wide-scale extermination.

No Masters here had such power at their disposal...

"So, my friend...what shall we do?"

"...If burning it all away is what it will take, then I will make it burn."

...but Benetnasch had a means to deliver what was necessary.

"For better or worse...I know some people who have enough firepower."

"...Them, eh?"

"Yes. Though I'll have to meet up with Persephone, make sure the area's evacuated, and get approval. Doing this won't be good for Cortana...but I guess that all actually depends on how the negotiations with her will go."

Benetnasch recalled the sky-blue Magingear he'd fought not too long ago, and it made him a bit uneasy. It was hard to imagine that Caldina would ignore this problem for long, however. They would likely accept Benetnasch's help simply because he could take care of it faster than anyone else.

"Something needs to keep the UBM occupied during the evacuations and preparations."

"I will gladly take the role...is what I would *like* to say, but separated from you, Necro Effect would expire, exposing me to the possibility of becoming sustenance for the maggots."

"Yeah. That's why whatever's buying us time...must be *something that* *cannot be damaged*," Benetnasch said as he took hold of something under his clothes. "The only one we can count on...is him."

"Good grief...so you will end up using it regardless." This was the thing he'd almost used while fighting AR-I-CA — a strange pendant that looked like the lower half of a gargoyle.

"Since the last time we used it, I've taken every chance I had to pour MP into it. Now it has 6,000,000...which should be enough to keep it active for at least half an hour."

"...As expensive as ever, that one."

"He's worth the price, though, and there are some things only he can do, so..."

Benetnasch held the pendant and raised it in front of him.

Then, he called out, "Awaken, Standing and Indomitable: Greatest Bottom!"

Light enveloped the accessory and...

◇◆

As De Vermis attacked the Masters and turned them into maggots using Reinvigorating Rebirth, it thought that things were proceeding smoothly.

Even now, the UBM was swiftly growing in overall volume.

This was done through the same Reinvigorating Rebirth skill. It simply transferred any of its fragments that left its range back to the main mass. Because of this, even if the injured Masters who were being consumed by maggots managed to escape, the fragments created from their bodies would always return to De Vermis.

From a purely animalistic perspective, the right thing to do might've been to let the Masters run with the maggots to spread itself far and wide and expand its territory.

However, that wasn't what De Vermis thought was the best course of action. Its optimal scenario was one where it turned more and more creatures into fragments, so that they lived forever in De Vermis's collective existence. In this UBM's mind, that was an act of goodwill...even if other creatures saw it as a violation of their very being.

Since fragments that left the effective range of Reinvigorating Rebirth couldn't be replaced and would die if they were further harmed, De Vermis found it only natural to retrieve them.

However, it would be a mistake to think mankind ought to be thankful for its non-expansionist inclinations.

After all, as it grew, *so did the range of Reinvigorating Rebirth*.

The size of the body it originally planned to have was three hundred metels, but if it grew beyond that, the effective range would grow as well. It grew slowly, but if it was able to do so unimpeded, there was no telling how vast De Vermis could become.

Perhaps it could one day cover an entire country.

“Not enough...” De Vermis said as it looked around for more food to turn into maggots.

The fear of the writhing monstrosities and the futility of fighting this foe had caused most of the nearby Masters to flee, and the UBM did not appreciate that.

It did not enjoy having fewer creatures to share its life with.

That was why what it saw next made it immensely happy.

“This is...”

It was a gigantic silhouette.

De Vermis could sense and understand that the thing before it was a powerful being, but at the same time, it was glad that it would be able to corrupt something so large. That would no doubt help it grow, after all.

Following those thoughts, De Vermis attacked it with magic — a focused onslaught of countless offensive spells.

It was hard to withstand the barrage unharmed, and even the slightest scratch would be enough for Reinvigorating Rebirth to start replacing the injury with maggots.

No one could escape it, no matter how strong they were.

“Hm...?”

That was why De Vermis was puzzled. Despite the many attacks it had just unleashed, it couldn’t feel the ability activating on its target.

That could only mean one thing — the target wasn’t even scratched.

“...Who are you?” it asked.

There was no response.

There *couldn’t be* a response, because it had no mouth.

No eyes, no ears, or even a head.

No arms, no torso, and no heart.

It was nothing but two legs and a tail, standing tall before De Vermis.

The silhouette was a lower half, shining in a way similar to, but unlike, silver.

It was the gigantic, fifty-metel-tall bottom half of a gargoyle.

A loud hum resounded throughout the area. It wasn’t caused by a mouth of any kind, but by the massive tail it was swinging.

The tail was vibrating at immense speeds, stirring the air around it.

Despite not having eyes, it flawlessly pulverized the six arms extended towards it with a single swing of its tail.

Those six arms were instantly reduced to bits smaller than grains of sand. This was achieved by the gargoyle’s Hyper Vibration offensive-defense skill, which thoroughly destroyed anything it touched.

De Vermis focused and quickly regrew its six arms before resuming its offensive magic barrage. However, once again, none of the spells did any damage to the gargoyle. The countless magic attacks were negated by a skill which made it immune to offensive magic.

Realizing that, De Vermis then tried to attack the legs, which weren’t vibrating like the tail.

But no matter how hard it tried, all the damage its arms might’ve done was negated by the gargoyle’s immense defense and damage-decreasing skills.

The creature rendered all of its attacks impotent.

“Just...what is this?” De Vermis asked.

The bottom half of the gargoyle statue had no mouth with which to respond. However, words weren’t needed for anyone who witnessed it to know its power.

A body made of a Superior Metal that surpassed even the Mythical Hihi’irokane.

An offensive-defense skill that easily pulverized the attacks of an Ancient Legendary.

And finally, an overwhelming aura that surpassed the one possessed by De Vermis itself.

This was the creature summoned by the Superior MVP reward once acquired by King of Tartarus, Benetnasch.

This was the creature only barely defeated by the combined efforts of the King of Beasts and King of Tartarus.

This was the strongest gargoyle in *Infinite Dendrogram*...and the first SUBM. The “Lone Yet Unmatched, Greatest One.”

Or, at least, one *half* of it.

Prologue: Another First Choice

March, 2044, Benetnasch

A girl had starved to death right before my eyes.

My memory of the events that followed that was hazy.

I remembered screaming at the top of my lungs, then frantically logging off and rushing into my bed, my blanket covering me like the overwhelming regret I felt.

Many questions raged in my mind as I lay there. Why did I pick Caldina? Why did I choose realistic visuals? Why did I walk down that street at all? Why...why did I ever pick up *Infinite Dendrogram*?

It was supposed to be a game, nothing more. A realistic game, but a game nonetheless.

But to me, it was just...*too* real.

I'd been utterly convinced I'd stepped into a desert city, despite never having been to any place like that in my life.

...And it had made me feel that I'd actually witnessed a child starve.

The moment of her death came back to me every time I closed my eyes.

"Why...? Why did that...?" I couldn't wipe away that memory no matter how hard I tried.

It was the first time I had ever seen such a cruel death. The shock and regret I felt stuck to me like tar.

I relived the moment in my mind over and over. I even felt the sensation of that bit of food she'd so desperately wanted before dying as it slipped from my fingers.

"If only I could...at least..." If I had been able to give her that snack, perhaps my regret wouldn't have been so deep.

But that was no longer a possibility.

I couldn't undo the past.

The dead girl couldn't come back to life.

Her untimely, unjust end haunted my memory.

"It's a game...just a game...but..." A character in a video game had died

— that was all there was to it.

But my heart just *couldn't let it end at that*.

I continued to cry and wallow in regret for hours.

But then, I thought of one thing more.

"...A funeral...for her."

I couldn't change the fact that the girl was dead, but I found hope in the idea that I could ease my regret if I set some flowers on her grave and said a prayer for her.

"I should...prepare some snacks too..." With my hands still shaking, I picked up *Infinite Dendrogram's* headset and logged in once again.

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The time that had passed in the game was three times what had passed in real time.

It was currently the dead of night, and since there weren't as many lights here as there were in real life, the city was dark. I hadn't logged out far from the alley where I'd found the girl, so I was able to return to it in no time.

"She's not here... Well, of course she isn't."

The girl was nowhere to be seen. I could only guess that she had been taken and buried by her family, or the church if she had no relatives.

In that case, I had to at least put some snacks on her grave and give her a prayer.

To find out where she was buried, I spoke to the nearby patrolman.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Hm? What is it, Mr. Master?" he asked.

"Umm, I would like to know where to find the grave of the child who was here."

"Child? Whose child?"

"It was a girl who died in that alley over there..."

"...Oh. Orphans who die in the streets are buried on the outskirts of the city, to the north."

"Th-Thank you!" I expressed my gratitude before rushing off.

"But it's best not to go ther—"

I couldn't fully hear the voice behind me.

I went to the north of the city and, eventually, found the location. It was over ten minutes by foot away from the gate.

There, out in the sands, stood several large areas enclosed with pitiful fences.

They looked like the fences around graveyards, but these areas were anything but.

There were no gravestones, or even graves, for that matter.

There was *nothing but piles of corpses*.

Lying atop the dry sands, there were parched and mummified corpses, skeletal corpses whose flesh had been consumed by insects, and fresher ones that were still being feasted upon — all thrown together to create an imposing mountain of death.

“...Egh...” Before I knew it, I was vomiting.

The fear I felt and my confusion at how such a thing could be allowed to exist overwhelmed my mind like a raging torrent.

“...Huh?”

And then I noticed a sign next to the entrance.

It said “Homeless Body Disposal.” Below that, there was an explanation:

“Because there are no places in Cortana where the homeless who are unable to pay taxes may be buried, and because there are no funds to cover the fuel expenses of cremation, they are to be left here so that the elements and/or the local wildlife may see to them.

—Mayor of Cortana, Douglas Coin”

Because of the nearby save point and oasis, Cortana was a flourishing city in spite of its barren surroundings. However, its area was limited, and unlike large cities in the other countries, it couldn’t expand much beyond its current size.

Because of this, even burial space was in short supply, and with Cortana being the city that exemplified Caldina’s ideal of “money makes the world go around,” money was required to procure a grave plot. Street urchins couldn’t possibly pay the fees, so they were all thrown outside the city, as though the expenses of even burying them in the sand were too great for the authorities.

I spent a good while standing before the “graves”...the *corpse-piles*, saying not a word. I could read the explanation on the sign just fine. The auto-translation feature made it easy.

However, I couldn’t *understand* it, no matter how hard I tried.

My mind grasped the meaning, but my heart could not.

There was reasoning behind these actions, but it still didn’t make sense to me that someone would actually act like this. My society in the real world would give a proper burial to even the most unfortunate.

This felt *less* realistic than anything I’d experienced since I came to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“...Ah.”

I gasped as I finally saw it.

At the top of the pile, on a corpse that was mostly bone, there were remains that still had skin and hair on them — and the body of the girl that had died right before my eyes.

I froze in place. I’d come here to give her a prayer alongside an offering of flowers or snacks.

But now, I couldn’t even do that much.

Falling to my knees, I looked away from her.

“Huh...?” And then, my vision stopped on a different sign.

It said, “Anyone is free to take the corpses, but bringing people back to life using Necromancy is forbidden within the city walls.”

The first half of the sentence shocked me. The idea that anyone could just take the corpses, though, felt apt for this inhumane place. Considering it would make space for more corpses, you could even call it “rational.”

That aside, though...

“Necro...mancy? Bringing people back to life?”

Those words implied that it was possible for dead people to live again.

Wait...perhaps it *was* possible? A world with magic may have resurrection spells, after all.

“A-Ahhh...” But bringing dead people back using magic was immoral. At the very least, it would stand against the faith I’d followed until now.

But if...if it was something I could do...

If it was possible...

“And if it...made this regret go away...”

...Then morality be damned. Just let me do it!

The moment that thought crossed my mind, my left hand began glowing purple...

"Very well. Then that shall be my nature."

...and an unfamiliar girl appeared at my side.

"...Huh?"

The best word to describe her was "purple." She had purple hair and wore a purple gown in the style of ancient Greece.

Her eyes, though, were a different color — a deep, striking black.

"Who...are you?"

"My name is Persephone. I was born of your flesh, soul, and the lamentation of your heart. I am your Embryo — a Type Maiden-Castle/Territory."

"Perse...phone?"

"I am pleased to meet you, my Master," said the girl with a ladylike bow. She shared a name with the queen of the underworld and was, apparently, my Embryo.

"So, will you use my power this very instant?" she asked.

"Power...?"

"Mmhmm. I am able to bring this girl back to life."

"...REALLY?!" I exclaimed. I'd grabbed hold of her shoulders before I even realized it.

"Though I am but a hatchling in my first form," she went on. "To resurrect someone, I need their fresh body, and the time they will be alive is brief."

"What do you mean...?"

"I can bring her back...for a mere three minutes."

I needed a while to process those words.

"Three...minutes." That was barely any time at all. It barely compared to the amount of time the mythological Persephone had offered Orpheus when he descended into the underworld to fetch his wife back to the land of the living.

It was so little time, in fact, that rather than bringing her back only to die again minutes later, it was perhaps better to just leave her as she was now.

But...three minutes...

That was enough to...

"I..." The bag of snacks I'd been holding made a rustling sound as it shifted in my hand.

And then, I made my choice.

Chapter Eight: The Tartarean Possibility

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Drawn by the pillar of fire, I'd arrived at the mayor's mansion to witness a battle between two giant beings.

The pale maggot creature used its six arms to cast spells, while the countless maggots composing its body tried to bite into its opponent.

However, the silvery creature that looked like only the bottom half of something...was completely unaffected.

It used its tail to pulverize the maggot monster, and the creature's attacks didn't do any damage to it at all.

However, the same could be said about the writhing mass it was fighting — it instantly recovered from any and all damage done to it.

An amalgamation of maggots that negated all wounds, and a leg-and-tail creature that didn't receive wounds in the first place. They both tried to defeat each other, but neither of them could do anything to hurt the other.

I felt like I was watching a scene from that mythological afterlife where battle never ended.

And, of course, it reminded me of Emily.

"...Cyco, what's the number on them?" I asked.

"Zero for both. The legs are a summon, while the maggot...doesn't kill anyone."

...So La Porte de l'Enfer wouldn't work on either of them, I thought.

"Hmm... So Master Dearest summoned Greatest. Well, that is no doubt the optimal choice to buy time against the creature," said Persephone, shifting my attention away from the eternal battle.

"You know them?" I asked.

"Yes. The lower half is...well, to be concise, a monster Master Dearest summoned using an MVP reward. Its name is 'Greatest Bottom.'"

"So that's KoT's..."

An MVP special reward could only have come from a UBM. With the text above the maggot creature saying "The Rebirthing Infestation, De

Vermis” in UBM nomenclature, one could say that this was truly a battle between UBMs.

“He seldom uses it, however,” Persephone continued. “It is quite costly, after all. Master Dearest is a caster Superior Job and he charges the MVP reward whenever he finds the time — but even with that, it cannot fight for long. And it is not even as powerful as the original.”

“The original?”

“As you can see, it is nothing but a lower half. Were it whole, it would be able to defeat this De Vermis creature, but with the upper half *taken away*, Greatest Bottom is only legs and a tail with defensive skills. It could never be defeated, but it could never defeat this foe, so this would no doubt continue without end. No... Seeing as it would not last long, we are at a disadvantage.”

I assumed that she was simply saying that it was weaker than it had been as a UBM. But...what did she mean by the upper half being “taken away?” It was like she was implying that the upper half was actually owned by someone else now.

But UBMs who split MVP rewards were...

“Persephone...!”

My thought was cut short by the voice reaching my ears. I turned towards its source and saw a skeletal dragon rushing forward with a thin man enclosed inside its ribcage.

The skeletal dragon was unfamiliar, but I knew the man. It was the same person I’d seen several times back at the Triangle of Wisdom’s HQ — King of Tartarus, Benetnasch.

“Oh, Master Dearest,” said Persephone.

“So this is where you were,” said KoT. “And you are...the Triangle of Wisdom’s...?”

Apparently, he remembered me as well.

“Hugo Lesseps,” I said. “I am with Teach— I mean Ace, AR-I-CA. I know about the Orbs and your negotiations with her.”

“I see...”

“What is that maggot creature?” I asked.

“...To be brief, this is the result of the mayor’s Orb breaking and the UBM within being released.”

“Huh?!”

“By the way, since you’re with her, I don’t suppose you would have any means of contacting her? There is something I must tell her.”

“J-Just a moment,” I said before opening up White Rose’s cockpit, turning on the comms, and connecting to Teach’s Blue Opera.

The King of Tartarus then explained the situation to her.

“...And now it’s gradually growing in size. Ordinary attacks are ineffective; the only way to defeat it is to completely incinerate the entire surrounding area.”

“...You can’t be serious,” Teach said from the other side of the comms unit, her voice like a groan. “I just finished disposin’ of the toxic stuff and I’m headin’ back and...yep, I see it. Boy, is that gross. And then there’s the thing that’s just legs and tail... Hey, KoT, is that...?”

“No comment.”

“Oh, okay then... Here goes nothin’.”

A moment later, a melodic engine sound rang out and a pale blue combat unit sped through the evening sky above.

Blue Opera then fired shells at De Vermis that crackled with lightning, but the monster simply ignored them, repairing the damage just moments later.

“Well, this is hopeless,” Teach said. “I can’t win against these types.”

“...Aren’t you a little quick to give up?” I asked.

“Hey, I was chosen for the Orb-gatherin’ precisely *because* my firepower isn’t too over the top! Big guys who regenerate are a job for Fatoum, Albert, the money-brain, or the bitch!”

...Who were those latter two? I wondered.

“Would they make it in time if I called them now...? They’re either at the capital or on the borders to other countries...and they’re slow as hell... Ugh! Losin’ Cortana would be real bad even for Caldina!”

This city was the starting point for Caldina’s Masters. If it was destroyed, the country would basically lose its entrance.

Not many Masters would want to start the game in a ruined city, after all.

Even ignoring all of that, Cortana was the heart of Caldina’s commerce. Losing it would be a major blow to the country’s economy.

“Ace, I have a proposition,” said Benetnasch.

“I’m listenin’.”

"If you accept three conditions, I will defeat this UBM."

"...Hmm?" Teach thought for a moment. "I see. So you *have* someone who can deal with this?"

"...Oh, you were aware of my ultimate, huh?"

"So name the conditions."

Teach didn't seem to have any doubts that KoT could do what he said.

"The first condition concerns the UBM's defeat itself. My method will make it impossible to give you the Orb if I didn't need it myself, as we agreed previously."

"Fine by me. Next."

"Second...we agreed that you would do me a favor when I gave you the Orb. I want it done regardless."

"I'm gonna need the details."

"If you find any items or information relating to grudge disposal or 'healthy revival' of the dead, I want to know about it."

"You're not gonna ask me to actually *give* you the items or the info?"

"No."

"Hmm...? Well, that's fine too. What's the last condition?"

"That would be..." Benetnasch said before pausing for a moment, as though hesitating to actually speak it out loud. "Permission to annihilate anything within a six hundred metel radius of De Vermis, part of Cortana included."

...I could see why he'd hesitated. That was an outrageous request.

"Of course...I would only do it after an evacuation," he continued. "My summon is buying the necessary time, so it should be doable. If possible, I would like you to help with it as well."

"I see... 'Annihilate,' though...really? Whatever you're plannin' to use has gotta be somethin'."

"...So, do I have your permission?"

"One moment," Teach said, and then I heard some rustling at the other side of the comms. "Ah. Hello, Madam— I mean, President. Yes, it's me, AR-I-CA. There is a problem with the Orb retrieval and... Huh? You already know everything? Just how much do you see? Are you actually Laplace's demon or something? It's in your name, so..."

I could tell that she was talking over comms with someone else.

"Okay then. Hey, Benny."

...Benny? That seemed like a weird thing to call him, but KoT didn't seem to mind at all.

"Yes?" he said.

"Just to check, is the mayor dead?" Teach asked.

"...He was consumed by De Vermis."

"All right, we'll just treat him as dead, then."

...I felt like I just heard a pretty grim exchange.

"Here's the results. You're good for the third condition. With the mayor dead, Prez used her emergency authority to give you permission. Her exact words were 'I will not hold you liable for any fatalities or property damages. Please thoroughly eliminate the threat of De Vermis from Caldina.'"

"...Understood."

...Fatalities or property damages, huh?

"Teach, I..."

"So, Yu, let's check the area around that thing for anyone who didn't get away yet!" Teach began to speak as though she knew what I was gonna say.

"...Yes!"

"So yeah, we'll be doin' that, but when are you gonna do your thing, Benny?"

"...I can keep up the summon for at most fifteen minutes and a half more, so... I'll use it after exactly fifteen minutes have passed."

"All right! Let's go, Yu!"

"Okay!" I moved White Rose — with its armor stored away to make it lighter — to go around and search for people in order to aid the evacuation.

...Though, I couldn't help but wonder what Benetnasch had that could defeat that UBM.

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City of Commerce, Cortana

After seeing off the two Magingears, Benetnasch rushed into the six hundred metel radius, deeply lost in thought.

"You seem to be shocked that the 'new life eternal' is not what you hoped it would be," his Embryo spoke to him.

"...Persephone."

Aragorn was busy watching for anyone who could interfere with the use of the skill, so Benetnasch and his Embryo were the only ones talking.

"That is why I told you not to rely on those accursed Orbs. If mere UBMs can hold the miracle you seek, things would have taken a turn for the better far earlier. Or perhaps a turn *for the worse*."

Benetnasch listened to her admonishment before slowly turning to her and asking, "Did you...know what De Vermis actually was?"

"Of course I did. *I'd heard about it*, after all. I knew full well that UBM was the sort of thing you hate the most — that which changes the meaning of death."

While talking to Hugo, Persephone had said, "That makes this city a true crucible of death. One who *transcends* death, one who *mass-produces* death, one who *changes the meaning* of death... Certainly this is not the result of deliberate meddling, but it is no doubt interesting."

"One who transcends death" referred to Benetnasch and Persephone.

"One who mass-produces death" was obviously The Murder Princess, Emily. Though if Persephone had truly understood her power, she might've said that she transcended death, as well.

And the "one who changes the meaning of death" was De Vermis. It transformed humans into maggots, even claiming their very souls. The way in which it ended people's lives *as humans* while still keeping them alive no doubt fit Persephone's description.

However, it was something she could only say if she had known of De Vermis's power.

But back then, not even the mayor — the owner of the Orb — knew about this.

"Why—?"

"Don't ask me why I did not tell you, Master Dearest. You would have wanted to confirm it yourself even if I did. You never stop grasping at straws, after all."

Benetnasch had no response. Her words were a knife sharpened by truth, and they cut deep into his heart.

"I will say the same thing I have said a thousand times — you are drowning, dragged down by countless weights. You could easily swim free if you cut them off, but you cannot, so you suffer without end."

"Even so, I..."

“I know full well. I was born from you, after all. But as the first weight you must cut off, I must keep saying this over and over,” Persephone said before resting her forehead on Benetnasch’s back. “What you wish to accomplish is a true miracle. Even if I went beyond the seventh form, there is no guarantee what you desire will ever be possible.”

“I know...”

“I wish for you to be happy. I wish for you to forget me, this world...everything that gives you all this pain and suffering...and return to a proper life on the other side.”

Silence.

“But of course, you would not do that...would you?”

“...No,” Benetnasch said before turning around and laying a hand on Persephone’s shoulder. “I won’t deny that I’m hurting and suffering... I know that this way of life restricts me.”

Persephone’s expression became cloudy for a moment.

“But...I freely chose...to be bound in this way.”

“Master Dearest...”

“I can’t forget anything I’ve seen, and there’s no way I can give up now. As long as I am me...I will keep taking the liberty to choose this way of life.”

Those words came out with a certain resolve. It was a resolve forged years ago — a will that had faded and been damaged since then, but had never once broken.

Persephone knew the significance of this better than anyone else. The words made tears well up in her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away.

“I see. In that case, there is only one thing for me to do. As the one who carries your wish, I will give my all,” she said as she grasped the hand over her shoulder.

“...Thank you.”

“For now, we must annihilate De Vermis,” Persephone said as she let go of Benetnasch’s hand and turned to face the UBM. “It is time. Master Dearest, the ultimate skill. Queen of the Afterlife, Persephone, stands by her dearest King of Tartarus, Benetnasch, to give her all to destroy this living hell.”

“...Please do, Persephone.”

Persephone called out to him, and Benetnasch responded with an awkward smile.

He then reached into his inventory and took out an item — a Legendary MVP special reward — before giving it to her.

With the item in her hands, Persephone nodded. “This should suffice. It will not be long...but long enough for the single attack we need.”

At those words, she raised the special reward upwards.

“Now...Master Dearest! I will build the gate!”

“...Yeah. I’m counting on you!” And so, Persephone...

“Here and now, I devote this treasure of a creature so many dread...”

...began to sing.

“This will become the gate to the realm of the dead.” Her voice was her own, but it seemed to echo as though many unseen voices were singing along with her. As they resonated, the MVP reward in her hands transformed into bits of light... It lost its Resources and vanished.

“It will be a door to the chamber of repose within me.”

The moment the reward dissolved into its Resources, a giant gate appeared before Persephone.

“Here these souls will make their triumphant returns.”

“Glory consumed by the past like a parchment burns.”

The form the gate took on was a purple triumphal arch. Though it did not resemble the great arch in real-world Paris, its splendor made it an apt comparison.

“Be that as it may, they shall cross through time,
And once again wield what they had in their prime.”

As Persephone’s song continued, a film of light appeared within the gate. Its colors were innumerable, and it soon covered the entire inner side of the structure.

“...It is prepared,” said Persephone, seemingly exhausted.

“Yeah...” Benetnasch replied as he put his hands on her shoulders to support her. “...Fourteen minutes and a half.” He whispered the time that had passed since he’d told Hugo and AR-I-CA of the time limit.

Thirty seconds left. As far as Benetnasch could see, with the exception of those trapped by De Vermis, there were no living souls in the immediate surroundings.

And so, the time came. Benetnasch canceled the Greatest Bottom summon, making it vanish and become bits of light right before De Vermis’s eyes.

“Hm...?” De Vermis was confused by a powerful enemy just disappearing suddenly, but didn’t think too much of it. The only thing that mattered to it was increasing the number of its fragments. With all living creatures in the area gone, it had to find new bodies it could transform into itself.

However...

“...What is that?” Almost before De Vermis realized it, a strange purple gate appeared far outside of its skill’s range. Busy with Greatest Bottom, it hadn’t noticed the structure being built, but it was sure that it hadn’t been there before.

However, when it saw the film of light appear...

"Ah..."

...De Vermis became afraid of something.

That was a feeling it shouldn't have possessed.

It felt as thought it was staring into an abyss — a vast nothingness directly opposed to the eternal life it desired.

Instinctually feeling that it had to destroy the gate, De Vermis rushed forward.

However, it was too late, for the preparations were already done.

"Gate to the Afterlife — Persephone..."

Despite still being far away, De Vermis felt like it could hear those words clearly — Benetnasch activating his Embryo's ultimate skill.

A moment later, the gate's light intensified. It began to shed a radiance that seemed otherworldly.

King of Tartarus, Benetnasch and Queen of the Afterlife, Persephone.

Those who knew their power might call them either "Indestructible" or "Witching Hour."

"Indestructible" because he had transcended ultimate destruction — what he had wouldn't remain even if the flesh decayed away — and "Witching Hour" because it referred to a time when you could encounter *something you should have never been able to encounter*.

Once they had used their ultimate skill, those around them would encounter something truly impossible — something that surpassed the demise of flesh and the ravages of time.

The shining arch of triumph...

"Amber Abyss Squadron!"

...allowed an amber metal dragon to fly once again.

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About Persephone

In Greek mythology, Persephone was the wife of Hades, the king of the underworld.

The most famous tale about her concerned her marriage to Hades — said to be the beginning of the four seasons — but the second most famous was that of Orpheus the musician.

Orpheus traveled to the realm of the dead to bring back his deceased wife. He played an indescribably beautiful song on his lyre that charmed all the residents of the underworld and eventually reached Hades and Persephone.

His music made Persephone weep, and she begged Hades to help Orpheus.

The singer was then allowed to take his wife back to the realm of the living, but only if he did not turn back to look at her the entire way out. If he did, she would have to stay in the realm of the dead.

In the tale, Orpheus looked back right as he reached the edge to the realm of the living, sending his wife back to the realm of the dead.

His dead wife returned to life for a single moment, only to be sent back, and that was where the story usually ended.

Having been based on a character from this myth, Persephone had an ultimate skill that worked in a similar way.

Queen of the Afterlife, Persephone was a Type Maiden-Castle/Rule.

Her ultimate, Gate to the Afterlife — Persephone, was a skill that momentarily brought the dead back to life.

It used Resources to create a gate for the dead to pass through, then brought the souls resting within Persephone back as they had been in their prime.

Persephone was able to bring the dead back to life using only their soul — something that normally could only be accomplished by the Skydragon King, Drag-Heaven.

She summoned the dead at the peak of their living power — exactly as they had been during the best times of their life, even including their equipment. It could be the famed heroes of ancient times, entire parties of champions, or even powerful monstrosities of old. The total power of the summoned souls determined the Resources needed, but they would come back no matter what.

However, this wasn’t a power that gave full control over the dead.

Anyone Persephone brought back wasn’t bound in any way, and they could use their resurrected bodies as they wished. They could be at odds with Benetnasch and perhaps even attack him.

That was why he connected with all the departed souls he summoned —

for if they didn’t share Benetnasch’s will, they would not assist him.

The ones summoned now were no different.

Benetnasch had helped these souls once, and they were now resting within Persephone, ready to share the necromancer’s will when they were needed.

And so they were called, here and now.

Neither he nor they wanted to see people be consumed by the living hell of De Vermis, so, having crossed a time of two millennia, they now flew through the skies of today.

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City of Commerce, Cortana

The purple gate shone, and a giant silhouette flew out from it — a mechanical dragon, covered in amber armor.

It was a weapon, operated by the four people inside.

The creature was in fact a Prism Dragon, and its name was “Amber Abyss” — the same superweapon of the pre-ancient civilization that had fought against the Incarnation of Armaments and vanished.

And now, Persephone’s power had brought it back, along with the soldiers who piloted it.

“Captain, we have exited the gate without issue. Analyzing the environment.”

“Keep an eye on the radar and fly towards the sky. Enter the Abyss Cannon firing sequence. You have a grasp of the situation, right? You better not fire it anywhere near the unevacuated areas!”

“Of course I won’t! Sure, it’s been two thousand years, but I haven’t forgotten how to use this!”

“Heh. You never change, sublieutenant.”

The revived dead were talking within the cockpit of the Amber Abyss. Since they had been kept within Persephone, they already had a full grasp of the situation here.

“Captain, the sublieutenant here sure seems fired up. I guess this is his chance to thank Mr. Benetnasch for confirming that his wife and kid survived and for looking into his descendants.”

“Th-There’s that, yes... But I’m also happy that I can fight for people again.”

“I understand...” said the captain as he looked down at the city and the disgusting creature that was De Vermis. “Our contract with King of Tartarus, Benetnasch says that we are to lend him our power when he fights monsters that endanger humans, the Incarnations, or the Extra-Continental Vessel. I believe this situation isn’t in conflict with that. Any objections?”

No one said anything in protest — their will was united.

“In that case...Amber Abyss Squadron, commence the mission!”

“Roger!” Amber Abyss suddenly stopped gaining altitude and stopped at one point in the sky.

Its metal head moved, targeting Cortana...specifically, the ruins of the mayor’s mansion.

“Prism Dragon No. 1, Amber Abyss, set the firing point.”

“Prepare to fire the Abyss Cannon. Pinpoint the radius of the attack. Fire at 20% energy.”

“Roger! Entering Abyss Cannon firing mode!”

The Prism Dragon opened its maw towards the surface.

Immense amounts of energy gathered in its mouth, but since it only needed a fraction of its total power, it was quickly ready to release.

“Energy at twenty percent...charging complete!”

“Abyss Cannon... FIRE!”

Thus, the compressed magical baryon acceleration cannon installed in its maw fired for the first time in two millennia.

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De Vermis couldn’t even begin to understand what the gate or the amber dragon were. However, it felt immense fear that drove it to desperately crawl away.

Alas, its running ended before it could even cover a few dozen metels.

De Vermis looked upwards and saw a giant orb of flame. Released by Amber Abyss, it warped the very air with its immense heat as it flew...and hit the ground close to De Vermis’s body.

“Hn...?!” The heat turned the air into plasma, evaporating the ground below and causing the UBM to let out a soundless scream. The maggots all over shrieked in pain, but without any air to carry their silent voices, no one could possibly hear them.

De Vermis had Reinvigorating Rebirth, but it wasn’t fast enough to replace the volume it was losing to this heat.

Its maggots were not just being burned, but obliterated without a trace.

Quickly losing parts of itself, De Vermis tried its hardest to survive.

The UBM pushed Reinvigorating Reincarnation to its absolute limit. It managed to endure by using the cell-to-maggot transformation it had used when the mayor lost his legs — continuous reincarnation that ignored the law of conservation of mass.

Using the skill caused immense pain, but it did not care about that. In fact, the pain of the skill was nothing compared to the pain of the fires burning it.

Loss of...whole... Calculate...healing... Must...bear...it... Despite losing immense amounts of volume, De Vermis didn’t give up on survival.

However, the next moment, the Abyss Cannon showed its true power.

The magic core within the orb of flame was released in a burst of heat.

Half of the magic released remotely activated a gravity spell. The rest of the magic became more heat, all of which was drawn downwards into the newly spawned epicenter of the gravity spell.

The result was a pit that trapped heat, and a gravity well that would not let the target escape.

Anything caught within would be trapped and thoroughly scorched.

This was the true power of one of the pre-ancient civilization’s strongest weapons — the Abyss Cannon.

Even greater shock overcame De Vermis. It beheld a meltdown leading straight into an abyss.

The UBM burned within the pit, sinking deeper into the ground with every passing second. The maggots that the orb of flame had missed *returned to De Vermis* while it sank several hundred metels into the ground.

The heat grew ever greater, burning the UBM with an intensity that soon surpassed the speed of its healing by a wide margin.

As all the maggots composing its body burned, De Vermis began to feel true fear.

I...I... Douglas... We... Eternal... A new life... ETERNAAAAAAAALLLL! Then came the final magic installed within the orb of flame — an immense explosion.

A few seconds later, a pillar of fire rose from the pit where the UBM was caught, scorching the last of the maggots.

Buried in a fiery grave, De Vermis's life eternal was burned away to nothing.

Prologue: Another Starting Point

March, 2044, Benetnasch

The girl's corpse lay before me.

But unlike my previous encounter with her, there was peace in her expression.

She'd been brought back. She seemed to have no memory of dying, so she was simply reaching for me just as she had before her first death.

This time, I was able to give her that snack.

She ate it as if it was the most delicious thing in the world.

Persephone noted that this had perhaps satisfied her one and only regret.

Crying, the girl ate up every scrap of food I gave her...only to die again three minutes later.

I...didn't know if I had done the right thing.

I'd brought her back solely to do away with our shared regret, as well as my own fear...only to let her die again.

Her last words were "I never thought I'd ever eat something so delicious. I'm so glad I could be here for this!"

Words that made it seem like she was born just to eat those simple snacks.

Words that made it seem like nothing in life had ever made her happier.

She left behind those words...and died again.

"In what world can you be all right with *a life like that*...?!" This cry escaped my lips as I looked at her tear-smeared, joyous face.

Was this really salvation?

"...Anyway."

Anyway, I would never forget what happened today.

And I would surely never log in to *Infinite Dendrogram* ever again.

"...Ah."

As I prepared to log out for good, Persephone opened her mouth to say something.

I turned around and saw her there with her hand meekly extended towards me, saying nothing more.

I didn't know what was on her mind. I knew barely anything about her. I only knew that she was my Embryo and that she had brought a girl back to life, if only for three minutes.

Perhaps it was because of her that I was able to get rid of these regrets. If so, then I ought to be grateful to her.

With that in mind, I prepared to log out...

"Hm...?"

...but then I remembered something I'd heard.

Embryos were things that evolved.

Right now, Persephone could only bring someone back for three minutes. She had just been born, after all.

But if...

"My Master?"

"...Persephone, I have a question for you," I said as I looked into her deep black eyes. "Will the time limit on the resurrection disappear if you evolve?"

"Ah...!"

Embryos evolved. Because of that, it seemed that she might be able to evolve past this limit.

"That...is a possibility."

"I see..." Upon hearing my response, Persephone grimaced.

What expression was I making? Was I laughing? Crying? Or showing regret for having asked such a thing at all?

It didn't matter to me.

All that mattered...was that there *was* a possibility.

"This world probably has tons of children who died like she did," I said, calling *Infinite Dendrogram* a "world" as though it was natural. "Probably a great many in this city alone...unfortunate urchins who die without even knowing what a helping hand looks like. Children who die without knowing even the smallest joys, like enjoying a snack."

I didn't know anything about this world. I couldn't have imagined that it would be filled with so much misfortune.

I found this world so unfair I couldn't stomach it.

"But...the girl looked happy. She felt saved in the end... That's what I want to believe."

“Mhm. Now you can proudly return to your world and...”

“*A single child,* out of all the unfortunate children here...” She was the only one who’d been saved.

But that wasn’t enough.

I wanted to turn all of this around.

“...What are you saying?” Persephone asked, her face full of fear.

“For now, it’s just three minutes.” I grabbed her shoulders and spoke of what could be possible for us. “But if you evolve and grow stronger, if your power grows beyond this...we may be able to save all the children who died just like her and give them a full second life.”

“You...!” The salvation of all unfortunate children who met untimely deaths — realistically thinking, it was impossible.

However, she had already done the impossible once.

Perhaps if I saved every child, this profound distress that made me want to bash my head against a wall would disappear? No — it *clearly* would.

“That is a miracle beyond the reach of mankind...! It is *far* too outrageous. There is no guarantee that it would be possible even if I became a Superior Embryo...or even something beyond that!”

“There is no guarantee...but it isn’t impossible.”

“Merely *trying* to achieve it is ludicrous! You should abandon this world and return to the other side!”

“I...can’t do that...” I’d learned too much.

I realized that this world had misfortunes that I couldn’t tolerate no matter what.

I would save the souls of dead children until I was satisfied.

Otherwise...the wound in my heart would never heal.

Therefore...this is the path I would walk.

“Let’s grow strong — you and me, together. If we keep growing stronger, we will eventually reach what we want. That’s what this world is about...right...?”

Silence. Persephone seemed to be thinking about something.

But then, she briefly closed her eyes and...

“...Very well.”

...nodded.

That made me very happy. With this...I wouldn’t have to give up.

“...Let’s keep going,” I said. “So that we may fulfill our desire...”

“...Indeed,” she said. “Let us pray that our hopes will one day come to fruition.”

And so, we made a promise to each other.

“We will bring back all unfortunate children from death...and give them full, happy lives.”

Together, we would fulfill this grand desire.

This was our true starting point.

Epilogue: Two Worlds, Two Mes

City of Commerce, Cortana

[The UBM, “The Rebirthing Infestation, De Vermis,” was defeated.]

[Selecting MVP.]

[“Benetnasch” was selected as MVP.]

[“Benetnasch” is presented with an MVP special reward — “Rejuvenating Grubwear, De Vermis.”]

Following that message, white boots dropped in front of Benetnasch.

Benetnasch had no attention to spare for them. He was focused on the scorched hole that De Vermis had vanished into.

The heat it created had reached Benetnasch, but the effect of the flame pit on the surface of the earth was minimal. Abyss Cannon was a weapon that could compress and focus its firepower, so it hadn’t delivered any life-threatening damage to anyone outside the established radius of six hundred metels.

Within the radius, though, some of the buildings had collapsed, while the ones next to the fiery pit were on fire.

The destruction in that particular area was devastating in its own right — and it was a kind of devastation that had already been caused by someone, somewhere, at some time.

Gate to the Afterlife — Persephone was an ultimate that could bring back any tians and creatures that had lived in the past and release them as they were in their prime. This meant that it could bring back long-forgotten devastation that was beyond the power of Masters.

His skill was rightfully feared because of it, but Benetnasch wasn’t one to care about what people thought.

There was only one thing in his sight, after all — his desire and the path leading to it.

“Hm. The skill on the reward is a lesser version of the original,” said Persephone.

She’d picked up and examined the boots before Benetnasch even looked at them.

"It transforms the wounds of the wearer into maggots, which in time become like the original skin, flesh, and organs. It also gives SP cost reduction and automatically restores it when worn. Not bad at all, but..."

Silence.

"...it goes against your tastes, so I will only treat it as a Resource for my ultimate skill."

The purple gate created by Persephone was already turning into bits of light. The Amber Abyss Squadron had also transformed back into souls and returned to rest within Persephone.

"So, what do we do now? Should we meet up with Hugo's group?" Persephone asked.

"...No, I'll log out for a bit," said Benetnasch. "I'll come back in about an hour and then we'll go undercover and travel to Melkava. We can't keep Vina and Trim waiting too long."

"Ohh. Well, you did say that you didn't want them to see this city."

The names Benetnasch spoke belonged to children he'd saved.

"Saved" was a relative term, though — he'd merely brought them back as undead after they'd died in a particular tragedy.

In a way, it was him grasping at a possibility again.

But as he was now, this was the most he could do, and even that came with many conditions that had to be fulfilled.

Thus, he hoped that would not be the case in the future.

"Yeah. I need to hurry back to them."

"But what of the information you are meant to receive?"

"...Knowing Sefirot, they can contact me no matter where I am. I don't think I need to give them an address or anything."

"That is true."

Benetnasch then opened the menu and logged out.

◇

Coming back to reality, Benetnasch — or, rather, the person who played him — opened his eyes to see the ceiling of a lightless room.

It was particularly dark because of the rain outside, and with the curtains closed it was hard to tell if it was day or night.

Then, with a hand as brittle as a dry twig, he picked up his mobile device.

There was a missed call and a voice message from his mother; after listening to the latter, he sent a message saying “I’m okay. Don’t worry about me.” Then, a moment later, he added “I’m sorry I can’t come back home for spring break” before sending it off.

Spring break didn’t actually mean much to him.

After all...he almost never actually attended the college he’d enrolled in last year.

With the message sent, he stood up, revealing legs so thin that anyone looking at him would worry about his health.

He went to the bathroom, showered for a moment, then went to his fridge to take out a tube of nutritional food and mineral water before wolfing it down as though it was a chore just to nourish himself.

He then went back to bed, put on *Infinite Dendrogram’s* headset and logged back in.

Once again, he returned to that world as King of Tartarus, Benetnasch...abandoning reality...and abandoning his flesh.

◆◆◆

Southwest of the City of Commerce, Cortana, Large Quicksand Patch

Some distance from Cortana, there was a giant patch of quicksand that had existed for over a hundred years now.

It had a diameter of three hundred metels, and it was said that nothing ever escaped from it.

It seemed like an antlion pit, and that was actually a very apt description.

It was the habitat of Sandhole Worms — Pure-Dragon-tier monsters that looked like antlions and possessed a skill that created quicksand.

As a secondary effect of the environment control AI’s save point, Sandhole Worms and other wild monsters were instinctively unable to come too close to Cortana.

Because of that, this patch of quicksand was right outside the save point’s monster-repelling radius.

Neither skilled Masters nor the Drag-Worms that made the desert their home could come out of this quicksand alive or overcome the many

Sandhole Worms here. Being so close to Caldina's starting point, this quicksand served as a newbie trap like Altea's Old Reve Orchard, but even more dangerous.

However...

"GYUAWAAAAHHHHH...!"

...the quicksand was now vanishing, accompanied by the death-screams of the Sandhole Worms within.

The antlion-like creatures occasionally stuck their heads out, but the bodies under their armor twisted and shrank as though being dried out before sinking back into the sand.

This continued for hours, and eventually, the screams of the Sandhole Worms stopped.

With the monsters gone, the environmental effect they were maintaining vanished, and the century-old patch of quicksand became normal desert again.

Then, from the depths of the pit, a small girl's hand peeked out. Clutched in that hand was an axe, which used its skill to raise her out of the sand, revealing her entire form.

This figure was none other than Emily. Though her clothes were covered in sand, she was in perfect health. There were no wounds on her, and she wasn't Frozen anymore.

After Hugo had Frozen her with La Porte de l'Enfer, AR-I-CA had thrown her into the quicksand here.

However, the Sandhole Worms within had shattered her Frozen body, activating Survival of the Fittest. She had then proceeded to kill all the Worms attacking her and turn them all into Resources, which was quite a struggle.

Being an immortal Superior, Emily was ultimately able to escape this death-pit.

Silence. Having just come out of the quicksand, Emily looked...very discontent.

In her killing mode, Emily wasn't supposed to show any emotion — but now, as though profoundly angry about being thrown into quicksand, she was displaying extreme hostility.

"Bad." Still visibly upset, she actually said something that wasn't "minus."

She stood in place, holding Youaltepuztli in her hands...

"..."

...then suddenly looked at the sky.

It was already past sunset — well into the night. As though confirming that, Emily looked ahead — to the city of Cortana away in the distance.

She then raised up the axes in her hands...and crossed them.

This was a preparatory motion for a skill that not even IF members were aware of.

It was impossible to communicate with Emily when she was in her killing mode, while the normal Emily never spoke of her powers to anyone — assuming she was even aware of them.

Even her own allies at IF didn't know the true extent of Emily's abilities. Perhaps this was only to be expected, considering that nearly all of them had aces up their sleeves that they concealed even from their own clan members. The one exception was Gerbera, who proudly flaunted the effects of her ultimate skill.

Because of this, most IF members assumed that Emily's immortality was the result of a passive ultimate Embryo skill.

However, Survival of the Fittest was a *standard* passive skill.

Her ultimate was something different.

"Harvest..."

And now, she was preparing to use it — *the wide-scale extermination ultimate that could easily destroy an entire city-state*.

"...Night..."

A calamity unlike any other before was about to hit Cortana...

"...Youaltepuzt—"

"Emily! Are you okay?!"

...when suddenly, the worried voice of Zhang reached Emily's ears.

Silence. The moment she heard the voice, Emily lowered her hands, and both of the axes returned to their crest.

Emily turned around...

"Mr. Zhan? What's wrong?"

...and faced Zhang as normal Emily, speaking to him in a childlike voice.

"Forgive me for taking so long. After The Blue Sky Songstress picked you up, I lost sight of her. I ran all around Cortana's outskirts."

"Hm...? I...see?" Emily said, tilting her head as though clueless what he was talking about.

She then staggered for a bit before leaning on Zhang.

"Emily?"

"...I'm kinda tired. Emmie wants to sleep..."

And just like that, the girl fell asleep.

Zhang was slightly perplexed for a moment, but he picked her up and left the pit where the quicksand used to be.

After that, he took out the small sand-boat given to him by Rascal from his Garage and left Cortana, taking care not to be seen by AR-I-CA or others.

Once they were some distance away from Cortana...Emily logged out for the day.

◆

Emily opened her eyes.

After logging out, she left her bed and walked around her room on bare feet.

With the exception of the hospital gown she was wearing, she looked exactly as she did in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

She did seem to be one or two years older than her avatar.

Suddenly, the automatic door to her room opened up, admitting a nurse wearing a white coat.

"How are you today, Emily?"

"Hmm...good!"

"I see. Anyway, I'll bring you dinner soon, okay?"

"Okaaay!" After seeing off the nurse, Emily looked around her room — a pure white sickroom. She then dragged a chair close to the window, climbed on it, and looked at the scenery outside.

The cloudless sky showed the moon and its beautiful patterns. The veil of night had fallen over the nearby forest, and she could hear the hoots of the owls there.

All by herself, she looked *through the grated windows* at the night scenery outside.

It was unclear if she was satisfied with what she saw, but she climbed off the chair and returned to bed, sitting atop it and waiting for dinner. She was well used to the meals served at the *psychiatric hospital* by now.

"Today was *so* fun too..." she said as she recalled walking around with Zhang, eating ice cream at the café, and looking around the bazaar — nothing more than that.

She would pay no attention to the time she'd apparently lost.

It was only the fun times that ever stayed with her.

"What should I do tomorrow?"

Like any innocent child, Emily wondered what the next day would bring.

◇◇◇

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

The amber-colored dragon summoned by KoT instantly ended the battle.

The UBM was purged by the dragon's flames, concluding all that had happened in Cortana that day.

As a new day dawned, the city began to relax.

Teach had contacted Caldina's capital and called for aid. They had already arrived and were working to get things under control, assisting the people who were injured or lost their homes in the chaos. They'd also declared that due to the mayor's death, Cortana would be briefly put under the direct control of the congress, and they prepared to investigate those who had close ties with the late mayor, among other things.

The happenings here had caused quite a stir, but they weren't anything particularly damaging in the long term, especially compared to what would've happened if De Vermis had been allowed to grow — Cortana could've been destroyed entirely.

I was also told that if the burning pit created by the amber dragon had connected with Cortana's oasis, it might've caused a steam explosion that would've wiped out the entire city.

Benetnasch had probably accounted for that when picking the "six hundred metel" range, but I couldn't help but notice how desperately the Masters and tians handling the aftermath worked to cool the burning pit.

I would've liked to help, but unfortunately, La Porte de l'Enfer didn't work on objects, so I had to leave it all to them.

"...Benetnasch, huh?" I hadn't seen him, Persephone...or Emily, for that matter, since my last encounters with them.

They might've left the city without anyone noticing. I wasn't completely certain, but I was pretty sure that Emily hadn't been sent to the gaol either.

There was a chance that I would meet them again someday.

With those Superiors gone from Cortana, Teach — the one who was still here — seemed to be extremely busy.

In spite of it all, she was Sefirot — a Master given special privileges by the president herself. It was expected that she would have a lot to do.

Appearances aside, Teach was actually pretty hardworking, so she must've been really busy right now.

...If only she were this dedicated in her personal life. I could respect her without any reservations.

"I see a lot of words like 'in spite of,' 'appearances aside,' and 'if only' in your mind."

"...Well, it *is* about Teach, you know?"

As for me and Cyco...we weren't citizens of this country, so we couldn't actually help that much. At most, we would occasionally dispose of some rubble using White Rose. But with many Masters gathering to help, it was already done.

Now, I was just waiting for Teach in a café, just like I had yesterday.

In silence, I pondered a variety of things.

Back in Hermine, the matter of the Orb had been accomplished with few casualties, but here, many people had died.

Emily was supposedly here because of the Orb, and she'd killed a number of people. Investigations also revealed that the mayor also murdered many for the power of the Orb.

And we obviously couldn't forget those that died after De Vermis was released.

Yesterday might have marked the end of an entire major city...but that wasn't even the last of the events surrounding the Orbs.

Teach now had two of them, while one had been destroyed at the mayor's mansion, leaving a whole four more of these Huang Hean treasures scattered across the continent.

I didn't know if all of them were in Caldina, but Teach had said something terrifying about them: "I did some extra lookin' up and it turns out that one of the seven stolen Orbs has somethin' *worse than a Mythical*."

A UBM that surpassed Mythical in status.

That could only mean that a creature more than a match for a SUBM was now in someone's hands, lying dormant in its Orb, always on the verge of being released. Seeing the kind of trouble an Ancient Legendary like De Vermis had caused, I didn't even want to imagine what *that* one would do.

However, I wouldn't hesitate to prevent that from happening.

I was basically dragged into this Orb hunt, but if it would prevent incidents like this one, I would see it through to the end.

Abandoning it...would it make it hard for me to sleep at night.

"Yu! Cy! Kept ya waitin', huh?"

As that thought passed through my mind, Teach entered the café.

"Teach, good work with every...thing... Teach?" I tried to express my respect for the hard work she'd been doing, but then I noticed something on her neck.

"What is iiit?"

"You have more hickeys than before."

"Ah," she said, putting her hand on her neck.

Other side, I thought. *Actually, there's some on both.*

"...Teach?"

"Ah hah hah. Well, you know the maid I told you about yesterday? The one who was gonna poison me?"

"Yes." *The one she was pillow-talking with straight until dawn.*

"It turns out she was staying at the same inn as me after that. She wasn't there when the mansion went down, so she was perfectly fine."

"That's a...silver lining on a dark cloud, as they say."

"What dark cloud? It's all clear skies for *her*! You should've seen how happy she looked while she was sleeping!"

"Teach...?"

"Well...I met up with her after the whole thing yesterday and she was pretty freaked out. I mean, think about it, her workplace got blown apart and her boss and colleagues all died! Anyone would panic!"

"And...?"

"I spent the whole night comfortin' her."

...Silly me for ever thinking she was hard at work. I want my respect back, I thought.

"I hope you die," said Cyco.

"I'm gettin' some déjà vu here!"

Thanks to her, the worries I had just moments ago were blown away. Did she have a natural talent for destroying my inner conflicts?

That aside, there was something I had to ask her now. It had been bothering me since yesterday.

"Teach," I said.

"What is iiit?"

"Yesterday, you fired lightning shells at De Vermis... Wasn't that the power of the UBM Orb you retrieved last time?"

"ACK?!"

...She actually said that. With her mouth.

"Didn't you say that you passed it over to a courier?"

"Uhh...yeah. That's what I told you, but..."

"...Teach?"

She reached into her flight jacket's inner pocket and...took out the Orb before putting it on the table.

"I actually had it this whole time... Ah ha ha."

"...You could've just said so."

"You lied to your disciple. How awful," said Cyco.

"Ughh...?! I-It wasn't my idea! It was all old man Grand!"

What did she mean by old man Grand?

"It's a long story, but..." she began, launching into her explanation.

◇

After retrieving the Orb at Hermine, Teach had apparently contacted the capital with a comms device.

"So yeah, I got the first Orb. Can ya send someone to take it off me?"

"Impossible."

And just like that, she was denied a courier.

There were multiple reasons for this, apparently.

First of all, Orbs weren't items that could be placed in inventories. That meant that Masters left them behind when they logged out, making them a bad choice for carrying them. Even if they were put up to the task, there was a chance that greed would get the better of them and they would make a run for it with the Orb in order to have the special reward for themselves.

The only Masters who could be trusted with the Orbs were other Sefirot members, but the only one of them who was both fit for courier work and wasn't too busy was Teach herself.

Tians weren't a good option either, though, because Caldina didn't have many that were powerful enough.

Almost none of them could stand their ground against pre-Superior or greater Masters, and if someone learned that a tian was carrying the Orb, it was likely that powerful Masters would attack them and take it.

By process of elimination, the most powerful and reliable courier was Teach herself.

However, she also couldn't stay logged in all day and night long, so just about anyone could take the Orb from her by simply picking it up from where she logged out.

If someone found out that she was still holding it, she would certainly be targeted somewhere.

Thus, the first thing she had to do was lie to me — her only companion — by telling me that she didn't have the Orb.

Neither I nor Cyco had Truth Discernment, and Teach already knew that.

Telling us that the Orb was "with a courier" was also a very deliberate act.

It was possible that someone could attack me while Teach was logged out and interrogate me about the location of the Orb.

If I truly believed that the Orb had been passed to a courier, Truth Discernment would detect that as a true statement.

The same would be true if anyone had asked me if the Orb was in Ace's possession.

Because of this, anyone who tried to get information from me would end up searching for a fictional courier.

Apparently, this trap that turns the useful Truth Discernment skill against the user was thought up by the person Teach had called "old man Grand" — King of Toys, Grandmaster — and Teach had put it to use right away.

As for how Teach had dealt with having to log out with the Orb in her possession... Well, she simply buried it in the sand of the dunes or the dirt of the cities after attaching a simple transmitter to it. Trapping it was an option, but that would make it discoverable using the Trap Perception skill.

Since I'd truly believed Teach's words, this whole "courier" thing had been a good decoy.

◇

"...But now we know that you still have it," I said.

"Uhh, yeah," Teach said. "But that's not a problem anymore."

"What do you mean?" I asked. In response, Teach put a map window on the table, expanded it, and pointed at it before saying, "Drag-Nomad is close to Cortana now. With Blue Opera, I can make it there within the day and give Prez both of the Orbs I got."

I see. With the courier work nearly done, there was no harm in telling me the truth now.

"So yeah, I'll be flyin' there soon. There's a buncha stuff I gotta do there, so you'll have to wait for me here in Cortana, okay?"

"Okay. I have school anyway, so in a way, this is good timing."

I can still stay here for about six hours of Dendro *time, but if I don't have anything to do, I might as well log out now,* I thought.

"Oh yeah. School," said Teach. "Man, I'm unemployed myself, so I kinda forget that you're busy."

...How am I supposed to respond to that?

"By the way, Teach," I said.

"What is iiit?"

"You're not hiding anything else from me, are you?" The first Orb-related incident in Hermine, the secret courier work... I felt like Teach had been hiding things from me ever since we'd met.

So, wondering if there was anything more I didn't know about, I posed that question to her.

In response...

"I am."

...she casually responded in the affirmative.

"Of course you are..."

"Yep. But it's got nothin' to do with Orbs. You can trust me on that."

"...What is it about, then?" I asked, slightly exasperated.

"About me, you...and Fran, I guess."

...I certainly didn't expect to hear my sister's name there.

“Is this—?”

“Uh, nonono,” she cut me off. “I can’t tell you now, but...you know what?” She folded her arms and seemingly thought about something for a moment before saying, “I’ll tell you either when you get a Superior Job, or when Cy becomes a Superior Embryo.”

“...What’s with those conditions?” The former was only achievable by the first person to make it to each job, while the latter had yet to be accomplished by even a hundred players in the whole world.

“That’s way too hard.”

“You think so? I’m pretty sure you and Cy will get there eventually,” she said with an amused smile. “So do your best, okay? I’ll be waitin’.”

Her heterochromic eyes were fixed on me, looking as serious as she could get.

◇

After that, I parted ways with Teach and logged out.

After taking off the headset, I heard songbirds singing as dawn broke.

Looking at the time, it was past five in the morning. There were two hours left until breakfast at the dorms, and three until classes began.

I could have taken an hour-long nap, but a good shower to wake me up was probably better than a lackluster sleep.

I took off my clothes and entered the bathroom attached to my room. Using the panel on the wall, I turned on the shower and stood beneath it.

I was glad that we didn’t have roommates here in Lorraine’s Girls College — I might’ve woken mine up with my showering.

“Ahh, I needed that.” After cleaning myself, I dried my hair and body before changing into the school’s uniform.

There was an hour left until breakfast, so I used the time to go through the texts that would come up in today’s classes.

Even with that done, I still had some free time, so I looked at some video sites for the first time in a while and...

“...Ah.”

...there was a video called “Hell General, Logan Goddhart gets REKT!” in the rankings for the gaming category.

Uploaded several days ago, it showed how the top player in Dryfe’s duel rankings had lost against an Altarian newbie...*him*.

“...He’s the same as ever.” Watching him fight Hell General in the video reminded me of his battles against Gouz-Maise...and Fran.

Earlier, remembering those things made me feel both longing and guilt. But now, I felt a bit proud... I could look straight at that video without feeling bad in any way.

It might’ve been because I — Hugo — had chosen to stand up to impending doom just like he did.

“It would be great to talk to him about the recent happenings someday.” That day, before we faced each other, we’d met up at a café and had this exchange:

“All right, then. Guess this is goodbye for now. Oh, should we add each other on the friends list?”

“...Not now. Let’s do it next time we meet...or the time after that.”

I’d said that because I knew that we would be enemies “next time” and that if we were to become friends, it would necessarily be “the time after that.”

We hadn’t met again after our meeting as enemies.

I didn’t know if he still saw me as an enemy or if he believed we could still be friends — but personally, the next time we met, I wanted to make it up to him and, if possible, be on good terms again.

“I guess it might depend on his relationship with my sister... Ah.” As I said that, I noticed the name of the person who had uploaded the Hell General video.

It was easy to guess who it was...

“...I see she’s still sour.” Apparently, my sister was still stuck to him like slime, gathering info about him using methods that were basically stalking.

She must’ve gotten the footage through all of that, and it showed me just how obsessed she was.

Thinking of their relationship, I grew slightly exasperated and let out a sigh.

“Yuri! The cafeteria’s about to open up! Let’s go!”

That was when a friend — Sonya — came to invite me to eat breakfast together.

“Okaaay,” I said as I closed the video site.

It was time to put aside the Orbs, KoT, Emily, and Teach, as well as Fran and Ray.

There were many problems in *Infinite Dendrogram*, but they would have to be dealt with later.

The Machine Knight of Ice and Roses, Hugo Lesseps would have to rest for a moment. Until today's classes ended, I would be Yuri Gautier — a third-year middle school student in Lorraine's Girls College.

I was both Hugo and Yuri — and without either, I would be no one.

"Yuri?"

"Comiiing!"

Called by my friend, I left my room and took a step into a life as Yuri.

To Be Continued in the Next Episode

Afterword

Hello dearest readers! I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Thank you for reading volume 16 of *Infinite Dendrogram*. This one took a step away from the stage where our protagonist, Ray, resides and instead focused on the story of Hugo, who is currently traveling around Caldina.

An important figure that has appeared in this volume is the Superior he met — King of Tartarus, Benetnasch.

As you may have noticed from the similarities between the wonderful covers Taiki drew for volume 1 and this one, he is a reflection of Ray.

You can see it in their positioning next to their Embryos, but if you look at the backgrounds, you will notice that while Ray is in front of “the kingdom they would now live in,” Benetnasch is in front of “the arch through which the dead may return.”

Their very natures are opposed, as well.

Ray stands in the path of tragedies and gives his all to keep hope alive.

Benetnasch follows after tragedies and fathers hopes that have already died.

Nemesis carves a path through the present using the pain of the past.

Persephone revives the past in its entirety and brings it into the present.

The time when they would face each other is still in the distant future, but it is my hope that the day will come when I will be able to let you dear readers witness it.

Now, enough about volume 16 — it is time to talk about the next one.

We have been on this journey for a whole 16 volumes now, and over a dozen releases of adaptations of the web novel. But with volume 17, the *Infinite Dendrogram* light novel will finally...

...get its first volume of all-new original content!

Did you think I was going to say it was ending? It most certainly will not! It will go on!

Up until now, I have been making edits and additions to the light novel to make it worthwhile for both the light novel readers as well as those who have been following the web novel, and I also wrote an all-new five-hundred-page bonus novel for the anime release, but now, the light novel series itself will get a full release of all-new content — a volume that isn't even partially an adaptation of the web novel.

I must admit that writing it makes me tense in a way I usually am not, but please do look forward to it, as I will do all I can to write the best draft I am capable of.

Additionally, last month marked the release of *Crow Record* volume 4 in Japan — the final one of the spin-off.

Just like the previous one, it comes with a bonus short story, so please do pick it up if you are so inclined.

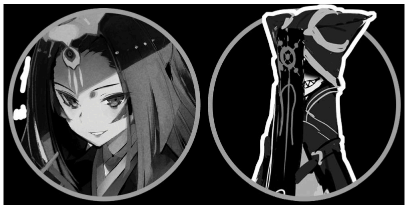
I must say that working on *Crow Record* has been a very positive experience for me.

I was especially happy with how charming and expressive La-na made the new characters, Max and Shion.

Crow Record may be over, but please do read through it if you can — now is the perfect time to do so.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Sakon Kaidou



Xun: "Hm? Ohh, right. The after-aftErword. I'm 'Xun,' shOrt for 'Xunyu.'
Fox: "And I'm the 'Fox,' Tsukuyo Fusooo!"
Xun: "...Huh? I'm jUst with yOu this time?"
Fox: "Yep. We only got one page left. It's not enough for more than two, so it's just you and me, sweetie."
Xun: "...Well, whatEver."

Fox: “You seem a little bothered by something. What’s on your mind?”
Xun: “Oh, I just wondEr what the author meant when he sAid that it’s the perfect chance to reAd Crow Record. Why’d he, of all peoplE, emphasize somethin’ like thAt?”
Fox: “Oh, thaaat? I’ll just tell you along with the announcement. VOLUME 17 IS SET TO COME OUT IN NOVEMBER! THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN IT WILL BE RAY AND THE CROW RECORD GANG!”
Xun: “...So that’s whAt that was about! It’s just mOre direct markEting!”
Fox: “If any of you haven’t read it yet, go pick it up! It’s both a good read and good prep for the next voluuume!”
Xun: “I now understand whY *you’re* the one doin’ this afterwOrd...”

Bonus Short Stories

Pandemonium

2044

This was back when Triangle of Wisdom was just another one of the many crafting clans in Dryfe. In their wooden shack — the workshop where their few members were trying to make humanoid robots a reality — there currently stood just two Masters.

"Hey, Fran, there's somethin' I've been meaning to ask ya."

"What is it?"

The two people speaking were the clan's test pilot, AR-I-CA, and the clan's leader who also served as their project supervisor, Franklin. Since they were the clan's top pilot and engineer, they often conversed with each other, sometimes alone and sometimes joined by the clan's accountant — a lady named "Hohlheim." When there was no one but the three of them around, Franklin spoke in a manner quite similar to Francesca's; their conversations covered many topics ranging from work to completely random things, and this was yet another such exchange.

"It's about the monsters ya make with your Pandemonium. Do they count as undead?"

"Hm...? Ohh, you mean, since I use monster materials? As in...*corpses*?"

Pandemonium was, of course, Franklin's Embryo — a factory that produced monsters based on the materials placed into it.

It grew larger with every evolution, and was now so large that he had to go out of his way to find a flat expanse of land with no people around to summon it.

If it was this huge in its fifth form, it was hard to imagine how big it would become as it evolved.

Since Franklin could be attacked outside of Vandelheim, producing monsters was now a stressful affair. At that time, he wondered how much a patch of land near Vandelheim would cost, wishing that Pandemonium could walk or at least be cloaked.

As shown by history, by mid-2044, the clan ended up becoming large enough for them to buy the needed land, and when Pandemonium evolved into its seventh form after the turn of the year, it gained optical camouflage as well as legs.

"I know what you're trying to say, AR-I-CA," said Franklin. "Pandemonium makes monsters from monster bones and dead flesh, and you want to know how and why is that any different from the creation of undead like skeletons and zombies."

"Yep-yep," said AR-I-CA, visibly happy that Franklin had instantly understood her.

"The difference is in the creature type and creation," said Franklin.

"...Hmm?" AR-I-CA raised an eyebrow. The answer was not quite what she wanted to hear, but from Franklin's perspective, there was no better way to put it.

"Making undead involves this energy called 'grudge,' but I really don't know much about it yet," Franklin continued, admitting that the details were currently beyond him. "And even if I wanted to find out more, we don't have any Necromancers in our clan."

"...Well, they don't seem like the type to care about robots. Hell, I don't think we got a lot of 'em here in Dryfe to begin with."

"Mhm. I'll probably never get involved with them, anyway."

That eventually turned out to not be the case. Franklin would eventually hire King of Tartarus to help in his attempts to develop grudge engines, and that same grudge would be the reason Ray Starling would eventually shatter his plans. This dark energy would eventually affect Franklin's life much more than he could have ever imagined on that day, conversing casually with AR-I-CA.

"So what *are* your monsters, anyway?" AR-I-CA asked.

"Well... Do you know *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*?"

"Mhm. I do."

"Without getting into specifics, the monster in that novel was made by gathering parts from other creatures, combining them to create a body resembling the animals the materials were sourced from, and bringing it to life. That's more or less what I do."

"Isn't that like a flesh golem? As in, an undead?"

“My monsters don’t have grudge, or even a soul. They just have some directive programming ‘burned’ into their brain cells... Which sort of makes them more like robots made of flesh. Oh, but...”

“‘But...?’”

“If I use lots of material from undead, I can make undead out of the residual grudge.”

“It all depends on the mats, huh? So you can make anythin’ the mats let ya make?”

“That’s mostly accurate. I definitely can’t make angels, though. The creature type has an entry in the info menu, but there has never been even a single sighting. I can’t make a creature type without the necessary materials.”

Even if creatures of the angel type did have a habitat somewhere, it’s location was completely unknown.

“Angels, huh...? I wonder if they’re winged and naked! You think they’re kinda horny too...?!”

“...It’s very obvious what you’re thinking, but if succubi wear clothes, I’m pretty sure angels would too.”

Slightly shocked by his friend’s blasphemous words, Franklin brought up a familiar comparison.

In the country of Dryfe stood the created dungeon called “Lust-Devil Palace.” Home to many succubi-like creatures of the devil type, it was a treacherous place no one had cleared yet in spite of the many Masters who had repeatedly tried to do so — and the reason behind their dedication should have been obvious.

It was also worth noting that, since necessary materials harvested from succubi were reasonably available on the market , Franklin could, if he felt like it, actually make that type of monster himself.

“Lack of materials is the reason I never made yokai, either.” Franklin continued. “I heard there’s plenty of them in Tenchi and Huang He to the east, but you never see them here. I’d have to import the materials to make them, but I need a lot to make a monster, so I can’t even imagine how much that would cost...”

“For somethin’ that looks like it can do anythin’, Pandemonium sure has a lotta limits...” AR-I-CA commented.

The Embryo seemed to have a high degree of freedom, but since it depended on the materials provided to it, Pandemonium ultimately had many restrictions. One could say that it was the pinnacle of Embryos that relied on external Resources.

As they talked about monsters and Pandemonium, AR-I-CA began wondering about something and asked, “By the way, Fran, ya compared yourself to Frankenstein, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“Frankenstein’s monster learned human words and culture, didn’t he? What would you do if the things you made gained intelligence or self-awareness?”

If that were to happen, they would stop being “biological robots” and become “living beings.”

AR-I-CA wanted to know what Franklin would do if that possibility existed.

“I go out of my way to make sure that *doesn’t* happen,” Franklin said, his eyes slightly colder than before.

“That so?” AR-I-CA said, choosing not to ask for an elaboration.

Embryos were mirrors of their Masters. If Pandemonium was a reflection of Franklin’s true nature, AR-I-CA had no intention of prying any further. She could tell that — just like her own eye — Franklin had some baggage best left untouched.

They both had told each other about certain aspects of their real lives, but neither of them tried to tread on the other’s deepest secrets.

“There’s tons of stuff involved, huh?” AR-I-CA said.

“I would say so,” nodded Franklin.

They enjoyed and found comfort in each other’s presence, but never overstepped each other’s boundaries.

This friendship of theirs continued for a long time...

...Right until the day AR-I-CA ruined it all.

Bar Chatter

February, 2045, The Tetragrammaton

Illegal Frontier, the criminal clan. Being a group that boasted only wanted Superiors as official members, it was no doubt one of the strongest forces in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Their headquarters was the amphibious battle cruiser called “The Tetragrammaton.” Inside it there were rooms for every member, as well as a number of recreational facilities.

“Heh heh! This is the luxurious grown-up life!”

Inside one such facility — a bar, to be exact — there stood Gerbera, holding a cocktail glass and posing in a manner she believed to be mature.

She was underage, however, so the drink inside was non-alcoholic.

Next to her, not saying a word, was one of the clan’s sub-leaders, Rascal.

He’d come here first and had been unwinding with a few drinks, but then he was joined by Gerbera and Emily, both of whom were strangely excited.

Rascal could only assume that they were in the middle of exploring the battle cruiser.

“It’s *shoo* tasty!” Emily said, drinking her orange juice float.

“It really is!” said Gerbera. “This bartender is quite skilled. I feel like this might even actually get me drunk!”

Like hell it will. It’s non-alcoholic, ya dumbass, Rascal thought.

The bartender, as it happened, was an Idea made by La Crima.

“Heh heh... This booze is making me feel like talking about my past... Wanna hear a story?”

“Tell me tell me! I love you, Gerbera!”

I’m glad they’re gettin’ along, but what if this dumbass turns out to be a bad influence on her? Rascal thought, beginning to worry.

“Very well — then I shall tell you the take of how I stole a national treasure from Caldina!” Gerbera said proudly before beginning to eloquently describe her endeavor.

Seriously? You’re gonna boast about your dirty deeds? Rascal thought with a sigh.

None of what Gerbera went on to say was a lie. She’d indeed used Alhazred’s cloaking ability to steal one of Caldina’s national treasures. The problem was that she’d neglected to consider that the item would have a transmitter on it, and she was chased down by the authorities the moment her ult expired.

“They sent skilled pursuers after me, but I was able to escape with my ult. They couldn’t keep on chasing me after I dropp— *let go* of the treasure! I came out on top! I was the victor!”

It was obviously a defeat, but in her mind, she was the one who had prevailed.

This was how Gerbera was at that point in time. Rascal had acknowledged her as almost offensively stupid, but still accepted her into the clan because of her Superior Embryo's abilities. A small part of him was actually starting to regret it.

"Wow, Gerbera! I thought you could only make sweets!" Emily said, clapping and clearly not fully understanding what she had just heard.

"Yes! Praise me more!" Gerbera declared proudly.

Rascal looked at them, not saying a word. Being a guardian-like figure to Emily even in real life, he had actually begun to worry that Gerbera could be a bad influence on Emily in a way unrelated to her illness.

Following this, Gerbera was sent on a certain mission to Altar...

The End

Similarity

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

While looking around Cortana, I'd chanced upon Persephone — King of Tartarus' Maiden Embryo.

Back when the pair had been collaborating with the Triangle of Wisdom, we'd met several times, but we never properly talked to each other. Now that I finally had a chance to do so, I couldn't help but notice something.

"Hm? What's the matter? Is there something on my face?" she asked as I looked at her.

It wasn't anything on her face, though — it was actually her face itself. Though her apparent age, hairstyle, hair color, and clothing were different, her face was much like that of Ray's Nemesis.

At first, I thought my mind was just playing tricks on me, but the more I talked to her, the more aware I became of the similarities between them.

I hadn't felt this way when I'd first met Nemesis, but having had a good number of conversations with her, I could now clearly see that she and Persephone had much in common — so much, in fact, that they seemed like sisters.

"...Maybe Persephone's Master is actually Ray's brother?" Cyco commented telepathically.

If siblings ended up having similar Embryos, you'd have ended up looking like Pandemonium, I thought in response.

"Huh...? That'd be scary as hell..."

Also, Ray already has a brother — KoD. His Embryo is nothing like Nemesis.

"I see you are busy thinking or possibly conversing by telepathy, but I must say that this silence is quite alienating..." said Persephone.

"Oh... Sorry about that," I said. "I know of this Embryo that is much like you...and I was wondering why you are so alike."

"Oh? An Embryo like me?"

"Do you have any idea why Embryos might end up looking similar?"

"Well, there are two hypotheses," she said as she held up both of her index fingers. "The nature of an Embryo depends on the nature of its Master. Their lives, preferences, their strong yearnings...Embryos pick up various things about their Masters and reflect them, gaining powers accordingly. In the same way, it is possible that the nature of the Master may influence the shape of the weapon, as well."

"So, you are saying that King of Tartarus and Ra— the Master I know have a similar nature?"

"You are the one who knows both of them. That is up to you to decide."

I fell silent and thought about KoT and Ray.

They were both Maiden Masters and seemed to have a tendency to burden themselves with the lives of others.

However, when I compared their expressions as I remembered them, I could see nothing in common.

Alike, yet completely opposed — that was the impression they gave me.

"...And the other hypothesis?" I asked.

In response, Persephone lowered the index finger on her right hand and said, "The abilities of an Embryo depend on the nature of its Master. However, there is a possibility that at the very beginning, one particular difference may depend on an external factor."

"That difference being...?"

"The visage. Or overall appearance, if you prefer," she said, using her left index finger to point at her face. "Offspring resemble their parents. This is natural for animals with genetics. The information comprising us, on the other hand, comes from our Masters, meaning that our powers cannot be determined by anything but their nature. However, the ‘vessel’ that is to be filled with this information exists *before* it meets its Master.”

“The zeroth form...”

“Indeed. There is no difference in power between zeroth forms, but if zeroth forms born from *the same parent* become the same type of Embryo...perhaps they would be alike in appearance or shape.”

In that case, Nemesis and Persephone were...

“Heh heh. That’s quite enough time spent on mere speculation, especially when it cannot be proven. It’s no better than nonsense. Although...” Persephone said, falling silent for a moment and then whispering, “An Embryo that shares my likeness... Perhaps I may one day encounter her?”

Her words were like a premonition of something in a distant future.

I couldn’t help but notice that instead of “I would like to meet her,” she said “Perhaps I may one day encounter her.”

The End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 16
by Sakon Kaidou

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Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0.1: January 2022
Premium E-Book

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
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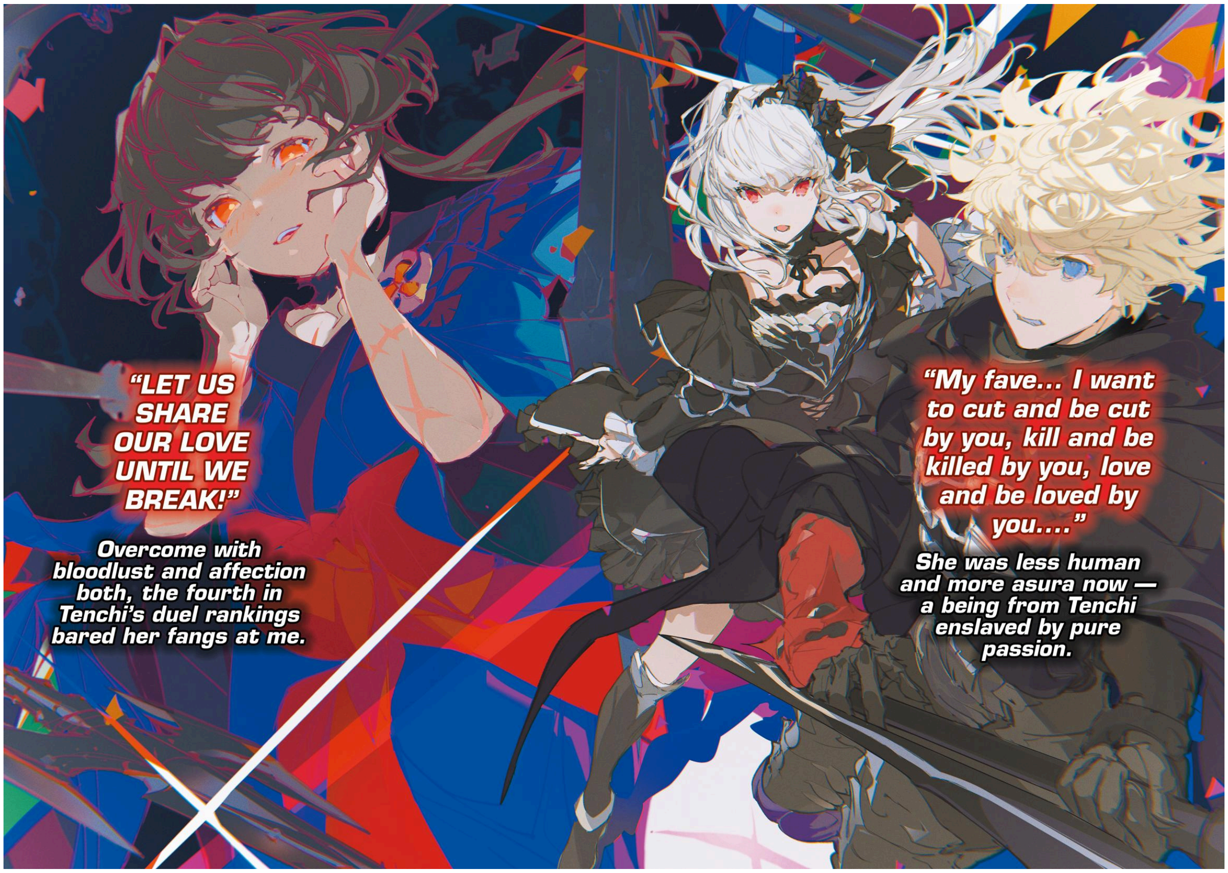


"LET US SHARE OUR LOVE UNTIL WE BREAK!"

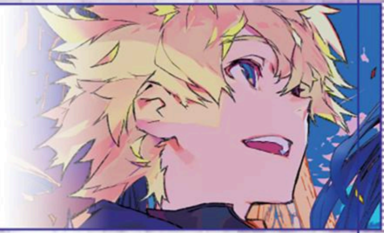
Overcome with bloodlust and affection both, the fourth in Tenchi's duel rankings bared her fangs at me.

"My fave... I want to cut and be cut by you, kill and be killed by you, love and be loved by you...."

She was less human and more asura now—a being from Tenchi enslaved by pure passion.

Character

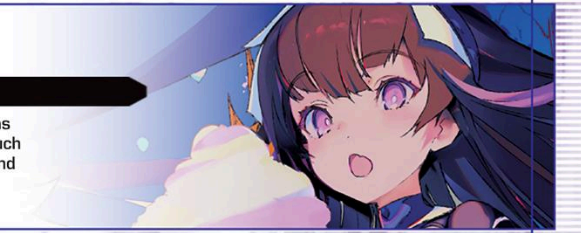
Ray



Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

A college freshman who gets caught up in various incidents within *Infinite Dendrogram*. Though he is generally mild-mannered, he has a strong will that causes him to fight for his goals and never give up on them.

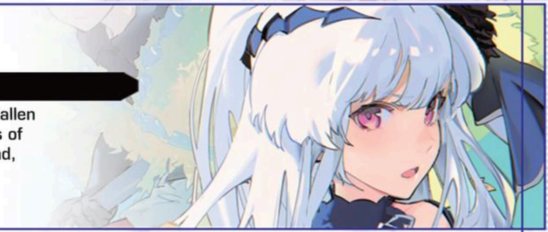
Nemesis



Nemesis

Ray's Embryo manifested as this girl. Nemesis acts as Ray's weapon by taking up the form of armaments such as a greatsword, halberd, shield, pinwheel, mirror, and twin swords. She is also a notable glutton.

Juliet



Juliet/Juri Kurosaki

The fourth in Altar's duel rankings and bearer of the Fallen Knight Superior Job, she fights by wielding many kinds of curses. Her manner of speech is difficult to understand, but Ray somehow has no trouble with it whatsoever.

Chelsea

Chelsea

The eighth in Altar's duel rankings, she is Juliet's closest friend. Her luck with men is so abysmal that her love life is DOA. Originally from Granvaloa, Chelsea's main job is Grand Pirate.

Max

Great Genocide Max

Another girl in the Altarian duel rankings. She challenged Juliet and was defeated, leading to her becoming Juliet's cutesy clothing dress-up doll. Before coming to Altar, Max was a Master from Tenchi.

Shion Manjushage

Shion Manjushage

The thirteenth in all three Altarian rankings: duel, kill, and clan. She loves ominous things to the point of being dubbed "The Misfortune Collector." Shion also insists that she is Juliet's rival.

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Prologue: At the Water's Edge

March, 2045, A Certain Place in Infinite Dendrogram

A silent shoreline stood beneath the veil of night.

Unlike its counterparts in reality, this sandy beach was completely free of garbage, and the way the moonlight fell upon the rolling waves perfectly captured the essence of what a night should be.

Some distance away, there was a seaside path with not a single pebble on it, flanked by trees that were similar to pines. As a whole, the entire scene looked stunning—a truly otherworldly sight.

It would've been perfect if it weren't for the single person who spoiled the image slightly.

Sitting on the sand as though they had fallen backwards in surprise, they looked ahead with eyes wide open.

However, there was nothing there *besides a couple of dents in the sand*.

Gradually washed away by the coming waves, these two sizable depressions were spaced apart as though some gigantic, unseen figure was simply standing there.

"...What do I do?" A voice cut through the silence of the night.

The voice belonged to the person sitting on the sand, their words seemingly an expression of panic and confusion at having "messed up" in some way.

Alas, there was no one there to help them with their predicament, and the panic ultimately drove them to flee, leaving only the gorgeous evening scenery behind them.

When the next morning came, the fact that there was *nothing there* shook the locals, as well as the entire country.

Chapter One: The Invitation

Scout, Ray Starling

Infinite Dendrogram was a VRMMO in the action-RPG genre.

Apparently, the standard activities here consisted of taking on monster-hunting quests from the Adventurers' Guild, delivering packages, or perhaps engaging in crafting.

Using the word "apparently" implied that none of this had anything to do with me, but that was the thing—my activities here were far from standard.

First, I'd gone to search for someone, taking me to a dungeon out of my level range; then I tried to level like the newbie I was, only to get PK'd. After that, I took a delivery quest, only to run into a UBM on the way and, by complete chance, I ended up fighting the kingdom's most infamous bandit gang and the UBM *they* spawned. Right after that I got caught up in a Superior's act of terrorism, and he actually targeted me specifically—and just when I thought I was finally going to get some time to chill, I was kidnapped by *another* Superior. Then I escorted a boy looking for his dad, only to end up fighting a flying UBM that happened to awaken at the same time, and when I went to get a job change, I ended up running into yet another Superior—and an ancient superweapon. When I tried to relax at a festival in my hometown, I ended up fighting a pre-Superior who planned to stir up trouble by meddling in someone's love life. Most recently, I took on a bodyguard role for the peace talks between Altar and Dryfe, only to fall into Dryfe's trap and end up fighting one of the Apices of all Masters.

Yeah... Even I could tell that my activities here weren't exactly conventional.

"With all that in mind, though...things are kinda chill right now," I said.

"Consider the scene before you, and think if that description is truly fitting," Nemesis retorted.

There were currently scores of wooden golems burning to cinders in front of me. The source of the fire was the Purgatorial Flames from my left

Miasmaflame Bracer.

I was currently in a forested mountain region, tossing flames onto an army of wooden golems. I couldn't blame any clueless onlookers for thinking I was just a pyromaniac.

As to how I ended up in this situation, well...

◇

It was April 18th—a Tuesday. Several *Dendro* days, as well as real-life ones, had passed since the chaotic peace conference.

Having come back from college, I logged in as I'd always done.

Because of various things, I hadn't yet returned to Gideon and was still at the capital, Altea.

I first hit the shops to replace my broken gear and stock up on consumables. Then, it was time to do some leveling. I may have had a unique Embryo that allowed me to turn the tide of difficult battles, but to grow stronger in the proper sense, I needed some levels.

"We are still lacking in raw power, after all," said Nemesis.

"Yeah. We just learned that the hard way."

Our clan had fought King of Beasts—the Physical Apex—and despite all our combined efforts, we didn't manage to come out on top.

I was told that Azurite herself would've been in danger if it wasn't for Fuso's negotiations.

"If we'd just had a little bit more power back then, we might've been able to seize a different possibility," I said. "We really need to level up so that we can reach them next time."

"Indeed!" Nemesis replied.

And so, with renewed resolve, I switched my job back to Scout so I could finally max it out. Then I figured that if I was gonna be leveling, I might as well kill two birds with one stone and do a hunting quest at the same time. I couldn't team up with my clan members because of time differences or in-game distance between us, but I figured I could handle the quest solo or just get a temporary party together.

I headed to the Adventurers' Guild, checked the catalog, and found a quest that was just perfect for me—a large-scale quest for the elimination of a monster type that had suddenly grown in number.

It was the kind of quest anyone could pick up, and the reward was based on how much you contributed to the extermination. The location was between Altea and Gideon—the now-nostalgic Sauda Mountain Pass.

The targets were the boss monster known as “Afforest King Golem” and its related species, the Planting Golems.

Afforests weren’t UBMs, but just like Goblin Kings and King Basilisks, they were always seen as major threats and targets for immediate elimination. Apparently, they were a troublesome monster type that appeared in fertile wild areas and incessantly spawned their kin—the Planting Golems—recklessly draining the land’s nutrients in the process.

Normally, they wouldn’t be somewhere like Sauda Mountain Pass, but recently, there had been an increase in dormant UBMs like Monochrome suddenly awakening, which had led to major disturbances in monster habitats all over.

It was kinda like how the lab coat maniac messed up the ecosystem around Gideon...but worse, since we now had a high-level boss monster and its kin making themselves cozy around the main path linking Altea and Gideon.

With the current situation in Altar, it would be pretty bad if this trade route was disrupted, so the authorities of both cities had teamed up to create this large-scale quest.

◇

And so, we were now here, exterminating the Planting Golems.

“...Live trees aren’t supposed to be *this* flammable,” I said.

“Might this cause a forest fire...?” Nemesis asked. Being monsters, the golems themselves disappeared the moment they died, but since their loot was wooden, their fires continued to burn.

I really didn’t wanna follow in Shu’s footsteps and create a scorched wasteland...

“Hey, should I be worried about this?” I asked as I looked at the flaming golem loot.

“Nope! I’ll put ’em all out!” I heard someone say, right before a mass of water crashed onto the burning remains.

The flames were silenced, preventing them from lighting the surrounding trees.

“See?” the person said, giving me a thumbs up. They...or rather *she* was a baby-faced girl in a pirate hat, and her name was Chelsea. She was an Altarian duel ranker in the eighth spot as well as a sparring partner of mine, and we were currently doing the same quest.

“If you just break or cut ’em up, these things just grow back from whatever’s left,” she said. Now *that* was obnoxious. I could see why they had been targeted for elimination. The damage they were capable of doing to local towns and villages was something else.

“I’m useless against them, so I’m glad we have you and your flamethrower here,” Chelsea added.

“Right back at you. I’m glad we have you too,” I said. This was an impromptu party, but she and I actually made a good team.

It was because of her that I could use Purgatorial Flames like I was. If I couldn’t rely on anyone to put the fires out, I’d have had to fight these things using Nemesis and her skills, which wouldn’t have been very efficient.

“Lemme check if they found it yet,” Chelsea said before using Telepathy Cuffs to contact our other party members.

I’d joined this party after running into her group by chance while doing this quest. On the party window, I could see the main stats and names of the other two members—Juliet and Max.

Chelsea and I were the only ones here. Juliet was using her wings and Max was riding her Type Sentinel Embryo to patrol the area and look for the Afforest. Since it was the source of these golems, this quest wouldn’t end until someone defeated it.

But since we had Juliet the Black Crow—fourth in the duel rankings—I was sure that we’d—

“Ray! They found it! It’s past the ridge, to the east of here!” Chelsea said, cutting my thought short.

“All right! Hop on Silver! We’ll get there by air!” I said. Just as I would expect, they’d located the monster.

Some time later, we arrived at the spot...

“UuuUrRrraaArrrrgHhhh...”

...where we saw a giant golem made of dirt and roots, with nearly a hundred trees growing out of its back.

“...Damn, it’s huge,” I said. Maybe I shouldn’t have expected anything less of a “boss monster.” It wasn’t as large as Leviathan, but it easily surpassed sixty metels, easily putting it in the “kaiju-sized” category.

Though, it *was* weird that something this big had gone unnoticed until Juliet spotted it...

“Julie! Where was *this thing* hiding?!” Chelsea called out to Juliet, who was currently flying around Afforest.

The Fallen Knight fired a dark magic spell at the monster before saying, “The wood itself stirred. Thus did the mind’s eye perceive from my skyward vantage.”

Oh, so that was how it was. Basically, “It was hiding in the ground, disguised as the forest itself, and moved along with the terrain. I could see it moving from the sky, but it must’ve been hard to spot from the surface.”

“...That translation is nearly thrice the length of what was actually said,” said Nemesis.

“Anyway, this is the real deal! Let’s chop it down!” said the other duel ranker present, Max. She was riding her bear-like Sentinel with countless blades growing out of its back. “Maddened Blade, Sip Their Blood—Ipetam!”

Following Max activating her ult, the blades on Ipetam’s back were released. They then spread out in the air around Afforest before flying straight towards it.

The dozens of blades pierced into the giant golem’s body, but...

“Ngh...! It barely did anything!”

...just like Max herself had said, the giant mass of trees and earth was largely unaffected.

“I’ll do it up close and personal, then...!” she then said as she used Laser Blade—the Swordmaster job skill Azurite had used. But since the blade was sized for a human, the damage to Afforest was minimal. “Damn it!”

“Don’t rush it, Maxie!” said Chelsea. “You’re specced against people, not monsters!”

“I know th— Don’t call me that!” retorted Max. Despite talking like a rowdy tomboy, Max was wearing a frilly dress. I thought she looked good in it, but when I’d actually said that to her once, she got mad at me for some reason.

“Whoa!” I cried out as a shadow fell over me and I made Silver back away.

A moment later, a leg the size of a building crushed the place we had just vacated.

“Don’t think we’ll go down without a fight!” I said as I aimed my left Miasmaflame Bracer towards the wall-like limb and showered it in Purgatorial Flames.

The superheated fire lit up Afforest just like the golems it had created...

“...High Fire Resistance.”

...but then, a veil of light appeared around it, greatly weakening the flames.

“That’s the skill B3 used...!” Back when we were fighting Monochrome, B3 had used this skill to weaken the heat and flames from its beams.

“Oh, right! Ray! Normal high-rank bosses aren’t like UBMs!” Chelsea called out to me.

Normal high-rank bosses... This was actually my first time fighting a monster like that. So far, I’d always ended up facing stronger Masters or UBMs...

“Unlike UBMs, they almost never have broken one-of-a-kind skills, but they get a bunch of utility skills! Figaro said that lots of them are stronger than some weaker UBMs!”

“I don’t think I know what a ‘weak UBM’ looks like!” I said. Still, I got the gist. This thing not only had stats to match its size, but also possessed a defensive skill that let it overcome its weakness to fire.

I looked and noticed that the wounds opened by Ipetam’s blades were closing, meaning that it probably had Auto Restoration as well.

“...Not being unique doesn’t make it a pushover, huh?” I said. Maybe this monster was nothing compared to my last big enemy—KoB—but it still far surpassed me in power.

The four of us were going to have to combine our efforts if we wanted to seize victory.

“Though the barrier stands vast and impenetrable, the champions arrayed against it act as one.” Juliet had basically read my mind and said, “This boss is very big and strong, but let’s work together and do our best to beat it!”

“Yeah! Let’s do this!”

And so, we all faced the Afforest King Golem.

◇

“We...won...” I sighed.

“The battle was more intense than I expected...” said Nemesis. It sure had been.

The battle had lasted nearly an hour and cost us all of our Counter Absorption uses as well as nearly all the grudge in my Grudge-Soaked Greaves.

At one point, Afforest had used a Purge Treant skill to create a tough golem army, then used Geo Drain to make the land wither and restore its own HP. After that, it had absorbed sunlight to attack us with Glint Pile, which was a high-rank ultimate job skill.

“Would you not say he was stronger than Gardranda and Gouz-Maise were at the time we fought them?” Nemesis asked.

“...Well, we beat those guys before they could mature.” Having just been born, Gouz-Maise was almost completely out of grudge, while Gardranda as I could summon her now was probably stronger than this boss—if she didn’t have a time limit, anyway.

Regardless, Afforest King Golem was really tough, and I could easily see what Figaro had meant.

As for how we beat it...Chelsea bound it using her Golden Bull Tsunami—Poseidon, then Juliet shattered the hardened chest-piece using her Corpse-Eating Bird—Hræsvelgr, then Max rode Ipetam close to the chest to tear it open. I finished it by using Vengeance on its core.

But man, if *regular* high-rank bosses were this tough and there were so many of them...wasn’t *Dendro’s* natural world just a little *too* terrifying?

“What about the remaining golems...?” I wondered.

“Leave them to the other peeps who took the quest,” said Chelsea. “We took most of the reward with this one. Anyway, I’m gonna open the loot now.”

“Yeah... Wait, ‘Open?’” I said in wonder, glancing over and noticing she was holding some sort of treasure chest. “‘Treasure Coffer of the Tree King’?” I read its name.

Oh, right. This was how normal boss monsters dropped their loot. I almost never fought them, so I’d completely forgotten about it—and this one in particular was bigger than any treasure chest I’d seen so far.

"After a savage battle, a pure droplet of salvation. (It was strong, so we'll probably get something good from this!)" said Juliet.

"I did some research on the Editing Division's site and they said that these boxes can give items you can exchange for money, a staff, or a shield—both of which will be made of wood," said Chelsea.

"...A wooden shield? Sounds like it'd burn easily," said Max. Overall, though, the girls seemed pretty excited about what they might find.

"The guild will reward each of us based on our contributions, so this is like a bonus," said Chelsea. "But since none of us use staffs or shields...we'll probably just sell them and split the money. You okay with that, Ray?"

"Yeah. Fine by me," I replied.

Chelsea had experience as the leader of a fairly prominent clan, so she immediately knew how to handle this loot. As the leader of a clan ranking second, I had much to learn from her.

So far, the only quest we'd taken as Death Period was our peace conference bodyguard duty. It'd be great to find more activities for us to do as a clan.

"All riiight! Here I gooo!" Chelsea said, her eyes shining as she vigorously threw open the chest.

At its bottom, there was...nothing but four pieces of paper.

"...Wha?" The unexpected items made Chelsea freeze in shock.

The rest of us were surprised too. We all stared at them like we'd never seen a piece of paper before.

"Hm...? They have names on them," I said. The pieces of paper all seemed exactly the same except for the names written on them.

I reached inside to get a closer look and picked up just one of the four—*a ticket with my name on it*, saying...

Anniversary Participation Ticket: This is an invitation to the developer-organized special event, The Anniversary.

If the owner of this ticket is online at the midnight of April 20th, JST, they will be transported to the designated event area.

This ticket can only be used by "Ray Starling."

"A special event...? The Anniversary?" I said, confused. It seemed like a strange time to be having any sort of anniversary.

"Ohh! I get it! These are for an exclusive event... YAY!" Chelsea cried as she unfroze, her eyes shining brighter than before.

"Exclusive?"

"A feast solely for those chosen by fate, obtained only through trials unnumbered and pursuit most relentless. (An event you can only participate in if you randomly get the ticket for it from a boss or a dungeon chest. They're very rare!)" Juliet explained.

"Ohh? And we went against the odds and got them, huh?" I said.

"Luck must have been on our side," said Nemesis. "...Not that I understood what Juliet just said."

A dev-organized event, though...? I thought.

"The Clash of the Superiors, Windstar Festival, Love-Duel Festival, and the tournament that's gonna start this weekend were all organized by tians, so this dev thing is kinda new to me."

"Most dev events are just seasonal things where you get special event monsters and stuff. These exclusive events are *very* exclusive, but as far as I know, their rewards are great too," Chelsea explained.

Well, I now understood why her eyes had lit up like that.

"The feast's appointed hour draws near. Will fate bring us champions together once again? (The day of the event is close... Will you all make it?)" Juliet asked.

"Well...yeah, I'm good for it," I said.

The event started at night, so I felt like it might impact how I felt the next day, but that wasn't a deal-breaker.

"I'm a-okay for it too! We're going to an event together! Let's form a party! And if it's an all-out battle royale, let's gank everyone!" Chelsea said with obvious joy.

"Heh! Sounds like a good time!" Max said, clearly excited.

"...I'm so glad," Juliet, standing by me, whispered silently, but not silently enough for me to not hear it.

I turned to her and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Ah!" she yelped in surprise before falling silent for a moment, then saying, "Umm... Chelsea's having a good time...so I'm happy for her...things have been pretty rough for her."

"...Ohh," I said. That was certainly true. Chelsea was met with a bunch of misfortune recently.

First, the clan she led collapsed because of a twenty-fold cheating scandal that she wasn't involved with in the slightest (worth noting that it had been exposed by King of Light, F). Then, she'd taken a bodyguard quest to rebuild her confidence, only to get PK'd by The Rabbit, Chrono Crown.

Talk about kicking someone while they were down.

But now, having scored a ticket to an exclusive event, she was extremely happy. I could understand why a close friend like Juliet would feel glad about it.

"Let's hope the event's good, then," I said.

"Yeah... It should be...fun," said Juliet.

"Hm...?" Something about Juliet caught my eye again. It seemed like she was worried, but this seemed different from her concern for Chelsea.

"Is something bothering you? I'll hear you out if you want."

"Ah?! N-No! Nothing's worry...ing... Ngh..."

She hastily denied it at first, but then slowly put on a troubled expression before looking at me with resolve in her eyes.

"U-Umm... Ray...you're...in college, right?" she asked.

Now *that* was a question I didn't expect.

"Yeah. Starting this year, anyway," I answered.

"...Was it hard to study for the exams?" Wondering why she was asking that, I went ahead and answered honestly.

"Well... Yeah, I guess you could say it was hard. I had to cut off basically all my entertainment and I studied pretty much nonstop starting the summer of my second year in high school. My brother kept inviting me to *Dendro* all that time, but I couldn't even think of starting it."

"...I...see," Juliet said. For reasons I couldn't understand, she looked downcast.

I wanted to listen to her worries, but it seemed like I'd only added to her uneasiness.

"Juliet?" I asked.

"I'm...fine... Yeah... I'm fine."

I wasn't able to ask anything more before we split up and I logged out for the day.

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Reiji Mukudori

It was noon on the next day, April 19th.

I was in my college's cafeteria, sandwich in one hand, mobile device in the other. Displayed on the device's screen was the site of the Editing Division, showing info about the exclusive event I'd be attending tonight.

There had been a bunch of such events so far, and they seemed to be different every time.

What they had in common was that you got tickets for them as rare boss loot or from chests in created dungeons, and that there were no tians involved at all.

The participants were transported to special areas like abandoned islands or unique dungeons and had to fight or cooperate with other Masters—or monsters—to come out on top.

I appreciated the fact that I wouldn't have to worry about the safety of any tians.

...I felt like I had to do that in every single incident since Milianne's.

Thankfully, the Altar-Dryfe situation had calmed down a bit after the peace conference. Thanks to Fuso, even KoB, the person we were most worried about, couldn't do much against us right now.

It was currently peaceful, so I felt like I could participate in this *properly* game-like event without worrying about anything else.

I was confident I would get to enjoy this with a clear mind.

"Rei, what're ya lookin' at? A porn site?"

"Natsume... Is that really your first guess?" I was just sitting here, embracing the joy of getting to participate in a normal game event for once, only for a fellow freshman—Soprano Natsume—to come by asking slanderous questions.

"I mean, you look really chill. That's not like you. You okay? Wanna play some cat's cradle?" she said, quickly making a cat's cradle butterfly and extending it to me.

"No," I said. I couldn't even comment about her cat's cradle obsession at this point. "And what do you mean it's not like me? I can't relax now?"

"I mean, you always look so concerned. It's like troubles and worries are part of your personality."

...I couldn't deny that.

"...I'm checking the *Dendro* wiki now. See?" I said, showing her the page I was looking at, proving that I wasn't on some inappropriate site.

"Ohh? Ohh. Hm?" Natsume put a hand to her cheek, the one that had a bit of face paint on it, and tilted her head slightly. "Exclusive events?"

"I got a ticket in *Dendro*, so I'm looking up what I'm getting myself into."

"Seriously? You too?"

"'You too?'" I echoed.

She put away the cat's cradle, took out her phone, and showed me a picture.

It seemed to be a CG-style *Dendro* screenshot and...

"...A ticket?"

...it displayed a ticket just like the one I'd received.

The name was blurred out, probably for privacy reasons, but there was no doubt that it was the same item.

"Yep! I got a ticket too, and I'm on an event high tonight!"

"Oh? We might see each other there, then," I said.

I was in Altar while Natsume was in Tenchi, meaning that there was an entire continent between us. Since *Dendro* had no fast travel, clearing this distance and meeting up was difficult for us, but since all the event participants would be transported to one place, we actually had a chance of seeing each other tonight.

"Wow! Wait, your Ray is famous! If we meet there, please lemme take a screenshot with you! No wait—you know what? Let's do the event together!"

"Yeah, sure. But only if it allows co-op," I said.

This was making me feel kinda awkward, but it was a rare chance to play with a fellow UTokyo freshman, so I ignored it.

With me, Juliet, Chelsea, and Max, we still had room for her in the party.

"YAAYY! I can't wait for tonight!" Natsume said with a joyous expression...all while doing high-speed cat's cradle for some reason.

"What's up with you two?" someone besides us asked.

"Oh, Fuyuki. We—"

"Rei and I are gonna spend all night together!"

"HUH?! Since when do you two have that kind of relationship?!"

"What she said isn't *wrong*, but not *right* either!" As I cleared up his misunderstanding, the lunch break came to an end.

...Damn. I’d forgotten to ask for Natsume’s avatar’s name.

Interlude: Outside and Within

Reality, Kurosaki Household

On the evening of April 18th, Juri Kurosaki—Juliet's real-life counterpart—came back home thoroughly excited to go on a quest with her friends Chelsea and Max.

"Hm-hm-hmm..." Juri silently hummed a tune. In *Infinite Dendrogram*, she may have been the famous Altarian duelist, the "Black Crow," but in reality, she was a fairly normal—although perhaps a bit introverted—second-year middle schooler.

Through her avatar in *Dendro*, she was able to express her eccentric style and worldview to the fullest, and nothing was more fun for her than entering that world and going on adventures with her closest friends.

"I'm baack!" Juri cried in high spirits as she entered her home and rushed to her room.

"Welcome back," her mother replied. "Juri, I need to tell you something. It's about your tutor."

"...My what?"

"You'll have one starting the day after tomorrow. I think it would be really good for you to learn from someone who passed the UTokyo entrance exams on their first try."

Hearing those words made Juri's heart skip a beat.

A full day had passed since that sudden announcement; it was now April 19th. Juri returned from school in a *completely* different mood than she had the day before.

The cause of her dampened mood was all the things she'd heard from her mother and Ray.

"Ughh..." She let out a sigh as she flopped facedown on her bed.

Her mother had told her a while ago that she would find her a tutor when she entered her second year of middle school. Juri had been able to avoid getting one during her spring break, but it was now over halfway through April. She couldn't push it back any further.

Her grades were neither particularly good nor particularly bad, but knowing how intense high school exams could be, it was a good idea to start studying now. Juri herself understood that.

She still found it hard to accept, though, because lessons with a tutor would take up time she could otherwise spend having fun with her friends.

Time in *Infinite Dendrogram* passed three times as quickly as it did in reality, meaning that every hour spent with her tutor would be three fewer hours spent with Chelsea and the others.

If the tutor only took up a small part of her week, that would be okay. But what if the tutor was strict and made her spend most of her free time on studying?

What if they put a limit on her *Dendro* playtime—and her mother agreed?

What if...she ended up like Ray and had to quit *Infinite Dendrogram* entirely until her exams were finished?

In that case, the upcoming event might be her last chance to play with the others for a very long time.

“Nhh...” Lying with her face buried in her pillow filled her head with all these negative thoughts...

“Ngh!”

...but after a moment, she roused herself and got up from her bed.

There was nothing Juri could do about the tutor at this point, and there was no telling how things would change tomorrow. So, she gathered her resolve and decided to prepare for whatever might come.

She turned her thoughts towards the event, dedicated to enjoying it to the fullest.

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A Certain Place in New York

It was late at night on the east coast, but Chelsea was wide awake.

Unable to sleep, she was sipping on brandy while sorting her *Infinite Dendrogram* photo collection.

In it, of course, were photos of the clan she’d recently lost.

“...Haah,” she sighed. Chelsea never would’ve thought that the clan that had lasted since their days in Granvaloa would collapse because of a twenty-fold cheater...who hadn't even *tried* to go for her.

"And these were the same people who joined me instead of staying in Granvaloa..." she said, gazing at a photo from her clan's golden age.

Back then, the clan had been over twice as large as it had been just before it disbanded, and it had been a well-known entity among all Masters of Granvaloa. Chelsea looked through the photos—among them a shot of her standing with a girl bandaged like a mummy—and said to herself, "I can't even say anything to Leon anymore... I'm just like his Eldridge."

Those were both the real and in-game names of a friend. When that thought had passed, she resumed organizing her photos chronologically until she came across her first photos from Altar.

I kinda remember having a hard time getting used to Altar's dueling rules, she thought.

Duels in Granvaloa were different than in other countries. While Altar, Dryfe, and so on had 1v1s, Granvaloa's duels—if they could be called that—were naval group battles.

Since the victory conditions were so different, as a new Altarian Master, she had a lot of trouble standing out at first. Still, she'd gained a friend and rival in Juliet, so she'd been able to enjoy herself in spite of that.

"...Ah," she murmured as she noticed a photo showing her and three of her friends after they'd won an event in Gideon called "Water Survival."

This reminds me that I haven't shown it to her yet, she thought. Chelsea's fighting style had changed since she'd moved from Granvaloa to Altar, and since she hadn't acquired a Superior Job yet, the height of her power was actually in the past now—before the move.

Looking back on the past as she was, Chelsea couldn't help but wonder what would happen if she were to face her friend using her previous fighting style.

If I get the chance in today's event, I should probably try that...or maybe I should just try it no matter what, she thought.

"Anyway, that's it for the photo sortin'. I'll go get some shut-eye." On the east coast, the event would start on April 20th, at 11 in the morning. She really ought to get some sleep for now.

The device Chelsea left behind still showed the many photos she'd just been sorting.

Among them was one shot of a vast naval battlefield, with her own pirate ship involved in the fray. Her vessel leisurely floated through a stretch of ocean crowded with wooden debris—*the remains of over a hundred other ships*.

This had been the result of a certain battle royale event in Granvaloa—a feat Chelsea had achieved in a time when she'd been called by a different nickname.

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Control AI No. 13's Workspace

"An eveeent, an eveeent! So much to dooo, so little tiiime, but I'll dooo what I caaan..."

In a space filled with countless floating screens, a number of cats dressed in clothing—all of them Cheshire—were singing as they worked.

Some other Cheshires were visible on the screens, as well. They were someplace far away, burying stone slates with something written on them.

Each cat looked both busy and happy at the same time.

"I see that somebody is hard at work."

"Wooow! You sure are busy, Cheshy!"

Two other entities entered the space and spoke these words.

Both of them were control AI No. 11—Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

"Yep. After all, this event's my ideaaa," said one of the cats.

"I handle miscellaneous chores, so I sometimes take charge of eveeents," said another.

"Gotta work haaard!" said a third. Perhaps because this multitasking forced him to distribute his processing power, the Cheshires spoke in a manner that was somewhat...slower than usual.

"Well, we will leave most of this event to you. Although..." said Tweedledum.

"Ain't this event a bit easyyy? And doncha think you're abusin' your authorityyy?" continued Tweedledee.

"Ngh," the Cheshires let out as all of them stopped what they were doing. "I mean...I want this event to be fun...and I got Alice to cooperate...a-and I asked you to give out the tickets, just like you always do..."

While Cheshire was in charge of miscellaneous tasks and chores, the twins were the control AI who handled events. As well, they were also the

AIs best suited to selecting the people who would participate in them.

"Yes. Once again, we have focused on Masters with sixth-form Embryos."

"Yep! The main point of these events is to get more Superiooors!"

The goal of *Infinite Dendrogram's* control AIs was to increase the number of Superior Embryos. The means to achieve that were many and varied, ranging from UBMs from Epic to Superior, as well as the presence of powerful dev-side Masters like Tom Cat or Chrono Crown.

This event was another means to that end.

"Well, I knew it'd be like thaaat," said Cheshire. "But we've held a lot of events with pre-Superiors and not many of them evolved, you knooow?"

"Indeed," said Tweedledum as he adjusted his glasses.

"That's whyyy, to spice things uuup, we got participants from a wider range of fooorms!" added Tweedledee as she spun around with her eyes closed. Though their actions were very different, both of them had confident smiles on their faces.

"...You mean like Ray? He just recently became high-rank, didn't he?" Cheshire said, remembering a familiar name that had recently gotten onto the list—one of the Embryos that was on it despite not being in its sixth form. "Or do you mean...?" he added. There was an entry on the list simply called "Top Secret"—a participant not even Cheshire himself knew anything about.

"You will find out when the event begins," said Tweedledum.

"It's gonna be sooo exciting!" said Tweedledee.

Cheshire looked at them in silence. While the twins may have seemed like polar opposites, they were actually one single Infinite Embryo. On top of that, they were perhaps the most dedicated of all the control AIs to the cause of creating Superiors, and that was exactly why Cheshire couldn't help but worry about what they were planning to throw into this event.

...This reminds me of the Love-Duel Festival, he thought. *Though I guess it's not quite as big a deal.*

Thanks to the twins causing Hannya to lose it, Gideon had yet again been brought to the verge of destruction.

However, in this event, there was no possibility of tian casualties. After all, it would take place in a special area meant specifically for it.

On an isolated island, far from the continent, the Masters would take part in a battle royale.

Chapter Two: The Rules

Paladin, Ray Starling

With college classes over for the day, I finished dinner and logged in to *Dendro*.

It was evening in real life, but here it was still just past noon.

“The event will begin soon, but we seem quite well prepared,” Nemesis said, glancing at the consumables and such that filled my inventory. I’d done various things in preparation for the event. Yesterday’s quest had given me some Scout levels, and today I’d switched back to Paladin so I could use more of my skills. “It is a shame, though, that your armor could not make it in time,” Nemesis added.

“Well, this’ll have to do for now,” I said. The VDA that B3 gave me had been completely destroyed at the peace conference, and the replacement I’d ordered hadn’t made it in time for this event. Left with no choice, I just bought some decent armor I’d found in a shop.

It seemed like a bit of a waste, but I had the money, so whatever.

“So, what have you learned about events such as these?” Nemesis asked.

“None of the previous ones had the same name as this one,” I said. “They were all totally different from each other too. There’s been battle royales, puzzle competitions, monster hunts, and so on... Like Chelsea said, the rewards were often rare items, including consumables that give you levels.”

There were even items that instantly max out low-rank jobs, which is pretty attractive for a guy whose build is incomplete, I added in my head.

“So that is the situation,” said Nemesis. “Well, regardless, you should try to enjoy this without fretting about much.”

We spent the daylight hours preparing, and soon enough, night fell in *Dendro*.

The moment it was time for the event to begin, we were whisked away from the capital and transported somewhere else.

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The very next moment, I found myself in a vast, white space.

Looking around me, I saw other Masters; more and more appeared as I watched.

"Huh... So this is how these things go," I said. Figaro, who'd started out in Legendaria, had told me of these "Accident Circles" that occasionally sent people to other places, sometimes across insane distances. Perhaps this was how one of those felt?

"Is that...The Unbreakable?"

"The newbie who faced off against just about every Dryfean Superior...?"

"Heh heh heh, imagine the rep you'd get for kickin' his ass..."

"Come on, you can't be *that* proud of beating a guy who's not even maxed out. We should wait a bit."

"True that."

Some of the other Masters talked amongst themselves while staring straight at me. I recognized none of them, and many of them were equipped with gear that looked totally different from any of the items I usually saw.

They must've been from places other than Altar or Dryfe. The eastern-style clothing on some of them particularly stood out.

Wait, I gotta find Juliet's group and... What does Natsume's avatar look li—?

"There you are!"

My thought was cut short by someone calling out. I turned to the source of the voice and saw...

...a ponytailed woman dressed in a vividly colored kimono.

The upper and lower halves of her clothing were unbalanced—the top had long sleeves, but the bottom was just a miniskirt. Overall, it seemed very cosplay-like.

She pointed at me, a smile spreading across her face that was decorated with a spot of paint.

Wait, I thought. *Face paint?*

"Found ya, Raaay! Man, seeing the real deal, your set's so dark and shadowy! The boots and coat alone make it a total home run at dark-iness! I'm loving Nemesis's 'blali' thing too!" the woman said as she approached me and slapped my back a few times.

"It has been quite some time since someone called me that," said Nemesis, her eyes becoming distant.

Anyway, it was fairly easy to guess who she was at this point.

"...Are you Natsume?" I silently asked. In response, she took out some string from her sleeve and said, "You okay? Wanna play some cat's cradle?"

...Yep, that's Natsume.

"Oh, and call me 'Alto' here!" she added.

"Sure thing," I said.

"Hm, so you are Ray's friend from school. A pleasure to meet you," said Nemesis.

"Same here, Nemmy!" Alto greeted her with a peace sign and a wink.

On her raised right hand I spotted a Jewel, so she probably used a tamed monster or two.

"Alto," huh? I thought. *From Soprano to Alto... How straightforward.*

"Not as straightforward as you, I would say," Nemesis commented. "Your name is practically the same both here and there."

...You got me there.

"Wooow, she makes quips! That's sooo cool! Maidens are so awesome—I'm kinda jealous! My Embryo isn't cute or anything like that, so I can't make outfits to match it."

"...Wait, your words imply that my apparel is on the same level as Ray's. How can you even *say* that?!" said Nemesis.

"Huh? Speaking of which, your armor is different than it was in the Hell General vid," Alto commented, pointing at my clothes and ignoring Nemesis.

“That gear broke, so I’m making do with this for now,” I said.

“You gotta be more prepared! I didn’t even log in until I finished all my prep for my part-time job!”

“Part-time job?”

“Haven’t you got one? People are crazy for UTokyo’s tutors and stuff, y’know?”

“Well, I’m all right as far as money goes...”

“Oh, how I’d love to be able to say that!”

Living in one of Shu’s apartments meant I had no rent to pay, and my tuition and other college-related expenses were covered by my parents. I had an allowance on top of that, and since most of my free time was dedicated to *Dendro*, it was more than enough for me to get by.

...Though, thinking about it now, it might’ve been a good idea to start saving up. With Rook and Figaro being from the UK, I could totally see myself wanting to fly there for an offline meet-up or something.

“Ah, there you are, Ray. Is this somebody ya know?” a familiar voice said.

I turned towards the source and saw Chelsea with the others...including someone who wasn’t with us when we’d gotten the tickets.

Next to Juliet there stood a woman dressed all in black. Her outfit looked very much like a mourning dress. I’d seen her in a couple sparring matches with some of the rankers I hung out with, and if I recalled correctly, her name was “Shion Manjushage.”

“Yeah, she’s a friend from my college,” I said.

“I’m Alto! I hope we get along! Wanna play some cat’s cradle?”

“Aha hah hah... I don’t think so.”

...Natsume tries to play cat’s cradle even with people she just met? I thought before saying, “Alto here happened to get a ticket too. She usually plays in Tenchi, but since this is a good opportunity, she wants to handle the event with us. Can she join the party if it’s co-op?”

“Well, we just met up with Shion too. That makes six people total, which works out just fine,” Chelsea said, and the others nodded.

“...This gathering...’tis truly fate,” said Juliet.

“Excuse me?” Alto said, raising an eyebrow.

“She’s saying it’s fine by her,” I said to her. She didn’t seem to have caught Juliet saying, “Let’s have fun together.”

Speaking of Juliet...I couldn’t help but feel that she seemed different than usual, just like she had yesterday.

“Ohh, that’s good to hear,” said Alto. “By the way, Ray, you’re basically in a harem party full of pretty girls. How’s that make you feel?”

“At peace...”

“WOW! What a total chad thing to say!” The fact that I wasn’t with Milianne, Louie, Azurite, or anyone else I had to keep alive at all costs really did make me feel more relaxed though.

With the introductions done, the only thing left was waiting for the event to start.

“Man, there sure are a lotta people here,” said Max.

“Seriously,” I said as I looked around the empty white space. At a glance, it seemed like there were at least three hundred Masters here. It was hard to tell what the people in the distance even looked like.

“You might not be the only rankers here,” I said to Juliet’s group.

“Hey, don’t act like you’re not second in a ranking,” Chelsea retorted.

“Well, that’s for clans. It doesn’t say much about my personal power level...” *My battle style is still far from reliable,* I added in thought.

“You should start dueling,” she said. “Be like me or Shion and take a spot in both the clan and duel rankings.”

The clan that Chelsea had recently lost was one of the kingdom’s top thirty clans, while Shion was an interesting case, being thirteenth in all three rankings—duel, clan, and kill.

“By the way, Shion...how’d you get a ticket?” I asked. She hadn’t been with us on the quest yesterday, so I was curious about it.

“Well, I obviously got it in the gacha! I’m actually quite surprised that all of you were able to get one as well! How many times did you pull?”

“Gacha?” Juliet’s trio all said in unison, clearly confused.

I, however, fully understood what she was talking about. It had to be the thing I’d gotten Silver from and had been visiting fairly regularly—the gacha machine at Alejandro’s.

So the tickets could come from the gacha too, huh? If I’d gone to pull from it after getting mine, I might’ve gotten a dupe, just like I had with the Exploration Permit.

...I haven’t pulled it in a while, though. I really wanna do it now, I thought.

“You have quite the distant look on your face,” said Shion.

“Please do ignore it,” said Nemesis. Soon after that, a rather old-timey chime rang out throughout the space.

“Oookay! With thaaat, all the currently online participants have been transported heeere! From this moment ooon, no one else may joooin!”

The sound was followed by words spoken in a familiar, drawling voice. It seemed to have been spoken through a megaphone, but it was no doubt the same voice I’d heard during character creation and in the wasteland that used to be Noz Forest.

A moment later, the lights—assuming there were any to begin with—went out, plunging the space into darkness.

Then, after several seconds, a single bright beam like a spotlight focused on a space in midair. There I saw Cheshire, standing on a floating platform while wearing a tuxedo—his formal wear, I assumed.

“Welcome, everyooone! Thank you for participating in today’s event, the Anniversaryyy!” Cheshire said with a bow. His proclamation was followed by the sound of many photos being taken.

There must be some Cheshire fans here, I thought. *Or maybe just cat lovers.*

“I will now explain the ruuules, so please keep it down for a momeeent,” said Cheshire, prompting a large flat hologram screen to appear in the air. It displayed a photo of a circular island surrounded by empty ocean.

The island featured forests, mountains, and rivers, but I didn't see a single sign of civilization. It seemed like the perfect example of an uninhabited island.

"This will be this event's areaaa. The island, I mean, as well as the area five hundred metels above it and twenty metels into the surrounding sea. Touching the barrier around this zone will disqualify you, so be caaareful."

The screen then displayed the boundary exactly as Cheshire described it.

I didn't see myself wanting to get away from the island, but I'd have to be careful not to ride Silver too high.

Juliet was nodding in understanding. She had wings she used to fly around, so she was probably thinking the same thing as me.

"Your goal is the gate at the peak of the mountain at the heart of the islaaand," Cheshire said, making the screen display a large gate. It had no doorknob or anything like that, but there were eight strange sockets on it. "As you can see, the gates have sockets that are meant for keys. These keys drop from the event monsters scattered all over the islaaand," he said, taking out ten plate-like objects and holding them like cards.

...How does he do that with those cat paws? I wondered.

"The keys are plates that each have a number from 0 to 9 on theeem. The gate opens when you put them in the sockets to make the correct eight-digit number. Hints for the answer are scattered all over the islaaand."

So we were meant to defeat monsters, gather the plates, and input the correct answer at the goal.

It seemed like a very "adventure" kind of event, mixing both monster hunting and riddle solving.

"Attention!" Cheshire exclaimed as he made the plates vanish, held up his equivalent of the index finger, and looked over the participants. "If you put in the *wrong* answer, the plates you used will disappear and be transported to a random place on the island, and you'll be forced to climb the mountain all over again."

That also meant that even if you put in the wrong answer, you could still gather the plates again and climb up the mountain for another try. I had Silver, so climbing mountains wouldn't cost me that much time. If we did this as a party, then between my Silver, Juliet's wings, Max's Ipetam, and Shion's "Prism Crawler," as I believe it was called, we wouldn't have any trouble getting around.

“Also, this event comes with a little bonus,” Cheshire continued. *A bonus?* “Instead of getting the death penalty, the players who die in this event will simply be teleported to their save poooints.”

“Wait, seriously?” Those words escaped my mouth, but who could blame me.

Dendro’s death penalty was particularly harsh even among games that had similar mechanics. It prevented players from logging in for a day of real time, which was three days in the game. However, that didn’t exist in this event, meaning that we could enjoy it without worrying about losing anything at all.

I heard some nearby participants say things like “Make that a standard feature. Holy shit...”

“Oh, but any broken gear that doesn’t have a self-repair function won’t come back, so be carefuuul.” My MVP rewards wouldn’t go anywhere, but I’d have to take care that Silver didn’t get destroyed. Just like normal, then.

As that thought crossed my mind...

“You also won’t drop any random loooot—*you’ll only drop the plates*.”

...Cheshire said something that completely changed the nature of this event.

It seemed like this was another mechanic to lower the riskiness of player death in this event, but that wasn’t the only implication.

He’d just basically said that plates could be gathered by killing players who had them.

It was both a riddle-solving adventure event *and* a direct clash between the participants—a fight for survival between Masters.

Cheshire then went on to reveal several more rules.

First, wild monsters unrelated to the event were incapable of entering the event area.

Second, participants were unable to equip Lifesaving Brooches.

Third, each participant would start in a random location within the event area.

Fourth, all participants would start a certain distance away from each other.

Fifth, the plates possessed by those who cleared the event would vanish.

“...And finally, the event can only be cleared by *the first three peeeooople*.”

That last one was perhaps the most important rule of all. It completely ruined our plans to party up.

"You will be transported to the area in five minutes! Use this time to prepaaare!" Cheshire said before he vanished and light returned to the space.

"So, what now?" said Chelsea. "Only the first three can clear it. That's only half of us at most. If other participants make it, it's even less than that."

"Well, we said that we're gonna team up *if* it's a co-op thing," said Max. "It clearly isn't, so I guess we're just gonna do it solo now, aren't we?"

The sulky tone of her voice made me think that she was upset that we couldn't do it as a group.

It wasn't like we had to do it completely solo, though. If three people could clear it, we could do it as a party of three.

Since our starting points would be random, though, the people we ended up near would be totally up to chance.

"So...it's not co-op, huh...?" said Alto, sounding troubled but still playing cat's cradle. And Shion...

"Hm? Hmm? Umm?"

...She didn't seem to have digested the rules yet.

"Well, it's all gonna be luck, I guess," said Chelsea. "But Julie, don't ya think this is the perfect chance?"

"Huh?" Juliet blurted out. Chelsea was smiling, but not in a cheerful way—it was a smile of someone gazing at her biggest rival.

"No death penalty. No dueling rules or barriers. A chance like this doesn't come often," Chelsea continued.

"Ah!"

"Let's go all-out and fight each other with everything we've got," Chelsea said, pointing at Juliet.

"...Yeah!" Juliet replied with a strong nod. Her expression now showed none of the slight grief I'd picked up on before.

"We will now start the transportatiooon!" Cheshire's voice rang out through the space again.

The event would soon begin.

"Nemesis," I called.

"Of course," she answered as she transformed into a greatsword and I prepared for the transportation.

"Oh, one last thing before you gooo..." I felt the same sensation I'd had when I'd been sent here. "...Don't forget the name of this eveeent!"

And with that, we were all sent into the event area—the battlefield.

◇

The next moment, I found myself in a dense forest. Looking around, I saw nothing but trees, the ground, and a sky mostly blocked out by leaves.

"It appears we have been flung into the forest we saw in that image," said Nemesis.

"Yeah. And it doesn't seem like there's any monsters nearby."

We had to beat event monsters and collect the plates, but I couldn't see any of them. Cheshire had said that there'd be distance between each participant, so for now, I didn't see any other players either.

"Though, another forest... Will you use Purgatorial Flames again?"

"...I know I don't have to worry about the collateral damage this time, but a forest fire would stand out too much." The PvP aspect of the event probably wouldn't escalate until the participants gathered more plates, but you could never be too careful. "First, I'd like to take a look at the surroundings and find out where I am," I said. "Silver!"

I took out my Prism Steed and hopped onto his back.

I figured I'd ride up into the sky to look around and *then* decide what to do.

I'd also like to meet up with the others as soon as possible.

"All right, so let's go up and—" I prepared to gain altitude, but then I heard a noise like a helicopter in flight. "Ah!"

I quickly made Silver dive into the foliage. Then, hiding between the tree branches and leaves, I looked up at the sky.

The source of the sound turned out to be a bird-like flying machine with two sets of whirling helicopter blades. It was either an Embryo or a Dryfean vehicle, and it had taken to the skies before I had.

"What do we do now?" Nemesis asked. Going to the sky now could result in a battle.

Is the informational advantage worth the risk? I wondered, but before I could make a decision, I heard a loud explosion.

Someone had shot down the flying machine.

A line of light—a beam—flashing up from the surface pierced right through the vehicle, bringing it down from the skies. Penetrated by the light, it caught fire, fell to the ground, and transformed into motes glowing particles—making it obvious that the Master flying it had been disqualified.

“That might’ve been us if we’d gotten there first,” I said.

“...It is best to avoid the skies, then,” said Nemesis. “At the very least, we cannot fly as long as those with such powerful anti-air capability remain.”

“Yeah.” I spurred Silver out of the foliage and downwards, deciding that we should move on the ground, using the forest as cover from those beams.

This event might turn out to be harder than I expected.

Interlude: The Strongest Pieces on the Board

Event Area, North

Atop a small hill, there stood a multi-legged machine.

Having just fired, its muzzle was hot, releasing white smoke into the air.

It wasn't a cannon, however. It possessed legs in the most literal sense, and the "muzzle" of its weapon was actually the end of its *tail*.

On top of that, the unit had pincers installed on its front, overall giving it the look of a mechanical scorpion. It was the very superweapon that had just brought down a participant using its magically charged particle cannon—a weapon dating back to the pre-ancient civilization.

"...A hit," said the woman within the mechanical scorpion's cockpit.

The upper half of her face was hidden by a visor that linked her to the scorpion, but it was still obvious that she thought very little of her kill.

"There is...no data on that enemy," she said. "I saw both The Unbreakable and Black Crow in the lobby. It would've been great if that was them..."

She was a Dryfean Master.

Of course, this event had nothing to do with wars or any squabbles between countries. The participants came from all over the world.

Despite that, here was someone who looked at it from a different angle.

"I got no idea how good the reward is...but for Reinhard's sake, I...should probably prevent it from ending up in Altar's hands."

Speaking the name of the imperator—as well as the person who did maintenance on her unit—she nodded to herself.

"I'll aim for victory while still taking them down. Let's go, Citrine."

This was the woman who rode her cherished Prism Crawler No. 2—Citrine Obliterator.

Fifth in Dryfe's kill rankings, she was Flow Princess, Juba—a pre-Superior from the imperium.

Event Area, Southeast

On an expansive plain, two Masters faced each other.

One was a bald man of rather advanced age with two different battle-axes on his back.

The other was a youth in a cowboy hat—someone who wouldn't look out of place in a western film.

They sought each other out fully intent on fighting, but their hands were now completely still. Though their expressions were full of animosity, they seemed to have no intention of attacking each other.

"So, cowboy...you're also participating in this event."

"That's *my* line, lumberjack. I thought I was lucky to be chosen, but it's lookin' like it might've been *bad* luck."

Despite clearly not enjoying each other's presence, they were actually not only part of the same country, but the same clan, as well.

"Stand aside, seventh. I will be the one to bring the reward to Lady Huili."

"That's *another* one of my lines. And this ain't no arena, partner. I'll crush ya, fifth rank or no."

They were respectively the fifth and seventh in Huang He's duel rankings, as well as two of the "Five Generals" of Huili's Army of Fools—the empire's top clan.

They competed in duels as well as in their contributions to Huili, who was said to be one of the most beautiful women in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Because of this, they had never gotten along.

It wasn't uncommon to see them squabble just like this, making Xunyu often say things like, "Man, whY's basically every one of our top duel rAnkers like *this*? Why can't thEy be more like me and Cang?"

They threatened each other, but neither raised a hand to fight.

Though their clan leader allowed rivalries, sabotaging other members was forbidden, so neither of them was able to take action to remove the other from this event.

"Tch... Just drop out after clearing the path for me."

"You really can't stop stealing my lines, can ya?"

The two then turned around and went to search for other prey.

Fifth in Huang He's duel rankings—King of Axes, Wan Zihao.

Seventh in Huang He's duel rankings—King of Cowboys, Jamie

Crescent.

They were both pre-Superiors from Huang He.

Event Area, South

"Hmmm-hm-hmm, hmm-hmm-hmm..." A woman was walking by a river while cheerfully humming the Japanese children's song "Kagome Kagome."

While her features were those of a proper noble lady, her expression was closer to that of a child overjoyed to go on a picnic. This contrast had a strange sort of charm to it, but that was where her charms ended.

Below her neck, under clothing that resembled an oddly modified kimono, there were countless scars, both large and small. Growing from her shoulders were two extra pairs of metal arms, which, combined with her own natural limbs, gave her a total of six.

Most importantly, she was surrounded by other participants who at that very moment were dying and becoming bits of light one after the next.

"AGHHHHHH..."

"S-STO—?!"

"GUHHH..."

There was death and blood all around her, yet her steps were light, as though she couldn't be happier.

But suddenly, her smile vanished, she stopped humming, and turned around.

"Whooo is behiiind youuu nooow...? No one, it seems," she said, sounding disappointed, with a serious expression on her face.

The only things left moving were her weapons.

"I was having *so* much fun that it ended before I could even finish the song," she said. "How troubling that you would stop moving just because you are dead. Isn't there at least *one* Death Soldier among you?"

Receiving no answer, she let out a regretful sigh.

"Hmm. Well, no matter. I will surely come across a strong individual if I merely keep on killing. After all, this is a festival with Masters from the world over," she said, composing herself and cracking a smile again. "This is not the island full of those I know well. To be part of a murder spree as enthralling as this... It is only natural that it would uplift me as it has."

Resuming her singing, the Asura of Tenchi began to stroll around the island.

Event Area, Middle

He said not a single word. Post-transportation, he'd realized that he was in the island's central mountain that he'd seen on the screen.

Whether it was someone's intention or by mere chance, he'd appeared close to the gate that served as the goal of the event. However, since there were none of the plate-dropping monsters nearby, he would have to go down the mountain to gather them.

Still, being here let him read the hint that was emblazoned on the gate itself.

Not saying a word, he chose to change his equipment right away. Since his gear was so well known, he'd taken it off in the lobby so as not to stand out.

Using Instant Wear, he switched to the full-body armor he usually wore. After changing, he did some meddling around the gate, then began walking away.

The footprints he left behind looked like those of a cartoonish bear.

Chapter Three: The Dark Knight, the Nukenin, and the Fallen Angel

Paladin, Ray Starling

So, it turned out the monsters we were supposed to kill during this event were called "Plate Holders."

They looked like puppets made from some kind of ore—and one of them was attacking me right this very moment.

"Ngh!" I let out a groan as I switched Nemesis into the Black Mirror's twin swords mode. The trees surrounding us made it hard to fight with the greatsword.

To avoid forest fires, I wasn't using my Purgatorial Flames and judging by how the thing looked, I doubted that Hellish Miasma would do anything, so I was left with no choice but to fight using Nemesis.

The creature's stats didn't seem to be that great, though.

It was like one of the Planting Golems from the other day, just without the regeneration. I figured I'd have no trouble beating it.

Well, you needed a minimum of eight plates to clear this event, multiple people could do it, and you could try again if you got it wrong, so making these monsters too strong would probably have ruined the game's balance.

"Whoa." Before I knew it, the Plate Holder was dead, and it had dropped a plate with the number "2" on it.

"Mhm. So we must gather eight such plates," said Nemesis. "Though, an eight-digit number? That could be..."

Yeah, there's only a few types of numbers that have exactly that many digits, I thought.

"...It could be a date of some kind," I said. "Day-month-year."

"Even if it is, there are a myriad of dates to choose from. And there still remains the possibility that the correct number has nothing to do with the calendar at all."

"Yeah. That's where the hints scattered across the island come in, I guess."

We had to gather plates from these monsters, find the hidden hints, and watch out for the other participants who may or may not have anti-air weapons.

...This event sure will keep us busy, huh? I thought. *Though, the lack of real risk makes it less mentally taxing and stressful than what I usually do.*

"Do not let your guard down," Nemesis warned. "You have no Brooch this time. That makes one less lifeline keeping you here."

"Yeah. Be ready to put up Counter Absorption if you sense any danger."

"Certainly," she said as she turned back into her greatsword form.

Black Mirror was her fourth and newest form, but she couldn't use Counter Absorption while she was in it, so the greatsword was better when we had to watch out for ambushes.

With the preparations done, we resumed traveling through the forest.

I encountered a couple more Plate Holders, but I hadn't yet met a single other participant.

I can hear sounds of fighting, though, I thought.

"They might have noticed you and retreated before you spotted them," said Nemesis.

"...Why aren't they approaching me?" I wondered.

"They might have decided that fighting while so few people actually have plates is meaningless, or..."

"Or...what?"

"...Your apparel scared them away."

"Whaa...?" My gear was the same as ever—Nemesis in hand, Storm Visage, Black Warcoat, and Grudge-Soaked Greaves.

Hell, without my VDA, my look was actually kind of toned-down from the usual.

"You scare away even tian brigands," Nemesis added.

"Everyone here's a Master, though..."

"In that case, they might be aware that you successfully faced Dryfe's Superiors and that your combat style is not well suited to endurance battles. Who in their right mind would fight you at the point where you have all your cards in hand?"

"...Good point."

I actually *didn't* have all my cards in hand, though.

Since I'd used my boots at the peace talks to summon Gardranda, the grudge levels in them were still low, while Monochrome was still far from fully charged. Other people wouldn't know that, though, so it made sense that they'd be wary of me .

"...Whoa!" Suddenly, I heard the sound of someone running ahead of me, coupled with the noise of trees being destroyed.

Looking beyond the trees in front, I saw something that deviated from the scenery of the forest I'd been seeing so far.

It looked like smoke—a white cloud on the surface, spreading out and *flowing towards me*.

"WAAAIT! I DON'T HAVE ANY! I GOT NO PLAAATES!" a familiar voice screamed.

"HYAHAAAH! I SEE, I KILL! WINNING'S GONNA BE A CAKEWALK WHEN I'M THE ONLY ONE LEFT!" another person yelled in response, making me wonder if the guy was RP'ing some battle-crazed lunatic.

"Ah!" the first person—Alto—cried as she leaped out of the smoke, her eyes widening in surprise when she spotted me.

"WHOOO! ANOTHER ONE!" the other person said, rushing to follow after her. He was a mohawked, muscle-bound man with a metal plate covering his face and a comically large gauntlet on his left arm.

A gauntlet that was currently being thrown directly at me. "Counter Absorption!" Nemesis and I cried in unison, preventing the gauntlet from even touching me.

I couldn't afford to worry about wasting my skill uses or waste time calculating if I could withstand the blow without it—every participant here was a Master, and there was no guarantee they *didn't* have skills that could instakill me.

My decision turned out to be correct, as the barrier of light we'd created immediately cracked upon impact, threatening to break.

"WHAAAT?! THAT WAS MY 'LEGEND OF THE STRONGEST FIST—POLYDEUKES'! HOW THE HELL'D YA BLOCK IT?!" The moment the attack came, I'd launched into a motion that was basically muscle memory at this point—the Impact Counter.

Nemesis touched the enemy at about the same moment the attack had landed...

“Vengeance is Mine!”

...and without the Brooch to protect him, my retribution skill pulverized him instantly.

The attack that had nearly broken Counter Absorption was probably an offense-enhancing ult, just like B3’s Atlas. Returned to him twofold, all of this damage turned the mohawked Master into motes of light before he even realized what was happening.

A moment later, the several plates he’d presumably gathered from monsters fell where he’d once stood.

“That was rather perfect,” said Nemesis.

“It would’ve been pretty bad if he broke through, though.” Knowing that Counter Absorption could presumably handle up to 300,000 damage, it was impressive that he came so close to its limit.

Assuming there were tons of Masters that powerful here, this event might’ve been more high-level than I thought.

“Oh yeah, Natsu— I mean, Alto?”

“Raaayyy! Thank you sooo much!” Alto said as she grabbed my hand and shook it up and down. “I told him I had no plates, but he just kept chasing me! I tried using a smokescreen to escape, but he was *this* close to catchin’ me...”

It seemed that the smoke I’d seen was the product of one of her skills.

“So, what now?” I asked.

“Huh?” Alto looked at my face, then Nemesis, then the place where the mohawked, masked musclehead had become bits of light and said, “I’m not fighting you! It’s too scary!” As she said this, she shook her head vigorously. “So let’s team up!”

“...From fighting straight to teaming up. Quite a leap, that,” said Nemesis.

“Hey, a whole three people can clear it and we’re friends, so there’s no reason not to!”

...Well, that’s more or less exactly how I see the situation, I thought.

“And on top of that, you’re not the type who can fight a lotta times, right? You used up one of your barriers just now too.”

I said nothing. She’d watched the recordings, so she seemed to know what I could and couldn’t do.

She was right—that punch had cost me one of my three Counter

Absorption uses, leaving me with just two.

"I'm a Nukenin, so I got a bunch of skills that can help ya escape!" Alto said.

"Nukenin? As in, a runaway ninja? I knew there was a ninja grouping, but didn't think there'd be a Nukenin job," I said.

Is that really a "job," though...? I wondered.

"I would say that your Death Soldier is no more of a 'job' than her Nukenin," said Nemesis. *Point taken.*

"The skill I used was Art of Smokescreen," Alto continued. "It spreads smoke that messes with perception skills. It does blind both friends and enemies, though!"

So that was why that mohawked musclehead hadn't noticed me until it was too late.

"That's a powerful skill," I said.

"Yep-yep. Nukenin is one of the ninja grouping's high-rank jobs! It's not very strong in fights, though!"

...So it is *a high-rank job,* I thought. *Well, I guess if you aren't a decent ninja, you can't last as a runaway one.*

"So yeah, I come with the added bonus of letting you avoid useless battles! How about it?"

This event was partially about survival. With that in mind, her skills might've been more useful to me than some additional mediocre firepower.

"I'll throw a game into the mix too! It's okay! Let's play some cat's cradle!"

"What's with your passion for cat's cradle?" That aside, though... "You can hold off on the game, but I'm fine with teaming up," I said. I couldn't keep fighting endlessly, so I had to pick and choose my battles. Alto, on the other hand, was great at disengaging, but didn't have much raw combat potential. We would both benefit from teaming up.

"YAAYY! I got a bodyguard!"

Hey, you can *fight the monsters yourself, can't you?*

Anyway, we resumed the search—now as a duo. The both of us watched out for other participants while hunting the monsters we came across.

Despite what she'd said, Alto actually did participate in the battles. Like the ninja she was, she fought by throwing kunai and shuriken from mid-range.

They really didn’t seem to do much damage, though.

“Normally, I make these poisonous or explosive, but it doesn’t look like poison would work on them, while explosions would attract the attention of other players—and we don’t want that, do we?” she explained, and I could actually see her point. I myself wasn’t using Purgatorial Flames to avoid starting a forest fire that would attract everyone on the island.

Since basically everyone was an enemy, the only ones who could afford to stand out were the ones powerful enough to deal with the consequences of that. Anyone else would be brought down just like that Master with the flying machine.

“Oh, Ray, you should put this on,” said Alto, handing me a folded piece of cloth.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Some cloth.”

“I can tell that much. Why are you giving it to me?”

“You should use it to hide your face.”

“...Why?” It wasn’t a piece of gear and didn’t seem to give any stats...

“I mean, you’re a retribution build, right? Plus you’re famous and tons of people know your face, so I think you’ll have a hard time landing counters as easily as you did back there.”

...She had a point.

“It’s not gonna do much against those who’ll still fight you even knowing who you are, but no one knows *everyone* in this event, so it’ll help a bit, doncha think?”

“I do. Guess I’ll use it, then. Thanks,” I said as I took the cloth from her and wrapped it on my face.

I thought I’d have trouble breathing with it, but thanks to Storm Visage, I was just fine.

“How’s this?” I asked. The silence I got in response was deafening. *Hey, what the hell?* I thought.

“You went past ‘dark knight’ and straight into ‘undead’ territory,” said Alto. “Like one of those corpse-things that lost its face.”

“The cloth and oxygen mask combo makes even your breathing sound terrifying,” said Nemesis. I responded by breathing even more heavily. “...Well, I suppose it would do the job of concealing your identity,” she added.

"Oh yeah! It's perfect!" Alto approved of that, at least. Well, if it was useful, then all was good. I needed to increase my chances of winning as much as possible, so every little bit helped.

Now done with my..."transformation," we resumed walking.

"Hm? Oh yeah..." I said, realizing something.

Alto knew of our skills and was worried that other participants would know about them too. However, I knew barely anything about what *she* could do...particularly, her Embryo.

"Hey, Alto," I said.

"Cat's cradle?"

"No. You still haven't told me about your Embryo."

"Ohhh..." she said, her eyes darting to and fro as though something was bothering her. "Hmm... Ray, have you got a good head on your shoulders?"

"...We go to the same college." What kind of question was that? And from her, of all people?

"That's not what I mean. Are you good at riddles and stuff?"

"I'm about average, I guess?" I couldn't recall dabbling in them all that much.

"Then let's just leave it at that. If the riddle thing goes wrong, it could be all over for us."

"...Are you implying your Embryo can't be used if your friend doesn't solve a riddle?"

"It's kinda like that, yeah."

"I see..." Knowing how Embryos worked, it wasn't that far-fetched that there might be ones that really were that weird. Honestly, seeing as Natsume was the kind of person who asked everyone if they wanted to play cat's cradle, it would only make sense for her Embryo to be particularly bizarre.

"By the way, Ray. What's our plate situation?" she asked.

"With the one we just got, we have exactly ten."

There were three that said "2," three that said "4," two that said "0," one that said "1," and one that said "5."

"...Seems a bit unbalanced, doesn't it?" said Alto.

"I see what you mean, but it's still just ten plates," I replied. "Though, if there's a meaning to this lack of balance, then I guess it'd suggest that the answer uses both '2' and '4.'"

"It's eight digits, so maybe it's a date?"

She thought of the same thing we did, I thought.

"It's possible, but we can't be sure just yet. We need to find the hints."

"Yep-yep. But wouldn't it be easier to search while flying? You *can* fly, right?"

Oh yeah, I haven't explained that to her, I thought.

"It's...not a good idea right now," I said. "There's someone with some crazy anti-air powers, so if we go up..."

Before I could finish my explanation, another beam of light pierced through the small bit of sky we could see through the forest canopy.

"...We're gonna get shot down like *that*." *Looks like they're still at it,* I thought.

"Wooow. That looks like it's from a sci-fi anime. We can't deal with *that*!" said Alto.

Well, it sure was easy to get her to understand... Hm?

"Is that the sound of something falling from above...?" asked Nemesis. Her words, combined with the rushing noise of the air parting, made me look up again.

A moment later, something broke the branches above our heads, and a black object fell onto the ground ahead of us.

Before crashing to the ground, it created a gust of wind and scattered feathers everywhere, which then slowly floated to the ground like black snow.

The feathers surrounded a black-clad girl, now lying unconscious in a small crater.

"...Juliet?" Indeed—it was none other than the Altarian duel ranker and the friend who was participating in this event alongside us. Her body and gear were both badly damaged, and most importantly, her Embryo-wings...Hræsvelgr had lost most of its feathers.

"Ray! A girl fell from the sky!" said Alto as if she had been waiting her whole life to say that.

"Shut up for a second," I said as I considered Juliet's situation.

I didn't know for what purpose, but she'd taken to the sky to examine the landscape before the anti-air beam-shooting Master had brought her down.

"And since the feathers are all over the place, I guess she used Molting to reduce the damage.” She’d used that skill with me during our sparring matches. It was one of Hræsvelgr’s skills, and it basically functioned like reactive armor. It caused it to release its feathers with a burst of wind and dark magic, making it a combination of a defensive skill and ablative armor.

It did, however, have a drawback—losing its feathers made Hræsvelgr unable to fly for the three hours until they came back.

“So, Ray... You gonna finish her off?”

“Hell no!” *I know this isn’t a serious event, but I’m not the kind of scumbag who attacks his friends when they’re unconscious!*

“But duel rankers are the kind of people who go around the battlefield singing and turning people into mincemeat, aren’t they? Isn’t it dangerous to leave her be?”

“The duel rankers I know aren’t...well...yeah. They aren’t like that. Probably,” I said.

“It is troubling that you cannot say that with certainty,” said Nemesis.

...Well, I did see Figaro churn through all of Mad Castle like a blender, I thought. *Wait, did Alto just imply that there’s a lot of people like that in Tenchi?*

“All I know is that you don’t have to worry about that with Juliet. Anyway...”

Leaving her here Fainted would’ve left a bad taste in my mouth, so I decided to take her with us.

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“I messed up...”

Juliet was in the place where Masters who had Fainted or were under the effects of Forced Sleep were taken to. It had many names, but Juliet’s group referred to it as the “waiting space.”

“Was I panicking?” she wondered, her head bowed. She was worried that this might’ve been her last day to play with her friends, and because of this, she rushed to search for Chelsea and fulfill her promise—to seize this opportunity and use it to the fullest.

Chelsea was Juliet’s longtime rival and closest friend, and this might’ve been her last chance to battle her. It seemed that the sentiment had overwhelmed her, making her overlook the possibility that there could be Masters present with anti-air attacks.

As a result, she was caught off guard, and though she was able to use Molting to avoid a direct hit, she was still shot down and had lost consciousness.

"I know I'm the *Fallen* Knight, but this is too much... Though, since I'm here in the waiting space, I guess I haven't gotten the death penalty..."

There was no telling when someone would finish her off, though.

"Chelsea..." Feeling apologetic towards her dear friend, Juliet was at a loss as she waited for the death penalty to come.

However, a whole five minutes passed, and she was still alive.

"What's going on...?" she wondered—right as the so-called waiting space around her began to dissolve.

Juliet knew that meant that she was recovering from her Fainting, and the next moment, she found that her body was swaying back and forth rhythmically. She couldn't open her eyes yet, but she could hear sounds—particularly the sound of a horse's hooves hitting the ground.

"We haven't run into anyone since then, huh, Ray? Not like I really *want* to run into anybody."

"Yeah, so far, I've just met you, the mohawk guy, and Juliet. This island might be pretty big."

Juliet then heard the voices of her friend, Ray, and Ray's friend, Alto.

She realized that they must have saved her and began to consider something else—specifically, the situation she was in.

Ah. Wait... Is this...?! she thought as a certain image came to mind—an illustration from a children's tale she'd read in elementary school, showing a prince astride a white horse with the princess clasped in his arms. That mental image made her wonder if she was currently in the exact same situation as the princess, with Ray holding her as they rode.

Hm...! Hm...?! she thought, flustered. Juliet had a high opinion of Ray. He was a friend who shared her taste in clothing and a sparring partner with a shockingly good sense for combat.

To her, he was "more than a friend, but less than a bestie"... Even if she did like him in a different way, there wasn't much to it.

Still, if he went and treated her like a princess straight out of a fairytale, she couldn't help but tense up and...

"By the way, Ray... Isn't this the kind of situation where you oughta princess-carry her? Or give her a piggyback ride at least?"

Huh? Juliet thought. Alto's words made her realize that a princess-carry would put her facing up. However, her senses were telling her that she was face*down*, and that she was on top of something.

"Hey, it'd be pretty bad if we got ambushed and I couldn't use both of my arms, wouldn't it?" said Ray.

"Alto, although Ray tends to be the voice of reason, he may sometimes do strange things," said Nemesis.

On top of that, Juliet also felt that she was tied to something at her waist.

That was when she opened her eyes.

"Oh, she's awake. You okay, Juliet?" Ray—who was wearing a dark-looking mask—questioned her with a worried tone, while Alto looked at her with pitying eyes.

And so, Juliet found out that she'd been put on Silver's back belly-down and tied to him so she wouldn't fall.

Ah. This is how they carry bags of rice, not princesses...

The reality was so far from what she'd envisioned that Juliet couldn't help but feel a little shocked.

Chapter Four: Another Team Up

Event Area, Southeast, Plains

An hour had passed since the event's beginning. The surviving participants were now enacting their plans to come out on top.

Some were focusing on hunting monsters and searching for clues to the puzzle, while others found advantageous positions and lay in wait to ambush other participants.

And then, there were some who attacked monsters and people without care or restraint.

"All right. Time to get this rodeo started," said King of Cowboys, Jamie Crescent. He was among those who chose to fight indiscriminately. "C'mere, Matanga," he said, making his crest glow and release his Embryo.

"PHOOO!" The creature made a loud noise as it manifested its form—a seven-trunked white elephant named "Elephantine Cloudscape, Abhra-Matanga." It was based on an entity from Hinduism that went by many names, among which were "Airavata" and "Elephant of the Clouds."

"Pale-Clouded Field of Unsight—Abhra-Matanga," Jamie said, unleashing his ultimate. True to its name, Matanga began releasing dense clouds from its seven trunks. So white they blocked sight of the land below, the clouds spread until they engulfed Jamie himself. They soon reached as far as four hundred metels in every direction.

And then, those same clouds assumed a form similar to that creature that had created them—a massive, seven-trunked elephant.

"There we go. That's a good size," Jamie said as he sat down on the heart of the gigantic cloud-elephant—Abhra-Matanga's actual body.

Having activated his ultimate skill, he then began enacting his plan for victory—crushing everyone else.

"All right, Matanga. Move," he said. Obeying his command, the Embryo began to push forwards, *causing the cloud-elephant to move at the same time*.

Like a thunderhead that had fallen from the sky, the giant cloud-creature walked on the surface of the ground. However, it was nothing but vapor, so it lacked the weight to do much harm to the land below.

Still, its majesty was enough to invoke terror in the other participants.

“An enemy! Disintegrating Bow of Divine Lightning—INDRAAAAA!” a Master ahead of the cloud-elephant roared, unleashing his Embryo’s ultimate skill.

A bolt of lighting that rivaled a Superior Job’s ult in power struck the massive being, despite the fact that it was made entirely of clouds.

“That’s one helluva skill, partner. Man, 500,000 damage sure is somethin’,” Jamie said, showing no surprise that his elephant had been hit.

This was simply how Abhra-Matanga functioned—the cloud-elephant that echoed its true form was now part of its body.

“It took a whole *1% of HP* outta my boy. Got a few tough guys here, huh?” he added—implying that his Embryo had *50,000,000 HP*. “Trample ’im.”

With those words, the clouds moved to crush the Master who had exposed his location. Each step made far less noise than its size would indicate, but it was still enough to crush trees and monsters below.

And, perhaps most importantly, the cloud-elephant would never stop.

Attacks on it had almost no effect, so it was easily able to approach its target and begin stomping on him over and over again. For something as big as it was, Abhra-Matanga didn’t seem to do much damage. However, since it did not respond to retaliation, it could just repeat its weak attacks until its enemies were dead.

Unable to escape or withstand it, Indra’s Master soon fell.

King of Cowboys, Jamie Crescent was a member of the top clan in Huang He, Huili Yuminjun, and his role there could be summed up with the word “tank.” His cloud-elephant had the immense HP to weather any attack and carve open the path for his teammates.

This was made possible by his Embryo and job combo.

Abhra-Matanga’s base stats were on the level of a Pure-Dragon. It had 100,000 HP; 5,000 END; and an AGI score that didn’t even reach four digits.

However, the clouds it released with its ult allowed it to grow in size, increasing its HP by a factor of 50.

This ult was essentially a skill that gave it HP in exchange for increasing its size. It did nothing to Abhra-Matanga's other stats, so its attack and speed remained the same. However, it greatly increased its hitbox, making it difficult to dodge *any* attacks—opponents had difficulty evading the giant creature's strikes, and in turn it struggled to avoid anything aimed its way.

On its own, the skill would lead to Matanga being pelted with attacks and dying in spite of its vast HP.

That was where Jamie's skills as King of Cowboys came in.

Found in the eastern parts of the continent, King of Cowboys was a hybrid Superior Job mixing the rider and tamer groupings, and was somewhat like the polar opposite of King of Chariots.

Whereas King of Chariots enhanced machines and other similar devices, King of Cowboys enhanced living creatures. One of the job's skills, Cattle Lifeforce Enhancement, multiplied the HP of King of Cowboy's tamed monsters by 10.

This skill was originally meant to help with stock-farming or subsidize a job's ultimate skill, but when combined with Abhra-Matanga's own skill, its HP went above and beyond.

Despite being a Sentinel—a high-rank Guardian—in its sixth form, it could achieve HP totals that surpassed those of Mythical UBMs.

With the addition of Lifelink diverting all damage suffered by the tamer to his monsters, you couldn't even kill it by targeting Jamie himself.

Few tanks were as potent as a fully enhanced Abhra-Matanga.

"If only I could do this at duels. I sure wouldn't be stuck at seventh anymore." Indeed—Matanga's ultimate could only be fully utilized in open fields. The confines of the duel barriers made it impossible for the combo to work as it did now, so the other duelists could overcome the limited buff to its HP.

In fact, Matanga had once been burned away completely by the second in the duel rankings, Xunyu.

"This here's *my* pasture, though. I'll crush the rest, win this little shindig and go git my praise from Lady Huili," he said with a smile even as his cloud-elephant was being continually pelted with attacks. Everyone nearby had immediately decided he was the greatest threat and had focused their spells, arrows, and thrown weapons on Matanga, who didn't seem to care all that much.

"These folks here are all hat, no cattle. They're showin' me exactly where we gotta go to crush ’em,” Jamie said, directing Matanga towards the source of all the attacks.

Crushing his enemies one after the other, he advanced to the north of the southeastern plains area until he came upon a river.

Beyond the river stood a dense forest. The river was by no means small, but the cloud-elephant could traverse it in a single step, and the trees of the forest were little more than blades of grass to its massive legs.

Jamie considered moving forwards and crushing any enemies that might be hiding inside...

“...Stop.”

...but then he ordered Matanga to freeze in place.

Seated on the massive elephant, he looked down into the forest, where he spotted a particular element of scenery.

“...I saw that in a picture,” he said. “Heard of it too. Seems like we really *do* have Masters from all over the world here. All righty, then...”

He hesitated a moment, wondering whether he should change course or press on...

“Matanga...we’ll go on a Rodeo Drive.”

...and decided to charge ahead.

“BHOOOHHH!”

“Rodeo Drive” was the name of King of Cowboys’ *final* ultimate job skill. It multiplied all of his mount’s stats aside from HP by 10 in exchange for draining HP at the appalling rate of 10,000 per *second*.

This HP drain would kill most mounts, but with fully enhanced Abhra-Matanga boasting a whole 50,000,000 HP, it was merely a drop in the bucket.

It was difficult to use in duels due to the aforementioned limitations the dueling rules put on Matanga’s ult, but there were no such restrictions holding them back now. Jamie prepared to unleash it while charging into the forest...

“If they want a rodeo, then I’ll give ’em one! Rodeo—”

...only for Matanga to vanish before he could do so.

“...Dri— Huh?”

The cloud-elephant vanished as Matanga’s true form became bits of light.

Left hundreds of metels above the surface, Jamie began to fall.

"What in tarnation...?" he cried, moments before he hit the ground and died instantly.

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Upon witnessing the disappearance of the massive elephant and the death of its Master, another Master—a beautiful woman clad all in black—puffed out her chest.

"Oh ho ho ho! And just like that, it is done!" She was thirteenth in every ranking in Altar—Dark Princess, Shion Manjushage.

"...This feels like a bit much. You actually made me feel *bad* for Jamie," another person replied, in a pitying tone of voice. This other voice was Max.

"That big thing was an Embryo, and my Judas is an Embryo too!" Shion replied. "That makes us even and this battle was fair!"

"Judas" was the name of Shion's Embryo, and it was exactly what had caused the cloud-elephant to vanish—or rather to instantly die. It was a Type Rule which gave all of her attacks a high chance to apply status effects. Normally, the status effect applied was randomly picked from a pool of thirteen, but her ultimate skill guaranteed that the target would receive a Death Sentence.

Shion's build combined her spells as the Dark Princess—a dark magic Superior Job—with the high-probability debuffs from her Embryo, Judas.

"That thing was so huge and tough that he probably didn't even notice the Death Sentence debuff," said a third person—Chelsea—with a wry grin on her face. "Funny, since there was a countdown right above it."

She'd been watching Jamie's defeat alongside Shion and Max. The three of them had met up some time before the cloud-elephant appeared, and as a result, they'd agreed to team up for the time being.

Chelsea was in fact the one who'd told Shion to attack the elephant. The Dark Princess had then used her Embryo's ult, Kiss of Death—Judas, and fired a controllable dark magic projectile. Using that projectile, she had been able to land a hit on the creature that appeared to come from a different direction.

While using that tactic to misdirect Jamie, they waited for the curse's countdown to reach 0 and kill the elephant.

It's not like it'd have helped him if he knew where we were, Chelsea thought. *Once it hits, Shion's ult can only be canceled by convincing her to do it herself.*

It was widely believed that Judas's Death Sentence could only be undone by Shion's own will.

Is that really the only way, though? Does she really have to just land it like that? Honestly, it's so broken that it makes me kind of uneasy. Well, even a dummy like Shion wouldn't answer an incriminating question like that...and she probably hasn't consulted anyone else even if she doesn't get it herself.

Regardless, nobody in a battle royale would want to deal with an unavoidable one-hit-kill ability like Judas had.

It's a reliable thing to have on your side, though, Chelsea thought. This had been why she'd chosen to convince Shion to try clearing the event as a group of three.

I'll have to pass on Ray and his friend. I'm not gonna make an enemy out of Shion. And Maxie has info on eastern rankers we don't know anything about.

Max had started out in Tenchi and had even become a duel ranker there, so she knew about rankers from the east—Jamie included.

If I'm gonna fight Julie, these guys are my best bet in terms of reliability and power... It's the best way to clear this event and have an all-out fight with Julie.

Being a duel ranker and ex-leader of a ranking clan, Chelsea calmly and thoroughly analyzed the situation.

Though, maybe we should've kept that elephant alive a bit longer. Shion would win against it ten times outta ten just 'cause of the compatibility... Wait, that aside...

"...I wonder why that elephant stopped moving," she said, thinking back to the massive cloud-creature stopping before a river.

"Perhaps it was in preparation for a skill?" Shion said.

"If that's the case, there must've been somethin' there that made him think to use it."

"Well, it ain't like we can figure out what's goin' on in the forest from here," Max said.

"...True." Jamie could see far and wide from his Matanga, but Chelsea's group had no means of finding out what was beyond the dense trees.

If Julie were here, we could've had her fly up and look around, but that's not somethin' we can count on this time, huh? They had little info on the forested area, but if the giant elephant had stopped and tried to charge into it with a skill, it was probably best to avoid it.

"Let's go to the opposite side of the forest. We still got no hints or plates," Chelsea said.

"Huh? What about the plates Mr. Elephant dropped?" Shion asked.

"Leave 'em. Everyone could see 'em drop, so there's probably tons of Masters fightin' there now."

"Well, that makes me a sad panda..." Shion was disappointed, but she understood the risk and did as she was told.

And so, the group went away from the northeast forest and headed southwest instead.

...I wonder where Julie's fightin' now. Chelsea's thoughts wandered to the friend she had promised to face with all her strength.

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Juliet, meanwhile, was near the center of the forest Chelsea's group were currently avoiding, in a space surrounded by trees that had been cut down in a strange manner.

"Ugh...!" she let out. Her expression showed how tense she was better than any words could.

"This woman...!" Nemesis said.

"...This reminds me of when I first met Figaro. I wonder why," said Ray.

"Wh-Wh-Wha?! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha?!" Alto replied, if something like that could even be called "replying."

"Oh, it appears I have stumbled upon quite an exciting group," said the fourth person here—their opponent.

Both a woman and an asura, she wielded different weapons in both of her hands as well as the two extra pairs of prosthetic arms sticking out of her shoulders. On top of that, a whole six more weapons floated around her.

She was like a many-armed deity depicted in some eastern religions.

"A-Ahhhhhhhh... Th... Asu—?!" Alto had been trembling in fear from the moment she'd seen her.

However, she was somehow able to weave together a few specific words.

“King of Asuras...Jubei Kaga?!”

This was the woman’s job, as well as her nickname. Fourth in Tenchi’s duel rankings, she was King of Asura, Jubei Kaga the “Multi-Asura,” and she was no doubt one of the strongest participants in this event.

Interlude: The Scorpion, the Axe, and the Costume

Event Area, North

Flow Princess, Juba was riding the mechanical scorpion named "Citrine Obliterator" from the hill in the north of the island towards the mountains in the center. Up until now, she'd held her position in the north, shooting down anyone careless enough to fly above her section of the island.

Now, she would hunt in the south and gather their plates.

That elephant Embryo... Juba thought. Just like many others, she'd witnessed Jamie's Abhra-Matanga, as well as the moment it vanished.

One of those attacks must've had a slow-working instadeath effect. I do know someone who can do that... Altar's "Night Spider."

The person who came to Juba's mind was in fact exactly the Master who'd brought down Jamie—Shion Manjushage.

She was fairly famous in Altar for taking a spot in all three rankings, so she was somewhat well-known in Dryfe, as well.

The owner of the first unit...Amethyst Captor. Besides that, Juba knew Shion as a fellow owner of a Prism Crawler—an elder sibling to her Citrine. It was obvious that Shion was someone to fear.

I shot down the Black Crow. I didn't go to take her plates since she fell into the forest, but even if she survived, she'll be easily hunted down by someone else in that condition. That means that the Altarian I need to look out for the most is the Night Spider. Seeing how skillfully she took out the elephant, she must be pretty sharp.

It might have been, however, that Juba was attributing *too* much to Shion. If Chelsea or Max had heard Juba's thoughts just now, they would've certainly said something along the lines of "I wouldn't be so sure. Especially about the 'sharp' part."

Her own allies saw Shion as a bit of a silly goose.

...There aren't many easy flying targets now...so I guess I should make

Shion Manjushage the "Night Spider" my priority target. And so, Juba and Citrine moved to search for Shion and her Amethyst.

Event Area, South

Deep inside a grove, a man looked up at the sky and sighed.

"This is what happens when you don't listen to warnings, cowboy," he said as he watched Abhra-Matanga vanish.

He was King of Axes, Wan—another member of Huili Yuminjun—and he couldn't help but be exasperated by how Jamie had retired from the game.

When at maximum size, Abhra-Matanga certainly had immense HP, and Rodeo Drive gave it plenty of attack power. Even Wan himself would have a hard time fighting against it.

However, the consensus among members of Huili Yuminjun was that being such a large target made it far too vulnerable to "less obvious" attacks.

Embryos were all unique, and many of them might have powers that could kill something in a single hit.

I suppose the only one who could pulverize it in a head-on battle is Lady Huili herself, Wan thought as he pictured the most powerful and beautiful Master he knew. The thought brought a smile to his face.

The top of Huang He's duel rankings was the Draconic Emperor, and the second was Xunyu. However, Wan and the other members of Huili Yuminjun knew that the strongest Master in Huang He was without a doubt Huili herself.

Though The Arts, Ming She might be able to defeat her, that didn't change the fact that she was indeed the strongest.

This was a truth that all Masters of Huang He would agree on.

"Anyhow, with my 'comrade' defeated, I suppose I will have to fight by myself. *Do you not think so as well?*" Wan spoke as though he was talking to himself, but he turned around as though there was someone there.

And indeed, there was a Master there with a spear held at the ready.

Based on his clothing, Wan assumed that he was from Tenchi.

"So you knew I was here," the spear-wielder said.

"Do not act like you were intending to ambush me. If I had not called out to you, you would have done so first," said Wan.

"Heh. I am no ninja or nobushi. As a martial artist, I will fight you fair and square—and I will win the same way."

"I like that. I will fight you, yes...but I will not let you have the victory."

They were both Masters, but their words certainly didn't seem Master-like. Most people would have dismissed this as just a bit of RP, but they were both genuinely elated to have found a strong enemy who shared their aura.

"HIIYAAH!" The Master from Tenchi rushed towards Wan while brandishing his weapon—a "jumonji yari" or "cross spear."

Wan equipped his battle-axe and prepared to intercept him.

A moment later, the sounds of clashing metal filled the grove.

"Hm... I see that spear is an Embryo."

"And your axe, while a work of art, seems to not be so."

Indeed, Wan's axe was not an Embryo.

It was a custom-made weapon forged by the clan's blacksmiths. One of its blades was focused on pure toughness, while the other was built to break through resistances, making it a versatile weapon fit for many situations.

Lumberjacks changed their axes depending on the trees they were cutting, and this axe worked on that same principle.

"An Embryo must have a power or two," Wan said.

"Of course!" the spear-wielder replied as he made the weapon's blade shine red.

Wan could now feel heat flowing through his axe as it clashed with the glowing spear.

So it heats up and releases the heat, Wan thought. The spear even launched small fireballs as its wielder lunged.

Wan was able to evade them, but the heat they gave off made him realize that they were likely as powerful as the ultimate skill of a high-rank flame magic job.

How very like Tenchi—simple, but usable and strong... Although...

"Erupt!" the spear-wielder cried as he thrust his weapon forwards, making it release a chain of fireballs.

Wan evaded them, and the fireballs instead struck the trees behind him.

A moment later, the trees exploded, and Wan was consumed by the flames.

"...Huh?" A voice of pure surprise rang out—not from Wan, but the spear-wielder himself.

He’d used his fireballs on trees many times now, but this had never happened before.

To escape the blast, he leaped away—only for his back to hit a tree.

What?! There was no tree here before...! he thought in shock. The man was a skilled Master from Tenchi, and he wasn’t the kind of fool who would fail to properly examine his surroundings to know if they were fit for spear-fighting.

The impact of him crashing into the tree dislodged one of its ripe fruits. At the mercy of gravity, it fell on the spear-wielder’s shoulder, broke open, and released its juices.

What followed were the sounds of sizzling flesh and a stomach-churning smell.

“GAAAAAHHH?!” The juice melted away the spear-wielder’s armor and burned straight through the meat of his shoulder.

An explosion, a crash, and severe burns—the chain of unexpected events had completely distracted the spear-wielder.

“This is the end,” Wan said, emerging from the blast to split the spear-wielder in half at the waist, along with the tree behind him.

Before his guts could spill onto the ground, however, the tree released a torrent of sap, which instantly caused another explosion.

The spear-wielder was completely annihilated, reduced to nothing but ash. Many martial artists from Tenchi had Death Soldier as a sub-job, but it meant nothing if the body was completely destroyed.

“My apologies for the underhanded tactics,” said Wan. “But while I *did* say I would fight, I said *nothing* about being fair.”

Despite being in the center of the explosion, not only was Wan himself unburned—there was not even a hint of fire damage to his clothes.

That made it obvious that there was a link between him and these strange trees.

“Now, the plates... Ah, here they are,” Wan said, looting the plates that had been blown away by the explosion. They had neither been destroyed, nor had they been damaged by the plant’s caustic sap.

“...So they *are* tougher than they look and feel. If I could bring this back, it would make a good souvenir for the blacksmiths,” he said with a smile before walking away. “I suppose I should go look for more. This event can be cleared by the first three players who solve the puzzle, but it is better to be early than late."

In good spirits, he began hunting for his next prey.

Whether it was a monster or another participant didn't matter to him. His goal right now was to fight to show the power of Huili Yuminjun and to present the final prize to the lady he so revered.

Thus, he walked away, leaving strange fruit-bearing trees growing behind him.

Event Area, Middle

The Master who'd started the game next to the goal—the one in the bear suit—was gazing up at the sky, watching as the giant cloud-elephant vanished.

Everyone was currently busy doing their own thing, but in the end, they would all have to head to the goal to insert their plates.

That meant that if someone set a trap here, then even flying participants would be caught in it.

That was exactly what he was doing now.

He was so focused on setting his trap that he didn't even notice *the enemy stealthily approaching him*.

Ninja-like, but closer in appearance to a desert assassin, he was using multiple presence and sound-hiding job skills as he used a cloth to apply a special poison, produced by his Embryo, to a black dagger.

A single stab to the bear-man's back with this poisoned knife would instantly bring him down.

So careless. This is why you always need to be on guard, the assassin thought mockingly as he brought his dagger down.

It was aimed straight at the bear-man's neck, but it only softly sank into the fabric, not even breaking through to his target's body.

"Ah?!" Feeling as though he'd landed a punch on an overstuffed pillow, the assassin was overcome with shock.

However, that told him the gear had a higher defense than it seemed to.

But there was something else that shocked him—the bear-man's speed.

Just a split second after being attacked, he had grabbed the assassin by the neck.

Nghh...! But this ain't a problem! he thought, taking the same cloth he'd used to apply poison to the dagger. It was still drenched in poison so potent that it didn't have to enter the bloodstream to have an effect—it was plenty useful when merely touching the skin, as well.

He should faint in less than a...se...cond...? he thought, but reality was quite different—the power of the bear-man's grip wasn't waning as he continued to strangle the assassin.

H-Huh? It didn't...work...? As he wondered why his poison had been so ineffective, he heard the bones in his neck begin to crack.

That was when he finally realized something.

Ah, so that's how it is. He wasn't...careless... He just doesn't have t—

Before he could finish his thought, his neck snapped, and his head rolled to the ground.

Silence. The assassin transformed into bits of light, and the bear-man gathered his plates.

Done with the ambusher and the placement of traps around the goal, he then began walking towards his next destination.

Chapter Five: The Asura

Paladin, Ray Starling

The attack came in a flash.

We'd moved into the dense forest at this point, so we dismounted Silver to make it easier to traverse. Before long, however, multiple daggers shot towards us.

"Ngh?!"

Juliet and I reacted just in time. She'd used her partially recovered wings to fly backwards, while I covered Alto and used my second Counter Absorption. The barrier of light stopped the attack from the flying blade—a grudge-clad spear.

"This is..." I was able to react to it in time because the weapon was cursed. Before I'd even seen it, I'd felt my Greaves begin to absorb its grudge, which alerted me to the enemy's presence.

Having overcome the preliminary attack, I scanned our surroundings and noticed that the blade Juliet had evaded—a tachi—was still moving.

"Ah!" Seeing that made me realize that this wasn't a simple thrown projectile, but a homing weapon much like Max's Ipetam.

Counter Absorption was a powerful defensive skill, but it only prevented *one single* attack, so a follow-up strike would easily break through.

"Tch!" Nemesis clicked her tongue as she prepared to expend the third and final use of the skill, but then...

"My, what a pleasant group."

...we heard a joyful voice, after which the flying tachi stopped moving entirely.

"Finally, I've found people who survived my first attack... People who can give me a true bloodbath!" The beautiful voice was thick with happiness, plain for all to hear.

A moment later, I saw blade-trails arc through the air—which were followed by the surrounding trees crashing to the ground.

Between them, in this newly created passage through the forest, there stood a single woman.

She was dressed in clothing that resembled a kimono, and her exposed skin was covered in countless scars. Four prosthetic limbs jutted out of her shoulders, each of them grasping a bladed weapon, and there were six more weapons *floating* around her. Two of them were the spear and tachi that had attacked us.

She was clearly just another participant, but the aura of strangeness mixed with familiarity that surrounded her filled me with terror.

"This woman...!" said Nemesis.

"...This reminds me of when I first met Figaro. I wonder why," I said. She seemed as threatening as Figaro had back at the Tomb Labyrinth, while her prosthetic limbs, although different in shape, reminded me of Kashimiya.

"King of Asuras...Jubei Kaga?!" Alto blurted out what I assumed were the woman's job and name.

"...King of Asuras?" I asked.

"Oh? Are you a Tenchi-dweller? You look like a kunoichi, but..." KoA said with a glance at Alto.

"Aaahh?!" Alto cowered and shook under the woman's gaze.

So she's the kind of person that can turn even this simpleminded, lighthearted cat's cradle maniac into a cowering mess, huh? I thought.

"...Some of that sounds a bit rude," said Nemesis telepathically.

"I do not recall ever seeing you," said KoA. "Odd, since I believe I would at least recognize the kind of Tenchi-dweller who would be *chosen* for such an event."

"Please don't mind me! Unlike them, I'm just a nobody!" Alto said, moving behind us so we would serve as a shield.

...Well, I am the tank of this group, so it's whatever.

"And this is not even the first time you've been used as a shield. Rook did so as well just recently," Nemesis added.

Yeah. And this honestly feels a lot better than trying to be a damage sponge against the goddamn KoB.

"I *do* recognize the winged lady here, though," KoA said as she tilted her head, presumably trying to recall exactly who Juliet was.

Though her actions seemed quite casual, I couldn't see any openings in her guard. The six floating weapons were still orbiting her like satellites.

“Truly, ’tis the hide of one hardened by battle... (She has so many scars...)” said Juliet.

“I have not died in a while,” said KoA. “The scars have accumulated.”

Changes to your avatar, such as scars or lost limbs, were removed when you recovered from a death penalty—but if you didn’t die, they would stay with you until dealt with. I knew this painfully well from my own time spent without an arm. Assuming the same was true of KoA, it meant that she’d been in countless deadly battles...yet survived them all.

And that was exactly what Juliet was referring to.

“Oh, I remember now,” KoA said as she clapped her unarmed *real* hands together and looked at us. “You are an Altarian duel ranker. The fourth from the top, to be precise—Juliet the ‘Black Crow.’ Am I correct?”

“...You speak the truth,” Juliet said with a nod. I guess she thought that there was no point in trying to lie now that the enemy had seen her face, name, and even her Embryo.

“Eh heh heh,” King of Asuras chuckled. “I feel so lucky to meet a famous westerner. I am Jubei, a duel ranker from Tenchi. And I am the fourth, just like you. This coincidence can only be a sign that we will have a fruitful crossing of blades.”

Though her words were unsettling, the smile on her face was charming.

“The fourth, huh?” I said. That was definitely the same number as Juliet’s, but...

“The duels of Tenshi are fierce and zealous, far beyond the contests waged within our own lands.”

Yeah, just like Juliet had said, Tenchi had over double the number of duelists that Altar had, so for a more accurate comparison of ranks between our countries, you had to cut a Tenshi duelist’s rank in half.

“That means she’d be a match for the second in our rankings...Kashimiya.”

In that case, the odds were against us even if we had strength in numbers.

Though, if this was an easy battle for her, then why...?

“Why didn’t you just keep attacking us until we died?” I asked. We’d been able to deal with the first attack, but she had a whole six floating weapons to work with. She could’ve easily defeated us...or at least defeated me.

“A chance to talk to Masters from the other side of the world comes rarely, does it not?” she asked in response. “I cannot talk to you *after* I slice you up, so I am doing so now merely to give me something to remember.”

...The mix of friendliness and bloodlust was disturbing, but it helped me understand what kind of person she was.

Still, this was something I could play along with.

“Can I ask something, then?” I said. Figuring it was our best bet, I was going to try to find out more about her.

“Ask away. Though I will ask you something in return later.” King of Asuras...or rather, Jubei readily gave me the go-ahead.

I actually hadn’t really expected this to work, but now that I had her attention...

“...Are those weapons floating because of an Embryo skill? Your Embryo’s the arms growing out of your shoulders, right?” While Embryos like Figaro’s replaced a part of the body, the arms seemed to be more like Juliet’s wings—a so-called “Fusion-Arms” type Embryo that *added* new body parts.

“Asura is indeed my Embryo, but the weapons float due to a job skill. It is called ‘Asuran Battle-Mounts’ and to put it simply, I suppose you can say that it adds extra equipment slots for weapons controlled by telekinesis.”

“Telekinesis...” I knew of skills that added equipment slots through Figaro, but I didn’t think there was a special variation of such skills that let you equip things without *actually* equipping them, so to speak.

“As you can see, Asura also gives me extra slots, so I can wield quite a large number of weapons,” Jubei added.

An Embryo called “Asura,” and a Superior Job called “King of Asuras.” They both had “Asura” in the name, and they both added equipment slots.

Well, now I totally got why her nickname was “Multi-Asura.”

“This allows me to cross blades with others as much as I desire. I like it quite a bit,” Jubei added.

“...I can see that.” Extra equipment slots didn’t seem like a very strong Embryo ability just by themselves, though. There were Embryos with abilities that could kill in an instant, so this was actually kinda mundane in the grand scheme of things.

That meant she probably had an ace or two up her sleeve.

For now, I would look at her stats and...

RESISTANCE.

“Huh...?”

My Reveal skill was blocked...? I thought, confused.

“Oh, did you just try to look at my stats?” Jubei asked.

“...Yeah.” *Crap. This is gonna end the conversation and start the battle...* I thought.

“My apologies,” said Jubei, contrary to my expectations. “Asura denies things like that.”

What? Denies things like that...? “You mean, it negates skills that target you?”

“Umm, not quite. Asura’s always-active ultimate skill nullifies any phenomenon at all that does anything to me without trying to harm me. Assuming you are the Dark Knight you appear to be, your cursed weapons would still curse me if they managed to cut me—so please try your best to do so!”

...I wasn’t a Dark Knight, but I understood how the Embryo worked now. She would be affected by debuffs and the like that were accompanied by damage, but she would resist things like Reveal or Fuso’s ranged curses.

It was a power meant to shift focus onto pure battle...or maybe embody the motif of the Asuras—entities from Buddhism associated with justice.

If the resistance is the ult, then the Embryo probably doesn’t have any powerful secrets I can’t see, but...

“...The ten weapons we *can* clearly see are fearsome enough,” Nemesis said telepathically, and that was exactly what I was thinking too.

I also had learned another thing about her—the fact that she had no intention of hiding anything.

Revealing her Embryo or job skills didn’t put her at any sort of disadvantage. She laid out exactly what she was capable of and sought direct confrontation.

Her build *as well as personality* were both all about pure combat.

“...So this is what Tenchi is like, huh?” I’d heard about it from Fuyuki and the others many times, but man, seeing it like this sure was scary.

I’d got the info I needed, at least. It was time to put it to use and find a way to defeat her.

“Now, it is my turn to ask questions...” Jubei said. Suddenly, I felt like fate itself was mocking my plans. “...Oh?” she added, her expression changing.

As though she'd just noticed something, *she was staring right at me*.

"Oh my. Oh my. Oh my oh my oh my..."

The next moment, she was *right in front of me*.

"Ngh...?!" I tried to jump away, but my body wasn't responding.

Her prosthetic arms had let go of their weapons, and three of them were pinning me by my arms and neck.

"...Ah!" Juliet cried out. I heard the flapping of her wings. Bound as I was, I couldn't see what she was doing, but I could tell that she was either trying to use a skill to free me or at least attempting to approach.

"Please wait a moment," said Jubei, warding Juliet off with her flying weapons.

As for Alto...she was kept in place by the one prosthetic that wasn't busy with me.

"I apologize for acting so rough," said Jubei. "I have a question...or rather, there is something I wish to confirm..."

She then pulled the cloth away from my face, taking my Storm Visage with it.

"Ahh!" she gasped in surprise. My hair and face were now exposed...

"You're *the* Ray Starling!"

...and her eyes lit up even brighter than before.

"'The'?" I, Nemesis, Juliet, and Alto all said in perfect unison.

What's so "the" about me? I wondered, but Jubei ignored us and kept talking.

"I saw the videos! They made me shake with excitement! Those were some of the most perfect, crazy, fantastic battles I've ever seen! I'm a *huge* fan! Carve your autograph on me! *Please*!" She set me free, keeping hold of my open hand and hopping up and down like a giddy child. She was acting like a totally different person.

"H-Hold on a sec..."

"The battle against Hell General! The way you rush-rush-*rushed* through those devil hordes...and the moment you bit into one of them! Then the battle against KoB! I saw it this morning! It was *amazing*! You stabbed and almost killed KoB even after you'd been reduced to just a torso! It moved me to my very core!"

"...Huh? What the hell, Ray?" Alto said, and I couldn't help but feel that she was freaked out by this.

"A slice-and-dice carnival! The counter-attacker and giant-slayer everyone's talking about! Ray Starling the Unbreakable! I gave up on ever seeing you because you're an Altarian, but now you're standing right here! Next to me! I feel like I've already won this event!" She seemed to be completely overjoyed and it didn't look like an act, which meant...

"...It appears that you have a fan," said Nemesis. "This seems like something to be glad about."

I had a fan despite not even being a duel ranker...?

"Ohh, I'm so happy...so, so happy...!" Jubei said in absolute ecstasy. It seemed like she was slowly returning to how she'd been acting before she'd found out my identity.

"I was worried for a moment, but it appears that we may be able to avoid battle here," said Nemesis. Unfortunately, I was getting the complete opposite impression.

"...I never thought I'd get to fight Ray Starling himself!"

The next moment, she unleashed her bloodlust upon me with the force of an explosion.

"Ngh...!" I used Nemesis to deflect the blade she'd swung at me while kicking off the ground to put some distance between us.

I instinctively knew her STR would allow her to easily split me in half, so I reduced the damage by letting myself be knocked back.

It went exactly as I wanted...

"Ah-HAH!"

...but then I spotted a floating weapon in the exact spot I was headed towards.

"Gh!" She'd either read me like a book or this was just her regular fighting style.

The same tachi that had been aimed at Juliet was about to cut into me...

"Blackwing Orchestra!"

...but then Juliet released a black wind magic spell straight towards me. It blew me off course—and away from the range of Jubei's floating weapons.

"Ray! Are you okay?!" Nemesis asked.

"...Yeah." Juliet must've aimed at me because she'd already seen the tachi in action before. She felt that her skill wouldn't work on the weapon, so she aided me by blowing me out of the way instead.

"Thanks, Juliet," I said.

"...No problem!" Even as we spoke, Juliet and I were on high alert.

Jubei had stopped moving once again. Instead of attacking us...

"Eh heh, ah hah, HA HA! Amazing! Is that your instinct? The super defense that transcends even AGI... I finally saw it live...and it's wonderful"

...she seemed to be *relishing* what had just happened. Her smile was even wider than before.

As for Alto...it seemed that Jubei wasn't interested in her. She'd escaped her range without any trouble.

"...Ray, does she not hold you in high regard...?" Nemesis asked, confused as to why Jubei attacked us.

"That's exactly why she's doing this," I said.

"What?"

"It's pretty obvious by now that she's a real battle junkie, right?"

"It is."

"Then it's only natural that she'd want to fight the person she's most interested in. Everything Jubei said about me relates to what I've done in battle."

"...Oh." Just like someone would start attending an idol's concerts after falling in love with their singing, someone who was charmed by my fighting would obviously want to fight me.

...Man, did that comparison feel weird.

"More...I want to see more. Slowly. Thoroughly. Until the end, until the final cut, until one of us expires," Jubei said.

I had a feeling that until she'd realized who I was, she was still partially playing around—as though she wasn't serious about any of this. But now, the purity of her bloodlust and fighting spirit was on another level.

It wasn't because her opponent was strong, but because she wanted to have a taste of battle against *me*.

She wouldn't hold back. She wasn't the kind of person who would ever do that. She was going to go all out, push her limits, and try her best to kill me.

It was almost as though she was trying to experience a live reenactment of my battle against KoB.

"...It's not like I did all that stuff on my own," I said, fully aware that she wouldn't listen.

"My fave... I want to cut and be cut by you, kill and be killed by you, love and be loved by you..." She seemed less human and more asura now—a creature from Tenchi enslaved by pure passion.

"LET US SHARE OUR LOVE UNTIL WE BREAK!" Overcome with bloodlust and affection both, the fourth in Tenchi's duel rankings bared her fangs at me.

If she was actually on Kashimiya's level, she was no doubt stronger than us.

However, unlike with Kashimiya, I could still *see* Jubei's attacks.

The Unsheath sliced at speeds so far above supersonic that I couldn't even understand, let alone sense any of them, but King of Asuras was far slower than that.

However, speed wasn't what she specialized in.

Even now as she laughed with manic joy, there were six weapons floating around her.

Each and every one of them was the kind of weapon you'd expect to see in the hands of a vanguard Superior Job. With the addition of the four prosthetic arms, she could wield a total of ten potent tools of death at once.

Most importantly, those weapons were...

"Alto," I said.

"...Yyeess?" She looked like she really didn't want to be here. Well, being a Tenchi Master, she must have understood the danger far better than me or Juliet.

But that was exactly why I had to ask her...

"You know anything about her?"

"...They say that Asuran Battle-Mounts has a range of 25 metels, but that's info people got from her dueling, so it's hard to tell if that's true," Alto explained, not daring to look away from Jubei.

For whatever reason, though, she wasn't making a move.

Apparently still in a trance, she was looking at me with her fleshy hands pressed against her cheeks.

"As for the flying weapons, I only know about four. A defense-breaking tachi that negates defensive skills, 'Peerless Excess, Hora.' The slow-killing shortsword that prevents all healing for 100 minutes after it cuts you, 'Death-Bearer, Kubigawara.' A maddened curse-spear that can slice and kill even spirits, ‘Anguishbloom, Higanbana.’ The retaliating katana that moves at insane speeds to inevitably strike anyone who comes too close, ‘The Denying Blade, Dankajin.’”

“...Now that’s something.” That was four special rewards, which was already more than I had.

The one Juliet had helped me evade must have been Hora. If it really did negate defensive skills, using Counter Absorption against it would’ve been certain death.

The other weapons were probably also MVP rewards or something close to that.

The two others that Alto hadn’t named were a chakram and a large hatchet. Like my Miasmaflame Bracers and Grudge-Soaked Greaves, they had a unique shape, making it likely that they were MVP rewards.

She was both stocked up on special rewards and had a bunch of extra slots to use them in, which was very...Figaro-like.

“Ah ha ha ha.” Jubei didn’t seem the least bit shaken that Alto had revealed all of that information. The joy in her face hadn’t faded one bit.

“So, have you said everything you wanted?” she asked Alto as her smile grew wider.

“EEP?!”

“Hm...?” Jubei sounded like she might be on the verge of killing Alto for revealing all of that, which had made Alto panic.

However, I got a completely different impression. To me, it felt like Jubei had actually been waiting for someone to explain everything about her.

“...I get it now,” I said. It finally made sense. She was both a Tenchi-dweller and a duel ranker—this was probably just how they were.

“You were waiting for Alto to tell us what you’re capable of...weren’t you?” I asked.

“Huh?” Alto was confused, but Juliet and Nemesis seemed to understand exactly what I was getting at.

Jubei’s smile widened again.

Information was a powerful thing. And in *Infinite Dendrogram*, where individuals could have unique powers, an informational advantage was more important than in any other game. That was exactly why Alto had recommended that I hide my face.

Jubei had answered every question I'd asked about her Embryo abilities and job skills, and that was before she knew who I was.

"Yes, exactly! I want those who withstand my preemptive attacks to be as well prepared as they can possibly be! After all, battles are at their most fun when they are close!" She didn't want to just massacre people before they knew what was going on—she wanted a fair fight.

That was Jubei Kaga's philosophy of fighting.

The scars on her body must've been gained through battles where she'd revealed everything about herself.

It seemed like a manifestation of carelessness or arrogance, but I felt that ultimately that was far from the truth. She was like Figaro or Kashimiya, in that she abided by certain self-imposed rules.

And, most notable of all, she'd been through many battles after revealing her hand, yet she still hadn't gotten the death penalty. She'd won against many powerful opponents even after she gave them all the information they needed.

She was an Asura like no other—truly King of Asuras.

"It seems you are well prepared now, so...let us begin!" Jubei said with a smile before kicking off the ground.

She moved at supersonic speeds as though it was the most natural thing in the world. I didn't know if it was because of her levels, stats, or a buff from some weapon, but she was a great deal faster than me.

"Blackwing Requiem!"

Before Jubei could get close, Juliet fired an orb of dark magic towards her. However, before it could land, one of the floating weapons—the chakram—flew towards it.

It traced a path over the dark orb, making it vanish in its wake.

Dark magic was supposedly hard to defend against, yet Juliet's black shroud had disappeared without a trace.

"Huh...?!" An MVP reward that broke any magic it touched... It was just like Rook's Touch of the Silencer!

Chakrams were weapons that were either thrown or wielded in hand. Using this particular weapon in the former way would've meant letting go of it, while the latter way would come with the risk of getting hit despite its anti-magic properties. But since Jubei used telekinesis, she didn't have to deal with either of those problems.

“Purgatorial Flames!”

I welcomed Jubei with fire from my Miasmaflame Bracer. But then, her floating hatchet spun around and slashed through the blazing torrent, *splitting it in two*.

“So that one kills fire...no...breath attacks!”

An anti-magic chakram, an anti-breath-attack hatchet, and an always-active ult that canceled all effects that weren’t coupled with damage.

It seemed that she wanted to do everything she could to ensure her battles would be physical.

“Entryyy!” After extinguishing our spells and fires, Jubei came close enough that we were in range of her floating weapons.

The tachi, the shortsword, the spear, the chakram, the hatchet...all of them approached me and Juliet with different trajectories.

The katana...the retaliating “Dankajin,” or whatever it was called, was still floating next to Jubei.

The weapons coming towards me were the tachi and the hatchet.

I could only use Counter Absorption to block one attack, but since the tachi was that defense-breaking Hora, I couldn’t even use that.

And since my AGI wasn’t high enough for me to evade both of them, there was only one thing I could do.

“Chaser From the Mirror!” I switched to the fourth form, and Nemesis instantly activated Chaser with Jubei’s AGI as the target.

My speed became equal to hers, and along with that we now experienced time the same way. That slowed down the weapons heading towards me.

“Agh!” I read the trajectories of the weapons and evaded them both.

They tried to reverse themselves and attack me again, but this time I dodged them by rushing forwards.

“All that sparring against Xunyu is finally paying off!” said Nemesis.

“She always gets me in the end, though!” Still, these floating weapons were easier to dodge than the golden prosthetics that had chased after me until I had nowhere to run and no option but to die.

Jubei, however, was far more than her floating weapons.

While attacking me, she herself had closed the distance between us. The four prosthetics were all holding blades, all heading towards each of my limbs.

It was like an approaching prison of sharp edges. No matter which side I dodged towards, I couldn't avoid attacks from someone who was just as fast as I was—and behind me there were the tachi and hatchet, still hurtling towards me.

That left me with only one choice—to step *forwards*.

I put power into my legs and rushed towards her with all my strength.

This was perhaps the most dangerous thing I could do, since this meant that I'd activate her Dankajin.

However, the katana didn't fly towards *me*.

Juliet, who'd evaded the flying weapons as well, had approached Jubei before I did and was now keeping Dankajin distracted.

So the superspeed counterattack can only happen once before it's unsheathed! I realized. Because of this, I was able to approach Jubei without resistance.

I thrust the twin sword in my right hand towards Jubei.

"Ah hah hah hah haah!" Amused by something, she laughed as she *grabbed Nemesis's blade with her bare hand*.

"Huh?!"

It was a technique that everyone even mildly interested in swords had fantasized about.

While I was completely immobilized by the surprising move, a total of seven of her weapons all hurtled towards me.

However, it was too late for that.

"Vengeance is Mine!" Nemesis and I both roared. She'd touched it, so our skill should work.

A shock wave erupted in Jubei's hands, and blood splattered all over.

Just like her tachi, my attack ignored her defense—it was a fixed damage counterattack. As long as I had damage stocked up, it could hurt anyone as long as the attack connected.

Free from her grip on the Nemesis in my right hand, I prepared to thrust the one in my left...

"Ah..."

...but a chill ran down my spine that made me reflexively jump to the side.

I leaped straight onto a blade held by her prosthetic and basically just *took* the damage to my right upper arm.

However, the sheer amount of attacks that landed on the place I had just been standing was several times greater.

“Mmgh...”

“So this is it... This is the thing I’ve heard so much about... Eh heh heh...” said Jubei.

While I had made distance between us, she was frozen in place, staring at her bleeding palm with an ecstatic expression.

The wound was far from deep. It hadn’t even severed any of her fingers—ultimately it was nothing more than a gash on her palm.

“Thank you for your *autograph*! Mmm...!” she said, licking at the blood before turning back towards me. “What a strange feeling. It was as though that power just burst out of my palm from the inside. Eh heh heh... Though, this is far from enough, as I am sure you know. It’s only double the damage you received, and the only damage I dealt to you before you activated your fourth form was from my preemptive attack. And since you copied my AGI, you can’t possibly have a great deal of damage stored up to return to me, can you? Or is it because your twin swords are split it in half? Regardless, the damage is less than I was expecting.”

I said nothing in response. Jubei had only seen my battles in videos, and Nemesis’s fourth form had only appeared in my battle against KoB.

Had she seriously figured out how my skills worked by just watching those? Not just that, but she’d actually grabbed my blade just so she could get me to use Vengeance...to mark the occasion with a scar on her body as though it was an autograph.

“...Ray, would I be correct in thinking that...?”

“You probably would be,” I said, knowing exactly what Nemesis was about to say. Everything that had happened so far went exactly as Jubei had wanted.

She’d actually *intended* for me to use Chaser, then just barely make it close to her...and then use Vengeance to land a blow on her, all while preventing Juliet from interfering.

“...The fourth in Tenchi’s duel rankings, huh?”

She wasn’t as fast as Kashimiya or as strong as Figaro.

However, she was *good*. As in, extremely skilled.

She simultaneously controlled ten weapons, analyzed her enemy, engineered the battle she wanted to have, and finally got the results she desired.

Though her eccentric appearance and behavior didn’t show it, she had an extraordinary amount of control over her technique.

“This was exactly as I anticipated,” she said, smiling in satisfaction at the theatrics she’d just directed and starred in.

Her words could only mean that she’d crafted the exchange we just had with the expectation that I would pull it off—all based on what she’d seen in the videos.

If I hadn’t met her expectations, I would’ve surely died somewhere in there.

“But...it was not *more* than I anticipated,” she said as her smile vanished and she looked at me. “It did not draw out everything good about *the* Ray Starling.”

It didn’t seem that she was disappointed in me exactly. It was like she was confused more than anything else.

“What am *I* lacking?” she asked as though the flaw clearly wasn’t with me, but with her.

Regardless, I had no answer to her question.

I felt like I had pushed myself to the limit and done everything I could.

If there was something I could do to be stronger than I was now, I would have liked to hear it myself.

◇◆◇

Event Area, East, Forest

Just what am I supposed to do here...?!

A high-level battle had unfolded before her eyes.

Her friend, that friend’s friend, and King of Asuras were fighting, and Alto was at a complete loss as to what to do.

Jubei Kaga is like the worst person to run into...we even work for the same daimyo...! she thought.

Though Jubei didn’t recognize Alto, Alto certainly knew Jubei.

This was because they were both serving the same daimyo family in Tenchi—Toseiden, one of their big four.

That was why Alto was so hesitant to involve herself in the conflict.

If she did, there was a chance that Jubei would set her sights on her after the event ended.

Jubei Kaga...she's such a battle junkie that she sided with Toseiden despite acting like a stereotypical Shimazu type from Nashumon...just because she wanted to fight against *Nashumon...!* Alto had actually refrained from giving her name because she didn't want anyone like that to actually remember her.

In fact, she wanted to use her skills as a Nukenin to get out of here as quickly as possible.

However, since she'd promised to cooperate with Ray, that wasn't an option.

I can't abandon an IRL friend! It's gonna leave a mark on our friendship and my mind...! That was why she couldn't run. She didn't want to fight, but running just wasn't in the cards.

But just letting him die would be basically the same thing...! I wanna do something, but what can I even do...?! This is so stressful... I wanna play some cat's cradle...! She wanted to calm her nerves with the game she loved so much, but someone would have to be quite off their rocker to play cat's cradle in this situation. An absurd act like that would have definitely jogged Jubei's memory.

There really was nothing she could do here.

Compared to Jubei, her attack power was practically nonexistent, her Embryo actually had a chance of *benefiting* the enemy, while *the very reason she was chosen for this event* wasn't something she could use in the presence of other people—especially ones from Tenchi.

The most I can do now is create a smokescreen to help everyone escape, but...

There was a chance that the hatchet would disperse the smoke just like it had dispersed Ray's flames. Even if the smokescreen worked, Jubei was the kind of person who would keep attacking even if she couldn't see anything.

If only there was something to distract her while I put up the smokescreen... In this situation, that just wasn't a reasonable hope.

Jubei was currently speaking to Ray, but it was only a matter of time before she flew into action again. Once that happened, they would have almost no hope of winning. Juliet knew that as well, and that was why she was mostly incapable of helping, aside from the fact that she was still recovering from her use of Molting.

God! Buddha! Cat's cradle! Gimme a helping hand! Hell, I'll take even the devil here! Cornered, Alto's thoughts had begun to race...when suddenly, there was a sound of a twig breaking.

Jubei was the first to react.

As though to swat down this nuisance getting in the way of her joy, she sent the defense skill-negating tachi, Hora, towards the troublesome target.

And so, the unfortunate intruder to the Kingdom of Asura died with just that single strike.

...Or at least, that was what one might expect would happen.

"...What is this?" Jubei asked, staring in confusion at her target, which clearly had her Hora blade stuck into it.

However, it seemed that this blade that was supposed to negate defense skills had actually landed in the target's body—assuming it was fitting to call it that.

The silhouette it had wasn't that of a human. It was a rather rotund *costume* covered in long fur.

The animal it was based on was...

"Ah. A bear." The words escaped Alto's mouth.

I asked for a devil and got a bear.

While that casual thought crossed her mind, the other three were *overcome by terror*.

"Shu...? No. You can't be him...!" At first, Ray immediately associated this unique appearance with his brother, but this was not him.

This was certainly a bear costume, but not Shu's Hind Bear.

It was also wearing an ushanka on its head and a gas cylinder on its back...and its fur was pure white.

Most notably, Ray felt no familiarity in the gaze of whoever was inside the costume. Instead, it felt like the bear was a hunter evaluating his prey.

"...The one who treads upon divine ground and answers the call of predation's chains." Though spoken in her own language, Juliet's words implied that she knew who this was.

As for Jubei...

"Eh heh. Eh heh heh... I did not know that this event also had your kind...*Superiors*."

...she had shifted her divided attention away from Ray and Juliet, and was now focused entirely on the person in the costume.

Her words, specifically *Superior*, made Ray remember something Shu had once said to him.

“Costumes are more usefur than you’d expect. I ain’t the only one using them, that’s fur sure.”

The Granvaloan “Human Bomb,” Antimicrobic Soy Sauce.

The Tenchi-dwelling “Ironman Mechanicus,” Bachigo Futae.

Legendaria’s most wanted, “Hypersomnia,” ZZZ.

And the person standing before them now.

Ray used Reveal and saw his name listed among the stats.

“God Hunter, Carl Lourlou!”

A member of Caldina’s strongest clan, Sefirot, as well as the bearer of the title “Multifariously Invincible.”

This was the spice that the control AI had prepared for this event—the Superior said to have the strongest defense of any Master in the world.

Interlude: The Ranker Known as Chelsea

Event Area, South, River

After taking out Jamie Crescent and his Abhra-Matanga, Chelsea's group decided to look around for any hint that would help them solve the password at the goal.

As the number of people in the event dropped, those remaining would be carrying more plates—and those with enough would start heading towards the gate. Knowing that only a total of three players could win, it was all but certain that some were already rushing to the goal.

Since incorrect answers at the gate would send you to some other place on the island, though, taking the time to look for hints about the right answer was a better plan than rushing to make a guess.

Because of this, Chelsea's trio decided to split up and search the island's south for clues.

"Hmm..." As Chelsea walked beside a river, occasionally dipping her hand into the water, she was lost in thought.

Another river, much like the one on the island's east side. Good for drinkin' too. Despite the isolation, the island's got some really diverse plant life and tons of water. Dunno if it's related to the event itself, but I wouldn't mind knowin' its coords.

An ex-Granvaloan like her couldn't help but see this island as one big treasure trove.

Granvaloa was a nation of linked-together seacraft drifting over the waves, but they, too, wished to have land of their own, be it a bit of coast or an island. One merely had to look at their adventurer's guilds to see this—Granvaloa *always* had search quests for habitable islands posted.

Just showin' them this island would make ya filthy rich... she thought. *That reminds me... I haven't seen any familiar Granvaloans here. I guess the ones who made it here must have joined after I left?*

She checked the relevant info windows, but found nothing about this island's location.

If this was any other game, one might simply assume that this area had been created specifically for this event and would disappear when it ended. But seeing as this was *Infinite Dendrogram*, the island was more likely to be a naturally occurring part of the world that had been remodeled to suit the purpose.

Well, whatever. I got Julie and the prize to worry about, sooo... Chelsea thought as she clasped her hands together before spreading them apart, creating a fist-sized orb of water.

"Here ya go," she said before throwing the water-orb spawned by her Poseidon's skill towards a tree growing on the riverbank.

The moment the orb touched the tree, *it immediately exploded*.

"Figured it was a trap," she said. "Come on out, then."

"Hmph. I suppose you saw right through it."

From behind another tree stepped a bald man with a double-headed battle-axe on his back—King of Axes, Wan Zihao.

"How did you know the tree was a trap?"

"It's obvious when ya look at the flora around it. I've been to a riverside in the east of the island, and though the temperature and altitude's the same in both places, you got a tree here that's nothin' like what I saw over there. Thought it was a hint at first, but I gave it a little tap just in case and it went boom."

"A sharp-sighted girl, aren't you?" Wan said in understanding as many trees exactly like the one Chelsea had just blown up sprouted all around him, giving the surrounding forest a new color.

"You don't look like a craftin' job. I'm guessin' the trees are your Embryo?" Chelsea asked.

"Indeed. This is my Embryo, Zaqqum."

Type Legion, "Orchard of Hell, Zaqqum."

It bore the name of a cursed tree said to spring up from the Islamic hell of Jahannam. When consumed, its fruits made the body boil before tearing it apart in a geyser of bodily fluids.

Based on something like that, it was no surprise that the Embryo was highly toxic as well.

It manifested as a Legion of trees growing fruits ripe with juices that were both acidic enough to melt through gear and flesh...and explosive enough to blow them up. And to top it off, if the trees were destroyed, they released acid and explosions even stronger than those of its fruit.

The drawback was that Wan had no direct control over the trees, forcing him to scatter them about and wait for the enemy to trigger them, but...

“Sure are a lot of ’em. Isn’t this dangerous to you too?” Chelsea asked.

“No need to worry,” Wan grinned, punching the nearest of Zaqqum’s trees. The tree exploded, but Wan and his gear were completely unscathed. “Zaqqum does no harm to me.”

This was the most terrifying thing about Zaqqum. It wasn’t its toxicity, explosiveness, numbers, or range, but the fact that Wan was completely immune to its effects, giving him an advantage in any area where his Embryo was summoned.

“Hm...? Looks like it’d be hella useful in duels,” Chelsea commented.

“It is! I am fifth in Huang He’s duel rankings—King of Axes, Wan Zihao! The third of the Five Generals gracefully serving the great and beautiful Huili!”

“That so? I’m Chelsea, a Great Pirate and eighth in Altar’s duel rankings.”

Following these introductions, the two equipped their double-headed axes and faced one another.

Their entire exchange so far was only meant to buy time. Wan needed to grow as many of Zaqqum’s trees as he could, while Chelsea had to prepare herself for combat and find out more about her opponent.

“What a coincidence,” said Wan. “We are both duel rankers and axe-wielders.”

“Yep.”

“But there is one major difference between us. Do you know what it is?”

“Nope. Haven’t the slightest. How ’bout a hint?” Chelsea said playfully.

In response, Wan roared, “I am...a Superior Job!” Not a moment after this declaration, he rushed towards her.

“Thought as much!” Chelsea replied, just barely managing to block Wan’s axe. The force of the strike sent her backwards.

Well, his stats are obviously better than mine, that’s for sure. Oh! she thought as she kicked off the ground to sidestep one of Zaqqum’s trees.

However, Wan then rushed closer and cut down the very same tree that

Chelsea had just evaded, sending a rush of fire and acid towards her.

"Whoa!" she cried, creating a water barrier just barely in time to block the attack. She then retaliated with a water projectile, but Wan deflected it with just a swing of the axe.

"A water-wielder! Such a weak power!" he remarked.

"Maybe it is!" Chelsea said. Pushed back by Wan's ceaseless offense, Chelsea had moved closer to the river. While she had a Great Pirate skill that let her walk on water, Wan had to get soaked to his knees.

However, he wouldn't be a vanguard SJ if he were slowed down by something as puny as water.

Making Zaqqum grow even in the river, he kept closing the distance between him and Chelsea.

I knew it'd be like this, Chelsea thought. She wanted to sigh with resignation at how expected this whole situation was. *He can grow them in water* and *there's a whole lotta them now. Both my ult and World Reversal Waterfall are a no-no. They'd just make the trees explode.*

The skills she favored in duels generally had a bigger area of effect. With her combat style focusing on weaponizing the liquids she summoned, she needed all the volume she could get.

Here, however, doing so would cause a chain reaction between all the Zaqqum trees, quickly showering her in acid and fire.

And since coming too close would mean being overwhelmed by Wan's stats, she was forced to keep her distance while firing off ineffective bolts of water.

Ultimately, though, it didn't matter if Chelsea was wary of Zaqqum.

"HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

If she didn't start the chain reaction, Wan could simply do it himself. Cutting down a single tree with his axe was enough to instantly cover the area in acid and explosions.

This was actually his primary mode of fighting, which was why Jamie had called him "lumberjack."

His ult allowed him to instantly create enough Zaqqum trees to blanket the entire arena stage, letting him start the chain reaction on command—a move too overwhelming for AGI builds to dodge, and too acidic for END builds to withstand.

His rival, Jamie, had to content himself with a lower duel ranking, because this move was enough to burn up Abhra-Matanga even when it was the largest size it could reasonably reach on the cramped dueling stage.

Zaqqum was a fearsome Embryo that could turn an entire area into one giant acid-explosion trap.

It was the reason why Wan was well-known and widely feared.

The info didn't lie. It sure is a duelist's Embryo, Chelsea thought. She'd actually known about this power before going into the battle. Everything she'd said when asked how she'd noticed Zaqqum had been a bluff—she'd actually recognized the tree's shape the moment she saw it.

He can summon tons of the trees and choose who's affected by them, but he can't detonate them from a distance. They only drop their fruits on impact and explode only if destroyed. Those are their flaws.

Chelsea even knew a few limitations Wan hadn't disclosed to her.

Shortly after she'd found out she would participate in this event, she'd gone on the internet to check out combat videos of duel rankers from all over *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Her reasoning was that if she and Juliet were chosen, other duel rankers would be chosen, as well.

And it's lookin' like he doesn't know either of the ways I fight, she thought. Chelsea knew Wan's fighting style, but Wan didn't know hers.

There was nothing strange about that. While most duel rankers would spend a lot of time researching the fellow rankers of their own countries, there was little point in doing the same for foreign duelists, especially if they weren't the top champions. Being from Huang He, it wasn't unusual at all that Wan didn't know anything about the eighth-ranked duelist in Altar.

Knowing about Chelsea the Altarian Duelist wouldn't have meant much in this situation, in any case, because *that wasn't the Chelsea he was fighting right now*.

"Your endurance is impressive, but...it is time to end this!" Wan cried. Chelsea used water to shield herself from the acid and fire while keeping a distance from Wan, but his immense stats and the time she spent on defense allowed him to draw closer and closer with every passing moment.

Wan created a Zaqqum forest and immediately detonated it in order to force Chelsea to defend herself, opening her up for an attack. The explosion, of course, would never deal even a single point of damage to him.

Wan then rushed through the inferno of acid and explosions to finish Chelsea off...or, at least, he *tried* to do that.

"...What?" Before he could approach her, he found himself lying on his back in the river.

At the unpleasant feeling of water rushing into his nostrils, he tried to stand up, but found himself unable to. After all, *it was hard to stand without legs*.

His were gone from the knee-down, as though blown away by an explosion.

What the hell?! Zaqqum ain't supposed to hurt me! he thought in shock, breaking character for a moment inside his own head. He tried not to show it on his face, even though the incomprehensible situation he found himself in made this difficult. Ultimately, though, it was obvious he was completely baffled.

At that moment, another explosion rang out—this time blowing away the arm holding his axe.

"This isn't...! It's *not* Zaqqum...!" Though it was too late, he realized that the explosions weren't caused by his Embryo.

"...So it finally hit ya, huh?" Chelsea said, looking down at him. Wan stared back at her, his vision filled with a cute, smiling face whose eyes were nonetheless icy cold.

And in her hand there was a Gem—a spell-storing consumable.

"Gems...? But...when did you take them out? And how did you hit—?"

"Not tellin'." Chelsea cut him off and threw the Gem at him.

The resulting Crimson Sphere burned away Wan's already half-dead body with little fanfare. The many plates he had collected scattered into the river, and all the remaining Zaqqum trees vanished.

Just like his rival before him, the duelist from Huang He found himself sent back without even knowing what had happened to him.

After gathering the plates, Chelsea quickly left the scene and headed downriver. The sounds of their battle might've attracted other participants, and she didn't want to risk dealing with them.

Mitigating risk was also the reason she hadn't answered Wan's questions and proudly explained how she'd managed to win—that might have inspired him to take up a mission of revenge in the future.

Chelsea knew that a brief feeling of superiority simply wasn't worth revealing your hand.

Right now she had none of the cheer she showed her friends, nor the mischievousness she showed her enemies. She only calmly weighed the pros and cons of her decisions.

He was a pain, but I've got some plates now. This should be enough for one attempt at an answer, so now I gotta find some hints. I wonder if those other two are having any luck, she thought.

Thinking of Max and Shion brought back a little of her usual cheer. The only things on her mind now were the plates she'd collected, her two friends, and the rival she would soon fight; Wan had already been forgotten.

The fact that she took out a top-ranking duelist who held a Superior Job didn't move her in the slightest. This wasn't anything unusual for her, after all.

At least, it wasn't unusual for the person she'd been before moving to Altar.

Chapter Six: The Asura and the Hunter

Paladin, Ray Starling

All of a sudden, we were joined by God Hunter, Carl Lourlou.

I didn't stop to wonder why he was here—after all, this was an event involving Masters from all over, so it wasn't that much of a surprise to run into a foreign Superior.

The real problem was the situation. We already barely stood a chance against just Jubei. With a Superior joining in, things were probably going to go from bad to worse.

"Carl Lourlou," said Jubei. "You once served Tenchi's Seihakuto clan. I heard you had left for the continent by the time I became a Superior Job... I certainly did not expect to meet you here."

She seemed to have a decent degree of interest in him.

The God Hunter, on the other hand, was looking not at her, but us. I could tell that even through the beady eyes of his bear costume.

Was he targeting us because we were the easier prey...? Weaklings were the first to die in a battle royale, so it *would* make sense.

More importantly, how do we deal with this...? I wondered.

"Eh heh heh," Jubei giggled, interrupting my thoughts. "I suppose I shall start with him, then."

Then, she rushed straight towards GH.

"Reasonable" meant nothing to an asura—the one who embodied strife.

All her weapons at the ready, Jubei Kaga turned to face Carl.

"Huh?!" I couldn't hide my surprise.

"Ray Starling," she said. "Let us meet again later. Until then, please think about what it was I lacked. I will do so as well... Ah ha ha ha HA HA HA HA! ENTRYYYY!"

After giving me the smile of someone in the throes of delirium, she let out a mad laugh and began to attack GH repeatedly.

This was no bluff—Jubei actually *had* shifted her sights from us to him. However, it didn't seem that she just wanted to fight the stronger foe first. It was more like...she was saving the main dish for later.

The God Hunter, on the other hand, was standing in place, not saying a word. The flying weapons had touched him many times by now, but his suit remained undamaged.

"FANTASTIIIIIIIC!" Jubei let out a cry as she raised up the katanas held in her four prosthetic arms and swung them down at GH.

For the first time since the encounter began, Carl did something to defend himself, raising his "arm" to block the attack.

Once again, the costume wasn't even scratched, but the weight of the impact cracked the ground beneath him in four directions.

These attacks were nothing like the ones she'd used on me—Jubei was really going all-out.

I didn't know whether I should be more afraid of her power...or Carl for withstanding it.

Regardless, this was likely a clash between two of the strongest Masters in this event, and we honestly had no business just sitting around and watching it.

"...Hey! Ray! Juliet! Let's get outta here!" Realizing that there was no better time, Alto gathered her resolve, raised her voice, and threw out a mix of smokescreen and firecrackers.

She'd basically read my mind.

"...Yeah!" I said in response. The smoke hid us from sight and the firecrackers drowned out the sound of our movement.

Her two-layered escape art allowed us to run away without issue.

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Event Area, South, Forest

Still silent as stone, Carl watched as Ray's group ran away, while Jubei paid no heed and continued to slice at him.

This marked a parting with her "fave," but she was absolutely certain that they now shared a bond—and that it wouldn't be long until they would enjoy a much better fight.

So for now, she would enjoy a battle against this unexpected behemoth of a foe.

"My beloved curseblaaades, rise and shiiine!" She barked out an order to the four katanas in her prosthetic arms.

The curseblades began to release a dark purple aura which soon enveloped Jubei's entire body.

A moment later, her stats rose at an explosive rate.

"Ah-HA!"

The four blades weren't MVP rewards, but some would say that they were more powerful and dangerous than some Epics or Legendaries.

In the past, all of them had been counted among the hundred most famous blades in Tenchi, but over the centuries of their existence, they had been stained by an immense amount of curses and grudge. As a result, they had been turned into "curseblades."

They greatly buffed the user's stats, but at a great cost. The user would lose control over their body and be rendered unable to unequip anything, as well as suffering continuous HP drain and eventually self-destruction.

The price was far too great for most to pay, and these curseblades had driven many swordsmen of old to go on rampages that ended in their death.

However, Jubei was an exception. Asura's ultimate skill negated all effects that weren't accompanied by damage, and this fully applied to the curseblades' debuffs.

This allowed her to use them however she wanted without any drawbacks.

"Hi-Fu-Mi-Yo-I-Mu-Na-Yaaa!" While chanting as though performing an invocation, Jubei continued her onslaught.

All floating weapons besides the retaliating Dankajin and the breath-dispersing axe, as well as the four curseblades held by Asura—a total of eight weapons—were absolutely showering Carl in attacks.

This chain of blows, each of which might easily cut apart even a vanguard SJ, were completely deforesting the area just from the shock waves.

The weapons' speed combined with their sheer number made their assault impossible to evade or deflect.

Carl, however, wasn't attempting to do either of those things.

He simply took every attack...yet there wasn't a scratch on him.

"Toughness? Hardness? No, this is something else!" said Jubei. Her excitement was rising, but she was still able to analyze the situation calmly.

My attacks aren't ineffective! His HP is *dropping! But the damage is* *lower than expected! He also isn't getting any debuffs! His bones aren't breaking and I see no bleeding! His movements are hardly hampered at all! And there is still not a single tear on his costume!* Jubei's relentless onslaught was more dangerous than that of an ordinary pre-Superior, but despite that, she hadn't managed to harm a single hair on the God Hunter.

There were no cuts on the suit—only short-lived little holes that soon snapped closed. It was as though her blades weren't cutting into him, but merely brushing against the plush costume.

By now, she'd done enough damage to kill ten vanguard SJs, but Carl wasn't even flinching.

What kind of skill is letting him withstand this? His HP isn't 0, so it's not a Death Soldier situation. Rear Soldier's Last Stand allows you to survive with 1 HP, but that skill would have expired by now. Is it some sort of spell? Doesn't seem to be. Jubei was attacking him with her chakram, but it hadn't broken any spells.

She didn't know how, but it was clear that Carl couldn't be killed by mere damage.

If this was some sort of defensive skill, the fact that the defense-negating Hora didn't work could only mean that the nature of the defense was different than anything she'd ever seen.

"I cannot see your wounds. This is not to my taste," Jubei muttered in dissatisfaction, never ceasing her attack.

She found joy in cutting and being cut, giving and taking wounds. An enemy who couldn't be harmed no matter how hard she cut him was no fun for her. It didn't take long after this for her to lose her interest, then excitement, and finally calm down entirely. Her ideal opponents were those who struggled to win tooth and nail no matter how many injuries they suffered or limbs they lost.

Even though Ray was far below Carl in power, there was no doubt that he was Jubei's main dish.

Carl did not respond to any of her attacks or her complaints. Instead, he pulled out a hose linked to the gas canister on his back.

The flamethrower-like weapon was aimed straight at Jubei—and a moment later, it released a scarlet spray.

"I expected as much." It was easy to tell what kind of attack this would be just by looking at the weapon, and Jubei was prepared to launch her breath-dispersing axe towards the crimson mist.

Split apart, the spray vanished...but the trees it touched all decayed at an extreme rate.

“Poison...? Since you only just used it, I assume the strength of the poison is based on the damage you’ve received?”

Carl neither confirmed nor denied that, but Jubei’s analysis was indeed correct. The weapon was “The Scarlet Brewer, Drag-Blood,” and the power of the spray it released depended on the damage the wielder had suffered.

With how much Jubei had attacked him, the power of the spray was now so great that it made the run-of-the-mill Poison effect seem inconsequential. Even if she’d dispersed it, the tiniest droplet in the air would be enough to give Jubei a crippling debuff.

However, she seemed completely unaffected.

“Poison I breathe in or drink doesn’t work on me. After all, they only start dealing damage *after* they apply their debuffs.”

Carl once again said nothing. She’d basically revealed part of her capabilities, but he didn’t seem to think that she was bluffing.

Taking as much damage as possible, then using that to clear the area, was one of his go-to techniques—and if that didn’t work, his compatibility against Jubei was terrible.

Jubei couldn’t cut Carl to death, but Carl’s poison didn’t work on Jubei. Neither of them could put an end to this battle.

While Jubei found Carl to be “against her tastes,” Carl found Jubei to be “bothersome.”

Still silent, Carl switched his weapon from Drag-Blood to an unusual staff shaped like a deer’s antlers. He then swung around like a Druid mid-ritual, making new trees sprout in place of the ones he’d withered with his poison.

As eerie as this sight was, the lingering spray didn’t seem to harm the trees.

Realizing what Carl was trying to do, Jubei tried to close the distance between them again, but he used the new trees and spray as cover for his escape.

“A Superior—running away! Your deviousness is irritating!” Though her face showed no anger, she voiced her honest thoughts.

However, this was an event with a well-defined objective—and for everyone but Jubei, confrontation was a means to an end, not a goal in and of itself. Because of this, avoiding bothersome opponents was the wise thing to do, especially if you'd seen easier prey—and a three-for-one deal, at that!

Naturally, Jubei wouldn't tolerate having her main dish taken away from her.

She couldn't let him flee or hunt down Ray, so she sliced through the trees and poison to chase after him.

Being faster than him, she caught up in no time...

"Ah...!"

...but that was when her battle instincts flared into life.

The moment she turned and jumped away, a heavy, metallic sound rang out behind her.

The noise had been made by a closing bear trap—perhaps one of the most well-known tools for trapping animals. Its maw-like blades were coated in some sort of poison—and its presence wasn't the only change to the environment. The sounds of some mechanism activating could be heard, as though in response to Jubei triggering the bear trap.

"...You *are* the God Hunter, after all."

It was one of the hunter grouping's Superior Jobs, and it was focused on "hunting" rather than "combat." The job granted toughness that kept the owner active for long periods of time without food or water, superb tracking capabilities, and, most relevantly to this situation, trap creation.

One of the God Hunter's skills was called "Quick Trap." Just as the name implied, it allowed high-speed creation of traps using the items in its user's inventories, and Carl had used it to set countless traps on the path he traveled.

He'd obscured Jubei's sight and pretended to chase after Ray's group, leading her straight into a death trap.

Asura's ult, "Speak of Strife by Blade—Asura," negated all effects that weren't accompanied by damage, but if she was targeted by so many traps at once, she would surely be hurt and collapse.

"Impertinent."

However, that couldn't happen when Asura's Master was Jubei.

Her blades deflected any and all traps coming towards her from every direction. The poison arrows, spells, explosions, spike pits—she broke through everything.

This was only to be expected. Jubei *was* King of Asura. She *manually* commanded six flying weapons, with nothing whatsoever to support her.

The kind of processing power she employed for this was beyond the capabilities of a normal person.

Because of this, none of the traps could take her life...but they did *overwhelm her brain*.

Not missing the opportunity, Carl had approached her from behind. Instead of the bear costume, he was now wearing leaf-covered clothing, like a hunter's ghillie suit.

This outfit had a forest-exclusive camouflage effect, which, when mixed with the scent- and presence-eliminating skills he had as God Hunter, had allowed him to approach Jubei undetected.

He'd lured her into this trap-filled space not to buy time for his escape, but to set her up for a sure-kill attack.

Only Life Can Pay For Life: Drag-Pain

The large knife in his hand was a Legendary MVP reward that accumulated the damage he'd received and stored it in the weapon's tip as fixed damage. In a way, it was much like Ray's Vengeance.

"Ah..." Jubei finally felt the destruction approaching her from behind. However, it was too late to evade or even turn around. Because of this, she twisted one of her prosthetics in an inhuman way to swat the approaching knife aside.

At the moment of impact, destructive energy began to spread out from the blade—but before it could reach her, she *purged the prosthetic*.

The obscene amount of fixed damage instantly made the freed prosthetic vanish, but that was the extent of the destruction.

Shock overcame Carl. Jubei reacting to his surprise attack and the disappearance of the thing he'd struck had put him off-balance, opening him up for a counterattack.

Like a sonic whirl, Jubei turned back to Carl...

"Hidden Blade..."

...and with her own flesh-and-blood hands, she swung a single katana.

This was the strongest weapon she had—the Mythical "Amasser's Woundblade, Kasanehime."

It had the terrifying power of *releasing a strike that dealt damage equal* *to all damage dealt to others in the past sixty minutes*.

"Scatter Like Mist: Unsan-Musho."

Indeed, it was a sure-kill weapon that grew stronger without limit the more she attacked.

The hunter's deadly strike had missed the asura, and now the asura had landed her own deadly strike on the hunter.

Considering how much damage she'd distributed in the past hour, the damage this attack would deal would utterly destroy even vanguard SJs.

And yet...the Multifariously Invincible was still standing.

Not even the ace up Jubei's sleeve could harm this costumed anomaly.

"...My, my," she said. Her countless attacks, the defense-breaking Hora, and now even Kasanehime all had failed...and this made Jubei realize something about Carl. She now understood that he was protected by some sort of "law."

It was most likely the power of his Superior Embryo.

Will I figure it out first...? Or...? Until she discovered the trick behind his invincibility, she wouldn't be able to defeat him no matter how hard or long she attacked him.

It didn't even matter how high her attack power was.

"Or will I break through it before then?"

Of course, the maddened embodiment of strife didn't care how pointless her struggle might be. Her enemy was desperately overwhelming, yet Jubei smiled wide and cut at him.

And so, Carl turned out to be the first person who became fed up with their battle.

"Huh?!" Jubei exclaimed, shocked. Carl had turned his back on her and began running away—this time for real.

Poison hadn't killed her, traps couldn't catch her, the ace up his sleeve had only destroyed one of her arms, and his invincibility didn't scare her in the slightest.

Realizing that this battle junkie wouldn't give up until the event had ended, he figured that the best course of action was to just leave.

Carl switched into his escape gear, activated all the surrounding traps to keep Jubei busy, and ran as fast as possible.

He could hear her insulting him, but he didn't care one bit.

He wasn't a knight, but a hunter. To him, victory meant getting results.

And beyond just his pride as a hunter, the prey that had escaped him earlier were much more worthwhile targets than the battle maniac he just left behind.

Thus ended the battle between the hunter and the asura. The former retreated, leaving the latter feeling exceedingly sour.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"...Did we get away?" I asked.

"It seems so," said Nemesis.

An asura in front, a Superior behind. Talk about a rock and a hard place. It was a downright terrifying situation, but thankfully, we'd been able to get away.

If Jubei hadn't made the suggestion she had, our group might've been completely destroyed. It was the kind of situation you'd expect in a battle royale, but you could say that the very fact that this *was* a battle royale had saved us in the end.

One thing was certain, though—as we progressed through the event, we would surely run into at least one of them again.

When that happened, we would have to beat either an overwhelming harbinger of strife...or a Superior everyone called invincible. Our chances against either seemed pretty slim...not that that was anything new for us, I guess.

"I-I thought I was gonna dieee...!" Alto dropped to her knees at my side, breathing raggedly.

"Thanks for the smokescreen," I said.

"Y-You're welcome! Wait, why're you so calm?! We just ran into a Superior!"

"Well, that isn't all that rare for me." Starting with Figaro, I'd already met more than I could count on one hand.

It was kinda weird, actually. Superiors were like an exclusive club with less than a hundred members, yet I ran into them fairly regularly.

"Wooow, *someone's* used to trouble. That's our Ray the devil-eater," Alto said.

"Don't make that a thing," I retorted.

“Well, that *is* the most notable scene in the videos,” said Nemesis.

I wonder who actually recorded our fight against Logan...? I said in thought.

“What about you? You okay?” I asked Juliet.

“No wound has struck true. My wings may yet still take to the skies.”

No problem, huh? Good to know.

“Anyway, we didn’t think much about *where* we were running, and we’re now at...” I said as I looked around and compared the scenery to the full view of the island shown to us by Cheshire.

We had bolted out of the forest and arrived at a shore—the outer edge of the island. There was a rocky area facing the sea, and based on the location of the forest and mountain, we were in the event area’s southeast.

“Anyway, let’s keep moving,” I said. “Someone will catch up to us if we stay in one place, and we sure won’t find any hints by just standing around.”

“Indeed,” Nemesis nodded before starting to walk. “But what do these hints look like, anyway? Cheshire certainly did not explain tha—AAT?!”

Her words were cut short by her tripping over something and falling to the ground.

“Ugh! Who put *that* there?!” she complained with her hand over her nose, glaring at a drain-like formation in the ground.

After a closer look, I realized that around where Nemesis tripped, there was some strange pale rock.

“Hm?” The thing Nemesis had stumbled over was far too square to be natural. It was as though it had been masterfully carved out by human hand.

“...It should be fine if I don’t go too high,” I said, still wary of the anti-air weapon I’d seen, as I jumped on Silver and rose up a bit.

I slowly gained altitude until I could look at the pale rock from above, and I saw something had been carved into it.

And so, below me...

“I see.”

...I read the letters “YYYYMMDD.”

The thing Nemesis had tripped over was part of one of those letters.

This was the first hint we’d found, and it confirmed to us that the eight-digit number was, indeed, a date in the Gregorian calendar.

Interlude: The Crawler-Riders, the Magic-Spinners

Event Area, South, Beach

Shion Manjushage was a fairly famous Altarian Master.

Being thirteenth on a single ranking would have been impressive enough, but she was thirteenth in *every* ranking.

Duel, clan, and kill rankings—Shion was a rare person who had taken the same spot in all three of them.

She was powerful enough to go higher, but she *chose* to remain where she was.

In fact, she was actually making her clan members—all of whom were her family's servants in real life—keep an eye on other rankers so she could adjust her kill count and clan score to maintain her position.

Her reason for going to such lengths was, to quote her, "Because the number thirteen is so ominous and cool!"

There was nothing more to it than that.

For that very same reason, she was after the position of the fourth—a more prestigious number which was also ominous in certain Asian cultures—which had made her proclaim herself to be Juliet's rival. Some other duelists and parts of the audience did also see it that way, so it wasn't entirely unfounded.

Because of this, she'd felt somewhat left out when Juliet and Chelsea promised to have an all-out battle. To quote her directly, "What about me?!"

From Chelsea's perspective, though, Shion and Juliet had already had their showdown during the Exodragon King incident—and in a quite troublesome manner, at that. Chelsea had told Shion as much when they'd met up again.

All of that aside, Shion was now focused on the event.

One reason for this had been Chelsea's words to her: "It's not like you'll become fourth in the rankings or something if you *do* beat Julie at this event. Doncha think it’s better to focus on winning that prize, using it to get stronger, and then challenging her?” Shion herself had said something similar during the Exodragon King incident, so that comment had been more than enough to convince her.

Chelsea’s true intentions in saying that, though, had been preventing Shion from interfering in her fight against Juliet—while also getting Shion on her side. The Dark Princess’s abilities made her a potent force against even the strongest players in this event.

After seeing Shion eliminate King of Cowboys, who could have become the greatest threat here, it would have been fair to assume that Chelsea had definitely made the right choice.

Dominating the event’s battles like this, they’d managed to acquire a fair number of plates; now they were searching for the way to use them—the hints.

To make the most of their abilities, they’d split up to make the search more efficient. They might have been more powerful as a group, but since only the first three through the gate could clear the event, they had to make a compromise between their combat potential and speed of investigation.

Thinking along those lines—or, rather, having been persuaded by Chelsea to think that way—Shion went to look for clues...

“Hm?! I found something strange!”

...and eventually found one.

This one, though, would have been hard to miss.

It was a white stone monument poking out of the sea about twenty metels from the shoreline. Its size? As tall as a five-story building. It could be seen from just about any point on the island’s southern beach.

“Hmm... There *is* something written on it, but I don’t wanna get too close...” Behind the monument there was the open sea, teeming with aquatic monsters warded off by the event area’s barrier. Shion had a distaste for octopuses and krakens and the like, so she didn’t want to come anywhere near them.

“Read it for me, Amethyst.” Because she was disinclined to approach the ocean, she made her Prism Crawler mount—the Amethyst Captor—do the job for her.

“Acknowledged,” said the mechanical spider as it turned its multiple sensors on the monument and read the text. “‘Each person’s answer may differ.'"

"So that is the hint...is it?" The cryptic, almost philosophical statement made Shion put one hand to her cheek and tilt her head. The gesture was very refined, but the thought running through her mind was, *I've got no clue what that means*.

"...Amethyst?" Shion asked.

"Insufficient information for analysis," Amethyst replied. The Prism Crawler was often called "Shion's external brain." In this situation, she tried relying on it like she always did, but not even an AI could figure out the correct eight-digit number from this hint alone.

"Hmm... I will take it back to Chelsea, then," Shion said. "She is a college student in real life, so she ought to be at least a little bit smarter than me!"

If Chelsea were to hear that, she would likely say something like, "Being 'a bit' smarter than you wouldn't even be enough to get *accepted* to my college," but Shion was right to bring this information to her teammate.

"Time to go to the rendezv—"

"Emergency evasion."

Shion, all smiles, was about to order Amethyst to move, but the mechanical spider used its eight legs to jump away on its own.

A moment later, immense heat and light sliced through the place they had just been.

"What?!"

"Analyzing the enemy," said Amethyst. "Applicable data discovered. Magically charged particle cannon—a weapon of the Obliterator."

While Shion was surprised by the completely unexpected attack, Amethyst had seen it coming and even knew what they were being attacked by.

Amethyst focused its sensors on the light's origin point, but there was nothing there.

"Camouflage."

Nothing *visible*, at least. The unit's sensors could easily detect something hiding there using Optical Camouflage.

Amethyst then aimed its tail towards that location and released multiple nets. Some of them struck parts of the scenery and, in a flash of purple lightning, removed some of the coverage afforded by Optical Camouflage.

Behind it, there stood a mechanical scorpion with a cannon for a tail. This was the unit controlled by the Flow Princess, Juba—the one who'd shot down Juliet.

"Identity of the enemy unit confirmed—Prism Crawler No. 2, Citrine Obliterator." It was a machine in the same category as Amethyst.

"...I should've expected this from Altar's strongest player in this event," said Juba. "Neither the ambush nor the camouflage is going to work against her..."

As Juba traveled, she had chanced upon Shion while she was still looking for hints on this southern shore. Since she was one of the strongest participants as well as an Altarian, Juba resolved to take advantage of this chance to take her out of the game. Using Optical Camouflage to hide, she tried to ambush Shion using her charged particle cannon.

And now, since that hadn't worked at all, Juba knew that Shion posed an even greater threat than before.

Of course, Amethyst was the one to actually react to the ambush; Shion hadn't expected it at all. In light of this, perhaps Juba was giving her more credit than was warranted...

"Yes! I am Altar's strongest lady duelist—Dark Princess, Shion Manjushage!"

...but Shion was willing to take it all anyway.

Amethyst, however, didn’t argue. It was a particularly loyal support mech.

“And that’s why...I’m gonna take you out...”

“Bring it on!”

Juba wanted to beat Shion because she was a strong opponent, while Shion faced Juba for no other reason than Juba had challenged her. Their motives might have been very different, but they would both fight nonetheless.

And so, the two Masters and their units rushed into battle.

“Initiating evasive patterns.”

“Initiating artillery patterns.” Amethyst began leaping around to avoid the cannon fire, while Citrine checked its memory banks for data regarding this enemy.

Amethyst then used webs to accelerate its movements, while the unmoving Citrine repeatedly fired its charged particle cannon, quickly turning the smooth beach into a pockmarked battlefield.

A spider fighting with webs and a scorpion fighting with its tail—they were much like the creatures they were based on, and the fight seemed evenly matched for a moment.

“Is it just me, or are our designs similar?” Shion belatedly realized.

“Affirmative. Both myself and the target—Citrine Obliterator—are Prism Crawlers built by the same creator. I am No. 1, while Citrine is No. 2.”

“Wow, you have a little sister?!”

“We have no gender.”

“But it has a girl’s voice.”

“Conjecture: that is the voice of No. 2’s pilot. No. 2 is a boardable unit.”

“I see! We’re both using bug robots... Let us find out which one of ours is the true king of insects!”

“...Neither scorpions nor spiders are insects.” Even Juba couldn’t help but comment on Shion’s words.

“If there is an actual person inside, I can kill it! Gloom Stalker!” With those words, Shion activated a skill. The result was a number of black homing projectiles—a manifestation of black magic that sought out living creatures, passing through anything inanimate. Combined with Judas’s Kiss of Death, they could deliver unavoidable death even through the toughest armor.

"Defense."

But then, Citrine created a barrier of light around itself.

"Huh?! That barrier better not be dark or holy!" Shion exclaimed. Dark magic could only be influenced by other dark magic effects or its opposite, holy magic.

However, Citrine's barrier didn't look like either.

"No. 2's barrier works on both offensive magic and physical attacks. It can only be penetrated by attacks with a greater output."

"No fair!"

In exchange for being able to break through most defenses, dark magic wasn't particularly strong. It seemed her only option for breaking the barrier would be her ultimate job skill, but that took some time to prepare.

"Amethyst!"

"I am a light support unit specialized in trap placement and three-dimensional mobility, while No. 2 is a heavy combat unit equipped with extensive armor and firepower. The enemy has the advantage."

Though they were both Prism Crawlers, the gulf between them was wide, like that between a utility vehicle and a tank.

However, that was exactly what made the current situation so unusual.

"Operating both the charged particle cannon and the barrier at full capacity would be taxing even for magic-focused Superior Jobs. It is likely that No. 2 is receiving some form of special support, either from a Superior Job or an Embryo."

The Prism Crawlers were famous weapons even older than The Era of the Peerless Three. A mechanic who'd inherited the title of Grand Artificer of the pre-ancient civilization built them, inspired by the Prism Horses and Dragons.

Their base capabilities were a match for the originals built by the Grand Artificer himself, but there was one drawback—the mechanic had failed to reproduce the reactors, making the Prism Crawlers completely reliant on the user's MP for energy. The amount of MP drained was different for each unit. No. 1, Amethyst, was the most balanced in this regard, but the combat-focused Citrine was a true magic hog.

Despite this, Juba had some means of ignoring this limitation and could run Citrine at full capacity for long periods of time. An experienced fighter would notice this and immediately understand that discovering what made this possible would be key to victory.

"I see I have no choice..."

And now, Shion...

"I will have to just keep shooting until I break the barrier!"

...unfortunately not the brightest player around, decided to do it by force. Like an aggressive monkey, she chose to merely keep attacking, sparing no thought to the possible source of her opponent's power.

Just as one could never reason with the embodiments of strife that were the asura, reason wouldn't work on idiots either.

Shion then did exactly as she said she would, repeatedly firing her dark magic while leaving all evasion to Amethyst. All of her spells were blocked by the barrier, failing to reach either Citrine or Juba.

Despite that, she just kept on casting.

Seemingly obedient, Amethyst continued to evade while closing the distance or repositioning to give Shion an angle that would let her shoot past the barrier.

However, there were no gaps in the half-sphere barrier, so in all honesty, Shion was merely wasting her time and energy.

What is she planning...? Juba wondered, still overestimating her opponent. She never presumed that the fearsome Master who'd taken out the giant cloud-elephant would perform such a wasteful assault without purpose. Thinking that Shion must be planning something beyond her comprehension, Juba became a bit paranoid.

I have the upper hand in both firepower and armor. She can't hit me as long as I keep up the barrier... Wait, is that *why? Is she* forcing *me to use the barrier?*

Normally, Juba didn't talk much, and when she did her words were slow. However, that was because most of her mind was entirely focused on analyzing her surroundings. She analyzed her enemies and the battlefield around her to gain full control over them and achieve victory.

Thus, her thinking right now...

Are these useless attacks meant to shift my energy distribution towards defense? Is there a reason she wants to shut down my full-power cannon fire?

...was actually more like *over*thinking.

Shion certainly hadn't put nearly that much thought into it. In fact, she hadn't even noticed Citrine's design flaw.

Citrine was a heavy tank, powerful in both defense and offense, but there was a cap on the amount of magic per second it could convert into energy, making it impossible to simultaneously use the charged particle cannon and the barrier at full power. Right now, to defend against Shion's attacks, seventy percent of its energy flow was directed to the barrier, with only thirty percent powering the cannon.

It's still enough to kill her, though. She's using Amethyst to evade my shots, but unlike me, she doesn't have any means of quickly restoring MP. Actually, all those attacks and my influence should mean she's going to run dry soon enough... I think.

Since she thought Shion was still hiding something, Juba couldn't be confident about her thoughts. The power of someone who held thirteenth place in all rankings was hard to gauge. It wasn't just about her personal power—one couldn't maintain all three positions without great leadership, thorough organization, and immense amounts of data about other rankers.

Because of this, Juba couldn't help but assume that Shion had incredible charisma and could analyze a situation with the best of them.

Again, she was overthinking it.

Her clan members were all her servants in real life. They were organized because it was their job, and data was gathered by the members who were best at it. They simply approached Shion every week and told her, "Milady, this is how many you have to defeat to maintain your current ranking." Shion herself had no analytical ability whatsoever.

That was why a UBM was able to take advantage of her during the Exodragon King incident.

I can't let my guard down. Just what is she planning...?

Juba outmatched Shion in terms of compatibility, but failed to realize that her greatest enemy was her own wariness.

...Well, more accurately, there was one other problem she had to worry about.

"Ngh. It's not working...!"

It had taken her nearly a hundred spells, but Shion finally began to realize the futility of her incessant casting.

The Weaver-Spider's Wand that she so loved was a luxury, custom-made item equipped with the "Halve MP Use" skill, but the sheer number of spells had taken their toll, leaving her MP at less than 20%.

"I feel like my MP is dropping faster than normal," she said. "I'm so tired that I feel like I am seeing two suns..."

"..."

"Oh?"

While Shion had begun to complain, Amethyst extended a thread to her. The non-damaging thread allowed for communication between them and them alone, somewhat like the two cans tied with a string.

"This message is top secret. I request that you do not change your expression to prevent the enemy from noticing," said Amethyst. Shion nodded in response.

"I propose a strategy that will make it possible to win."

"Huh?! Have you come up with something?!" Shion exclaimed, instantly forgetting Amethyst's request.

Amethyst then proceeded to present its idea.

"...Huhhh?" Upon hearing it, Shion couldn't hide how unpleasant she found the prospect. Then, after about ten seconds of thinking coupled with light groaning, all while Amethyst was still evading Juba's beams...

"...I guess I have no choice!" she hesitantly agreed.

On the other side, there stood Juba, who felt that the end of the battle was close.

Reveal tells me that she has less than 10% MP left. Even using her Prism Crawler should be too much for her, she thought.

Shion had already ceased her magic attacks and was now doing nothing but evading Citrine's beams. However, that would stop once she ran out of magic to power Amethyst.

Juba had fought as carefully as she could, and now her victory was close.

That was when Shion *returned Amethyst to her inventory*.

Juba couldn't believe her eyes or even begin to understand that action. Shion had put away the one thing keeping her alive.

However, looking through Citrine's optical sensors, she saw Shion holding her wand towards her unit.

That made her realize two things.

First, Shion had put Amethyst away to focus her magic on attacks.

And second...Shion's incessant spellcasting didn't have a single thought behind it.

"She was...just an idiot the whole time...?!" Juba shouted in exasperation, shock, and anger. As if channeling her sentiments, Citrine fixed its sights directly on Shion.

The dim-witted caster who'd thrown away her only means of evasion had no way to escape the impending blast.

"Obliterate!" Juba shouted, using a skill of the same name. Shion didn't even try to evade the light that engulfed her.

The beam's impact blew away even the patch of beach she was standing on.

"A direct hit...!" Even from her cockpit, Juba could see that Shion had been struck by the beam. The charged particle cannon had no doubt made short work of her.

"Hoo... That was scary."

"...Huh?" However, once the light faded, Shion was still standing there, completely unharmed.

"Huh...? Huhh...? Huuhh...?" The figure standing in that spot clearly had Shion's face, but her silhouette was nothing like it had been before.

"It was so bright that my eyes are all watery..."

The once-humanoid silhouette had been replaced by that of a soft, rounded form based on a skeleton of a bipedal carnivorous dragon. Shion's face was about where the dinosaur's neck would be.

She was now wearing a type of animal costume.

◇◆

The Exodragon King incident was something that had happened in Gideon some time after Franklin's Game.

At its core, it was a battle between two UBMs: Armordragon King, Drag-Armor and Exodragon King, Drag-Mail. The former led armordragons, while the latter commanded maildragons, and none of this would have been an issue if humans hadn't been caught in the crossfire.

Juliet, Chelsea, Max, and Shion had been deeply involved in it, and in the end, Shion was the one to finally defeat the Exodragon King, putting an end to the incident.

Being the MVP, she had received a reward—Ultimate Costume Series, Drag-Mail.

It was a costume-type MVP reward just like Shu Starling's Hind Bear. Despite its appearance, it was an Ancient Legendary treasure—and as such, it had a powerful skill.

"Antimagic Exoskeleton" reduced all incoming magic-based damage by 100% in exchange for increasing physical damage to the exposed face by 1,000%.

While alive, Exodragon King had used its exoskeleton to negate all and any magic damage, and although the conversion to MVP reward had given it an extra weakness, this power was still as effective as ever—as evidenced by Shion withstanding the charged particle cannon attack like it was nothing.

◇◆

A defensive MVP reward?! Strong enough to negate Obliteration...?! Though the attack hadn't been the strongest it could possibly be, Juba was shocked that Shion was completely unharmed.

Wait... Then...why didn't she use it before...?! If it was that easy for Shion to nullify Juba's attacks, she could've done so at the start.

What's her plan...?! I don't get it! I just can't understand her...! Completely unable to read her, Juba was at a loss.

As for the reason why Shion didn't use it...she simply didn't want to wear something she thought was "tragically un-beautiful." Her fixation on fashion had made her partially forget she even had it. If Amethyst hadn't reminded her, she would have gotten the death penalty before she remembered it.

It hardly needs to be repeated, but Shion was what one might call a silly goose.

Is there some sort of risk to wearing it? Is there a time limit? Or a reduction to physical resistance? Despite her confusion, Juba tried to understand her enemy and in the process came upon the correct answer.

Indeed, while Shion was now strong against magic, her physical defense was unchanged, while any physical damage to her face would be increased tenfold. Juba could win by just crushing her with Citrine's tank-like frame.

She silently considered doing just that. It would be a risky move. There was a chance that ramming Shion with the magic-based barrier wouldn't do any damage, meaning that she would have to hit her with the unit itself. Since Shion wielded material-passing dark magic, this would leave Juba open to her spells.

It would all depend on what happened first: Juba crushing Shion, or Shion's spells reaching her.

"I'll...do it!"

Juba did not hesitate to enact her newfound plan. Trusting her piloting and Citrine's power, she would charge towards Shion.

The mechanical scorpion's many legs displaced the sand as it approached Shion...*only for it to suddenly screech forwards on its back legs, like a bike doing a wheelie*.

"Huh?!"

"...?!"

Both Juba and Citrine were shocked. They had no intention of doing anything like this.

To them, it seemed that for completely unknown reasons the unit had flipped over, *and they realized its legs were caught in some kind of thread*.

That was when Juba and Citrine immediately figured out what had happened.

"A wire trap?!" It was the exact trap that Amethyst Captor had left behind before being returned to Shion's inventory.

Amethyst Captor was Prism Crawler No. 1. It was not designed to have much combat ability on its own, instead being intended to support the Superior Job riding it. It specialized in three-dimensional mobility, web-slinging, trap-placing—and most relevantly, tactical support using its high processing power.

Amethyst had the best analytic and strategic abilities among all the Prism Crawlers. And though a flat beach wasn't a good place for taking full advantage of its three-dimensional mobility, it was *perfect* for burying traps.

Though No. 2 was a fearsome foe, Amethyst knew all of the other unit's strong points and weaknesses. While its foolish owner was fruitlessly wasting time and MP, it used the chance to set up traps unnoticed. While fighting, it had also analyzed Juba's personality and realized that if she couldn't use her trusty charged particle cannon, she would likely elect to dash straight in for a physical battle.

The result of all that strategizing was now plain to see—the mechanical scorpion had been flipped over, *exposing the unit's undercarriage, unprotected by the half-spherical magic barrier*.

"Gloom Stalker!" Not missing the chance, Shion used her remaining magic to release multiple high-rank ultimate job skills.

The winged, black homing projectiles easily passed through the armor of Citrine's underside, reaching the cockpit and battering Juba over and over.

I...lost...! Juba thought dimly, finally fully grasping the fearsome intellect of the one who had crafted this plan.

Juba had been defeated by nothing other but Amethyst's processing power...

Shion Manjushage... She pretended *to be an idiot while she was inventing this thorough strategy... The kingdom has some truly terrifying players...*

...but until the very end, Juba failed to realize who she should *actually* be afraid of.

Thus, the Dryfean pre-Superior, Flow Princess, Juba, retired from the event, with the mystery of her combo still unsolved.

◇◆

"VICTORY! IS! MINE! Ah ha ha ha ha!" Switching from the costume to her dress, Shion burst into a fit of refined laughter.

"Oh? I'm feeling pretty good about myself right now, so why do I feel like things are suddenly getting dark?"

There was something she hadn't realized yet—the fact that there had actually been two suns in the sky until now.

Amethyst had noticed this fact and guessed that one of the stars was Juba's Embryo, which must've been the thing helping her cover Citrine's heavy MP costs. However, there was nothing they could do about it, and facing it hadn't been necessary to achieve victory, so Amethyst hadn't even pointed it out to Shion. It simply wasn't high on its list of priorities.

"So many plates! And I have a hint now too! I am the *best*!" Having achieved victory, Shion was joyously gathering the plates Juba had dropped.

Alas, she was a bit *too* happy, and as a result she raised her voice a little too much.

The joy had also made her forget to redeploy Amethyst.

A crushing silence. Unbeknownst to her, a hunter in a presence-hiding ghillie suit was standing right behind her.

He...or rather, God Hunter, Carl Lourlou was holding a harpoon gun.

While Shion was still gathering the plates, he fixed his sights on her...and pulled the trigger.

A moment later, the sound of an explosion mingled with the roars of the crashing waves.

◇◆

And so, Shion Manjushage retired from the event.

She had been taken out by a third party while looting the enemy she'd defeated—a common enough occurrence in battle royales.

Chapter Seven: A Hint

Paladin, Ray Starling

“So the answer is a date on the Gregorian calendar,” I said.

“Yep,” Alto nodded. “That seemed likely since it was eight digits, so this just confirms it.”

“Yeah.” Having found our first hint, we were now walking along the shore looking for more of them.

On the one hand, we had nowhere to hide out here...but on the other, neither did anyone approaching us. I looked around and didn’t see any place our potential ambushers could be lurking. There were some trees growing around a nearby river, but not enough to act as cover for anyone waiting to attack us. On top of that, Juliet was flying right above us, looking out for any potential threats. I told her that those AA beams made it dangerous, but she insisted that she could evade them now that she knew about them.

“...The hint we were given before we were transported here was ‘Don’t forget the name of this event,’ wasn’t it?” I said as I remembered the event’s name—The Anniversary.

“Yeah,” said Alto. “If that’s a hint, then I guess the answer might be...*Dendro*’s release date?”

“Perhaps there is a hint that reveals exactly *which* anniversary they are referring to,” said Nemesis. “We need to gather more.”

Right now, it felt like we only had one point of a polygon. We couldn’t know the true shape without getting a couple more points.

“Mine eyes bore witness to a guidestone pale as death—one that may yet deliver us to glory.”

“You found the next hint, huh?”

Juliet just landed and said, “I saw a stone that looked as white as the rocky area from earlier. I think it’s a hint.”

Flying really *was* useful for looking out for enemies and searching for hints. Maybe there were other hints that could only be seen while on the ground?

Anyway, Juliet led us to the place she'd spotted—a sandy beach in the event area's south.

However, it had already been destroyed.

Patches of sand had been melted by some kind of heat attack, and the resulting glass was still warm.

It was clear that someone had fought here, and I had an idea who it might have been...

"...The Master with the anti-air attacks," I said. This damage had probably been done by the very same person who'd shot down one Master right before my very eyes and had later brought down Juliet.

He, or maybe she...they'd probably fought here and been defeated. If they'd won, Juliet would've obviously been shot at again.

The fact that we could safely take to the sky now was good news for us.

"And the hint you mentioned is...over there?"

We drew closer to the sea, where there stood a large stone monument. On it, there was text, just like there had been in that rocky area.

"'Each person's answer may differ,' huh?"

"Well, then it can't be the release date!" said Alto. "*Dendro* came out at the same time worldwide."

"The feast marking one's first breath," said Juliet.

"Yeah. Most people have different birthdays, so it may be that. The fact that plates with '2' or '0' seem more common might've been because most of the playerbase was born in or after the year 2000."

There were a few born in 1999 or earlier, of course, but talking overall proportion, players born after that were the majority.

However...

"The number '4' also seems more common though. Taking that into consideration, maybe it's not our birthdays, but the days we started playing *Infinite Dendrogram*?"

That could be anywhere between July 15th, 2043 and today—April 20th, 2045. All of the numbers in that range would have 2, 0, and 4 in them which would explain why they were more common.

"That *is* true," said Nemesis. "What do you think, Alto?"

"Hm? Me? I'm combining those answers into one *super* answer." *...A super answer?* "Hey, Ray. You know how Embryos don't always hatch on the day you start the game?"

“Oh.”

“It *can* be the same day, but there’re people who create their characters one day, then stop and return and hatch their Embryos some other day. That’s why my guess is...the answer is the participant’s *Embryo’s* birthday. Whaddya think?”

That...was actually pretty likely. Your own birthday, your starting day, and your Embryo’s birthday were all worthy of being “anniversaries,” though, so it was hard to be certain just yet.

“We can try out all of ’em if we want,” Alto continued. “We each put in a different answer and then just go by whoever passes.”

If one of these answers turned out to be right, that method would let at least one of us pass—and if it was the first one who tried, then the other two would pass, as well.

Wrong answers would mean getting teleported to some other part of the island, though.

More importantly...

“I’m not sure if we’ll have enough plates for that,” I said. “Since that’s personal info, I won’t ask for your birthdays, but what are your starting days and Embryo birthdays? Mine is March 16th for both.”

It had now been over a month since I started, but it really didn’t feel like that.

“The path I now walk began upon the day celebrating the world’s first full revolution, and upon that very day were my black-plumed wings bequeathed unto me.”

“...Pardon?” asked Alto.

“You mean you started on the one year anniversary event and your Embryo hatched on the same day. That’s July 17th, 2044, right?”

“Indeed.” Shu had told me that had been a good time to start, with tons of events to keep you occupied. Apparently, that was also when he’d gotten the King of Destruction job.

“I’m impressed you understand her... I started on February 14th, 2045. Same day for the Embryo hatchin’.”

“All right, that means that the plates we need are... Hm?”

Alto was a fellow newbie, yet she’d started on February 14th, which was...

“...You got into the game right after the UTokyo secondary exams?”

"Yyyep! When the exams were done, I got all hyped and bought the gear for it!"

"You didn't even wait to hear the results...?" *I only got my set after I found out I'd made it in and moved to a new place,* I thought.

"You speak of...the Palace of Knowledge?!" cried Juliet in shock, surprised that both of us were UTokyo students.

...Crrrap.

"Wooow, look at Ray, revealin' personal info in an MMO! You baaad, baaad booooy."

"...Sorry," I said. "I'm really, seriously sorry."

"Buy me lunch next time!"

...It feels like you always settle debts with lunch, I thought.

"Keep it a secret, will ya, Julie?"

"V-Very well..."

"Hm? What's wrong? You look kinda tense... You okay? Wanna play some cat's cradle?"

"Umm, I-I'm fine, thank you." Juliet was acting strange again. It started when I mentioned UTokyo... Did she have some real life circumstances related to our college? Would I be overstepping any boundaries if I asked?

...Well, for now, I would just count our plates and see if we had enough for all our dates.

Keeping in mind our starting dates and Embryo birthdays, we looked over the plates...and realized that we didn't even have half of the amount we needed. Only one of us would be able to finish the event with these, and that only barely.

"Not enough, but..." I said.

"Hm? If there's not enough, we just gotta beat the monsters and get more, right?" Alto asked.

"...How long has it been since we last ran into a monster?"

I had a pretty bad feeling about this.

"This event is a survival-battle royale... So, honestly, it wouldn't be surprising if there were a limited number of monsters on this island."

The frequency of our monster encounters had dropped significantly, which supported this theory.

If I was right, the plate-gathering part of this event was really about gathering up the "right to give your answer." Even if we wanted to test one of our potential solutions, the plate limit made it difficult.

“This means that the number of times *all participants* can input an answer is limited. Those who defeated a lot of other people can do it many times, while those who haven’t can barely do it once...”

This event was designed to eventually funnel participants into battles against each other. I had no idea why they’d felt it necessary to include these quiz elements and hadn’t just made it a regular battle royale, but...

“We need to beat other Masters to clear this,” I concluded. “And the ones who will make it to the end will be the strongest...which will be the likes of Jubei and GH.”

“Hmmm...” Alto let out a sigh like she lost all hope, and I couldn’t blame her.

Honestly, though, I felt like those two were better targets than most other participants.

First of all, they’d probably have an obscene number of plates. No matter which one of the two managed to win the event, all of those plates were still in the hands of a single Master. If that Master went on to give a correct answer, all of the extra plates they were carrying would vanish—which meant we would never be able to get them.

That suggested actually fighting them would give us *higher* chances of clearing the event.

“...Hey, Nemmy, what’s with all the resolve on Ray’s face?” Alto asked.

“That is how his face looks when he is preparing to fight against the odds. He makes it all the time.”

“All the time, huh...? Well, putting Jubei Kaga aside for now... Carl Lourlou is so invincible that you hear about him all the time even in Tenchi... How do you plan on beatin’ him?”

I was also aware of the “Multifariously Invincible.”

And that was exactly why I could say this with certainty.

“We can win against him *this time*.”

“Huh?” Juliet and Alto both said at the same time. No one would blame them for being surprised.

I went on to tell them something I’d once heard from Shu, as well as providing some conjecture of my own.

Three minutes later, after listening to everything I’d said, they were thinking deeply about God Hunter’s powers and counters.

"I see... That *is* one way to do it..." said Alto.

"A rule hardly familiar to most..."

"But, Ray, would that actually work...?"

"Well, it depends on how it goes, but...I think that Juliet and I could pull it off."

If the situation called for it, I could maybe do it by myself too.

"That sooo...? Ummm... Will I just drag you down, then?" Alto said with a sad look, pointing at herself.

"Hey, we're just dividing roles," I said. "You're a great help while we're moving around, and it's thanks to you that we were able to get out of that situation so smoothly. If we're up against some big shot, though, Juliet and I are better for the job. That's all there is to it."

"I see... But I... Umm... Yeah... Never mind."

She was deep in thought about something. Was it something to do with her Embryo she'd told me about? "I see... Well, in that case, let's leave it at that and go looking for more hints."

If we're gonna fight them, it won't hurt to lower the chances of getting wrong answers... Huh?! As I was thinking about all of that, I felt a presence. I turned towards it, away from the sea. Juliet had noticed it before me, while Nemesis and Alto followed my lead.

It was a river about a hundred metels away from us.

On the bank of the river flowing into the sea, there stood a familiar-looking girl wearing a pirate hat.

"Chelsea..." Juliet had found the very person she'd promised to fight, and Chelsea was staring back right at her.

The pirate girl waved at us before running closer. She wasn't doing this at combat speed, but the speed of someone hurrying to greet a friend.

It seemed like she was trying to suggest she didn't want to fight...but that wasn't it at all.

"Heyoo. So you formed a trio too," she said.

"'Too?'" I asked.

"I teamed up with Shion and Max. We agreed to meet here, but I don't see either of them, so...didja beat 'em?"

So our group of six became two parties of three, huh? I thought.

"No. There was no one here when we showed up... There were signs of fighting, though."

“Hmm. Really? I guess they fought someone, anyway, and either lost or the battle went to a standstill. Shame.”

To me, she didn’t seem too upset about her companions’ fates. Well, unlike the peace talks, this was an event where nobody risked anything, so maybe it was fair to not feel too strongly about losing a teammate.

Or maybe there was something she wanted more than victory.

“Anyway, there’s somethin’ I’d like to ask you three.”

“Wha—?! You wanna join this team?! As in, you want me to leave?!” Alto said with a fearful voice.

“...Why would you think that?” I asked.

“I mean, in *Dendro*, you’ve spent more time with them than with me! I’m basically an outsider here! I’m also not a ranker! I don’t eat devils for breakfast like you do! And I haven’t dated you IRL either!”

“Huh? Are you two a thing?” Chelsea asked.

“No. We’re just friends,” I answered. *And what does “eating devils” have to do with anything? Let go of that already,* I thought.

“You’re gonna make me leave to take in somebody you like better! ‘Sorry, Alto, this event can only be cleared by three people.’ That’s what you’re about to say, right?!”

“No, damn it. Who do you take me for?”

This event was really making me realize that, despite normally being a cheerful cat’s cradle fan, Natsume became a real downer when she was at her wits’ end.

In a way, her thought patterns were like...cat’s cradle, actually—all tangled up.

“If I’m left alone, I’ll be taken out of the event in secooonds!” Alto cried, flinging herself onto the ground to roll in the sand.

“Ah ha ha! Your friend’s funnier than I thought,” laughed Chelsea. “Don’t worry, though. That’s not what I want.” Her smile then vanished in an instant. “Sorry for messin’ up your trio, but...”

She fixed her gaze on Juliet.

“...Can ya let me fight Julie one-on-one?”

“Let’s go all-out and fight each other with everything we’ve got.”

“...Yeah!”

“Oh...” The words they’d exchanged in the event’s lobby came rushing back to me. Chelsea was here to try and have that promised fight.

However, Chelsea wasn't smiling, and even Juliet was hesitant for some reason.

"I planned to have Shion and Max keep everyone else from gettin' in the way, but neither of them are here and Julie ain't alone either, so asking nicely is about the only thing I can do."

If a team wanted to win this event, it was best to fight as a team instead of letting one of your members fight one-on-one. Chelsea had probably considered that when she made her request.

"Hey hey hey, that would be a bit too much," said Alto. "I mean, Juliet is our heavy hitte—"

"Why not?" I said, cutting her off.

"Whoa... Mr. Ray?"

Don't "Mr." me, I thought.

"I knew that they wanted to fight before we teamed up. Also, do you really wanna make your teammate focus on victory when there's obviously something she wants even more than that? Wouldn't it leave a bad taste in your mouth?"

"...I guess it would," Alto said with a nod, covering her face with both hands.

I didn't know if she was ashamed of what she'd said or if she was grieving what she thought was the inevitable end of our team up.

"You wanna fight her too—right, Juliet?"

"...Yeah!" she said. She'd clearly only hesitated because she was being considerate of me and Alto. But now that we'd given her the go-ahead, she was all smiles—a way more fitting expression for her, if you asked me.

"Heh. I was actually plannin' on negotiatin' with ya, offerin' this and that for the privilege of a fight. I guess you're just too much like us duelists, Ray," Chelsea said with a grin.

"Well, I've sparred with a whole lot of you."

"Ah ha ha ha. When things cool down, try joining the duel rankings too, will ya?"

"I'll think about it. Anyway, we'll head off to the west so we don't get in the way."

I'd seen them duel before and knew that their fights could cause lots of collateral damage, so it was best to keep a distance.

I turned away from them and walked towards the west, with Nemesis and Alto following after me.

"So yeah, Juliet..."

But there was still one last thing I had to say to my teammate before I left.

"...Meet up with us later."

I believe that you'll win, I added silently.

It wasn't because her rank was greater or because Juliet had won in the duels I'd seen. Even I could tell that Chelsea now wasn't the same Chelsea I'd seen at the arenas. She had some powerful ace up her sleeve, and she was now gonna use it against her dear friend and rival.

But I still believed in Juliet's victory, because...that's what being a team was all about, right?

"...Acknowledged!" Hearing those words behind me, I left the beach that was about to become a battlefield.

◇

Since it was clear by now that the Master firing the anti-air beams was out of the game, we were riding Silver through the air over the shoreline. It only took us a few minutes to make it to the west shoreline of the event area. It was as beachy as the south had been, and the shallow water below was crystal clear.

"This would be a nice place for a resort," I said.

"A resort, eh...? That does remind me of the time your plans to visit the seaside fell apart," said Nemesis.

"Yeah. Back when Fuso kidnapped me... I'll never forget the encounter at school afterwards..."

It was weird to think that had happened just a short time before I'd headed off to college. I felt like it was forever ago.

"'Fuso?' You mean Fuso Tsukuyo, the Superior? And what encounter in school?" Alto asked.

"...You'll find out eventually." Fuso's name and face were the same here and in real life, so Natsume would run into her sooner or later.

I was currently wielding Nemesis in her greatsword form, and Alto was sitting behind me. I asked if Alto had any means of flying, and she said that the whole "flying on kites" thing was from a different job in the ninja grouping.

“It just hit me that there’s only one type of monster in this event,” I said. “None of them can fly, and wild monsters... Ohh, right, they can’t enter because of the barrier.”

While flying around the kingdom, you might have a hard time dealing with the occasional avian monster or dragon, but that wasn’t the case on this island. Looking outside it, beyond the barrier, I could see some bird and fish monsters, so I assumed that the local creatures had all been removed for the event.

“Oh yeah. Alto, what about your Jewel? Don’t you have a flying monster in there?” I asked, remembering Rook and his avian servant. Many Masters used tamed creatures for flight.

“Uhhh... Um, the monster inside can’t fly... Yeah. It just can’t.”

“I see. Hm? That’s...”

Looking down, I saw something that stood out from its surroundings—a “landmark,” as they were called in battle royales.

It was a wooden shipwreck—a ruined vessel wasting away on the sand.

It stood out on its own, but as I looked at it, I quickly noticed a familiar white color to the sea-facing side of it.

A stone monument much like the one in the south had been placed at its bow.

“That’s gotta be the third hint,” I said. I couldn’t read it from here, so I descended towards it.

When close enough, I jumped off Silver and approached the monument.

“I hope this helps find the right answer,” I said. *Now, let’s see what’s written on... Ah!*

“...RAY!” Nemesis called out right as I jumped to the side.

A moment later, something crashed into the shipwreck, breaking its bow and sending the white monument splashing into the water.

“Ahh?!” Alto cried out at the sight, but none of us could do anything about it.

After all...the one who targeted the monument—and us—was still attacking.

Jumping away had left me open to a follow-up attack, and the next projectile was already streaking towards me.

“Silver!” I called out, bringing my trusty steed to pick me up and help me evade the incoming attack.

As more of these attacks followed, I realized they were actually massive harpoons—spears whose tips exploded on impact, launched from a whaling gun.

Who was firing all of them?

The silence provided the answer...along with the polar bear standing on the deck of the wrecked ship.

“Eep...!” Alto yelped.

“God Hunter...!” I said. He’d appeared seemingly out of nowhere, but that wasn’t the most important thing to worry about right now.

This was the Superior that we’d left behind to fight Jubei.

I didn’t know if he’d won against her or if he’d simply run away, but I knew that we were now going to fight a Superior who was often described as “invincible.”

“...It’s happening *here and now*, huh?” I said.

A couple days ago, I’d fought one of the “Apices” of all Masters. The result there had pretty much been a draw even though I’d gone at her with my whole clan; without Fuso, it would’ve been a heavy defeat.

So what would happen if just Alto and I were to fight someone considered “invincible”?

Our chances of winning a direct fight were so low they might as well be at the bottom of the sea.

“...Sir, Mr. Ray-man Sir, is this sudden altercation in any way winnable without our heavy hitter?” Alto asked, clearly in a panic.

Well, I *had* told her that “Juliet and I could pull it off.” Perhaps Alto hadn’t expected us to encounter GH when it was just the two of us.

As for the answer...

“...It is *now*,” I said, boldly declaring that I could emerge victorious against an invincible opponent.

“Whuh?”

“...”

While Alto was shocked by my declaration, God Hunter didn’t say a word. However, I could practically feel his fighting spirit ramping up. It seemed he took my words as a taunt.

And maybe they were, but I certainly wasn’t bluffing. I was absolutely sure that at this moment, in this exact situation, I had a fighting chance against an invincible Superior. This wasn't just unwarranted arrogance.

"Nemesis," I said, transforming her into the Black Shield. "Let's win this."

"Certainly!"

Thus began yet another of my battles against a Superior.

Interlude: Blade-Dance

Event Area, Middle, Base of a Mountain

Great Genocide Max—the girl bearing this over-the-top name had originally been a duel ranker from Tenchi, counted among the top thirty martial artists from that land of strife.

She'd since left this prestigious position and moved to Altar to become a duelist there.

The reason for this was the existence of someone who was essentially a *direct upgrade* of her—King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga.

Max's Embryo, Ipetam, was a high-rank Guardian—a Sentinel—with countless blades growing out of its back; it had the power to levitate them and direct them at Max's enemies. Jubei, on the other hand, had a *job skill* that let her control six levitating weapons.

Both of them commanded floating armaments, but the gap in their overall power was evident to anyone.

Although Max had Jubei beat in quantity of her armaments, Jubei was superior in both quality and technique. Despite that, Max had challenged Jubei for the position of fourth-ranked duelist in Tenchi, in order to gain the right to face the top three.

As Jubei was still ranked fourth, the outcome of her confrontation with Max should be painfully obvious.

To make matters worse, their battle had taken place in public, which had made the gap in power that much more obvious. Max now seemed like the weaker version of Jubei.

She'd left Tenchi because she couldn't bear being called that.

Max had then moved to the main continent, traveled to Altar, become a duelist again, and then finally met Juliet and her group. After all that, she'd grown as both a fighter and a person. And perhaps *this encounter* was the chance she'd been given to confirm that.

"...Jubei."

"Maxie. It has been *so* long."

Max had once again crossed paths with the physical manifestation of strife—her direct upgrade.

Max had split from Chelsea and Shion to search for hints, and on the way to take a look at the goal, she'd run into Jubei.

King of Asuras was surrounded by pieces of metal and event plates.

"...Oh? Have your tastes in fashion changed?"

"One more word about the outfit and you're dead."

Max wearing frilly dresses was a fairly recent thing. She'd challenged Juliet to a duel for fourth place—and to get her to agree, Max had said that if she lost, she would do anything Juliet wanted. It was clear how that had turned out: Max had become Juliet's dress-up doll.

Max was used to the way Juliet dressed her by now, but having an old acquaintance comment on it still annoyed her.

"Eh heh heh. We'll be fighting to the death regardless," Jubei giggled. "I must say I am surprised to see that you are in this festival as well, Maxie."

"Don't call me that... What's with all the loot, anyway? This your handiwork?"

"No. It appears that someone set traps all over the mountain, and half of what you see was caused by people triggering those. Though...I sliced the other half apart," Jubei explained with a smile as she showed her old acquaintance her floating weapons and the three curseblades clutched in her prosthetic arms.

That was when Max noticed something.

"...That's one less arm than I remember," she said.

"Yes. A certain Superior in an animal costume took it from me."

"Hm...?" That description made Max think of the bear who'd been selling popcorn in Gideon. But if that was the person Jubei was talking about, the destruction to the island would've been far greater.

It also made her think of Bachigo Futae, a Superior from her old home of Tenchi who wore a crochet animal costume. Maybe the costume thing wasn't so unusual after all.

Regardless, that wasn't the important thing right now.

"Jubei," said Max as she looked into the eyes of the asura who had surpassed her in every way.

"Yes?" Jubei replied.

"...Having one less arm ain't an excuse for losin'."

"I knooow."

Max's gaze and the words they'd exchanged were the signal. The two old enemies fanned out their blades and prepared to face each other.

"Maddened Blade, Sip Their Blood—Ipetam!" Max called.

"GRRAH!" Ipetam answered, releasing over a hundred blades from its back.

"It has been so long since we've fought," Jubei said, widening her smile and causing her weapons to orbit her at high speeds. She was now prepared to deal with anything, no matter how many attacks were launched or from what angle.

"Heh!" Understanding that, Max put on a smile that was joyous, belligerent, and fearful all at the same time.

Their combat style was quite similar, but Max had lost against Jubei every time she had challenged her.

How much had she changed since those defeats? Since Jubei's SJ had no level cap, had Max only fallen further behind?

The answer to that would yet again become obvious in the next few moments.

As Jubei prepared her six floating weapons and the three curseblades, Max rushed towards her.

Her combat style was simple. She used Ipetam's floating blades to attack the enemy from every direction in order to overwhelm their capacity for defense and evasion, then used the blades fixed to the sheaths on her legs to launch herself towards them for an attack using Laser Blade—the Swordmaster's ultimate job skill.

This was a constant barrage that could exceed a hundred strikes per volley. It was an onslaught that few could withstand.

However, Jubei wouldn't be a duelist from the land of strife if she wasn't one of those few. Moving by Jubei's will, her six floating weapons flew to shatter Max's hundred.

Ipetam's blades all had a *direct* trajectory towards the target, so someone like Jubei had no trouble predicting all their paths and cutting them down.

Max had expected this, however.

She's still not using her arms! she thought.

Jubei was in the habit of primarily fighting with her floating weapons. Strikes made with the blades held in her arms, prosthetic or otherwise, were stronger, but since they broke her stance, they opened her up to attacks that she might not be able to counter. By contrast, she didn't have to move her body to move the floating weapons, so she always relied on them first while keeping her actual physical arms ready to defend against any attacks that may come her way.

Just five of her floating weapons had brought down over twenty times that number of blades that Max had launched her way, while she herself remained completely unengaged. If Max were to rush her now, the last floating weapon—the counterattacking Dankajin—would strike her down, leaving her open to a quick death by Jubei's own hands.

That had happened to her many times back when they'd fought in Tenchi, which implied that nothing about Jubei had changed much since then.

And that was why Max's true advantage—the value of the days she'd spent outside of Tenchi—would be tested *now*.

"HIIIYAAH!" With Ipetam's blades in each hand, Max rushed into the range of Jubei's floating weapons.

Dankajin was instantly unsheathed, launching a high-speed counterattack on Max.

Before it reached her, Max stuck out her left hand and *cut it off at the wrist*.

"Hgh...!" Though discomfited by the feeling of losing a hand, she made the blade in her now-disembodied extremity fly towards Jubei.

The blade, still held tightly clutched in her severed hand, did exactly that, and a moment later it was struck by a counterattack from Dankajin, now distracted from the rest of Max.

Dankajin was a counter-focused weapon that always hit anyone who entered its range. However, it was automatic, and it always went for the nearest living entity—meaning that a freshly sliced-off hand functioned as a sufficient distraction.

I see she has not forgotten Dankajin's effective attack range, Jubei thought. The scores of Max's blades kept five of Jubei's floating weapons busy, while the last one was distracted by Max's hand.

Max then closed on Jubei, coming into her melee range.

However, no amount of her high-rank ultimate job skills could match the strikes from Jubei's curseblades. Max was also inferior to her in raw strength, speed, and the amount of punishment she could take. Having lost a hand, she also now held only a single blade, as opposed to the three in Jubei's prosthetics.

Max had managed to close distance with Jubei, but that had only made her death more inevitable.

The thing she chose to do in this desperate situation was *letting go of her single sword*.

"Oh!" Shifting to flying mode, the blade entered the range of Jubei's curseblades, where it was quickly struck down.

This seemed like a bad move on Max's part. A surprise attack like this would have no effect on Jubei when she was ready for it.

"RRHAAGH!"

But what if Max layered it with two *more* such attacks?

Max even let go of the sheathed blades on her legs that she used for propulsion before sending them against Jubei. Again, they were countered by the two remaining curseblades.

Max's flying blades could reach Jubei even from a close range. Forcing Jubei to use her three curseblades made her lose her footing slightly, but the opening it created was small. Whether Max equipped a new blade from her inventory or had Ipetam manifest a new one, Jubei would be fully ready to counter it by the time it was in her hand.

And that was exactly why Max accelerated towards her unarmed. The girl who commanded a hundred blades moved in to fight with none.

Jubei was caught off guard by this, and the momentum Max had built up allowed her to approach her before she could swing her curseblades.

And so, the two fingers Max had managed to extend towards her foe *tore out one of the asura's eyes*.

"Ngh...!" The prosthetics didn't move fast enough to prevent the attack, while using the Kasanehime she was holding in her own arms wasn't an option. That weapon built up power without limit, so she had to think carefully about how to employ it when it had accumulated *too much* of said power. In a situation like this, slightly off-balance from intercepting the blades, using Kasanehime could even lead to her own destruction.

Max was well aware of this, and guessed that destroying half of the blades that made it to her would have made Kasanehime’s power too great for Jubei to use it in this specific situation.

This was a move Max had carefully crafted just to deliver this single attack—this *repayment*—to Jubei.

It was something that Max would never have been able to do in the past—and right after it, the three curseblades sliced Max to pieces.

“...Heh,” Max chuckled as she fell.

She’d expected this outcome. This happened to anyone who entered the range of this asura—this embodiment of strife. But she wanted to challenge Jubei even if it cost her her life.

She wanted to measure the distance between her and Jubei, as well as weaken the asura for her friends.

I did...what I could... she thought. This would at least increase Chelsea’s and Shion’s chances of winning against Jubei, which was another reason why Max hadn’t hesitated despite the odds.

Though, for all Max knew, they might not end up being the ones to finally face Jubei. It might even be the winged Altarian duelist who’d once defeated her but was now her friend.

Regardless, Max had carved her mark upon this embodiment of strife, and for that alone, she was satisfied.

Max died, and Ipetam’s floating blades vanished.

After that, all that was left were Max’s plates and Jubei. She touched her now-gone left eye and cracked a grin.

“Max is *as strong as ever*.”

Overjoyed, she said something she’d truly believed for a long time now. That had been her honest impression of Max since her days in Tenchi.

Max had a combat style much like Jubei’s, but was a *direct upgrade* to hers, controlling many times more weapons. Despite being but one Master, she could completely overwhelm Jubei’s processing power.

So far Jubei had always won against Max thanks to her Superior Job and quality equipment, but she always wondered if her victory would be so assured had they been equal in those regards.

Jubei had always considered Max a rival and had been saddened by her departure from Tenchi. And now, having learned that Max had continued to improve since that day and had even become good enough to take out Jubei’s eye, she was filled with glee.

Even though she now had only one eye to perceive the light, she nevertheless felt as though the sun was shining twice as brightly.

"I am meeting Ray Starling soon, so I should probably bandage it up," she said before starting to hum a song and walking away from the place where she'd fought Max, certain that this wouldn't be the last time she would fight her truest rival.

Chapter Eight: To Beat the Invincible

Several Minutes Before Ray Starling and Carl Lourlou Began Fighting

After defeating Shion, Carl headed to the goal in the middle of the island.

His objective was to clear the event. With the plates from Shion, Juba, and those he'd defeated before them, he now had enough for a whole four answers. Because of that, he had elected to give it a try.

Standing before the input device, he began to insert the numbered plates.

He'd found two hints so far: "The answer may differ for each person," and "204Y."

The latter made it obvious that the answer was a date in the decade of 2040, while the former meant that it was something personal, like the day you started *Infinite Dendrogram* or the day your Embryo hatched.

Having narrowed it down to just those possibilities in his mind, Carl figured that it wouldn't hurt to try at least one of them.

With that in mind, he had input the day he'd started playing...which turned out to be the wrong answer. That had flung him to a random part of the island.

Despite that, Carl wasn't panicking. No matter where he'd been sent, he only had to trek as far as the mountain in the center to get back to the goal.

Now, the place he'd been teleported to was *the deck of a shipwreck to the very west of the island*.

He'd actually appeared at the very moment Ray had descended upon the ship's bow and prepared to read the hint inscribed there.

Realizing that he stumbled upon an enemy, Carl had reflexively attacked him using ranged weaponry. Not even he had expected to meet another participant immediately after being teleported.

However, this actually wasn't coincidental.

Wrong answers at the goal teleported the player to a random place *next to hints that they hadn't yet found*.

Cheshire hadn't mentioned this detail, and it could only be discovered by getting a wrong answer once. It was actually insurance on the control AI's part, meant to prevent scenarios where none of the participants could manage to arrive at the correct answer.

This consideration from the control AI's had now led to a battle between Ray and Carl.

Ray fought to survive against this immense foe and take his plates for himself. Carl fought to hunt down the person he'd once marked as prey, to teach him a lesson for his conceit in thinking that he could win...and to not lose against the little brother of *the one who'd defeated him*.

Thus, their clash began.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

The God Hunter fired the harpoon gun in his arms.

It seemed to be an MVP reward that automatically created the harpoons it fired, but the trajectory was so direct that Silver was able to evade the shots.

Leaving evasion to him, I rushed towards God Hunter.

"EEP!" Alto yelped.

"Don't bite your tongue or anything!" I told her. This was no situation to make her get off of Silver. If I did that, GH would target her instead, so I had no choice but to make her deal with the steed's erratic movements.

"Purgatorial Flames, full power!" I roared, releasing flames that consumed the God Hunter below. A direct hit from these could set aflame even Pure-Dragon-tier creatures and above, but the white bear below was completely unaffected.

Not a single strand of fur on his costume was even singed.

"U-Um, he's not burning at all!" Alto exclaimed.

"...I figured this would happen." There was no way the God Hunter's gear would burn because of something this basic. Actually, even Xunyu's Baolongba wouldn't be able to set him on fire.

After all, Carl Lourlou's equipment *couldn't break*.

It wasn't a matter of the gear's quality—it became indestructible *because he was the one wearing it*.

"...It's just like Shu said." My bro had told me about the Multifariously

Invincible and his gimmick.

He'd also told me how to counter it.

I recalled the conversation I'd had with Alto and Juliet before Chelsea came along.

◇

"His Embryo, 'Indestructible and Everlasting, Nemean Lion' makes his gear indestructible," I said.

"So, what—it just doesn't break no matter what?" Alto asked.

"Yeah." The gear he had equipped just never broke—that was the secret of his invincibility.

"But even if his gear doesn't break, he can still die, right? So... Oh."

"...That precious treasure which preserves life." Realization had hit Alto while she was talking, and it seemed Juliet had gotten the gist too.

"Yeah. His Embryo works even on the Lifesaving Brooch."

The Lifesaving Brooch was a well-known accessory, but it wasn't the only one relevant in this case.

There was the Lifesaving Brooch, which prevented any fatal damage but had a chance to break upon activation.

There was the Cameo of Health, which prevented any debuffs...in exchange for a chance to break upon activation.

And then there was the Thiefsbane Bracelet, which prevented any thievery attempts...also in exchange for a chance to break upon activation.

Nemean Lion's power prevented them *all* from breaking, making them usable indefinitely.

The Cameo prevented hampering debuffs like Bone Fractures, while the Brooch prevented attacks that would reduce his HP to 0. He would be in good health no matter how much HP he lost. He would be invincible in any and all situations.

That was God Hunter, Carl Lourlou—the Superior whom no one could destroy.

My Vengeance ignored defense, but not even that could reduce his HP to 0.

"That's just broken!" said Alto.

"Yeah," I nodded. "There's probably no one who can beat him on a *normal battlefield*.”

“What do you mean?”

“...He speaks of the law of the arena, as well as those of this very fete,” Juliet said.

I would expect no less from a high-ranking duelist.

Alto spent a few seconds thinking about what we might mean, but then clapped her hands together as she realized.

“Oh yeah! This event doesn’t allow you to use Brooches at all!”

That was indeed the answer. People in this event couldn’t wear Lifesaving Brooches.

Knowing my combat style, that was a pretty big negative for me, but it was even worse for GH. He wasn’t wearing the thing that had made him truly invincible. Even if he had some sort of substitute, it likely wasn’t a fully functional replacement.

That was probably why he also never participated in duels.

“So we *can* beat him now! Yaaay! Let’s vince the invincible!” Alto said with obvious joy. Juliet and I were silent, not sure how to break it to her. “Huh? Did I say somethin’ wrong...?”

“No, Alto,” said Nemesis. “You are not wrong, but...”

“If we meet him again, it would mean that Jubei wasn’t able to beat him,” I explained.

“...Oh.” When we escaped that forest, Jubei and Carl had begun a one-on-one fight. If Jubei, with her immense combat ability, wasn’t able to beat Carl, it would mean that he was near-invincible even without the Brooch. In fact, it wasn’t out of the question that he had some kind of MVP reward with a similar effect anyway, just like Rosa did.

If that was the case, our chances of beating him were slim.

“Nnngh... It’s your fault for gettin’ my hopes up. You implied we were on a battlefield where we can actually beat him...”

“Sorry,” I said. “But there’s one other way this event area is different from a normal battlefield.”

“Which would be?”

“Look,” I said as I used a finger to draw a warped circle—the outline of this island.

Then, I drew a circle of the same shape just around it.

“This is...”

“There are no rules in the field, but there *are* rules in the event.” If we were to fight GH, we wouldn’t target his HP. Cheshire’s words came back to me.

“This will be this event’s areaaa. The island, I mean, as well as the area five hundred metels above it and twenty metels into the surrounding sea. Touching the barrier around it will disqualify you, so be caaareful.”

“We’d make him lose by taking him out of bounds.”

◇

And then, we’d unexpectedly encountered GH himself. Juliet wasn’t with us, but we still had a chance of winning.

We’d been traveling along the coastline to make it easy to push him out of the zone in case we encountered him.

If Juliet was here, we could rely on her Hræsvelgr’s wind powers to send GH flying about twenty metels. I’d heard that she’d successfully done that once against some large dragon during the Exodragon King incident.

However, there was something that I could do as well.

“Now!” I called, making Silver rush towards him.

The white bear readied his harpoon. The flames hadn’t harmed his gear, but they had harmed something else.

I could sense his shock as *the shipwreck he was standing on collapsed*.

The shipwreck was already on the verge of breaking, and my Purgatorial Flames had weakened it to the point where it could no longer support him.

“I burned a whole lot of trees yesterday! Tough luck, huh?!” Fighting against Afforest King Golem and its Planting Golems had given me a good grasp of how fast burning wood collapsed.

With his footing gone, GH dropped his harpoon gun and was hurtling towards the ground in midair.

That was the perfect time for us to charge him. He had nothing to grab on to and was completely at the mercy of gravity.

And even if his weight exceeded a hundred kilograms...

“SILVER!”

...my trusty steed’s horsepower would be more than enough to push him out of bounds! As GH fell, I made Silver intercept him with the boundary of this event behind him.

And so, my Prism Steed slammed into the white bear's body...*and stopped in place*.

"Huh?!" The shock wasn't mine alone. Nemesis, Alto, and even Silver seemed to be equally surprised.

I timed this perfectly, going in to push GH when he was most defenseless.

However, the white bear simply *didn't move from his place in the air* and gazed down on me with the lifeless eyes of his costume.

Next thing I knew, he was holding on to Silver's head with his left hand. In his right hand was a dagger, poised to strike me right in the face.

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About the Polar Bear

Ray Starling wasn't aware of this, but the costume his opponent was wearing was the MVP special reward for beating the UBM known as "Polaris Bear, Polar Star."

Polaris—the star that never moved from its place in the sky.

Called "Ultimate Costume Series, Polar Star," the item born from this creature had the effect of *negating knockback*. No physical power, no pressure from skills, and not even *gravity itself* could move the God Hunter against his will when he was wearing this.

Ray Starling was also unaware that the reason why Carl Lourlou had received such a reward was *his own brother, Shu*.

After the First Knight-Machine War, Shu Starling had been traveling to Tenchi when he'd clashed with Carl Lourlou during a certain incident at the Harshwinter Mountains.

Shu's Right of Destruction was put to the test against Carl's indestructibility. The ultimate offense faced the greatest defense, but back then, Shu's STR had been too low for Right of Destruction to negate Nemean Lion's effects.

However, in spite of that, Shu had emerged victorious.

His path to victory against Carl had been the same as the one Ray had chosen—to take him out of bounds.

Except while Ray only wanted to take him out of the bounds of the event, Shu chose to take him out of the bounds of *the planet's gravity*.

Indeed, Shu had achieved victory by literally kicking Carl into outer space.

Carl hadn't died, but he had no means of returning—or doing anything, for that matter—so he'd had no choice but to use the suicide system.

The one who was called invincible had been utterly defeated, and he had never forgotten this. He still wanted to get back at Shu Starling for it.

Because of this, the Polar Star that he'd defeated later was adjusted to fulfill his need for knockback resistance—and because of this, he had no intention of showing mercy to the one who faced him now: the younger brother of the Master who'd beaten him.

And so, he swung the hurt-returning dagger down towards Ray's face.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"Gifted Quiz!"

"Question: The creature that is four-legged in the morning, two-legged at noon, and three-legged in the evening would be man, but what is the name of the three-legged bird from Japanese mythology?"

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, I heard a familiar voice, followed by an unfamiliar one.

Looking ahead, I saw God Hunter's dagger hovering right in front of my eyes—but he himself, seemingly shocked, wasn't moving one bit.

"Ah!" I used the chance to take Silver back to my inventory. Alto and I almost fell into the sea, but I was able to summon Silver again at the very last moment and ride him along the surface.

While we did all of that, GH never moved an inch.

"Th-Th-That was toooo close..." Alto said. Looking at her, I noticed that she now had a cat's cradle string in her hands. It was the same one that she'd shown me here in *Infinite Dendrogram* earlier, but it was now emitting a golden light. Inside the complex netting, there was a semitransparent projection of a polar bear.

"Alto, is that...your Embryo?"

"Yeah...it is. It's called 'Gordian Knot'... You know what that means, right?"

Gordian Knot...a famous legend about Alexander the Great. It was a knot tied to an oxcart, and a prophecy stated that the one who could untie it would become ruler of all Asia.

“Gifted Quiz gives a question and freezes the target in place until they give the correct answer. In exchange, giving the correct answer doubles all of the target’s stats. I got no control over the question and it’s all random...”

“Now that’s...a difficult skill to use.” It was a combination buff and binding ability that Alto herself had almost no control over. If she used it on an enemy and the question was easy, it would just help them, and if she used it on a friend and the question was hard, she’d just incapacitate her allies.

If she’d used it on me and that had happened, it would’ve been over for us. In a survival-battle royale like this, you could never know when you’d be attacked.

I understood why she hadn’t used it until now.

“And you didn’t use it on Jubei because...?” I asked.

“...Imagine *her* stats getting doubled.” *Good point,* I thought.

“But isn’t GH wearing the Cameo? It negates debuffs, so...”

“Ray, this ain’t a debuff, but a setup for a buff!”

“...That makes sense.” So although debuffs didn’t work, buffs with...questionable usefulness still did. I never thought about it that way.

“But, uh...umm... I... Sorry.”

“Huh?” Alto, who had just saved us from a real tricky situation, was becoming all negative again.

It took me only a moment of wondering to realize why.

“That question...was probably too easy... Again, sorry!” she said, looking up at the polar bear with almost teary eyes.

“...Yatagarasu,” he said, speaking for the first time since we encountered him.

“...If you knew the answer, you could’ve said it earlier,” I said. Or maybe the minute or so he’d spent without saying anything was just him preparing to speak?

Regardless, GH was now blessed with Gordian Knot’s buff, giving him a golden aura. We were now faced with a strange creature that could only be described as a golden polar bear.

He descended from midair and stood on the water’s surface. I could only guess that he was using that skill or whatever it was that had held him in midair earlier.

"Well, damn..." Stats-wise, we had no chance against him even before the buff, and now his stats were double, along with the weight of his intimidating aura.

"...By the way, it lasts ten minutes...and it can't be used on the same person twice in the same day...so..." Alto explained. The polar bear projection had vanished from the cat's cradle in her hands.

I didn't expect her to be able to, but apparently she couldn't freeze him again.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire, eh...?" said Nemesis. "Well, that's nothing new for us...!" I replied. With his stats doubled, though, GH was truly a menacing enemy.

If we couldn't push him out of the event area, what could we even do to beat this Superior?

We had the option of giving up on both his plates as well as the sunken hint, but I didn't think he would let us escape.

"Hey, Ray..." As I fixed my gaze on GH, walking on water towards us, Alto talked to me in a tone of voice I hadn't heard from her yet. It was still negative and full of fear—but rather than fearing something in the present, it seemed like she was anxious about the future.

"...What?"

"Can you promise to never, ever, *ever*...tell anyone?" She was a friend, and I had no trouble promising her things, but...

"...Tell what?"

"*About what you're gonna see now.*" Those words tore my attention away from GH and towards her.

She was holding up the back of her right hand...the Jewel.

"Promise?"

"...Yeah," I said with a nod.

That seemed to have made her relax, if only just a little bit. During our exchange, GH had come uncomfortably close to us...

"Get him, *Horobimaru*."

"GOD HUNTER, SIGHTED."

...but then something *punched him away*.

The entity that had appeared from Alto's Jewel was larger than the bear, and its fist had sent him flying even though Silver's charge hadn't been able to make him move a single inch.

The polar bear went on to spring off the water's surface, then slightly sink into the water.

Unexpressive as he was, his shock was still evident. The being that had appeared left me, Nemesis, and clearly even God Hunter himself at a loss for words. Even if he was normally talkative, the surprise would have rendered him speechless.

The entity looked like heavy armor from Heian-period Japan, but it also had some qualities reminiscent of a western suit of armor.

It was all clad in metal, and its joints were knit using tiny metal fibers. On its shoulders there were large Japanese-style armor plates, which, combined with the tassets of a similar theme, made it overall look more like a samurai than anything else.

However, the armor had no helmet at all, and I didn't see even a skull or anything there. It was like an armored warrior without a head.

I had heard the name of a being with this unique appearance.

"Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru."

It was the name of the SUBM that had appeared in Tenchi.

Interlude: The Closed Sea

Event Area, South, Beach

This was the same battlefield where Shion defeated Juba, only to fall to Carl right after.

Two famed Altarian duelists now stood upon it: Juliet the Black Crow and Chelsea the Wandering Golden Sea—respectively the fourth and eighth in the rankings.

They were besties, combat partners, and rivals all at once, and now they were facing each other in single combat.

“...I came to Altar right about when Gloria did her thing, right?” Putting her battle-axe, Poseidon, down in the sand with its bladed side first, Chelsea began to talk about her memories.

“Hm?” Juliet, facing her from some distance, found Chelsea’s attempt at conversation strange, but listened to her regardless.

“It was right after my closest friend also left Granvaloa,” Chelsea continued. “I left to look for an SJ I could take and went to Altar ’cause it was closest.”

Saying nothing in response, Juliet recalled the time she’d first heard that.

The friend Chelsea spoke of was none other than Zeta—the now-wanted Superior. They had once been part of the same Granvaloan pirate crew.

“After the move, I decided to try my hand in Altar’s duel scene...and that was when I met you, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” nodded Juliet. Back then, Rosa and the rest of K&R hadn’t arrived in Altar yet, so the country didn’t have many female duelists. As fellow girls of the arena, they’d noticed each other, and Chelsea had struck up a conversation.

“I never had any idea what you were saying back then.”

“Ngh...” Chelsea was now Juliet’s closest friend, but unlike Ray, she didn’t have the strange ability to instantly understand her as though she was speaking normally.

“I eventually figured it out, but by that time, you’d started talking to me like a normal person.”

“Yeah. I did...” Juliet used her own, natural manner of speech with those she was close to. She’d slowly gained a few such friends over the years, but Chelsea was and always would be the first.

“It’s a bit embarrassing to say this, but...we really *are* friends, aren’t we?” Chelsea asked.

“I really feel that way...” said Juliet with a light blush and a nod.

“We’re friends, but also rival duelists,” Chelsea continued as she caressed her axe. “But there’s a side of me I haven’t shown you yet.”

A second later, their surroundings sank into the sea.

Or rather, the water flowing freely between the grains of sand on the ground raised the local sea level precipitously.

Surprised, Juliet flapped her wings and rose above the water.

“By that, I mean...you’ve never met the ‘me’ from the past, when I was at my strongest.”

With over half of her body now submerged, Chelsea continued speaking.

“You...or rather, the strongest girl in Altar *needs* to see it.” She pulled out her Poseidon and leaped out of the water. “I am the Great Pirate, Chelsea—the eighth in Altar’s duel rankings, nicknamed the ‘Wandering Golden Sea.’”

She then used her skill as a Great Pirate to stand on the water’s surface and introduced herself properly.

“And I *was* the second in Granvaloa’s duel rankings, nicknamed the ‘Closed Sea.’” That was who Chelsea used to be—someone many thought to be the strongest woman in all of Granvaloa.

“Bestie...you’re about to get a taste of my *real* fightin’ style,” Chelsea declared as she stood atop the rising sea. “Hope it ain’t too much for ya, Julie.”

“...Try me!” Juliet replied, all smiles, and commenced the battle.

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Type Weapon, “Panthalassic Axe, Poseidon.”

That was the name of Chelsea’s Embryo, and its abilities were centered around the concept of “liquid summoning.”

The skill that probably stood out the most was its ultimate, Golden Bull

Tsunami—Poseidon, which summoned a flood of liquid gold. Besides that, there was World Reversal Waterfall, which created a massive pillar of water that could be used for both defense and offense.

However, neither of those pushed her "liquid summoning" theme to its limit.

She could also summon simple seawater, the volume of which easily surpassed the amount of the liquid gold she could conjure up; given enough summoning time, it could even exceed that of the World Reversal Waterfall.

Chelsea had been preparing to summon water from the moment she'd put her Poseidon into the sand, and by now, the water had already submerged their battlefield and still continued to flow unabated.

Liquid summoning with a long precast? A flooded surface doesn't mean much to me, though... Juliet thought. Being capable of flight, she could easily avoid the water below.

The height limit for this event was a whole five hundred metels—far higher than that of the arenas. And since Juba had been dealt with, she didn't have to worry about being shot down from the sky.

Juliet could easily win this by simply attacking Chelsea from above over and over until she died.

As she became puzzled why this "all-out battle" was going in that direction...

"Julie."

...Chelsea looked up at her and smiled. "*You sure you're high enough?*" A moment later, continuous explosions resounded over the beach.

"Ah?!" Juliet's intuition drove her to rise higher for an evasive maneuver as trails of light pierced the sky. *Flare bombs!* she thought as she looked down to see a large object.

Its silhouette was all too familiar to her.

“Your ship!”

It was the pirate ship that had been parked in Gideon’s fifth district—the place that had once been the HQ of the Golden Pirates.

“Yeah. We had dessert parties there, so of course you know her,” said Chelsea.

That was a pleasant memory between her, Juliet, and Max—but right now, Juliet found the ship, with its proudly displayed Jolly Roger, absolutely terrifying.

“With the clan disbanded, I can carry her around like this. She’s my property, y’know?”

Just like Caldinans with their sandships, Granvaloans carried their vessels in large inventories. The size of these ships and regulations around dueling prevented them from being used in Altar’s arenas, but the only item disallowed inside this spacious event zone was the Lifesaving Brooch.

“So you raised the water because...”

“Ya guessed it. To let this baby float. Twenty metels from the coastline just ain’t enough.”

While Ray and Alto were incorporating the event’s barrier into their fight against Carl, it was nothing but a limitation to Chelsea.

“Here’s another thing about my Skyanchor here—*she’s fitted with an anti-air loadout*.”

As Chelsea proclaimed this, the ship revealed a number of anti-air guns that did not match at all with its wooden hull. Energy then flowed from the magic tank within, activating every single one of them.

“So yeah, flyin’ around like that ain’t very safe.”

And with that, the sky was torn apart by a flood of light. Explosions resounded and overlapped, playing an orchestra of destruction.

“Gh...!” Even Juliet found it difficult to evade the barrage. Gaining altitude wasn’t an option—five hundred metels was far too little before these powerful AA guns.

Instead, she spun around as she went down and...

“Blackwing Orchestra!”

...used the black feathers she released while evading to power an offensive skill. Each of the plumes released jet-black blades of wind, raining down on the Skyanchor.

“Julie, here’s something you may not know about Granvaloan ships...”

However, the wind-blades barely did any damage.

“What?!”

“Their surfaces have anti-water and anti-air coating. We go sailing through storms, y’know? You’d have to use your ult to break through this resistance.”

Chelsea was right, but Juliet would have to stop moving to prepare her ult, which would leave her open to the anti-air barrage.

To avoid this AA fire and buy time to use her ult, Juliet had to go not above Skyanchor, but *below* its firing range.

Thinking that to be the best course of action, she quickly descended.

The automated AA turrets followed her, but she continued to go down as though falling until...

“Welcooome.”

...she was right next to her friend—and her friend’s axe was swinging towards her.

Though caught by surprise, Juliet parried the axe with her cursed sword, using the force of the collision to slow her momentum before flapping her wings to readjust her stance.

“Julie, didja think about why I’m bein’ so talkative right now?” Chelsea said with a joyful tone. It seemed as though she’d expected Juliet to deflect her surprise attack.

Juliet had missed the moment Chelsea had left her ship, but the girl had somehow known exactly where Juliet would go and water-walked right to that location. That, along with the precise targeting of the flare bombs and the guns made Juliet realize that she’d moved exactly as Chelsea expected.

“You were talking to lure me down for a battle on the sea...weren’t you?”

“Yep! I suggest you don’t go up again. I set the guns to attack any livin’ thing that’s too high up there.”

Chelsea knew Juliet’s combat style almost as well as her own. With her analysis skills, it wasn’t hard to make Juliet act as she wanted.

Their surroundings were covered in water, but with the job skill that let her walk on water, that wasn’t a problem. Juliet, on the other hand, couldn’t go too high because of the AA weapons, forcing her to fight in low altitudes.

She could no longer bring death from above even if she wanted to.

“Now, here’s a question for ya: why do ya think my ship is specced for AA?” Chelsea asked.

Juliet realized that she was once again funneling her into acting a certain way, but she couldn’t tell how.

She carefully observed both Chelsea and Skyanchor when suddenly...

“Hm...?”

...she felt something odd.

Juliet had Danger Perception and Killing Intent Perception as job skills, but neither of them were active. Instead, her pure combat intuition was telling her that she was in grave danger.

“The answer is...” Chelsea said as Juliet flapped her wings to dodge to the side. “...because I’m strongest on the sea.”

A moment later, an explosion erupted right under where Juliet had been floating just moments earlier.

Though overcome by shock, Juliet instantly understood that this attack wasn’t caused by Chelsea’s Embryo or job skills. The explosion was quite obviously a Crimson Sphere, and there was only one way Chelsea could use something like that.

“Gems...!” Looking down, Juliet saw countless Gems floating in the beautiful water below.

This was a strategy that would never appear in an Altarian duel.

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Upon moving from Granvaloa to Altar, Chelsea was deeply troubled by the stark differences in dueling rules.

What made Granvaloan duel rules different wasn’t the lack of duel barriers—that was a difference in environment, not the rules specifically.

Was it the fact that you won by sinking the other side’s boat, then? That was a major difference, but there was something even bigger.

It was *the use of items*.

Since there were no barriers, Granvaloan duelists were allowed to use Brooches to ensure their survival, but more importantly, they could also use many items that were banned in Altar’s duels.

HP recovery consumables—allowed.

Artillery shells and Gems made by other people—allowed.

Special gear that ran on MP from magic tanks or similar outside sources instead of the user's own—allowed.

Granvaloan duels were based on naval warfare, so there were almost no limits on the items that could be used in them.

That was the main difference between Granvaloan duels and the ones held in other countries, and it had taken a long while for Chelsea to adjust to that.

Indeed, her true combat style was one in which she utilized countless offensive consumables as sea mines.

This particular style of combat was also extremely compatible with her Embryo.

Poseidon could summon a crushing wave of liquid gold that could be used both offensively and defensively. However, those who knew Chelsea as she had been in the past would understand that the most fearsome thing about her wasn't her flashy skills, but her seemingly minor techniques and trickery.

She had a skill called "Creek," which created a weak flow of water from any nearby spot in space. It dealt almost no damage and only barely exerted enough force to knock over a toddler, which made it unable to even trigger Danger Perception.

In exchange for this weakness, however, she was able to create water in any place within a range of several hundred metels.

She could do it in deserts, in the air, in the sea...and at riversides.

Indeed, this was the exact skill Chelsea had used against Wan. She'd walked downstream alongside the river while preemptively and secretly arranging Gems in the water. All the while she'd used Creek to move the Gems, leading them to Wan and then detonating them right when Zaqqum exploded, seizing the chance to blow off his legs.

Her true power was in these precise and silent "sea mine attacks."

She also had a strong predictive ability that had allowed her to dominate Granvaloan naval battles.

Her keen analytic eye and control over conversation were both weapons she incorporated into her fighting style. Sometimes, she provoked her opponents to infuriate them; sometimes she used the truth to push them to act exactly like she wanted.

Chelsea funneled her opponents into situations advantageous to her, where she would silently attack them with her sea mines and sink their ships.

Even the Granvaloan Superior, Antimicrobic Soy Sauce, had been no match for her back when he was still in his sixth form. He could turn the surrounding water into explosive material, but Chelsea would just see it coming and use it against him.

Avoiding the minefield and approaching it from the air was made impossible by the excessive AA armaments on Skyanchor, forcing everyone to fight on her home turf.

On top of that, Granvaloan duels weren't one-on-one, but crew versus crew—meaning that she had multiple crewmates supporting her and protecting the ship.

Because of this, back when there had been no Master Superiors or Superior Jobs, she and her Skyanchor had managed to rise to second place in Granvaloa's duel rankings.

Since the number one spot was held by Grand Captain and the capital ship—Granvaloa itself—it was fair to say that Chelsea was effectively the duel champion.

Because of this, she was once known as "the pirate fleet's most fearsome woman."

However, with the increase in SJs and Superiors, other Masters increasing their boating skill, and her lackluster performance after the move to Altar, that title had been all but forgotten.

But that was the very woman Juliet was facing now.

The environment, the lack of death penalty, and Chelsea's mentality were all exactly as they had been back then, and she was ready to bare herself to her friend and rival.

The Closed Sea was unleashing her entire being upon the Black Crow.

◇◆

"...Chelsea," Juliet said. She'd never seen her friend fight like this.

Chelsea had prevented her from using her most powerful techniques and was aiming to win by dragging Juliet into her own battlefield. It was a chillingly fierce, yet quiet and fearsome strategy.

If Juliet didn't have her wings, she might have already lost without so much as scratching Chelsea.

However, she could still fly and hadn't drowned yet—and that meant she could still fight.

"Yeah, that's about what I'd expect from ya, Julie..." said Chelsea as she observed Juliet settling into her now-familiar combat style.

She used her well-rounded strength to the fullest, reaching for victory no matter the situation or what enemy she was up against. It was beautiful, dazzling, and charming to the point of being emotionally moving.

Now that Chelsea had her ship and sea mines, there was the possibility that Juliet could be defeated with little resistance.

But she was still alive—she hadn't sunk yet.

And that one fact was why she could still fight. Her time having fun with her friend wouldn't end just yet.

Both of them had cracked a grin without realizing it as they took their fight to the next stage.

"Blackwing Requiem!" Juliet launched a remote-controlled dark magic spell at Chelsea. Neither water nor explosions could defend against it.

But there was something that *was* able to block it—dozens of winged black spheres surfaced from the water and welcomed Juliet's spell.

Gloom Stalkers?! she thought in surprise. The dark magic spell that she'd seen Shion use countless times now was a high-rank ultimate job skill.

And it had just been launched en masse from the sea—or rather, from Chelsea's minefield.

The Great Pirate had actually thrown every single Gem she had into the water right as she raised the sea level, and there were more than just Crimson Spheres among them.

"I went around and bought tons of dark magic Gems just in case I fought you or Shion," Chelsea said. "There aren't many of them on the market, though, so it cost me a whole lot." She held her hands out and waved them lightly as though to say "I'm broke now."

However, she had managed to gather more than enough of these Gems for her purposes. She'd always thought that a chance like this would come sooner or later.

I don't know how many dark magic Gems she has, Juliet thought. *I might run out of MP before she runs out of them... Also...*

Also, Gems didn’t use Chelsea’s MP, and she could activate many of them at once. It wasn’t impossible for her to completely overwhelm Juliet.

“In that case...!” Juliet said as she flapped her wings and flew towards Chelsea, intent on fighting with something other than magic.

“That’s exactly what I thought you would do!” cried Chelsea as she braced herself for Juliet’s approach.

There was no longer any room in the fight for her silver tongue or Skyanchor’s aerial domination. The battlefield was now limited to the surface of the water, and the winner would be decided by pure fighting technique.

“Up you go!” Chelsea said as she swung her finger like a conductor’s baton, directing serpentine jets of water upwards into the air.

Countless such flows aimed straight for Juliet, and all of them carried Chelsea’s sea mines. Juliet’s friend and rival was planning to detonate one Gem when Juliet got too close, leading to a chain explosion that would completely consume her.

The trajectories of the water flows were such that it was difficult for Juliet to evade them all—a fact that made it obvious how well Chelsea knew Juliet.

She can only do this because this fight is right above the water...! Grazed by the exploding Gems, Juliet considered the differences between the Chelsea she knew and the Chelsea she was fighting now.

It wasn’t merely the presence of Skyanchor or the Gems she used as sea mines—Juliet also couldn’t see *where* the flows that she commanded actually began.

On land, Chelsea’s liquid summoning was somewhat telegraphed, so Juliet could easily spot them and counter the attack. That was always how it had gone in their duels.

But just as you would have trouble finding a specific tree in a forest, you couldn’t spot a water current in the sea. Until the flow broke the surface, it was hard to tell where the liquid Chelsea summoned was coming from—and where it was heading.

Actually, Chelsea had found it necessary to attack her with flows that shot *out* of the water exactly because she was fighting Juliet in particular. In battles against other ships, she could simply sink them without ever breaking the surface of the sea.

As she is now, she's clearly a pre-Superior...among the best of them too! Juliet thought. Perhaps if the battle against Chrono Crown had been on water, Chelsea might've been able to prevent him from evading or accelerating, quietly ending the battle with her silent sea mine attacks. That was how powerful she was right now.

But still...! Even despite the dire circumstances, Juliet was having tons of fun fighting Chelsea in her current state.

She couldn't ascend upwards and was always in danger of being blown up by the mines in the water below, which trapped her between sea and sky.

But still...she was having *tons* of fun.

After all, this was her first true all-out battle against her dearest friend.

It was so much fun that she wouldn't regret it if this turned out to be her final duel in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

And so, with a smile on her face, she flew towards victory.

You really are somethin', Julie, Chelsea thought. She knew Julie well and had made her water flows as difficult for Juliet to evade as she possibly could.

However, Juliet had the combat skill and adaptability to dodge them regardless.

She was closing the distance between them, but Chelsea knew what she was planning.

She can't use her ult, Chelsea thought. Juliet's Corpse-Eating Bird—Hræsvelgr was a powerful mixed-magic spell, but to prepare it, Juliet had to move her wings to her arms.

It came at the cost of mobility, which would spell certain death in Chelsea's minefield.

Because of that, what Juliet was about to do was...

Cursed Phalanx Disorder, Chelsea thought. It was the Fallen Knight's ultimate job skill that turned her cursed weapons into missiles flying towards the enemy.

Being merely a high-rank job, Chelsea didn't have the stats to survive a direct hit from even one of them. However, since cursed weapons were physical, they could be deflected by things other than dark magic.

She's closin' the distance to deplete the Gems I'd use to intercept her attacks. She'll break through half my minefield and use her job's ult when I run out of Gems to counter it.

However, neither of them knew exactly where that divide was.

Chelsea didn't know how many cursed weapons Juliet had prepared, while Juliet didn't know how many Gems Chelsea had floating around.

Victory would belong to whichever one of them turned out to have the greater number.

Though, to reveal the answer to this question, there *were* more of Chelsea's Gems than Juliet's cursed weapons.

That was exactly why Juliet was closing the distance.

Despite the danger of being shot down before she could use her Cursed Phalanx Disorder, she was approaching her rival. It was more or less a strange game of chicken.

Neither of them were saying anything anymore. The battle itself had their full attention.

Juliet was focused on heading forwards and looking for the best moment to strike, while Chelsea was focused on preparing for Juliet's ultimate job skill—and bringing her down when it came.

Their AGI was different, and thus the time they experienced was different. Their intense focus had made it feel like time was slowing down.

It seemed almost as though this moment would never end.

The both of them were indeed hoping that this thrilling split second would last forever—but alas, that was impossible.

When the distance between them was only fifteen metels, an explosion singed Juliet's leg...

Now!

...and in response she took a small pouch from her sleeve—the inventory holding her weapons.

"Cursed Phalanx Disorder!" With that, she destroyed the inventory with her own hands, spreading the many weapons into the air.

Then, following her command, the weapons used the grudge stored within as fuel to propel them towards Chelsea.

"...Now," Chelsea said out loud as she activated all of the Gems she had prepared.

Magic lights began to appear beneath the surface of the ocean between them...and below where *Juliet had just passed*.

This was Chelsea's plan—to prepare enough Gems so that she could not only counter Juliet's Cursed Phalanx Disorder, but also surround Juliet completely and defeat her once and for all.

Their attacks were unleashed at the same time, and the sea was soon swallowed up in a massive burst of power.

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She wondered what had led to her defeat.

Had it been overconfidence? No—her plan had been solid and her execution had been nearly flawless.

Had she not adequately prepared? No—she'd been ready for this battle long before it was imminent, and she'd expended every resource she'd stocked for this exact scenario.

Had it been some sort of mistake? No—although her strategy did have one weakness, it shouldn't have posed a problem.

Explosions from below the water surface could always be evaded by going upwards. However, that meant becoming the target of Skyanchor's AA cannons. If Juliet took to the sky to escape the magic of the Gems, they would quickly shoot her down.

Because of this, Chelsea's plan was as good as flawless.

However...*Juliet had actually flown upwards despite the danger*.

She just barely escaped the inferno below her and increased her altitude, all the while weathering the fire of the AA guns.

Being burned and shot out of the sky should have been inevitable.

However, she was still alive—and she was *right in front of Chelsea*.

"HEEEAAHHH!" Juliet swung her sword as she fell. "Fell" not merely because she was descending, but because she no longer even had the wings to fly—they had been completely consumed by flame, having become her shield through her Molting skill.

Chelsea had obviously known about that, but she believed that Juliet would've been shot down regardless.

Juliet, on the other hand, had wagered that she'd make it through the barrage with a tiny sliver of her health remaining.

Whether due to her own incredible battle intuition or the influence of a teammate who was known for recklessness, she'd charged straight through the cannon fire, made it to the other side, and reached Chelsea.

Gotta use my water flow control to make a wall! Chelsea's heyday had really been back in her time in Granvaloa, but that didn't mean that she was weaker now in *every* way.

"Ah...!" Back when she'd won all her battles using her sea mines, she didn't have the *close combat technique she'd honed under Altarian dueling rules*—the fighting style she'd developed to stand her ground against her rival.

However, she couldn't move her axe fast enough to block Juliet's sword. Her reaction was delayed by her overwhelming focus on her *old* fighting style.

The golden axe failed to stop the black blade, and the winged girl's sword sliced into the seafaring pirate.

Being a high-rank job, Chelsea didn't have the bodily strength to withstand the strike of a vanguard Superior Job. The sword entered her left shoulder and cut diagonally through her body, the edge finally exiting at the right side of Juliet's waist.

It was a fatal blow. The beautiful blue sea was now stained red with fire and blood.

Without a word, Chelsea looked down at her wound, then at the friend who had sunk into the water right at her feet.

Unlike Chelsea, who had a water-walking skill, Juliet—now wingless—had sunk beneath the surface of the sea. Having clearly overextended herself, she didn't seem to have the strength to get up again.

...If I'd left a mine under my own feet, I might've been able to make this a draw, Chelsea thought. With a wry smile on her face, she created a flow that brought Juliet to the surface.

"Ughh...! Chelsea...?" said her nearly drowned friend, coughing.

"Here," Chelsea said as she reached into her inventory and gave Juliet the life jacket she'd used during a previous event, hoping that it would keep her friend from sinking.

Now... Is there anythin' else? Chelsea thought.

Her pain was set to "off," so she could still move, but certainly not much. She had only seconds left until she would receive her death penalty.

"Next time..." With great effort, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Huh?"

Chelsea had spent a moment thinking what she ought to say in this exact situation. "The next time we get a chance to fight like this, I'll have developed a fighting style different from the one I had *and* the one I've got now." She cracked a faint smile. "So fight me just like this again, will ya?"

It was a promise.

Juliet had defeated the Chelsea she was now and the Chelsea she'd used to be—and yet her friend would still challenge her again in the future. Maybe that was just Chelsea being a sore loser, but duelists were just like that. They found joy in competing for victory against people who were simultaneously their bitterest enemies and dearest friends.

Chelsea had continued living this lifestyle despite Altar's different duel rules exactly because she found it so much fun. And it was made even more fun by the fact that she had forged a strong friendship that helped the both of them improve each other.

That was why Chelsea would never tire of this.

"...Sure!" Juliet said, readily accepting Chelsea's promise. She was worried that this might've been the last duel she would ever have, but this promise thoroughly overshadowed that fear.

Thus, she smiled, believing with certainty that the two of them would play together again.

The two girls smiled at each other as one of them vanished, ending their duel.

Until next time.

Chapter Nine: Invincible Versus Invincible

March 15th, 2045

A month ago in real time and three months ago in *Dendro* time, a particular individual was walking on a beach at night.

"So I'm finally movin' to Tokyo tomorrow, huh? Guess I can't stay up all night this time."

Listening to the waves and feeling the wind, Alto was strolling along the beach. She'd passed the UTokyo entrance exams and was now preparing, with her mother's help, to move to Tokyo.

Alto...or rather, Natsume didn't have much to bring, but her parents, overjoyed that she'd made it into UTokyo, had bought her enough furniture and the like to make the move a daylong affair.

"Huh?" As she imagined what her new life would be like, she noticed the entity standing on the beach with her.

It was the suit of samurai armor that had been making waves across Tenchi for the past few months. The creature had drifted to this country's shore about five months ago and, upon arrival, said:

"Who here craves my arms and armor?

Challenge me in combat.

What I still bear is a longbow, naginata, and this armor itself.

I am a Superior Unique Boss Monster.

I am called Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru."

Superior Unique Boss Monster—SUBM. A highly exclusive group of monsters containing the likes of "Biframe White Whale, Twin Moby Dick" and "Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria."

Horobimaru was one of these creatures, but he was an odd example, never engaging in battle unless challenged. He simply presented his rewards and merely stood in place, waiting for those who would face him. Anyone who attacked him would be deemed a challenger, and he would quickly deal with them—and *only* them.

He brought no harm to anyone besides the martial artists who dared to fight him, making him an extremely peaceful SUBM.

Fighters from all over Tenchi had gathered to try and defeat him, and out of the thousands to face him, only two had ever actually bested him—King of Brigands, Bigman, and The Gun, Sauer Urgaur. Both of them were Superiors.

Following both defeats, Horobimaru instantly revived himself and granted them weapons. Bigman received the naginata, while Sauer was given the longbow.

Since Horobimaru hadn't come equipped with a helm or a tachi, it was rumored that those items had been taken before he'd arrived at Tenchi.

And now, the only thing left was the headless suit of animated armor.

However, despite losing all of his weapons, Horobimaru was now stronger than ever before.

Bigman and Sauer had lost the right to challenge him again, but he had become so strong that even the other Superiors seemed to be completely powerless against him. His strength and toughness had even driven some to deem him completely invincible. Fighting him now seemed so hopeless that it didn't take long for the number of challengers to start dwindling. Even Superiors and pre-Superiors who spent a long time preparing for the battle were defeated, while everyone else had already given up.

There was a time when this stretch of coastline had been bustling with people challenging Horobimaru around the clock, but now he might not even see a single combatant per day.

Tonight was no different—Horobimaru stood in the same spot, but Alto was the only person around.

"A headless samurai, standing on a beach at night. I can't tell if this is picturesque or something straight out of a horror film," she nonchalantly commented before an idea popped into her head. "I'm not gonna be able to log in tomorrow anyway, so let's give him a little test! Just for funsies!"

If she was going to be too busy to log in the entire day anyway, getting a death penalty didn't mean anything. She planned to try fighting him and maybe get a screenshot or two to post on her social media accounts.

"All right, the camera's set, so...Gifted Quiz!" Thus, with little thought behind it, she used her Embryo's skill on Horobimaru.

Alto’s Embryo was called the “String-Weave of Chance, Gordian Knot.” It was a buff that posed a random question to the target and held them in place while they answered.

Alto knew that an SUBM would immediately get it right and attack her. However, she hoped that before the answer came, she could at least get a picture she could caption with something like “I caught myself a Horobimaru!”

“Question: What is the capital of Japan?”

“Whoa, that’s so easy I’m gonna cry...” Alto said, cursing her misfortune, expecting Horobimaru to answer right away and kill her instantly.

Silence.

“Whuh?” Contrary to her expectations, Horobimaru said nothing and did not move whatsoever. She found it strange, but she didn’t miss the chance to get close to him and snap the picture.

“All righty! I can see this gettin’ a lotta likes!” she said excitedly.

“...Hmm?” However, when Horobimaru continued to stay silent and unmoving, she started to become confused.

Huhhh? I mean, the answer’s obviously Tokyo. It’s one of the most famous cities in the world, isn’t it? Don’t Dendro’s servers have this data stored somewhere? she thought, not realizing how off the mark she was with that assumption.

The question was only easy for *Masters*—any of them could answer it in a split second.

However, for tians and monsters, it was information from a different world they could never know.

No matter how much Horobimaru thought about it, the answer could never come to him.

Five minutes passed, then ten. Alto was actually about to give up and log out, when...

“I have been immobilized,” said Horobimaru. “I will never break free of this by my own power.”

“Huh?” Alto was surprised that he’d said anything that not only wasn’t the answer, but also sounded like words of someone thoroughly defeated.

However, the surprise was nothing before the shock from the words that followed.

“Thus, I recognize you as the final victor.”

“Huh? Wait. HUH? Hold on. Whaddya mean?! Say that again!” As Alto became more and more perplexed, Horobimaru knelt before her.

Gifted Quiz was now undone.

“I am no longer Horobimaru,” he said. “I grant you this body of mine, ‘Prototype Horobimaru-Star Armor.’”

The reason Gifted Quiz had ceased to affect him was that his nature had changed. He was no longer the target of the skill or even an SUBM at all—he had become Alto’s property.

Indeed—through her Gordian Knot, Alto had just *defeated* the SUBM that many of Tenchi’s strongest were powerless against.

“When champions with Superior Jobs stand before you, I will wield my powers against them for three minutes once a day. Grant me much strife and many battles, and I shall grant you victory.”

Without even waiting for Alto’s response, Horobimaru took out a Jewel and placed himself inside of it. The Jewel then moved by itself to take its place on the back of Alto’s right hand.

Horobimaru was gone, leaving only Alto...who was so shocked she had fallen backwards onto the ground.

“...What do I do?”

She had just defeated Horobimaru and taken him for herself. If anyone found that out, Tenchi’s battle junkies would be hounding her every moment she was online. Smart as she was, she instantly realized how terrible this was, and the joy of beating the SUBM was quickly crushed by fear.

Before anyone could see her, Alto logged out, certain that she simply couldn’t let anyone know about this.

After that, Tenchi had held a countrywide event to celebrate Horobimaru’s final defeat, and Alto didn’t log in once for the entire event.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

My college friend had just summoned an SUBM.

I would say that I was pretty used to shocking things by now, but this was enough to render even me speechless.

Still, I managed to call out to her.

"Alto, this is..." She turned back towards me when she heard my words, and she looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"...Keep it a secret, okay...? Never ever *ever* tell anyone about it..."

"Uhh... Sure."

"If this comes out, my *Dendro* life will be over for good..." She seemed to be caught in that downward spiral of negativity again. "This guy says that he'll only fight SJs, and if people in Tenchi find out I have him, I'll have no future there! He's a real problem child! I have no idea how to use him... Hell, this is actually the first time I've summoned him! I'm scared of what's gonna happen after this!"

...I could see her point, though. And I could understand why she hadn't summoned him in front of Jubei.

I wasn't the only one surprised by this turn of events, though. God Hunter seemed just as, if not more, shocked. He also seemed hesitant to come closer, standing at a distance and observing us.

Who could blame him, honestly? A newbie to the game had just used a Superior MVP reward to summon the actual SUBM itself. For someone who'd gained all his strength through normal means, this was completely unheard of.

I thought that GH might even decide to retreat now. Instead of fighting such an uncertain battle, he could choose to head for the goal instead.

However, contrary to my expectations, he brandished his dagger and advanced towards us.

He wasn't Shu, so I couldn't read his emotions through his costume just yet. However, there was something I *could* understand.

His intention could be translated into one simple phrase: *Like hell I'm going to run*.

These feelings of pride and resolve were so great that I could sense them even behind his bear costume.

"Nemesis, Alto...Horobimaru." This Superior, driven by his strong will, was now approaching us completely intent on victory.

In this case, the best thing to do was respond in kind—not back down, but step forwards.

We were here to win this event. There were Masters from all over the world here, and if we were to break the tape at the finishing line, it would be better to do so after facing our enemies head on, not through underhanded means. The latter would have certainly left a bad taste in my mouth.

“Let’s win against the invincible Superior!”

“Certainly!”

“O-O...Okay!”

“Fully understood!” The three of them answered my call in their own ways, and thus began the final round between us and God Hunter, Carl Lourlou.

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Event Area, West, Coastside Cliff

If he wanted to strive for victory like the hunter he was, Carl should’ve chosen to retreat.

Ray’s group had yet to acquire too many plates, and it would’ve surely taken them a while to find and read the hint that had sunk into the sea when the shipwreck was destroyed.

Even though they could fly using the Prism Steed, if he moved at top speed Carl would still reach the goal and input the correct answer before they could.

It had been the same situation with Jubei—to Carl, it was better to run away from enemies who were too much trouble.

However, there were some things that he couldn’t run away from no matter *how* much trouble they might be.

He couldn’t turn his back on the younger brother of the man who’d defeated him. He couldn’t run from the “Invincible” SUBM when he was deemed to be “Invincible” himself.

Jubei was too much trouble, but *nothing more than that*.

These two, however—his pride wouldn’t allow him to ignore either of them.

Thus, no matter how uncertain his victory seemed, Carl chose to stay.

Giant-slayer? SUBM? It doesn’t matter. Come at me. I am invincible—the “Multifariously Invincible.” Even if the entire world is against me, not one of them would be a worthy opponent.

Those weren’t exactly his thoughts, but an approximate translation of his emotional state as he charged towards his prey.

The prey, of course, were not content to simply let themselves be hunted down.

The headless armor samurai kicked off the sea's surface and rushed towards Carl. What followed was something like a cross counter—both of their attacks landed at the exact same time. Carl was punched, while his dagger fell on the armor samurai.

The exchange was like a replay of the battle's first strike, for it sent Carl flying backwards yet again.

This was in spite of him wearing Polar Star, which had the power to nullify all knockback.

And on top of that, the skill of his Drag-Pain—the dagger which returned damage dealt to him in the form of fixed damage—had failed to activate.

In fact, the dagger was now half broken.

Carl said nothing, but he wasn't fazed by this. In fact, he'd expected this by now.

I knew it. So it is true. How fiendish. My gear no longer functions.

Having been attacked by Horobimaru, the Superior now knew exactly what made the creature so powerful.

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The headless samurai, Horobimaru—otherwise known as "Prototype Horobimaru-Star Armor."

He had two special traits that made him what he was.

First was his sheer toughness. His defensive power, endurance, and all of his resistances were so high that not even END-focused SJs could match him. Even SJ ultimate job skills were like mere scratches to him, and only Greatest One exceeded him in magic and debuff resistance.

In terms of pure toughness, Horobimaru ranked second among the SUBMs.

However, that trait paled in comparison to the second one—his skill, which was quite ironically called "Anti Skill."

This ability made it so that *anything* that touched him would be rendered unable to use skills for 999 seconds.

People, monsters, armaments, consumables—anything Horobimaru touched would lose its active and passive skills.

Polar Star had lost its knockback negation with the first punch Horobimaru threw at Carl. And now, the Drag-Pain he'd used against him had become nothing but a mere dagger.

Both MVP rewards had temporarily lost their indestructibility, but while Polar Star had the endurance to withstand the damage, Drag-Pain had broken.

Tenchi's martial artists wielded many job skills as well as powerful blades, blessed or cursed with all manner of special powers. But while facing Horobimaru, none of those skills meant anything, rendering them powerless against him. All offensive magic and curses were also more or less negated by the armor's pure toughness.

The only thing you could rely on while fighting the armor were your own stats and techniques that didn't rely on skills to be effective.

That was the final form of the SUBM that had appeared in the land of strife—Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru.

The fact that this invincible monster had been defeated by a skill that *didn't touch him* and *couldn't be negated by resistances due to being classified as a buff* was a great example of the power of compatibility.

The entity that had created Horobimaru certainly hadn't anticipated such a pitfall.

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Physical contact negates my skills, meaning that my Drag-Pain is of no use.

All skills that had to touch Horobimaru to work were useless solely because of that. Drag-Pain had been one of the aces up Carl's sleeve, but it was no exception to this rule.

This, too, was an example of the power of compatibility.

Then again, one might say that he had already done a great deal to swing the compatibility of this battle in his favor by simply wearing a full-body costume. If his skin was exposed and Horobimaru touched it, Nemean Lion's skills would vanish, making all his gear destructible once again. It was exactly *because* his entire body was covered that Horobimaru's blow had only negated the skills of Polar Star.

However, that was little consolation. To Carl, facing the armor samurai meant a thorough defeat.

Carl was invincible through a skill combo, while Horobimaru was invincible through a combination of pure defensive power and a skill that *negated* the skills of anything he touched—which included Carl's invincibility combo.

The Prototype Horobimaru-Star Armor was Carl's natural enemy.

And what of it?

Despite that, Carl moved with determination.

So what if he is my natural enemy? I am invincible—the Superior who was called invincible and who strove to live up to that name. There is no reason for me to back away from anyone, even my natural enemy.

Carrying those feelings in his heart, Carl made a move.

The hunter that had felled many a powerful quarry considered his options.

Drag-Blood's AoE poison was not viable. Not only was it useless against nonliving animated armor—Carl knew that its debuffs and the like could end up empowering Ray Starling. The third one could easily withstand it with just an Elixir.

Only a debuff as powerful as a Superior Embryo or SJ ultimate skill would be useful here, but Carl hadn't yet taken enough damage for Drag-Blood to have reached that level.

Having been just sent here, he also didn't have any traps set up in the area. Thus, he couldn't use the same strategy he'd used against Jubei.

Carl put away his dagger and equipped a weapon that was perhaps most appropriate for his role as a hunter—a bow.

He pulled the bowstring back and fired into the sky.

"That's...!" Ray was familiar with this technique. It was a Heavy Bow Samurai skill that he himself had weathered back when K&R had attacked him—Early Summer Arrow Rain. It turned a single arrow into a hundred. The hunter grouping was obviously capable of using bows, but the skill was only a high-rank ultimate job skill.

However, the *user* was Carl—a Superior.

If someone like him dedicated one of his two high-rank job slots to Heavy Bow Samurai, it could only mean that there was more to it than the skill itself.

As though to confirm that fact, the arrow that split in midair became *a meteor shower*.

And that was no poetic exaggeration—the arrows had all become actual meteors.

This was because the bow itself was an Ancient Legendary MVP reward—Star-Summoner, Meteoloader. Any arrows this bow shot to a certain height would fall back down as meteors with greatly increased toughness, weight, and heat.

This also applied to the arrows created by Early Summer Arrow Rain, which meant the skill summoned not a hundred arrows, but a hundred *meteors*.

This was Carl's wide-scale extermination combo. It was so powerful that not even he could avoid it, but his defense made that irrelevant.

Also, what he was aiming at wasn't actually Horobimaru himself.

"...Whuh?"

Instead, he'd aimed at the woman who was now staring at the meteors above with a dumbfounded expression—Horobimaru's owner, Alto.

No matter how tough he may have been, Horobimaru was ultimately her summon. If she were to die, Horobimaru would vanish as well.

She had no means of defending herself against this, and the meteors would soon overwhelm her...

"Not happening!"

...but a knight stood to protect her.

The man on a silver steed, clad in a black coat, grabbed Alto and rode off, zigzagging between the meteors. Before the meteors landed and the shock waves reached them, he spurred his horse downwards while evading any superheated rock that launched their way.

"EEK! EEEEEEEEEEP!" Alto shrieked at every meteor that nearly grazed them.

"Ray!" Nemesis called out.

"It's fine. They're slower than lasers, and the shock waves aren't as bad as the ones from that whale thing!" Ray said, relying on his combat experience to evade the meteors. The falling rocks went on to crash into the ground below, creating many repeated impact explosions.

Carl and Horobimaru were standing in the middle of it all, both thoroughly unharmed.

He instantly found the only weakness in my meteor shower. I suppose I shouldn't expect any less from his brother. Though, he just broke it all with his fists.

Seeing Ray counter this attack made Carl crack a smile under his costume.

Horobimaru was still facing him, seemingly indifferent to his owner's predicament, and the armor's movements made Carl realize something.

Given what I know about the owner, she would definitely use Horobimaru to protect herself. The fact that she isn't must mean that she cannot*. This thing is not being controlled by her. And from what she said, Horobimaru would only take action to fight and destroy Superior Jobs... It makes one wonder who is being used by whom.*

Carl's conjecture was correct. Horobimaru was Alto's property, but she couldn't control him like a regular tamed monster. He could only be Called in battles involving Superior Jobs, and once summoned, he would do nothing but fight the SJs. Alto herself wasn't aware of this specific fact, but if there were SJs on her side, Horobimaru would attack them as well.

Defeating—no, *fighting*—Superior Jobs was the very purpose for Horobimaru's existence. Upon accepting his defeat by Alto, he had released his Resources as an SUBM and was no longer counted among their number, but that purpose had never changed.

After all, this was part of his nature before Jabberwock had even given him the designation of "UBM."

"98 Seconds remaining." However, some things *had* changed after he'd stopped being a UBM—most notably, the time he could be active.

Horobimaru's Anti Skill constantly drained an immense amount of SP. When he'd had the vast Resources of an SUBM, he could use it and fight without needing a moment of rest; but having become a living armor summon that was merely *based* on the original SUBM, he would exhaust his SP in a mere three minutes. Once that time ran out, Horobimaru would automatically be sent back to the Jewel.

Because of this, Carl could win not by defeating Alto, but by merely focusing on defense and waiting for the summon time to expire.

He had done something like that against Jubei, and Carl fully understood that he would also have to do it here.

I am not *doing that.*

However, satisfying his feelings was more important than following the optimal course of action right now.

This was a battle against another "invincible." His first fight against an SUBM...and the SUBM was being used by a newbie.

These facts made it impossible for Carl to take the easy way out.

This wasn't a matter of haughtiness or scorn, but pure pride.

"Destroy Superior Jobs!"

"...Come." He spoke his second word today and prepared to welcome Horobimaru.

The armor charged at him with more speed than ever before. With Polar Star's knockback negation nullified, the incoming attack would surely send him flying outside the barrier, especially since he was only a metel away from it.

With over half of his body submerged, the Superior didn't move as he waited for Horobimaru to come closer, *only for the armor to be sent flying*.

Horobimaru's shock was apparent. Before the armor had even realized it, there was a ring of wire encircling his right leg.

It was the end of a snare trap—one of the most basic traps imaginable.

Carl had been waiting for Horobimaru to come closer just for this.

He had thrown the materials for the trap into the water ahead of time and waited for the armor to approach before using Quick Trap to create the full snare right under his feet and catch him.

Horobimaru no longer had the upper hand.

You should never underestimate a hunter, SUBM. You cannot negate traps of this kind, can you?

A snare this primitive had no skills for Horobimaru to cancel, and Carl's traps were meant to be used on creatures Pure-Dragon-tier or higher, meaning that it had no trouble catching this empty suit of armor.

Pure physics took over as the momentum from the snare trap flung Horobimaru behind Carl.

And so...

I am not the only "invincible" who would lose by going out of bounds.

Horobimaru touched the barrier...and vanished.

Carl had used himself as bait to trap his prey—a strategy employed by many skilled hunters.

Silence fell over the battlefield. Having defeated the greatest threat, Carl was taking in the moment...

"SILVEEEERRRRRRRR!"

...when suddenly, someone seized that very moment as an opening.

A black wall was rushing towards Carl.

It had been created by the skill called "Wind Hoof." This was the power that allowed the silver Prism Steed to gallop on compressed air while also permitting the rider to create barriers using his own magic.

And now, right in front of the steed, there was a barrier of air so heavily compressed that not even light could pass through it.

Ray didn't have the time and his Grudge-Soaked Greaves didn't have the magic to create an omnidirectional barrier like the one he'd once used against Franklin. The small barrier right in front of Silver was the most he could manage right now.

However, that was enough. This barrier wasn't actually meant to protect anyway.

Ray didn't intend to win against someone "invincible" with defense. He was doing what he'd been planning to do from the start.

Shock overcame Carl as he realized what was about to happen. Having been defeated by Shu, he'd been investigating Ray since the moment he'd revealed his power during Franklin's Game and the events before it.

For Ray Starling, the black air barrier was not a means of defense...

"Wind Hoof, cancel!"

...but a compressed air bomb.

A moment later, an explosion would erupt in front of Carl, and with his knockback immunity nullified, the pressure would send him flying outside the barrier.

However, there were still a few moments left before that happened.

Not bad. Not bad at all. You sure are something else, Shu's brother. You were waiting for this the whole time, weren't you?! Very well—then I will show you the ace up my sleeve. Another way to be invincible is to kill everyone who threatens you, and that is exactly what I'll do. My Burst Mode is gonna blow you away—along with your explosion!

With that surge of emotions, Carl activated the accessory with the Clothing Switch skill and prepared to swap Polar Star for his offensive gear when...

"Blackwing Requiem!"

...he received a direct hit from a spell coming from the right.

His surprise was evident as he turned towards the source of the attack and saw a heavily injured girl with black wings—Juliet.

She had finished her battle with Chelsea and had rushed back to the side of the teammate who'd believed in her victory.

Her spell delayed Carl's counterattack by just a few moments, and his defeat was now inevitable.

The wind unleashed from the black barrier landed directly on Carl, throwing him back to the edge of the event area...and making him vanish.

The invincible Superior was eliminated.

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Kingdom of Altar, East

Carl was sent back to his nearest set save point—a particular town in Altar.

He was in the exact same position he'd been in when he touched the edge of the event area, so he fell backwards immediately after arrival.

"You are back. Why the strange posture?"

A colleague who had accompanied Carl on a quest westward posed that question in a tone that suggested he wasn't even a little bit worried. It seemed that he'd been waiting for Carl to return.

Not saying a word, Carl slowly stood up. A keen eye would notice that his hands were slightly shaking.

"Did the event end already? I certainly do not believe you lost, but..." The colleague—a fellow Sefirot member, God Hand, Yumeji Iryo—adjusted his glasses.

He had no idea how deeply those words might have stung Carl right now.

Still shaking from the bitter humiliation, Carl somehow wrung out a response.

"I lost. I hate this. I'm so sad. I'm going off. See you tomorrow."

"Huh? Oh. Sure, see you then."

Leaving his confused colleague behind, Carl logged out and went to sulk in his bed.

God Hunter, Carl Lourlou was not very sociable and a Master of few words. Any words that he did manage to speak did not nearly measure up to the complexity of his emotions.

Chapter Ten: Event Cleared

Paladin, Ray Starling

As God Hunter vanished into the edge of the event barrier, it finally dawned on me that we'd actually *won* against him.

It was hard to call this a real victory, though. We couldn't have done it without the event's rules or Alto's completely broken summon—Horobimaru.

Juliet had also been a major factor. If she hadn't made it in time, it might've been over for us.

"Juliet...?" I said as I noticed her descend to the beach, halfway in free fall, and then drop to her knees. Worried, I ran up to her and realized that she was completely out of MP. "Are you okay...?!" I asked as I reached her and cast a healing spell—which for some reason did absolutely nothing.

The battle against Chelsea had done a number on her, sure, but there was clearly something else at play here.

"Wait...!" That was when I remembered who we'd fought before that—as well as the weapon the person used against her.

Jubei had hurt Juliet with her Death-Bearer, Kubigawara—the shortsword that prevented all healing. Even though Juliet had only been scratched in that battle, at least one of them must've been from that blade.

It hadn't been a problem then, but as we could clearly see, Chelsea had left her covered in heavy wounds. That had suddenly made the sword's healing prevention a *serious* problem.

Honestly, I was surprised that she'd even managed to make it to us in her current state.

"The Bleeding status seems to have made her consciousness hazy," said Nemesis.

"I-I heard that Kubigawara's effect lasts 100 minutes...but if she's *this* hurt..." added Alto.

Only about half of that time had passed since we fought Jubei. The continuous damage from the injury-based debuffs would kill her before the effect expired, so to win at this event, she'd have to reach the goal and put in the correct answer during what little time she had left.

"...For now, Silver and I will dig out the hint in the shipwreck. You two gather up Carl's plates."

"Very well," said Nemesis.

"R-Roger dodger!" said Alto. With that, we split up and went to get what we needed for the goal.

Despite having lost by going out of bounds, God Hunter had dropped his plates like anyone else who'd been defeated in this event. He'd had so many that we didn't even have to count the plates Nemesis and Alto gathered to know it'd be enough for all three of us.

As for the monument in the shipwreck...it said, "Day of Anniversary."

"...Hm?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Huh? Kind of a weird clue, isn't it?" Alto said, done with the plate-gathering. We seemed to be thinking the exact same thing.

Nemesis, however, was more puzzled by our reaction than we had been to the hint.

"What's so odd about this? That hint suggests the answer is an important anniversary for you, does it not? That means the answer must be either the day you began the game or the day your Embryo hatched, just like you said."

My Embryo's general knowledge was exactly one-to-one with mine or vice versa, but...

"Nemmy, it's the specific *way* they wrote it. Just 'anniversary' by itself would tell us that—the 'day of' part is extra,'" said Alto.

"'Day of Anniversary' would mean something like...'Day of Special Day.' It's redundant," I added.

"I see..." Nemesis said thoughtfully.

I thought "Anniversary" here could be the name of this specific event, rather than just the general word. "Day of Anniversary" would make more sense in that case—and the answer would be today's date.

But about the other hints? While the "YYYYMMDD" one would still apply, it would contradict the one that said that "The answer may differ for each person."

That doesn't add up, I thought. *I mean, the event starts at the same time for every...one...*

"...Oh," I let out as I realized the true meaning behind the second hint.

"Ray?"

"Raayy?" The two looked at me with curious faces.

In response, I said, "I know the answer. Let's hurry to the goal."

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"First of all, you know the most obvious hint? The second one we found? That was a trap."

"A trap?"

As we headed to the goal, I began explaining what I'd realized.

Juliet still wasn't able to move much, so I was supporting her as we rode on Silver's back. This meant Alto had to walk, but as a Nukenin with an AGI build, she was able to keep up as long as I didn't go too fast.

"Yeah. It's a really obvious hint that basically anyone with eyes can find. That's exactly why there's a trick to it."

The stone monument could be seen from basically anywhere in the southern half of the island. I didn't see one myself, but I wouldn't be surprised if there was one just like it in the north, as well.

Such an obvious hint was no doubt the best way to mislead the participants.

"Though, it being a trick doesn't make it a lie," I continued.

"Whaddya mean?" Alto asked.

"Well, consider the fact that *Dendro* runs on a single worldwide server." No matter where they were in the real world, any players who logged in to *Dendro* would be in the same world as every other player. Even in my clan we had Rook and Figaro, who both lived in the UK.

"It does, but what about it... Oh."

"Exactly. Although we can all be here at the exact same time...our times in reality may be different." The Earth was a sphere, obviously, and the distance between different countries had spurred people to develop a particular concept to deal with it. "Our time zones may be different depending on *where* we are logging in from."

In our time zone, JST, the event started at midnight of April 20th. But for someone in the UK or the US—Chelsea, for example—the starting time was actually April 19th. This meant that...

"So that's the trick. The second hint is actually about the date the *event* starts for you," Alto said with a nod.

"Yeah. That's gotta be it." If we hadn't found that hint at the shipwreck and figured out the trick, we might've been wasting our time giving personal anniversaries—all of which would have been wrong.

For all I knew, that might have been the exact mistake that had teleported God Hunter directly to us.

Anyway, we now had the solution.

"So yeah, the correct answer for all three of us should be '20450420.'"

"Doesn't this seem a bit...I dunno...malicious? And kind of a weird solution?"

"Well, from what I heard, this wouldn't be the first event that seemed kinda weird." A good example was last year's Valentine's event that led to Figaro and Hannya meeting for the first time. Apparently, it had been an event where only couples could participate, and the enemies were succubi that threw chocolate at you and healed for 3x the damage dealt. If that wasn't weird, I didn't know what was.

I still couldn't be sure if that was all there was to this "anniversary," though. Maybe it wasn't just the name of the event and it actually *was* a special day for someone?

"Anyway, we know the answer and got all the plates we need!" said Alto in a cheerful, carefree tone, distracting me from my thoughts. "Now we just gotta clear the event! I wonder what we're gonna get! This whole thing was a heap of trouble, so I hope it's somethin' super nice!"

"Same," I said. "I hope it's worth the effort we put in."

Juliet had fought so hard she'd been left in this awful state, while Alto had been forced to reveal her secret weapon just so our team could win. I really wanted them both to be properly rewarded for this.

"...By the way, your, uh...*friend* disappeared. You sure that's all right?" I silently asked Alto as I remembered the suit of samurai armor that had vanished while we were fighting God Hunter.

"It should be fine," she replied. "Maybe he'll come back once the event ends... But what if he doesn't...? Wait—that might actually make my life easier..."

She folded her arms and tilted her head in thought.

"...Things aren't as easy as they seem for you, are they?" I asked.

“...Ever since getting Horo— *him*, I haven’t had a single chance to party up with someone and go on quests together. In Tenchi, there’s no telling when somethin’ could happen to reveal the secret, and even if I let him go I might be attacked by people angry at me for stealin’ their chance to beat him,” she said as she gazed back at the barrier where Horobimaru had vanished. “You’re all from another country, so I got to play with you without worryin’ about things like that. It was so much fun...”

“We’ll play again someday. Here *and* there,” I said.

We met in real life basically every day, but as for *Dendro*...maybe I could go to Tenchi after all those problems with Dryfe were taken care of.

“...Eh heh heh. Well, that makes me happy. Ah! Oh yeah! We should go to the beach in the summer! And bring the rest of the *Dendro* freshmen!”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Wait until you see me in my swimsuit! Hee hee!” she said, all smiles. The anxiety was completely gone from her face.

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After ten more minutes, we were running up the mountain path leading to the goal.

Alto was a bit out of breath, but not enough for it to be a problem. Juliet had less than 20% of her HP left, but she was still alive. It seemed like we were going to make it to the goal.

...But I was certain that it couldn’t possibly be this easy.

“Ah! Ray! Look! I see the goal!” Alto said as she pointed ahead.

I could see it as well. At the heart of the mountain, there was a gate as tall as a three-story building. On it there were three lamp-like devices, and none of them were lit up. If they represented the number of people who had cleared the event, that meant that nobody had done it yet.

“Yay! This means that all three of us can clear...it...” said Alto before falling silent as she caught sight of what else lay ahead of us.

“I have been waiting for you.”

To be specific, the embodiment of strife itself was standing right in front of the gate.

“...Jubei.” I said her name. Once again, we were face-to-face with the many-armed Master who commanded six floating weapons—King of

Asuras, Jubei Kaga.

I wasn't the least bit surprised that she was waiting for us here. I knew that if Carl hadn't taken her out of the event, she would obviously go to where everyone else would be heading.

And, of course, there was no chance that she would just try clearing the event before we got here. When we left her in the forest to fight Carl, she'd said that she wanted to fight me again, and I had no doubt that she was serious about that.

Her goal for this event had already shifted from winning to *fighting me*.

"Haven't seen you in about an hour," I said. "And it looks like that time's been...pretty hard on you."

One of her prosthetic arms was gone, while her left eye was covered with a bandage.

Juliet had fought Chelsea, Alto and I went up against Carl, and it seemed that Jubei got into some fights herself.

"It doesn't exactly seem to have been easy for you either," she replied. "Though all three of you survived and gathered enough plates in spite of that. The Nukenin accompanying you does not seem strong enough, however... Does she perhaps hide something interesting I am not aware of?"

It was unlikely that she'd somehow found out about Horobimaru, but the way Jubei sized up Alto as she spoke made my friend turn pale.

"The final...trial..."

"Juliet...!" Juliet had come to, dismounted Silver, and brandished her sword. However, there was no power in her arms, her wings were gone, she was bleeding all over—she was barely even standing.

Needless to say, she was in no state to fight.

"I would have preferred to fight Ray Starling and Ray Starling alone, but I suppose I have no choice," said Jubei. "I will fight all three of you instead."

She seemed to completely disregard the state Juliet was in. Perhaps this Tenchi-dwelling manifestation of strife simply saw such injuries far too often to care by this point.

For a moment, I said nothing and simply pondered Jubei's words until an idea came to mind.

"You wanna fight *just* me?" I asked her.

"Well, of course. I enjoy fighting many people at once every now and again, but nothing brings out the real *flavor* of a fighter like single combat."

"That so...?" I said with a nod before giving my proposal. "Let's do that, then. One-on-one, with me."

I offered to do exactly what she wanted.

"Huh?" Jubei, Alto, and Juliet all simultaneously voiced their shock.

Nemesis, however, didn't seem that surprised. The only thing I could sense from her in her blade form was a sigh.

"Before we do, though, I want you to let these two put in their answers."

"Ray?!" Juliet and Alto voiced their surprise again.

Juliet was in no state to fight; Alto wasn't a combat build to begin with and her Horobimaru had vanished at the barrier, though she probably wouldn't use him against Jubei even if she had him.

I was the only one who could still fight. My Grudge-Soaked Greaves were depleted, and my Black Warcoat wasn't charged, but I could still do *something*.

There was another reason behind my proposal too.

"I certainly would not mind," said Jubei. "In fact, it is a very, *very* welcome proposition."

Well, *someone* was happy with my suggestion, at least. Jubei seemed to be a fan of mine and she just plain enjoyed fighting, so it came as no surprise that she'd be interested.

Juliet, however, didn't seem to agree. She moved to stand in my way.

"Ray...! I...I can still fight...too!" she said with desperation. "You can't...fight her alone...! We're a team...!"

She probably thought that I was sacrificing myself to let her and Alto win. The tears in her eyes told me as much.

I hopped off Silver and laid my hand on her shoulder.

"Juliet, I suggested that because I want *all three of us to reach the goal*," I explained.

We'd made it this far together, so the best outcome would be for us all to clear this thing together too. If we all fought together, Juliet would be taken out right away and that would leave a bad taste in my mouth.

However, that wasn't my only reason for suggesting single combat.

"Most importantly...I wanna do this because it's *her*," I said.

"...Huh?" I looked over Juliet, right into Jubei's eyes, staring straight at me with both glee and longing.

"She said she was my fan and she wants to fight me directly." It had manifested in a disturbing way, but this was no doubt a kind of fondness on her part. "Not giving her what she wants wouldn't sit right with me either."

And so, I had resolved to fight her with all I had and try to defeat her fair and square.

She was much stronger than me and I probably had only the tiniest fraction of a percent chance of winning, but I'd give her the one-on-one battle she wanted.

"...Okay," Juliet said, understanding my point.

She then looked me in the eyes...

"Meet up with me later."

...and said the same thing I had said to her.

Just as I had believed that she'd win against Chelsea, so too did she believe that I would win against Jubei.

"Sure," I said with a nod. "You go on ahead and wait for me."

With that, the promise was sealed.

Juliet smiled, approached the gate, and put in the correct set of numbers —today's date.

Then, one of the three lights on the gate lit up and a fanfare resounded as she vanished.

Looks like I was right about the answer, I thought.

"Imagine how embarrassing it would have been if you were not," Nemesis said telepathically.

"Seriously." *That would've been pretty damn bad, yeah.*

Anyway, Juliet had cleared the event and now it was Alto's turn, but...I was suddenly struck with an idea.

"Jubei," I said. "I know I offered a one-on-one fight, but is it okay if I get someone to buff me?"

"Why, certainly," she replied. "I will enhance myself with my curseblades as well."

All right—so there's no problem if I do this, I thought as I looked at Alto.

"Alto," I said. "Hit me with a Gifted Quiz."

"Huh? But..."

"I wanna make sure I've got the best possible chance of winning. There's a risk I won't be able to answer the question, but doubling my stats is worth the gamble."

"...Oh," she said, apparently realizing something. "You...haven't given up?"

"Like I said, I want all three of us to clear this thing."

No matter how strong Jubei was, as long as I didn't give up, my chance of victory was never zero.

I had absolutely no intention of just *giving* her the win. That would be rude to my teammates as well as Jubei herself, who had so kindly accepted my proposition.

"So I'll fight as hard as I can... That's all there is to it."

"...You're so optimistic... I'm kinda jealous," Alto said with a wry smile before activating her Gifted Quiz.

"Question: Recite the digits of π up to ten decimal places."

"3.1415926535." I gave the correct answer, and my stats were instantly doubled. Good thing I'd gotten an easy one.

"There. Do your best! If all goes well, I'm treatin' ya to a helluva lunch at school tomorrow!"

"I'll hold you to that." Following that exchange, Alto headed to the gate, put in her answer, and vanished.

With that, only Jubei and I were left.

The silence stretched out between us. It felt as though we were the only participants left on the island.

"Sorry for the delay, Jubei," I said, finally breaking the silence.

"You did not keep me waiting too long," she replied. "Also...some things are better the longer you have to wait for them, no?"

"Maybe." I'd been studying for my exams while yearning to play *Infinite Dendrogram*, and though the wait was excruciating at times, I was really happy when I finally got a chance to do it.

The world was full of such things, and for Jubei, *this* was one of them.

"Let's get started, then," I said.

"Yes. Let us have some fun."

This would be my final battle in The Anniversary.

My opponent was King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga, and our fight would now begin.

Chapter Eleven: The Knight and the Asura

Event Area, Middle, Front of the Gate

Two Masters were facing each other at the gate, neither of them moving.

Ray was considering the situation to pinpoint any paths to victory, while Jubei was merely relishing even this tense moment.

It could not last forever, though.

Ray had ten minutes until Alto's buff expired and his chances of winning became even lower than they were now.

Jubei Kaga fought by commanding her ten weapons with extreme precision—which made her the one-man equivalent of a coordinated squad of warriors.

Currently, she wielded six floating weapons, three curseblades, and the single sword she held in her real hands. All of them were MVP rewards or greater, and Jubei herself was a combat-focused Superior Job.

Fighting her meant facing the assaults of nearly a dozen lethal weapons at once. King of Asuras was armed ten-fold.

To top it off, her Embryo, Asura, had an always-active ult that nullified all debuffs which weren't accompanied by damage.

There were no flaws in her defense or offense—this asura was defined by her sheer power.

Her opponent, Ray Starling, on the other hand, was a retribution-based fighter—a counter-attacker.

Instead of attacking his enemies first, he fought by suffering damage and returning it multiplied by using his unique skill, Vengeance Is Mine.

He used his own HP—his life—as a bargaining chip, gambling it all on the possibility that he could manage to survive even the most lethal attacks and go on to defeat even those far stronger than himself. It was perhaps an even more insane combat style than that of the asura he faced, who was fairly straightforward despite her overwhelming power.

If these two were to fight now, the odds of winning would be just barely less than a hundred percent in Jubei's favor.

Even if Ray were somehow able to build up the damage for his retribution, he couldn't use Vengeance without somehow drawing Jubei into the range of his own blade. However, that would mean passing through her six floating weapons as well as the three curseblades, and that was a true fool's errand.

During their first battle, Jubei had been curious about what it would be like to get hit by Vengeance—but this was a serious battle and she would surely fight him with all she had.

Ray also had his ranged counterattack—Payback Beyond the Stars—but it took an entire minute to charge, which was far too long against an opponent like this. Besides that, his MVP rewards—the pillars of his power—were also currently unusable.

The gap between them was obscenely wide. Normally, Ray's only option would be to give up. However, he wasn't someone who would resign himself to fate just because he was facing a superior opponent.

He stared at Jubei in silence, looking for a pathway that could lead to his victory.

One disperses breath attacks, one extinguishes magic, one ignores defense, one prevents healing, one can kill spirits, and one moves at insane speeds to attack anyone who comes too close, he thought, looking at each of the six weapons that floated around her.

He knew the effects of some through experience, while others he'd learned from Alto. All of them were powerful weapons and each seemed wildly different from the rest, but Ray could find one thing in common between them.

...They're all her meta against specific situations, he thought. It was especially obvious with the katana that apparently attacked and landed a hit no matter how fast the enemy moved. Even Ray could guess whom, exactly, it was meant to counter.

All of these abilities were extremely useful, though he couldn't help but notice something.

They're all effective against specific opponents, but not so useful against anybody else. And that includes me, he thought—and indeed, he was right. The weapon that prevented healing meant little in a battle that would no doubt be short, while the one that canceled magic was even more useless in a clash where magic would barely be a factor.

In fact, the cursed spear that killed spirits could even *help* Ray by feeding his Greaves or giving him a chance to use Reversal.

She's not going to change her gear, even though I'm the only one she's fighting right now? Wait, no...

As that thought went through his head...

"Heh heh... Did you finally come to a conclusion?"

...Jubei, looking at Ray's preoccupied expression, posed a question with a smile on her face.

In response...

"Yeah. The KoA skill that gives you the floating weapon slots doesn't let you change them at will, does it?"

...he exposed one of her secrets.

"Oh my..." Jubei was both surprised and overjoyed at his insight.

Asuran Battle-Mounts was a skill that allowed King of Asuras to telekinetically control a maximum of six weapons. However, those weapons had to be chosen at the start of each day, and they couldn't be switched for any others unless one of them was destroyed.

While Over Gladiator also increased their available weapon slots, the player using it still had to actually hold the weapons in their hands. Asuran Battle-Mounts, on the other hand, basically created six new arms—all with the same stats as the user—to wield its full arsenal and this limitation was the price of that power.

Jubei had actually been diverting attention from this particular limitation by being so open about everything else about her power. Ray, however, had seen right through it.

...Looks like I'm right, he thought, based on her reaction.

Jubei's floating weapons couldn't be switched. To account for the variety of participants she would face in this event, she'd opted for a wide variety of hard counters. That had come at the cost of focused power against a single opponent. If this had been an arena duel, for example, Jubei's loadout would surely be far more aggressive.

That means...I can *break through those floating weapons.* Ray's build already favored END; with his stats doubled, he would be tough enough to withstand non-critical attacks from any of Jubei's weapons except the defense-ignoring Hora.

That fact alone made it so that Jubei was effectively wielding not ten weapons against him, but five.

I can let those hit me as long as the hit isn't lethal. That'll just give me more damage to send back to her. Ray's thought process might have struck most people as indicating a few screws loose in his head, but he braced himself for a chance to take action.

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I suppose I should have expected this, thought Jubei. *He saw right through me.*

Their previous battle was the first time Ray had ever seen her, and he was too overwhelmed by her fighting style to think too deeply about it. However, that single battle was enough for him to unravel even information that she had yet to reveal herself.

Perhaps this was a power that someone needed to have in order to win against those much stronger than themselves.

Experiencing it firsthand made Jubei shiver with happiness.

Even his very aura has changed completely, she thought. Jubei had watched the videos where he'd fought Giga Professor, Hell General, and King of Beasts many times over, and right now he seemed closer to how he'd been in that footage than he had before.

The battle against King of Beasts... He only throws his heart and soul into the battle when it's truly mortal combat.

The man who had overcome all the odds to shatter Giga Professor's plot, defeat the Hell General, and fatally wound King of Beasts—that was the Ray Starling Jubei wanted to see.

Though...this is still not quite enough.

With the battle against KoB behind him, Ray had been slowly returning to his usual self—but his battles against Jubei and Carl as well as the promise to his friend were gradually driving him back to the brink, where Jubei wanted him.

Despite that, he was still a step away from being the person who would do what Jubei really wanted—someone who would exert far more power than she'd anticipated.

She silently reflected back upon what had happened an hour ago. *Ray Starling. Let us meet again later. Until then, please think about what it was I lacked. I will do so as well.*

That was what she'd told him before they parted ways after their first battle.

Just as she'd promised, she'd spent some time considering what she was lacking, doing so even as she cut apart the other participants.

The videos of Ray's battles had been burned into her eyes, and as she'd watched them over and over, she had vaguely begun to grasp what it was she needed—what was necessary to force the Master known as Ray to take that final step.

...He might despise me for this, she thought. Jubei now understood him well enough to figure out how she ought to do this, and that was exactly what made her hesitate.

However... She was Jubei Kaga. An asura. An embodiment of strife that loved herself more than she cared about being hated and who valued mortal struggles above all else.

"Ray Starling, allow me to give a little...*prayer* for this battle," she said.

"A prayer?"

"Yes." The sweetest smile then appeared on her face as she continued to say, "If I win against you, *I will kill that Nukenin the moment I return to Tenchi*."

"...You *what*?" Seeing Ray's fierce glare as he spoke, Jubei realized she had successfully set him off.

"Y-You...! What nonsense is this?!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Consider it compensation if Ray Starling fails to entertain me sufficiently. She is among the powerful few who managed to clear this event. Perhaps if I kill her enough times, I will force her talents to bloom...perhaps even to the point where I might find her diverting."

This was no bluff—she had every intention of acting on those words. If Ray wasn't able to defeat her, she would spawn-camp Alto over and over, caring nothing for her reputation or their feelings.

The most important thing for her right now was to fight Ray at his most serious, and those words were the means of bringing him out that she'd come upon after thoroughly analyzing his battles.

Ray Starling was a Master who went above and beyond when faced with situations that had tragic consequences.

"I had not seen much of what she was capable of, so...that would be something I could enjoy in its own right in the future, I suppose."

And so, the result of Jubei's analysis...

"Don't worry... *That future ain't happening.*"

...was more than enough to make The Unbreakable take that final step over the edge.

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Their exchange ended, and they both made their first moves.

The knight kicked off the ground and jumped onto the steed at his side. His legs wouldn't carry him fast enough—instead, he mounted his silver horse to advance as fast as he could.

This meant exposing his precious mount to the asura's blades, but he chose to do so regardless in order to protect his friend's future in the game.

The steed followed his owner's will and galloped as fast as he could.

This unity of horse and man was heading straight into the range of five floating weapons. The tachi, the spear, the shortsword, the chakram, and the hatchet all flashed towards them on strange, complicated trajectories.

Only Jubei knew what path to take to avoid the coming pain.

Heedless, the knight only charged ahead.

He cared nothing for the pain he suffered or damage he received—he only aimed to break through Jubei's defenses without dying.

The only thing he'd actually evaded was the tachi.

The spear dug into his stomach, the shortsword pierced his chest, the chakram tore open his upper arm, and the hatchet sunk deep into the body of his steed.

It only took a moment to bring him to the verge of death.

Despite that, his mount kept galloping onwards.

Thanks to his doubled HP and END, the attacks that might have been fatal under ordinary circumstances had become bearable.

The last weapon to welcome him was the retaliating katana—the bane of all those who boasted supreme speed, which Jubei had acquired from a UBM after being defeated by the boy who was unparalleled at the art of unsheathing. It activated against the oncoming horseman as well, unleashing an attack that couldn't be evaded and always hit its target without fail.

Thus, the blade struck home...

"Ghh!"

...and hit the object clutched in the knight's arms—a large, black, round *shield*.

He'd made his greatsword transform into that, figuring that if he couldn't evade the oncoming attack, he could simply *block* it.

The knight already had a good idea of the blade's range from their previous battle, so he was able to prepare the shield in the nick of time.

And with that, the horseman had broken past the barrier of floating weapons arrayed against him.

"Hellish Miasma, full power!"

At that moment, the rider released a dark purple smoke from his right arm. Worthy of its name, it was the miasma that inflicted three heavy debuffs at once.

The breath-dispersing hatchet was still stuck in the steed's metal frame, so it could do nothing to defend against this new threat. Thus, the smoke flooded the space around them almost instantly. The poison did nothing to the asura, so it was nothing but a smokescreen. She knew that was enough—using the miasma as a cover was one of his favorite tricks.

However, what awaited beyond the miasma was pure pandemonium.

"AHAH!" the asura laughed with a demonic grin as her three prosthetics brandished her curseblades. Each of them could sever a dragon's head. With three such weapons arrayed in front of him, the knight was no doubt faced with a certain kind of hell.

One blade to the right and two to the left. An open right eye and a closed left eye.

Faced with this hellish choice, the horseman went *left*.

Although the eye on that side was sightless and there was the smokescreen all around them, he would still have to deal with the *two* murderous blades.

The asura couldn't see, but she could still hear. She was, after all, a superhuman being who could fight with her multiple floating weapons using only sound.

Thus, the steed's galloping hooves were more than enough to expose the knight’s position. She could sense that he hadn’t dismounted either, so she swung her left curseblades despite being unable to see her target. Their aim was true, but the sound that followed wasn’t that of flesh being cut, but the clash of metal on metal.

“Ah!” The two curseblades had been stopped dead as the asura’s wrists slammed into two black blades.

These were the knight’s weapons—the form assumed by the shield after blocking the asura’s katana.

And the asura herself was reflected in the mirror opposite her.

At this moment, her speed was *his* speed.

Her left eye was blinded, her vision was smothered, and he was free to strike her prosthetic arms with his twin blades.

“Vengeance is Mine,” the knight and his blades roared in tandem, severing the two prosthetics.

A fixed amount of damage, delivered back twofold after suffering enough damage to nearly die.

It was more than enough to completely destroy the Embryo-arms.

“AH HA HA HA HA HA!” Despite more than half of her prosthetics being destroyed, the asura laughed. This was exactly what she wanted, after all. The knight had overcome the gap in their power—he’d truly done more than she’d been anticipating.

Engaging in mortal combat with someone like this made her heart tremble with joy. Her right prosthetic hand twitched, yearning for blood.

The knight’s twin blades were not much of a defense. Their speed was equal to hers, but the knight’s movements were limited by his position on horseback.

Thus, the last curseblade had no issue splitting him in half at the waist.

It was a fatal blow. Nothing human could survive such a wound.

Despite that, the knight’s advance did not stop.

His power as a Death Soldier let him keep moving even after he expired. In fact, he’d actually taken the curseblade’s attack on purpose so that he could once again channel the power of retribution.

“...Vengeance is Mine.”

The blade in his left hand destroyed the final prosthetic. The many arms of Asura were now gone, leaving the owner with only her own body.

The asura no longer spoke. The combination of joy, shock, and sheer battle fever had driven all words from her head, just as gone as her prosthetics.

Despite that, she kept on fighting...and swinging her blade.

She still had the ace up her sleeve, Kasanehime—the murderous sword that turned the wounds it inflicted into power.

"Counter Absorption!"

The knight turned his twin blades and mirror into the greatsword and prepared for the attack with a barrier of light. He intended to block this attack and win by returning the damage twofold.

However, that simply could not happen.

Following the battle against the hunter, the asura had dealt more than 1,000,000 points of damage.

The barrier could only withstand 300,000 points, so it would easily shatter and the knight behind it would vanish without a trace.

Blocking the blow was surely the misstep that would result in his defeat.

"...Scatter Like Mist: Unsan-Musho."

The deadly swing broke through the barrier of light like it was nothing. However, it failed to touch the knight or his steed.

"Huh?"

It was as though the horseman and his mount had evaporated like mist.

Despite her blade not touching them, they had completely vanished. The asura's sword sliced through nothing but empty air.

The knight and his steed were nowhere to be seen, swallowed up by the miasma.

However, a moment later, *they appeared right behind the asura*.

Shock overcame her. She had no idea what had just happened.

In fact, the knight and his blade didn't know either. But the knight didn't actually need to *understand* anything to take action. His powerful will drove him forwards, intent on what needed to be done.

"VENGEANCE IS MINE!" he roared as he swung down his greatsword, wiping away the asura without a trace.

And that was the end—the final conclusion to the battle between the knight and the asura, as well as the finale of the blood-soaked event.

Chapter Twelve: The Promise

???

“...Eh heh heh.” With her body having completely vanished, Jubei’s consciousness was now in a dark area—the place Chelsea’s group had called the “waiting space.”

She had Death Soldier among her sub-jobs, but its effect was meaningless when there was no body left to control. She might have been able to move the floating weapons in her Asuran Battle-Mounts, but the weapons had all vanished when she used Kasanehime.

They were all MVP rewards that would come back in time—but until then, she couldn’t use them in any way.

Thus, the battle ended in her defeat. However, she wasn’t the least bit dissatisfied with this outcome.

On the contrary, having experienced a battle against *the* Ray Starling, she was completely ecstatic.

She couldn’t even bring herself to care about the event anymore. She hadn’t been gathering hints or plates to begin with, so in a way Jubei was playing an entirely different game all by herself.

“I wonder if he made it to the goal in time.”

Instead of being upset, she was sincerely worried about whether the man who’d just defeated her had managed to reach his goal.

This had been a very fruitful event for her regardless.

All that was left now for her was to wait until her Death Soldier skill expired and she was sent back. But before that happened, a certain thought passed her mind.

“It is surely a coincidence, but...he is rather similar to them,” she said out loud, picturing the one who’d defeated her. “The ones who saved me back then.”

The visage bore resemblance to the ones who’d helped her—the ones who saved her from a speeding truck.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

We were now in some strange, sparkling space where you couldn't tell which way was up or down.

"...I thought I was gonna die," I said.

"You were certainly close to it." Nemesis nodded. We managed to beat Jubei in time, but I was uncomfortably close to getting a death penalty once my Last Command expired. I might've not cleared the event if Nemesis hadn't been there to turn back into her human form and put in the correct answer fast enough.

"...The wounds are all gone now that we're past the finish line, though." Before, I'd been riddled with holes and my body had even been cut in half at the torso, but now I was in perfect health.

Without this aspect of the event, my battle against Jubei would've ended in a draw.

Silver still had the wound he'd received, though.

"Oh... If this won't fix itself, we might have to ask Blue Screen."

"Indeed. I feel like your steed helped us greatly this time as well."

Silver gave no sound or movement in response to our words. I was certain that the battle had only ended in my favor due to his efforts.

"Rayyy. Good work back theeere."

My thoughts about Silver were cut short by a drawn-out voice. I looked towards the source of it and saw Cheshire, wearing the same tuxedo he'd had during the explanation.

"Cheshire."

"Congrats on clearing the eveeent. The final stretch suuure was something."

"You're telling me. Thanks... By the way, what about the two who cleared before me?"

"I gave them the reward and seeent them on their way. They wanted to stay, but rules are ruuules."

"I see..." Well, they probably hadn't anticipated that all the people who cleared the event would be members of the same team. Only the first three could do it, after all.

It had probably turned out like this because we'd beaten the other players who were closest to winning—Jubei and Carl.

Alto and Juliet were already sent back, though, huh? I would see the former at school, while meeting up with the latter would probably have to wait until I returned to Gideon.

"Anyway, lemme give you the reward toooo!" said Cheshire.

"Sure. What is it, anyway?" I asked.

"A fine dining catalog, perhaps?" Nemesis asked.

...I really doubt this is the kind of event where we'd get little souvenirs like that, I thought.

"Here it iiis. This is the rewaaard. Congratulatiooons," Cheshire said as he gave me...a ticket.

"A ticket? Is this an invitation to another event?" *Was this like a qualifying round for the real deal? I doubt I can handle battles harder than the ones I fought here,* I thought.

"Nuh-uhh. That's a gacha ticket."

"...A what?" I really hadn't expected to hear such a familiar term here...

"You probably know it already, but places like Gideon have these gacha machines that let you pull for money." Oh yeah, I was *very* familiar with that. I'd actually planned on pulling once I got back there.

"The ticket is for those... It just *guarantees an S-rank pull*."

Ohh? A guaranteed S-rank, huh? Cool, I thought...and then his words began to actually sink in. *Wait, WHAT?!*

"You mean, like Rook's MVP reward?!"

"Oh, you should know that S-rank doesn't necessarily mean that you'll get thaaat. Please understaaand."

Ah, so Rook's pull was lucky even for an S-rank. Still, a guaranteed S was a big deal.

"...Indeed. You have pulled so many times, but have yet to have a single one."

"...True." Looking at it that way, I kinda wanted to save it until I got a natural S-rank pull.

"Well, it's up to you when you use iiit."

"Yeah. I'll think about it."

Honestly, a guaranteed S-rank gacha ticket felt like a very fitting reward for an in-game event.

And that thought jogged my memory about something I wanted to ask.

“Hey, Cheshire,” I said.

“Yeees?”

“Why’s this event called ‘The Anniversary,’ anyway? I thought it was just to make the answer a trick question, but I feel like there’s gotta be more to it.”

“...Uhhm...” Cheshire looked up at me, looking slightly bashful. “Today’s uuhh...birthdayyy.”

“Whose?”

“Mine.”

...The control AIs had birthdays? I thought. Regardless, the naming made sense now. It felt like kind of an abuse of authority on Cheshire’s part, but...

“Well, happy birthday.”

“Thaaanks. I’ll send you back to Altea nooow,” he said as light began to shine beneath my feet.

“All right,” I said. “See ya, Cheshire.”

“Take care,” said Nemesis.

“Until next tiiime!” And so, seen off by a white cat waving at us, we returned from the tumultuous event.

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After the teleportation, we found ourselves in front of Altea’s save point—the fountain. This wasn’t the place I’d been when I was whisked off to the event, but I felt like we were probably told at one point that we’d be sent back to the save point instead, so I didn’t worry too much about it.

In my hand, I held my reward—the gacha ticket.

“Well, I’ll just keep it for now,” I said. I wanted to save it for something special. A guaranteed S-rank deserved that much.

“Hrmm... The sky is turning brighter.”

“It was the dead of night when we left. That whole thing sure took a long time.”

There weren’t many people around the fountain at this hour. Looking up at the sky, I saw dark clouds being gradually painted in lighter colors by the morning sunlight.

“Hm...?”

And between them, I spotted something that looked a little like a bird. It grew larger and larger until I recognized the shape as someone I knew well.

“Ray!”

She flew right towards me.

“Juliet...” I said.

“I suppose she could not wait for you in Gideon, so she flew all the way here,” commented Nemesis. I knew Juliet could fly at supersonic speeds, but this was a bit much. She must have been *really* eager to see the outcome of the event.

There was only one thing I had to tell her, then.

“I won,” I said as I showed her the ticket, fulfilling the promise I’d made.

“...Yes!” And so, with a joyous expression, she landed; we exchanged a high five.

Epilogue

Control AI No. 13's Workspace

"Phew..." With the hard work of the event behind him, Cheshire returned to his workspace.

The uninhabited island that had been used for the event could be repurposed for another one in the future, so he requested that the environment AI—Caterpillar—store it away.

Everything else related to it was done and dusted, as well. They didn't get any new Superior Embryos this time, but that was hardly unexpected. They'd had Alice prepare spare avatars for all the participants in this event, though, in order to provide them with a healthy new one once they were disqualified or emerged victorious, so the preparations had taken up more time than usual.

They had gone to all this trouble because the event might have been less enjoyable if it was too risky.

A thought came to Cheshire's mind and he pulled up a display showing one of the photos in the database. This particular photo was more than two thousand years old, and it depicted a little girl with a white cat.

The little white kitty was curled up in a small cradle. The girl had prepared it for her *friend* who was soon to be born.

However, the white kitty was an Embryo. Although he had indeed just been born, he was no baby. Because of that, he certainly didn't need the cradle, but he slept in it regardless just because it made the girl happy.

Closing his eyes allowed him to remember those times as though it happened yesterday.

"We should have a festival for your birthday."

"People don't normally throw entire festivals for personal birthdays. Also, I'm an Embryo, and there's the birth celebration for all the Masters."

"Hey, c'mon. We all have the same birthday, but you're all born on different days. That makes you all pretty individual."

"You think so...? But if we have a festival for every Embryo's birthday,

then every day would be a festival...”

“That sounds fun! You should do it sometime, Tom!”

“Well, I tried...but it was probably a bit too bloodyyy...” Tom said with a wry grin as he thought back upon the festival he’d managed to set up.

Regardless, the participants had enjoyed it. To him, that meant it had all been good.

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Reality, Kurosaki Household

April 20th, a little before 4PM.

Juliet...or rather, Juri Kurosaki had spent the previous night participating in The Anniversary event with her friends, but now it was evening after a long day at school.

She was currently sitting on the sofa in her living room, waiting for her tutor to arrive for their first meeting. Her mother said she’d found a UTokyo freshman who’d made it in straight out of high school.

Juri imagined her tutor must be diligent and incredibly focused on education, which meant that she might very well be banned from any form of entertainment.

But...Ray and Alto are UTokyo freshmen... If I had either of them as my tutor... A twist of fate like that would certainly allow her to keep playing *Infinite Dendrogram* and hanging out with her friends there.

As that thought crossed her mind...she shook her head.

...No! It doesn’t have to be them! I need to assert myself no matter who it is! She told herself she’d gather her courage and claim the future she’d promised to her friends. Just like she had during The Anniversary, Juri resolved to fulfill this promise.

As Juri steeled herself, the intercom rang out.

“Excuse me—I am from the tutor’s association. I was meant to be here at four.”

“Just a secooond. Juri, your tutor is here.”

Urged by her mother, who had prepared some black tea for the tutor, Juri went to greet the person at the door.

As her mother opened the door, she momentarily imagined she might see her two teammates from *Infinite Dendrogram*, but...

“Pardon the intrusion.”

The person at the door was a diligent-looking woman with glasses and a suit. She was too much of a woman to be Ray and too serious to be Alto.

Nrgh... No. I knew it’d turn out like this. It’s fine...

This almost took the wind out of her sails, but she didn’t cave in just yet. Instead, she psyched herself up, fully intent on asserting herself so she could keep playing *Infinite Dendrogram*. Saying that to her new tutor on their first meeting, though, would sound so ridiculous that her mother might step in and ban her from playing before the tutor even had time to say anything.

She had to bide her time.

With the introductions done, they moved to the living room, where Juri’s mother and the tutor began discussing the length of her lessons and what days they would meet. Juri’s mother was worried about Juri’s declining grades and tried to set her up for as many tutoring hours as possible. Part of the reason for her academic problems was that Juri had been staying up late playing *Infinite Dendrogram*, so it wasn’t unlikely that she would be banned from it entirely.

Since she was at such a disadvantage, Juri couldn’t figure out how to approach this discussion.

“Considering her grades, may I ask for visits five times a week?” Her mother’s suggestion made Juri’s face tense up as she thought, *You have to be joking*. However, the poor grades were partially her own fault, so she couldn’t argue.

But then, help came from an unexpected source.

“Mrs. Kurosaki, once or twice a week—for a total of about six hours per month—should be sufficient,” said the tutor.

“But I’m worried about her grades...”

“Merely increasing her study time would make it difficult for the young lady to maintain her focus. Instead, I recommend that you give me a few intensive hours where I teach her the proper methods of learning and problem-solving, which will in turn allow her to study on her own more effectively. Also, giving her too many tutoring hours would only reduce her own desire to learn by making her feel all her studying can happen while she’s being tutored.”

“My! Is that how it is?”

Perhaps it wasn't "help," exactly. The tutor convinced Juri's mother against setting her up for endless hours of tutoring, but she was serious about education and was fully intent on making Juri study on her own time.

If this tutor was so good at convincing people, how could Juri possibly win any *Infinite Dendrogram* playtime out of her?

A-An hour a day...? No, that's just three hours there... Juri was at a loss.

However, the tutor was sharp enough to notice. The girl's expression seemed to spark some thought in the woman, and she took out an object that might make Juri feel better.

"You okay? Wanna play some cat's cradle?"

With those familiar words, she presented her with a cat's cradle string.

"...Huh?"

"Cat's cradle makes for a good mental exercise. It can help soothe your nerves as well." The smile on her face as she spoke those words also suddenly looked very familiar.

"*...Alto*?"

"Wheuh?"

The tutor—Soprano Natsume—had put on a suit, glasses, and wiped off her customary face paint to leave a better impression on Juri's parents, and the sound she made when Juri called her by that unexpected name completely clashed with her current appearance.

For the record, Juliet wasn't forbidden from *Infinite Dendrogram*—or any other kind of entertainment, for that matter.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

I logged in to *Dendro* right after I got back from class.

When I met Natsume there, she'd told me that Horobimaru returned to her—and that she'd used her ticket right away. She was lucky and got an MVP reward, but instead of being happy about it, she'd put on a distant look and said, "...Will having stuff like that make people think I'm powerful? What if it gets me attacked...?"

I started to feel like the problem wasn't just her being overly negative, but the land of Tenchi being...the way it was.

If Alto was right, though, I had three MVP rewards, so I would be attacked all the time. I couldn't even imagine what kind of life Jubei would lead carrying around a whole seven of them. And that was just off the top of my head.

"Anyway..." I ducked into a fairly open alley and took Silver out of my inventory. I wanted to check on how the minor damage he'd gotten from Jubei was doing.

I only needed a moment to realize that the wound was much smaller than before, which made me guess that it would be gone in no time.

"What a relief," said Nemesis.

"Yeah." That was one less thing to worry about.

There was something else regarding Silver that we had to consider, though. It was the teleportation ability that he'd used against Jubei—the third skill that was still locked.

This was the second time I'd seen it, with the first being the battle at Quartierlatin, but I still didn't know its activation conditions or effect. I tried asking Silver himself about it, but unlike Gardranda he didn't give an answer either in reality or in my dreams.

"If only there was some specialist we could ask..." With Silver being a weapon of the pre-ancient civilization, that was a tall order. The person who'd taught me the most about Silver so far was Mario, but he was a Dryfean, so I couldn't go to him again.

Besides him, there was Blue Screen, who'd fixed up Gold Thunder and was involved in SMPS production...but I hadn't heard of him coming across any new information regarding the Prism Steeds.

"How easy this would all be if we could only talk to the Grand Artificer who made Silver," said Nemesis. "Flagman, was it?"

"Yeah, but you sure as hell can't speak with a tian from 2,000 years ago... Hm?"

...I feel like I heard that name recently, though, I thought.

After that, we did various things in the city before returning to the inn we were staying at.

"Oh. Mr. Starling, we have a letter for you," said the innkeeper as we entered.

"A letter?" I opened it to see a collection of dates and time intervals, accompanied by the words, "If circumstances allow, please come visit me at any of these times."

However, the most notable thing to us was the sender's name.

"Ray."

"Yeah. Mhm. Seems like we had the right person here in Altar all along."

The letter was from Integra Sedna Clarisse *Flagman*.

She was the childhood friend of the first princess as well as the current Arch Sage.

And so, I accepted the invitation from the one who had inherited the name of Grand Artificer.

To Be Continued

Afterword

Cat: “All right, time for the afterwooord! I’m the ‘Cat,’ Cheshiiire!”
Bear: “...”
Cat: “I got a good bit of spotlight in this volume, complete with my own illustratiooon!”
Bear: “...”
Cat: “Heh heh. It was my birthday, so I even got into a fancy tuxedo to celebrate the occasiooon!”
Bear: “...”
Cat: “Hm? Brother Bear, you’re being oddly quiet right now... AH!”
Bear(White): “...”
Cat: “Wait, you’re Carl?! Well, I guess you’re the ‘Bear’ of this volume, but still!”
Bear(White): “...”
Cat: “Huh? Wait, am I supposed to speak enough for the both of us? Seriously?”
Bear(White): “...”
Cat: “Oookayy... I guess this is my punishment for abusing my authority with that eveeent... But how can I pad out the page count without banter...? You know what, I’ll just talk about what led to this! Specifically, this event’s background and the reason why Carl was in it!
As was mentioned in the story several times now, our goal is to increase the number of Embryos in their seventh forms. Because of this, we often do things that might help sixth forms evolve. SUBM attacks, my dueling, Chrono’s PK, and events like this one are all among our strategies. Though, as you can tell from the fact that we don’t even have a hundred of them yet,

we didn't have many successes. Because of that, for this event we tried expanding the range of participants, inviting standout sub-sixth forms like Ray and Alto—as well as Carl, who's already in his seventh. We hoped that this change of selection standards would spice things up a bit."

Bear(White): "..."

Cat: "Carl's role in this was basically the same as a creature in a horror game—the 'Invincible' monster that you'd never want to encounter, especially not on an isolated, uninhabited island. The twins expected the presence of such a menace to accelerate the evolution of the other participants and personally, I do think that it was a good punch to those who don't butt heads with Superiors very often or at all.

In the meta sense, this was the first appearance of a character who has been mentioned since the very first volume, as well as Ray's Superior encounter that wasn't in the web novel. The author wanted his entrance to come as a bit of a surprise.

Though, as you have surely read, in spite of his status, he was defeated as the volume's mid-boss. The existence of the barrier, Horobimaru's skill-canceling, Ray's 'explosiveness'... There were several reasons for his defeat, but if there's one thing to be said about this, it would be that if someone is called 'Invincible,' you can safely expect them to be beaten in one way or another."

Bear(White): "..."

Cat: "That said, Carl is a Superior with many aces up his sleeves that he didn't show, so do look forward to his next appearance.

Anyway, it's time for the comment from the author."

Thank you for reading volume 17 of this series. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

This was the first volume of all-new content, so I'm curious whether or not you're satisfied with it.

The most extra content I have written before this were additions to the previous volumes, the digital-only Fairytale Squad story, and the story that came with volume 1 of the anime, but this was the first time I'd ever written a full volume exclusively for the light novel series.

It was a lot of work and I spent a lot of time dealing with the typos, but I feel like it made me grow a bit as an author.

This volume covered an event that was particularly game-like and a little laid-back.

Up until now, Ray had been involved in battles that had tian lives, cities, and even countries on the line, but this was all about an event that he could thoroughly enjoy alongside his friends.

You could say that this is represented by the bright, cheerful, and wholesome cover Taiki had drawn for this volume. It is quite unlike what we had so far and I personally like the aura it exudes. Alto in all her yellow glory looks great, as well.

This volume 17 also gave a spotlight to the four stars of *The Crow Records*.

The scenario for this volume had a foundation in the plot of that series, so they really stood out here.

Out of the four, I personally found Shion especially easy to write. Silly gooses are the best gooses.

Though, since she did not do one iota of combat analysis, Juba's gimmick was left unrevealed. You will have to wait until her next appearance to find out more about it and Juba herself.

Anyway, volumes 15 and 16 were centered around people other than Ray, and this volume had him cooperate with an unusual bunch, but with volume 18, we will finally go back to the familiar members of Death Period.

Do look forward to the events that will unfold when Ray returns to Gideon.

Also, volume 9 of the manga has been released, as well. It features Kami Imai's amazing depiction of Marie and Veldorbell's battle, so do pick it up if you are so inclined.

Please continue supporting Infinite Dendrogram.

Sakon Kaidou

Cat: "There. With the author's comment out of the way, it's time to announce the next—"
Bear(White): "VOLUME 18 IS SET TO COME OUT IN JAPAN IN MARCH, 2022!"
Cat: "Huh?!"

Bear(White): “...”
Cat: *(Did he only keep quiet all this time because he was building up the energy to make the announcement?)*
Cat: “A-Anyway, see you in the next voluuume! Goodbyeee!”
Bear(White): “...Bye.”

Bonus Short Stories

The Ones From Tenchi

Tenchi

Jubei Kaga.

Capricious and belligerent, she was a person who exemplified the spirit of Tenchi, holding the very fitting “King of Asuras” job as well as the seat of the fourth in the country’s highly competitive duel rankings.

Just like in Altar, the top three in the rankings could only be challenged by those just below them, so Jubei’s position as the fourth led to her being regularly challenged by duelists trying to take a shortcut to the top. In fact, her renown as a fighter had driven some to challenge her *outside* the duels, as well. Some even tried to ambush her instead.

A life like hers would be too much for most, but she was among the few who thoroughly enjoyed it.

However, there had recently been a change in her that had greatly shocked the battle junkies of Tenchi.

Jubei’s strife-filled existence had resulted in her being covered in countless closed wounds—scars that doubled as medals gained from defeating so many skilled warriors.

The change that shook the country was the fact that *every single one of these scars had vanished*.

That could only mean one thing—that someone had defeated her, resetting her avatar back to its default, unscarred state.

Many of the country’s fighters went on to speculate about the identity of the powerful champion who subjugated King of Asuras.

She herself, however, seemed to be busy looking for someone.

All of those battle junkies were certain that the person who’d defeated her and whoever she was looking for were one and the same, and that her goal was a rematch.

But the truth was quite different from that...

◇◆

On the afternoon of a certain day, Alto was munching on dango at a particular tea house in a mountain pass.

In real life, the scenery alone would make this a tourist hot spot, but instead of enjoying it, she was merely doing her utmost to ignore the slight commotion around her and keep eating her snack.

“...I got nothin’ to do with this. I just wanna eat my dango. Dango are good...”

One could say that she was engaging in a form of escapism.

The reason for her willful detachment was that a short while ago, in a grove not too far away, she’d tested out the MVP special reward she’d received using the ticket she’d won at The Anniversary.

Although it had guaranteed an S-rank pull, getting an MVP reward using the gacha still required some degree of luck, and she wasn’t assured an item that would suit her build. MVP rewards received by defeating UBMs were adjusted to suit the player they were awarded to, but MVP rewards received through the gacha were simply hand-me-downs from deceased tians who’d once had them.

Alto needed even more luck than usual for the reward to be something that fit her playstyle. Now, as the owner of what was left of Horobimaru—perhaps the biggest bombshell in Tenchi—she had a playstyle that prioritized keeping a low profile and running away if needed.

Because of this...

“Hey! What was that explosion! I heard it from behind the goddamn mountain!”

“It didn’t sound like explosion magic. Maybe it’s a new UBM!”

“WOO-HOO! Let’s go beat its ass! And if it’s beaten already, let’s beat whoever beat it!”

...an MVP reward that summoned thunderous sounds and unbridled destruction was useless to her.

What am I supposed to do with that pile bunker?! I tried it out on a tree and it blew away the entire grove! How am I gonna use somethin’ that’s both dangerous and makes me the center of attention?!

She’d used the weapon away from any people, but it had so much presence that its activation had been heard across mountains. It had once been the cherished armament of The Ram from a distant land, but it was completely at odds with Alto's playstyle. More importantly, she now had to wait until things cooled down without any of the battle junkies realizing that she was the one who'd caused the loud sound.

A dozen minutes passed as she did nothing but eat her dango.

The commotion caused by the battle junkies was growing more distant, filling Alto with relief that the danger had passed...

"I found you at last."

...only for someone far more dangerous to replace them.

"Eep..."

King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga.

Alto's group had encountered her at the event and gone on to defeat her. The fact that she was speaking as though she'd been looking for Alto filled her with immense fear.

"Oh, please give me a moment!"

In her panic, Alto tried to either initiate the log out process or use her Nukenin disengagement skills, but before she could, Jubei's prosthetic arms grabbed her by the shoulders, making it impossible for her to escape.

"Ah ha ha ha ha..."

She's here to settle the score! Alto thought, bracing herself.

However, Jubei was merely looking at her with a smile on her face. That might not have meant much, though—she was the kind of person who smiled and hummed happily even as she turned people into mincemeat.

"I came to you today with a question," she said.

"Whuh?"

So she won't kill me right away, Alto thought. This wasn't enough to make her relax, but she did calm down a tiny bit.

"It is about Ray Starling," Jubei said.

"Ray?" Alto repeated as the reason behind this encounter became clear to her.

Jubei was a fan of Ray and he had defeated her at the event, so she would obviously be more interested in him than Alto. She now understood that Jubei had been looking for her to ask something about him.

"Yes. I was thinking that you might be a real life acquaintance of his."

However, what she said was both far beyond what Alto'd expected—and uncomfortably accurate.

“...Wh-Why would you think that?”

“In that event, you, Ray Starling, and Juliet formed a party. Juliet being with him is understandable because they are from the same country, but I find it hard to believe that you—someone from Tenchi—had ever been involved with him prior to the event. I feel like that is reason enough to believe you might share a real-life social circle or even be friends. Would I be wrong?”

“W-Well, it could be that he just fell in love with me at first sight...”

“Oh? Is that how it is?”

“We go to the same college!”

Alto tried to dance around the truth—but when Jubei tightened her prosthetics’ grip, still smiling, she instantly revealed the truth.

“My, that is most fortunate. Now, for the main reason I contacted you. There is something I would like you to ask him...”

Alto’s answer seemed to have put Jubei in a good mood.

Oh no. Oh no...!

Alto, however, was back in her downward spiral of negativity as she pictured what would happen now.

What if she’s gonna ask for his real name and address so she can stalk him IRL and eventually chop him up and kill him out of her infatuation with him...?! If that happens, I’ll appear in some weekly mag with only my eyes censored as “Friend S: the one who gave info to an internet stalker” and then I’ll be shunned and expelled from college and my life will be over and...

“RAY, I’M SORRY! KING OF ASURAS IS AN E-DATING MANIAC!”

Her negative thoughts took over and she blurted out those words, tears welling up in her eyes.

“...Eh heh heh. I do not believe I have ever received an insult greater than that.”

Hit with the kind of disparagement she had never built up any resistance to, even Jubei couldn’t help but be taken aback.

However, she quickly recovered and said, “This is not about meeting him. I wish to ask Ray Starling about an accident that happened about ten years ago—”

She wanted Alto to ask Ray if he was the one who’d saved Jubei from a traffic accident...

"Oh?"

...but before she finished her sentence, she let go of Alto and turned around.

She was now surrounded by fierce-looking Masters.

"We heard a scream and rushed here, thinking that someone needs help, and here we find you...King of Asuras!"

"Heh heh heh. Looks like your luck has run out!"

"WOO-HOO! WILDY MATCH! LET'S GOOOO!"

These were the very same battle junkies who had gone to search for the source of the loud sound (Alto's pile bunker MVP reward).

"Oh my," Jubei said, still smiling, as she spread out her floating weapons and unsheathed the curseblades with her prosthetics.

When those who thrived in strife faced each other with bloodlust coursing through their veins, there was only one thing that could happen next—all-out combat.

"EEP...!"

As the battle began, Alto used the opening to put up a smoke screen and run away as fast as she could.

Jubei's opponents were no easy prey, keeping her busy long enough for Alto to escape.

However, this was only the beginning.

Jubei, still wishing to have her message passed on to Ray, would keep following Alto, who would escape yet again.

This game of tag would continue for quite some time and take them all over Tenchi.

They would eventually go on to become a duo...but that was a story for another time.

Shion's Stresses

Gideon the City of Duels

"HuUhh?"

One day, during her visit to Altar, the Huang Hean Superior and second in Huang He's duel rankings, Xunyu, entered a store to buy materials for her Fu, only to see something strange.

“I hate this! I hate this so much! Neeeeeennnghhhh!”

There was Shion Manjushage, making odd, angry noises.

Xunyu wasn’t close to Shion, but they had met when she’d attended an Altarian social gathering for duelists.

What she was doing as she made those noises was...pulling on the gacha machine. This was the store owned by a certain Alejandro—the same one equipped with that curious device—and Shion was endlessly making pulls that cost a hundred thousand lir each.

Normally, the store only allowed one pull before making the puller go to the back of the line and wait for their turn again, but Shion’s intensity had rendered everyone unable to object.

“Guess I gottA get involved,” said Xunyu, feeling she had to do something. “Hey, donchA think you’re bothErin’ the other customErs?”

“Leave me alone!” Shion said before she realized something. “Oh, wait. It is you.”

“You know yoUr wailin’ can be heard all acrOss the store, right? Just whAt the hell happened to yA?”

“Oh, it is simply unbelievable! I lost the event I was in before I even realized what was going on! And I am not getting anything good from the gacha!”

Shion went on to explain what had happened at The Anniversary.

Although she’d been able to defeat a powerful enemy, she’d somehow lost while gathering her spoils.

It had been a surprise attack from Carl that had defeated her, but she still had no idea that was the case.

Being disqualified right after winning a fight had left her sour beyond belief.

Afterwards, she’d went on to talk to Juliet, who’d said that she’d won and received an S-rank gacha ticket. That had motivated Shion to come here and get a natural S-rank pull, which was what she was trying to do right now.

“I came out of all that with nothing to show for it! That is so stressful!”

“I seE...” Xunyu said.

Though, doncha think you’ll get even more stressed if ya burn your money on the gacha? she added in thought.

“All this after I beat a scorpion and a huge elephant! It’s like a compound fracture on my breakable bone!”

“What’s thAt supposed to...? Wait, ‘huge elEphant?’ Was it mAde of clouds?”

“Yes! And I beat it splendidly!” Shion said proudly.

Those words made Xunyu realize something.

Huang He’s strongest clan, Huili Yuminjun, had the so-called “Five Generals,” each of which took a spot in the duel rankings ranging from third to seventh.

From the highest ranked, they were King of Gardens, Saimei Takanashi; Beast General, Anthropos Farma; King of Axes, Wan Zihao; Kidnap Princess, Clobbergirl Fanatic Pie; and the one Shion had defeated—King of Cowboys, Jamie Crescent.

Despite being the lowest in the ranks among them, Jamie Crescent was said to be extremely hard to defeat in open fields, so Xunyu was surprised to hear that Shion had done exactly that.

It sparked her curiosity as a duelist.

“Well, I’m intErested. All right, we’re gOin’ to an open arenA.”

“Whuh?”

As she was caught off guard by what she just heard, Xunyu extended her prosthetics and wrapped them around her.

“Pullin’ the gachA won’t help ya with strEss, anyway. Hang oUt with me for A while.”

And so, Xunyu dragged Shion to an arena and made her spar with her.

Once they were done, Shion’s pent-up competitive spirit was all but exhausted, and she looked thoroughly refreshed.

The B and the C

Gideon the City of Duels

“Huh?”

On a certain day after The Anniversary, Chelsea, who was lost in thought as she was stocking up on consumables at Alejandro’s store, saw a familiar, spectacled woman looking over the shields on sale.

The person considering the gear was none other than B3, or Barbaroy Bad Burn. Once the leader of the PK clan known as “Mad Castle,” she was now part of Ray’s Death Period, as though she was cursed to always join clans with sinister-sounding names.

Though, it's not like Ray's clan is focused on PK... Anyway, Barbaroy, huh? Chelsea thought.

To Chelsea, she was "an acquaintance of a friend" in a whole three ways.

She was acquainted with one of Chelsea's sparring partners, Ray; fellow duelists, Kashimiya and Rosa; and an old real-life friend, Eldridge.

They weren't friends, really, but neither were they complete strangers—but having so many shared acquaintances, each from a different angle, made it hard for Chelsea to gauge how close the two of them actually were.

She hasn't noticed me and it looks like she's seriously thinkin' about what to pick, so I won't bother her, she thought before shifting focus back to her own shopping and problems.

The thing on her mind right now was the promise she'd made to Juliet.

A new combat style that makes me more powerful than I used to be and more powerful than I am now too... Well, I already know the most obvious way to get stronger.

That was, without a doubt, getting a Superior Job.

The very reason why she'd come to Altar in the first place was to search for a Superior Job that was different from the ones she may have been able to get in Granvaloa.

Getting an SJ would let her finally break through the level 500 wall.

It's not that easy, though, she thought.

Securing an SJ was simultaneously the most obvious and the most difficult way to grow stronger. For each job, it was a race that only a single person could win, and with nearly five in-*Dendro* years having passed since release, there were far fewer jobs available than there had been at the start.

The deaths of tians with Superior Jobs opened that job up to any capable candidates, but Chelsea couldn't rely on that to get hers.

King of Blaze, Bug General, and King of Venom were opened up that way during the recent incident in Altea, but none of them synergize with my build.

As she pondered her predicament, the store was suddenly filled with commotion.

The cause of that was B3, who had used Instant Wear to switch to a huge suit of armor. Apparently, she'd only done that to see if the available shields were the right size, but it was scaring the other customers nonetheless.

...That's her MVP reward. "Gunhammer Plate, Magnum Colossus," I think.

Both Chelsea and B3 were prominent high-rank jobs that counted SJs among their friends, but that suit of armor was something that clearly separated them. MVP rewards had special skills and extremely high regenerative abilities, making many of them akin to extra Embryos.

Unfortunately, Chelsea still had none of them.

During her time in Granvaloa, she'd almost never encountered UBMs, and even if she had, they were the kind who'd fought from deep below the surface instead of her turf—the sea level.

However, securing an MVP reward now seemed like a far more reliable way to grow stronger than finding an SJ to take.

There's been a change in the local monster habitats. That's the reason why the Afforest was where it was. Maybe a UBM from some unexplored area wandered somewhere more accessible?

"...You know what? I'll look around."

Encountering and winning against UBMs required a good deal of luck, but luck wasn't a problem if you simply tried enough times.

Having realized what separated her and B3—who was on the same level as her—Chelsea had found the path she would take to become the newer, stronger version of herself.

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 17
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

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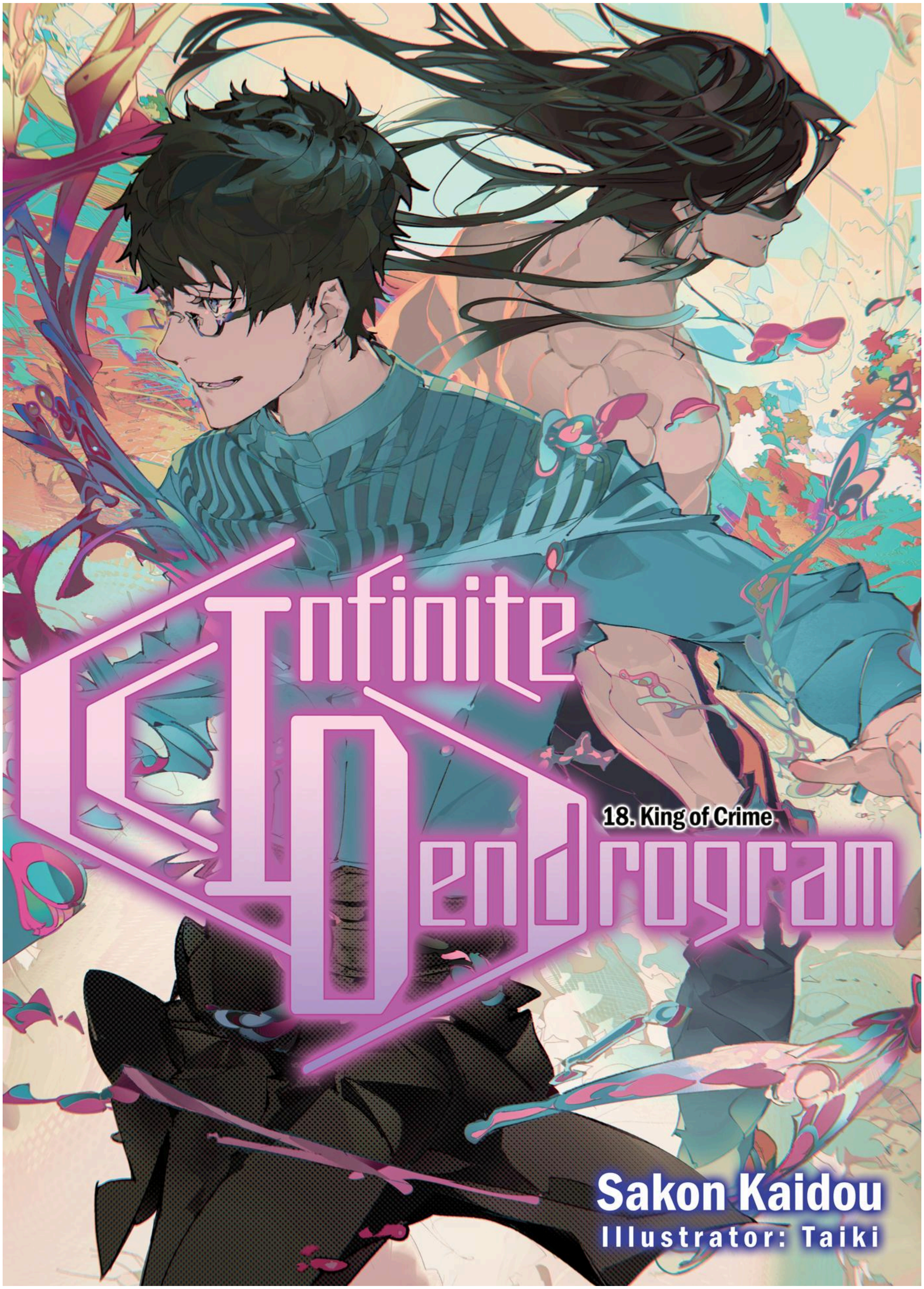
Ebook edition 1.0: April 2022

Infinite Dendrogram
18. King of Crime
Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki



Infinite Dendrogram
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Infinite Dendrogram

18. King of Crime

Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: Taiki

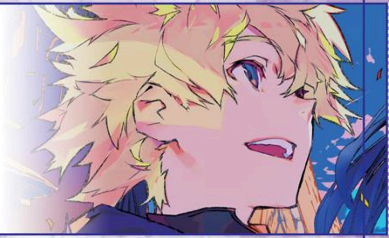
Death Period:
RENEWED!

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

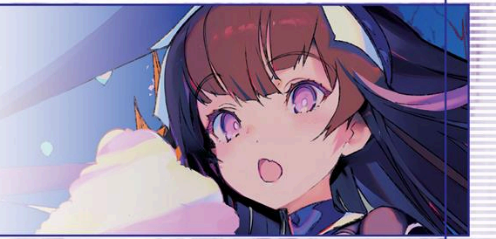
A college freshman who gets caught up in various incidents within Infinite Dendrogram. Though he is generally mild-mannered, he has a strong will that causes him to fight for his goals and never give up on them.



Nemesis

Nemesis

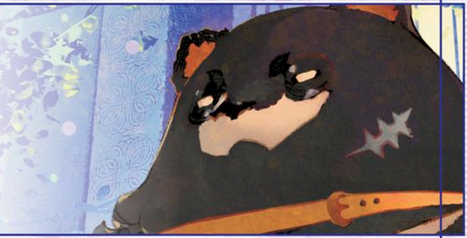
Ray's Embryo manifested as this girl. Nemesis acts as Ray's weapon by taking up the form of armaments such as a greatsword, halberd, shield, pinwheel, mirror, and twin swords. She is also a notable glutton.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

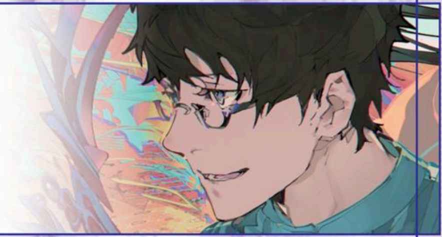
Shu is the King of Destruction, the first in Altar's kill rankings, and Reiji's brother in real life. A Dendro veteran since before Ray even began his journey, Shu has seen many adventures, oftentimes through the eye holes of an animal costume.



Sechs

Sechs Würfel

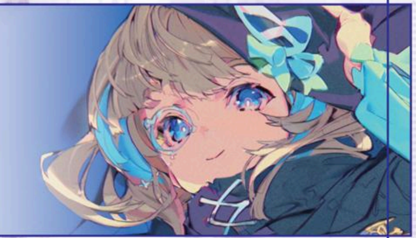
Bearer of the King of Crime job, Sechs is a man who commits sins for the sole purpose of being "evil." Though currently imprisoned in the gaol, he is also the leader of Illegal Frontier—a clan made up entirely of Superiors on wanted lists.



Integra Flagman

Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman

The Arch Sage of Altar and an old friend of two of the kingdom's key individuals—the First Princess, Altimia, and the Vice-Commander of the Royal Guard, Liliana. Integra is a mysterious woman who bears the name of the pre-ancient civilization's Grand Artificer.



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Prologue: The Minority's Justice, The Majority's Evil

June, 2044

Thunderous explosions rang throughout a forest on the border between Altar and Legendaria.

Calling it a "forest," though, wasn't entirely accurate, because the trees—the old growth that had stood there until just yesterday—were all but gone now.

The land looked as though it had suffered a relentless aerial bombing, and this unbridled destruction continued unabated. There were no longer even any animals running from the overwhelming noise that shook the earth and sky. How could there be? The battle had been going for an hour now. All the local fauna had either escaped or died long ago.

The only moving things left were two large silhouettes.

"UAAAAGH!" One of the figures was a giant humanoid robot that was over a hundred metels in size. With an echoing roar that shook the ground, it ran at near-sonic speeds before leaping forward.

Its target was the other silhouette—a strange object that looked like three large disks stacked together. Seemingly about a hundred metels in size, the object stood on a singular column-like support that pierced the ground. Its appearance might be compared to the stacked prayer wheels used in Tibetan Buddhism.

However, the *living face* each of them possessed might make the comparison to religious instruments a bit bizarre.

"Nejirebana!" The steel giant coupled its leap with a spiraling right-hand palm attack called "twisted flower." The palm would soon grab one of its opponent's disks, then use its speed and sheer strength to twist and break it.

"Turning Space."

However, two words from the topmost disk reversed everything. Instead, the steel giant's right arm shattered.

"...Kodachi!" Not faltering, the giant went on to twist its body in midair and throw a roundhouse kick. This had actually been its plan from the start—the giant had expected the palm attack to fail and was ready to deliver this far stronger blow.

But as the kick was right about to connect...

"Turning Land!"

...the land beneath the steel giant flipped upside down.

The ground itself crashed into the giant, sending it flying.

"NGH!" Despite the impact, the giant spun in the air to brace itself.

However, its movements began to grow more sluggish once it landed.

"Warning: Energy cells depleted. Full Offense Mode can no longer be maintained. Recharging cells would require twenty-four hours spent in a noncombat state. Furthermore, there is a severe combat munitions shortage."

With a mechanical voice, the steel giant—or rather, the Embryo—declared that it had run out of everything necessary for its ultimate skill. It said all this while in the process of transforming from its robotic form back to that of a battle cruiser.

"In that case, fire every armament the moment you transform! B-type shells for all!"

"Affirmative." In response to its Master's order, the Embryo loaded all armaments with the specified type of shell.

And when it had finally become a battle cruiser again, it gunned its engines to full power and surged forward. A moment later, however, the land beneath the battle cruiser was flipped exactly as before.

"BALDR! DO IT! FIRE ALL GUNS!"

"Affirmative." As the battle cruiser moved, crushing what remained of the trees beneath it, the Embryo obeyed its Master and fired every weapon it had equipped. Hundreds—*thousands* of shells and missiles flew towards the disks.

Upon seeing this onslaught...

"F o o l i s h."

...the faces on the slowly spinning disks cracked a smile and spoke these words in perfect unison, their voices strangely distorted.

"Turning Space," the topmost disk said. All of the heavy ordnance aimed at it flipped around and flew back towards the battle cruiser instead.

That was one of the three great “Turning” abilities the disks possessed—the ability to turn space itself.

The Master of the battle cruiser clicked his tongue in annoyance and switched its engines to full capacity in order to escape, but...

“Turning Land.”

...the face on the middle disk spoke. At its words, the land around it shifted like a table being flipped over.

This was the second “Turning” ability. It allowed the disks to freely warp the landscape around itself, and its effect reached as far as ten kilometels away. Right now, it was using this power to force the retreating battle cruiser back into the trajectory of its own shells and missiles.

“Ah...!” And thus, the battle cruiser was drowned in flames. There was no sign of its Master escaping the conflagration—he must have been engulfed as well. Even the disks could see that he could not possibly have survived it all.

Eventually, the battle cruiser vanished, presumably having succumbed to the fire.

“H e f i n a l l y d i e d,” the three faces of the disks said as they gazed at the flames, chuckling.

This impudent enemy had spent most of the battle outside the range of Turning Space—but in the end, he’d apparently lost his presence of mind. As a result, he had been destroyed by his own weapons.

“H e a n d t h e d a r k m a n w h o d i e d f i r s t w e r e a t r u e n u i s a n c e.”

“W e w e r e i n j u r e d.”

“T h e h u m a n s w i l l h a v e t o p a y f o r t h i s.”

The strange entity’s name was “Divine Disks, Spindle.” It was an Ancient Legendary UBM that had lived in this area for a long time and ruled over its people with an iron fist. Despite being inorganic, it was also carnivorous; perhaps the most distressing thing about its dominion was that it demanded human sacrifices to feed on—and even seemed to derive excitement from this.

Many tians had challenged this creature in the past, including combat-focused Superior Jobs from Tenchi. However, not even the likes of them could bring this entity down. That was just how strong the disks were.

If the overseer of UBMs were to look at this creature, he would surely describe it as “an Ancient Legendary that was absurdly close to Mythical.” If it defeated just one more UBM, in fact, it would no doubt ascend to the Mythical tier outright.

Today, a mere two people had attempted what so many before them had failed to do—and they both had met with abject defeat.

The first opponent had died early on when the bottom disk used its “Turning Life” skill, which accelerated his cell division cycle, causing them to multiply so rapidly that he burst into pieces. The other had just vanished within his own artillery barrage.

Once again, the Divine Disks had emerged victorious.

“We are fatigued. Let us feast to heal ourselves.”

“One village should suffice.”

“Agre-e-e...” However, as they were in the process of planning their victory celebration, the third disk’s words trailed off into nothing. Its spin, normally steady, had also become unstable—almost as though it had suddenly gone rusty.

“What is wrong?” the other two disks asked. However, it returned nothing but silence.

Eventually, the disk stopped spinning completely. The eyes on its face rolled backwards, and it opened and closed its mouth like a fish out of water. Then, suddenly...

“Goodbye.”

...a voice that sounded nothing like its own escaped its mouth before it shattered from within.

Without much flair or fanfare, one third of a near-Mythical creature instantly died.

“Wh...What?! Brother...brother... What happened...?!”

“What is this?! Who?! Who...did this...?! Unforgivable!” The remaining two disks were shocked by the sudden loss of someone who had been with them all since their creation. As bewilderment overtook them...

“Ohh, so you were brothers? My condolences. I see I’ve done you some great harm. Committed a crime you can never forgive.”

...they noticed someone standing within the motionless face of their brother.

“I do find that *very* satisfying, though.” The person—an unremarkable young man with black hair and black eyes—said all of this with a smile.

It was the same human who had been killed by the third disk's "Turning Life" earlier.

"Y o u...y o u a r e a l i v e?!" the other disks cried in shock.

"I happen to have a body that does not die when split apart. Thanks to Shu's distraction, I was able to enter your brother with little effort."

The man said all these outrageous things in an incredibly matter-of-fact manner as he looked up at the two remaining disks. His eyes showed no pride in having defeated a third of such a powerful creature, but neither did they betray any disdain or fear. He looked as tranquil as someone gazing out at the sunset over the sea.

"Y o u... C u r s e y o u! Y o u r d e a t h i s n i g h!" The top disk was overcome with anger and set the man as its target for Turning Space. In several moments, he would be twisted right out of his body along with the space he inhabited.

"Focusing on me right now is dangerous," the man casually remarked, pointing at the still-burning fire.

"...Strength Cannon."

As soon as the voice issued from the smoldering wreckage, a shell of light broke through the veil of flame.

"W h...W h a t...?!"

And just like that, it was over. Before the top disk could change Turning Space's target, and completely ignoring the second disk's ability to turn the land, the shell of light flew towards the top disk.

"...Just fuckin' break already." The shell reached its target at the same time as those words did, and the immense power within utterly obliterated the disk.

"G h... G h a h..."

"B r o t h e r...!" As the top disk died, the second let out a wail of grief.

The man responsible, however, was standing in the fire with an indomitable grin on his face. As he looked up at Spindle's final remaining disk, he made his Embryo—now in its cannon form—disappear.

"Yeah, I figured it couldn't do the turning thing fast enough," he said. "An hour is more than enough to figure out how fast you operate."

The voice that was currently speaking belonged to the man from the battle cruiser.

"What...? How? You should have been dead too..."

"Sorry, but the 'B' in 'B-type' stands for 'bluff.' Those special shells sure put on a hell of a show, but they don't actually *do* much."

As if to prove his point, the man showed no signs of discomfort as he stood next to the roaring fire.

"...They did burn my costume though," he added with a sigh. "This show's on the rougher side, I guess."

Indeed, his costume's top half had been completely burned away, leaving his upper body exposed.

"Curse you puny humans...! You will pay for what you did to my brothers...!"

"...And that would be why you lost."

"What...?"

"Ya spent your days actin' like god up in these mountains, only dealin' with weaklings—forcin' them to pay you tribute in sacrifices. Of course you'd lose your instinct for combat."

"*What...*?!"

"And *that's* why ya don't even recognize an obvious distraction. Holy shit, how much time can ya waste talkin' when you're up against the *two* men who just killed your brothers?"

That was when the last disk realized that the black-haired man was nowhere in sight.

"Shapeshift: Linker Arm of the Destroyer, Macht Kanone!"

He was standing in one of the creature's blind spots, his left arm transformed into one armed with a cannon. Both the arm and the weapon looked *exactly* like the one possessed by the man with the battle cruiser.

"Once again...goodbye."

The cannon fired, and the last of Spindle's divine disks vanished like mist.

◇

Divine Disks, Spindle. A terrible being that regularly demanded sacrifices from the local villages—a creature that was taboo even to touch—had thus met its end at the hands of two *people*.

However, if anyone was present, they might not recognize them as human.

One had changed into a raccoon-like costume, which just made him look like some new kind of monster; the other had completely shed any semblance of humanoid form and become a black slime shaped roughly like a starch cake.

“...I *raccoon* we won,” said the former, awkwardly replacing “reckon.”

“It seems that way,” said the other. “Oh. It appears the MVP reward went to me.”

“Well, you made the winning move. No surprise there.” They—Destroyer, Shu Starling, and King of Crime, Sechs Würfel—were talking so casually that it was hard to believe they had been in a fierce battle mere minutes ago.

Although the conclusion seemed anticlimactic, Spindle certainly hadn’t been an easy foe.

The Divine Disks were extremely powerful, with their stats and skills alone making its defeat a difficult challenge for either one of them.

They’d ultimately won for two reasons. Shu had pointed out the first—that Spindle had lost its touch for combat. The second was the fact that Shu and Sechs were working together. They had both acted as distractions to create openings the other could take advantage of. Without such cooperation, Spindle would’ve won despite its rusty combat instincts.

Perhaps “cooperation” wasn’t quite the right word, though, since *they weren’t actually coordinating whatsoever*.

They both possessed a degree of confidence—or perhaps it was more like vigilance—that did not plan beyond thinking “this is what he’s gonna do next.”

They knew each other well enough to make such guesses and be correct almost all the time.

They clearly didn’t know *everything* about each other, though, as evidenced by the fact that Shu was looking at the starch cake next to him with slight surprise and thinking, *Huh...this guy can’t keep up his human form if he’s tired?*

Sechs’s Embryo was a Type Body called “Nu.” Its base form was that of a slime, and his human form was actually a result of a transformation. At this moment, he was so fatigued that he couldn’t even assume his regular appearance.

This seemed like a golden opportunity to send this criminal to the gaol, but Shu had no means of doing that now. He'd just used his first form and his ammo stocks were depleted, so he had no way to deal damage to someone immune to physical attacks. Things might be different if he had the King of Destruction Superior Job, but he would only acquire it after about a month of real-life time following this encounter.

As he was now, however, he was powerless against Sechs.

"Apologies for taking the MVP reward," Sechs said as Shu looked down at him. It was hard to tell what he was thinking.

"It's fine," said Shu. "The only reason I signed myself up fur this was because it pissed me off that children were bein' wagoned off as human sacrifices."

"Oh, that is true. I am certain you will not be thanked for this, however."

The local villages had long tolerated the practice of offering sacrifices to the Divine Disks. This was because the land was Spindle's territory, and that deterred most other monsters from entering. Outside of the need for human sacrifices, this place was actually on the safe side compared to the rest of the world.

The villagers believed that instead of worrying about some unknown monsters that could consume all of them, it was better to pay a "tax" of their own children to ensure the safety of the rest. "The devil you know" and all that.

In a way, it was like a religion that treated Spindle as a god.

This was especially clear when Shu had declared that he would defeat the UBM—only to be showered by loathing gazes and ceaseless verbal abuse.

Destroying this monster that demanded sacrifices was, from their perspective, a grave sin and a heavy crime.

And that was exactly why Sechs *also* wanted to defeat it.

"In the long run, defeating that UBM might actually increase the number of casualties here," Sechs said. "I am certain that the victims themselves do not believe that you have done the right thing. That may even include the parents of the sacrificed children."

"Probably," Shu replied, his voice nonchalant. "I did what I wanted. To me, that was the right decision. It just also happened to be wrong for those villagers. That's all there is to it."

“...So you are not afraid of being in the minority.”

“If I changed my opinions just to be part of the majority, I’d stop being myself and lose my sense of what’s right.”

“Your sense of justice, you mean?”

“Nothin’ that grand. I just don’t give up on the possibility I want. That’s the one thing that won’t change no matter who tries to deny it—or how many,” he said, looking back at the place where Spindle had once stood. Nothing of it was left. “This time, I just wanted to break some shitty spinnin’ top that demands child sacrifices, so that’s what I did. I won’t regret it no matter what anyone has to say about it.” Within his suit, he cracked a smile. “Well, I’ll still get in touch with my contacts in Altar and Legendaria to have them build a defense network here. A freshly opened monster habitat ain’t safe, and I can do that much.”

Saying nothing in response, Sechs looked up and considered Shu.

He was a man for whom the opinions of others didn’t matter at all—they were merely by-products of his actions. To him, all that mattered was that he did what he wanted. He was the only one who needed to see the purpose and value of anything he did. He influenced other people, but was immune to influence from them. It didn’t matter if he wore an animal costume, played the comedian, or obliterated those who stood before him—his nature remained unchanged.

He had a well-established, powerful sense of “himself.”

He was one who delivered his justice even in the face of terrible adversity.

Sechs thought many things about this person before him, and found himself a little bit ■■■■■■■.

“We are directly opposed,” he finally declared.

“Hm?”

“I came to defeat the UBM because I wanted to do exactly what the majority was against. You came to defeat the UBM in order to do what *you* felt was right. Our actions and their results are the same, but we are thoroughly opposed otherwise.”

“We’ve always been like that, haven’t we? Like, since the time we met during that whole Theresia thing,” said Shu. This wasn’t a new concept to him.

“That is true. You keep her status as The Evil a secret to protect her, while I keep it a secret because it's bad for the world. We truly are opposed."

Shu did what *he* wanted and delivered his justice.

Sechs did what the world *didn't* want and spread his corruption.

They were indeed directly opposed, but that was exactly why they occasionally saw eye to eye.

One man's justice could clash with another's, but justice and evil could interlock like gears and begin to turn.

That might have been a good way to describe their relationship.

That might've been why Sechs didn't actually dislike Shu, despite the fact that he'd thwarted many of his crimes.

That wasn't the only reason, though. In spite of being Altar's most wanted criminal, Sechs didn't have many personal desires...but Shu had caused him to develop one.

When he gets a Superior Job and becomes my equal... he thought as he looked up at Shu. *I will have him do that until...*

This desire had stuck its head out of its hiding place, but not far enough for him to say it out loud.

The time for that would come later.

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The two then went on to part ways.

They would spend their days encountering one another regularly—chatting, quarreling, and even cooperating like they had done during their encounter with Spindle. Sechs certainly saw Shu as a friend and someone special to him, while Shu didn't actually hate this loathsome criminal all that much.

However, after a year in *Dendro* time, right before the first Knight-Machine War, the two would finally clash. It was a battle that no Master or tian ever knew about—a deadly struggle between the giants of steel and darkness.

Destruction and Crime—the kings of both had fought until they shattered.

Begin Episode: "King of Crime."

Chapter One: Real-Life Relationships

Reiji Mukudori

A real-life day had passed since the battle royale on the uninhabited island.

It was now a Friday, and my college, UTokyo, was brimming with excitement.

The reason for all the enthusiasm was obvious. The week after next, from Wednesday on May 3rd to Sunday on the 7th, we would have five days off in a row—Golden Week.

I could hear cheerful talks between friends, lovers, and everyone else—making plans to go on trips or other activities for the occasion. Some people were considering not taking any lectures on Monday and Tuesday as well, opening up a full nine days for longer outings. The freshmen, however, seemed particularly keen to visit their homes. College life was still new to us, after all, and I could totally understand those who needed a break from it.

Even I'd gotten a call from my mom this morning, asking me if I wanted to spend Golden Week with my family. I spent a long moment thinking about it, but I wasn't feeling homesick or anything, so I decided to pass this time.

But before I could open my mouth, mom went and said something shocking.

"Your sister's coming back too. The 5th is her birthday, if you recall."

And just like that, I knew that I *absolutely had* to return—at least for the 5th of May.

Not being there to celebrate my sister's birthday would leave me afraid for my future. Knowing her, she wouldn't be upset by my absence, but there was a chance that she would "kindly make up for it" by barging into my place and whisking me away to spend some "quality time" somewhere foreign. I'd already had quite enough of that with the South America visit...

My home at the big N was just two hours away by bullet train, and I had no *Dendro* plans for Golden Week yet, so I figured I'd be able to return for the 5th.

Speaking of birthdays, Shu's was on the 3rd of March.

A brother and a sister, born just about a year apart—the sister on Boys' Day and the brother on Girls' Day. It was quite a rare coincidence, and it seemed kinda auspicious. The only way it could be better was if their days were switched.

As for me, I was born on July 7th—Tanabata. The 3rd day of the 3rd month, the 5th day of the 5th month, the 7th day of the 7th month... Our parents probably hadn't planned for us to have these birthdays, but I'd found it really strange when I was little. Hell, I still thought it was weird.

Anyway, thinking about visiting home, my sister, and some *Dendro* matters had left me feeling fatigued all morning, and I'd spent my lectures just zoning out.

Lunch time rolled around with me having learned absolutely nothing in class, and I was now sitting in the second cafeteria, absentmindedly twirling spaghetti with meat sauce onto my fork without actually bringing it to my mouth.

"What's up, Rei? Summer heat a bit too much? You okay? Wanna play some cat's cradle?"

"It ain't summer yet. It's obviously just May blues. Lil' early for that too, though, I guess."

"No, it's clearly bloodlust. He hasn't had his fix of *Dendro* devil meat."

The friends eating with me—Natsume, Kasugai, and Fuyuki—suddenly started commenting on my current state of mind.

"...You guys really just say whatever pops into your head, huh? Especially you, Fuyuki." Also, I hadn't eaten any devils since the battle against Logan. Why are Fuyuki and Natsume so fixated on that?

By the way, the fifth of us *Dendro* freshmen—Akiyama—was currently at her part-time job.

"Then why do ya look so gloomy? Didja get a bad gacha pull with your ticket...? Or wait—did someone break your heart?! Are you *sure* you're okay? Wanna play some cat's cradle?!"

"Mukudori...I'm goin' to a mixer next week. Wanna join?"

"Wait a sec, you two. He's got a Maiden, so he's with a girl basically every second in *Dendro*. Plus the internet tells me that he's constantly surrounded by weird women, so it's *obviously* not relationship trouble. If anything...he's probably tired *because* he hangs out with girls all the time."

"...Could you all quit it? Especially you, Fuyuki." *Also, I didn't even use my ticket yet, Alto,* I added silently.

"It's not the heat or May blues, and it's *definitely* not a broken heart or too much interaction with women. I'm just dealing with some tiring family matters and looking back at all that happened in *Dendro* this month."

"Ohh," Kasugai and Fuyuki said in unison. "I get ya! That was one hell of an event!" Natsume nodded in understanding. Of course she'd get it—she was with me for one of the most notable moments. "And Altar is havin' a rough time too, huh?" she added.

"...Yeah."

Way too many things had happened this April. On the first Saturday, there were the incidents at Torne and Quartierlatin. The following Saturday, there was the incident involving Hannya and King of Light, F. The Saturday after *that*, there were the peace talks that went so very wrong. And yesterday, there was The Anniversary.

Dendro time went by three times faster so it didn't exactly feel like it, but in real-life terms, something had happened every single week of the month so far.

Then again, it hadn't been much different in March either.

...We won't get another incident this Saturday, will we?

"And I was directly involved in all of them..." I muttered. The only exception was the terrorist attack on Altea that had happened at the same time as the peace talks.

"Wanna play some cat's cradle to take your mind off of it?"

"No."

"How 'bout that mixer, then?"

"No."

"Mukudori, relax—the KoB video with you in it is good stuff. It's doing good numbers."

"...Why would that make me relax?" Speaking of which, after hearing Jubei mention it, I'd gone to see the KoB video for myself. The uploader was the same person who'd put up the Logan video, and for some reason it was edited to make Altar's side—and me—look better than we really were. Since there were no other recordings to disprove any of that, the internet now saw the video as the absolute truth regarding what happened.

...By this point, I was pretty sure I knew who was behind this. I sighed as the silhouette of a Superior in a lab coat loomed in my mind.

“What about Tenchi? Anything happening in your country?” I asked.

“Not really. Everybody at Toseiden’s just chillin’,” said Natsume.

“Nothin’ here in Nanshumon either,” added Kasugai.

“Hokugen’in...we won against Kurowa in the north, but besides that, yeah, not much is happening here.” Tenchi was considered a single country on the world stage, but internally it was split into a number of lands ruled by different “Daimyos.” It was worth noting, though, that that title came to us via the auto-translation, so maybe it wasn’t actually a hundred percent accurate. Anyway, the situation there was similar to Sengoku Era Japan’s. Civil wars were a common thing, and Hokugen’in—the Daimyo Fuyuki served—apparently just took part in one.

“Kurowa? Are they the bunch who really don’t know how to pick their battles?” Kasugai asked.

“Yeah. Soon after they got a new Daimyo, they invaded us at Hokugen’in, and we’re one of the Tenchi’s Big Four.”

“Tenchi’s Big Four” were the particularly strong and long-lived Daimyo families of Tenchi—Kasugai’s Nanshumon, Natsume’s Toseiden, Fuyuki’s Hokugen’in, and Seihakuto. They were dominant in the south, east, north, and west, respectively.

Akiyama, who wasn’t with us here, was the only one of them who served a family outside of those four.

Jubei also happened to serve the same family as Natsume, as a matter of fact.

“What’s the power balance between them in terms of Sengoku Daimyos?”

“The Hokugen’in are like the Takeda from the Sengoku Era, while the Kurowa are like the Date from the Azuchi-Momoyama Era, I guess.”

...That actually seemed like a pretty even fight. Fuyuki had cited the eras when both clans were at their height, so from her explanation it didn’t really seem like that uneven of a matchup for Kurowa.

“Kurowa was a powerful family that had save points in their fief, and their tian soldiers outnumbered Hokugen’in’s 3-to-2,” Fuyuki explained. “However, that’s not the case with Masters. Hokugen’in had two Superiors:

Bigman and Saki Muryo-Taisu.”

...Those are some major names. I thought.

“So yeah. They struck first, but when we struck back, we just crushed them.”

“...I see.” This was clearly a case like the First Knight-Machine War on our side of the world, where Masters had made all the difference.

“The very first battle was an overwhelming defeat for them—even their Daimyo got killed. Now we’re just taking their land while trying to minimize casualties and dealing with the bandits popping up in the neutral zones. I actually went on a quest to help with that... Though, something weird’s been happening recently.”

“What kind of weird stuff, exactly?” I asked.

“Well, there seems to be a third party involved,” Fuyuki said. “There’s been ambushes by some...demi-humans that look like monsters...like people you’d find in Legendaria. They’ve slowed Hokugen’in’s advance down a lot, and they even managed to give me the death penalty.”

“Demi-humans that look like monsters...?” I’d heard of something similar appearing during the terrorist attack on Altea—a “Bug General” leading an army of bee-people.

“Hm...” According to Kasumi and the others who were there, the Bug General mentioned someone who, in her own words, “gave me power and this army.”

Altar and Tenchi were on opposite sides of the continent. It didn’t seem likely that a single person would be able to successfully pull strings that were *that* long, but it still stuck out to me.

“Troubled again, Rei? Wanna exercise your brain with some cat’s cradle?” said Natsume.

“No, he’s obviously imagining the taste of the demi-humans,” said Fuyuki. “You know how he fights. I’m sure he’ll eat bugs *and* corpses if he has to!”

“...I think he’s just tryin’ to fight off the headache you’re both givin’ him,” said Kasugai. Well, nothing would come from thinking about it now, so I figured I’d just leave it for another time.

And what the hell kind of person do they think I am? I thought in response to their comments. *I guess I* did *eat a corpse during the Gouz-Maise thing, but still...*

◇

The lectures ended before evening, and I wasted no time before making my way back home. Tomorrow was Saturday again, so I could focus solely on *Dendro*.

We at Death Period were planning to look for a place to use as our HQ, and The Tournaments I had a small part in were going to start soon too. My business in *Dendro* seemed like it would be comparatively lighthearted this time.

“Well, I can only hope nothing goes wrong.” With that thought, I kept riding my bicycle until the building where I lived came into view.

“Hm?” In addition to the building, I caught sight of a taxi driving off, leaving behind a single familiar person.

Flanked by paper bags that looked way too cumbersome for a woman like her, she seemed to be thinking something along the lines of "What now?" It looked like she'd gone on a shopping spree and ended up with too much to carry up to her apartment.

"Hello," I called out to her.

"Mr. Mukudori. Hello," the strikingly blonde woman greeted me in her somewhat awkward Japanese. She was a minor acquaintance of mine.

"Would you like some help carrying that?" I asked.

"Is okay?"

"Of course. We're neighbors."

She...or rather, Francesca was a neighbor who lived right next to me. Helping her bring her stuff up was no big deal.

"Thank you."

"Hey, it helps to help others," I said as I picked up two-thirds of everything she had.

It was just two bags, but they were way heavier than they looked. Looking in, I saw lots of small glass containers, making clinking sounds as they shifted around.

"That's a lot of little bottles. What are they?"

"Paints. Clay. College assignment. Deadline next week."

"Oh, so you go to a fine arts college."

"Yes. Bought more—just in case. Too much."

Francesca still wasn't proficient at Japanese, so her responses were very simplistic. She seemed to understand me just fine, though, so maybe it was just speaking that was giving her trouble.

"Which college do you go to?"

"Togeidai. Freshman."

Tokyo University of Fine Arts, huh? Just like my school, it wasn't far from here. I probably could have guessed that just from the fact that she lived in the same apartment complex as me.

"Hm...?" *Wait... Freshman? I thought she was older than me... Are we actually the same age?*

"...Twenty-one," she said as she pointed at herself, apparently understanding my confusion.

"Oh, I see."

It was hard for me to gauge a foreigner's age, but she was indeed older than me. I guessed that she'd just decided to go to college at a later age.

Her Japanese might've been the way it was simply because she hadn't been here long. We'd been neighbors for over a month now, but this was the first time we'd actually gotten to talk like this.

"You?"

"Me?" As we talked, we arrived at the elevator.

"I'm eighteen. A freshman at UTokyo."

"...C'est surprenant."

...Was that French for "I'm surprised" or "I didn't expect that?" Did I really not seem like a UTokyo student? Even in *Dendro*, I'd had people like Juliet and Bishmal tell me the same thing.

Though, Chelsea was more like "Where *is* that, anyway?" which was probably a very normal reaction for a foreigner unfamiliar with Japan.

As that thought passed through my mind, Francesca said, "I guessed fourteen."

"Wait, *that's* what you're surprised by?!" Now I was the one left in shock. Did she really think I was four years younger than I actually was?! I did hear that to foreigners, Japanese people often looked younger than they were, but did she seriously just skip straight past high school and assume I was in *middle school*?! "I'm a proper college student. Think about it—a middle schooler couldn't live alone in a place like this."

"I see. Hm..." she said, nodding in understanding.

However, I felt like her lips were moving slightly, murmuring something in French. I couldn't catch exactly what it was, but I felt that she said something like "I lived alone, though."

"We're here," I said as the elevator stopped on our floor. The both of us then exited the elevator.

The floor's number, by the way, was thirteen. I wasn't on this floor by accident, but by choice. The ominous number meant this floor had relatively few residents, and since Shu owned this whole place and I would get to live here for free, I specifically went for a cheap apartment that probably wouldn't have been picked by anybody else anyway.

Francesca looked like a westerner, but she lived on this floor too. That was probably because she simply didn't care about superstitions like that...or maybe she had some kind of religious reason for it.

I went and carried her things over to her door. I then asked if I could come in for a moment, and she gave me a nod. When she opened the door, I detected the faint smell of paint and clay. Looking around, I saw an odorless air freshener. It was probably meant to mask the smell, but it wasn't doing a good enough job to remove it completely.

...This wasn't really my business, but I figured Francesca probably wouldn't be getting her deposit back.

"Where should I put it?" I asked.

"Here is fine," she said.

"All right," I said as I set down the bags, mindful not to break anything.

"Thank you. I'd make tea, but..." she said as she looked ahead of the entryway, where the door to the living-dining-kitchen area would be if this was my apartment.

...I knew what she was trying to say. If the smell was still detectable despite the door and the air freshener, this was obviously no place for someone unaccustomed to it to relax and drink tea.

"It's fine. Feel free to tell me if you need help—we're neighbors, yes?"

"Yes. I will get back at you for this."

Her lack of Japanese proficiency came out yet again, this time in the form of a line you were more likely to see in battle manga than hear in everyday conversation.

◇◆◇

Francesca Gautier

After exchanging goodbyes with the kindly neighbor who helped me carry my stuff, I closed the door.

This was the first time we'd talked since he'd moved in and brought me some Japanese noodles for some reason or another, but as far as neighbors went, at least he didn't seem stressful to talk to.

"...So he was actually a college student after all," I said to no one in particular. "It's so hard to guess Japanese people's ages."

Since I wasn't talking to someone who needed to understand me, I spoke using my native language. A little bit of French had slipped out while I was talking to him too, but he probably hadn't heard it.

Regardless, I appreciated his help. Japan was a relatively peaceful country, so it wasn't likely that someone would steal my things if I left them there, but thanks to him I managed to get everything up here in one trip.

"Phew... Though I guess I really *did* buy too much. I guess I just really wanted to get my assignments out of the way before the break."

I'd put everything directly from my cart into the taxi, so I hadn't even realized how much I'd bought until I was dropped off. Pretty stupid of me.

"The break that starts the week after the next... 'Golden Week,' was it? How strange to have a break at this time of the year... Though if I do my assignments before that, I'll be able to focus on the other side. I suppose that's rather convenient for me."

As I muttered to myself, I carried my things out of the entryway, through the living-dining-kitchen area, and into my workspace beyond.

When I opened the door, my nose was assaulted by the now-familiar smell of clay and paint. Here and there, you could see vase-sized statuettes and figurines, all of which I'd made myself. Many of them hadn't dried yet, so the smell was still extremely strong.

My apartment had two rooms and a living-dining-kitchen area; with the exception of the room I used as a bedroom, all of it was in this state. One room was the workspace, while the living-dining area was where I put all my finished pieces. I hadn't even done any cooking recently out of fear that the paint may catch fire.

The disorder here reminded me of my clan on the other side, even though the details were different.

"If this was a normal apartment, I'd have been kicked out by now." Thankfully, though the rent here was steep, this place had one big advantage—there was basically no risk of that happening.

Based on the neighbor's reaction, it seemed like the smell wasn't carried out into the rest of the building anyway.

...I should still consider calling a cleaner when it's time to move out, I thought.

"Hm..." Cleaners weren't cheap, but my current livelihood simply wouldn't be affected by that.

I had enough wealth to leave Europe, rent an expensive apartment, enter a Japanese fine arts college, and live comfortably not just until graduation, but for the rest of my life.

"...Maybe a grave visit is in order." That thought had reminded me of the person who'd suddenly died at the end of last year, leaving all this wealth to me and my sister both. It was making me feel a little bit sentimental.

"Speaking of which...I wonder what she's up to right now?" I then thought about my sister, who lived apart from me—in this world as well as on the other side. We'd been reunited when it was time to split the wealth, and that was when I'd invited her to come to the other side in the first place.

Based on what I saw in DIN articles, she seemed to be getting caught up in all kinds of incidents that were no less dramatic than the ones we had in the west. My sister was a purehearted girl who was easily troubled by all sorts of problems in life, so I could only hope she didn't find Caldina too stressful.

Once I was done bringing in my things, I sat down on the sofa in the living area. Instant coffee in hand, I relaxed while watching a French-language news program.

I was used to it by now, but the scent of the coffee mixed with the smell of my supplies always made me feel like I was drinking a cup of pure black paint.

"...I should at least clean up enough to have guests over." Something like what had happened today could happen again, so I'd decided to at least free up the table in the living-dining space and make sure I was mostly drying the pieces with a weaker smell.

Once I was done with my coffee, I went to work.

I looked over the clay statuettes and figurines on the work table and took one in hand. Some time had passed since I'd made these, so they were already dry. I could store them away without a problem, so I wrapped them in a French newspaper and did just that.

Considering I'd only been living here since February, I'd made quite a lot of pieces. With so much of my time being dedicated to college and the other side, I often wondered how I found the time to do all this.

"...Oh?" While cleaning up, I picked up a statuette that had been sitting on the edge of the table. Made of clay, it depicted an orb-like monster with tentacles.

I could clearly remember when I'd made this.

It was about a month ago, and the whole process of sculpting it was like a tribute to the dead. I was probably the last person who should be pointing this out, but you could tell that the artist of this statuette was full of anger and discontent.

I spent a few moments looking at it in silence—or maybe "glaring" would be a more accurate description—before wrapping it up and storing it away just like the others.

"...I won't mess up next time. I'll get back at him, no matter what," I said, staring down at the clay statuette of the thing I'd named "RSK."

Once I was done cleaning up for the time being, I went to my bedroom. Next to the bed, on a storage chest as tall as my waist, there lay the hardware for a certain game.

"Okay. Now..." I said, putting it on and lying down.

I'd repeated this sequence so many times I'd lost count. It was what I had to do to live as myself on the other side...in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"First things first, there's gonna be the right arm. Final tuning time!" And once again, I, Francesca Gautier, became Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin.

Chapter Two: Invitation

Paladin, Ray Starling

I logged in to *Dendro* right after taking care of business in my apartment.

I appeared in-game at the fountain plaza in Altea. Though by now I was quite familiar with the location, the recent terrorist incident had changed things up a little. The destruction caused had since been repaired using job and Embryo skills, but the repaired areas looked different from the ones that had remained untouched, giving the plaza a patchwork appearance.

I heard that all the different areas blend together given enough time, but it seemed like Altea would just be like this for now.

"Ray." As I was taking in the new scenery, Nemesis came out of the crest.

"Nemesis."

"This is the start of another weekend, is it not? What are your plans for it? Taking and leveling your next job?" Yesterday, right after the event, I'd done some hunting and maxed out Scout; that had brought my total level to 250. It took a while, but I was now halfway towards the non-SJ max level.

I still hadn't decided what job I'd take next, but it was probably between Knight, Priest, and Adventurer. The first two had good synergy with Paladin, while Adventurer had many versatile utility skills that I'd be able to use even when I had Paladin set as my main.

Whichever I picked, though, leveling it would have to wait.

"I think I'll prioritize other business for now," I said. "That event in Gideon is coming up the day after tomorrow, remember?"

"Oh, that is true."

"I contacted everybody by email and they said they're already on the way to Gideon. I gotta get going too."

With everything that had been going on, our clan had figured it was a good idea to exchange email addresses. Some used their personal addresses while others had made new ones just for this purpose, but our whole clan now had an easy means of contacting each other in real life.

It was worth noting that unlike in *Dendro*, our communications weren't auto-translated, and with Rook and Figaro being from the Anglosphere, Io's group emphasized the need to prepare a free translation tool.

"Since Silver can get us there in no time, though, I'll take care of business here in Altea first."

"I see," said Nemesis. "I must say, traveling to Gideon has certainly become easy for us. I recall when it was a daylong endeavor riding Marilyn's dragon carriage."

"True." In *Dendro* time, that was more than three whole months ago.

I could clearly remember traveling through the Sauda Mountain Pass—the same area that B3 had blockaded—then suffering when Marie gave us a dinner that couldn't even be called "food," then fighting Gardranda... It was a hell of a time.

...I feel like I'm looking back at the past a bit too much today, I thought.

"Is my life flashing before my eyes?" I wondered.

"...What an ominous thing to say. Where did that come from?" Nemesis asked.

"Well, it's now guaranteed that I'm meeting my sister soon. Maybe my body's sensing danger and is preparing for death by showing me the past?"

"What *do* you think of your sister?"

"A raging storm."

"...Can a person truly be compared to something like that?"

Let's put the matter of my sister aside for now, I thought. The encounter was still a week away, after all.

"Let's stop by The Overlord's Antiques, then go to the castle," I said.

"Mhm. Now that you mention it, you did make an order there."

"Yep."

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It had happened back when I returned to Altea following my second death penalty.

After checking up on the city and the castle, I went straight to The Overlord's Antiques with a fairly obvious purpose—to find a replacement for my Volcanic Darkmetal Armor.

B3's gift had served me well in Quartierlatin and the battles after that, but alas, Behemot had left it broken beyond repair.

I obviously had to get something new, so I made my way to the now-familiar store.

However, as much as I looked around, I couldn't find any armor that was just right for me—they were either outside my level range or simply weaker than VDA.

I was left with no choice but to buy something less powerful, but that was when the hooded shopkeep said, "It would take a while, but if you wish, we could procure a certain armor for you from one of the other branches. It would be better than your VDA and, of course, suitable for your level range."

Apparently, the shopkeeper recognized me from the time I'd come here to buy an inventory. He'd also remembered my equipment from back then and said that he could prepare something even better.

This offer couldn't have been more perfect for me, so I took it immediately.

◇

"So yeah, it should've arrived by now."

My order hasn't come in time for yesterday's event—but that might've been a good thing, since I could've lost it when Jubei split me in half.

"New armor, again," said Nemesis. "I wonder what this one will be like..."

"The shopkeeper said it's good, so I wouldn't worry about it."

"It is not the *quality* I am concerned about."

"What is it, then?"

"...At this point, I would hope you could infer that from my words alone."

I still had no idea what she meant, but before I could figure it out, we'd arrived at The Overlord's Antiques. Pushing open the door, I saw the hooded shopkeep right behind the counter.

"Hello there. Has the armor I ordered arrived yet?" I asked.

"Yes, it did," the shopkeep said, reaching into an inventory and taking out the armor.

"...Huh?"

I couldn't help voicing my surprise at its appearance

"Hm? This armor is...*the same*?" Nemesis said exactly what I was thinking. Yeah, the armor on the counter was clearly VDA. The design was identical, and the weight I felt in my hands when I picked it up was the same too.

It did seem to be a bit different on the inside, though.

This version looked like it'd be easier to move around in, and somehow I got the impression it might even be tougher than the one I'd had before.

"This is indeed a Legendarian Volcanic Darkmetal Armor," said the shopkeep. "However, though it may look the same, it is actually quite different. The higher ability of the artisan has made it more powerful, and more importantly, its focus is different."

"Focus?"

"It *is* a crafted item, after all. Like any crafted item, some aspects of it can be changed around somewhat. Consider the VDA you wore previously—it was crafted to have a lower level requirement than usual."

Oh yeah—I recalled B3 saying something like that. VDA originally had a level requirement of 200, but the one she'd given me was designed to be worn by anyone 100 or above.

"This VDA's level requirement was untouched. In exchange, it possesses two additional skills: HP Boost and Destruction Resistance," the shopkeep explained.

"That so?"

"The HP Boost, by the way, is level 5, which means that it increases the wearer's HP by 50%."

"That's a hell of a boost!" A skill like that could bring even *my* HP over 10,000!

"I have never seen a non-MVP reward with such a bonus... But, dear shopkeep, would I be correct in assuming that a crafted item of this quality is quite rare?" Nemesis asked.

"Why, of course," the shopkeep said with a nod. "Applying skills while crafting is a risky endeavor, and it only becomes riskier the higher level of a skill you are attempting to add. A level 5 HP Boost and Destruction Resistance together would reduce the odds of success for any common craftsman to a paltry 2% or less. Failure would result in worse equipment, and although it depends on the means of production, you might even end up adding *negative* effects.”

...Now *that* was just scary. Crafting seemed like a real high risk, high reward kinda deal.

“With Recipes, enough DEX, and the right skills, crafting items in their standard form is relatively easy, but high-quality custom pieces such as this are exceedingly rare. This one was actually left behind by The Craft from some generations ago.”

Wow, a crafting Superior Job. That explained why this VDA was so different despite looking the same as the one I had.

“Your previous VDA was excellent as well... In fact, the mere ability to craft VDA is proof of great skill, and a VDA with the level requirement cut in half is a truly incredible piece. However, it goes without saying that it still does not measure up to one made by The Craft.”

“...A treasure such as this seems expensive,” said Nemesis. “A success rate of 2% would make its price at least fifty times higher than average, no?”

Oh yeah. The price. I hadn’t asked about it back when I made the order, so it was about time I finally heard it.

“Taking its historical value into consideration as well, the price would be 200,000,000 lir.”

“God DAMN...!” Though, all things considered, that did actually seem like a reasonable price. A 50% boost to HP seemed like something that’d be on a lot of people’s wish lists, even those who were higher level than me. I could totally imagine this armor being used by tanky SJs specced into high HP.

Hell, the fact that something this good could be bought with money at all was kind of amazing on its own.

Nevertheless, the price was still prohibitive for anyone but a few SJs...and certain outliers.

“That is a price *you* can pay, however,” said the shopkeep, and that sure was the truth, huh? I was one of those outliers, after all.

The amount of money I currently had was *400,000,000 lir*—nearly double what I’d need to buy the piece.

I’d kept getting more and more money without many chances to spend it, and then multiplied my wealth several times over by gambling it on The

Clash of the Superiors as well as the Kashimiya vs Tom duel. Even buying tons of Brooches hadn't put a dent in my funds.

"Wait, how does this shopkeep know the extent of your wealth?" Nemesis asked telepathically. *Dunno, but this one seems like a pro merchant. Maybe it comes naturally?* I thought in response before pondering the situation a little further.

I'd considered using my money to fund a base for our clan, but this armor would help me a whole lot. I felt like I wouldn't get another chance to buy it if I passed on it now, so...I really didn't know what to do.

"I would prefer to make a trade instead," said the shopkeep, stopping my train of thought.

"Huh?" *A trade...worth 200,000,000 lir?*

"You were among those involved in the Quartierlatin incident, were you not?" the shopkeep asked.

"Yes," I said, slightly surprised that this person even knew that.

"I hear that the pre-ancient civilization weapon created a metallic powder. You took copious amounts of it for yourself, did you not?"

"Metallic powder...? Ohh, that." Yeah, when the flying whale-like superweapon fell from the sky, there'd been a lot of this strange powder in its remains. The kingdom retrieved most of it, but since I beat the whale, I also received three inventories' worth of the stuff. However, I hadn't gotten much use out of it. I'd supplied some of it for my Storm Visage order, but other than that I'd just been sitting on it.

"Would you trade it for this armor? In fact...*please* let me have it."

"Well, I don't mi—"

"I will pay 20,000 lir per hundred grams."

"God DAMN!" *What the hell kind of price is that?! It's making me feel like I'm dealing with the wrong kind of powder—the white kind! I didn't know it was illegal, officer, I swear!* I thought. *Wait a sec...*

I currently had three inventories full of the stuff.

I'd never emptied them, so I didn't know the total amount, but during the tutorial Cheshire had told me that even the starter inventory could hold a full ton of items.

That meant that I had at least three tons, which was...600,000,000 lir?

"...That amounts to double your wealth even after you pay for the armor," said Nemesis. *Yeah. Dealing with shady powders sure is something,* *huh? I can totally see things going very wrong somehow. Am I gonna end up at the bottom of Tokyo Bay? Help!*

“Calm down. Your thoughts are a mess,” Nemesis interjected.

Ah! Crap. I lost my cool for a bit there over that obscene amount of money...

“Umm, why is this powder so expensive?” I asked the shopkeep.

“Those metal particles are used in the production of Second-Model Prism Steeds—SMPS. It is known to be excellent for the creation of all kinds of high-quality equipment. However, almost all of the powder is in the possession of the government, and because most of what they have is dedicated to the production of SMPS, there is almost none of it in circulation.”

I did know that Altar was bolstering its forces by making SMPS production into a high-priority task. And since the powder obviously wasn’t unlimited in supply, I could understand them not releasing it to the market.

“The SMPS that do make it to the market can be dismantled, of course, but in the process of building them, the metal powder used is alloyed and becomes impure,” the shopkeep added.

“I see,” said Nemesis. “So Ray is the only person who has a large amount of this powder in its pure state?”

“Indeed he is.”

Well, that explained the obscene price, and why I was being offered this deal.

Now it was time to decide whether to accept it or not.

I could just buy the armor using money, but since we’d be looking for a clan base soon, it’d be better to hold on to some of it. If Death Period had crafting jobs, I would’ve considered giving the powder to them, but sadly we had none. Selling it here seemed like a good idea.

There was a chance that we’d get a crafter eventually, so I would’ve liked to keep some of it just in case.

“Will you trade us the powder?” the shopkeep asked.

“...One inventory’s worth of it,” I said as I took out one of the three powder-filled inventories I had.

The deal was complete, and I got my new armor—a better version of VDA.

Also, when the shopkeep checked the inventory’s capacity and the weight of the powder inside, we discovered that it had *triple* the space of the starter inventory and held three tons of powder all by itself. Because of this, the inventory I gave not only covered the price of the armor, but also got me an extra 400,000,000 lir—essentially doubling my wealth.

...And I still had six tons of powder left.

◇

Having gotten my VDA 2.0, I made my way to the castle.

Giving greetings to the guards—who seemed more numerous than before—I passed the gate. It had been melted during the terrorist attack but had been recently rebuilt.

"I'm kinda getting used to visiting the castle," I said.

"Same here," Nemesis agreed. "And the guards seem to have gotten used to your appearance. I hope this does not stop them from apprehending anyone suspicious."

As we walked and talked, I heard construction and other sounds coming from various places within the castle. They were obviously repairing the destruction caused in the terrorist incident, but apparently that also included the maintenance of the castle's security facilities, which had been deactivated for a good while now. With most of the court wizards dead after the war against Gloria, little could be done with the security system, but Integra's return had made restoring it possible again. Because of that—and a few other reasons—she and basically everyone else in the castle were extremely busy.

"Needless to say, that includes Azurite," I said. "I doubt Liliana or even Sir Lindos can catch a break either. He's barely had time to recover."

"They do have a shortage of personnel here," said Nemesis. "Since this is the castle, they cannot hire as many Masters here as they did for the restoration of the city."

"Yeah. Security and confidentiality reasons..." They couldn't rely on Embryo skills for this, so repairs on the castle would probably take longer than repairs across the rest of the city. At least they were already done with the gate—the "face" of the castle, so to speak.

It was still badly damaged on the inside, though. Looking at the castle from above, you could see a large hole that had been blasted through the middle of it all the way into the depths below. Liliana and Integra had told me that that hole was the result of King of Blaze using his final skill.

On top of that, the magic distribution network had been severed with noteworthy precision, while another area was so contaminated with poison that no one was allowed to enter it.

...Just how long will fixing all this take? I wondered.

"I would not know," said Nemesis. "And it is not just material damage we have to consider. There were many casualties as well."

"...Yeah." Bug General's army had attacked the city, while the Kings of Blaze and Venom had targeted the castle; the combined total of people who'd died because of them was even greater than the overall fatality count during Franklin's Game. I didn't know if it was any consolation to the deceased that all three of them had been dealt with.

However, there was one problem with that line of thought—there were actually two other attackers.

The first was a man with the ability to transform into a bat. Liliana had witnessed him at the gate, but there was nothing to suggest that he'd been defeated. In fact, though it was confirmed he'd engaged in subversive action, there was no sign that he'd ever actually fought anyone.

For some reason, though, he'd broken not only the magic distribution network, but also some paintings and furniture in the castle, which Liliana found really strange. I could remember Integra jokingly saying, "Obviously he was just doing battle with the furniture, floors, and walls. What's so strange about it?" which made Liliana a bit angry.

Apparently, Third Princess Theresia hadn't been far away at the time, but all they could get from her was that she'd been hiding and didn't know anything.

The second attacker, however, was far more dangerous than the bat-man.

It was King of Thieves, Zeta herself—a Superior who had once been affiliated with Dryfe.

She'd left the imperium in order to become the central part of the trap set up for the peace talks. During the attack on Altea, she'd fought and defeated Xunyu, and it seemed pretty clear that Zeta had survived the rest of the incident. That was clear from the fact that there were no reports of her entering the gaol, as well as a lack of confirmed sightings by the DIN branch in Dryfe.

That left us with two possibilities: either she'd received the death penalty and hadn't logged in since, or she was still alive and hiding somewhere in Altar.

With two of the attackers being unaccounted for, possibly hiding in this very castle, I could fully understand why there were more guards than usual.

"Hm..." But even though the incident had all these loose ends, we could at least be thankful that the injured had recovered quickly and that Milianne and the rest were unharmed.

Most of the Royal Guard had suffered severe poisoning or received heavy wounds, but Integra's first-aid treatment was enough to keep them alive until Miss Eldritch returned and fully healed them, and they had gone back to work as though nothing had happened.

Elizabeth's fiancé—Canglong—had actually collapsed during the incident, but now he didn't have a single scratch on him.

Based on what Elizabeth told Marie, he was actually the Draconic Emperor—a Special Superior Job from Huang He—and thus possessed immense regenerative abilities.

Speaking of notable people, Marquis Findle had also been badly injured, but again thanks to Miss Eldritch, he was fully healed now.

All the healing brought about a different problem, though.

The reason Fuso had been obeying Azurite in the first place was because the Hannya incident had put her in immense monetary debt to the country, forcing her to enter into a Contract.

At first Azurite had planned to reduce Fuso's debt in exchange for her help with healing the injured—but before she could, Fuso had repaid everything she owed. Apparently, making sure to be as obnoxious as possible, she'd said something like, "Hee hee! I'm finally freeee! Oh, being used and abused by this foul princess was suuuch a paaain. Oh, I'm still open for business if you need me, so don't you worry about thaaat. *We can make a deal.*"

Fuso then topped it off with, "So, what'll you gimme for treating these poor people? I won't take money, just so you know."

With the lives of her loyal retainers on the line, Azurite had no choice but to accept some devilish deal, and the last time I'd seen her, she was in a really bad mood because of it. I could clearly remember the way she'd clasped her head in her hands and said, “I was even tracking the flow of wealth in this country to prevent things like this from happening...”

Did Fuso have some fortune stored away somewhere? I wondered. *Or did she get an exorbitant sum of money in exchange for treating someone?*

Regardless, Azurite no longer had a leash on her. For all I knew, that might’ve been part of the reason why she was rushing to start The Tournaments in Gideon.

“...Hm?” As all of this was running through my mind, I noticed a familiar shape in the hallway.

The person looking outside the window and blowing bubbles through a pipe was...

“Xunyu?”

“Hm? Oh, RaY. Hey thEre.”

Standing shorter than usual to match the window, she used her open hand to wave me hello.

“New rAgs, huh?” she said. “Some goOd stats on thosE.”

I would expect no less from Xunyu. All she needed was a glance to know the skills on my VDA 2.0.

“Yeah. I can’t walk around in stopgap gear. I wouldn’t be ready if something happened. That aside, what are you doing here?”

“I got nOthin’ to do and that’s whAt I’m doin’—nothin’. Well, actuAlly, I’m usin’ skills to hElp with security, but nOthin’s happenin’, so I’m kindA spacin’ out.”

“You got nothing to do? Weren’t you about to go back to Huang He with Elizabeth and Canglong? Aren’t you busy preparing for that?” That was what she’d told me last time we’d talked.

There was a chance that she would have been hired to help Altar in the war against Dryfe, but with Elizabeth’s marriage being set in stone, it was decided instead that she’d serve as the princess’s bodyguard on the way to Huang He. With Elizabeth having been the target of terrorist attacks a couple times now, it was obvious that she needed a Superior bodyguard—or maybe even more than one.

I could recall Xunyu saying that the previous time we’d talked might’ve been the last before she left.

“That was thE plan... Hell, I shoUld’ve been on thE way back to Huang He bY now, but...” she said as she reached into an inventory and took out a newspaper.

At a glance, I saw sentences like “Clashes Between Caldina and Granvaloa Intensify!”, “The Magical Apex VS The Human Bomb—the Fight of the Strongest Exterminators!”, and “Vennsayle the Lake City Devastated!”

“This is...”

“This ain’t thE only place at wAr. The neighbOrs’re seein’ some spicY conflict too. It’s too damn dangeroUs to go back by lAnd or by sea. Cang and I’d bE fine, sure, but ElizAbeth and the officiAls? Not so mUch.”

The Magical Apex and The Human Bomb... Shu himself had told me that their extermination potential was even greater than his.

Going by land would mean going through their battlefield in Caldina, while going by sea would mean going through Granvaloa—which, if the conflict intensified, would also become a danger zone. Transporting VIPs through either was far too risky.

“But Altar is no better, is it?” I asked. “Things have cooled down for now, but there’s no telling when they’ll heat up again.”

“Yeah. And thAt’s why we’re waitin’ for sOmeone from thE motherlAnd to come pick us Up.”

“Who’s that?”

“Guy cAlled ‘Gray.’ One of Us Huang He Si Ling—Gray α CentaUri the ‘Spirit Turtle.’ His Superior EmbryO’s called LaputA and it’s a goddAmn flying fortrEss. It’s the perfEct ride for sitUations like this.”

A flying fortress Superior Embryo, “Laputa...”

...Well, if that didn’t sound like something that could be brought down by a single word: *Balse*.

“He stands oUt and puts othEr countries on edge, so it’s normAlly hard for him to move aroUnd like this, but it lOoks like Caldina gavE the go-ahead. They strUck a deal for thAt.”

“A deal?”

“It’s relatEd to the Orbs. Like the ones Cang broUght that the princess is gOnna use for the tournAments.”

“Oh those?” I knew about the UBM Orbs. Called “Treasurebeast Orbs” in Huang He, they were items produced as a result of a Draconic Emperor from history sealing away UBMs.

Some of the sealed UBMs’ power could be used with just the Orbs, but you also had the option of breaking the seal and defeating the UBMs inside to take the MVP rewards. I was told that Figaro had fought a UBM that had once been sealed in such an Orb. He'd won, and his reward for that was the blue coat he always wore.

As part of the engagement between Elizabeth and Canglong, Huang He had gifted Altar a whole ten Orbs like this.

Azurite had spent a long time thinking about how to use them or whom to entice with them, but she'd made her final decision right after the peace talks—she would use them for The Tournaments in Gideon.

I would review the details once I got there, but in a nutshell, it would be an event where Masters would fight for the right to challenge one of the ten UBMs. The catch was that they would all have to sign a Contract preventing them from committing hostile actions against Altar for a set amount of time.

She'd come upon this idea upon remembering the turncoat Masters that had popped up during Franklin's Game, as well as realizing how much control she'd had over Miss Eldritch while she was contractually obliged to serve her until she'd repaid her debt.

Besides the right to challenge the UBMs, there were extra rewards in the form of "rare equipment from Altarian history," and I played a part in that...as a cleaner.

"How are the Orbs releva... Oh, wait, it's Caldina."

"YeAh. Damn things'rE givin' the sAndy land a hard timE."

I'd heard rumors of the incidents in Caldina centered around the Orbs. Some people had mentioned a giant maggot creature appearing in some big city, which had been attacked by a metal statue and some kind of dragon.

And according to the newspaper in my hand, even the conflict with Granvaloa had been caused by the Orbs.

"BasicallY, in exchange for Huang He abAndonin' the rights to thE Orbs that leaked into CaldinA, they want 'em to temporarily allOw Huang He's forces to enter the coUntry and provide escOrts as needed."

"...I see," said Nemesis. "So what they are saying is, 'Keep the Orbs if you must. Use them as you will. In exchange, we demand you do not interfere with the retrieval of our prince and his bride. In fact, assist us.'"

"Yeah. MorE or less."

...It was Huang He's fault for failing to prevent the theft in the first place, but they abandoned both that responsibility and the right to the Orbs and used the situation to their advantage, huh?

“Well, thEre’d be some filthy quarrEllin’ even if they demAnded the Orbs back, and if they weren’t cOmin’ back anyway, it was better tO just act like ya gave them awAy and attach some conditiOns to it. Our head honchO is that kinda fella. The first princE, I mean.”

“Canglong’s older brother, right?”

“YeAh. The current empEror ain’t doin’ too hot, sO he’s workin’ hard in his stEad. He’s even thE one who made Huang He mOre welcomin’ to MastErs.”

“Is he also the one who got the idea for the marriage between Elizabeth and Canglong?”

“Nope. That wAs the emperor himsElf, apparently. I dunno much ’bout it mYself. Though, it was thE first prince who put me as Cang’s bodYguard.”

It seemed like a complex situation, and it bothered me somehow.

...I had my hands full with the situation here in Altar, though. I couldn’t think too much about whatever was happening with the imperial family on the other side of the continent.

“Will Huang He be all right without you and this ‘Gray’ person?” I asked.

“Well, I heArd they recently got rid of a lOcal mafia, and with Caldina bEin’ in the state it is, and Tenchi bein’ Tenchi, they dOn’t really need anyonE... And thoUgh the two that’re lEft are unhinged, they sure as hEll aren’t weak. I can voUch for that.”

“Hm?”

“BasicallY, out of us Huang He Si Ling, GrAy and I’re on the simplEr side.” Xunyu seemed like she stood a chance against literally anyone, while this “Gray” person had a flying fortress for an Embryo...and they were on the “simpler side”?

“What of the other two?” Nemesis asked.

“The battlEs they’re specced for are limitEd. Though, if thE conditions are right...one of the twO can be as bad as your bro or KoB.”

...Looks like I certainly didn’t see all the cards Huang He could play, I thought.

“Well, enoUgh ’bout my situatiOn. Why’re *you* herE in the castle? YoU won't find Elizabeth's sister if it's hEr you're after. ThAt LiliAna woman ain't herE either."

Yeah, I'd have figured as much. Considering the date, they must've gone to Gideon for the preparations.

That wasn't the reason I was here, though.

"Oh, it's not either of them this time. I came to see someone else." Before logging out last time, I'd gone to the inn I'd been staying at, where I'd received a letter—an invitation, to be precise.

It had multiple days and times on it, and I could come at whichever time suited me. Thus, I was here today and now.

"Who woUld that be?" The one who'd invited me was...

"Integra."

...Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman.

I would soon talk with the person who shared a name with the person who'd created my Prism Steed, Silver, and countless other wonders of the pre-ancient civilization.

◇

I didn't actually know all that much about Integra. So far, we'd only had a single conversation, and all I learned was her name and the fact that she was the Arch Sage.

However, since they were Integra's childhood friends, Azurite and Liliana had told me a few other things about her.

Integra had lost her family when she was little and had been completely without relatives since then, but she'd gone on to have her talents noticed by the previous Arch Sage, who'd taken her under his wing. Despite her young age, she was rumored to be the most gifted and strongest out of all of his disciples.

By his order, issued some time before Gloria's attack, Integra had left Altar and gone on a journey—during which she became the new Arch Sage. She'd returned to Altea during the recent terrorist attack and cooperated with Canglong to take out King of Blaze.

Besides that, all I knew about Integra was that she'd only begun calling herself "Flagman" after coming back and that she was currently busy with the castle's repairs.

Liliana and Azurite must've had lots of memories of her, but I hadn't heard most of them yet—nor did I know the reason why Integra began using the "Flagman" name. My upcoming talk with her seemed like a good chance to ask about that, among other things.

With that in mind, I knocked on the door leading to the lab that was supposedly used by the previous Arch Sage and his disciples. After I heard a "come in" from the other side, the door opened without me lifting a finger.

Inside, I saw many bookshelves and desks covered in various implements, papers, and folders. The lab was a crucible of knowledge if I ever saw one, and in its heart there was Integra, seated in a chair clearly too large for her tiny frame. She wasn't wearing her pointy hat today, which only made her look smaller. It really emphasized the fact that she was even shorter than Nemesis.

Integra put down the papers she was reading on a desk and said, "Hey there—I bid you welcome, Ray Starling. Your Embryo too. I couldn't ask for better timing—I was just about to take a break."

"Well, hello to you too," I said. "So, why did you call me?"

Before answering my question, she waved her finger slightly without getting up from her chair. As if prompted by the motion, two other chairs in the room slid towards Nemesis and I.

"First things first—take a seat," she said. "This conversation may be a bit on the longer side."

"...I see," I said, and we did as directed. The chairs then started moving again, bringing us to a better position for a conversation with Integra.

It didn't end there. A small round table and a tea set also moved on their own to set up a little tea party for us.

"...Now *this* is a wizard's room if I ever saw one," I said. I felt like I was in a western animated film I'd seen when I was little.

Integra was also wearing a robe, and if that pointy wizard hat she'd had equipped when we met outside was part of her usual wardrobe, I could honestly say that she was the most "wizard-like" person I'd met in this ostensibly fantasy-themed—but ultimately quite eclectic—world of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

It was oddly *novel* to me. As I watched in surprise, Integra smiled as she used her moving teapot to prepare us some black tea.

"It's just solid object manipulation—nothing but basic geomancy. Oh, and I heated up the water by simply increasing its heat energy. Once you know how it works, it's as easy as lighting a match."

Once she'd finished her explanation, two teacups made their way towards us.

"It's still strange watching it in action," I replied.

"If you think *this* is strange, you should visit Legendaria someday," Integra said. "You may find yourself welcomed not by mere magicwork, but furniture that's functionally alive."

Now that *really seems like some* Beauty and the Beast *stuff,* I thought.

"Speaking of Legendaria, that's where these tea leaves are from," she added. "The taste is a bit odd, but personally, I am a fan. I hope you enjoy it too."

"I will gladly try it," said Nemesis as she took a sip.

I also took my cup in hand. A strange fragrance unlike any I had encountered in real life reached my nose, but the taste struck a balance between sharpness and sweetness. Overall, I found it pretty good.

"Thank you," I said. "This tea is really nice."

"I'm glad to hear that. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to begin the conversation I brought you here for. There are two subjects I'd like to discuss, but they're mutually exclusive and I'm not sure which one to start with," she said as she pondered something. "Though...I guess I should go with *this one*."

I took another sip of the tea...

"Are you Altimia's lover?"

"BPFFT!"

...only to spit it out and start coughing.

I think I inhaled some of this tea after hearing that...!

"N-No! Ray and Azurite are not like that!"

"Huh? Is it Liliana, then? She was the one he met first, wasn't she?"

"That does *not* mean they are in a relationship!" While I was still busy coughing, Nemesis was vehemently arguing with Integra's assumption for some reason, her face beet red.

That was when I finally became able to breathe and talk again.

"Phew. I'm good friends with them both, but neither of them are my girlfriend or anything like that...!"

"Hmm... So, you are not interested in their bodies *or* their status? They're both quite the prize—especially Altimia."

"I don't care about that!" *And don't talk about your friends like they're objects you can own! One of them is even Altar's acting ruler!*

"...Hearing you so strongly deny that you find my friends attractive actually makes me feel a bit sorry for them. Well...have you ever really *seen* them? It's been a few years since we bathed together, but they were *really* beautiful, if you ask me."

"I never saw...! Oh..." *Umm... Yeah. I actually have seen Altimia naked once.* It was a mixed bath, though, and it was kind of an accident.

"Oh? And there's the first detection... Huh? So you *have* seen them without their clothes on? Knowing that, I'm very curious—and concerned—about your relationships."

"A-All you need to know is that I don't have any ulterior motives like that and I haven't paired up with either of them!"

"Hrm... Well, I suppose I understand. With that, the main topic of discussion is out of the way."

"Did you *really* call us here just to sexually harass him like that?!" Nemesis exclaimed in shock, and I totally agreed with her. What kind of girl would invite a guy over just to ask if he was attracted to her friends or if he was dating any of them?

"Oh, don't put it like that. I see nothing unusual about being intrigued by any men who become close to my childhood friends, especially since they used to be so detached from such matters. I'm *immensely* curious."

"...These 'matters' seem way above your age level." It felt like every second kid I met here in *Dendro* was terrifyingly mature—Xunyu being the most obvious example.

"Hm?" Integra said as she tilted her head in confusion. "Aren't you Altimia's age? Maybe a year older at most? Then I am your elder by a substantial amount. Respect is due."

"Huh?" Seriously? Integra looked like she was twelve, so I just assumed she was actually around that age. I'd even been surprised that she could be childhood friends with Liliana and Azurite despite being so much younger than they were...

"My apologies..."

"Ha ha ha—I'm just kidding. You can speak as casually as you like. I myself only used formal speech with my late teacher, so I don't mind it at all—not one bit. Though...do understand that you are younger than I am."

"Of cour— I mean, all right." So despite looking younger than Nemesis, she was actually older than me... This was especially surprising since she was a tian, and she wasn't even an elf or some other long-lived race from

Legendaria.

"...So, how old *are* you?" I asked.

"That's not the kind of question you ask a lady." *...Yeah, that might've been rude,* I thought.

"Anyway, let's move on to the other matter," Integra said. "Though this is more of an aside."

So the thing about lovers and bodies and all that stuff really was your main deal...

"I'd like you to show me your Zephyrus Silver."

"Silver?"

"Yes. The second thing I'd like to discuss concerns the last Prism Steed made by the Grand Artificer Flagman...the first of us."

The *last* Prism Steed, huh? Back in Quartierlatin, Mario had told me that Silver was either an early prototype separate from the five "official" Prism Steeds or a recent experimental unit made to test a new function. Apparently it was the latter.

Also, Integra just called Flagman "the first of us," which meant that her carrying the Grand Artificer's name wasn't just some accident—she'd actually inherited it from him.

...How is this an "aside"? It seems way more important than those questions that bordered on sexual harassment. "All right," I said. "Though, I wanna ask something as well. It's about Silver and Flagman."

"I have his name, so I assume you're curious about my relationship to him? I'll explain that too," she said, placing one palm against her chest. "First of all, I'm not the Grand Artificer's descendant. My teacher was a Flagman as well, but none of us are connected by blood. It's merely a name that has been passed from teacher to disciple."

"A name passed on from teacher to disciple... Is it like the professional names used by artists, martial and otherwise?"

"Ah, you're thinking of the custom they follow in Tenchi. It's not exactly the same, but it's also not entirely different either. My teacher was the Arch Sage, and he'd inherited the Flagman name along with the job. And when he died and I became the new Arch Sage, I began calling myself Flagman just like he did. Just having his name doesn't mean any of us have even a fraction of the Grand Artificer's technological knowledge, though."

"Is that how it works?"

“Yes. Our technological prowess more or less died with the third Flagman. Do you know the Prism Crawlers? Those were made by the third.”

Oh, so that’s the guy who made Shion’s spider...

“Anyway, I’ve been curious about your Zephyrus Silver for a while now,” Integra continued. “Since before you even obtained him, in fact.”

“Hm?”

“We’ve known for a while that the first Flagman created him, but nothing about the steed’s functions or abilities was recorded. Even we—Flagman’s successors—don’t have any of that information, even though we have full specs for the other five.”

Now that was just weird. If he’d left behind a record of Silver’s creation, you’d think he’d have also left a spec sheet or something like that. It wasn’t as though he couldn’t do it or the records had been lost, right?

“So, as someone who inherited Flagman’s name, I have always wanted to see Zephyrus Silver for myself. Do you mind if I take a look?”

“Not at all. There’s things I wanna know about him too.”

“Oh, you did mention that, yes.”

“Yeah. I can’t get any details for the third skill. Maybe you can help me with that?”

By becoming a Prism Rider—the job dedicated to the use of Prism Beasts—I’d unlocked the message the first Flagman had left on Silver. However, all it said was that I didn’t have a high enough level of Authority to see the skill’s details.

The skill had been activated only twice so far: once in Quartierlatin and once during my battle against Jubei.

Silver seemed to be using it of his own accord and only in certain situations, but I didn’t really know what “it” was. I was hoping Integra could tell me that.

“Very well. I’ll look into that too,” she said.

“Should we go outside?”

“No, there’s enough space here.” Given the go-ahead, I reached into my inventory and took Silver out.

The damage done by Jubei had already been repaired. He was tilting his head at me, apparently confused that I’d taken him out indoors. Despite this, he was standing still in place, his hooves firm on the floor.

"I'll start, then," said Integra.

"All right. Be a good boy, Silver." As though acknowledging my words, he let out an engine noise that somewhat resembled a neigh.

This reminds me of the time I got Mario to check on him, I thought.

"It might take a while, so you might have to wait a bit. Do help yourself to as much of the tea and snacks as you wish."

"Very well! We will wait as long as necessary!" Nemesis said as she dug into the snacks.

...And this reminds me how she emptied the cookie plate when we were visiting Countess Quartierlatin. Control yourself this time, Nemesis.

As I was thinking that, Integra was carefully examining Silver, peering at him here and there while checking something using a lens or an object that looked like a pin.

"So you're not dismantling him?" I asked.

"All you really need for this is a high-level See-Through Sight and some examination magic. Also, as I said, I don't even have a fraction of the first Flagman's technological prowess. I wouldn't want to dismantle Silver only to be unable to put him back together."

"I see..." I thought of how, back when I was a little boy, I'd let my curiosity get the better of me and used a screwdriver to take apart a toy clock. I couldn't put it back together, but Shu had fixed it like it was nothing.

Also, Integra's words reminded me that despite his animal-like form, Silver was actually a complex machine. The whale and horseshoe crab thing from Quartierlatin were like that too.

It felt like the pre-ancient civilization had a strangely high amount of animal-like machines. *Wait, that reminds me of another question I had,* I thought.

"Hey, can I ask something else?"

"Go ahead."

"What's the difference between regular machines and Prism Steeds like Silver...or Prism Beasts in general?" Based on the info acquired from the wrecks, the whale and the horseshoe crab weren't actually Prism Beasts despite being animal-like, so I'd been wondering where the lines were drawn.

"The differences there, eh...? Well, I could just say that it's just the series they’re part of, but apparently there *was* a rough definition of ‘Prism Beast’ in place during the time of the pre-ancient civilization.”

“What was the definition, then?”

“Generally speaking, Prism Beasts are anything that fulfills two conditions. One—it’s equipped with an artificial intelligence and is capable of autonomous action. And two—it’s designed to have human riders.”

Machines with AI that allowed autonomy, but were designed to have humans ride them... Those conditions seemed contradictory, but Silver obviously fulfilled them both.

“Because of this, modern Magingears, with their lack of AI, aren’t counted among Prism Beasts. Machine golems, which have AI but can’t be ridden by humans, don’t make the cut either.”

“I see...” *The whale and the crab were unmanned, so I guess they’re more like the latter example,* I thought.

“The first Flagman also created these ‘Prism Persons’—stand-alone automata with functioning AI. They’re still ‘Prism,’ but since they weren’t designed to be ridden by humans, they weren’t ‘Beasts.’ The ‘Prism Person’ name might’ve been coined for the express purpose of establishing that distinction.”

“I see...”

“Though, annoyingly enough, the mass-produced ‘Prism Persons’ you and Altimia fought at Quartierlatin—Prism Soldiers—were designed to have human...or at least, animal...riders, which by a strict definition would make them Prism Beasts.”

...This was starting to feel like animal classification. Parvorder: Odontoceti. Family: Monodontidae. Genus: Delphinapterus. Species: Beluga whale... Something like that.

“So, if someone woke up today and decided to make a machine that had AI and was designed to have human riders, it would be recognized as a Prism Beast?” I asked.

“It would, but that’s unlikely to happen either way. AI technology has been lost, after all. Legendaria and Huang He have AI created by sealing spirits from nature or the realms of the dead within certain objects, but Prism Beasts need intelligence born of pure science, not magic.”

The distinction seemed broad at first, but it turned out that it had some pretty strict limits.

“The first and the third Flagman were geniuses when it came to that, but none of us who followed can match them. Well, it’s more...even though the basics of it were passed down to us, we just can’t understand them.”

“Really...?”

“Apparently, in its early years, Dryfe delved into the process of capturing ancient machine golems, taking out their AIs, and installing them in Magingears. I hear that went nowhere because they couldn’t recalibrate the programming.”

Dryfe had only received its first humanoid robots once Franklin’s Triangle of Wisdom had created the Marshal II. Up until then, the only Magingears they had were tanks or powered suits, and I would guess that AI from the presumably humanoid golems wasn’t suited for those. Hell, there was probably nothing in their programming that accounted for people riding them.

“In that case, the SMPS factory in Quartierlatin...”

“Yes. In a way, it’s a groundbreaking discovery. We may be seeing the revival of the age of Prism Beasts. It looks like more and more people are becoming Prism Riders, after all.”

With SMPS spreading throughout Altar, Masters and tians alike were taking the Prism Rider job so they could make the best use of them. SMPS were decently fast, could gallop in midair, and had the ability to create barriers. Being machines, they never had bad days and didn’t require much in the way of upkeep. Generally easier to handle than many regular mounts, it seemed like SMPS would only get more popular over time.

The more powerful riders already had mounts that they’d gotten attached to, though, so not many of those had made the switch.

“Oh, speaking of,” said Integra. “There’s something an owner of an original Prism Steed like yourself should know.”

“Hm?”

“This is some info discovered by going through what the first Flagman left behind...the conditions for the prism rider grouping’s high-rank job.”

“Oh, now *that’s* something I’d love to know.” To my knowledge, no one in the world had it yet. The job wasn’t even in the Catalog or in DIN’s information network. It was likely that the Authority thing mentioned in the message on Silver involved getting the high-rank job, so I was definitely curious about this.

“The prism rider grouping’s high-rank job, Prism Cavalier, has three conditions,” Integra said. “First, your Prism Rider skill, Prism Authority, has to be level 1 or above. Second, your total level has to be 400. And third...”

“Third...?”

“The *entire world’s* combined Prism Authority skill level has to be over 5,000.”

...What? “You mean...?”

“I mean that it’s only unlocked if Prism Beasts and Prism Riders are popular enough. The level requirement is steep too, so this job’s on the rarer side.”

...Well, that explains why nobody has it, I thought.

Even with Prism Rider maxed out, Prism Authority was stuck at level 1.

“So we need at least 5,000 people to have the Prism Rider job, huh...?”

“Well, it’s getting more popular. At the rate it’s going, it should get there eventually.” It’d be hard with just Masters, but with SMPS being delivered to tians both within Altea and to the many orders of knights and such serving the nobility all across Altar, it really didn’t seem impossible that the number would get there soon.

It seemed like a good idea to finish leveling my low-rank jobs to prepare for the occasion. I didn’t have any high-rank job I was planning to take, and since I had Silver, Prism Cavalier seemed like a good choice for me. Silver couldn’t unlock his full potential right now, and not putting such a treasure to good use felt like a waste.

Though, what I’d just heard made me curious about something else.

“The Prism Beasts were made by the first Flagman, right?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Yet the Prism Rider job existed before that?” The prism rider grouping was based entirely on the premise that Prism Steeds would be in common use. Without that, the job would serve basically no purpose.

Did that mean that jobs from the prism rider grouping only appear once the first Prism Beasts existed or...?

“It’s said that the job was actually there before he made the steeds,” Integra answered.

“Now *that’s* strange. I mean, a job for something that doesn’t exist...?” Cause and effect seemed to be a little switched up there.

“Yes. Though, it’s not just the prism rider grouping. You can say the same thing about all jobs.”

“Hm?”

“This is something my teacher...or rather, my teacher’s teacher...looked into.” Having said that, she made the wheeled blackboard in the room roll over closer to us. Then, the chalk moved by itself to draw something on the board. Integra herself was still focused on Silver throughout all of this. It honestly made her seem less like a wizard and more like a psychic with telekinesis.

“Tenchi has this strange high-rank job called ‘Sumo Wrestler.’ It’s related to a contest called ‘sumo.’”

Oh, so even that existed as a job here. I guess it was just a contest rather than a whole ritual, huh?

That aside, I couldn’t help but wonder if the chibi sumo wrestler she drew on the board actually enhanced her explanation.

“What’s relevant here is that the culture surrounding the contest has only spread within the last millennium. And that’s despite the fact that Sumo Wrestler had already been discovered during the time of the pre-ancient civilization.”

“...Hm?” A job based on sumo had existed since before sumo was even a thing here? Just like with Prism Rider, cause and effect seemed really off. The chicken had come before the egg.

“From what I’ve heard, the world you Masters go to also has a Sumo Wrestler job,” Integra said.

“Uhh, yeah. Though jobs over there aren’t the same as jobs here. Taking it doesn’t mean you’ll get levels or skills or anything.”

“I did hear that as well. Over there, though, the contest came before the job, didn’t it?”

“Yeah...” On that front, reality and this world were the complete opposite.

“And Sumo Wrestler is far from the only example,” Integra continued. “Even the ‘Mechanic’ job existed before people began using technology.”

So the prism rider grouping wasn’t the only one with this chicken-and-egg problem, huh?

“The job names here often match the ones you have over there,” she said. “That includes magic jobs like my Arch Sage, doesn’t it?”

"Well, ignoring the question of whether or not they actually exist in our world or not...we do have a concept for them, yeah."

"Perhaps that is just a coincidence. Or perhaps those who created this world built the framework of 'jobs' based on jobs that existed in other worlds."

...Now *that* was something to think about. From a game design perspective, you could probably assume that the devs had referenced real occupations and programmed those into the game. Knowing *Infinite Dendrogram*, though, it might not have been quite that straightforward.

"So, Prism Rider and Prism Beasts..."

Those things seemed out of place because they didn't exist in real life. Unlike the other jobs we'd discussed, where at least the concept existed in the real world, Prism Rider could only be found *here*.

Then again, maybe...

"Yes. It may be that there is *a world besides the one you Masters go to*, where Prism Rider is a job and Prism Beasts are a common sight."

A place besides reality and *Infinite Dendrogram*... Maybe it was another game? Or maybe...

"But that would mean that the first Flagman *just happened* to create something that was recognized as a Prism Beast."

A magic machine equipped with AI and designed to be used by humans—it didn't seem impossible to come up with that independently. And the fact that he'd done that was the reason the Prism Rider job had ever seen the light of day.

That made me think of something. "Wait, actually—the existence of the job names 'Prism Rider' and 'Prism Cavalier' were probably the reason why the things he created were called 'Prism Beasts' in the first place," I said.

"That's the obvious assumption."

"It is, isn't it? Otherwise, the only alternative would be that the first Flagman made the Prism Beasts and uncovered the Prism Rider job because *he knew of some place where they already existed*."

Man, that was a stupid thing to say, I thought. It was unthinkable that people of this world would know about concepts that didn't exist here, so yeah... It had to have been a coincidence.

For some reason, though, Integra was just staring at me. It didn't seem that she was flabbergasted by the stupid thing I'd said. It was more like...

"Integra?"

"...Oh, I'm just impressed by the imagination you Masters have. Back when my teacher first taught me all this, that idea never occurred to me."

"I see. Well, it's not like it's actually possible."

"Ha ha ha! Maybe. Anyway, I just finished checking Silver," she said as she took her hands off of him.

"That was fast! And we were talking the whole time too..."

"I'm not the current Flagman for nothing," she said. "Talking and working at the same time comes naturally. Anyway, there are a few things I can say about him now."

Integra sat down and took a sip of tea to get some moisture into her throat.

"First of all, his design is about the same as that of the other Prism Steeds...with the exception of the unknown mechanism in his torso, which is wired to every other part of his body. I'm guessing that's supposed to make Zephyrus Silver original."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. My question made Integra heave a long sigh, but it didn't seem like she was sighing at me—more like she was sighing about the concept of "originality" that she'd just brought up.

"Sorry about that... Well, basically—though the first Flagman was a genius, he had one problem."

"That being?"

"The fact that he never made the same thing twice."

"Huh? But what about SMPS and the Prism Soldiers in Quartierlatin...?"

"Sorry, I wasn't entirely clear—I was talking about the things he created *personally*. It doesn't apply to factory production."

"Oh, I see. But isn't that normal for artists and the like?"

"...He wasn't an artist, but a scientist. It should have been routine for someone like him to make copies of his best creations. If he could make it once, he could mass-produce it... However, he just didn't do it." She heaved another sigh. "Anything he poured his heart and soul into making would always be different from anything he'd ever made before. That was why he never made multiples of his masterpieces and never cared if he produced garbage."

"Masterpieces and garbage...?"

“One of his masterpieces was one of the Prism Persons. Named ‘Agate Designer,’ it was basically an automaton with extremely high DEX. It had creative potential that would make even crafting-focused Superior Jobs flee with their tails between their legs. When it came to processing technology, it surpassed even the first Flagman himself. It actually served as his assistant for many of his creative endeavors that followed.”

“Now that’s something...”

“Oh, it is. Despite that, he never even tried to create multiples of it. It was clear as day that a few more of them would accelerate his work, yet he was satisfied with having just that one. He never even tried to create anything that shared its core concept. The time he spent on END- or AGI-focused creations would’ve been a lot more fruitful if he had just made more Agates. I mean, if we had at least one, then the second and every other Flagman up to me would’ve had a far easier time with our—”

“Whoa, let’s calm down.” This seemed like a touchy subject for her. It felt like she was on the verge of reaching her boiling point. Even Silver looked a bit scared of her. Nemesis, though, just kept eating the tea snacks.

...It just hit me that Nemesis isn’t involving herself in the conversation at all.

“...Sorry about that. As Flagman, I’ve inherited many things, but Agate is easily at the top of the list of things I would’ve *liked* to have inherited but didn’t.”

Well, a Prism Person like that would have certainly been useful for Altar as a whole.

“Anyway, back to the matter at hand... Since he focused so much on creating things without overlapping concepts, he made even things that were obviously garbage.”

“Like?”

“Obsidian Earth-Edge the Prism Steed.”

...That’s the one owned by Figaro, I thought.

“The core concept of Prism Steeds was to expand the battlefield of combat-focused Superior Jobs, but Obsidian couldn’t fly or swim, so it couldn’t even do that. And since it was limited to fighting on land, AGI-focused Superior Jobs were better off just running instead of riding it. What use could they get out of it?”

...Yeah, Figaro also said that he ran faster than Obsidian, so he only

used it for mounted competitions.

"It had more power and heavier armor than the other units, but that didn't even matter in battles between Superior Jobs where both sides just launched ultimate job skills at each other. It's a hunk of garbage that came about as a result of ignoring the core concept of the Prism Steed series. In all honesty, it's hopelessly useless."

Man, that's so harsh...

"Though, I guess it could work as the mount of an END-focused Superior Job, but that comes with a high risk of it being destroyed, just like Gold was."

"That's a scary thought," I said. "So, what's original about Silver?" The answer to this could be related to his third skill.

"It's..."

"It's...?" I gulped and waited for her answer...

"...Something I couldn't figure out."

...only to fall right out of my chair when it finally came, like something straight out of an old manga.

"I-I see... So you couldn't figure it out."

"Well, to be more precise, I couldn't figure out *everything*. There are things I *did* find out, though, such as the fact that his mechanisms aren't based on aeromancy...wind magic, I mean."

Those words surprised me in an entirely different way.

"They aren't? But I use his Wind Hoof all the time, and even his name references the wind."

"It's looking like the reference may have just been something the first Flagman thought of at the moment of Silver's creation. Silver's true nature as a Prism Steed lies somewhere else."

"His nature..." This made me reflect upon the battle in Quartierlatin's skies. The very moment we were about to crash into the whale and die, we suddenly appeared right under it instead, still riding Silver.

That may have been a glimpse into his third skill and true nature.

"Also, it wouldn't make sense if it was wind-based," Integra added.

"Why?"

"In the recent peace talks, Her Majesty used Silver to fight Jade Storm—the aeromancy Prism Steed—and apparently, he was far slower in general and only slightly surpassed Jade in the turning department."

“Oh yeah. Azurite told me that too.”

“If they’re actually of the same type, then Zephyrus Silver, which was made later, shouldn’t have been weaker than Jade. More importantly, with how much the first hated making the same thing over again, I really can’t imagine him using the same element for two Prism Steeds.”

Oh yeah, that makes sense.

“Also, Wind Hoof ‘compresses the air to create platforms and barriers,’ right? From a physics perspective, the process of compression should also condense the heat, creating a plasma. Since that doesn’t happen, that means it’s probably not just simple gas manipulation.”

“I see...” She had a point. This made me realize that Silver was full of mysteries even beyond his unknown third skill.

“So there you have it. Currently, the application of its original concept just happens to *look* like aeromancy. And a good candidate for its original concept is part...”

Integra stopped talking in the middle of her sentence.

“Integra?”

“...No. I won’t give you my uncertain, off-the-cuff guesses. As the current Flagman, I don’t want you—the owner of the first Flagman’s last Prism Steed—to have a false impression of him.”

“I see.” I considered pressing her to continue, but ultimately didn’t. She seemed to have pride in the name she’d inherited, so it didn’t seem like a good idea to argue against that if she brought it up.

“Anyway, that’s it for the matters I called you here for,” she said. “Sorry for taking your time.”

“Hey, this was fruitful for me too,” I replied. “I can now work towards becoming a Prism Cavalier.”

“Oh, please do. Zephyrus Silver and SMPS were left behind by the first, and I’m sure that’s exactly what he would have wanted.”

I went on to put Silver back in my inventory when...

“Hm? Is the chat over?”

...Nemesis finally stopped eating and looked at me.

“Nemesis...”

“Th-The snacks are simply delicious. I would put them on the same level as Brother Bear’s popcorn, if not higher.”

“For real?!” *There’s something even better than THE popcorn?!* “Let me have a tast— Hey, Nemesis...”

“...Y-Yes. There is none left.”

Apparently she hadn’t stopped eating because our conversation was over, but because there was simply nothing left to eat. She’d been notably less gluttonous recently, but then she went and did something like this. It felt like she’d go on an eating spree every time I was busy talking to someone.

“...I made a setup that automatically replaced the empty plate, yet you *still* ate everything?” Integra’s face was in a mix of surprise and exasperation.

“...Sorry about this,” I said.

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s a small price to pay for having you come all the way here. Though, I intended to give you some for the way back, but now it’s all gone.”

Nemesis...

“Mhm. It was most delicious,” she said. “Who made them?”

“The snacks were made by an acquaintance in Caldina, so it’ll be a while until I get more.”

“Hrm, that is a shame.”

“Ha ha ha. I’ll make sure you get some when they arrive again,” Integra said before turning to me. “Enough for you to have some too.”

“I’ll be looking forward to that,” I said.

With that, our conversation was over.

I was kinda curious about the piercing gaze she’d given me when we first met, but looking back on it now, it was probably just the gaze of someone wary of a guy who’d gotten close to her childhood friends. The “main topic” of whether I was in some kind of spicy relationship with either of them must’ve also been related to that. She’d just been looking out for her friends in her own way, and in my opinion that was a pretty good thing to do.

“Oh, one more thing, Ray Starling.”

“Hm?” As I was about to leave, Integra called out to me again.

“I have one last question.”

“Ask away.”

“Why do you give so much for Altar?”

I felt like this wasn’t the first time I’d been asked that.

My answer was the same as back then, though.

"Azurite, Liliana... I just like the people I met here and the kingdom in general. It'd leave a bad taste in my mouth if it were destroyed."

"I see... Mhm. So that's how it is. I see... I see. *That's* the kind of person you are..."

"Hm?"

"Oh, don't mind me. That was definitely my last question. Thanks for coming today."

"Don't mention it. And thank *you* for taking a look at Silver."

"Thank you for the delicious snacks," Nemesis added.

With those words, we left Integra's room.

All right, time to head back to Gideon, I thought. *If I leave now, I should be there before sundown.*

◇◆◇

Arch Sage, Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman

Once Ray and his Embryo left, the door closed and I went to check if the counterintelligence devices had reactivated before examining the action on the magic I'd set up in this room.

That magic, by the way, was basically a lie detection spell. Its power surpassed Truth Discernment, because it considered things like body temperature, heart rate, and even brain waves. It could even detect when someone was lying by omission or if they were speaking with an ulterior motive.

It was seamlessly mixed with the magic imbued into the furniture, so it was impossible to even notice it.

This was functionally an interrogation room, and my main goal for today was to examine Ray Starling.

He'd appeared seemingly out of nowhere and formed connections with Altar's central figures like Altimia, Liliana, and Count Gideon in no time at all. Masters were many in number, but those that had an impact on the kingdom as great as he were few and far between.

He wasn't even a pre-Infinite—a Superior—yet he'd defeated Superiors such as Mr. Franklin and Logan Goddhart.

To add to that, he also owned Zephyrus Silver—the only one of the first

Flagman’s creations that his successors knew nothing about.

Everything we’d learned about him had been extremely unusual, so I’d established this meeting to find out what kind of person he really was and what drove him. We’d even considered the possibility that he had direct ties to the Incarnations and was working as their pawn.

However, he had shattered all those expectations.

“...And the only thing that triggered the magic was ‘I didn’t see them naked.’ Now, isn’t that just hilarious?”

That meant that he was wearing his heart on his sleeve, saying only more or less exactly what he’d been thinking.

The words “I’ll do my best for this kingdom because I like it,” were hard to believe, yet he wasn’t lying in the slightest. He wasn’t motivated to obtain some grand goal or reward, but by a simple desire not to lose what he already had.

One could say he was a very convenient person for the kingdom. Though, with how many *inconvenient* people this place had—us included—I felt like it was only fair for it to have someone like him around.

Anyway, he wasn’t hiding anything, nor did he hold any suspicions about me.

“He wasn’t the least bit wary of the tea I made, nor did he hesitate to give me info about Zephyrus Silver—one of the aces up his sleeve.” Though I did understand why he trusted me as much as he did.

I was Altimia and Liliana’s childhood friend, and he trusted the two so deeply that he’d completely dropped his guard around me simply based on that. There was nothing impure about that trust either. I’d confirmed that he wasn’t trying to show off to them, nor did he have any grand political ambitions. In fact, back when he’d met Altimia, he hadn’t even realized that she was a princess.

This meant that there was no selfishness in any of the help he’d given them... It had all come naturally to him.

“...That’s such a difficult way to live.” The bodies of Masters restored themselves, and they may have been able to turn off physical pain, but they had nothing to protect them from a broken heart. If he truly cared for Altar’s people and wanted to protect the kingdom, he would surely receive such wounds eventually.

Or maybe he already had?

Maybe that had changed him? Or maybe he'd remained unchanged in spite of all that?

Or maybe he would never change at all?

Maybe he would stand against my actions, the doings of The Evil, the plans of the Incarnations, and all other threats simply because *not* doing so would, in his words, "leave a bad taste in his mouth."

Maybe he would always continue fighting to prevent any tragedies he saw...no matter how much he hurt himself in the process.

"Hm..." The path he walked was different than ours, but it may have been just as thorny.

His unique outlook had convinced me of something else too.

"Masters aren't a monolith after all. They all have free will."

Ignoring Incarnation disguises such as The Lynx, it was best to assume that Masters all had minds of their own.

I didn't know how Embryos worked, but Masters themselves seemed like people who were in some kind of *parasitic* relationship with these "lesser Incarnations." With that in mind, it was possible that everything they saw and heard could reach the Incarnations themselves.

That wasn't a problem, however. Nothing I'd told him was a lie.

I hadn't implied that I'd inherited information which was detrimental to the Incarnations, all while revealing just enough to explain my situation.

If the Incarnations came for me at this stage, I'd certainly die.

But as long as Crystal was all right, she would be able to straighten the course of those who would come after me.

...Though personally, I intended to settle things within my own generation.

"Looking back at the battle between Chrono Crown and Kashimiya, it's obvious that the Masters have complete dominance over their Embryos. That means that they're functionally outside the control of the Incarnations... In that case, it may help if we had Masters with power close to that of the Incarnations on our side. Even if we cut them off in the end, they would be useful in battle."

The first person to come to mind was the individual I'd just been talking to, but I shook my head right after.

"Ray Starling...is no good for this." He was a trustworthy person, but that was exactly why it was clear he'd never take my side.

What I needed was *someone who wanted to kill the Incarnations even if it meant destroying the world*.

Masters with any less of a driving ambition and less power simply wouldn't be enough.

Under the pretext of gathering info about Altar to make up for "the time I'd been away," I'd spent a good while investigating various Masters. The papers here in the lab had lists of Masters registered with the kingdom, and it was possible that I would find the one I was looking for among them.

"...I already have someone in mind," I said to myself as I reached into a bundle and took out a paper with a tag on it.

On this paper, there was a photo of a man from a time when his face was still full of fighting spirit, alongside his powers and achievements.

In bygone days, he was a famed duel ranker and the owner of a major clan.

But now, he was a man who'd lost everything.

This was the kind of person who could share my ambitions.

The kind of people I needed weren't the kind needed by Altimia and the kingdom.

I didn't need someone like Ray Starling, whose driving force was an urge *to not lose anything*.

I needed someone whose driving force was the fact that *they'd already lost everything*.

"...The 'broken sword,' eh?"

Interlude

Gaol

Somewhere in this world—at the infamous gaol, to be more specific—something unusual was occurring.

The nameless town that the prisoners inhabited was currently *devoid of any signs of life*.

All the gaol's residents save for a select few had died and vanished from this world.

The townscape, styled straight out of a western movie, was completely barren. The only things of note here now were the automated item-dispensing vending machines, leaking light and sound onto the ghost town's streets. Even those had something strange about them, though, with some of the machines displaying confirmation or selection screens as if people had vanished while using them.

The town's death had been just that sudden and indiscriminate.

"...This is just creepy," said Gerbera—one of the few Superior prisoners—as she looked out the window of her clan leader's café, Dice.

Her bored, listless tone and her casual pose, with her chin resting on her hand and her elbow on the counter, hid it well, but there was no exaggeration in her words—she was actually creeped out.

That comment was directed at the person sitting next to her, taking sips from a caramel macchiato.

“Hee hee! A GODlike day for a GOD like me! How wonderful it is to drink such a perfect caramel macchiato here in the gaol! Good job, Sechsy!” spoke the cross-dressing boy—King of Plagues, Candy Carnage. His manner of speaking was about as inelegant as a person could sound.

“I am glad you like it,” replied Sechs—the owner of this establishment.

Next to Candy, there was a hammer-like *measuring flask* about as big as himself.

Even though the object resembled a measuring flask, it was hard to tell if that was actually what it was. The transparent spherical section was split into multiple layers, each of which looked like slowly turning petri dishes growing some kind of culture. In several places on the sphere’s surface, there were holes apparently spraying *something invisible to the naked eye* into the air around them.

Gerbera knew that this object had caused the deaths of everyone in the gaol except for them.

The strange measuring flask was King of Plagues’ Superior Embryo. A rare triple hybrid as well as a “twin” simultaneously belonging to two categories that branched out from the Arms type, it was a Type Legion/Weapon/Calculator, and its name was “Pestilent Divinity, Resheph.”

True to its name, which it shared with a deity of plagues that had left a mark on both Egyptian and Abrahamic texts, this Embryo was a potent exterminator even by the high standards of Superiors.

Gerbera knew several of its capabilities.

Its core traits were “malignancy mutation” and “contagion magnification.”

Once Resheph was supplied with cells or materials from living organisms, it could automatically research, develop, grow, and release bacteria that exerted certain effects against them.

The most terrifying thing about this Embryo, however, was the fact that the bacteria it released could not be controlled in any way. The most Candy could do was set a limit on their multiplication and lifespan, or take samples from certain creatures and analyze them to exclude them as targets of the contagion. That was exactly what Candy had done with himself, Sechs, Gerbera, and Alhazred in this situation.

But that was the extent of the control he had, and it was uncertain how far the contagion could spread without such limitations. It was possible that without the involvement of the control AI, the bacteria he'd left outside of the gaol would still be spreading even now.

...That means that this café is crawling with germs, doesn't it? Gerbera thought. *That's just dirty and depressing... I can't even drink my coffee like this.* Stirring the coffee in her favorite dolphin-themed cup, she heaved a sigh.

Released without any limitations, the modded bacteria demonstrated extraordinary effectiveness.

Resheph was currently releasing three types of pathogens.

First was "Soiled Future," which simultaneously inflicted heavy disease and binding-based debuffs.

Second was "Collapsed Present"—a carnivorous bacteria which ate the infected organism from the inside.

And the third was "Punctured Past," which improved the activity of the other pathogens already infecting the body.

The resulting triple biohazard had exterminated the prisoners without even giving them a chance to resist. Enhanced by the "Past," the "Future" was too strong for all but those with considerable debuff countermeasures, while the "Present," since it was nothing but a bacteria that consumed flesh, would continue ravaging the body even if the infected drank an Elixir.

As the Superior Job of the pestimancer grouping, King of Plagues also had the Underground Prosperity skill, which further increased the vitality and infectious capacity of the pathogens. It was possible that the bacteria would continue to spread until they buried the entire gaol.

Candy had no means of controlling them once they were released, so not even he could stop them now.

Even if he were capable of it, though, doing so would require him to *want* to stop the contagion in the first place. The fact that he would never consider doing that, combined with the very fact that his mind birthed an Embryo like Resheph, placed him among the most unhinged Masters even by Superior standards.

It was what had gotten him the nickname of "Legionkiller," as well what had led to every building in the small country he'd extinguished becoming a ruined gravestone to the people who had once lived there.

Wait... Gerbera thought. *We gave him our hair for his Embryo to analyze. That was so he could exclude us as targets for his bacteria,* *but...that means he can also create bacteria that only targets us. He's got us by the throat.*

It suddenly occurred to Gerbera that Candy held her life in the palm of his hand, but then...

...Oh, wait. If he wants me dead, I'll die either way.

...she realized that regardless of whether he made his contagion targeted or indiscriminate, she couldn't escape it...

Huh. So there's no point in caring about it... Ugh...

Following that thought, she let her head drop on the counter, fully aware that she'd been making that gesture far too often recently.

Wait, but what about our leader...? Oh...yeah. Gerbera considered Sechs, who'd given Candy his hair just like she did, but then realized something else.

He can just change his cells around if he feels like it. Actually, I don't even know if bacteria can do anything to slimes...

Gerbera had been told that Sechs and Hannya had once teamed up to defeat Candy. She could only assume that Sechs's slimy nature had rendered the pathogens ineffective.

But then what about Hannya...? Oh, I think I know...

She considered the other Superior and soon realized that she, too, stood a chance against Candy.

One of the core traits of Hannya's Sandalphon was the randomization of the local space. Since Candy was the epicenter of the contagion, anyone facing him would likely die before they got close.

However, Sandalphon potentially allowed Hannya an almost instantaneous approach, as well as the safety of being a kilometel up in the air.

I guess she wins against him in the game of compatibility... I know I can't do that...

The bacteria targeted any organisms regardless of whether or not Candy acknowledged them, making it impossible for Gerbera's Alhazred to defend against him.

...I guess I could do something when I'm right next to him...like I am now. However, the only reason they were this close in the first place was that they were allies.

Facing Candy Carnage properly meant crossing a country-sized biohazard exclusion zone. Many tians and Masters alike had tried to do so and failed in the attempt. Even The Hero's sword couldn't sever the thread of KoP's life.

It was thanks to this that Candy Carnage had become the greatest tian genocider, and how his King of Plagues job had reached the high level of 1,680.

Well, Alhazred's out for a walk and we're allies now. I can't kill him, and I wouldn't even want to try, Gerbera thought. *Imagine the grudge he'd hold if I managed it, though...* she sighed.

Candy had actually killed Gerbera once, but she now had enough perspective to know that it had been her own fault for walking into a battle where he had the advantage.

...Seriously, though—how did the Superior Killer do it? It was difficult for her to imagine how an Embryo that did nothing but fire living bullets could take out King of Plagues.

As all these thoughts about Candy were running through Gerbera's mind...

"Okie then! I'm gonna log out for now! My skin needs some beauty sleep."

...Candy said, standing up.

"Very well," said Sechs. "Thank you for your work today."

"The bacteria will spread on its own, so don't you worry a bit. Starting now, the gaol's gonna be a GODlike heaven where logging in = death!"

...Sounds more like hell to me, Gerbera honestly thought.

"See you two lateeer!" Candy said with a wink before finally logging out.

"...He's finally gone," Gerbera let out in a tired voice.

This certainly wouldn't be the last time she would see Candy, though. After all, albeit temporarily, Candy was a member of Illegal Frontier.

"This is so depressing..." *A clan with that thing in it is not the place to be,* she added in thought before laying her head on the counter again.

Then again, Candy's not the only one with a few screws loose. Just look at our leader. The man who'd welcomed her into the clan and talked to her more than anyone else here was plenty unhinged, as well.

...Does that mean that Rascal, Zeta, and Emily are all comparatively normal? Seriously...? Isn't it kinda bad if the least crazy people in your

group are a mummy and a murder child...? Now that I think about it, even Rascal is a perv who owns a robot maid, but I wonder how normal he is otherwise...? She'd upset some people if she said those words out loud, but no one could hear or confront her about them as long as they stayed in her head.

I guess I must be the most normal one after all... Again, no response.

"Wait, leader...why'd we kill everyone in town anyway?" she asked.

"Oh, did I not tell you?"

"All you told me was to 'prepare for the move.'"

"And that is the entire reason. We are preparing to move."

"Hm?" Gerbera tilted her head. If *Infinite Dendrogram* had emotes, a question mark would have been hovering above her head.

"In a few days, we are breaking out of the gaol."

"...I've been wondering about this for a while, but is that really something you should be saying out loud?" Gerbera was worried that the gaol's warden—the control AI known as Red King—would hear about their plans.

Naturally, she had completely forgotten that she had said the same thing back when she'd first arrived here.

With a smile plastered across his face, Sechs said, "Actually, the control AIs know everything avatars see and hear."

"HUH?! Are you serious?! But I *bathed* here!" Gerbera exclaimed, covering her (nonexistent) chest.

This café had a sizable bath that she'd occasionally used alongside April. Prism People were fully water-resistant, remaining undamaged even if completely submerged. When bathing with April, though, Gerbera had never once even considered the possibility that it would damage her. If Flagman hadn't made her water-resistant, Gerbera's carelessness might've caused April to be lost forever.

"No need to worry," said Sechs. "I am sure the control AI feels no lust for humans."

"But won't the devs in the studio be able to look over the data the AIs collect?"

"...Devs? Studio?" Sechs said and thoughtfully put his hand on his chin as though he'd just heard a very strange statement, only to remember something and nod before adding, "Ohh. There is no need to worry about that. I am sure of it."

"...Really?"

"Yes. Also, we can talk about breaking out all we like. I already had a talk about it."

"You did? With who?"

"Red King."

Hearing the name of the gaol's ruler absolutely shocked Gerbera.

"Huh?! You mean, he *OK'd* our escape?!" She couldn't begin to understand why Red King—the warden of this place—would even suggest something like that.

"I suppose you could say that."

"Hm?"

"These were his words..." Sechs said, turning his black eyes elsewhere. "'Do it if you think you can.' Well...let's do just that, shall we?"

With that, Gerbera understood that breaking out of the gaol wasn't exactly forbidden—there was merely something that prevented it, and whatever it was, the warden had limitless confidence in its ability to keep them inside.

Despite that, Sechs seemed to have just as much confidence that he could escape.

"Ahhh... I have no idea how we're gonna do it, but you seem really sure that we will," said Gerbera.

"I am. I would prefer to give you the details by email, though."

"Hmm... All right. I'll set up a throwaway and give it to you."

"Please do. Oh, and let me answer your question about why I asked Candy to spread the bacteria," he said as he looked out the window to the now-empty streets of the town. "It is so that no one would interrupt us when the time comes for our escape."

"Interrupt us?"

"Some would simply get in our way, while others might see it as their own opportunity to escape. There is also a chance that these people would have Embryos that may be a major threat to any of us three."

That was indeed a possibility.

With how varied Embryos could be, it was fairly likely that someone here in the gaol would have one that could counter even Superiors like them. Even if that wasn't the case, it was possible that new Superiors or pre-Superiors would be sent to the gaol right before their prison break.

“I requested that Candy spread the bacteria to remove such uncertain variables. Since dying makes you unable to log in for three days, that will be how long we have to make our escape. Though, we still have to go around town and kill off the people who did not die from the bacteria.”

That was the explanation Gerbera needed.

It was certainly best if there was no one who could get in their way. Candy’s ability to continuously exterminate vast amounts of people was highly effective for this task, and it might’ve been one of the reasons why Sechs took him into the clan.

Anyway, it looks like I did the right thing, Gerbera thought.

“With that in mind, the two of us should go and finish off any survivors.”

“Uhh... Don’t bother,” Gerbera said, casually waving her palm.

“Hm?”

“Uhh... I only just now found out why we’re doing this, but I knew you were planning to kill everyone the moment Candy started spreading his bacteria, so...” Gerbera said as she pointed at the empty space—no, at the *invisible assassin* who had just returned. “I made Alhazred kill everyone who survived. All of them.”

It seemed as though she thought nothing of this deed one way or the other. However, on the inside, she happily puffed her (nonexistent) chest, extremely pleased with the levels she’d gained from this.

“It was fine that I did that, right?”

“Of course. Thank you very much. You saved me the trouble, after all.”

“Hey, I just gave the order to Alhazred. It’s no big deal...”

Countless people had died of a disease while an invisible assassin had picked off all the survivors. At this moment, the gaol was less like a prison and more like a hell.

Or, true to Gerbera’s nickname, it might be described as a nightmare.

“Oh. There is actually one person I didn’t kill,” added Gerbera. “Though, honestly, that one’s impossible...”

“Ah. I know exactly who you mean. You can ignore him—I doubt he will be leaving his domain soon.”

Someone who hadn’t succumbed to Candy’s bacteria and someone Gerbera couldn’t kill—this was none other than the last Superior of the gaol, staying firm within his domain away from town.

He'd rejected Sechs's invitation, ignored Candy's bacteria, caused Gerbera to steer away from him, and stood still right where he was.

"He will eventually escape by his own means," said Sechs. "We will go on ahead without him."

"...Fine by me," said Gerbera. "But are you sure escape is even possible?"

"No need to worry. It was an uncertain prospect when it was just me and Candy, but with you here, I guarantee that we will be able to escape."

"...Hmm." *Will I really be much help with that?* Gerbera tilted her head and wondered. *Though, if he's right, that means my short—well, actually I guess it was kinda long—stay at the gaol is about to end, huh? There's no place here that sells sweets besides Dice, so I'm kinda looking forward to getting out.*

Albeit still unsure how it would be accomplished, Gerbera started to grow excited for the time when she'd finally leave this place. Soon, it was time for her to log out.

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Several hours later, she received the details of the prison break at the throwaway email she'd provided to Sechs. This elicited only yet another confused head tilt. *Huh? That's all it takes?*

Chapter Three: The First Clan Meeting

Paladin, Ray Starling

By the time I arrived in Gideon, it was already dark out.

“...That took longer than expected,” I said.

“Well, you certainly could not have anticipated that encounter,” shrugged Nemesis. We’d jumped on Silver and headed towards Gideon as soon as we left Altea.

The best thing about flight as a means of travel was that it freed you from the need to follow the roads and let you take the direct path towards your destination. It was made even more convenient by the fact that many of this world’s most popular means of flight, such as flying mounts or aeromancy, didn’t require much space for taking off and landing.

Because of this, I’d always wondered why there was nothing like an aerial transport network here.

Today, however, I learned—or more like, had been taught—the reason for that.

“...Yeah, I sure didn’t expect to run into a stray dragon.”

“It was our first aerial battle in a while. We are lucky to have come out of it as well as we did.”

Indeed—while flying towards Gideon, we’d somehow crossed paths with a skydragon. Although I was able to win against it solo, I really couldn’t say that it had been easy.

“Well, the thing was just firing breath attacks at us from outside my range...”

“That was also why Hellish Miasma could not reach it either.” I hadn’t even been able to use my usual tactic of weakening my opponent before coming in close for a counterattack. I’d solo’d a Pure-Dragon-tier worm shortly after Franklin’s Game, but this one was way more trouble.

That battle was enough for me to realize that a world with things like *that* flying around was no place for an aerial transport network. They might not have been much trouble for skilled vanguards, but common folk would be in serious danger of dying on every flight.

“...Oh, I remember.”

“Remember what?”

“The talk at the café I had with Hugo shortly before Franklin’s Game.”

“...Ohh. That.”

◇

The day after our encounter with the Gouz-Maise Gang, but before we had ended up fighting on different sides, Hugo and I met up and had a little chat. Some of the conversation was about Magingears and other technology in Dryfe.

“So, the only three types of Magingears are humanoid robots, powered suits, and tanks?”

“Yes. And before the leader of our clan made Marshal II, it was actually just two.”

“Hm...”

“What is it?”

“Well, I understand that ships are Granvaloa’s thing...but what about planes?”

In response, Hugo put on a troubled expression and said, “...We do not have those. If you’re wondering why, well...I suppose you could say that songbirds cannot fly in a sky ruled by birds of prey.”

“Ohh, so aeronautics here is so rudimentary that flying monsters are a major threat.”

“Exactly. Flight speed, maneuverability, offensive potential... Current airplanes fall short on every factor needed to survive the skies. When there are creatures out there that fly around at supersonic speeds, ordinary planes are simply not enough.”

“...Yeah, I can easily imagine one of those planes losing a wing and crashing the moment a monster appears.”

At the very least, it was doubtful that any machine like that would stand a chance against Pure-Dragons. A single hit would reduce the plane’s flight ability, and then it’d be easy prey.

“I guess that’s why it’s better to just ride a Pure-Dragon-tier skydragon,” I said.

“Tamed Pure-Dragons are not exactly common, though. Anyway, that is why there are no planes. Well...I suppose there are plane-like Embryos, but not many of them are focused on transportation.”

“I see. And here I thought planes were always a good way to get to distant countries.”

“Currently, your only options here are Granvaloa’s sea routes and the roads of the desert.”

“The desert, eh...? That doesn’t sound like an easy trip.”

“Truly... Regardless, I do hope to visit a distant land someday.”

“Same.”

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That conversation now felt like it had happened so long ago.

“I wonder what he’s up to now,” I said.

“Would he not still be in Dryfe?” asked Nemesis.

“If he is, we may run into him if a war breaks out again.” Though, I kinda got the impression he wasn’t there anymore. “Anyway, on to the meeting place.”

“Mhm. Thanks to that encounter, we are in danger of being late.”

Our clan had agreed to meet up today in order to talk about tomorrow’s base-hunting and the following day’s Tournament over some dinner. We had ten minutes left until the appointed time, which was just about enough to make it if we hurried.

After more or less that exact amount of time, we arrived at the location. Since Rook was already here in Gideon, I’d asked him to secure the place, and going by the sign that said “Reserved by Death Period,” he’d made a smart move and gotten it set aside exclusively for us.

“...That sign sounds so threatening,” said Nemesis.

“That’s our clan name. It is what it is.”

I opened the door, making the bell above it ring out.

Inside, there was a round table surrounded by familiar faces.

“Sorry for the wait, guys.”

“Raaaayyy! You’re almost late!” said Marie, her cheeks all red. Apparently, she’d been drinking. “All righty,” she continued. “Let’s get some of this wine for you too—OW!”

“Control yourself,” said B3, having hit Marie on the back of the head. “Most of this clan are below drinking age. Him and myself included.”

Now that she mentioned, yeah...the only ones in the clan who could drink were Shu, Lei-Lei, and Marie.

Not content to just take the hit, Marie retaliated against B3, who retaliated back.

They seemed to have the sense to not use their Embryos here, at least, but it was still a scuffle that looked like it belonged in a wrestling ring.

“Our teacher and B3 are the same as ever,” said Fujinon.

“Yeah, they were just like this last time too!” said Io.

“Sh-Shouldn’t we stop them...?” asked Kasumi.

I was curious what they meant by calling Marie “teacher,” but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to ask. I had a feeling that it had nothing to do with combat and everything to do with the kind of things she had in her sketchbook.

“Ray, Nemesis, we have free chairs here.”

“Over heeeeere!” Rook and Babi said as they pulled us closer to them.

“Thanks. But damn, we really were late, huh? Everyone’s already he—Huh?”

I looked over my fellow clan members, all seated around the large round table.

However...

“Where’s Shu?”

...I didn’t see his bulky costume anywhere. Lei-Lei wasn’t here either, but she was really busy in real life, so that was expected.

“He was here at first, but then it looked like someone contacted him and he went to see them,” said Rook.

“See who...?”

“We don’t know. ‘It’s a beary big secret. You’ll be surprised’ was all he said.”

...A surprise?

“He also said we can start eating without him.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, let’s be reasonable here. If we start eating, my partner here won’t leave anything.”

Just like she didn’t leave a single one of Integra’s snacks... Integra’s snacks!

“Do not worry,” said Nemesis. “A dinner like this is rare. I will eat at a slower pace."

Well, that's...not at all reassuring. Eating at a slower pace doesn't mean you'll eat less.

"I may have not forgotten the welcome party on the day I hatched or the fact that Brother Bear ate all of my à la carte while we were logged out...but I have no intention of getting back at him."

"...The very fact that you even remember something like that at all makes it seem like you're holding a hell of a grudge." *Food's important and all, I get it, but let it go and leave some for the rest of us.*

And so, we went on to dine and talk.

We started by talking about what we wanted in a clan base, and we decided on the following things: private rooms (everyone), large bathing area (the ladies), large room for meetings and stuff (me, B3, and Rook), space for free-range keeping of large monsters (Rook and Kasumi), cafeteria (Nemesis), and a pool (Marie and Babi).

That was a large number of conditions to fulfill, but none of them was outlandish or anything. Wealthy merchants who'd moved due to the recent events might've left behind a mansion or other kinds of estates that ticked every box, and we should've been able to secure it if we had the budget...which I assumed we did.

It looked like we'd have to spend some time looking around Gideon, though.

I'd had a look around Altea, but since it was the capital, it didn't have much quality real estate still available for purchase. It seemed like a certain religious group and fan club were buying up any available land. Setting up in Altea would mean setting up close to those two, and that smelled like trouble best left avoided.

Even Azurite agreed with me on that, which only made the situation there seem more terrifying.

After nearly an hour passed since we began, the bell on the door rang and I heard a familiar voice.

"Yo. Sorry fur the wait."

"Shu, you're finally...huh?"

As he entered the establishment, clad in his usual bear costume, we were overcome by surprise.

The door wasn't the widest, but his large costume smoothly changed shape to let him fit inside.

What caught us by surprise, however, wasn't the way he entered, but the people who followed him inside.

"Hey. Mind if we join?"

"Heh heh. It's been a while." Shu was accompanied by Figaro and Hannya.

"Figaro! You recovered?!" Following the Hannya incident, Figaro's chronic condition had become worse, leading to his hospitalization. He apparently hadn't logged in once since, but seeing that he was here now...

"Yes. I would say that I'm better now, but that would be a bit of a lie. I do *feel* good, though."

"Hm?" It wasn't like Figaro to give such vague answers and have such a hard-to-read expression.

Hannya, standing next to him, seemed somewhat perplexed too.

Wait, it's not just that. She also looks...bashful?

"...I actually kept having new spasms every time I saw her face in real life," Figaro explained. "It kept extending my stay at the hospital."

...What?

"I hope you can forgive a man who can't even *touch* his beloved yet," he said as he faced Hannya.

"I can," she replied. "Especially since I know that this is proof of your love... Also, here we can gaze at each other to our hearts' content..."

"Fuyuko..."

"Vincent..."

...Did they just go and get lost in their own world? I thought. *I'm not sure if it's a good idea to call each other by your real names here... Then again, I guess this place is reserved, so it's just us here.*

"...You look away for one moment and they become a pair of lovebirds," commented Nemesis.

"...So this is what Figaro has become," said B3 with a complicated expression.

"...Shu," I said, turning to my brother.

"I was beary surprised too," he said. "They met IRL and...progressed? Apparently? Anyway, this is how they are now."

"I'm not sure what to say... I guess...congratulations?" I said as I started to applaud lightly. Most of the other members weren't sure how to process this either, but they joined me in clapping.

"Thank you!" said Hannya, all smiles.

"Thank you," added Figaro with a nod. "Now, as for the reason why we came here..."

His expression became more serious—he was clearly preparing to say something important.

"Hannya and I would like to join your clan... To be part of Death Period."

"Oh!" I was told that they might've been interested in joining once Figaro recovered, and it seemed that the time had finally come.

"Can we?" Figaro said as he held out his hand.

"Why, of course!" I replied, giving it a good shake.

And just like that, it was officially decided that Figaro and Hannya would join Death Period.

With these two additions to the clan, we now had eleven members, making us into a double-digit family. This was all the more reason to work hard and find the best clan base I could.

Also, it was decided that the people who would be covering most of the base-buying budget would be me, B3, and Marie. Figaro and Hannya still had debts to pay after the incident, while Shu was using his wealth to produce ammo for Baldr in case of another large-scale battle. For now, the costs would be covered by those of us with money to spare, and the rest would have to give their contributions later.

Speaking of the base, Figaro and Hannya had no requests regarding it whatsoever, since apparently their primary home would be Figaro's place here in Gideon.

As for Shu's request, I rejected it right away. If we'd focused on finding somewhere that had a *popcorn factory*, we'd never have a base.

With every member besides Lei-Lei present, it was time to shift subject to the matter of The Tournaments.

The Tournaments were an event held in preparation for the coming clash between Altar and Dryfe. Its main purpose was to tie as many Masters as possible to the kingdom, and it would be done through arena duels where the prize was the chance to challenge UBMs.

The rules for it—the content of the Contract the participants had to sign—had four points.

“1. The participant must be an Altarian Master.”

“2. The participant will be unable to switch countries for three years after The Tournaments.”

“3. If the participant commits a crime within Altar’s borders that would otherwise be worthy of one or more years of penal servitude, they will be rendered unable to use any save points.”

In a way, these three were about what you’d expect. They were meant to strengthen Altar, slow down any weakening, prevent crime, and entice foreign or free Masters to join the kingdom.

The most important point out of the three, however, was the one discussing criminal acts. It didn’t apply to minor offenses, but anyone who did something really bad would be punished. This was apparently meant to deter potential turncoats like the kind we’d seen at Franklin’s Game.

The fourth and final point had a hard focus on the coming War.

“4. The participant will receive the right to challenge a UBM depending on where they place in The Tournaments. Additionally, those who also sign the Contract declaring intent to participate in any War involving Altar upon the kingdom’s side within the next three years will receive an extra prize in the form of the right to select a rare piece of equipment. The order of selection will also depend on placement in The Tournaments.”

If you also agreed to assist Altar in any War you could join within the next three years, you received an extra prize in addition to the right to challenge the UBM.

The “you could join” part was there to account for the fact that the three factors of location, timing, and quest status may have made that impossible. It wasn’t certain that the Master who signed the Contract would even be online for the War, so the Contract was lenient enough to account for that.

“The winners of The Tournaments may simply win against the UBMs, but there is the possibility that they would lose instead, no?” asked Nemesis.

“Oh yeah, there is.” The winners of The Tournaments were simply given the *first go* against their UBMs. If they and their party lost, the second place winners would challenge the monster instead.

Because of this, there was a degree of uncertainty in who, exactly, would become the MVPs. Even if a first place winner lost against their UBM, the damage they’d dealt and their general contribution to the battle during their attempt could still be enough to get them the reward.

That seemed to hinge on how much of a fight those before you were putting up.

“Anyway, the important thing now is deciding which of the ten days we’ll take,” I said. The Tournaments would start the day after tomorrow and run daily for ten days. This was meant to give time to potential participants to make it here, as well as to just prolong the show.

A participant in one day’s Tournament couldn’t participate in another’s, but three real-life days seemed like enough time for most people to get a chance. Also, since the functions of the Orbs were open to the public, those with more time on their hands could prioritize The Tournaments for the most optimal or powerful Orbs.

The Tournaments happened to start on Saturday for me, so I had a good range of Orbs to choose from.

On Saturday I could choose between Tournament days one or two, and on Sunday I had days three, four, and five... I could even go for day six, but that’d be early Monday morning.

“Oh. Count Gideon sent us this,” said Marie as she handed me the details of the prizes—the UBMs.

The dates, rules, and the fact that we’d be fighting to challenge UBMs were revealed a good while ago, but these details were only sent out yesterday in *Dendro* time.

The details of The Tournaments’ UBMs were, in order...

Day one: Legendary “Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage” (Type: Demon). Core traits: AoE healing proportional to damage dealt (Presumed).

Day two: Legendary “Fortcrushing Mawdragon, No Mercy” (Type: Dragon). Core traits: Object hardness-ignoring attack (Presumed).

Day three: Name and tier unknown (Presumed type: Undead). Core traits: Poltergeist, curse-based debuffs.

Day four: Ancient Legendary “Spiritblade Rider, Gradsoul” (Type: Elemental). Core traits: Grudge absorption and body enhancement.

Day five: Epic “The Uncornered Rat, Balooberry” (Type: Beast (Rat)). Core traits: Fatal damage negation followed by time-limited body enhancement (Presumed).

Day six: Name and tier unknown (Presumed type: Dragon (Serpentine)). Core traits: Tornado, lightning, and explosion generation (Uncontrollable in its Orb form).

Day seven: Name and tier unknown (Type: Unknown). Core traits: Short-distance warping (Presumed).

Day eight: Epic “Twin Orphans, Arma-Karma” (Type: Elemental). Core traits: Clone creation (Summoning?).

Day nine: Legendary “Prospector Centipede, Gold Rush” (Type: Insectoid). Core traits: Vein prospecting, underground scanning.

Day ten: Mythical “Night Sky General, O’oimimaru” (Type: Yokai). Core traits: Unknown (Space alteration?).

So those are the details of the ten UBMs... I’m seeing a lot of “(Presumed)” and “?” here, I thought.

“...A Mythical whose power we don’t even know...? Sounds pretty scary, if you ask me,” said Marie, prompting all of us to nod in agreement.

This information had been gained either by reading the descriptions Huang He had provided alongside the Orbs or by simply testing them out. The descriptions given weren’t complete due to much of the information being lost in Huang He’s civil war, while some Orbs had effects that were hard to understand even by using them. That more or less explained why there was so much uncertainty here.

I would’ve liked to meet the person who picked these and tell them off for sending undefined hazardous material to other countries, but it was likely that Huang He had specifically picked Orbs they didn’t mind letting go of or even wanted to get rid of. A lot of the Orbs that did have known details seemed pretty useful, though, which might’ve been their way of making up for that.

“It’d be pretty bad if any UBM escaped,” said Figaro. “Did they account for that?”

I nodded in response and said, “Apparently they won’t use the normal duel barrier of the central arena, but the one Franklin used to seal people inside.”

That barrier could only be broken by the likes of Shu.

The arenas would be unusable until the UBMs were defeated, but with the monsters being weakened by their six hundred year imprisonment, it was unlikely that all the combined participants *wouldn’t* be enough to.

...Though I was a bit concerned about the Mythical.

“Also, they said that if Figaro and Hannya returned—and they did—they wanted Superiors to go on guard duty and remain on high alert, just in case," explained Marie. "And while The Tournaments' fights will have spectators like any Gideon event, the UBM battles certainly won't due to the dangers involved."

On top of that, the entertainment part of The Tournaments would only begin once the day's top sixteen were decided. The fights before that would be quickly settled using the barrier function that did the opposite of what had been done to Figaro and Xunyu during Franklin's Game—they would *accelerate* the flow of time within.

Without something like this, there would be too many participants for a day's Tournament to actually end within that day.

"I see," I said. "With different types of Superiors around, it should be possible to deal with most situations."

Speaking of which, Azurite would also get Miss Eldritch to join this guard duty.

Azurite really didn't like relying on her, but her debuffs and healing, not to mention the organizational potential of her Lunar Society, made her a must-have if something went wrong.

"By the way, I'm not pawrticipating in The Tournaments," said Shu. "I'll just do security and that's it."

"Huh?" That was news to me.

"But...why?"

"...I mean, this whole event's meant to improve the power of Altar's Masters, right? If I go fur one of the UBMs, I'll probably just get another costume I won't use."

...That seemed pretty likely. For some reason, every one of his MVP rewards besides the one from Gloria was a costume.

"Also, if I pawrticipate in it..." he said before falling silent.

"Hm? Bro?"

"Nah, don't worry about it. All that matters is that I'm not in."

Hmm, I wonder what he was about to say... I thought.

"Perhaps it was something about the fact that he could accidentally break the barrier?" Nemesis said, telepathically.

Oh yeah. That's a possibility. He could endanger The Tournaments spectators and perhaps even give a chance for the UBM to escape.

"In that case...I won't participate either," said Hannya.

“You too?”

“Yes. As he is now, Sandalphon can’t be used to his full potential in arenas.” *Oh yeah, that was the reason why her duel with Figaro happened outside the city.*

“I also still have to pay my debt to the country, so I will just focus on security.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll pass that on to Azurite.”

That meant that if you ignored Lei-Lei, who probably wouldn’t make it, the clan had a total of eight participants.

“So, Ray, what we’re about to discuss is...our distribution, right?” Figaro asked.

“Yes. Exactly.”

I wouldn’t expect any less from the man who knew more about duels and UBMs than anyone else in Altar. He instantly understood the point of this meeting.

I looked over everyone again and repeated what I’d been told by Azurite.

“The UBMs will first be challenged by the day’s winners, then the runner-ups, and so on. While The Tournaments would consist of duels, the UBMs can be challenged with a party, and the party members can be anyone regardless of if they participated in another day’s Tournament or didn’t participate at all.”

“And that is why it is best for the clan members to spread out across the Tournament days and aim to win as many high placements as possible,” Nemesis added.

“Exactly.” Everyone seemed to agree with that.

“Our clan has many people who can take first,” said B3. “Figaro most obviously.”

“That is true,” said Marie. “Me, Figaro, Rookie, and even Ray can do it if the matchups are good. My student trio has potential too, so even if they don’t take first, they might still land some good placements.”

“...I didn’t hear my name in there,” noted B3.

“Huh? You’re too slow and heavy to get from point A to B, let alone place high.”

“You’ve really said it *now*, ya dinky piece o’ paper scrap!” B3 roared as she instantly donned her armor and began scuffling with Marie again.

Their combat styles were very different, but it seemed that when it came to STR they were about equally matched.

...I'd say they're getting along pretty good, though, considering, I thought.

Anyway, despite what Marie said, I wasn't that confident that I could place high. My fighting style could be strong, but it was far from reliable, and since those videos had exposed me, a lot of people knew the cards I could play. That had become especially obvious in my recent fights against Jubei. And if people were aware that I would be their enemy in The Tournaments, they could easily prepare countermeasures.

I was also so lacking in pure power that even the dragon we'd fought on the way to Gideon was a real challenge. It had only retreated once we'd been backed into a corner and had started charging Payback.

It had probably gone away because it had realized how dangerous that really was, which was about what I'd expect from a dragon. They were clever creatures. If it had been as unintelligent as, say, a worm, there was the possibility that it could have charged me before I'd fired, giving me the death penalty.

...Also, I'd felt like I'd seen something like a Pomeranian on the dragon's back as it retreated. I had to have been seeing things, though. A dragon-riding dog? That just didn't make sense.

...Anyway, back to The Tournaments.

While B3 and Marie were fighting, the rest were considering which UBM to target.

I also looked at the details to find out which day was best for me.

"Man, this is hard..." I couldn't skip class, so I could only participate on days up to the sixth. Out of these, there were three that caught my eye: the unnamed undead, Balooberry, and Sasage.

I didn't want the undead's powers, but I felt like I'd be effective against it when we had to fight it. Reversal and Grudge-Soaked Greaves would likely give me the upper hand.

Balooberry had a very good power—someone like me could never have enough means of negating fatal damage. However, if the UBM both negated fatal damage and enhanced itself afterwards, I would be at a real disadvantage against it.

Then there was Sasage on day one. As someone whose build was based on taking damage, I felt like I could really use the healing. It would enable me to heal even with Purgatorial Flames, and it might even have been possible to land Vengeance and then instantly recover the HP I'd lost for it. If I could heal by attacking, I also wouldn't have to add Priest to my build.

"...I probably shouldn't count my chickens before they hatch. I gotta place high in The Tournaments first."

"You do lose quite often when very little is on the line," said Nemesis. "That recent event was especially full of close calls."

"...Yeah." The results I got were so inconsistent that even I didn't really know how strong I actually was at this point. At the event on the uninhabited island, I'd been saved by Juliet, Alto, or the environment more times than I'd like to admit.

I figured this Tournament might've been a good chance to properly gauge my power in its purest form.

Anyway, while we Tournament participants had long discussions about who would take which day, the two who wouldn't participate—Shu and Hannya—were talking about something else.

"So he was still in the gaol?" Shu asked.

"Yes," Hannya replied. "He was operating a café and seemed to be used to life there."

Apparently, he was asking her something about the gaol.

Looking back on it, Hannya's incident had begun soon after she arrived here, and she hadn't logged back in until today, so they hadn't had a chance to really talk like this yet.

"Strange that you'd use the word 'still.' No one can escape the gaol. Even I couldn't," said Hannya.

"...Speaking of, how did you try to do that?"

"I used the skill Sandalphon got when he became a Superior Embryo...what was it again?"

"'Downfall Screamer,' Lady Hannya! It focuses my spatial control into the tips of the towers and pushes space itself aside to deliver a powerful drilling effect!" Hannya didn't seem to remember her own Embryo's skill name, so Sandalphon answered in her stead.

"Yes, that's it. I used it to open a small hole leading outside the gaol, but it closed before I could pass through it."

"I am certain that the observer of the gaol wields spatial manipulation powers that surpass even mine," said Sandalphon. "I gave my all to drill open the space, yet he restored it like it was nothing. You cannot escape from anyone capable of that!"

Listening to this from the outside made both Hannya and the observer of the gaol seem pretty nuts.

Sandalphon's words, though, seemed to have made Shu frown. I could tell even through his costume.

"...You actually opened a hole?"

"Yes," said Hannya. "I could see a bit of the outside, but it closed the moment I stopped the skill to try and pass through it."

"Hypothetically...do you think he could escape by *cutting off a part of his body* and sending it through the hole while it's open?"

Cutting off...a part of his body?

"I doubt it. I mean, Red King...the observer of the gaol would take that into account. Even if Sechs tried that, he probably has a means of preventing it."

"...True."

Sechs...King of Crime, Sechs Würfel? I did know the name, and I knew that Shu was deeply involved with him...but why was Shu so wary of someone who was already in the gaol?

"Raayy! Let's finish our plans for The Tournameeents."

"Oh... All right."

Called by Marie, I shifted my focus back to The Tournaments.

I'd ask Shu about this some other time.

The discussions were soon finished, and this was the resulting Tournament participation split.

Day one, "Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage"—me.

Day two, "Fortcrushing Mawdragon, No Mercy"—B3.

Day three, name and tier unknown (Presumed type: Undead)—Rook.

Day four, "Spiritblade Rider, Gradsoul"—Io.

Day five, "The Uncornered Rat, Balooberry"—none.

Day six, name and tier unknown (Presumed type: Dragon (Serpentine))—none.

Day seven, name and tier unknown (Type: Unknown)—Marie.

Day eight, "Twin Orphans, Arma-Karma"—Fujinon.

Day nine, "Prospector Centipede, Gold Rush"—Kasumi.

Day ten, “Night Sky General, O’oimimaru”—Figaro.

We were all more or less matched to UBMs based on our combat styles. I didn’t really know why Rook chose the opponent he did, but knowing him, there had to be a good reason.

Also, we’d avoided not only the dragon on day six, but also day five’s Balooberry, even though it was obvious it would become a powerful MVP reward.

The reason none of us wanted to take it was because we had full details on it and because it was “too good.” It was abundantly clear that it would be sought by many powerful Masters, potentially those high up in the rankings, making it more difficult to place high in that Tournament. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised to even see Kashimiya there. No matter how powerful the potential reward, it meant nothing if we couldn’t even challenge the monster for it.

The person with the highest chances among us there was Figaro, but he instead chose the Mythical of day ten—potentially the most dangerous one, but also the one best left to someone like him. It wasn’t like he needed fatal damage prevention anyway. He could do that by simply enhancing the gear he already had.

It took much deliberation, but I myself chose Sasage. Thus we ended up with no one from Death Period participating in The Tournaments for Balooberry.

Marie had actually tried to convince Rook to take it, but all he said in response was “A *rat* UBM? Never,” all while maintaining a perfect, all-denying smile.

Anyway, just like that, it was decided which day we would participate on.

Mine was the very first, and as the leader of the clan I’d have to do my very best.

Though...why did it feel like I was forgetting something important?

Interlude

Dryfe Imperium, North, Vara Plains

Located in the north of the northern country, the Vara Plains were a wasteland of little value.

Some decades ago, it was a wetland overflowing with life, but the worsening climate of Dryfe had destroyed most of its flora and fauna.

There was little of note here besides the occasional monster.

"Z e E z e e E Z e e E e e z Z e E e e."

And now, in this wasteland, a sound very like hard objects being ground against each other could be heard.

It was a cry of an abominable creature—the self-assertion of a life-form inhabiting this wasteland.

The entity was an insect equipped with long, sharp, and hard mandibles, and its name was "Borer Deathbug, Shellstro." It was a Legendary UBM specialized in defense and magic that enhanced its piercing ability.

Adapted to this wasteland, it had spent its days burrowing underground and attacking anyone who'd wandered into this place, stabbing them with its imposing mandibles and sucking out their life.

It could have been called the lord of the Vara Plains, but now...

"Z e E z z e E e E e z e e e..."

...it was on the verge of death, skewered like a scientific sample.

"W o w O w o."

The abhorrent bug was surrounded by a number of other creatures.

Standing far taller than the average human, fully covered in plate and with insect legs peeking out of their head-concealing helmets, they were the Legendary-tier devils, Gigaknights.

A total of *ten* were surrounding Shellstro to finish it off.

Six were holding down the UBM's legs to keep it still, while the other four were stabbing their greatswords into the gaps in its shell, quickly stripping it of its HP.

UBMs fought—and won—their battles through the uniqueness of their abilities, but that meant nothing when they were outnumbered ten-to-one by creatures that were the same stat tier as they were.

"Well, I guess I win..."

Standing some distance away from the Gigaknights' hunt was the one who'd summoned them. A Dryfean Superior and secretly a part of Illegal Frontier, he was Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

Shellstro was among the eighteen UBMs whose locations and details he'd been given upon joining IF. Although it was fairly strong, the creature had little in the way of trickery. This had prompted Zeta to make the assessment that Logan "was perfectly capable of beating it by himself," as it could neither escape nor repel him.

And just as she'd expected, Logan had rendered Shellstro completely incapable of even resisting.

Logan had once seen Gardranda—a demon on the level of a Legendary UBM—defeat two of his Gigaknights with little effort.

One could say that his success against Shellstro was a result of learning a lesson that day, but it really had more to do with the new build that Zeta had taught him, which let him *overwhelm his targets with devils without regard for the related costs*.

His current job configuration was so effective that even a Legendary UBM—albeit a very straightforward one—was no trouble for him whatsoever.

"Legendary Shellstro...done." He had just defeated this great creature, and yet contrary to how he might have acted before, Logan showed no pride in it. All he did was matter-of-factly record the UBM's defeat in the list Zeta had provided him. It was almost eerie how unexcited he was.

The reason for it, however, was clear—it was the peace talks, where he'd been instantly defeated by Tsukuyo.

Equipped with his new build, Logan had entered the scene as if he were the strongest there...only to be erased by the High Priestess's Gloria β, along with all the other Dryfean Masters besides Behemot.

An intense battle had ensued, and he hadn't been involved in any capacity. The fact that he'd been taken out like cannon fodder despite being a Superior had been terrible for his mental health; it was weighing down on him even now.

This was only made worse by the fact that it had been his *fourth* major defeat in a row, and defeating a UBM that'd been handed to him on a silver platter wasn't enough to make the shock go away.

Things might've been different if Zeta were here—she was good at directing and teaching Logan. However, she'd yet to return to Dryfe from the terrorist attack on Altea.

"...Altar's about to have some kind of 'Tournament,' right? Guess it doesn't matter to me anyway. I'm with Dryfe and I have lots of UBMs...and I can't win against people."

It was an event that bound you to Altar in exchange for the right to fight for a chance to battle UBMs.

The terms of the Contract were strict, but UBMs were rare content—enough to make it worth it.

Logan, however, was currently defeating UBMs one after another, yet none of this helped his state of mind at all. Partially because he was the former duel champion, he felt that this game was primarily about competing with other people. Nothing else had much of a point if you were on a losing streak.

As he was now, Logan was actually far stronger than he had been while he was acting tough in the arenas, but his spirits were at an all-time low. It was as though these two things were inversely proportional to each other.

If Sechs knew about Logan's current state, it might've reminded him of Gerbera. Despite its humble size, IF had two members that had been defeated and then grew stronger, but had found this failed to improve their feelings.

"...I wonder if the Unbreakable's participating." Remembering the newbie who had kicked off his chain of defeats, Logan let out a heavy sigh.

The recording of Ray Starling's battle against King of Beasts had once again put him in the spotlight. This consequently led to more people taking a look at Ray's fight against the Hell General, which caused Logan no end of headaches.

As the view count rose, Ray Starling eventually came to be called a "devil-eater."

Overcome by curiosity, Logan had summoned a devil and tried biting into it. The taste was downright hellish, making him conclude that someone who could fight after eating something like *that* was simply crazy.

He still wanted to get back at Ray Starling, but the last time he'd tried that without ample preparation he'd been instantly erased by Tsukuyo Fuso. This time he intended to attempt it only after he'd become as strong as possible.

[The UBM, "Borer Deathbug, Shellstro," was defeated.]

[Selecting MVP...]

["Logan Goddhart" was selected as MVP.]

["Logan Goddhart" is presented with an MVP special reward—"Borer Deathspear, Shellstro."]

"Oh." Following that message, an MVP reward appeared in Logan's hand.

Shellstro's focus on penetration had made its reward take the form of a spear. At first glance it might appear very simple, but there were a few elements of the design that deserved a closer look.

It was black like the UBM's shell and generally didn't deviate much from the usual form of a spear, but it was also covered in sharp, insect-like decoration. Some would find it appealing, others cringey...

"It's so cool..."

...and Logan was the former.

To him, Shellstro's design was almost as cool as that of Viledragon's Prideblade, Woltgyzur—his current favorite—a weapon that resembled nothing so much as a generic key chain with a dragon twisted around a sword.

Hell General, Logan Goddhart was an elementary school boy in real life and his tastes reflected this perfectly.

Regardless, Logan was done here. Feeling good about receiving an MVP reward he liked, he made his way back to Vandelheim.

"That was the last one on the list I could do. Now I gotta go back and do the homework Zeta left."

Shellstro was the final of the eighteen UBMs that Logan could defeat on his own. Those remaining were more difficult than this, so it had been decided that he would beat them with Zeta's support.

"I hope she comes back soon... Oh. That reminds me..."

Though Zeta hadn't returned to *Infinite Dendrogram*, they had talked a bit by email. According to her, IF was planning to do something big soon.

Their leader—King of Crime, Sechs Würfel—had been imprisoned in the gaol since the last war, and Logan had been informed that he was about to break out.

The gaol was a game system meant to confine players who'd committed major crimes, so Logan wasn't even sure if it was even *possible* to escape it. However, Zeta and the other long-time members of IF seemed to have no doubt that he'd succeed.

Sechs Würfel... I wonder what he's like, Logan thought.

Regardless, he had been told that once Sechs broke out of the gaol, they would all separately head to Tenchi in the distant east, where Illegal Frontier would truly set their plans in motion.

I'm in the clan, but I haven't met the leader yet... Actually, I haven't met any members at all besides Zeta. Logan had never been part of any clan before IF, so he was looking forward to seeing his clanmates.

...I'm probably the weakest of us all though, he thought. The repeated losses had stripped him of his confidence, and despite the fact that he knew next to nothing about the other members of IF, Logan was already assuming the worst.

At this point, he had no means of knowing that a fellow clanmate in the gaol was thinking the same thing as he was.

Chapter Four: The Ring and the Axe

Paladin, Ray Starling

The day after the clan meeting, I went to the knight offices attached to Count Gideon's mansion.

My business here wasn't with the knights, however. I'd come here to visit the facility deeper inside. It was a place I'd been going to whenever I was in Gideon and had free time—the cursed item vault.

I had a part-time job here as a "cleaner" who uncursed the items within. It was an easy activity, since I just had to equip Gouz-Maise and stay next to the cursed items.

Once uncursed, most of them reverted back to being proper, high-quality equipment. There were some that could only maintain their form thanks to the curses and crumbled once they were broken, but apparently there was nothing that could be done about those. As a result, they never held me accountable for those.

This part-time job provided uncursed equipment to Altar and charged my Gouz-Maise with grudge. Both sides benefited from our arrangement. This was relevant now because these uncursed items would be the extra rewards for The Tournaments.

I was glad to find out that my little part-time job would end up helping Azurite.

Another benefit I got out of this was that for every ten inventories I'd uncursed, I could pick any one of the uncursed items.

Having done about sixty inventories now, I could take away a total of six items. And since The Tournaments started tomorrow, I came to take my share before any of them were given away as extra rewards. First come, first served after all.

I was also accompanied by Rook and the Kasumi-Io-Fujinon trio.

However, I still hadn't picked a single item despite having the right to take six. The ones I'd uncursed and looked over either required a higher level than mine, weren't appropriate for my combat style, or were simply rejected by Nemesis.

It was obviously difficult for me to pick six in one day. I could just randomly take items I didn't need, but I'd probably end up just selling them or leaving them to collect dust, which didn't seem like a fitting way to treat the kind of rare equipment that you probably couldn't even find on the market normally. Also, with my MVP rewards, VDA, Storm Visage, and Lifesaving Brooch—a necessity for my combat style—a good number of my equipment slots were already in use anyway.

I couldn't reasonably pick a whole six of these items and frankly didn't even need them all that much in the first place.

That was why I, as the leader of Death Period, decided to give four of the picks to my clan members. Considering that it might increase the clan's overall strength, this seemed like the best use of this reward.

"Are you sure about this?" Rook asked.

"Yeah. The Tournaments starts tomorrow and there's bound to be other stuff going on in the future. If we all can become stronger now, we should just do it."

"YAY! Our leader's so generous!"

"Thank you."

"Th-Thank you..."

The five of us soon arrived at the vault. One of the workers here dealt with the many layers of security and let us go inside.

The vault was full of container-type inventories stacked high on top of one another. Usually this place was dense with grudge that made it feel oppressive, but most of it had been absorbed by Gouz-Maise. Now it felt more like an antique storage area.

"There's so many of them," said Rook.

"And they were all cursed, as well... How did this happen...?"

"Yeah, I had the same question as you guys," I said.

A mountain of cursed weapons that needed this many inventories just to store them... I'd been wondering how exactly this collection came to be. When I'd asked Count Gideon, he said all he knew was that the cursed items had been stored here for most of this land's history. However, I got my answer when Azurite was telling me about the extra rewards.

Apparently, it went all the way back to before Altea was Altea, when the Sacred King defeated The Evil. According to information left behind by

Azurite's ancestors, the city was at one point the base of the King of Kings, which led to it housing a large number of weapons and other kinds of equipment. Before this land was united under the flag of Altar, those who captured the city had tried to get ahold of those weapons, but the vault was so secure that they couldn't even access it.

However, there was one entity who'd opened the vault, and it was the final ruler of the city—The Evil.

It was said that this was why most of The Evil's dependents had powerful equipment. Some of the items in here didn't even have to be equipped—they themselves became monsters that went on to attack people.

Azurite's ancestor and his party had won regardless, but the equipment remained even after The Evil and the dependents were dealt with. However, whether due to The Evil's influence or the fact that they'd been in the center of a war, most of the equipment had become cursed. The mechanisms involved might have been the same as the ones behind the Tenchi curseblades Jubei was using.

Figuring that it wasn't a good idea to have so much cursed gear laying around in what would become the new capital, they decided to move all of it to Gideon—the birthplace of the Sacred King's queen as well as the holy land of duelists even in those bygone days. The reason for that decision was that Gideon already had a special vault meant for storing cursed equipment.

Thus, all cursed gear from then and onwards was moved to Gideon, which eventually led to this place accumulating the collection it had now.

"And that's how it is," I said, finishing off my explanation.

"Now *that* is something... Could this be the cause of all the incidents here in Gideon?"

Yeah, I wondered the same thing, I thought. *It's like the place itself is cursed, and maybe this vault is the reason.*

Anyway, it was time to make our picks.

"Oh yeah...the uncursed inventories are over here, so look around those. Tell the worker if you find something. I also borrowed enough of these magnifying glasses for each of us. They've got Identification on them."

"Okaay!" The room was small, and since she was the loudest, I could only hear Io's response. The others gave their replies as well, though, and went to find gear that suited them.

I moved some distance away from them, towards a different pile of inventories, and began uncursing the gear within like I usually did.

"Well, it is true that we found nothing among those you already uncursed," said Nemesis. "I hope we have better luck with what we work on today."

"Nemesis, keep in mind that we *gotta* pick two items today, so be a bit less strict, okay?"

"Hrm... Very well. But I will not be lenient on weapons."

"Fine, fine." Nemesis had said things like that many times before. She had extremely high standards for any weapons that would take her place in protecting me.

Honestly, though, even I can't imagine myself fighting using anything other than Nemesis... Hm?

"What's wrong, Nemesis? You're all red..."

"...That is for you to guess." *Well, okay.* Anyway, it was time to resume uncursing.

Even if I didn't have much luck with weapons or armor, I could maybe find a useful accessory or two.

An hour passed as I kept uncursing the gear, not finding anything that suited me.

Io had quickly chosen an animalistic set of armor, but everyone else was still deliberating on what to pick. She hadn't left yet, though, instead staying to help Kasumi and Fujinon with their choices.

Rook seemed to be considering his pick very carefully. When I asked why, he said that he was specifically looking for gear that was effective against undead. Apparently, he was thinking ahead to The Tournaments, already considering his fight against the UBM.

Rook's current minion capacity was enough to comfortably fit even Liz. As long as he was able to buy the time to merge using Union Jack, he should have been able to stand his ground even against many stronger Masters. Also, his assumption was that the undead UBM he'd fight wouldn't be very popular. Its capabilities were known, but they didn't stand out much. On top of that, its tier was a mystery. Altar currently didn't have many high-ranking Masters that used debuffs, so Rook believed that he would be able to place fairly high—maybe even reach the top.

Just as I'd thought, Rook had his reasons for picking that specific day.

Speaking of Rook, his partner—Babi—had seemingly grown bored of the search for the right item and was now sleeping in the corner of the vault.

“Hrm. We still are not having any luck,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah.” Most of the gear we’d uncursed today were weapons. Nemesis was extra strict with them, but even if she hadn’t been, normal weapons just weren’t a good fit for my combat style.

If I wasn’t wielding Nemesis, I was just a low-stat vanguard with a couple of heavy-hitting skills. Sure, my HP was pretty high right now, but only Nemesis could use that for offense, so there really was nothing that would serve as an appropriate substitute.

“I really can’t imagine switching to normal weapons at this point,” I said. “Oh. An accessory. It’s been a while since we saw one of those.”

The next item I took out of the inventory I was cleaning was a bracelet. It wasn’t *that* cursed, apparently. The thing was clean after only about a minute.

“Hm...? ‘Big or Small’?” I held it in my hand and found that I could read its name, but all I got for its effects was “Unknown.”

This seemed like a standard case of something needing a higher Identification level. Not even the magnifying glass I had was enough.

...Well, whatever. This seems like a caster item anyway, so I probably won’t use it, I thought.

I put Big or Small away in the inventory for uncursed items and took out the next one...

“...Hm?”

What? I could’ve sworn I’d put the bracelet away, but for some reason, I was still holding it in my left hand.

Or, rather, my bracer was grabbing on to it.

“...Gardranda?” In response to my question, the left bracer moved on its own to put Big or Small on my right wrist.

It was rare for her to act like this. Was the bracelet that important to her? “Well...I guess I could try putting it on.”

“Indeed,” said Nemesis. “With the curse gone, I doubt equipping it will bind it to you or anything of the sort.”

Anyway, I went and put Big or Small on my right wrist.

Once an extra accessory slot was taken, the bracer on my left hand moved on its own to force my finger to move over the floor. It seemed that she was writing something. I followed it with my eyes and made out the words “Say ‘Minimum’...and summon me.”

“...Seriously? You know what will happen if I summon you, right?” I was referring to the drawbacks that followed her summoning. I could be subjected to three different debuffs, get set on fire, or lose control over my body. None of those seemed all that attractive.

In response to these concerns of mine, she only said, “It’s okay... Summon,” before adding, “You still owe me from last time.”

Silence. Yeah, now that she mentioned it, I’d summoned Gardranda in the fight against KoB, but I got the death penalty before I got hit with any of the drawbacks for it. They weren’t on me when I’d returned either, so I just assumed that was how it worked, but Gardranda seemed to be holding a grudge about it.

...Wait, do you even benefit from me getting the drawbacks? I wondered.

“...Well, all right,” I said. “Oh uh, Rook... If something weird happens to me, do something about it, okay?”

“All right.” Rook was quick on the uptake, as always. He was already preparing Liz in case something happened.

With my preparations complete, I went and answered Gardranda’s request.

“Minimum. Miasmaflame Princess—Gardranda.” Only after saying that did I realize that I hadn’t specified how long I wanted the summon to last or how much MP I wanted to put into it.

However, it seemed like the summoning worked regardless, and the Miasmaflame Bracers flew from my wrists.

A moment later, Big or Small began to shine and the bracers vanished...but Gardranda was nowhere in sight.

“...HUH?!”

I had no idea what was going on at first. Miasmaflame Princess was a skill that used the bracers as a medium to summon Gardranda, and the bracers themselves became Gardranda’s own equipment. However, right now I couldn’t see Gardranda *or* the bracers.

“What happened... No way!” I cried.

Does Big or Small actually set summoned monsters free?! If that’s the case, then she must’ve gone off somewhere and...

“Hm...?” And then, just when I was on the verge of panicking, I noticed that everyone else was looking at me in surprise.

No—not at me. They were actually looking at something above my head.

“R-Ray... Your head...” said Nemesis.

“...This isn’t the first time I’ve felt like this.” It reminded me of the time Franklin, dressed as a penguin, had given me a drug with a particular furry side effect.

Remembering that event, I put my hand up to my head...and felt something strange there.

“...Ngh.” The feeling was followed by a tingling sensation on my finger. If my avatar had pain on, it probably would’ve hurt me.

I slowly lowered the hand so I could get a good look at it, only to see a small creature biting into my finger. It looked like a *tiny person with exaggerated proportions*. They had brownish-red skin, a set of horns, and their hands were covered by a familiar pair of bracers.

Either this was an insane coincidence, or the person was...

“...Gardranda?” I asked as I set her down on my palm.

“KSHAA!”

...That response wasn’t in a language I could understand, but it seemed like a “yes” to me.

It was obvious that Big or Small was doing this, but...

“...I’m gonna log out and look this thing up.”

“That is for the best...”

“KSHAA!”

...I have no clue what you’re saying.

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Conveniently, the details of the ring were on the wiki.

Big or Small was a magic item created a long time ago, and so far about four of them had been found.

Its special effect was the adjustment of summoning output. By saying “Minimum” or “Reduce” while summoning, you could summon creatures at low cost in exchange for making them weaker. Meanwhile, adding “Maximum” or “Increase” made the summon stronger in exchange for making the involved costs steeper.

However, the enhancement function wasn’t very useful because it increased the costs so much—up to several *dozen* times—while only strengthening the summon by a one-tenth for the extra MP or whatever else you spent.

"And using the Minimum function makes the summon basically powerless in exchange for reducing the cost to almost nothing. That includes Gardranda's drawbacks, right?"

I'd unsummoned her before logging out and nothing had happened to me yet.

"KSHAA!"

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" I said. "It's cool that I can summon you so casually, but it's kind of tough that we can't actually talk with each other."

"Then why not buy a non-humanoid translation item?" Rook asked. "You should be able to find one in Gideon's markets."

"Oh, they have things like that? I guess I'll look around," I said. "I don't think I ever saw you use it, though."

"That would be because I can understand them without it."

...Yeah, I wouldn't put that past you.

"Anyway, it's looking like this will be one of the items I take," I said. Gardranda would probably hold a grudge if I didn't. "Where is she, anyway?"

"On your head." *Again? Does she like being there or somethi...? Hm...?*

"Hey, Nemesis. I'm feeling a bit of a tingle on my head..."

"Of course you would. Little Gardranda is gnawing on your head. In fact, she's eating your hair."

"How about you STOP HER?!" *What a way to remind me that she was a man-eating goblin! She's after my body—I mean my flesh!*

"KSHAA!"

"Hrm, even I can understand what she just said. It must have been 'delicious,' or at least something along those lines," said Nemesis, slightly salivating. "Ray, if I may ask—"

"HELL NO!" *One man-eater is one too many!*

Anyway, I picked Big or Small as my first reward and another hour had passed since.

I'd already unsummoned Gardranda Minimum—otherwise known as "Smol Gar." She didn't seem to like being unsummoned, probably because she wanted to keep gnawing on my head, but I was able to convince her by promising that I'd summon her again after buying a translation item.

She'd actually bit me so hard I was bleeding, but the damage was light enough that even my healing magic could take care of it. Well, the damage obviously wasn't as bad as a lost arm.

Next time I summon her, I won't tell her to not bite me...but I'll at least try to make her hold back a bit, I thought.

By this point, Rook and Fujinon had also decided what they'd pick, meaning that the only items left to select were Kasumi's and my second one.

"Kasumi is a High Summoner, so wouldn't it be best for her to take a summon-related accessory like the one Ray got?" Rook asked.

"It ain't summoning skills she needs, but defense! Even *I* can take her out in one hit!" Io asserted.

"...Io, you're all about offense. Most rear guards in your level range wouldn't survive your attacks," commented Fujinon. They were all hard at work picking the right item for Kasumi.

"What about you?" Rook asked me. "Do you think you'll find your second one soon?"

"Hrm... I've been uncursing and looking at everything, but I've hit a bit of a roadblock here." After uncursing Big or Small, I went on to work on weapons again, but progress had suddenly stagnated.

One weapon shortly after I'd resumed was taking an unusually long time to uncurse. Up until now, even the worst curses hadn't taken much more than five minutes to remove, but I'd been absorbing grudge from this one for a whole hour now.

At first, I thought that Gouz-Maise was just full and couldn't take any more, but when I switched from this weapon to another, that one still took less than a minute to fully uncurse.

This meant that it wasn't about me or my greaves, but this weapon in particular—the large battleaxe wrapped in a jet-black cloth.

I'd considered leaving it aside, but it had sparked my curiosity, so I was still trying to remove the curse.

I was doing all of this with the weapon on the floor, by the way. Unlike some cursed items, it didn't seem to be leaking its aura into the air around it... In fact, it felt like it was the other way around—that the dense curses were tightly *sticking* to it instead, like coagulated blood.

And no matter how much grudge I'd vacuumed out, it didn't seem to be losing any of those curses. Clearly, the amount of grudge on this axe was far beyond that on any other weapon I'd encountered so far.

"I guess the curses are just that strong?" I said.

"Perhaps," said Rook.

"...Maybe I should just take it as a source of grudge, then." I'd stocked up on a lot of grudge by now, but I could see myself using all of that up in the coming battles.

I might even be forced to use Big or Small to summon Gardranda Maximum.

Using more MP is fine and all, but since Big or Small influences the length and effect of the demerits too, doing that would mean certain death for me no matter which of the three I got.

"A one-handed axe, eh?" said Nemesis. "The fact that you cannot know what you will get once you uncurse it makes it rather like the gacha. Well, that *would* suit you. It seems like a fine choice to me."

"Hm?" Her words made me slightly confused. "But it's a weapon," I said. "You'd usually have something against those." Nemesis had extremely strict standards for weapons—and shields—that I would use instead of her. She hadn't approved of any weapon I'd uncursed so far or any weapon in the shops we'd visited. Yet this axe...passed?

Apparently, Nemesis hadn't even realized that she'd approved of a weapon until I pointed that fact out. She looked at the axe, blinking, and said, "That *is* true... How should I put it...? My intuition is telling me that it is a worthy pick.”

“Your intuition?”

“I happen to be half-weapon, so there are things I understand exactly because of that.”

She—Nemesis the Maiden-Arms Embryo—crouched down and looked at the axe on the floor.

“This is an amazing weapon,” she asserted. “And...I believe I have seen something like this before.”

“Oh. Wouldn’t that be your second form? It’s black...and it’s an axe...kind of,” said Kasumi.

“No, I doubt it’s reminding me of myself.”

“Then it’s my Five-Ring!”

“That one is nothing like it in size,” said Nemesis. “And it is not about shape, but...its aura?”

Nemesis seemed to be trying to recall exactly what this weapon reminded her of. I tried thinking with her, but I was also drawing a blank.

Still, Nemesis was okay with it, and it was useful as a source of grudge, so it looked like I’d be taking this one-handed axe.

“...What’s its name, anyway?” I said, bringing the Identification glass close to it.

Cursed items had a tendency to have names that referred to their nature, like how my BR Armor was CBR Armor at first. I thought of just taking a look at this one, but...

“Name: [] An unnamed axe.

The axe that was not ■?# by ■?#.

The axe that ■?# to ■?# in ■?#.

The axe that is ■?#, as well as ■?# to the ■?#.”

That was all that Identification was giving me.

The name field was empty—no, there wasn’t even a blank space in there—while the explanation had holes all over it.

Unlike with Big or Small, it wasn’t just a problem of low Identification level. This felt closer to looking at Shu’s hidden stats right after I’d first started.

“...I guess it’s an old crafted item, and the person who made it just didn’t give it a name?” After all, the only line I could fully read was “an unnamed axe.”

Perhaps the craftsman hadn’t been satisfied with it?

Looking at the actual axe, the handle didn’t seem to be complete in places. Also, it really did seem like a weapon from a very long time ago. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was older than any of the ones I’d managed to purify.

“Excuse me...is Death Period here?”

While I was considering the axe, the door to the vault opened up and I heard someone address us with those words.

The one saying them was a youth with dark circles under his eyes, as well as the manager of this vault—Count Gideon.

He was even younger than me, but he was in charge of the entirety of Gideon County, which was among the most important areas in the kingdom. In that role, he had always been directly and strongly affected by the many disasters inflicted upon the city. You could say that he was among the greatest victims of the Gouz-Maise Gang, that lab-coat bastard, Exadragon King, and Hannya.

That was probably why he had those bags under his eyes.

“Count Gideon. What brings you here?” I asked.

“I have come here because there was something I wanted to talk to your clan about... Have you found anything you like?”

“Yes. Three of us have already made their choices, leaving only her and me,” I said as I pointed at Kasumi. With Count Gideon being sort of like my boss for this part-time job, I was naturally speaking in a more respectful manner.

“...Quite curious, that,” said Nemesis telepathically.

What?

“Well, you speak to Azurite—the first princess and acting ruler—as though she were merely a good friend, yet to Liliana—a knight—as well as the count here, you speak with reverence.”

Azurite did tell me that I can talk to her casually in private conversations... Hell, now that I think about it, for both Azurite and Liliana, I’m just talking to them the same way I started out talking to them.

“Is that how it is?”

That is exactly how it is.

“Oh, right. Count Gideon, would you happen to know anything about this axe?” I asked.

"An axe...?" he said as he looked down on it and tilted his head. "No, I do not... You there, what are the records for it?"

He was talking to one of the workers outside the vault, the same one who'd recorded our picks. After looking at the many documents, the worker gave a shake of the head.

"There are no records left on it, sire. Though the number on the ledger does imply that it was stored away here around when Altar came to be."

"...A significant number of the items here were acquired by defeating The Evil. In many cases, their details and origins only became evident once they had been uncursed and their functions were revealed... I suppose all we know is that this is one of them. The documents will have to be rechecked after the Tournaments' reward distribution...no, before that... Oh, my apologies."

"No need for that..." Using cursed weapons while they were still cursed was risky, especially when Identification couldn't give you much information about them, so I could understand where Count Gideon was coming from. The way he was clutching his stomach made him seem like he was overburdened with responsibility, though... *He was way more lively before and after Franklin's Game,* I thought.

"So, what was your question about the axe, again?" he asked.

"May I have it as my second reward even though I never managed to uncurse it?" My question made the count a bit surprised, but he quickly nodded in approval.

"I certainly would not be against that. I did say that you are free to pick anything within this vault. Though...are you certain?"

"In my case, the curse is a blessing in its own right."

"I see. Very well, then. I will ensure that it is done." The count knew that I converted grudge into magic, so it didn't take much to convince him.

And just like that, it was decided that my second reward would be this nameless one-handed axe.

Careful not to touch it directly, I put it away in my inventory.

"Now, Count Gideon," I said. "You mentioned having some business with us?"

"Yes," he said. "It has come to my attention that your clan is looking for a base here in the city."

...How did he hear about that? I wondered. *Did he get it from his ninja*

intelligence network?

"Mr. Figaro told me as much when he came to visit today to greet me after being away for so long."

Oh...I guess that was it.

"Well, we are," I said. "We had no luck in Altea for a variety of reasons..."

"I am aware. The city of Gideon would deeply appreciate it if a powerful clan like yours would make your home here. It would certainly be reassuring, at least..."

I'd heard that even during the Gloria incident, a large clan had stood against the dragon to protect their hometown. The count was probably thinking of that.

"Oh, did you come to welcome us?" I asked. "We actually planned to greet you after we were done here, so..."

"No. It is a bit more than that." More? I wasn't sure what he meant by that. Frankly, I was confused.

"Since Death Period wishes to secure a base here in Gideon, I would like to introduce you to a property you might find interesting."

And just like that, the confusion was gone. Count Gideon had come here to offer us some real estate.

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After that, we went to take a look at the property the count wanted to offer us.

I wasn't sure why the count himself was introducing it, but I figured there had to be a reason.

While we rode the carriage, the count was resting his head on the door and, seemingly without realizing it, saying—almost *moaning*—things like "My stomach hurts," "I hope The Tournaments go well," "We'll not be terrorized again, will we?" "I wish I could find a different job..."

The city had been threatened so many times in recent memory that it seemed to have taken a toll on his mental health.

He was younger than me, but the stress was already making his hair turn gray. I really hoped he got some well-deserved rest once The Tournaments were over and the matter with Dryfe was settled.

The count was actually seated in the carriage's frontal compartment, separated from us. It was probably so that he could take a nap or maybe even get some work done.

...He really *didn't* have it easy, huh?

Besides him, the people in the carriage on the way to the property in question were myself, Fujinon, Io, and...

"Hm..."

...Shu, whom I'd called over using my Telepathy Cuffs.

He was the clan's most veteran Master and already had experience with *Dendro* real estate from when he rented a popcorn factory, so I had him come along for advice.

Rook had decided not to come with us. Kasumi had yet to pick her item, so he'd stayed behind to help her. I was wondering why Fujinon and Io also didn't stay for that, but as they'd left the vault and followed after me, I'd notice them give Kasumi a hearty thumbs-up.

...Well, they're cheering their friend on. Even I could tell that much.

"Real estate, huh...?" Shu, who was sitting next to me, said as he looked outside.

It seemed that something was on his mind, but I couldn't tell what it was—so I just went and asked. "What's up, bro?"

"Well, we're on the way to check out some pawrperty, but I don't remember there being much good real estate here." His words prompted me to look outside. The carriage was on the main road, but the buildings on every side of it had this gloomy look to them. It wasn't a nice thing to say, but it reminded me of something I'd seen on TV—slums in the big cities of developed nations.

There also seemed to be a degree of social disorder here, and you could see a bunch of establishments with less-than-wholesome signs on them.

Also, the faces of the people here—or rather, the looks in their eyes—were less than welcoming.

"So this is the..."

"The eighth district, yeah," said Shu. "It's the place with the thieves' and pimps' guilds. There's no district in Gideon that's got a worse public order...fur real."

Well, uh... That sure explained why it was different from the first and fourth districts I always visited. Though with Rook's group regularly going to the pimps' guild, he was probably used to it by now.

"WOW! Fujinon, look! Over there! That sign's kinda lewd—it's got panties on it! There's also some signs I can't read 'cause of the mosaics! That must be the underage visual censorshi— GHUH...?!"

"Io, please have some discretion! You're a girl!"

The district seemed to have gotten Io excited.

Maybe a little *too* excited, seeing that Fujinon had to interfere.

"...Is it a good idea to go through here in a carriage this fancy?" I asked.

"Well, this pawrt of town ain't peaceful, but no one's dumb enough to go after a carriage with the count's family crest on it. Hell, I'd say we're perfectly safe."

...Makes sense. Forget the count—if they went after it now, they'd be dealing with a goddamn Superior, I thought.

"Do not forget yourself," said Nemesis telepathically. "Your mere presence has made bandits shrivel up in terror." *Hey, that was more about the other three setting an oppressive mood...*

"Hrmm... But just what kind of real estate can there be in an area such as this?" Nemesis wondered.

"I'm as curious as you are. Though, since the count himself is introducing it, I'm sure it'll be good."

"Ah! I know!" Io said as she puffed her chest.

"You do? Let's hear it," I said.

"It's gotta be a place where there was a massacre! Two Mafias or something fought and everyone living inside died! Since then, it's been overrun by ghosts and no one wants to buy it! That's why he'll have you use your MVP reward and anti-undead skills to purify it, then sell it to you for cheap!"

"I see..."

...Why does that sound so plausible?

"Io, that would be a literal haunted house," said Fujinon.

"Well, the kingdom as a whole is kinda haunted, so..."

"What was that, Shu?" I said.

"Ah, furget I said anything."

...Well, I also told Azurite that it felt like the country was cursed, but still...

"Anyway, since the count himself is introducing it, I really don't think it'll be a haunted house or anything," said Fujinon.

"Huhh? What's your guess, then?" Io asked.

"I think he'll kick out the squatters from some abandoned building and then build our base over it. Death Period will help with the evictions."

"...That's a scary thought," I said. That seemed like it'd spark some serious trouble with the locals, so I'd honestly be against that.

I could only hope neither Io nor Fujinon were right.

"Seriously, what *is* he gonna offer us..." I wondered out loud.

Once the carriage left the main road, I saw we were heading straight towards a familiar building.

It was one of Gideon's thirteen arenas. There was one in each district, and this was the eighth's.

"Huh. This is my first time seeing this one," I mused. Each of these lesser arenas stood at the end of the main roads connected to the central arena in the heart of the city. With the exception of the central one, the arenas were more or less identical in structure, and this one here was just like the others. Though for some reason, I felt like it was more desolate than the others. "We have arrived," said Count Gideon as the carriage stopped. That meant that the property was somewhere nearby.

However, upon getting off and looking around, all I saw were stores, taverns...nothing that could be called a mansion.

"Count Gideon, where *is* the property you wish to introduce to us?" I asked.

"This one here," the count said. He pointed to something, but I couldn't see what he was pointing at.

Is it...behind the eighth arena? I wondered.

"Mr. Ray Starling, leader of Death Period," he said as he looked straight at me with those tired eyes...

"Would you buy the eighth arena as your base?"

...and made an offer I could have never imagined.

Chapter Five: Homes, Sweet Homes

Paladin, Ray Starling

It went without saying, but arenas were extremely important to Gideon. They were the reason why it was called "the City of Duels," and it was the only city in this world that boasted a whole thirteen of them. One could say that they were the skeleton that defined Gideon's shape.

Normally, someone in charge of the city would never even think of letting them go.

However, the count had explained himself a little further. "There are two reasons that made the eighth arena unnecessary for us," he'd said.

The first reason was fairly obvious: its poor location.

Back when it was a city-state and a few centuries after it had become a part of Altar, Gideon didn't have any problems of that sort, but over time the eighth district became an unlawful place. By the time the Count Gideon of several generations earlier realized this, it had already felt as though the place had always been in such a state. This had caused commonfolk to start avoiding the eighth district, and as it became a hot spot for outlaws and groups in the legal gray zone—such as pimps and thieves—the eighth arena began seeing less and less activity.

Another reason for the drop in activity was that the eighth arena was still a publicly run, clean establishment that hadn't become corrupted by the lawless district where it stood, and with the locals preferring to bet on the more intense, unofficial underground events, even the people living right next door almost never visited it. It wasn't uncommon for there to be duels hosted at the eighth arena without a single spectator.

Despite that, the barrier equipment required regular inspections and maintenance which could only be done by experts, whose services did not come cheap. Combined with the cost of cleaning and maintenance of other facilities, the eighth arena had become unprofitable to run.

The second problem was that as the spectators decreased, so had the number of duelists. Due to Gloria's attack and the previous war, Gideon's arenas had lost a significant number of their fighters, tian and Master alike. Some of those fighters had been rankers.

And with the duelists—the entertainers themselves—leaving, the city's dueling industry suffered an overall decline. This was made worse as more and more wealthy Altarians moved to other countries and the kingdom's economy suffered. These days, the only duels that could attract a full arena of spectators were those between high-rankers as well as special events like The Clash of the Superiors. There were also fewer people renting dueling areas for sparring matches, and the eighth arena almost stopped being used entirely.

And with every arena's revenue dropping, the deficit at which the eighth was being run had become worse than ever.

That was when Count Gideon had begun to consider letting go of the arena.

The Gideon family had stored away immense wealth that would keep the city financially secure for now, but that obviously wasn't unlimited. The treasury was also losing significant amounts to things like rewards to Masters, so the count wanted to reduce his losses somehow.

At first, he'd thought of giving the arena away to the royal family so the knights could use it as a training area, but decided against that because a location situated in a district often known as "The Town of Vices" seemed like an inappropriate donation to a royal lineage.

Instead, he'd gone on to look for someone to sell it to. Even though it was in a bad location, an arena was superb real estate that many powerful clans would desperately want to have.

However, the clan at the top—The Lunar Society—was an awful group on which to bestow that particular benefit. Considering their negotiations with the royal family, it wasn't unlikely that they would use the arena as a base of operations from which they would spread their influence into the eighth district—and then the rest of Gideon.

The count had then considered K&R, which conveniently boasted a number of prominent duelists among their ranks, but he wasn't sure about the morality of selling such a property to a PK clan. In a way, they seemed like an even worse option than the religious group.

The once-great Babylonian Battlegroup was no longer active enough for such a purchase, while AETL Union, which was a combination of the princesses' and Liliana's fanclubs, would never leave their idols' home in Altea.

Holding on to the eighth arena was a net negative, yet the count couldn't find a viable potential buyer.

Just when he was at a loss for what to do with it, a new clan appeared on the scene, and its name was Death Period.

In other words...us.

When he heard that we were looking for a base here in Gideon, the count saw it as an opportunity to finally sell the eighth arena.

We were Altar's top second clan, we were trustworthy, and we had the power to set up in the eighth district without a problem—in fact, there was a chance that the locals would fear us and our presence would act as a deterrent against lawlessness. We even had the duel champion, Figaro, so selling it to us meant giving him easy access to the arena facilities for training and the like.

We were also a clan that had a whole four Superiors, which was unheard of here on the western side of the continent, so the count was sure that we would have the money to purchase it as well as the funds to maintain it.

Basically, we were the best potential buyers the count could ever ask for.

The price, by the way, was 15,000,000,000 lir for a full purchase or 500,000,000 lir for yearly rent.

"...That's cheaper than I'd have guessed," Shu and I said in unison.

"HUH?!" Io and Fujinon exclaimed, also in unison.

Their response really highlighted how absurd my words really were.

My sense of scale here is a real mess, huh? I thought. *That's probably because even the armor I'm wearing is worth 200,000,000 lir.*

Shu also was a guy who could spend billions on a single battle. There were few things King of Destruction destroyed better than his own bank account.

Purchasing the arena was a bit too expensive even for us, though. Due to the recent payments they'd had to make, Shu's and Figaro's finances weren't in a good state right now, so we couldn't buy the place even if we pooled everything we had.

The yearly rent, however, was perfectly payable. I had eight billion on me, so I could cover the first year with just my pocket money.

And apparently these prices actually *were* on the cheaper side. The historical and functional value of an arena was astronomical, but the count had priced this one after considering its location and deterioration from age.

"...It's a hell of a facility to have, though," I said.

The arena was all that we wanted out of a base and then some. First of all, there were personal rooms. Just like the other arenas, this one had box seats, all of which were equipped with air conditioning and the like. All they needed was some furniture to become high-class hotel rooms.

Since there were a whole twelve of them and since Figaro and Hannya would live at Figaro's home, there were more than enough for each of us. We might have difficulties if we got a few more members, but in that case we could then just use the waiting rooms or remodel the place to make new ones—the count said that we were allowed to do that. We didn't even have to make a deposit.

The building also had the large baths that the girls wanted so much. An arena was, in a way, a sports facility, so it wasn't surprising that it would have places for people to wash off the sweat. They were properly split into men's and women's baths too.

Io and Fujinon took a look at them and said that though they needed some cleaning, they were up to par.

There was a space the arena's staff used for meetings, which could easily function as a meeting room for our clan. And the building obviously had the space for monsters that Rook and Kasumi wanted. Designed to enable even battle royales, the arena stage itself was more than large enough for that.

Of course, we couldn't ignore the cafeteria that Nemesis insisted we have. Though, since we had no cook, we'd have to hire someone or cook for ourselves.

Somewhat unexpectedly, though, we also had the pool that Marie and Babi wanted.

Just like the Roman Colosseum was used for various kinds of events, so was this arena equipped with functions to support several types of competitions. Among these were aquatic contests, and thus the stage could be turned into what was essentially a pool.

Of course, filling it up with water would be costly and maybe take some time, but the arena was properly supplied in that regard. Though, considering how little business this place was having recently, the pipes would probably have to be checked first.

Ignoring Shu's "popcorn factory" request, the arena ticked every box our clan had. On top of that, it offered a barrier function that none of us had even considered.

The advantage of having a duel barrier in your base was immense. It would let us freely test new combat tactics and skills, as well as spar without worrying about how much longer our reservation would last. We didn't have to care about any prying eyes either, and that might end up being the most beneficial thing of all.

All of this combined made the arena perhaps the best base we could have here in Gideon. It seemed like a miracle that we even had the opportunity to buy it.

The only real problem with it was the price.

"So buying it is thirty years of rent... What do you think, bro?" I asked Shu.

"Time's thrice as fast here, so that's ten years IRL," he said. "I'm pawsitive we won't be movin' away furom it, so it's cheaper to just buy it. Though, it's hard fur us to get the money fur the purchase right now."

"Yeah. It's a pretty serious deal, so I think we should discuss it with the rest of the clan first."

Sure, they entrusted the matter of the base to me, but this feels like too important a purchase to make without their approval... I thought.

"Huhhh? You know you can pay the rent for the first year and then just save up the money to buy it later, riiight?"

Oh yeah. That's an option.

Shu was funneling his wealth into ammo and Figaro also wasn't in a good situation financially, but after the thing with Dryfe was over, we'd have plenty of time to gather the billions to own the property permanently.

"Also, it'd be pretty awful if you saved up to buy it only for the kingdom to go bye-bye by next yeeear. It won't hurt as much if you just rent it for a year, will iiit?"

"If that's a joke, I'm not laughing... Hold on."

That was when I realized that I was hearing a familiar voice that didn't belong here. Turning around...

"Eh he!"

...I saw an eldritch abomination.

Yes—*Miss* Eldritch Abomination herself.

"...And so we're joined by the fox," said Shu.

"That you are, Mr. Beaaar," she said in response.

This reminded me of my first encounter with her.

But how did she...? Oh, I get it now, I thought as I held up my left Miasmaflame Bracer, ready to fire it into my own shadow.

A moment later, *a silhouette jumped out of it* and, upon landing on the ground, corrected its posture and gave me a bow.

"...Tsukikage." Another familiar face—Miss Eldritch's right-hand man, Eishiro Tsukikage.

"Greetings," he said. "You noticed me faster than you did before."

Of course I would, I thought. I had no idea how long they'd been there, but apparently they were both hiding in my shadow.

"So...why are you two here?" I asked.

"We saw you, so we decided to follow you," she said. "Nothin' more to it!"

"Who in their right mind slips into a guy's shadow just because they see him?! Why are you in Gideon in the first place?!"

"Hmm? We're here for The Tournaments, of couuurse. We gathered some volunteers from our faithful and brought 'em all with uuus!"

That was a bit of a shock to me. Thinking about it now, The Lunar Society did have the right to participate in that event, but...

"...You know you have to sign a Contract to participate in it, right?" I asked. She obviously wasn't the type to tie herself down, especially after just being freed from one such obligation.

"You don't gotta go to war if you don't want the extra rewards," she said. "And we don't do crime, anyway, so signin' a Contract that prevents that doesn't mean anythin'. The Lunar Society is a clean religious organization."

"...Correct me if I'm wrong, but you did *kidnap me*, right? Also, Azurite said you implied you'd be willing to commit acts of terrorism."

"Huhh? You're a Master, and as you suuurely know, crimes against Masters aren't criiimes. And implyin' somethin' isn't the same as doing it, is iiit?"

...Her face as she said that was *so* annoying. It felt like she was in a better mood than usual and wanted to make it as obvious as possible.

"Well, whatever," I said. "At least we won't have to worry about The Lunar Society doing anything stupid in the kingdom."

"Whaddya mean? We only brought less than a third of our fighters. The rest can still do whatever they want. Kage isn't in the tourney either, so that's another negotiating card I can playyy!"

Yeah, I should've expected something like this, I thought. I could totally understand why Azurite called her "parasite."

"By the way, you buyin' this arena?" she asked.

"That's the plan... What about it?"

She put in an even wider smile and said, "If you're not takin' it, I thought we should pick it up instead. A little bit o' blackmail and some negotiatin' and the count would—"

"Count Gideon, we'll take one year's worth of rent for now, please. I'm paying out of pocket."

"Oh. Excellent. Thank you very much."

Not wanting Miss Eldritch to have this establishment, I instantly agreed to the rent arrangement.

Thus, it was decided that this arena would be Death Period's base.

Miss Eldritch, by the way, instantly left, shouting, "I'll get back at you in The Tournameeeent!" as she did.

"...What did she come here for, anyway?" I wondered.

"Fur you. To light a fire under ya, to be precise," said Shu. *A fire?* "If she really wanted to take the arena, she'd have gotten it without tellin' us a thing. All she came here to do was act unbearable, annoy you, incite you...and motivate you to rent this place."

"Huhhh...?"

"Also, she said that Tsukikage won't pawrticipate in The Tournaments...but that implies that she herself *will*. That was a roundabout way of sayin' that she won't commit any crimes against the kingdom."

"...I see." *She's shady, openly awful at times, and filthy when it comes to money...but I suppose she's not rotten to the core, at least... Even if she did kidnap me once.*

"Anyway, we got our base now," said Shu.

"Yeah," I said. "Hm...?"

As I nodded to his words, I noticed that he was looking at the eighth arena. His real eyes were hidden by his costume, so I mostly had to guess from body language and stuff, but it felt like he was putting on a so-called "distant look."

It seemed like he was looking at the arena, but it felt like his eyes were fixed at something else entirely.

We just got a base for our clan... Does he find that significant in some way I don't quite get right now?

◇

After signing the contract, we told all the other clan members that we got a base and had everyone—except Lei-Lei, of course—gather at the eighth arena.

The fact that the base was an arena was so unexpected that even Rook looked surprised.

Despite the shock, though, all of them approved of my decision. In fact, the more experienced among us were extremely happy to have an environment where they could test out the aces up their sleeves without worrying about anyone seeing them.

And I'm glad they like it, I thought.

"But man... The crazy good armor, the money for the powder, Big or Small, the axe, and now this arena. That's a lot of things to get in one day..."

I felt like all of this was a little *too* lucky.

Nemesis often noted that my luck was on the bad side, so this made me concerned about what would happen once the pendulum swung back and I had to pay my dues for all the good luck I'd been having today.

"I understand why you would harbor such worries, but I do not believe they are necessary," she said.

"Why?"

"Because nothing that you received today was by mere luck. The material you exchanged for armor and money was your reward for defeating the whale. The bracelet and axe were your rewards for your part-time job uncursing the items in the vault. And it is because of your hard work that this arena has remained here and Count Gideon began to trust you enough to make this offer. All you have received is merely the results of your actions. It just happened to arrive on the same day. There is nothing more to it."

“...Really?”

“Be proud! Your actions deserve to be acknowledged!” she said, poking my chest.

Her words and actions made my anxiety wash away.

“Thanks for that, Nemesis.”

“That’s the spirit!” she said with a bright smile.

“Yep, she’s completely right,” added Marie as she barged into the conversation. “As someone who has watched you since your early days here, I fully agree with her!”

Nemesis seemed dissatisfied with Marie’s sudden appearance and her words, apparently struggling to keep herself from pointing out that Marie was actually responsible for my first death penalty.

“By the way, Ray,” Marie continued. “Wouldn’t you say that now is a good time to use it?”

“Use...what?”

“The thing you told us about yesterday! The ticket you won at the event!”

“...Oh!” So much had happened that I’d almost forgotten about the ticket.

I’d recently participated in a battle royale event at an uninhabited island—The Anniversary—and since I was one of the three winners, Cheshire had given me a gacha ticket that guaranteed an S-rank pull.

“You’re also participating in tomorrow’s Tournament, aren’t you? I’d say it’s a great time for you to power up. And let’s not forget you’ve just gotten a perfect environment to train and maybe test out whatever you pull.”

Marie was right—it seemed like there was no better time to use it than now.

Juliet and Alto had both gotten MVP rewards from their tickets, and Rook’s natural S-rank pull had also given him an MVP reward, so if that happened to me too...I’d have my fourth.

Though, since the MVP rewards from gacha were adjusted to suit the late tians who’d once had them, whatever I received might end up difficult for me to use—which was why I would probably need to test it in our arena before tomorrow’s Tournament.

I reached into my inventory and took out the ticket, making everyone gather around.

“...What is it about gacha that makes you want to watch people pull?”

“Let me explain, Fujinon,” said Marie. “It’s because people are attracted to things that have an unknown result. Also, if it’s other people pulling, you don’t suffer at all even if the pulls are trash.”

“...Marie,” I said. “This ticket guarantees an S-rank pull. It literally can’t be trash. Whatever comes out will be worth *at least* the maximum amount you can put into the gacha, which is 10,000,000 lir.”

“But in your case, it can easily be a hundred-in-one set of Tomb Labyrinth Exploration Permits, don’t you think?”

“...Don’t joke like that...please.” I’d pulled even more of those after the second one...

At least the unsigned ones can be sold... I thought.

“R-Ray, are you certain about this?” asked Nemesis. She’d been encouraging me just a few minutes ago, but even she looked concerned now.

“D-Don’t worry, Nemesis... I’m not *that* unlucky.”

My luck really wasn’t good, but yeah...

“But...when it comes to gacha, you are predisposed towards downright comedic pulls.”

“I’m not gonna accept that assessment!”

“I still believe you should save it,” she insisted. “Considering how the gacha has been until now, you should pull when you are cornered and out of options. Does it not seem like you might receive something very powerful then?”

“I don’t wanna rely on gacha in a situation like that!”

“But think about how it’s been in the past...”

“No! My past self was weak! Here and now, I will surpass it!”

“I would prefer it if you did not waste such impressive words on something as mundane as a gacha pull...”

Shaking away Nemesis’s words, I mustered up my courage and used the ticket! It dissolved into shining bits of light and a rainbow-colored crystal appeared in my hand as though to replace it. This was an S-rank capsule, just like the one Rook had gotten on his pull.

I’d used the gacha many times since then, but this was the first time I had an S-rank capsule myself. I was overwhelmed, but the S-rank was guaranteed in this case. The real challenge began now.

"...Hm?" Hidden within the crystal's rainbow light, I noticed a bunch of letters written on its surface. It said *Open only in spacious areas*. "...This isn't the first time I've seen this text." The capsule that had given me Silver had it as well.

"In that case, the prize within the capsule must be at least as large as Silver," said Nemesis. "That rules out most kinds of equipment."

"And it's definitely not a Permit or anything. What a relief..."

"...You were actually worried?"

"...Yeah. I put on a bold face, but I'm well aware of my gacha luck..."

"If only you were aware of your fashion sense, as well..."

Anyway, it was time to open the capsule. We needed a large space, but we now had a whole arena stage for that. There was enough surface area there for even a large ship.

Hell, if we got something that was too big for the arena, you could say that I really hit the jackpot.

And so, with everyone watching from a safe distance, I went and opened the rainbow capsule.

After a bright flash of light, a large object stood before me.

"Stood" didn't seem accurate, though, since it was *floating*.

"This is...?"

For a moment, I didn't understand what I was looking at.

It was large enough that I had to crane my neck to see the top of it, as well as wide enough that I couldn't have wrapped my arms around it.

Roughly cubic in shape, it seemed about three meters in both height and width.

At that moment, I realized that the object was actually a *house* floating a little more than fifty centimeters above the ground, and its name was "Carriage House of Legend."

"Well it's...not an MVP reward," I observed. Ship and building MVP rewards did exist, but based on the naming, this wasn't one of them.

According to the explanation, this thing was a house built by the King of Building from a long time ago. Since it floated, it was immune to earthquakes and the like, and it wouldn't move even in the center of a raging storm. It was also too durable to be affected by regular attacks and even regenerated the damage done by the stronger ones. The owner could easily move it around too, making moving and setting it up really simple.

It even came with an inventory made specifically for it. All in all, this was a house that could be set up anywhere and at any time.

The inside was amazing, as well. Though it seemed small on the outside, looking in, I saw a whole bunch of rooms. It reminded me of B3's dragon carriage, but this was a giant leap ahead of that.

And to top it all off...

"Oh. This house acts as a save point."

It was a simple kind of save point that couldn't be used if you were returning from a death penalty, but it was a save point nonetheless.

I'd heard that Xunyu had received a save point dragon carriage as a reward for her bodyguard duties, and this house here seemed like a similar kind of treasure.

"Ohh? Somebody I know said that items with save points are beary useful," said Shu.

I see, I thought.

As far as houses went, this one here would certainly be counted among the best. I sure as hell didn't pull trash this time, and it was no doubt worth more than 10,000,000 lir.

However...

"You pulled a house while celebratin' gettin' a house! It seems like a bit of a waste!"

"GUH...!" Io's words made me drop to my knees.

I could sense the others thinking stuff like, *Why would you point that out?*

And so, this became a day on which Death Period received *two* houses.

I guess I really am predisposed towards joke pulls, huh...?

Chapter Six: Rumination and Reminiscence

Paladin, Ray Starling

After securing a base and getting our own rooms, we'd gone to the fourth district to buy ourselves some furniture.

And now, we were making ourselves at home.

My room, by the way, was inside the arena itself. It seemed weird to set up the Carriage House of Legend here in the arena and sleep in it when I could just use the arena instead. I would probably just use it instead of tents or inns while I was in other places.

With that in mind, I was in the box seat that would become my room, refurbishing it with a curtain, a table set, and other furniture.

Among them was the placeable time-preserving inventory that Nemesis wanted. It was larger than other inventories I used and thus difficult to carry it around, but it had the ability to keep things as hot or fresh as they were at the moment they had been stored away, which was obviously very good for food.

It was fairly expensive, but it was probably nothing compared to the money I'd be spending on food from here on out. Just thinking about that gave me a headache.

I'd also bought the translation item I needed, so I summoned Smol Gar and put it on her. She instantly demanded to eat my hair, so I cut a little bit off and gave it to her to chew on.

I'm also using a hair restoration potion I got, but...this won't be bad for me in the long run, right?

"That seems like that for the furniture," said Nemesis. "Now, to focus on The Tournaments tomorrow."

"I spent most of today picking rewards and moving in here, so I didn't even level up or anything." Then again, a day spent leveling a low-rank job might've been wasteful in comparison.

“I guess we’re not getting much prep for this,” I said.

“Hrm. Well, The Tournaments are within duel barriers,” said Nemesis. “Since everything is reset after every match, you can use your MVP reward skills as much as you desire. You actually have a chance.”

“I won’t work...for free,” Smol Gar stopped eating my hair and interjected.

“For free?”

“The duel barriers. Once they’re gone, the summoning demerits would disappear too, right?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think you’d know that.”

“Shared memories.” Oh yeah—she was just like Nemesis in that she could check on my memories.

Though apparently the ones I considered more private were more difficult to access.

“It’s like the duel had never happened, so...no.”

“Well, the costs expended and items broken *do* get reverted,” I said. I’d heard that that was how Logan had become the top of Dryfe’s duel rankings.

...Thinking about it now, I still didn’t know why and how duels worked the way they did. It didn’t seem like a big deal from a game design perspective, but the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* was built upon many solid principles. How did the barriers deal with, for example, the law of the conservation of energy? Were the battles within actually just fully sensory 3D simulations? Like...were they to *Dendro* what *Dendro* was to reality?

But that wouldn’t explain some other things, like how Xunyu was able to *break* the barrier...

The more I thought about it, the more mysterious it seemed. *Well, we now have our own arena, so when I find the time, I might have someone look into this.*

“Anyway, no arena,” Smol Gar insisted. “Though, I may think about it if you let me eat your finger after you summon me...”

“...Seriously, how do you benefit from me getting the demerits?” I asked. “Also, I guess I got two gluttons on my hands here.”

“What do you mean, ‘two’?! Do *not* group me with that man-eater!” Nemesis said.

“...Didn’t you try to get a taste of me just like her?” *Why are my* *weapons such big eaters?* I wondered.

"Oh man... Hm?" As I sighed, I looked through the window—the glass facing the arena itself.

It was already dark out, yet in one of the spectator seats, I saw a familiar—but still rare—sight.

The person was obviously Shu, but he wasn't wearing his costume.

"Hm..." Somewhat curious, I decided to go to him.

As I left, I saw Nemesis trying to take some of the hair I'd given to Smol Gar, who retaliated by biting her.

What the hell are you two doing?

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King of Destruction, Shu Starling

A clan...a base...I'd never had these things before.

It wasn't like I didn't have good friends, and I'd gotten a bunch of clan invites during my time here, but until Reiji invited me to his, I had just been rejectin' them all.

The reason why I hadn't joined any of them must've been...the bad timing.

It had taken some time after *Infinite Dendrogram* began for the Masters of the world to start bandin' up and formin' clans, and I met *them* before all of that.

"Them" bein' Humpty, Theresia, and...him.

Those encounters had happened not long after I started, and *Infinite Dendrogram* stopped bein' "just a game" for me just as fast.

That was why I'd never joined any clan.

Reiji's was the only exception.

"...It's been so long since then, huh?" Shortly after startin' I'd talked to Humpty after bein' thrown into a certain incident, in fact.

The subject had been "What is *Infinite Dendrogram*?"

Back then, I had three hypotheses about this absurdly realistic world.

The first was that it was an extremely detailed program designed to be like this from the start.

The second was that it was a virtual world, simulated using time acceleration.

And the third...was the least plausible theory of the three.

Upon hearin' those three hypotheses, Humpty had said, "...Ohh, you're on the right track. None of those three quite hit the mark, though."

She'd often led me into trouble and tended to obfuscate the truth—but she never lied either. By that point, it was already clear that this place wasn't normal.

And that became even more obvious after I met The Evil, Theresia, who had a built-in function to *end* this world.

Despite that, I'd stayed here and even invited Reiji to join me.

There was a goal I had—somethin' that I wanted to fulfill. Somethin' that'd been on my mind for a long time.

And I felt like it could only be done here.

That must've been why I'd also been subjected to desires that were similar to mine.

"Hrn..." The air-conditioner in my Hind Bear costume was makin' it hard to focus, so I went and took it off.

This wasn't somethin' I normally did. I guessed that bein' at my clan's base made me relax just enough to do it.

The arena was open at the top, but the barrier could be set to interfere with the vision of those lookin' from the outside in. That was just another reason why this was such a damn good piece of real estate.

Feeling the wind flowin' in from outside, I closed my eyes and recalled the battles I'd had against those who were frankly on another level.

In a desert, I'd fought the man who held the greatest magic—The Magical Apex.

"I am a cup that has lost the contents that were meant for it."

"My father did not let me inherit anything he had."

"He feared me so much that he even turned our country into a republic..."

"All so I would not receive any of it."

"Far Atum—the genesis was excruciatingly distant."

"And that is why the person I am in this world will claim it all for himself."

"I will acquire everything that I was supposed to be given."

"My wife told me that she would guide my way."

"And in exchange, I will destroy every obstacle in her path."

"She also told me that Shu Starling would one day become such an obstacle."

"Through our cooperation just now, I could feel that you are indeed powerful."

"And that is why, I will now measure your power directly...Shu."

As I was leaving Tenchi after receiving my Godcloth, I'd encountered the man with unmatched technique—The Technical Apex.

"They must see use."

"These fingers must see use, lest the ancient techniques within them grow dull."

"Touch the skin. Tear the flesh. Split the bone. Reap the life."

"That alone is honing your skill."

"To use what you had under the light of day meant always changing your domicile."

"How vexing."

"Here, however, even the living can be freely used for such things."

"The techniques must not degrade before they are inherited."

"And that is why we are here."

"We came here today to test our arts on the godbeast of Kamuy Forest."

"Yet you defeated the beast and took away our chance."

"Thus, we will hone our techniques on *you* instead."

And here in the duel city, I'd met the beast with the strongest body of all, as well as her Master—The Physical Apex.

"Then I don't mind.

"All I want is to face you in a contest of pure power."

"Like I said, that was just a final check that you were truly a worthy opponent."

"If that killed you, you would've been unworthy of a proper fight...a mere pebble just like the rest."

"You are indeed worthy."

Lookin' back at the memories I had of the "Apices," I let out a sigh.

Thinking about them made me realize something once again.

"Man... What the hell do they think I am?" It wasn't like they hated me or had some kind of grudge or anythin'.

Despite that, way too many people wanted to fight me.

Measurement, honin', the fight itself... They wanted different things, but they all had in common the fact that they didn't give a damn what *I* wanted.

The "Apices" had way too many screws loose.

Just like *him*, they lived in a world where common sense just wasn't a thing...

Well...Behemot, at least, was probably normal in real life.

As far as I could tell, she was—

"This is rare. You never take off your costume when you're not fighting."

My thought was cut short by a voice from the side.

I turned to its source and saw...Reiji. I was so lost in thought that I hadn't even sensed him approach.

"Well, I've been doin' some thinkin' and felt like feelin' the wind," I said.

"Ohh. Well, you can't do that with the costume, I guess. But, man..."

"What?"

"This is supposed to be your normal appearance, but it actually feels weirder than the bear suit."

"Someone I'm beary familiar with told me the same thing."

That "someone" was Rachel...Lei-Lei.

...Now that I thought about it, she had a few screws loose too. Though, maybe it was better to say that she was just "slightly off." I'd known about her behavioral principle—her dream—since we were children, and her Embryo, Eden, was the result of *Infinite Dendrogram* adapting it in an unusual manner. The powers it had because of that were just...freaky.

"So, you ready for tomorrow's Tournament?" I asked.

"Well, as ready as can be, I guess," he replied. "I'll use everything I've got...except Gardranda. She told me not to summon her in duels."

"Conscious summons and intelligent tamed monsters can be like that every now and then."

"...I can't imagine Rook's three monsters being that disobedient, though." Well, they'd all fallen for him, so...

Then again, Gardranda was kinda similar in that regard.

Whether he realized it himself or not, Reiji was always the type of guy people easily liked. The incident with the amazons in South America was one of the more...unfortunate results of that.

...Man, goin' to pick him up from there sure was a challenge.

Big sis, Sensei... I knew way too many people who seemed like they belonged in different genres of fiction, and they sure didn't make my life any easier.

When she heard that our sis had taken Reiji to the Amazon, our mom actually collapsed from worry. Seriously, though, how do you end up goin' all the way to South America "for a part-time job"?

Well, the job she was currently on was an extension of that one, but still...

That reminds me that she still hasn't given back the money I spent to go there, I thought.

"You okay, bro?" Reiji asked.

"I'm just rememberin' this and that. By the way, Reiji, I heard you got some beary weird axe?"

"Yeah. This one here," he said as he reached into his inventory and took out a one-handed axe covered in a black cloth.

"Lemme look at it fur a minute."

"Sure." When he gave it to me, I took a look at it, then *threw my fist at it*.

The clash between my fist and the axe resounded throughout the arena.

"NHUH?!" Reiji immediately voiced his shock at the sight.

Though...in all honesty, I wanted to yell in surprise myself.

"...I see." I was surprised, sure, but part of me also wasn't.

Its aura alone told me that this was *that* kinda thing, but I couldn't help but be shocked that *my all-out attack didn't even crack it*.

My fists could shatter even Mythical metal. I could even put cracks in the Ultrahard Regalia that Fatoum made by *compressing* Mythical metal. Even special defenses meant nothing as long as the object's endurance was below my attack power, since that would activate Right of Destruction.

That meant that this axe was made of something even tougher than my attack power.

I felt like I couldn't put a dent in this thing even if I used Baldr's ult.

"The hell are you doing?!" Reiji panicked, taking back the axe and holding it close.

"Hey, it was a joke. I wasn't bein' fur real."

That was a lie. I'd actually punched as hard as I could. From what I could see, this axe that didn't even crack under my fist was already missin' a few pieces here and there. I couldn't help but wonder what had caused that.

"Anyway, it's beary tough, so if nothin' else, you can always use it as a *shield*." In all honesty, I couldn't even imagine what would happen if someone tried to wield it as a *weapon*.

"That so...? Well, it's still cursed, so it's not like I can equip it. Using it could have some major drawbacks."

"Ha ha ha." It'd be weirder if it didn't.

"Phew," Reiji sighed. "I'm used to you doing crazy things when you're in bear form, but when you look like this, that kinda stuff is heart-stopping. It makes me remember that competition you were in."

"...I guess I get ya." For a moment, I almost remembered how I'd felt back then, but decided to put it out of my mind.

"I'll go back to my room, then," he said. "Got my Tournament tomorrow and all."

"That so?"

“The results of The Tournaments will change what I’ll be able to do in the fight against Dryfe. Losing to KoB made me realize that I’m still not strong enough...so I’ll take my best shot at this.”

I said nothing in response. The War would surely follow after The Tournaments. Tians as well as control AIs such as Humpty would surely act to prepare for that.

It was clear that Reiji would soon take part in his first War, and I in my second... No—this War would be a *first* for me too in a lot of ways.

“Shu?” As Reiji looked at me with curious eyes, I wondered if I should tell him about what had happened.

“...Don’t mind me,” I said. “You go on and rest fur tomorrow.”

I ultimately decided against it.

“You don’t have to tell me that... Also, the bear puns really don’t work when you look like that.”

“How unbearable.” This conversation wasn’t much different from ones we always had. It ended, and I just watched Reiji as he walked away.

The thing I was considering telling him was a story of the past—the actual reason why I hadn’t participated in the first War against Dryfe.

I didn’t say anything because it was more or less nothing but an excuse—an explanation of my actions and an expression of my regret.

It was a story of the time Sechs and I had fought *until the very end*.

Chapter Seven: Love Letter

January, 2045

The New Year of 2045 was a memorable time for many.

Most were obviously celebrating the holiday, while some, like Reiji Mukudori, were busy preparing for the upcoming college entrance exams.

It was a good time for *Infinite Dendrogram* players too. The game held a New Year's event that had, among other things, increased spawn rates for monsters that were bursting with Resources in the form of XP.

It was not all good, however, as something unpleasant—as well as unavoidable—was on the verge of happening.

This was a major event involving two countries—namely, Dryfe's declaration of War against Altar.

After many consecutive bad harvests, Dryfe had been thrown into a state of famine, and to mend the situation, they would invade Altar, which had abandoned them in their time of need.

Altar's leadership already knew that Dryfe was readying their soldiers for an invasion through the old Lunnings Duchy and that they would attack in about three days. That was information gathered by DIN, the Arch Sage, and Altar's intelligence, so it was unlikely to be wrong.

In preparation for that, the Altarian King, Eldor Zeo Altar, began recruiting volunteers. He didn't discriminate between tians and Masters, calling upon anyone and everyone who lamented this dire situation and wished to fight against it. This was directly opposed to Dryfe's approach—the imperium offered rewards to any Master who helped them out.

Because of this, Altarian Masters—especially the "ludos"—weren't too receptive to the king's calls.

Even many worlders prioritized defending their own hometowns instead of the country itself, and as a result, Altar didn't have many Masters fighting for it.

But perhaps most importantly of all, there were also no War participants from the Altarian Big Three—the ones that had protected Altar from the Tri-

Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

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In the terrace of a café bathed in the late-day sun, a man in a raccoon costume was drinking black tea while reading an evening newspaper.

The paper wasn't from DIN or the largest printer in Altar, but it was one that was infamous for its articles full of scathing critique.

It didn't take much reading for the costumed man to realize that today's paper had focused heavily on attacking Altar's Big Three.

First of all, the High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso, had demanded something far greater than ever before in exchange for her clan's participation in the upcoming War. Since Altar's stance was to not reward any Masters, they had refused. And because Tsukuyo Fuso refused to bend, the negotiations were simply canceled.

The article was condemning her for profiteering from the situation.

That all seems right to me, the person in the costume thought. *That fox would definitely take advantage of this.*

That was, after all, exactly what she'd done during Gloria's attack.

It was worth noting that despite Tsukuyo Fuso's decision, the Masters of the Lunar Society weren't actually prohibited from participating if they so wished. As far as religious groups went, theirs was quite lenient. This might've been expected, however—the core of their teachings was the phrase "Embrace this free world and celebrate your liberty to your soul's content."

The article that followed that one was about the Over Gladiator, Figaro. It claimed that, when asked about whether he would participate in the War, he said that he "wasn't interested in sloppy fights." The writer condemned him for being a "picky fighter" who fought exclusively in duels and one-on-ones, calling him a "self-centered battle maniac" for it.

"...That ain't exactly wrong," said the man in the costume. However, since he knew the circumstances, he felt like the article was missing some details. He had been there when Figaro was interviewed, and the conversation went as such:

"Mr. Figaro, will you participate in the War?"

"...No."

"Why?! Is this not the perfect opportunity to show your might to the world...?!"

"I'm not interested in that. Also, it'd be a sloppy, messy fight where I'd have both allies and enemies—and more importantly, tians and Masters... There would be no point."

The exchange ended with the interviewer in shock.

The words quoted in the article weren't actually *wrong*. However, it appeared that the journalist writing it interpreted them as "I'm not interested in sloppy fights. There would be no point—in other words, I don't stand to gain anything from joining in," which wasn't exactly accurate.

Figaro could only fight solo, and since the War would involve both allies and enemies, he wouldn't be half as strong if he participated.

The fact that both tians and Masters would be participating made it even worse for him, because Figaro *had never actually killed a single tian*.

Outside of duels where everyone involved would come back, ending tian lives was something that Figaro simply never did. This didn't make him a rare case—many worlder Masters shared his stance on tian murder.

Infinite Dendrogram was extremely realistic, and that extended to its people. Some Masters took it a step further and never killed even monsters, instead focusing on crafting. A few had even given up on the world entirely.

A War that involved tians and didn't allow solo combat was an environment that would have made Figaro powerless, both physically and mentally.

What he'd meant with his words was that "there would be no point—in other words, I wouldn't be useful."

You couldn't even blame the journalist for misinterpreting that. Who would ever believe that the duel champion who was also a Superior would even imply that he would be useless in a war? It was unthinkable, especially if you didn't know Figaro's flaws.

The fact of the matter was that if he were to participate, even a lowly grunt could take him out. The only way he could be of use in the War was if there was a situation where he could fight alone and his only enemies were Masters.

However, the first Knight-Machine War wasn't that kind of conflict.

"All righty..."

The last article was about King of Destruction.

It mentioned the message KoD had sent to the various newspaper companies, and it even publicly revealed the text of it.

The message read, “If I participate in a big event, I could accidentally expose my face. I’m not going to the War.”

That was it.

All KoD had sent was a brief message saying that he wouldn’t participate in the War because he wanted to maintain his status as “The Unknown.”

The general reaction to this could be summed up in three sentences: “He’s hiding, yet he sends out a message like this. What a bastard,” “He’s gotta be hiding because he’s actually weak and doesn’t want anyone to find out,” and “He probably only beat Gloria because the other two softened it up.”

It was notably harsher than the reaction to the other two. That was because while Tsukuyo Fuso was the head of a major group and Figaro was the duel champion, everything about King of Destruction was a mystery.

Not saying a word, the man in the costume—Shu Starling himself—read the disparaging remarks as if they didn’t make him think anything at all.

It was as though being condemned didn’t affect him whatsoever.

Or perhaps he...

“I have been searching for you.”

Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him.

Looking around, he saw a huge hamster. It was none other than the control AI that also served as the third princess’s pet, Dormouse.

It was also one of the few creatures that knew KoD was Shu.

“Yo, Dormouse. I’m pawsitive I haven’t seen you in a hot minute. What did you come to me fur?”

Shu’s response was the same as it’d ever be—casual and with costume-related puns.

“Theresia wishes to speak to you,” Dormouse said, taking a crystal ball out of his fur.

It was a comms magic item, and out of it came a little girl’s voice.

“It’s been a while, Shu.”

“...Yo.” At some point, their conversation had stopped reaching anyone except those at Shu’s table—Dormouse’s doing, no doubt.

“So, what did you call me fur?” Shu asked.

"It's about the message the newspapers received. Are you really the one who sent it?"

"Yeah. Why ask me that, though? It was obvious it was me since all the newspapers are makin' it public after running it by Truth Discernment. Hell, you could've just asked Dormouse."

"That's true... I just didn't think that you would refuse to participate in the War just because it may expose you."

Theresia had no intention to condemn his decision—she'd simply felt that the text was unlike him and had sent Dormouse to get a confirmation.

"That so?" Shu asked.

"Yes... If that was a reason for you to not get involved in a conflict, you wouldn't have actually been there for very many of them...including the ones where Sechs was involved."

"...He and I just kinda happened to keep clashin' here and there," Shu said with a sigh as he remembered the many incidents they'd been part of. "Anyway, yeah...it's not that I'm afraid to show my face. Well, I guess I am a *little* bit. I'm a shy boy and showing it around gives me pawse."

Shu spoke partly in jest, and Theresia met those words with silence. It was starting to become hard for him to joke around, so he spoke a little more seriously.

"I doubt I'll be makin' it to the War, and if everyone fought clingin' to the hope that I'd come to their aid, it could just make the casualties worse, so I went and used a shitty excuse and said I won't come at all."

"So what is the actual reason you're not going?" Theresia asked. She was now certain that his nonparticipation wasn't by choice.

In response, Shu was quiet for a moment, then said, "...I got a love letter."

It seemed like one of his jokes at first, but the face he was making inside the raccoon costume was completely serious.

"A love letter? From whom?" she asked.

"...Dormouse, read this for me," he said as he reached into his inventory and took out the letter.

It was crumpled, presumably by Shu grasping it tightly, but it was readable nonetheless.

Dormouse skillfully balanced on three legs and took the letter in one of his forelimbs.

"'Mr. Starling...'" he began reading, but before he could even properly start, he was filled with shock as the entire text sunk in.

The letter went as follows...

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Mr. Starling,

By the time this letter reaches you, the War between Altar and Dryfe will be five days away.

I know you will act of your own volition and participate in it to protect the kingdom.

That is why, six hours before the War begins, I will attack either you or what you wish to protect.

If you are alongside Altar's army on the front lines, I will target those present.

If you challenge Dryfe on your own, I will target Altea.

If you have a death penalty or are offline, I will destroy Altarian cities one by one until you come back.

And if you are alone somewhere far from any settlement, I will attack you.

Where you are does not concern me. *This me* will act as described regardless.

This moment and situation makes it possible for us to fight until the end.

You would give me a serious fight under these conditions, would you not? And that is why, here and now, I challenge you.

I will face you no matter where you are at the time.

If possible, I wish the circumstances to be as favorable as they can be.

Regards, King of Crime, Sechs Würfel

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It was a letter from the Master Shu was more involved with than any other.

A *letter of challenge* from King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

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Cruella Mountain Belt

The Cruella Mountain Belt that acted as the border between Altar and Caldina was a dangerous territory rife with bandits who targeted the passing trade caravans.

One of the mountain villas here was a hideout of such thieves, but now only two people were in it.

These two had slaughtered each and every one of the bandits who originally inhabited it.

They hadn’t had a strong reason for doing so—they were merely traveling through the mountains to avoid being seen and had stumbled upon this villa. The bandits attacked them on sight and were in turn annihilated in the blink of an eye. You could say that the thieves were simply unlucky.

“...You really doin’ this, Sechs?” One of the two was a relatively short man wearing a gray suit, a matching trench coat, and a gangster-like hat.

He was The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx. With his back to one of the villa’s pillars, he was spinning a gear-like object in his hand while talking to the other man—a black-haired, black-eyed, plain-looking youth in clothing just as unremarkable. He was none other than King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

“Yes,” Sechs replied with a smile. “I understand that you came all this way to try and make me reconsider, but I am resolute.”

Slightly irritated by the response, Rascal spun the gear again before saying, “Tetragrammaton...our base ain’t even done yet. We’re still in the process of gettin’ the Soul Trader to be our fifth official member, and we don’t even have that many supportin’ members either. Our alliance with The Death has also just begun. We’re just startin’ to take off.”

They were both part of Illegal Frontier—a clan made up exclusively of criminal Superiors.

In fact, they were the leader and sub-leader.

IF was still new and was currently in a very important time period for its development as a clan—and yet the leader, Sechs, was prioritizing personal matters instead of the good of the group.

“Most of that is true,” he said. “But the base is already complete, no?”

“Only on the outside,” Rascal retorted. “We don’t have the people or the processors to run a ship that huge, and good processors’re hard to come by even in pre-ancient civ ruins. Most o’ them become sentient and turn into goddamn UBMs.”

"Is your Machina not a valid substitute?" Sechs asked.

Rascal glanced at the gear in his hand, shook his head, and said, "Sure, my Deus Ex Machina can be a *connector*, and I can use it for control, but connectin's basically all it does then. It's pointless if there's nothin' to connect it *to*. If I want it to act as a good processor, I need the processor itself. That's why I'm plannin' to raid some major ruins in Caldina soon. It wouldn't be easy, though, and I was plannin' on your assistance..."

"That is unfortunate. However, my decision is final."

Sechs didn't waver even though Rascal needed his help.

That said all that was needed to be said about how important this was to him.

"Why do it now?" Rascal asked. "Ya didn't forget our goal or the benefits of achievin' it, right? It's nothin' but risky now, but eventually, those risks're gonna be gone."

"Of course I did not forget it, and I am fully aware of that." Sechs nodded in response, still unwilling to change his mind. "However, chances for a serious fight against Shu are few and far between."

"...You tellin' me he was holdin' back? Against *you*?"

"He was always doing his best, but he never once fought *with the goal of defeating me*," Sechs said as he closed his eyes and reflected upon the past. "In every incident he was involved in ever since the time I kidnapped Theresia, I was merely an extra. He always had things he had to prioritize over me."

They had been involved and interacted with each other for a long time now, sometimes as enemies, sometimes as allies. However, they had never had a true clash against one another. This was because although their goals were generally very different, they were never quite directly opposed.

"That is why it must be done now."

"I...I see," said Rascal, finally understanding Sechs.

"I will use the coming War to create a situation in which he must defeat me. He will surely come and fight me with that in mind."

If Sechs merely engaged in more terrorism, Shu would likely take care of the problem while avoiding conflict with him.

However, things were different now that Altar as a whole was being threatened. If Sechs chose to attack the Altarian army before they faced Dryfe or assaulted the towns on the other side of the land, it would severely damage the kingdom's defenses, making their defeat in the War all but certain.

If what he wanted was to keep the casualties to a minimum, Shu would have no choice but to fight Sechs.

"Ya know this comes with the risk of losin' and bein' sent to the gaol, right?"

"Yes."

"And that you'll be leavin' behind the clan...that you created?"

"Yes," Sechs replied, fully aware of what Rascal was saying. "But would you not say that this is typical of us members of Illegal Frontier? To put our desires above the convenience of others?"

"...That is true." Rascal had no grounds to argue against that. Even the goal they shared as a group was ultimately only meant to support the goals they had personally, and Rascal was no exception—he was playing *Infinite Dendrogram* because there was something he felt he had to do.

"My apologies," Sechs said. "I might end up entrusting the management of the clan to you."

"Don't say that like ya haven't been leavin' the business work and infrastructure to me since before IF was even established," Rascal said, then heaved a sigh. "Well, fine. You do you. I still owe ya for Emily and other stuff. I can hold this thing together while you're away." To Rascal, Sechs was both the clan leader and a friend, so he ultimately respected his decision no matter how risky it was. "Leave a letter for Zeta before ya go, though. She'd probably get really annoyin' if ya don't. I can actually imagine her thinkin' *I'm* plannin' somethin', and we don't need an internal conflict on our hands," Rascal said with a wry grin.

"Very well," Sechs replied with a faint smile.

"Also...this is in case ya lose, but...I dunno what kinda place the gaol is, but get out of it within a year. I'll keep workin' on the prep until then."

"You believe I can escape the gaol?"

"Yeah. You may fail sometimes, *but you can do anythin'*, can't ya?"

Sechs said nothing in response to that, but his face was still in a smile.

"Go get 'im, leader. What you want is right in front of you."

"It certainly is. Farewell."

With that, Sechs went towards Altea, where Shu was waiting, while Rascal turned away and went on the path back to Caldina.

This had been the last time they'd met, but neither of them believed that it was their last *ever*.

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Kingdom of Altar, Nowest Canyon

Three days had passed since Shu had shown Sechs's letter to Dormouse and Theresia. Before dawn, when light was still scarce, Shu stood alone in the Nowest Canyon.

This was where Altar's Big Three had faced and defeated the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria. The local geography had been devastated, while the ecosystem had all but vanished within Gloria's Fatal Field, making it an area where neither people nor monsters ever ventured.

That was exactly why Shu had chosen it as the place where he would face Sechs.

Well, that and the fact that it was between Altea and the old Lunnings Duchy, which would make it easy for him to contribute to the war effort.

It was predicted that the War would start at noon. However, Shu felt that defeating Sechs and surviving to assist Altar would be more difficult than anything he'd ever done before.

More time passed as he waited in silence. The sun had begun to rise and the clock hit six in the morning when...

"Apologies for the wait."

...Sechs arrived, just as he'd said he would.

He was still the black-haired, black-eyed, bespectacled, plain-looking youth that he'd always been. He was even wearing his usual smile.

However, even though this was merely a form he was assuming, Shu felt as if Sechs was...somewhat excited.

Silence followed. Shu had chosen to fight in these mountains, and now Sechs had come here as well.

They had both been certain that this would happen. Sechs knew that Shu would do this, and Shu knew that Sechs wouldn't use the opportunity to commit some other misdeed.

Despite the fact that they would now fight to the death, they knew each other better than some people who were the closest of friends.

"...If you were here, you could've just shown yourself instead of wastin' my time," Shu said as he eyed Sechs for an opening. He was waiting for a moment he could deliver a fatal blow and end this battle before it could even properly begin, but alas, on this particular day, Sechs's guard was impenetrable.

"Wasting your time...? So you intend to defeat me and rush to aid in the War?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think you will have any strength left?"

"Dunno. But it's possible that I'll be able to do *somethin'*, ain't it?"

"That is true. Oh, and if you lose to me, I will attack Altar, so please face me with everything you have."

"...I knew you'd say that." Since Sechs's goal was to force Shu to fight him as hard as he could, that much went without saying.

If this was a battle he could simply lose without consequence, it wouldn't have required such a set-up. Losing to Sechs would obviously influence the War and the fate of Altar.

"...Though, I will say that participating in the War does not seem to suit you," Sechs said with a lower tone than usual, but his face still smiling. "The proactiveness of people is highly influenced by their views of good and evil. Apparently, if they see something as bad, they will simply not do it or at least be reluctant to, and if they think nothing of it, there will be no such reluctance. "

"*Seems so.*"

They both spoke as if these words had nothing to do with them.

"And if they think that something is right...they will push themselves to do it." Nothing could stop a person from doing what they thought was righteous. Even if their actions brought harm to others, they would not slow down as long as they believed they were just. "In most cases when people become like that, they are not alone. They are often accompanied by like-minded brethren and act as members of a greater group, losing control for the sake of their justice. Looking around and seeing many people who shared their will reassured them that they were righteous, which only made them more dedicated to the cause."

The march of an army fueled by a sense of justice was truly a fearsome thing.

"Both armies that will soon face each other in the old Lunnings Duchy believe themselves to be right," Sechs said as he looked into the distant west, his smile now gone. "The Altarians defending against Dryfean invaders think they are on the side of justice, and the Dryfeans trying to save their country from famine also see their cause as righteous. With these thoughts reinforced by those around them, they march into a war—perhaps even clinging to the comforting pretense that there is no other way."

Sechs spoke of the nature of this War, but it was clear that these principles applied to wars in general.

"But...there is no *true* righteousness there," he continued as Shu just silently listened. "Not a single person in either army did what they believed was right in the absence of anyone to affirm it."

He then looked away from the western horizon, faced Shu, and put on a smile which seemed different from the one he'd had.

"But there is someone *right here* who never wavers." The smile on his face now was much like the one Sechs had shown when Shu went to defeat the UBM that was treated as a god, paying no heed to the verbal abuse hurled at him by the villagers. "I've thought so since the day I met you. You knew full well that the girl could destroy the world, yet you protected her regardless—and still do. You never hesitated or doubted your decisions, always sticking to your strong sense of justice."

In Sechs's mind, Shu was a strong person who did what he felt was right regardless of what others thought of it, and that was exactly why Sechs had found himself drawn to him.

"This person before you...*I* have no sense of right or wrong or anything like that, so I find myself dazzled by your strong sense of justice."

"...That so?"

Shu also believed that Sechs was nothing like the people he was talking about. He didn't see himself as just and never felt remorse no matter how many evils he'd committed—he was merely doing what the people had *deemed* was bad.

Good and evil didn't exist in Sechs's mind. There were only the crimes as established by society. His conduct was never hindered by a sense of wrong nor expedited by righteousness.

In his life, Sechs merely moved forward...no—he *descended downward*. He was like a drop of water, falling into a dark abyss and dragging everything down with him with no regard for good or evil.

Never doing anything but committing crime, Sechs was more of a phenomenon than a man—the world's most hollow king of sins.

Shu already knew that, but he was still unaware of the reasons why.

"Do you remember the Divine Disks?" Sechs asked. "That is the UBM that you and *I* cooperated to defeat."

"...Yeah."

"The people that worshipped it instantly went on to join Altar. Their village is now no different from any other."

Sechs brought this up like it was simple gossip, but those who tried would make out a hint of...*irritation* in his voice.

"The moment they were no longer under the wings of their deity, they fled beneath the wings of Altar. They worshipped their god, sacrificed children to it, and condemned you for its sake. They believed they were righteous, but now they live on completely forgetting their previous faith and allegiance. They are all weaklings who kiss up to the strong and have no justice of their own."

His words were far harsher than anyone could ever expect from him, which made Shu ask a question.

"Are you...angry?"

"Angry? *Me*?" Sechs put his hand on his mouth. It seemed that he hadn't realized it himself.

After a few moments of thought...

"...Perhaps."

...he acknowledged Shu's words.

"I myself was a sacrifice, after all."

"A sacrifice?" That wasn't a word one would associate with the fearsome King of Crime, yet that was what he called himself.

As for the reason for that...

"The me that is not this me...the person I am in reality...was born as *a clone made for organ transplants*. Biological stock."

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Cloning technology had already existed for decades before the current year of 2045. There had been successful clonings of not only animals, but people, as well. The old technological hurdles related to clone lifespan and body function had already been conquered.

The people of this world—those that dwelled on Earth—already had functioning cloning technology. However, it wasn't something that would see common use, and the reason for that was obvious—morality.

Though technology had permitted it, cloning people was considered unthinkable from a moral standpoint.

However, there were hushed whispers that human clones were being produced in the less regulated countries as well as in other places, but in secret, away from the eyes of the moral public.

These were clones that elite or wealthy people created in case they were heavily injured or afflicted by internal diseases, when they would call upon them to provide healthy organs.

Nothing but living, breathing storage for "spare parts," these clones were the very definition of sacrifices.

In countries driven by morality, they were seen as fiction—but they did indeed exist, and Sechs was one of them.

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"You're...a clone?"

"Yes. It has been twenty and...a few more years since I was created."

Sechs had never revealed this truth about himself to anyone. Even Rascal and Zeta were still in the dark about it, yet he'd gone and told it to Shu.

"I was created when a certain elite family finally had their heir apparent. Not legally, of course."

Some people with incredible wealth chose to go to particular other countries to secretly create organ transplant clones, *just in case*. They would be raised so that their ages matched their originals, and if the originals caught some sort of disease, the clones would have their organs used to save them.

"Though, my original died before I could provide my organs," Sechs said. "Apparently, it was some sort of accident that killed him instantly." Shu was silent. "However, he is not *officially* dead."

It was easy for Shu to understand what Sechs meant by that.

"...'Cause you replaced him?" he asked, to confirm.

Sechs responded with a nod and said, “It was declared that he survived and I was made to take his place. Instead of just my body parts replacing his, I became a replacement for his entire existence... Though, perhaps they had anticipated this. I grew up knowing I was an organ transplant clone, and yet I was still provided with basic education.”

Shu merely listened as Sechs continued. “Of course, I could not possibly take over the social life of the original, but that was not a problem if I simply never saw anyone. Officially, ‘the heir is currently recovering from the accident.’”

He’d been isolated from the public, taught what he needed to know about the world as well as any relationships relevant to him, all in preparation to make a soft landing into society as a replacement for this dead heir. All but a select few believed that the original was still alive, completely clueless to the existence of Sechs himself.

“My role is to continue the lineage. After all, I have the appearance and DNA of the original. My father—at least genetically—is already too old to have offspring, and despite the fact that he commissioned a clone, he is against creating *actual* offspring via artificial insemination. I will eventually marry a woman of some other elite family, we will have children, they will inherit everything from me, and I will be dismissed.”

“Sechs...” Hearing that made Shu feel something, but it was definitely not pity.

He didn’t look down on Sechs enough to feel something like that for him.

If there was a word for what Shu was feeling, it was most likely “understanding.” Sechs had been born as spare organ storage, but when donating became impossible, he was forced to be a full replacement for his original and carry on the lineage.

That explained why he was so...

“I have no life of my own. I was not even born with the *intent* of being a person... When I came to this world and received Nu—this body—I became fully aware of what I truly am.”

He raised his right hand and turned to slime.

No, not “turned,” but “returned.”

“I am nothing but a droplet of blood and DNA—a substitute that changes shape to suit its vessel.”

As he spoke, he changed himself into a man, then a woman, then Sechs.

"And that is why...*I am Nu*."

Albeit to varying degrees, Embryos were influenced by their Masters. They represented their natures, actions, and maybe even their ultimate fates.

Looking at it like that, Nu might have been the only thing Sechs could ever be.

"But despite what I am, I was at least able to roll the dice on what I would be in *this* world."

Sechs had his share of free time in reality. Though he was locked away, he'd been given the freedom to read books or enjoy a game or two.

However, he didn't know what to actually do with that free time.

And that might have been exactly why, just like the many others who were uncertain what to do with their time, he was attracted to *Infinite Dendrogram's* offer of infinite possibilities.

To him, it had seemed like a door to a world where he could truly live freely.

And upon seeing the die on the table during the tutorial, he'd made a decision.

He was a hollow person meant only to be a replacement. Any paths he could choose in his daily life were not actually his own.

And that was why he'd decided that *he* would be the one to roll the die and set his future here in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"*That* is my freedom."

The fate he'd rolled for himself was one of evil. Directly opposed to the justice of the majority, he would be a methodical committer of sin.

However, he was satisfied with that. He had chosen to be evil and he lived as such.

Everyone looked at him, and through his evil, they were acknowledging *Sechs himself*.

And that was not the only thing that being evil had provided him. It had given him personal principles, human relations, allies, memories, and had led to him meeting a person who was both his opposite as well as his mirror—a person he was more taken with than anyone else.

"Shu."

"...Sechs."

Sechs looked directly at Shu and slowly began talking once again.

“Please...fight me until the end,” he said. “This is my true form. What I truly am. I am a substitute that changes shape to fit its vessel. A droplet of blood and flesh. This is my undiluted nature.”

Sechs then began converting his body into red-and-black slime.

"And in spite of this nature of mine, living as *this me* in this world made me see something I could not see before. I feel as though I am not far from fully grasping its truth. I simply need to come to understand what I must."

He looked at Shu with eyes full of longing.

"And so, for me to live as myself...this me—the entity that I am—must face you...my polar opposite."

Sechs shut his eyes and clenched his hands into fists as though to grasp what he was seeking deep within. He considered Shu—the unwavering man who was no one's replacement and never compromised who he was. Sechs wished...

"...To understand you." He opened his eyes again.

"If I do that, I might be able to live as myself. Not just here...but on the other side as well."

Infinite Dendrogram promised to provide its players with their one true possibility unique to them. That manifested as their Embryos, as well as the experiences they had here.

And Sechs sincerely believed that his possibility could only be found if he defeated Shu—his polar opposite.

"Our lives may be transient, but let us fight...until the end."

This was why he wanted a fight to the death—the moment they both would bare everything to one another.

"...How long have I been involved with ya now?" Shu said as he processed Sechs's words. "Over four years, right? If that's the answer you came to after thinkin' that long, then sure. Let's do this."

Thus, he accepted the suggestion.

"Though...I'll tell ya one thing." Shu fell silent for a moment...and removed his apparel. He'd used Clothing Switch to change from the specialized, unwieldy raccoon costume into custom-made pure combat equipment. This set was the most optimal fighting gear he had at this point in time. It didn't hide his face whatsoever and doubled as an expression of a will to destroy his enemies.

And thus, Shu...

"Don't think that a *measly little* fight to the death's gonna be enough to really understand me."

...grinned back at Sechs and took to action.

And so, with the War but a few hours away, known to none, a battle between two of Altar’s strongest had begun.

Chapter Eight: Gods of Destruction and Creation

King of Destruction and King of Crime

Shu and Sechs had fought many times before. Over four years had passed since they met, and they had already clashed more times than could be counted on one hand.

Because of this, both of them had a good understanding of each other's combat styles.

Shu had two different ways of fighting: an "army of two" approach and "machine god rush."

The former was focused on using his unbelievable STR, resistance nullification, and combat prowess to fight from up close while Baldr provided him with wide-area artillery cover.

The latter was the fighting style he used against large or powerful foes—close combat while inside Baldr's giant robot form.

Regardless of which he was using, however, he was simply delivering destruction in different ways. One could actually call his fighting style "simple," especially when compared to that of his opponent.

Sechs's combat style, after all, was often described as "faceless."

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"RRHAAGH!" Expelling his breath, Shu took a step forwards and threw his right fist at Sechs.

"Shapeshift: Rechter Arm of the King of Destruction!" King of Crime responded with a gleeful smile, followed by a right punch of his own.

The fists clashed, and *their powers canceled each other out*.

As though the punches were equal in might, their bodies didn't even flinch. However, the impact cracked open the ground beneath them, and Sechs's right fist began to shatter shortly after.

"Baldr!" At that moment, Shu used his immense leg strength to jump backwards.

A split second later, a rain of incendiary missiles from Baldr's Stardust Genocider showered Sechs in fiery destruction.

"Shapeshift: Eisshild." Even a slime like Sechs should have not remained unharmed by Baldr's searing blaze—and yet, Sechs was neither burning nor boiling.

The reason for that was his left hand...equipped with a *shield of ice*.

The hand itself was different, as well, with skin of a color far darker than Sechs's own.

Shu instantly understood what that meant.

"An Embryo that's got Heat Absorption! Where'd ya *stock up* that one, huh?!"

"It was a little find in Caldina."

Despite the fire surrounding him, Sechs replied as though he was rather chilly.

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Sechs's Superior Embryo was called "Nu," and its core trait was "transformation."

It gave him the power to transform into other people, copying their jobs, skills, and even their Embryos—the entities that were thought of as one with their Masters. That meant that by simply transforming a part of his body into that of another Master, he would essentially be transforming it into their Embryo as well.

He'd nullified Shu's first attack by turning his right arm into Shu's own to meet the strike. And for the incendiary missiles that had followed, he'd used Jötunheimr, a shield-like Embryo focused on Heat Absorption, which he'd acquired from an enemy he'd faced in Caldina.

The more transformations he had stocked up, the more cards Sechs had in his hand.

That was why his combat style was called "faceless."

Of course, it had its own share of weaknesses.

First of all, Nu's Embryo stat growth bonus was negative.

King of Crime was not a combat-oriented SJ and thus didn't have impressive stats to begin with, and since Nu's stat growth bonus further halved them, Sechs's own base stats were astonishingly lackluster.

Additionally, the transformation skill, Shapeshift, had several limitations.

First, it required him to take in actual cells. He couldn't add any Master or tian transformation into his stock without absorbing cells from their body in some way.

Second, it was limited to beings who actually *had* a physical form. He couldn't assume a body that resembled the spiritual kind of undead, nor could he copy Embryos of the Territory type.

Third, stocking up on transformations didn't give him any actual information about them. He didn't know what skills they came with or how they were used. Simply putting these transformations in stock did not mean he would automatically understand how to wield them, and to employ them optimally, he had no choice but to learn it from the sources themselves.

And then there was the fourth and final limitation: the fact that he could only transform into those who were "half of what he was."

With Embryos, that meant half of his own Embryo's form, rounded up. This meant that even as a Superior Embryo, Nu could only completely transform into Embryos *up to their third form*.

With people, he could only assume the shape of someone who had *half of his total job level or less*, meaning that to transform into the first-rate Masters who were far above level 1,000—such as Shu—Sechs had to have a total level of over 2,000.

If he didn't fulfill this requirement—if his level was less than double that of his Shapeshift target—the resulting transformation's precision, stats, and skill power would greatly suffer for it.

Also, if he were to transform different parts of his body into different people simultaneously, the limit would be calculated from the sum total of all of them. That made more extreme multiple-person transformations all but impossible.

As well, Sechs could only stock a certain amount of transformations at a time. The sum total level of all the available transformations in his stock could not exceed ten times his own total level. Any more and he would be unable to add new ones, making it necessary to get rid of others to make space. If he later wanted a transformation that he'd discarded, he would have to absorb the target's cells again.

The way Nu's transformations and storage worked meant that this Shapeshift skill required a great deal of levels.

Because of this, the powerful, chimera-like transformations that were possible in theory were in practice barred behind the impossibly high level limitations.

However, Sechs wouldn't be the *King of Crime* if he didn't break such expectations.

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"...Look at how much heat it absorbs in just its third form," said Shu. "That's a good Embryo you picked up."

"Embryos with a single focus are quite good at what they do even when they are low-rank."

"Well, my Baldr does a lot, but nothin' too great—and comin' from *you*, that almost sounds like you're makin' fun of him!" Shu roared as Baldr fired its Twin Quintuple cannons.

Sechs responded by returning to his slime form and slithering into the cracks in the ground created by their first clash.

"Shapeshift: Gebrochen Schwert."

A moment later, a blade thrust out of the ground. This was a copy of the sword-like Embryo that had a blade-extension skill—Næġling.

"Tch...!" And the right arm holding it...

"Sword Avalanche."

...belonged to King of Swords, Foltesla.

What followed Sechs's words was exactly what the skill's name suggested—a literal avalanche of swords. The cascade tore the ground apart and even managed to slice into Shu's leg, which was caught at the edge of the skill's AoE.

"Gh!" The severed tendon almost had an impact on Shu's movements, but the equipment on his legs acted as enough support to minimize the effect. His current gear was focused on keeping him fighting regardless of the situation. He'd assumed many things about how this battle could go, but he never once assumed that Sechs would never manage to hit him with an unexpected attack.

“When did ya get Foltesla?!”

“I stole a part of him away some time before he vanished.” Sechs’s arm, peeking from the wounded ground, was no longer Foltesla’s. It now looked noticeably aged.

Shu didn’t know who the arm belonged to, but he recognized the blaze burning right above it.

“You...goddamn...!”

After all, even the Arch Sage used this immensely powerful spell.

“Fixed Star.” This was the ultimate job skill of one of the strongest tian casters—King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn. As a fire spell of the highest tier, few things could match it in pure firepower.

If the ball of flame landed, even Shu would melt away in an instant.

“RRAGH!” With a beastly roar, Shu kicked up the surface beneath him. His vast strength forced the very bedrock upwards, crashing into the incoming ball of flame.

The Fixed Star melted right through the bedrock, but before it could fully break through, Baldr fired a missile barrage at his rocky shield. With the bedrock reduced to pieces and melting away, the Fixed Star had lost a good amount of its power; it vanished within the explosion.

Before it could fully abate, though, Shu and Sechs were already making their next move.

Sechs transformed his body into that of a certain Master called “Juliet,” then grew out Hræsvelgr’s wings and took to the skies.

Shu used one of his equipment skills—Air Skip—to chase after him.

...He just keeps turnin’ into things I don’t know! Though Sechs hadn’t used a mix of forms yet, with Shu included he had already turned into three separate Superior Job owners. That number would go up to four if the owner of the ice shield was a Superior Job as well.

Those forms alone should’ve taken at least 5,000 levels of Sechs’s available transformation storage.

That was perhaps the biggest issue here. When it came to Sechs’s combat style, the level limitations on simultaneous use of multiple transformations meant little in comparison to the limit on how many forms he could have in his stock.

However, despite having already shown so many of his abilities, it didn’t seem like he’d run out of cards to play quite yet.

...What level is he now? Shu wondered. It was already obvious that Sechs had to be at least double Shu's level.

He'd asked him about it once, and even back then, Sechs was *over level 2,000*.

This absurdly high level was all thanks to his Superior Job, King of Crime.

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King of Crime was a job unlocked, as the name suggested, by committing countless crimes.

While even Murder Princess could theoretically be acquired by honest people, King of Crime was essentially exclusive to sinners.

The job had an ultimate skill that was simultaneously its *only* skill, and it was called "World Record."

This skill had multiple effects, among which was a stat bonus dependent on skill level, but that effect wasn't all that impressive—nor was it the skill's primary focus.

World Record's core feature was *the acquisition of XP—Resources—by committing crimes*.

While most people gathered Resources by defeating other creatures or completing job quests, King of Crime could do that through the very act of sinning. And the greater the crimes—the worse a criminal the people of this world believed him to be—the more XP flowed towards him.

It was unknown where the Resources came from or what exactly counted as a grave sin, all of which served to make the skill rather mysterious. There was speculation that it relied on the hatred King of Crime received for his transgressions—specifically that the relevant negative emotions were converted into Resources and sent towards him.

Regardless, this was the *only* skill that the job had, and it was a skill that sped up the owner's leveling. Of course, each level-up provided more stats, but the job didn't have the growth of combat-focused Superior Jobs.

It seemed especially weak when compared to Draconic Emperor—another job defined by its high level.

King of Crime could be considered a vain, self-absorbed job that did almost nothing but increase the level's number.

It was as though the creator of the world was talking to the sinner, saying "This is all that you are."

Because of this, most people who became Kings of Crime died shortly after. After all, their stat growth meant they were no match for combat Superior Jobs.

However, things were different for Sechs Würfel.

He was the current King of Crime, and he was perhaps the biggest sinner out of all who had ever claimed the job, meaning that the experience given to him by World Record was simply immense in comparison to his predecessors.

Because of this, Sechs's current total level was *2,890*.

This meant that he could freely transform into anyone up to level 1,449—and that his total transformation storage cap was 28,900 levels.

With the exceptions of over-leveled beings such as King of Beasts, The Earth, and Draconic Emperor, Sechs could become a replacement for just about anyone.

That was the true nature of his combat style—the one those who understood it called "faceless."

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...What's he gonna do next? Up until now, Sechs had been using partial Shapeshifting to assume forms Shu didn't know about.

However, that had its own flaws.

While such chimera-like transformations allowed Sechs to wield many and varied powers, the stat balance was all off.

Indeed—the transformed parts of his body had different stats than the others.

There would be no issues if he continued to use them for singular attacks like he had been doing until now, but keeping that up for too long ran the risk of making Sechs lose his balance.

Shu knew this, and what's more, Sechs knew that Shu knew this.

Since he can transform into me even now that I've gotten my SJ and leveled up, his level's gotta be way bigger than I thought. Though...it's not large enough to let him transform into multiple SJs at once. That's why he's constantly changin' his arm.

As he chased after Sechs, Shu analyzed the situation.

I dunno how long he's gonna keep usin' the partial transformations, but when he figures out they're not workin', he's gonna use a full body one.

When Sechs assumed the shape of another person, he matched them in almost everything, including stats—but excluding Embryo form. In addition to that, he would still be a slime, meaning that he would maintain his physical immunity and ability to split apart for multidirectional attacks. He might even be able to use the leftover levels for other transformations and skills.

If, for example, Sechs transformed into Shu, he would receive Shu's stats and resistances, as well as Baldr up to the third form, theoretically giving Sechs the upper hand in this fight.

However, both of them knew that that would've been a bad move.

Shu wasn't afraid of facing an enemy who was a perfect mirror of his own body, because he was confident that he could wield that better than anyone else. The advantages of being a slime also wouldn't mean much before Shu's Right of Destruction.

Additionally, Sechs didn't receive stat bonuses from his transformation target's equipment. His gear post-transformation would be either a mere mimicry of Shu's gear or simply Sechs's own equipment, and the stats and abilities would obviously be different as a result.

Though they'd seemed equal when their fists met on the first clash, Shu had actually won out because of the stat bonuses from his equipment. Sechs's World Record gave him enough of a bonus to prevent Shu from destroying him instantly, but the gap in their powers was evident regardless.

Also, Baldr's first three forms were hard to utilize in battles against powerful foes. Even Shu himself faced all major threats with either the first or the seventh.

The second form was lacking in pure firepower, while the third form was a pillbox that allowed for no mobility. The fourth, fifth, and sixth had better maneuverability than the seventh, but in terms of firepower, they were certainly a downgrade.

Those were the reasons why even Shu only fought his strongest enemies with either the seventh or, if the situation was good for it, the first forms. And even the first also had the major drawback of being incredibly difficult to hit anything with.

Because of all that, becoming Shu entirely wasn't even an option for Sechs.

Whose form would he assume, then?

Would he combine someone's powers with his abilities as a slime?

Would he take the form of King of Swords, Foltesla?

Would he become King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn?

Or would he shift into an SJ or Superior Shu had never even heard of?

The answer would now become clear.

"Shapeshift..." A moment later, Sechs's form changed...

"*King of Destruction*."

...and, betraying all expectations, he assumed the shape of his opponent.

Shock overcame Shu. It wasn't a choice he'd been remotely anticipating. After all, Sechs was unlikely to win against him while using the same character, so to speak.

Was he perhaps planning to send Shu flying and hit him with Strength Cannon while he was in midair and unable to dodge?

However, switching between transformations didn't reset the drawbacks each form suffered from. If Sechs fired Strength Cannon and missed, he would be unable to use it again in this battle.

Also, Shu currently had Air Skip active, so he would have some maneuverability in the air even if he was sent flying. It wouldn't be hard for him to avoid a ranged attack from someone whose AGI was the same as his.

That was exactly why he hadn't thought Sechs would even try to take this form. He knew Sechs had to understand all of this as well.

Shu was on edge, wary of where Sechs was planning to go from here.

"Heh heh..." King of Crime, wearing Shu's face, let out a little laugh. "I Take Countless Forms—Nu..."

He spoke, calling forth his—*Nu's* ultimate skill. "...Schwarz Baldr."

And with those words, he transformed himself into a towering, jet black robot.

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The greatest of Masters, tians, and even monsters rarely revealed all they were capable of.

The only ones who freely exposed their own cards were those whose craving for the limelight surpassed their caution. Those who were Superior or greater never showed the true aces up their sleeves to anyone, and they went the extra mile to hide them when dealing with Masters, who couldn't be silenced by death.

For example, The Earth—the Magical Apex—had only revealed two of the great spells he'd crafted, and there was always the possibility that there were actually five or more in total that he had access to.

King of Beasts—the Physical Apex—had also never shown anyone the combination of her Superior MVP reward and the ultimate skill that put her in her strongest form.

As those who matched these "Apices," both King of Destruction, Shu Starling, and King of Crime, Sechs Würfel had aces of their own as well.

The two had already fought too many times to count on both hands, but this was the first time Sechs had ever used his ultimate against Shu.

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Still in the air, Shu was faced with *his own ace that he'd kept up his own sleeve*.

"...Yeah, it's about what I'd expect from your ult," he said.

At this moment, Sechs looked much like Baldr in his ultimate form. However, this version of the machine god was all black, like the primordial watery abyss from Egyptian mythology—the namesake of Sechs's Embryo.

"'Black Baldr,' huh? 'Schwarz Baldr' *really* doesn't roll off the tongue. What's with you and makin' everythin' German?"

Then again, Baldr's from Norse mythology, so maybe "Schwartz" is just fine there, Shu wondered as he dodged backwards. He used Air Skip and his immense STR to make some distance between him and the black machine god, who responded by firing countless missiles from his chest.

"So you took to the air to separate me and Baldr!"

Sechs's goal here was to fight Shu until the very end. That included doing all it took to win.

Shu was currently separated from his Embryo. While Baldr could still provide artillery support for Shu, he couldn't use his ultimate—which was the only thing he could do to stand a chance against the dark copy that no doubt also possessed the immense stats of the original.

Shu couldn’t have used his ult until now because that had come with the risk of Sechs literally crawling inside him—that was what he had done to the UBM they’d cooperated against.

Now, however, it was clear that he had to use his ult as quickly as possible.

He would be fine as long as they were still in the air, since the machine god had no means of flying and couldn’t use its stats to their fullest in this situation. All Sechs could do right now was fire missiles at Shu.

However, the moment he landed, Sechs could use the dark Baldr’s full power to kill Shu in an instant.

“You’re always a real hog when it comes to upkeep, but now that the shoe’s on the other foot, I can see what a real pain in the ass you truly are,” said Shu to Baldr.

“I am afraid I cannot agree,” his Embryo replied.

Shu had actually anticipated that Sechs would use something like this, but there was something that even he had failed to anticipate.

Nu was an Embryo focused on transforming into other people, so it was obvious that its ultimate would be something that fit into that theme. And if it was more powerful than Shapeshift, one could easily expect that it would allow Sechs to employ even other people’s Superior Embryos.

However, there was one thing that Shu had never seen coming.

“He’s dodgin’ the ult’s goddamn payment!”

Sechs had transformed into Baldr *with* his ultimate active. However, normally, The Unmatched God of War—Baldr was a skill that used up an energy cell created within Baldr. Those energy cells could only be produced if Baldr spent a certain amount of time active *outside* of combat.

Because of this, even though Shu expected Sechs was capable of copying even Superior Embryos, he never thought he could actually use an ult with such strict conditions.

However, there he was, using The Unmatched God of War despite ignoring all of those restrictions.

He’d even used missiles right away, while the original Baldr had to spend time crafting them.

...Did he cover the payment some other way? Shu wondered. Since the price obviously wasn’t paid with an energy cell, Nu’s ultimate skill had to have demanded something else.

Something like this shouldn't be possible for cheap.

It probably ain't just lots of MP or SP. Was the cost covered by somethin' produced over time, similar to Baldr's energy cells? No...Baldr himself needs both time and materials. Unlike him, Nu shouldn't have the default ability to produce stuff.

Sechs had to have paid some sort of a steep price. In exchange, he was able to use a skill that either "drew out the full potential of the one he was transformed into" or "made him the strongest that *he knew* the person could be."

Though given their relationship, those two were one and the same when it came to Shu.

What did he pay? It's powerful, so it's gotta cost a lot...an MVP reward?

Shu was aware that Dryfe's duel champion, Hell General, Logan Goddhart, sacrificed MVP rewards to summon Mythical devils. Sechs surely had many such MVP rewards he could give away for his ult. However, Shu had seen no sign that he'd sacrificed anything of the sort before activating it.

Is there a time-related limit, then? Can it only be used once every...I dunno, month? It wouldn't be the only ultimate that had such a long cooldown. The leader of Caldina's Sefirot as well as Dryfe's Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin both had ults that functioned like that.

Slowly, over long periods of time, they accumulated the Resources necessary.

Seems closer, but it doesn't quite cover everything. Nu's not the kind of Embryo to stock up on Resources. If anything, it's more likely to use... Ah!

At that moment, two things came to Shu's mind.

First was the way Nu's Shapeshift functioned. It was a transformation ability entirely dependent on Sechs's total level.

The second thing was the Master he called "fox"—Tsukuyo Fuso.

Specifically, it was her job, High Priestess, and its *final* skill—Ulfaria Eltram.

"...I get it," he said with certainty.

Predicting the trajectories and avoiding the missiles coming his way, Shu glared at the black Baldr.

"*You sacrificed your levels*, didn't ya?"

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The Superior Embryo, “Primordial Shifting, Nu,” had an ult called “I Take Countless Forms—Nu.”

This was a skill that sacrificed *the user* in exchange for giving him a different form. It allowed Sechs to select a transformation target he had stocked up and let him use all of their powers, if only for just thirty minutes.

It didn’t matter if that meant using a Superior Embryo or a skill that required specific items to be used.

However, *using it caused Sechs to lose 500 levels*.

That was more levels than many tians could stand to gain even if they dedicated their whole lives to leveling. It was such a steep cost that this could rightly be called a final skill—in the sense that it would often mean utter self-destruction.

Though Sechs had many levels thanks to World Record, this certainly wasn’t cheap for him. His level was now 2,390. Since this ult had the same level conditions as Shapeshift, the next time he used it, he wouldn’t even be able to take Shu’s form again.

And if he used it too many times, Sechs *would no longer be able to become anyone or anything*.

Nu—and Sechs himself—would lose his purpose.

It was such a double-edged sword that it made perfect sense why he had never once used it against Shu.

And yet, he was using it now.

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Shu silently considered his enemy. Sechs had used the War as an opportunity to challenge him, but he must’ve been preparing for this for a long time. He’d even stocked up on forms he could take and raised his levels so he would have enough. He wanted to fight Shu until the end, and with everything he had. He wanted them both to give their all—and for him to emerge victorious, having gained the understanding he so desired.

“...Fine.” Shu had given a lot for this, and this was Shu’s response: “I’ll play the ace up my sleeve too.”

Shu had two goals for this fight.

First, he wanted to beat Sechs and put an end to all the crime he'd been committing in Altar.

Second, he wanted to rush to the War between Altar and Dryfe to aid the kingdom's war effort.

He'd sent out a message suggesting that it was better not to expect him, almost certain that he wouldn't be able to participate in the War. Despite that, he hadn't given up on the possibility. After all, it wasn't impossible that he'd still be able to make it in time to assist in the War, and if the possibility wasn't zero—even if it was a tiny fraction of a percent—Shu would simply reach for it.

That was the kind of man Shuichi Mukudori was.

At this moment, however, he abandoned his second goal.

This wasn't him giving up, though. The man who was right now giving all he had was none other than Sechs Würfel—his rival, his foe, his friend, and his reflection—and Shu had simply decided to throw away all considerations outside of this and stop caring whether he'd have enough power left to spare once this battle was over.

He'd recognized that he also had to give his all against this enemy—and resolved to do just that.

"I'll use everythin' I got too. Though, just lemme repeat what I said," Shu said as he pointed at the black machine. "Don't think a little fight to the death's gonna be enough to *really* understand me."

That was another way of saying "you won't fulfill your goal either."

Hovering in the air, the dark god let out a roar. Just like the original Baldr, it must've contained Sechs transformed into Shu.

However, the entire machine was *also* Sechs. The doppelganger within was but a small part of the whole, and the roar of the dark god was not the loud workings of the machine, but Sechs's own voice.

As that sound shook the air itself, the armaments on the dark machine's chest, fingers, legs, *everywhere* opened fire.

It was indiscriminate, unbridled devastation. Like a god of destruction, the black machine ravaged its surroundings, defacing the already blasted land of the canyon even further.

As the storm of shells and fire rained down, Shu rushed towards Baldr, and Baldr rushed towards Shu.

Neither could evade every attack launched by the other. Gear and armor was damaged; blood and energy was spilled.

Eventually, the dark god landed, and Shu reached Baldr at the same time. The dark god kicked off the ground at supersonic speeds while Shu entered his Embryo. The dark god threw his deadly punch while Baldr assumed his robotic form. And ultimately, their fists clashed once more.

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Launched from below, the steel god’s fist welcomed the dark god’s arcing punch.

The shock from the clash dwarfed the one before it. Its power was so immense that the walls of the canyon that had enclosed him until now *were completely blown away*.

The two gods in the center, however, didn’t flinch at all.

In silence, these reflections of one another stared at each other.

One was the color of steel, while the other was of the deepest black.

A flawless, shining metal that bent before nothing and remained itself no matter what.

A chaotic darkness that sought itself and took on countless other colors on the way.

It was as though their colors represented their very natures.

Words were no longer needed between them.

The steel god kicked off the ground. The technique he planned to use now was “Nejirebana.” The twisting of this right palm-strike was meant to drive the full force of his momentum into his foe.

In response, the dark god also stuck out his right arm.

A moment later, that same arm *began to turn at an extremely high speed*.

“Gh...!” The way the arm rotated was far too visceral compared to the way the steel god moved, based solidly in martial arts. The dark god’s hand was instead turning from the wrist down like a drill.

Thus, the two twisting hands clashed. The steel god’s right hand pulverized the dark god’s, but its rapid spinning took two of the steel god’s fingers.

...Gotta be that thing’s MVP reward, Shu thought, instantly understanding what caused the spinning.

Just like Shu had some unique gear, so there was gear owned only by Sechs.

The MVP reward for the turning UBM they’d cooperated to defeat had gone to King of Crime, and Shu guessed that he’d just experienced a manifestation of its ability.

Did he force his hand into that spin to mimic my Nejirebana? Is it a skill that lets him spin his body...? That seems a bit weak for a reward from that thing. Best assume this ain’t all it can do.

While Shu was thinking that, the dark god regrew his lost hand.

...He's still a slime. No surprise he'd be able to do this much.

The dark god was as strong as the steel god, but he was also a slime, letting him ignore all physical damage. Even though Shu's Right of Destruction enabled him to physically destroy Sechs, it didn't prevent *reconstruction* of those destroyed parts.

However, the damage had still made him lose some volume—or rather, his HP. Shu's attacks were not exactly ineffective here.

Sechs can keep goin' in good condition for a while, but there's still a limit here—he can't have his actual volume drop below that of his transformation target. Not that that changes my plan.

He would simply fight the dark god, whittle away at Sechs's HP, and eventually destroy him.

There was no other way than that, but...

...I'll be at a disadvantage if this drags on, Shu thought. While the steel god was a machine, the dark god was a slime that had means of healing himself. He was well aware that he couldn't win an endurance match. He had to make it quick.

And for that, he had to use the ace up his sleeve.

He'd already resolved to do just that.

"Ah...?!"

But before Shu could actually do it, the steel god found himself tripped up. As though hit by a sliding kick, the right leg he used to support himself was knocked off the ground, making him lose his balance and fall.

"This is...!" Looking down, he saw the shattered fragments of the dark god—a part of Nu—clinging to his right foot.

It didn't make sense, though, that such a small part could deliver enough power to make the steel god trip.

There had to be some other cause...

"So this is what the reward was for!"

...and Shu knew exactly what it was.

It had to be the Ancient Legendary MVP special reward, "Spinning Belt, Spindle." This item contained the power of the turning UBM, concentrated solely on making Sechs's body revolve quickly.

It wasn't *just* simple turning around, though. Its activation required no physical focal point, letting him turn along any vector even if he was midair.

Additionally, it allowed turning not only on *his own axes*, but also making his *surroundings turn* around a specified point in space.

Sechs not only had the UBM's Turning Space at his fingertips—that power was available even to the parts that had been separated from him.

Because of this, he was able to rotate things that he'd merely attached severed parts of himself to. The effect of the turning was weaker the less of his total volume Sechs used, so the amount attached to the steel god wasn't enough to actually force Shu to spin—but it was enough to make him lose his footing and trip.

As long as part of Sechs clung to Shu, he simply couldn't move as he intended.

Even though he had Shu's body, Sechs didn't have his technique, and this was one of the ways that he intended to make up for that gap.

With a sound much like the one that had preceded it, the dark god threw another fist towards his destabilized enemy. Shu tried to raise his right hand to protect himself, but the part of Sechs attached to his right arm essentially negated his defensive movement, letting the dark god deliver his punch straight to his chest.

"Kh...!" That alone was enough to send a shock wave that reached even Shu in his cockpit, making the surrounding consoles release sparks and the entire frame audibly and visibly creak.

The punch that followed the first left the chest armor in ruins.

"Baldr!" That one word was enough for the Embryo to understand what his Master wanted.

A moment later, the steel god's chest *exploded*.

Stardust Genocider had been fired within the warped, shattered armor, behind unopened nozzles. The resulting explosion reached his own inner machinery, blew open the chest armor, and caught even the dark god unawares.

Shock overcame Sechs as he realized these were the same incendiary shells as before.

Even though he had equipment to mitigate some of the risk, he still had a slime's characteristic weakness to fire. The high temperatures almost made the dark god's surface melt, forcing him to jump away.

However, the steel god was in an even worse state. The armor over his chest was completely gone, and the damage had spread to the other parts;

the surface of the unit was covered in heat from the incendiary shells.

That was exactly what Shu had intended, however.

The intense heat enveloping him had made the bits of Sechs that were clinging to him melt away.

He'd chosen to harm himself just so he could remove what was hindering his movements.

Though, the price to pay was not exactly small.

"Total damage has exceeded 40%. All armor compromised. Serious damage to inner systems within the chest area. The Stardust Genocider in the chest area, as well as all Bloody Laser Storm slits within all armor, have been rendered unusable."

"Figured." They'd been punched by the god's own power twice, and suffered the self-destructive missile "launch." In fact, it was a miracle that the damage wasn't more than fifty percent.

However, this had completely eliminated his already low chances of winning a drawn-out battle. Even if his opponent had no means of healing, fighting him in his current state would mean utter defeat.

"Well, not like it changes what I'm doin'." Shu had already decided that he wouldn't make this an endurance battle. Sechs had used his pricey ultimate as well as his MVP reward, revealing every card in his hand. "Guess I'll lay it all on the table too." Right now, Sechs had both Shu's job and Embryo powers.

But that didn't mean that he had everything that Shu possessed. Though he could assume the forms of people or their Embryos, he couldn't transform into things—or more specifically, *items*.

It was a limitation on Nu's abilities, likely born out of Sechs's own nature.

Compared to the ability to transform into people and Embryos, it seemed like a trivial limitation. However, that was exactly what made it so important to Shu.

Sechs now exceeded the original in physical form and skills; this was the sole way in which Shu could still surpass him even now.

"Baldr... Rev up the Gamma."

"Affirmative. Fatal Engine, Gloria γ, ignition."

It was something just barely visible through the gaps of the destroyed chest armor—the place where a human's heart would reside.

As though to make its origins clear, this “heart” looked quite different from most of the steel god’s inner workings, with an appearance more organic than mechanical.

It was King of Destruction, Shu Starling’s *final* card in the most literal sense of the word.

It was the *curse* left behind by the terrible dragon.

This thing that had been sealed away within this chest was now receiving energy from the steel god, making it roar in a way that made the very ground tremble.

Now awoken, the curse would seek its tribute, and that was exactly what made this his “final” card.

He had nothing to say about that. He’d already resolved to pay the price.

The War was barely on his mind anymore. He had no power or thought to spare for it.

He would give his *all* to this battle against Sechs.

Thus, he spoke the name of the power within the Fatal Engine, Gloria γ—the Superior reward left to him by the strongest dragon.

“The Dying Breath at World’s End: Gloria.” “Code, acknowledged.” Following Baldr’s response, the steel god...

“War God Ship, Baldr. Assuming Ragnarök Form.”

...was reborn in a red-gold hue reminiscent of twilight.

Chapter Nine: In Skies of Twilight and Dawn

About Baldr

Baldr was the god of light in Norse mythology, as well as the owner of the world’s greatest ship—Hringhorni.

This was reflected in Shu’s Baldr, as well. His first form was a weapon that fired a projectile of light, while the fifth, sixth, and seventh forms were all ships.

It was as though the final result of the Embryo’s evolution had been fixed from the start. Perhaps Baldr had understood—or was made to understand—his Master’s true nature even before Baldr was born.

However, there were a few other aspects that were core to Baldr’s myth.

First, he was killed by his brother Höðr, who was tricked into doing it by the evil Loki.

Second, his death meant the disappearance of light and the beginning of Norse mythology’s Twilight of the Gods—Ragnarök.

The Baldr of myth was instrumental to the beginning of the end—a sign of a coming calamity.

Baldr the Embryo, however, had never possessed anything like that—*but he did now*.

By defeating the overwhelmingly terrible Tri-Zenith Dragon, Baldr had received the Fatal Engine, Gloria γ. Taking the form of an extra engine within Baldr, it was never active and functioned as nothing but dead weight.

It was never active because activating it would mean the end of everything.

Once it was turned on, it would be covered in the red of heat and *the gold of the dragon*.

And that was when all would end.

That included the enemy, as well as...

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Twilight and Chaos

The god cloaked in red and gold...the twilight god stood up.

Sechs had no idea what had caused his foe to assume this appearance. Was it an Embryo skill? A job ultimate? The effect of an MVP reward?

Regardless, this was a Shu that Sechs was not aware of.

Sechs had given his all and successfully forced Shu to play this new ace up his sleeve. Neither of them was holding back, and their fight was now more true than ever.

However, this still wasn't enough.

"Not yet..." Drawing out Shu's full power wasn't enough. He still had to fight him, understand him, and find out what made him *him*.

Sechs thought he could do it—felt he had to do it—and had challenged Shu for that exact purpose.

"Not yet...!"

That was why he couldn't let it end here. He still had not gained anything.

A sound hard to describe rang out as the twilight god moved forwards once again.

Shu was now faster than the dark god even after Sechs had used an ultimate to match his speed.

It instantly became clear that Shu had used some sort of transformation skill that increased stats. If it was from an MVP reward, Sechs could never copy it, and if it was a job or Embryo skill, he didn't know how to activate it.

And so, he could do nothing to prevent the coming clash.

However, though his stats were lower than Shu's now, Sechs was still a slime and could rebuild his form. An injury or two was a small price to pay if he could learn more about his opponent.

Part of Sechs's fighting style involved understanding others through the violence they inflicted upon him. Because of this, what would happen next was an inevitability.

The twilight god threw his right fist at him, and the dark god welcomed it with his own. The resulting clash *made his right arm vanish without a trace*.

Even Sechs couldn't help but be shocked by this. In fact, it was so unexpected that the dark god trembled with raw emotion, an unusual sight for him. Sechs's counter punch not only wasn't enough to match Shu's—it was so weak by comparison that his entire arm shattered at the atomic level.

This wasn't simply due to Shu's Right of Destruction. It was the result of the unimaginable gap that had widened between their offensive abilities.

The slight increase in speed was only a small part of what made the twilight god what it was. His true value resided in his offensive power, unmatched by anything else.

The dark god, Sechs, had used his ultimate skill to match—no, *surpass*—Baldr in overall power. However, the twilight god's might was oppressive even to him.

"Shu! You...!" To gain Shu's power, Sechs had sacrificed a whole 500 levels.

What, then, had Shu given away to gain power that surpassed even that?

"Nejirebana." Instead of an answer, the twilight god followed up his attack with a palm-strike.

The dark god raised his left arm in defense, but upon impact it dispersed all the way to the elbow, and it did nothing to stop the palm from reaching his face, which was also reduced to atoms.

Shock overcame Sechs yet again. Losing his head wouldn't normally be fatal to him. Nu the Type Body Embryo had no concept of a "weak point." As long as his volume remained plentiful, attacks to his head or heart were no different from scratches.

However, two attacks from the twilight god had shaved away an extreme amount of Sechs's body.

"So this is Shu's trump card..." Sechs murmured. "This is so..."

A god of twilight, wielding immeasurable physical offensive power. Combined with KoD's Right of Destruction, his limbs became weapons that could blow anything out of this realm. Even the dark god, who had copied the original Baldr and gained his defense, was unable to protect himself against this. Would Mythical metal withstand this? Would the "Invincible" Superior survive this? Sechs didn't know the answer to either of those questions, but he did know one thing.

I...Nu does not have anything left that can counter this... Sechs thought. His slime body already had supreme physical defense, and even though he was weak to energy-based attacks, he could defend against them with Jötunheimr's Heat Absorption or other abilities he had in stock.

Even so, the twilight god's attacks were far beyond anything he could use.

And since Shu now had the upper hand in skill as well as speed, Sechs couldn't even hope to fully evade his strikes. The most he could do was turn the attacks slightly aside, but even an edge that barely scraped him would reap his volume—his HP.

Spindle is meaningless, as well, he thought. Simply touching the twilight god would disperse the dark god at the atomic level, making it impossible for him to attach any pieces to Shu's body like he had been doing.

Through nothing but sheer power, Shu had rendered all of Sechs's resistances and strategies meaningless.

...It must have been risky, though. Since the twilight god's own limbs weren't shattering under the force of their own strikes, it must've been a skill that increased not STR, but the final attack power.

Despite that, Baldr's mechanical frame was covered in cracks all over.

The offensive power delivered by the twilight god traveled through the surrounding space, even damaging himself slightly. It wasn't a drawback specific to the skill, but a mere phenomenon caused by its natural function.

Still, it was obvious that it couldn't be used for an extended battle.

A Superior MVP reward focused on a brief, decisive battle... Sechs thought. He had a Superior MVP reward of his own, and in terms of compatibility he was actually above Shu.

His ultimate skill that cost 500 levels would only last 30 minutes, and he'd already lost a great amount of his total volume...but that didn't matter one bit. If he used his Superior MVP reward—Organ of Rebirth, Gloria δ—against someone who could only fight briefly, he would *certainly* come out victorious.

To be more precise, he would *ultimately* come out victorious. That was how the reward worked.

It completely upset the basic idea that "you either defeat your enemies, or they defeat you." It was pure treason against the very way *Infinite Dendrogram* worked, and it certainly wasn't any weaker than Shu's fearsome Gloria γ.

However, that wasn't something Sechs could use now. Considering the nature of its owner, it was likely the most meaningless Superior MVP reward ever.

...I suppose this was part of the reason why Rascal tried to stop me. If they had waited until Gloria β became something he could use and their goal as Illegal Frontier was fulfilled, Sechs would finally be able to win no matter whom he was up against.

But... However...

“It does not matter to me whether *I* win or lose against Shu.”

Sechs wasn’t interested in coming out victorious to begin with.

That was why there was no point in waiting until he could fight against Shu and win. There was something far more important to him.

“He is so different from me. This is about whether I can understand him... That is *all*!”

Sechs was only after the results of an all-out, true battle between them—the clash of their souls. He was certain that these results could only be found at the conclusion of a battle in which both of them fought to the very last.

“And that is why...!”

He still had not gotten his answer, so he simply could not allow this to be over yet.

“I will not let this end here...! I cannot...!”

The dark god’s soul let out a panicked shout...

“SPLIT SPIRIT!”

...and used the last skill in his—Nu’s—repertoire.

The next moment, the dark god split into *six* of himself.

It was as though he had become the embodiment of chaos. This multiplication was caused by the last skill Nu had acquired.

Split Spirit was a skill that built upon Sechs’s ability as a slime to separate himself into parts.

It allowed him to split into a maximum of six iterations of himself while maintaining all the powers he had as one person. The drawback was that none of the resulting splits could transform into anything else, and the original’s HP was equally divided between them. That meant each of them represented only a sixth of the dark god Shu had been fighting until now.

Additionally, it had the demerit of semi-permanently reducing maximum HP.

Once the skill expired and the other splits vanished, Sechs's max HP would not go back to what it was before. Instead, it would stay divided all the way until he came back from a death penalty.

To Nu, HP was equal to body volume—and for King of Crime, dying would mean being locked up in the gaol for an obscene amount of time. The risks of using this skill were quite extreme.

But Sechs had used it regardless.

Just as he'd sacrificed his levels, so did he sacrifice his life force...all so this fight would continue.

"Shu," the embodiment of chaos—the six dark gods—all said in unison as they approached the twilight god.

Dashing, jumping, flanking, crawling, they attacked their opponent in a relentless assault that was impossible for him to defend against alone. Their cooperation was flawless in a way that only a group who were all one could achieve.

It wasn't the drawbacks that had prevented Sechs from using Split Spirit. The skill was just most effective after he had used Nu's ultimate to become someone overwhelmingly powerful.

Because of this, it was fair to say that the twilight god was currently surrounded by six fully realized steel gods.

"SHHEAH!" The twilight god retaliated by throwing a punch towards the first of them, "Eins," who was heading directly for him. It sank into his chest and caused his entire upper body to vanish.

With their HP divided by six, a single punch from the twilight god was enough to take them out.

On the other hand, that meant that collectively, they were able to withstand a whole six of his attacks.

"Shu!" Zwei, the one who'd jumped, was approaching the opponent from above while swinging down with both hands for a crushing attack.

In response, the twilight god launched a kick with his right leg.

As he was faster, his kick blew away both of Zwei's arms down to the elbow before they could reach him. He then accelerated his raised leg downwards, delivering an axe-kick that split Zwei in half.

That was when the attacks of the four remaining ones landed upon the twilight god. His armor shattered, and his left arm was cleaved from his body.

To the four remaining, this was confirmation of a certain fact. It was already obvious that Ragnarok Form didn't increase speed to the same extent that it increased attack power, and this proved that his defense also did not receive any such extreme bonuses. In fact, since the twilight god actually damaged himself with every attack, he might have actually been *more* fragile than before.

He could still be damaged if an attack connected, so...

"Shu."

Drei stood before the twilight god. Like a raging bear or a magnanimous king, he had his hands spread out as if to say, "Let us compare our strength."

The twilight god...Shu accepted this challenge.

He had to punch and obliterate all of them regardless of anything else. Since Ragnarok Form didn't enhance his potential for wide-area extermination, anyone as powerful as the steel god had to be dealt with with his own fists.

The twilight god kicked off the ground and approached Drei. Drei stood no chance against one who surpassed him in speed and technique, and the twilight god could waste no time grappling with him.

He threw a punch from his right, causing Drei's upper body to disintegrate on contact just like Eins.

The next moment, Drei's outstretched arms let out a powerful light.

"Gh...!" This was a light so bright it burned the eyes and caused temporary blindness, and Shu instantly recognized it.

"F Warheads!"

It was one of Baldr's weapons—missiles that released intense light that made it impossible to see. He'd used it himself against Gloria.

"Tch...!" Since the dark god possessed the steel god's stats and could use everything he could, Shu did know Sechs could fire such special warheads, but it still surprised him to see them delivered from the arms. They were normally fired from the chest, which he had obliterated with his attack.

He only needed a moment to understand how this was done, though.

Although Drei *looked* like Baldr, he was actually Nu. Because of this, it was no surprise that he could move the F Warheads through his liquid body to fire them from elsewhere.

This tactic paid off, and Shu was briefly blinded. Before Baldr could repair his burned-out visual sensors, an impact shook the twilight god.

"SHUUU!"

That was the voice of the fourth—Vier. He'd used the opening created by the flash to cling to the twilight god with both his arms and legs.

It almost made Shu lose his balance, but besides that, it meant little. Vier couldn't attack from this position. The twilight god, on the other hand, had more than enough power to instantly make another split vanish. All he had to do was throw the punch.

"Ah...!"

However, that was soon made physically impossible.

While the visual sensors were still fried, from inside the twilight god's cockpit Shu felt as though the world was flipped upside down.

And that was exactly what had happened—up had become down and down became up.

"This is...!" Shu said. The twilight god, as well as Vier still sticking to him, had both begun to spin.

Shu already knew what was making this possible.

"Again with that MVP reward...!" Spinning Belt, Spindle—the MVP reward that let Sechs rotate his body. A small part of Sechs could only make his opponent lose his balance, and it was difficult to attach to the twilight god he was now.

This was different, however. Vier was the same size as the twilight god, and he had stuck his entire body to him. That made it possible to force both of them to spin at extremely high speeds, rendering Shu incapable of doing anything.

His immense stats could only be put to use if he had his feet on the ground.

This was almost a reverse of the situation when the dark god first appeared. However, there were two key differences.

First, the high-speed spinning made it uncertain what the twilight god would actually hit if he swung his fist. He was just as likely to punch himself instead of Vier, which would cause a great deal of damage.

Second, there were still the fifth and sixth—Fünf and Sechs.

As the twilight god spun, his sensors began to recover, and he saw his two other opponents.

The dark gods were both in the *exact same pose*.

"Ah...!" Shu knew what that pose meant. "They're usin' the World Breaker!" The *final* ultimate skill of King of Destruction, World Breaker. It was a sure-kill attack that combined the immense attack with Right of Destruction to demolish space itself, ensuring the destruction of both the target and the user.

Fünf and Sechs were both preparing to launch it at the twilight god at the same time. A direct hit would be fatal even for him.

Not saying a word, Shu considered Sechs. He realized that his opponent was planning to end the battle.

This was the climax.

However, Shu had no means of escaping Vier's grip. Stuck in the air, he couldn't make use of his stats, and all of his firearms had been destroyed.

"I can't move or even touch the ground, huh?" Shu mused.

However...

"I can still reach the sky."

Following those words, the twilight god made a fist.

He wouldn't target Vier, nor would he brace for Fünf's and Sechs's attacks.

He would instead shatter the very space in front of him.

That was all that he needed.

"Shu," Fünf and Sechs both said as they rushed towards him.

"World Breaker," Shu replied, before they reached him.

That moment was the end of everything.

The final ultimate was launched with all the attack power of the twilight god behind it.

The resulting destruction of the surrounding space engulfed everything around it.

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Nowest Canyon was a dead land.

The battle between the Superiors and the SUBM had changed its landscape, destroyed its trade routes, and the Fatal Field had wiped out all life it had once had.

However, despite all of this, it could still be called a "canyon."

That was no longer true, as *everything here had vanished*.

In its place was a gaping crater, as though it had been the site of a mortar strike, making it impossible to imagine that a canyon had ever stood here.

Now, the area was no longer worthy of its name. The Nowest Canyon had come to an end.

But despite that...

"...Guess it's down to this one."

"It seems so..."

...there were still people standing here.

One was King of Destruction, Shu Starling.

After having lost the left arm to his opponent, he'd now lost his right to his own World Breaker—it had completely vanished. The twilight god's armor was mostly gone as well, and he was only barely standing on nearly broken legs.

He'd used the strongest World Breaker in history, and it was a mystery how he survived. Was it the slightly increased defense? Or did even this skill, which seemed synonymous with the user's death, have some degree of consideration for its king?

The second figure was King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

Only the sixth of the dark gods was left, and even he would've vanished if he hadn't used the fifth as a shield. What had happened to the fourth, who was at the epicenter of this destruction, is hardly worth mentioning...

That wasn't to say that the one still standing was in a good state, though. There was almost nothing left of him now, and he could only barely maintain his shape.

Split Spirit had an extra effect that helped maintain the shape and size of the splits even if they lost volume. Without it, Sechs would've already crumbled.

A single attack from the other would be enough to fell them both.

"So...do you understand?" Shu asked. Only silence answered him. It was obvious what the question was about. He asked if this battle to the death, soon to end, had helped Sechs understand Shu.

The answer to that was...a complete denial.

"...No. I feel like I am close to grasping it, but I cannot... I do not understand. I thought I would, so why...?" said Sechs, struggling to comprehend what he was still missing.

"Yeah. Thought so. Of course you wouldn't understand," Shu replied.

"Why?"

"The goddamn fact you'd even ask that..." Shu let out a sigh before continuing. "I'm not just about fightin', and *we're* not just about killin' each other."

Sechs couldn't say anything in response. Shu was a person who was often caught up in all kinds of trouble, and he'd resolved many problems through combat.

However, his life wasn't all about fighting.

He lived in *Infinite Dendrogram* as no one but himself.

He wore an animal costume and handed out candy to children.

He sometimes cooked food and brought it to his friends at the castle.

He was occasionally invited to party with his friends and acquaintances.

He didn't live in this world *just* as a warrior. His peaceful days were as much a part of him as those of strife.

And that included the days he'd spent with Sechs.

"There's no way you can fully understand me by *just* fightin' me to the death."

Sechs was still speechless. Shu seemed completely right.

In fact, one could say that Sechs's very idea that he could understand Shu by "giving his all and making their very souls clash" was logically inconsistent.

"...Why?" said Sechs, completely dumbfounded.

"Ya wonderin' why ya didn't realize it earlier? I think I know," said Shu.

"Why?"

"It's 'cause for you, both here and on Earth, human relationships and exchanges of life are one and the same." Sechs had revealed that he was an organ transplant clone—a life made solely to be given away to the original. And after the original died, his life became solely about passing on his genes—continuing this lineage of life.

And even here, his first act of freedom was to roll the dice that would set his way of life, and it landed on the path of evil.

Because of that, exchanges of life were normal for him.

"You always lived under the assumption that everythin's about taking life or having it taken away from you. Your thinkin's messed up on a fundamental level."

"...Hah hah..."

There were two reasons for the laughter that escaped Sechs's lips.

First, he laughed because he was disappointed in how off-the-mark his methods were.

And the second reason for his laughter was...joy.

He...Shu understands me so well... His true self was something that even Sechs himself couldn't truly comprehend, yet even he had someone who really understood him...and that realization made him happy.

So happy, in fact, that he was tearing up.

I still cannot understand Shu. But even so...I am sure that I will only know myself if I keep involving myself with him. And on top of that...

Even though he knew his methods were wrong, he wouldn't change the way he was. He had no intention of giving up on his goal of understanding Shu, nor would he stop walking the path of evil that he'd chosen.

If he'd compromised that side of himself, after all, he would never achieve what he wanted—to understand the man who *never* compromised himself.

"So, yeah... You should try somethin' besides crime now," said Shu. "Take up cookin' or whatever."

"You will not tell me to *stop* committing crimes?"

"You won't budge on that no matter what I say or how hard I kick your ass."

"...Heh heh." *He truly knows me well,* Sechs thought, smiling. "Now..."

"Yeah."

Thus, Shu and Sechs—the gods of twilight and darkness—faced each other.

"Let us settle this."

"Yeah. Time to end this."

Both of them dashed towards each other. There was no strategy and no tactics—nothing like that at all—in their actions...

With bodies on the brink of collapse and life that could be extinguished by a gust of wind, the two charged forward, each intent on delivering the first blow.

The dark god may have had the upper hand simply because he still had all his limbs. With no arms and barely working legs, the twilight god could hardly make use of his speed advantage.

"SHUUUUU!" And so, the dark god swung his fist.

"SEEEEECHS!" The twilight god threw up the remains of his shattered leg.

Thus, the final shock wave resounded through the brightening morning sky.

Both of their attacks connected.

The dark god's fist blew off the twilight god's head.

And the twilight god's leg split apart the dark god's torso.

To a human, both of these attacks would've been fatal.

However...

"...Shu."

"Yeah?"

The dark god's body was beginning to crack, spreading from the gaping split in his torso.

And then, his body shattered and started to dissolve into tiny sparks of light.

"Let us meet again."

"...Sure."

At this point, Shu had left Baldr and stood watching Sechs vanish with his own eyes.

"And...let us fight again."

"...Haven't learned your lesson, huh?"

"No."

"...Well, whatever. Just don't do any of this blackmail type shit again... I feel like I said that to Humpty once."

"Heh heh... Very well. I will have my rematch...under different circumstances."

"Well, it's not like ya lost here, really. It's a draw."

"Hm...?" All that was left of the dark god by now was his head, and it was tilted—intentionally or otherwise—in a questioning manner.

That was when the twilight god lost his light and assumed an ashen color before starting to disperse like dust.

"Time's up for me too." Shu's own body was becoming bits of light as well. That confirmed Sechs's suspicions about this power being one that came at a heavy cost.

"...For me, this is still defeat," Sechs insisted.

"Well, aren't you stubborn?"

"Heh..." Sechs laughed as he was reduced to nothing but droplets...

"I suppose...that is just...*who I am*..."

...and ultimately vanished.

The kingdom's worst criminal, the leader of the Illegal Frontier—King of Crime, Sechs Würfel, was thus sent to the gaol.

"You don't need me to be your mirror... I know you'll find yourself one day, on your own." Shu's rival, friend, and reflection was no longer here to hear his words. "Anyway... I wonder what's gonna happen now." As he was also dissolving into light, he looked up at the sky.

"I hope Altar's still around when I come back. Worst-case scenario, this and that'll happen with Theresia and it'll all be over... Though, I guess Dormouse'll do somethin' about it then."

He spoke as though he wouldn't be around for a while.

"'Only god knows what the world'll be like in a *month*,' huh...? What a sick joke."

And with those final words, Shu and his Embryo vanished just like Sechs and Nu.

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About Baldr

There was another story about the Baldr of Norse mythology.

After Loki's trickery had caused his death, he was given a chance to come back to life—but for that to happen, everyone in the world had to weep for him.

Loki also prevented this resurrection. Thus, countless winters passed by with Baldr still deceased. He only came back to life after Ragnarök had destroyed the world and paved the way for a new one.

It was not exactly based on this story, but the Fatal Engine's skill—The Dying Breath at World's End: Gloria—had *two* drawbacks.

First, it guaranteed the user would take a death penalty in five minutes. It not only destroyed the Embryo it was installed into, but also killed its Master.

However, this was the lighter of the two drawbacks.

The second one was far worse, as it *increased the death penalty tenfold*.

Normally, avatars would come back in 24 hours of Earth time, but this drawback made it so he could only come back after *240 hours*.

That was thirty days in *Infinite Dendrogram* time—a whole month.

Shu knew well what it meant to use this during the War, and that was exactly why he'd had to steel himself to disregard everything besides his battle with Sechs.

King of Destruction, Shu Starling's avatar would be rebuilt and returned to this world after a month had passed within it. The First Knight-Machine War would already be over by then, and the king, the commander of the Royal Guard, and many others would be lost forever.

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That was how the battle ended.

Shu defeated Sechs, and Sechs was defeated by Shu.

However, Shu was unable to rush to the battlefield and aid in the War effort, while Sechs, despite getting the clash of souls he'd wanted, still could not truly understand Shu.

Sechs had insisted this was his defeat, while Shu saw it as a draw.

It was hard to say that either of them was wrong.

Nevertheless, this was the end of the battle that happened behind the scenes of the First Knight-Machine War.

However, it marked the beginning of a new battle...for the both of them.

Epilogue

King of Destruction, Shu Starling

Hearing songbirds from somewhere, I opened my eyes.

My sight was hazy, but I could tell that I'd just woken up.

"...I was sleepin', huh?" It seemed like I'd dozed off while thinkin' 'bout the past. That might've been why I had a dream that was so damn nostalgic—a dream of the last time I met that guy.

"Achoo...!" As my consciousness was roused, so was the rest of my body, and I quickly started to feel cold. Gideon's nights were on the warmer side, but sleepin' without even wearin' my suit really wasn't a good idea.

"Should've saved my deep thinkin' for after I got back to my room..." My END was in the four digits, so I couldn't get sick from a li'l bit of sleepin' outside, but that didn't stop my body from gettin' cold.

I used Instant Wear to switch to my usual costume. As I did, the sky became brighter as the sun began to rise.

"Hm?" Looking down at the arena, I saw Reiji and Rook come out of the entrance. Both of them were fully geared, so it seemed pretty clear they were about to do some final optimizations before today's Tournament.

He got Rook to be his sparrin' partner. Even at this stage, Rook's Union Jack gave him the stats and skills to match first-rate Masters. He even had three options to choose from dependin' on what he wanted—Marilyn for the big muscle and tankiness, Audrey for flight and ranged attacks, and Liz for physical attack negation and high-speed offense. Rook was more than good enough to play the part of a powerful enemy Reiji might meet in the Tournaments.

"Hrm..." I watched as the two started sparring inside the duel barrier. The barrier was set to accelerate what was happenin' in there, but I could clearly see Rook in his Dragon-Devil-Man form and Reiji fightin' against him.

I didn't know whether Rook had chosen this transformation 'cause he was simply tryin' them in order, or if he felt like Metal-Devil-Man was bad against Reiji 'cause of his fixed damage attacks and fire elemental affinity.

There was a clear gap in their stats, but Reiji was keepin' up.

He began by goin' on the defensive, usin' Reversal to counter the potential debuffs; then, once he had enough damage stored up, he switched to Chaser and targeted Rook's AGI, lettin' him go on the offensive.

He used his twin swords to fight against Rook's lance, but as Dragon-Devil-Man, he had such high stats that Reiji couldn't damage him much. His only real ways of attackin' him were the Miasmaflame Bracers and Vengeance.

Instead, though, he used Instant Equip to take out *that* axe.

"Right after he said he wouldn't use it," I muttered. "Well, there's the barrier, so I guess he's just tryin' it out."

It was worth testing it to see if it was usable in the tourney. Equipping it didn't seem to do much at first. So far, he was only usin' it like a shield, defendin' against Rook's lance attacks.

Though, if my predictions were correct...

"Oh." Suddenly, a roaring sound.

A sonic shock wave so explosive that it passed the barrier reached my ears, and the axe was spinning in the air, free of Reiji's grip.

Actually, the right arm that was holdin' it until a moment ago *had been blown away and reduced to dust*.

Reiji'd probably tried to switch from usin' the axe for defense to attackin' with it, but he couldn't even swing it at Rook—his arm shattered when he just raised it up.

"...Well, that's usually how it goes with cursed weapons." Usin' them was always a huge risk, and when it comes to that, that goddamn axe was the worst one I'd ever seen.

My Gloria γ could also be classified as cursed gear, but I felt like even that wasn't as bad as that axe there.

...Anyway, it seemed pretty clear that he wouldn't figure out how to wield it before today's tourney.

The two were silent, both clearly surprised by what had happened to Reiji's arm, but it didn't stop Rook from loppin' off his head.

Not holdin' back one bit, huh? I thought. *Well, I'm the one who taught him to be like that.*

That was the end of their first match, and the barrier disappeared.

Barrier duels ended when one side's HP dropped to 0, and Death Soldier's Last Command didn't mean anythin' in this situation.

Even if it did activate, though, he wouldn't be able to do much with his head separated from the rest of his body.

...Maybe that was the reason Rook decapitated him?

"...I loooost!" Reiji cried.

"Ah hah hah," Rook chuckled. "That was basically an accident."

Reiji's arm had returned, makin' him whole again.

I'd kinda expected the axe's curse to be the kind that persisted even outside barriers, but it seemed like it wasn't.

"...Looks like I'll have to seal it away for now," Reiji said.

"Indeed," Nemesis agreed. "This one will need to have more of its curses dispersed before I would deem it safe in your hands."

Reiji then hesitantly and carefully put the axe away in his inventory...

"...All right! Let's do it again!"

...and went for a rematch as though it was nothin'.

I knew they were just sparrin', but you'd expect one to be more shaken by the fact that he had his damn arm blown away.

Then again, he'd sparred with Figgy and other rankers plenty of times now. Was that why he was like this now?

"...Nah."

How long had it been since he'd first arrived here? It was over a month in real life, and he was just not a newbie anymore.

He'd fought a whole bunch of tough enemies, and either overcame them or hadn't broken when he failed.

And throughout all of it, he'd gained experience and grown stronger.

His level had grown, and so had his technique.

Despite all that, there was one thing that had stayed the same—he was always a guy with a strong heart, and that hadn't changed one bit.

Despite his weaknesses and wounds, he'd always remained strong.

Sechs said that I had a strong sense of justice. If you asked me, Reiji was the one with a strong heart, and that was no different even here.

And to match his strong heart, he was given power in the form of his Embryo—Nemesis.

"Still...not now." It was still *too early*. It wasn't the time yet.

"...Is this how Sechs felt?" Had King of Crime had similar thoughts while I was hardstuck as a high-rank job?

“Hm...”

And if that fight before the War was the battle he’d wanted, when would *my* desire come true?

With such thoughts in mind, I watched Reiji and Rook continue to spar.

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Gaol

That morning, the gaol was a very silent place.

This was thanks to King of Plagues, Candy Carnage’s bacteria having exterminated nearly all the Masters in the town, as well as Gerbera getting rid of everyone who’d somehow survived.

The only ones in town who were still alive were members of Illegal Frontier, and the only one currently here—in their café, Dice—was Sechs.

The other two were nowhere in sight, and his Prism Person—April—was in his inventory, leaving him all alone.

Completely silent, he was seated in one of the café’s chairs and...sleeping.

He’d spent last night closing up shop.

Now that he’d decided to leave the gaol, he would never return here again, but since he had some memories of the place, he’d decided to clean it up.

All the tables and chairs besides the one he was using were already in his inventory. As though to not leave behind a bad impression, he’d stored away all the tableware and furniture.

The only exception was the clock on the wall.

“...Morning already?” The clock was pointing at six and the light of dawn began to spread as Sechs woke up.

Even the gaol had a day-night cycle, as well as its own weather. Like a colony ship from a sci-fi story, it had a fully functional artificial environment.

Red King was not the only one responsible for that, however—the other control AIs were no doubt lending him their aid.

However, Red King was the only one who would be concerned with what Sechs was about to do.

From their perspective, that was yet another manifestation of freedom. Their stance could be described as “do it if you think it possible.”

“...What a nostalgic dream that was.” Sechs had dreamed about his memories from right before he’d been sent to the gaol again—the last time he’d met and fought Shu. The remnants of the sensations brought about by that dream made Sechs smile without realizing it.

He’d believed that he could find himself through that battle, and that if he and Shu—someone radically different from him—would clash on such a soul-connecting level, then even a nobody like Sechs would perhaps develop a “self.”

However, Shu had clearly told him that it would never work—and indeed, Sechs didn’t feel as if he had anything that he could call “himself.”

If he did possess such a thing, he didn’t even know how to tell. From his point of view, he had remained unchanged.

However, there were some things that were different...or, more specifically, things about *him* that were different.

After that battle, he’d tried focusing on things other than the evil he’d established as his guiding principle. Just like Shu had suggested, he’d begun doing things he hadn’t done before.

This café was the result of that.

He’d learned coffee-making, dabbled in glasswork, and opened up this establishment. Like a model prisoner, he’d also participated in Red King’s events. He’d read books and even wrote his thoughts about them.

Ironically, he’d led a far more respectable life in the gaol than anywhere else, including his real life.

He spent his days here—talking to acquaintances, hanging out with allies, and occasionally dealing with all kinds of trouble.

One could say that his life here was much like Shu’s.

The thing known as the “self” was something gradually built by going through life like that. Perhaps if he’d stayed here far longer than he had, Sechs may have eventually found that elusive “himself” he was looking for.

However, his days here were about to end.

“Now...” Sechs said as he looked at the clock, which showed that it was slightly past six in the morning. “I will be departing this place in less than six hours.”

He then stood up and walked out of the café.

Once outside, he lightly jumped and sprouted a pair of wings.

They were Juliet's Hræsvelgr, which he'd had in his stock since before he was sent to the gaol. During his time inside he'd changed his "loadout" many times, but this was among his forms that remained, just as Shu's had.

Silently, he flapped the black wings to take to the gaol's sky, a clear firmament that seemed to continue forever.

However, Sechs knew full well there was a wall one thousand metels up.

Despite appearances, the gaol was nothing but a cage and a nest.

It was a cage because you could not leave until you did your sentence, and no one so far had escaped it.

It was a subspace nest, created by the Embryo once known as the "Incarnation of Cages."

Looking down at this tiny world, Sechs said to himself, "Though small, it still had everything."

The gaol was a feature meant to quarantine the most sinful of Masters.

It was made to encourage the growth of the innocent Masters who fought against criminal Masters, as well as the growth of criminal Masters trying to avoid imprisonment.

By spurring both sides to struggle, the gaol was something that accelerated Master evolution across the board.

That was also why even if you were defeated and quarantined here, you still had access to most everything you needed.

There was a town. There were dungeons. There were rare items. There were job crystals from all countries.

And though there were no tians, there were still other Masters you could make friends with...or fight.

Because of all that, even here you could experience growth.

Growth for those trying to deliver sinners to the gaol.

Growth for the sinners trying to avoid the gaol.

And growth for the sinners already sent into the gaol.

This, too, was another system through which they tried to create one hundred Superior Embryos.

And it was not without success—there were two Masters who had become Superiors while imprisoned in the gaol.

It was a cage to quarantine the criminals, as well as a nest to help the quarantined grow.

To Red King, the prisoners were like little chicks—Embryos that had not yet become Infinite. And the reason he let them do as they liked was because he was certain they could never escape.

And so, at the top of this cage-nest, Sechs looked down on the empty town—the gaol as a whole—and said, "...Today, I say goodbye to this place."

His sentence would keep him here for many centuries to come. The day when he could leave the ordinary way was obscenely distant.

Thus, the means he would use would be that of a sinner...the path of evil.

"Red King." He looked up at the sky-ceiling, as well as the entity who was surely behind it, looking down at him as well as the rest of the gaol.

"Today, I leave."

It was a declaration of a coming prison break.

The first reason why he'd sprouted wings and flown to this height was to take one last look at this microcosm—which he intended to never see again—and burn the sight into his memory.

The second was to declare that he, a fledgling bird, would seek freedom from this cage and leave it.

He already had his wings.

This bird no longer needed a nest.

As dawn broke on the first day of The Tournaments in Gideon, some of the gaol's inhabitants would soon attempt the impossible.

They would commit the cardinal sin of organizing a prison break.

End

Afterword

Cat: “Hmm... Hrmm...”

Xun: “Time fOr the afterword. I’m ‘Xun,’ shOrt for ‘Xunyu.’”

Fox: “And I’m the ‘Fox,’ Tsukuyo Fusooo! Just so y’all know, the Bear and Sechs are on a break this time.”

Xun: “Guess thEy’re tired from what happenEd this volume... Anyway, Chesh, whAt’re ya groanin’ fOr?”

Cat: “Oh. I’m the ‘Cat,’ Cheshiiire! And I’m a biiit troubled right nowww...”

Xun: “Why’s thAt?”

Cat: “There’s a problem with this afterword...”

Xun: “A problEm?”

Cat: “...We got a whole seven pages left, but no real subject to spend them on. We’re out of things to talk about.”

Xun: “It’s an aftErword. Do we really nEed ’em?”

Cat: “A-Anyway, let’s use this to give out a couple tidbits! You two will reveal some info relevant to the volume that the volume itself missed! You first, Xunyu!”

Xun: “You’re not bEin’ reasonablE...but all right, I’ll dO it.”

Cat: (I didn’t even have to convince her... She’s so nice.)

Xun: “Ray’s group gOt an arena, so I guess I’ll tAlk about how duelin’ wOrks in Altar and elsewhEre.”

Fox: “Is it that different in other places? FYI, I already know that Granvaloa doesn’t have arenas.”

Xun: “Yeah, thAt was brought up in VolUme 17. I’ll talk abOut other countriEs. First of all, those who stArted in Altar woUldn’t know this, but the kingdOm’s arena situatiOn ain’t normal.”

Fox: “That so?”

Xun: “Ya gOt way more of ’em than any othEr country. You can actUally add up all the arEnas everywhEre else and yOu’d still have less thAn Gideon by itself. Even oUr Huang He has just threE of ’em, each in a diffErent town.”

Fox: “Meanwhile, Gideon alone has thirteen...”

Xun: “And sincE Huang He’s arenAs prioritize events and rAnked matches over anythin’ elsE, ya get way fEwer chances to spAr or do some secrEt trainin’ than in AltAr. Rentin’ thEm ain’t as easy, so you almOst never get tO test out your skills bEhind a barrier that dOesn’t show what’s gOin’ on inside. That’s whY you gotta do yoUr secret trainin’ deEp in the mountains and away frOm people, even if thAt comes with thE risk of givin’ you the deAth penalty. And there’s obviOusly no barrier, so yoU also don’t get bAck your MP, SP, items, or whAtever else your skills usE.”

Fox: “Now that just sounds painful.”

Xun: “Huang He’s a lAnd with lots of placEs good for trainin’, thOugh. One of our SuperiOrs, Ming She, bAsically lives in thE mountains. Anyway, ’caUse of all that, I like GideOn a good bit. It’s grEat to always have accEss to an arena. It’s alsO why I’m pretty jealoUs of Ray’s groUp for gettin’ one fOr a base.”

Cat: “It’s actuallyyy the first time an arena has become the HQ of a claaan!”

Xun: “By the wAy, though things arE about the same in thE rest of the coUntries besides Granvaloa, in Tenchi, yA got people riskin’ thEir lives in duEls outside of barriErs like it’s nOrmal.”

Fox: “Well, it *isn’t* normal. There’s gotta be something wrong with them.”

Xun: “Why’s Gideon got sO many arenas, anyway? Care to tEll me, devcat?”

Cat: “We’re not fit to answer thaaat... Just like the Primeval Blade and jobs, they’ve been around since before we got involved, so we just don’t know.”

Xun: “...Y’all arEn’t that good at runnin’ this shOw, huh?”

Cat: “I don’t think I can disagreeee... But there is a reason why they’re spread out like this.”

Xun: “Hm?”

Cat: “The arenas that are around now are the ones that remained intact even after we got involved. And out of the places that had multiple arenas grouped up, Gideon just happened to be the only one that stayed exactly the way it waaas."

Xun: "...That rAised more questions thAn answers, but I wOn't ask."

Cat: "Thank youuu. Please dooon't."

Fox: "Anyway, it's my turn now. I'll say a thing or two about bases in general. First of all, a base can be literally whatever—cabins, mansions, anything. A base is a base. There's even clans that use ships. And the bigger clans tend to have more proper bases."

Xun: "I'm not in a clAn, so lemme ask... WhAt's the point of a basE, anyway?"

Fox: "This is more about buildings in general than just bases, but they can have all kinds of bonuses. For example, they can increase the rate of MP and SP regeneration, or give production quality or success rate bonuses to crafting jobs. My Lunar Society's base reduces the MP cost and cooldowns of healing spells, so we don't have to worry even if we get a lot of patients at once!"

Xun: "That makes yoUr base sound less like a rEligious place and more like a hOspital."

Fox: "*Dendro's* religious institutions are all about clergymen grouping healing skills to begin with. Most of them function like hospitals."

Xun: "Oh, that sO?"

Fox: "I wasn't there back then, but our base was actually very busy during Volume 15."

Xun: "Your group's a rEal pain in the ass fOr Altar, but it's lOokin' like nOt havin' you around woUldn't be tOo good either..."

Cat: (That's exactly what makes them so baaad.)

Cat: "Anyway, that filled in the pages. With that done, it's time for the comment from the author!"

Xun: (He was being serious about that...?)

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Volume 18 came later than planned, but I hope you enjoyed it in spite of that.

It was originally set to release in March, but we had to delay it by a month for quality assurance reasons, and I deeply apologize for making you wait.

However, it was because of this delay that I was able to polish the text and, more importantly, Taiki was able to deliver such wonderful illustrations for this volume. My personal favorites are the color illustration depicting the clan and the one finally showing Baldr in all his glory.

Speaking of Baldr, his design was actually created during the airing of the anime.

Since the anime only covered everything up to Volume 5, it only showed Baldr in his battleship form, but the robot form was actually designed first. This ultimate transformation was what the battleship form was based on.

Baldr wasn't the only thing designed by the anime staff. We also had them create designs for several items and characters, and I deeply appreciate their work.

And now, after two whole years, you were finally able to see Baldr in his robot form.

I was the one who requested that he receive an illustration in this volume, and I can only hope that you were left surprised by how cool he actually looks.

Anyway, this volume was about Ray's everyday life, the results of his actions, as well as the past shared by Shu and Sechs.

I feel that I write many characters that are fundamentally opposed to each other, but these two were perhaps the most extreme example of that.

While Shu always made choices he deemed right, Sechs simply went with the flow to do what the world saw as evil.

While Shu had an unwavering soul, Sechs didn't even have a core sense of self.

I hope the battle between them as well as their story has reached your heart.

Volume 19 will continue from here.

Holding new equipment, Ray will challenge his new opponents in The Tournaments, while Sechs is fully prepared to make his escape from the gaol.

Where will these paths they have taken ultimately lead...?

To learn that and more, please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Sakon Kaidou

Cat: “VOLUME 19 WILL probably RELEASE IN AUGUST, 2022!”
Fox: “He went and made the announcement right as the author’s comment ended.”
Xun: “ThoUgh...did you hEar him say ‘probably’?”
Cat: (Feigning ignorance by whistling.)
Fox: “Oh, I get it. He’s scared that this volume may be delayed too.”
Cat: “ACK!”
Xun: “Oh, so thAt’s it, huh?”
Fox: “He went and made the announcement right away ’cause he wanted to make the date somewhat fuzzy.”
Xun: “And he’s dOin’ an awful job hidin’ it...”
Cat: “...Th-The next volume should come out as planned, so please look forward to it!”

Bonus Short Stories

Coming soon! Check your J-Novel Club library for an updated ebook, or watch the forums for when the stories are available!

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 18
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2022
Premium E-Book

Sakon Kaidou
Illustrator: Taiki
Infinite Dendrogram
19. The Overlord of Dreams

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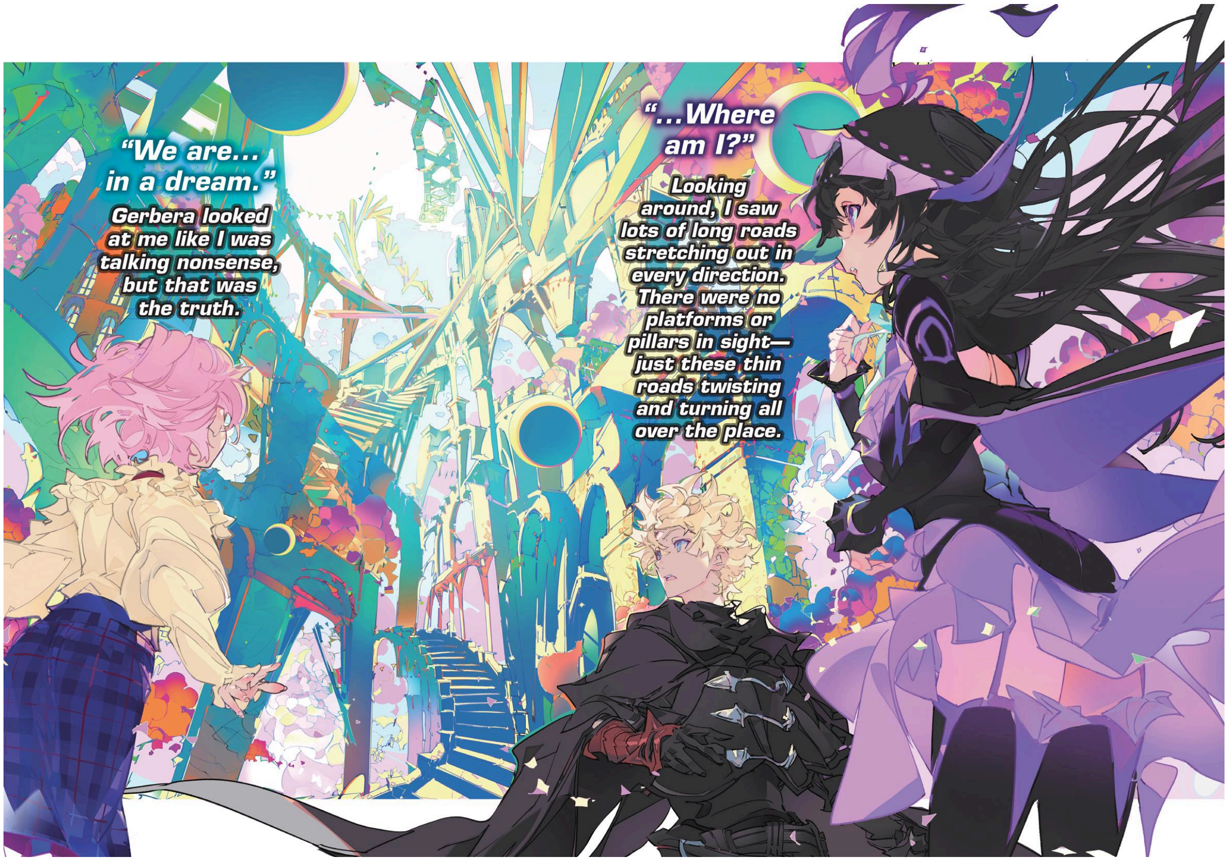
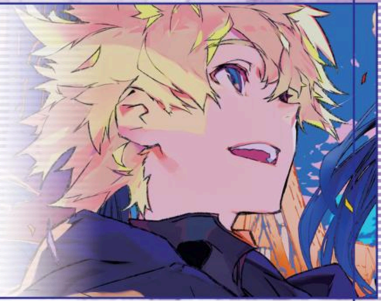

"We are… in a dream."
Gerbera looked at me like I was talking nonsense, but that was the truth.
"…Where am I?"
Looking around, I saw lots of long roads stretching out in every direction. There were no platforms or pillars in sight—just these thin roads twisting and turning all over the place.

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

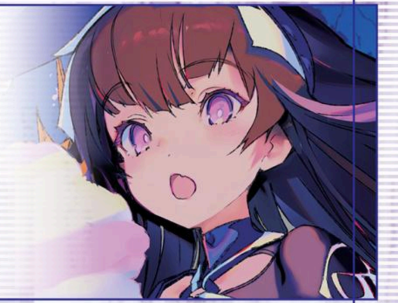
A college freshman who gets caught up in various incidents within Infinite Dendrogram. Though he is generally mild-mannered, he has a strong will that causes him to fight for his goals and never give up on them.



Nemesis

Nemesis

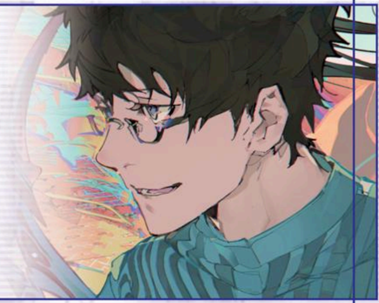
Ray's Embryo manifested as this girl. Nemesis acts as Ray's weapon by taking up the form of armaments such as a greatsword, halberd, shield, pinwheel, mirror, and twin swords. She is also a notable glutton.



Sechs

Sechs Würfel

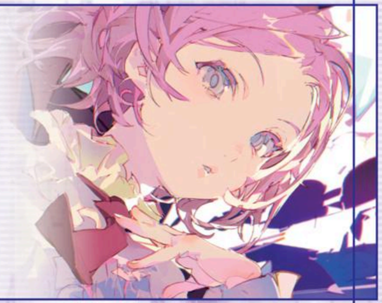
Bearer of the King of Crime job, Sechs is a man who commits sins for the sole purpose of being "evil." Though currently imprisoned in the gaol, he is also the leader of Illegal Frontier—IF—a clan made up entirely of Superiors on wanted lists.



Gerbera

Gerbera

A Superior from IF and owner of a Sentinel-type Embryo specialized in stealth. Once overly confident in her powers, she challenged Shu and was defeated, sending her to the gaol. Since then, Sechs has put her through hellish training that left her spirit broken.



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Prologue: The Sword and the Axe

Ray Starling

The sound of hammering reached my ears. Next thing I knew, I was in a place I didn’t recognize.

I got the feeling that I couldn’t trust my own senses, and that made me realize that this must be a dream. The vagueness of every sensation definitely reminded me of the time Gardranda had pulled me into a dream with her, but somehow it was also crystal clear that this wasn’t her doing.

The space I was in was completely unfamiliar to me.

It wasn’t just a deep darkness, nor was it some place from my own memories—it was simply a place I didn’t recognize. At the same time, I couldn’t even be certain about what I was seeing all around me. It kinda felt like I’d been thrown into outer space with no suit on.

Nothing here seemed definite. It felt hazy even by dream standards.

However, the purpose of the space was one of the few things about it that was extremely apparent.

In the center there was a single furnace. It was only slightly larger than a person, but it had a presence so overwhelming it almost made me forget this was only a dream. Even the heat coming out of it felt like it was radiating from the heart of the Sun.

The fact that there was a furnace here was what revealed the nature of this place—it was a smithy.

In front of the furnace there was an anvil, and someone was wordlessly hammering away at it.

This person was extremely nondescript: I couldn’t tell if they were a man or a woman, old or young, or even if they were human. Their image was so vague that I could barely even perceive them directly.

Despite this, the person also had an extremely powerful presence.

Even though I didn’t know anything about smithing, I could really feel the heat and weight behind the power and technique they were putting into every swing of the hammer. If someone told me that this person was forging the world itself, I would've readily believed them.

However, that wasn't the case, for the thing on the anvil wasn't the world, but a single-edged axe. It had no grip, so the person was only hammering on the blade portion of it. The shine of the hot metal was completely unlike that of heated iron or steel. I would bet that even *Infinite Dendrogram* metals like mithril or the Mythical hihi'irokane didn't even look like this.

After all...the metal was slightly transparent.

It reminded me of the blue blade wielded by Azurite—Altar.

Though it was now glowing red with heat, the true color of the axe-head must be quite different. Even at this point in its creation, I could tell that the completed work would be truly beautiful.

The process continued. I had no idea how much time was passing. For all I knew, I might've been watching this in fast-forward.

As the person worked, the shape of the axe became more and more clear, and after it had its grip attached, the weapon assumed the form of a large one-handed battle-axe.

The weapon's final color was a white that was even more beautiful than I'd expected. I had never even seen such a color before. Combined with its slight transparency, it looked like it was not only a weapon, but some kind of ceremonial instrument.

Despite this being my first time laying my eyes upon this *white axe*, though, I felt as though I'd actually seen it somewhere before.

At some point in the process, the person making the axe stopped working on it.

It didn't look complete yet. It appeared perfect on the outside, but I couldn't help but feel like something was still missing. It was like it hadn't received the finishing touch.

"...Two and one." That was when the person first spoke.

I could understand the words, but the voice somehow gave no hints as to the figure's age or gender.

After falling silent again, the person raised their hand, making the axe rise up and stop in midair.

They then raised their hand again, making another weapon appear.

It was a *blue sword* that I knew well by now—the Primeval Blade, Altar.

However, this Altar looked different than the one I knew. It seemed also incomplete, as though it was missing something. Again, it seemed to have not received the finishing touch.

"I am the Blacksmith." That sounded like a job name, but the way the person said it made me feel like it had a different meaning.

The Blacksmith went on.

"I am conflicted."

"Only one weapon is to bear the role."

"I am conflicted."

"Only one weapon can be treated with all of my being."

This wasn't an explanation—they were simply talking to themselves.

Faced with the white axe and the blue sword, the Blacksmith continued to speak. It almost seemed as if they were directly addressing the weapons they created.

"But before me are two masterpieces." The Blacksmith eyed the axe and the sword, looking conflicted, just as they had described. I could tell that much even though I couldn't clearly make out their face.

"One will become the crowning work."

"While the other will find its place among the refuse."

Even as an onlooker, I could tell that this was a painful choice for an artist to make.

"Which of these weapons should be core to the ■?# that my brethren and I will soon create?"

Thus, the Blacksmith continued to think out loud.

Just like with the creation process itself, in this dream I couldn't tell exactly how much time was passing by, but this must have gone on for a long time before the Blacksmith ultimately...

"I have decided."

...took the blue sword in hand.

That was when the dream ended.

◇◇◇

Paladin, Ray Starling

"Ah...!" Next thing I knew, I was surrounded by familiar things.

Looking up, I saw the sky, framed by audience seating in every direction. This made it clear that I was in the eighth arena, which now served as Death Period's base. Specifically, I was on the stage.

"Ray—you're awake."

"...Nemesis?" Her voice was coming from my crest.

"I must say, it was rather surprising that you fell asleep on the stage with no warning. Are you certain you are not more tired than you think?"

"...Well, I did wake up kinda early to spar." Rook and I had fought a few matches this morning. Since he had a diverse set of combat styles, he made for good practice for The Tournaments. Rook had beaten me more times than I'd beaten him, so after he left I'd stayed behind to think about what I had to work on. Apparently I actually fell asleep in the process.

"I planned to wake you up in time for The Tournaments, but you woke up faster than I expected," said Nemesis.

I checked, and it looked like almost no time had passed. The dream I'd seen felt really long, but it actually hadn't even lasted five minutes.

"That dream..." What was that all about, anyway? I'd heard that dreams were supposed to be things your brain reconstructed from your memory, but this one was completely alien to me.

I recognized Altar, sure, but the rest...?

"Hm...?" Suddenly, I felt my hand touch something. Looking down, I saw a large one-handed axe with its blade covered in a black cloth.

"...What's this doing here?" The thing I'd touched was the nameless axe that had blown my arm away the moment I even tried to use it in my first match against Rook. It really hadn't seemed like I could put it to good use, so I'd put it away in my inventory. "Nemesis, did you take this out?"

"I certainly did not... Speaking of which, when *did* it leave your inventory, I wonder?"

So, what—was I supposed to believe that it had escaped by itself?

Actually, now that I thought about it, that was pretty believable. I already knew of gear that moved on its own—Gardranda being the most obvious example.

I looked intently at the nameless axe. Since it was covered in a cloth I couldn't remove, the blade's actual shape was hard to make out, but I felt like it resembled the axe I'd seen in the dream.

I'd experienced something like this before, so I had a guess about what had happened.

"Did you show me a dream? Like Gardranda did?" Obviously, the axe did not answer my question.

“What is this about, Ray?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Nemesis’s worried question made me realize something, though—the memory of my dream must not have been shared with her, just like with Gardranda.

This meant that this axe was indeed the one from my dream, and that it showed events from its creation. I spent a few moments pondering this.

“...Nemesis, I’m kinda hungry,” I said. “Would you mind bringing me something to snack on from the preservation inventories at the cafeteria? I wanna stay here and think a little longer.”

“Very well. Wait here.” Nemesis, now out of the crest, dashed off the stage and into the building.

I looked at the axe again.

“It’s just you and me now,” I said, addressing the axe. “Can you talk?” I posed another question, but once again received no answer. It wasn’t even moving like Gardranda did.

It seemed like the axe was nothing but a mere weapon, and I was starting to feel that maybe the dream was completely unrelated—that I was overthinking things.

But if that dream *was* shown to me by this axe, and if it had shown something that had actually happened, the implications could be huge.

If the dream was meant to show me the axe’s origin, that meant this weapon was another work by the creator of Altar itself. If that was true, then it must have been on the same level as that revered blade.

“...Or, at least, it *could’ve* been.”

I recalled what the Blacksmith said.

“One will become the crowning work.”

“While the other will find its place among the refuse.”

And then, the Blacksmith had picked up Altar.

That had been his answer. The Blacksmith had chosen Altar, and Altar was the weapon that had become their crowning work. In the creator’s eyes, at least, this axe had been rejected and was now nothing but refuse.

That was why they’d abandoned it without even giving it a name.

That’s kinda irresponsible, isn’t it? I thought.

Even if they couldn’t make it into their life’s masterwork, I felt like this axe at least deserved to have a name. If the dream wasn’t just some random fantasy or delusion, that meant this axe had enough of a mind to show others its own past.

In that case, it might actually resent the fact that its creator hadn’t even graced it with a name.

Also, my axe had a different color than it did in the dream. The Blacksmith was working on a pure white axe that was slightly transparent. This axe as I had it now, however...was drenched in the color of blood.

What could have caused this change? Did its lack of a name have something to do with it?

Even now, my Grudge-Soaked Greaves were absorbing the grudge stored within this weapon. Did that mean it would be white again once the grudge was gone?

I had no way of knowing if that was true. Gouz-Maise had already sucked up a whole lot of grudge from it, though, and I didn't see even the slightest change in its color.

I sighed. I didn't even know if it made sense for me to start feeling bad for this axe—this cursed weapon.

But looking at it as it was now after seeing that dream...it did leave a little bit of a bad taste in my mouth.

"Well, I guess I can consider it a quest." I tapped the axe's grip with my finger. "I'll eventually figure out how to give you back your color. And I know I'm not your creator, but I'll think of a name to call you by, at least for now."

Let the quest...begin!

It seemed kinda weird to give *myself* a quest, but whatever.

The axe didn't react to my words—not with speech or any other kind of noticeable change.

Maybe the dream I'd seen really was completely unrelated, but I didn't really care. I'd give it back its color and grant it a name because I *wanted to*, and that was it.

I'd probably end up thinking of a name over the next few days or something, though. There was no time limit, so I figured I might as well take my time.

"Ray, I brought some sandwiches and tea," said Nemesis as she returned with the breakfast, snacking on it as she spoke.

"Thanks, but...don't walk while eating. We'll have to clean it up, you know?"

"Hrmm...I suppose being in an arena makes me feel as though I'm going on a culinary tour of some event or other..."

Always about the food, huh? Well, I couldn't say it wasn't like her.

"Anyway, once we finish breakfast, we're going straight to the central arena. The first four matches are before noon."

"That is true. Heh heh heh...I cannot wait. Tonight, I thirst for blood!"

"It's still morning." Following this familiar exchange, the two of us—plus Smol Gar—had our breakfast.

This was the start of the opening day of The Tournaments. The full event would take ten days in *Dendro* time, and this was the first part.

It was a huge occasion in Altar, and it was bound to result in many chance encounters and a whole lot of drama.

At that point, however, I had no idea that my greatest battle would be one I *never* could’ve seen coming.

Chapter One: The First Battle

Paladin, Ray Starling

The Tournaments would be held on every day of a ten-day period.

One Tournament could have a maximum of 256 participants, all of whom would have registered themselves and signed their Contracts ahead of time. Since Masters might have real-life circumstances or other factors that would prevent them from participating, those who didn't make it to their fight by the designated time would be removed from their slot in The Tournaments. A lottery would then be held to determine their replacement, with anyone who still held a slot in the rest of the competition being ineligible.

The first four fights of The Tournaments—the preliminaries—would be staged using the barrier function that accelerated the flow of time within it. Then, from the fifth battle onward—when all but sixteen of the day's participants had been eliminated—The Tournaments would switch back to a proper show with an actual audience. This was meant to save time, as showing every single fight would be so time-consuming that the whole thing would take much more than a single day. Even with this arrangement, though, the finals wouldn't happen until evening—but that might have been the best time for them anyway.

The preliminaries also had one rule that the actual Tournaments did not—specifically, we weren't allowed to know whom we would be fighting.

The brackets were randomized, and they would already be set up by the time we'd have our first battles. However, they would only be made public when we would have our top sixteen.

There were multiple reasons for this, but one of them was controlling information.

In addition to accelerating time, the barriers that would be used for the preliminaries would also prevent anyone outside from looking in. That would make it impossible to see any of the battles or find out what the other contestants were capable of. That was a big reason why we weren't allowed to know whom we'd be fighting until we actually stepped out to face them—if the bracket was revealed any earlier, we'd be able to investigate our upcoming opponents and find out what they could do. If they were famous enough, we could even prepare for the fights by changing our gear to hard counter them. For example, if our opponent specialized in fire magic, we could give ourselves an advantage by equipping armor or accessories that gave fire resistance.

I'd known about the importance of metagaming since my time in high school. The president of the EGRS had made sure of that.

Anyway, needless to say, I was no exception, and I had no idea whom I'd be fighting first.

The final brackets would be revealed when only sixteen of us were left. This was because if the remaining contestants weren't already famous, the probabilities of any one person winning would be affected by whoever they'd defeated in the preliminaries. It was the kind of consideration you'd expect from the City of Duels.

Well, none of this actually changed what we contestants had to do. No matter whom we were up against, we'd just have to win the four preliminary battles and try to achieve victory in the actual Tournament afterward.

The other contestants and I were now in the waiting rooms, waiting on our turns. Since there were a bunch of these, we were placed among those we *wouldn't* fight in the preliminaries.

"Hm..." I wasn't going to be fighting anyone here, at least for now, but for some reason...I could sense them staring at me.

"I see nothing surprising about that," said Nemesis. "You have become quite famous."

"KSHAA!"

Smol Gar was chomping on my hair again with a loud munching sound. I couldn't tell if she was agreeing with Nemesis or not.

"Yeah...even I'm pretty aware of that by now," I said. My battles against Dryfe's Superiors—with the added exaggerations—had become well-known, and the others here were reasonably wary of me. Everybody must've been wondering what they'd do if they ended up fighting me outside of the preliminaries.

To be honest, though, I wasn't sure if I'd even make it that far.

In this tournament, being famous was a huge disadvantage. Anyone I had to fight would know my abilities the moment I stepped into the arena. Even if they weren't able to prepare gear that countered mine, they would still have an advantage. This was exactly what I'd experienced during The Anniversary.

I did have a few things going for me, though—namely, the fights would all take place inside an arena. I was bad at long-range combat, so the fact that we would always be close enough for me to play most of my cards was a real advantage. I even had the option of equipping my Storm Visage and filling the arena with Hellish Miasma. Now *that* would really give me the upper hand.

"...A truly vile thought," said Nemesis.

Yeah, if I did it in the actual Tournament, the audience would probably boo me real hard, I thought. *Especially since the miasma would probably make it impossible to see anything.*

"A Paladin who forces his opponents to duel in a cloud of poison gas...quite the concept."

Honestly, my fellow freshmen in college already think I'm some kind of devil-eating berserker. I doubt too many people would be surprised if I did do something like that.

"...Anyway, it's almost our turn," Nemesis said.

The contestants were being called up pretty quickly—probably because of the barrier's effect that sped up time. Some new numbers were called just a minute after the previous ones had stepped inside, and even the longest waits weren't longer than five minutes. Considering that this wasn't even the only waiting room, it was all going pretty fast.

At this point, it looked like everyone's first four battles would be over before noon.

"Ray Starling, it's your turn next."

"Okay." Called by the arena's staff, I stood up from my chair.

"How exciting," said Nemesis as she switched to her sword form.

"KSHAA!" Smol Gar hissed regrettably as she undid the summoning effect and became my Miasmaflame Bracers once again.

I equipped my Storm Visage and put up the hood of my Black Warcoat. Now fully prepared, I left the waiting room. I heard words like "Dark Lord" and "Devil-Eater" behind me, but I pretended that I didn't.

“Please step into the arena,” said the staff member, pointing at the black barrier enveloping the stage. “Your opponent is already inside.”

“All right.”

I supposed that having us both enter at different times was another way to prevent us from knowing our opponents.

“All right...let’s see what kind of demons lie in wait for us.”

“I am quite satisfied with *one* demon, thank you very much,” Nemesis said.

Oh yeah. We’ve already got Gardranda, I thought. *Though, in this tournament we’re fighting for the Orb containing Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage—a demon-type UBM. So if we make it to the end, we’ll be getting a new demon regardless.*

With that useless thought in mind, I passed the dark barrier.

While it just looked like a wall of pure darkness from the outside, it was pretty clear when looked at from the inside, like a canopy of transparent glass. The light passing through made it easy to see the entire arena, including the opponent who was about to walk in.

“Oh, there’s my enemy this ti...wait, huh?”

“Huh?”

The person who’d walked to the stage was as surprised as I was.

The reason for that was obvious—we were already acquainted.

“Now that’s some dangerous-lookin’ gear you’re wearing. You’re Ray Starling, aren’t you?”

“And you’re...Lang, right?” It was one of the Masters who’d taken to the skies with me during the battle against Monochrome. He was also a member of Riser’s Babylonian Battlegroup and had fought alongside Kasumi’s trio during King of Thieves’ terrorist attack on Altea.

What were the odds of getting *him* as my first opponent?

“That’s me. Hey, you mind if I call you just ‘Ray’?”

“Not at all.”

“Thanks. Heh heh...but *man*, I sure got the short end of the stick this time, huh?”

“Short end of the...?” What did he think I was, anyway?

“I didn’t join the tournament for nothin’, though. I won’t give up without a fight,” he said, using Instant Equip to take out a lance.

“I’m not planning to lose either,” I replied as I brandished Nemesis and hopped onto Silver's back. Silver counted as equipment, so I could "equip" him here with no problem.

I used Reveal on Lang, but didn't get much out of it. I could see his job, but his stats were hidden. That meant he was using something to hide them, and my skill level was too low to counter it. I'd done a similar thing to hide the accessory I'd put on as a replacement for the usual Brooch.

That wouldn't help much in this case, though. Just as I'd feared, I ended up facing an enemy who recognized me right off the bat. It was best to assume he knew about my combat style, Counter Absorption use limit and all. The exact same thing had happened during The Anniversary.

I, on the other hand, didn't know the first thing about Lang's combat style. I could recall him riding a hippogryph back in Torne, but Monochrome had taken him by surprise and given him the death penalty before he could actually do any fighting. Practically speaking, I had almost zero information on him.

Since he'd died from a single hit from the laser—albeit to a critical body part—I could assume he wasn't an END build, at least. This was supported by his Gale Rider job, so it was pretty obvious that he was focused on AGI.

"Ten seconds."

"Hm...?" As I heard the staff start the countdown to the beginning of the match, a particular question came to mind.

Lang was a Gale Rider who had a hippogryph as a mount. Tamed monsters could be used in arenas as long as they didn't exceed the minion capacity.

Why wasn't he mounted like I was, then?

"Five...four...three..." Before I could come up with an answer to that, the countdown continued. "Two...one...zero!"

And with that, the match began.

"Heaven's Circuit—Halley, activate!" Lang immediately used a skill named after a comet, drowning the arena in a blue light...

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Central Arena

Large crowds were gathered outside the Central Arena.

Many held tickets to The Tournaments without assigned seats. They had arrived early so they could get the best seats available.

Besides them, many people were simply out enjoying the events and food stalls that had opened up for the occasion, making the area pretty lively even by Gideon standards.

"Ah! Riser!"

"Hm? Oh! It's been a while, Io."

Within the crowd, Masked Riser the Kamen Rider had run into a girl he was acquainted with—Io, a member of Death Period. Both of them had been among those who had acted to protect Altea during the recent act of terrorism.

"The other two aren't with you?"

"We split up to buy some food at the stalls. We're getting ready to cheer for our leader!" There were quality inventories that preserved food freshness and warmth, so buying food ahead of time presented no issue.

"I see. So he's in today's Tournament."

"Yeah! What about you?! The name of today's UBM makes it sound like it'd become a mask, doesn't it?!" Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage did indeed sound like it could become a demon—or more specifically oni—mask, but Riser chuckled and rejected the idea.

"I am fairly attached to my current mask, so I'm actually avoiding UBMs that could replace it. Also, while the UBM's abilities are pretty versatile, they don't really synergize with my build."

"I see! It's like how our bear wouldn't know what to do with more costumes!"

"I guess it's kind of similar." In actuality, all of Shu's MVP rewards besides one had ended up being costumes anyway, so he never had much choice to begin with—not that these two had any idea about that.

"So I suppose you're just here to watch the fights, then!"

"Well, that's part of it, but some members of our clan are participating too. Remember Lang? The hippogryph rider who fought with us in Altea? He's in this one."

"Oh, him! You don't say... Wait...huh? I'm trying to remember—did he use his Embryo then?" Thinking back on the battle against Regina Apis Idea, Io found she did recall a Master who was riding a hippogryph. However, she couldn't remember seeing him use his Embryo. His weapon, skills, and mount were all standard. She thought that maybe he just had an

Embryo that was hard to see, but...

"He didn't."

...Riser immediately confirmed that wasn't the case.

"It's not like he was holding back, though," he added. "It's because his Embryo is...well, he just couldn't use it back then."

"Hm?" Io looked at him, puzzled, but Riser, who felt like he couldn't reveal his own clanmate's abilities, could do nothing but smile awkwardly.

The words "he just couldn't use it back then," though, said everything that needed to be said about it.

Lang's Embryo—Speeding Comet, Halley—could only be used in a limited number of situations.

Therefore, its category had to be...

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"What...?"

Once the bright light subsided, my surroundings had completely changed.

There was now another boundary within the barrier—a gigantic, spherical cage made of metal the color of the night sky. Between the bars of this cage there was a metallic mesh of the same color, making it impossible for even mice to escape.

Silver and I were now trapped inside here.

Well, maybe "trapped" wasn't the right word for it. The cage was *large*—about the same size as the stage itself. It didn't limit my movements any more than the barrier did. Since this cage was spherical, the surface we were standing on was now slightly inclined, but that was the biggest change.

I tried attacking the cage with Nemesis, but it reflected her without issue. She didn't even leave a scratch. It looked like destroying it using normal methods would be difficult.

"This is..." If this cage was an Embryo, its category must've been...

"Type Castle." Nemesis finished my thought. This had to be a building Embryo. I hadn't fought one of these since Franklin's.

I'd heard that Castle types were rarely suited for direct combat. Many of them acted as a base or had abilities focused on crafting, and they couldn't be moved by any means except by returning them to the crest and placing them elsewhere.

Franklin's Pandemonium was a Castle Embryo that produced and stored monsters, and since it had legs, it could be used like a fleet carrier.

But this one...

"I see. A cage-like Castle *would* be useful in combat," said Nemesis.

Obviously, a Castle that trapped your opponent would be an asset in battle. But...this one seemed a bit too big to feel like it "trapped" me, exactly. It covered the entire stage, so if it was supposed to limit my movement, that completely defeated the purpose.

And actually...where was Lang himself, anyway?

"Ha ha ha! This ain't a cage, and it ain't *just* a Castle."

I heard a voice above me. At the very top of the spherical cage, haloed by the sun's light, I saw a unique-looking silhouette.

"This one's Type is...Chariot/Castle." The figure was Lang, sitting on a large motorbike decorated with a ram on the front.

A motorbike sticking to the upper part of a sphere, and a rider sitting on it. Lang's face was concealed, but rather than a tokusatsu hero's mask, Lang was wearing a helmet like the ones used by racers.

"...A hybrid," I said. His Embryo was both a Chariot—the motorbike—as well as a Castle—the cage.

This mix of spherical cage and motorbike reminded me of something I'd heard of before.

"This is a Globe of Death...!"

"You know about them? Guess I won't have much explaining to do, then!"

A Globe of Death was a type of stunt where performers rode motorbikes inside a huge sphere made of metal mesh. Since it involved driving at high speeds without even knowing which way was up or down, it was extremely difficult and dangerous.

If this was Lang's ult, this "Halley" Embryo must've been based on this exact stunt.

"...Weren't you a hippogryph rider?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, this baby only works inside its cage," Lang said. "I need Pete—that's my hippogryph—so I can move around outside."

So the hippogryph was just his spare mount, and Lang was at his strongest when he was in this cage and on that motorbike. That explained why he hadn't used it during the battle with Monochrome—this cage sure didn't look like it could fly.

"I heard you were like a junior Riser, and I guess that includes riding a motorcycle, huh?" I said.

"Hell yeah!" he replied with a laugh.

It really stuck out to me that he'd actually told me about his Embryo. After he'd used his ult, I'd lost sight of him for a moment, and that would have been a good opportunity for him to attack me by surprise. Had he felt that it would be unfair if I didn't know his abilities like he knew mine?

This focus on fighting fair and square was just like Riser too.

"Anyway, I guess we should get this started, huh?" Lang said as he grasped the handle and revved up his Halley. As the engine let out a roar, the mufflers released a black smoke.

"...Yeah," I replied. I made Silver use Wind Hoof to create a compressed air barrier. Instead of completely surrounding us, I made it holed like the metal sphere.

Then, I had my right Miasmaflame Bracer let out its Hellish Miasma. The spray of gas flowed out through the gaps in my barrier.

I instantly noticed that none of it was escaping through the metallic mesh, which made me suspect that it not only bound us physically with the visible cage, but also had some of the properties of a non-physical barrier.

"I said I got the short end of the stick, but I'm not gonna lie—the idea of fighting Ray Starling the Unbreakable has got me pretty excited." Lang was giving me the same kind of vibe that I'd felt from the many duel rankers I'd sparred against. I could sense him smiling under that mask.

"Word of advice: try not to blink," he said as he revved up his ride again. "My Halley...is *pretty fast*."

The moment he revved a bit harder, he *disappeared from sight*.

My eyes widened. The trail I could see at the edge of my vision made it clear that it wasn't teleportation, but actual extreme speed.

And I wasn't using "extreme" lightly. I hadn't even blinked, yet I'd already lost sight of him.

"Ah! Behind you!" Nemesis warned me, but I felt an impact before I could even turn around.

“Gh...!” The attack was so heavy it blew me *and* Silver away. Despite the compressed air barrier sheltering us, we both took a considerable amount of damage.

And that wasn’t all. We were sent flying all the way to the opposite part of the cage.

However, before we could actually hit the wall, a silhouette approached us.

It was Lang on his bike. I couldn’t see it before because the sunlight was drowning it out, but the bike was a blueish-white color, making it look like an actual comet speeding toward us.

The distance between us was quickly diminishing. “Nemesis!”

“Of course!” She activated Counter Absorption, and Lang drove right into it.

The damage that was supposed to reach us, as well as his kinetic energy, was taken by the barrier, briefly stopping him in his tracks.

“Purgatorial Flames!” I held up my left hand toward Lang and doused him in fire.

He quickly tried to turn away and evade it, but the fire reached him first.

“Damn it!” With his bike and rider suit singed, Lang accelerated and drove away from us. He was driving straight toward the inner wall of the spherical cage. He quickly reached a speed where I could barely see him anymore and instead of crashing into it, he began driving straight *up* the incline instead.

“Ah! SILVER!” Silver quickly used Wind Hoof to take refuge in the middle of the sphere, and a moment later a blue-white silhouette roared through the spot where we’d just been at a speed that not even sound could keep up with.

“...I see,” said Nemesis. “This sphere is a space where he never has to slow down.”

A Globe of Death was a stunt where the riders reached extreme speeds and spun around the inside surface of the mesh sphere until they were unable to differentiate up from down. Because of this, Lang could accelerate and crash into his opponents from anywhere as long as they were standing on the sphere.

The open space in the middle of the sphere seemed safe, but I didn’t feel like I could rely on it too much. Since this was Lang’s Embryo and this was his home turf, it was best to assume that he had some sort of counter to anyone who took refuge in the interior space.

He was still racing around the edge right now, but he would probably do something else soon.

"But man..." I said, trailing off. Lang's speed really was insane. From what I could tell, it was considerably greater than even Marie's, who easily broke the sound barrier.

And not only was he fast; he easily turned this speed into offensive power. If I weren't an END build and hadn't increased my HP with my new VDA, I might've gotten some bad injury-based debuffs, and my situation would've been pretty dire. Silver was slightly damaged too and couldn't move as fast as usual.

"A high-rank job with a high-rank Embryo who reaches a speed like this..." said Nemesis. "I reckon there must be more to it."

"Yeah..." There were multiple ways that enhancements to an Embryo's abilities could be implemented, and the ones I was familiar with were "extra costs," "conditions," "uncontrollability," and "limitations."

"Extra costs" were obviously anything that enhanced skills or gave buffs using something other than MP or SP. Nemesis's damage counter could be considered one of these.

"Conditions" were the—well, special conditions that had to be fulfilled in order for the enhancement to have an effect. In Nemesis's case, Like a Flag Flying the Reversal was a good example.

"Uncontrollability" was trading control for raw output—in other words, discarding control over something, perhaps even making it dangerous to yourself, in exchange for increasing its power. Nemesis had nothing like this, but Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda could be considered as such.

And finally, "limitations" were just that—anything that limited the scope or use of an ability. These included an ability having a set amount of uses or only being usable in certain environments. Needless to say, this included the use limits on my Counter Absorption.

I was pretty sure that Lang's Halley also had to be operating under some limitations. He'd said that the bike could only be used within the metal sphere. So, by limiting where it could be used, Halley greatly enhanced its speed and charging ability as a Chariot.

The flaw with this arrangement was that it couldn't do anything against anyone outside the cage, making Lang completely vulnerable to people with wide-range firepower, and they didn't have to be as powerful as Shu to threaten him.

This weakness was what gave him all this speed and charging potential—but in a duel, this weakness barely meant anything.

The spherical cage was about as big as the stage itself. His opponents couldn't get far enough away to avoid being enclosed, nor was there any space to attack him from the outside.

I would even say that it was *optimized* for duels.

"Lang...are you a duel ranker too?" I asked. Even as he replied, he kept up his insane speed that made him hard to see. The Doppler effect made some of it difficult to hear, but I could still make out what he said.

"I was! But right before we met, I lost to Max and got knocked outta 30th place! I hadn't even gotten a nickname yet!" So he was an ex-ranker. The speed and attack power he had here suddenly made sense.

He was no different from all those rankers who'd outclassed me before. Were my MVP rewards enough to close the gap or even surpass him?

"...Ray, the Hellish Miasma seems to have no effect," Nemesis notified me.

Since I'd released the poison miasma, it had filled the entire sphere. The triple debuffs it gave should've made it difficult for Lang to keep going as fast as he was, but he didn't seem affected.

And then I began to notice a reason for that.

"The miasma...is being mixed with a gas." The dark purple of the miasma was blended with something black—the gas released by the muffler as Lang revved up the bike.

I'd thought it was just the exhaust, but now it didn't seem like it was quite that simple.

"Halley...Halley's Comet... Oh, I get it now." While thinking about what Lang's Embryo was based on, I came across an explanation for the gas. "Halley's tail..." Halley's Comet was the first widely known example of a periodic comet, and over 130 years ago it was incorrectly theorized that its tail or "coma"—the gaseous bit—contained poison that would kill all life on earth, or that it would blow away the atmosphere and cause mass suffocation.

Of course, it had neither poisoned the earth nor rid it of oxygen, and ultimately, it turned out to be nothing worth worrying about. However, in this Embryo that was named after the comet, the dangers of its tail were very real.

The exhaust itself was a poisonous gas that filled the metal sphere. The reason why my miasma hadn't leaked out of the cage was because it was designed to keep this gas *in*.

This made me realize something else.

"...So he's wearing a gas mask too, huh?" That full-face helm must be gas-proof. He wouldn't have used this skill if it weren't.

Strangely enough, we'd had similar thoughts. And thanks to that, my Storm Visage protected me from his poison, but my Hellish Miasma couldn't hurt him either.

Because of this, we both had to find another way to come out on top. However, I was having a hard time thinking of anything that would work on him.

Lang moved around at incredible speeds. I couldn't catch up to him, and even landing a counterattack was a challenge.

Payback had to be charged, while Shining Despair was even harder to land than a regular counterattack. The same could be said about Grand Cross, which took a moment to activate. Using Chaser to copy his stats probably wouldn't do much good either. It wasn't Lang himself who was fast, but his mount. Taking his AGI wouldn't let me catch up.

"He said he lost to Max, though..." Nemesis noted. I knew about Max—she was one of Juliet's friends and one of the duel rankers. We'd recently teamed up for a quest, and she'd participated in The Anniversary too.

I vaguely knew her combat style and could imagine how she'd beaten Lang...but that didn't help me much. Her Ipetam had the ability to create lots of swords that she could use like drones. She must've filled the cage with them, making it impossible for Lang to ride properly.

That was something I couldn't do.

What else was there, then? Could I fill the area with Purgatorial Flames and cook him slowly? "No, I need something else..." I muttered. I got goosebumps just trying to search for some card I had to play.

This was a warning sign—my instincts were reacting to a danger my mind hadn't consciously recognized yet.

I pulled Silver's reins and dodged slightly to the side. The next moment, a blue-white silhouette passed by me at supersonic speeds.

Taking Silver's left plating and my left leg with it, the speeding figure pierced through to the other side of the cage.

"...Wh-What?!" I did my best to stabilize myself so I could stay mounted on Silver. I was so stunned it took my mind a moment to catch up and realize that the silhouette was just my opponent speeding around on his bike.

Spinning like a bullet, he'd flown through the air straight toward me. My guess was that he'd somehow jumped his bike off the cage's wall the moment his speed reached the maximum.

The move was like a racer flying uncontrollably off the course, but it had enough power to pulverize both me and Silver.

"Gh...!" I looked at the wall he'd flown toward, but there was nothing there now. I didn't see the destroyed remains of Lang or his bike, and I could only hear the engine sounds ahead as I tried and failed to catch up with him.

It seemed like he'd landed without a problem and was accelerating once more.

"...How does that technique work?" Nemesis, who'd finally caught up with the situation, said with mixed terror and amazement.

I was wondering the same thing—except I thought this technique seemed familiar somehow.

Back when I was in high school, our clubroom had volumes of a hobbyist manga about four-wheel drive car races lying around. I'd read them, and I was pretty sure I'd seen a technique like this in there. Doing it with a bike you were still riding seemed extremely reckless, but Lang was the Master of Halley—an Embryo focused on bike stunts. For all I knew, he was the perfect candidate for pulling off such a dangerous move.

"So he can even run us down if we're in the air. How shall we approach this, then?" Nemesis asked, slightly distressed.

Lang had already begun accelerating again, and he would probably pull that stunt on us one more time.

I felt like we barely had thirty seconds until the next attack, if that. If he kept up this hit and run strategy, we'd eventually mess up on our defense and be defeated. We could use Counter Absorption to cancel both his damage and kinetic energy, but he was so fast that we couldn't tell which direction he'd attack from. We'd most likely put up the barrier on the wrong side.

"...That leaves just one thing." The situation wasn't great for us, but we still had one card we could play.

"Our MP stores...are good." After the battle at the peace talks, I'd uncursed a whole lot of items. The nameless axe was an especially good source, and my Grudge-Soaked Greaves now had enough grudge to use *that*. Even though I'd lost the left one along with my leg, I probably didn't need more than the right for this.

The rest depended on how Halley worked—but in the worst-case scenario, I'd cover for it with Hellish Miasma.

"Ray...are you actually planning to use *that*?"

Yes, I am, I thought in response.

"Are you *certain* it's a good idea?"

We have Halley and the duel barrier. That's two layers of protection. Also, we don't have an audience this time, and I don't think it'll be enough power to break out. And honestly...I doubt we'll need to make it that powerful anyway.

"I suppose we can give it a try, then," Nemesis said.

"Yeah," I said as I lightly tapped Silver's neck. "You know what to do, Silver."

My steed let out a noise that was almost like a neigh.

And I...

"Wind Hoof...Activate."

...prepared to use a certain tactic.

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Central Arena, Stage

"He's tough," said Lang to himself. "Just what I'd expect from Ray Starling the Unbreakable!"

He was speeding along Halley's walls, half excited and half tense. The poison gas skill his Embryo had—Halley's Tail—was still active, since it would give him the upper hand if the suffocating poison gave his opponent a debuff. The person he was fighting right now, however, seemed to have nullified this effect in the same way Lang himself did.

But that wasn't a problem, since Lang had one more way of fighting—in this case, his max-speed flying charge attack.

Halley the bike could only work within Halley the metal sphere. It could only travel within this dark metal cage like a comet speeding through the night sky.

But because of this, within the cage, Halley's speed was unmatched.

Combined with Lang's job as Gale Rider, Halley could currently go over five times faster than the speed of sound. It needed some time to accelerate, but once it topped out, it had a level of speed and power that was completely unexpected from a fifth-form Embryo.

That held true even if it was in the air, and unless they had some special means of defense or incredibly high stats, anyone would die instantly when hit by four hundred kilos of raging metal moving at those unreal speeds.

Most of his defeats in duels—including the one against Max—had been because he was defeated before he could reach his maximum speed.

Because of this, people like Ray—who stayed in the air and observed—were only setting him up for victory. As long as Lang attacked at the right time and from an angle where Ray couldn't defend with Counter Absorption, he could end this battle in a single hit.

That was what he'd planned to do with his first flight, but Ray's own instincts prevented that. The deadly attack had only taken away a part of Ray's body, and Lang was forced to accelerate once again.

Even so, it was effective enough to make him certain he could win if he only landed a direct hit.

Twenty seconds until I top out! I'm moving at a speed he can't even track! I'll win as long as I don't let him guess the timing of my next jump, and I make him miss with Counter Absorption... Lang thought. It didn't even matter to him if Ray dodged the attack, since he could just repeat it over and over.

All he had to worry about was a scenario in which Ray used Counter Absorption *with* the correct timing and direction, but that was pretty unlikely.

Lang truly believed he could win this.

And that was when something happened to Ray.

That's... Lang began to realize what was going on.

Ray...or to be more precise, *Silver* underwent a change.

He was gathering the surrounding air and building the compressed air barrier once again. The barrier was all black, likely due to the miasma and poison gas that flooded Halley's cage.

I guess he wants to defend against my jump! It's my most powerful attack, though—it's gonna take a real good wall to protect against it! Lang was confident that his momentum could break through even Mithril and Ancient Legendary metal, so a wall of air barely fazed him.

He also realized that Ray may have also been using this omnidirectional barrier to determine where Lang's attack was coming from and *then* use Counter Absorption, instead of trying to block it.

"Now *that's* an idea! Let's see if you're fast enough!" Lang cried.

Thus passed a window of time that felt both short and long.

By the time Lang reached his maximum speed, Silver...was still gathering the air.

Despite that, he wasn't creating a vacuum. Halley had a function that prevented air from flowing out so that the poison gas from Halley's Tail could stay within its confines, but there was nothing keeping air from flowing *in*. The arena barrier also worked in a similar way in order to prevent vacuums caused by fires and the like.

The presence of air or the lack of it, though, didn't affect Lang and Halley's speed at all.

"A balloon's not gonna protect you—doesn't matter how thick it is!" Lang shouted as he prepared to jump with his bike for the finishing move.

Wait, no... In a moment, Lang's instincts told him something his mind didn't, just as Ray's had earlier.

Or more accurately, they'd *remembered something*.

It was a scene he'd witnessed—a color he was familiar with.

The reason Silver's barrier was black wasn't because of how much poison gas it was absorbing.

The blackness was due to the air in the barrier being so dense that not even light could pass through it.

This is... Lang knew about this strategy. In fact, most people with ties to Gideon knew about it.

It was the tactic that had led to Ray becoming known as the "Unbreakable."

It was a trick well outside Ray's usual combat repertoire, used only in that specific battle.

"Wind Hoof, cancel."

It was the Wind Hoof Bomb—a compressed air explosion.

The immense volume of air that had been compressed was released with Ray's words. The blast of air delivered destruction in every direction, and this time it was far worse than it had been when used against RSK—and that was because of Halley itself, which didn't let any air escape outside.

This was like dynamite going off inside a safe. In this airtight space, the blast was extremely fearsome.

Even so, it wasn't enough to shatter Halley's bars. The sturdy Castle designed to not let anyone out was able to withstand an explosion like this.

However, there was something that couldn't.

It was neither the safe nor the dynamite in this case—it was the safe's *contents*, lacking the endurance of the exterior—Lang himself.

As the interior of Halley was engulfed in violent destruction, his HP quickly began to drop...

...and it reached 0 before Ray's did.

Chapter Two: Remembering and Overlooking

Paladin, Ray Starling

My first battle in The Tournaments was done, and—however barely—I'd emerged victorious.

It was all thanks to the Wind Hoof Bomb. Against the God Hunter, I'd used it for just its knockback, but this time I had employed it more offensively. Not even the fastest enemies could avoid a huge explosion centered on you—essentially an omnidirectional attack.

Honestly, I felt like the cage being airtight made my explosion kind of overpowered, but both Halley and the duel barrier handled the force just fine, so it didn't really matter—especially since the fight ended before the blast waves bounced off the walls and obliterated me as well.

Also, if Lang had charged at me while I was still compressing the air, I'd planned to cancel the charging right then. Doing that right as he touched my barrier would've basically guaranteed a hit. It would've been a bit of a gamble, though—Lang might've been incapacitated by the blow, or he might've kept charging through and ended up defeating me instead.

Regardless, the battle was over, and everything had worked out about as I'd expected.

Lang and I also got the opportunity to have a little chat after the match. Though we were both surprised by the cards we'd each played, we agreed that it was a pretty good and clean battle.

"...A 'clean' battle choked with miasma and poison gas," said Nemesis. "I doubt it was good for the environment."

"Kshoo. (Not...ecological.)"

Hey, don't say that, I thought.

Anyway, looking back at the fight, the reason I'd won was that I had a lot of cards I could play. Lang was slightly stronger than me in terms of baseline power and he'd completely negated my miasma and counterattacks, but I could still beat him using Silver's Wind Hoof Bomb.

This battle really drove home the fact that this *versatility* was my biggest strength.

I had Nemesis with her various counters, three MVP rewards, and Silver. My arsenal was so big that even if I was up against someone stronger than me, I had options that could give me the upper hand. This was even better in duels because even if I played every card I had in one match, they'd all be restored once it was over.

Winning my first fight had also given me more confidence. If I could keep this up in the second fight onward, I'd...

[Reiji, ya got a minute?]

"Hm?" Unexpectedly, I got a call over the Telepathy Cuffs from Shu.

[Yeah, sure. I just got out of my first match.]

[That so? Well, ya should know that uh...]

Shu seemed kinda panicked...or maybe troubled? Either way, he didn't sound like he usually did. I figured he wanted to tell me something but was also hesitant about it.

[...Ya know what, forget it. I'll tell ya after the preliminaries.]

[Huh? Uhh...okay?]

[Three more matches. Bear it, brother.] And with that, he ended the call, and I was left wondering what he wanted to tell me.

"What was that all about?" Nemesis wondered, just as confused as I was.

"...Beats me." We looked at each other and tilted our heads in confusion.

When I came back to the waiting room, I instantly became the center of attention again. "He won. No surprises there," I heard someone say, but honestly, I definitely didn't feel like it was no surprise. The battle hadn't been easy. I'd almost lost a bunch of times—hell, I could've lost the moment Lang created Halley. I hadn't known what it did, so if he'd just charged at me instead of explaining it, I would've died easily.

"Indeed," said Nemesis. She was out of the crest, but since there were people around, she spoke to me using telepathy. "I have always known this, but in Master-to-Master combat, one must always be wary of unknown abilities. Such ignorance might kill you in an instant."

Yeah, I thought in response. *With how varied Embryos can be, it's scary to fight Masters who have powers you know nothing about.*

“And that is why you need some means of avoiding such instant kills,” Nemesis continued via telepathy. “Duels do not allow Brooches or the Death Soldier’s skill, and my skills may lack the precision to fully protect you.”

I guess I should start every match by spreading Hellish Miasma.

That hadn’t done much against Lang because he was doing something similar, but it was pretty clear that it was an effective move in general. Whenever it actually worked, it would make my enemies slower. And if they lacked a means of attacking airborne opponents, I could use Silver to retreat to the sky. Then, I could spread the miasma throughout the area, switch to the flames if necessary, or even use Shining Despair—all while keeping a safe distance.

Though, that sounds kinda...

“If you do not mind me pointing it out... Would that not be...exceedingly villainous?”

...It would, I thought.

“What’s the point of looking good if it just ends up making you lose, though?” I asked out loud.

“Coming from a man who took a bite out of an undead and a devil, that is a truly convincing point...”

“I guess it is...whoa.”

I suddenly felt myself starting to doze off—the battle against Lang must’ve been more mentally demanding than I’d thought.

“We still have time until the second match. I will watch over you, so please do take a nap,” said Nemesis.

“You know what, I think I will. Thanks... Oh, and tell Smol Gar not to chew on me.”

“Very well.”

“Kshasha?”

I went ahead and closed my eyes. Soon enough, my mind drifted into sleep—not caused by a status effect, but simply from my own exhaustion.

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As I slept, I saw a dream—not like the one I’d had that morning, but a completely normal one.

“Mukudori, do you know the word ‘metagaming’?”

This dream was based around a memory I had from back when I was in a high school club. Still in my first year, I’d been sitting in front of a table and facing the person on the other side, who was the president. The club was called the Electronic Game Research Society, or EGRS for short.

“I...can’t say I’ve heard the word, no.”

“It’s a gaming term that refers to the battle over the information on the game’s current climate.” Prez had trading cards spread out on the table. She was organizing them based on their levels or types and putting them together into a single pile...building a deck, so to speak.

“The ‘climate’ or ‘meta’ of card games changes all the time. New expansions get released, different cards get banned, new limits are set, different decks become popular, and new combos get discovered. It’s very important to gather this information before you build your deck and go to tourneys. Do you know why?”

“Uh, I don’t play card games that much...”

“I see. Don’t worry—I’ll teach you.”

EGRS was a video game club, but the shelves here were full of hobby mags and manga. This was because the prez—Koyomi Hoshizora—was a fan of tabletop games, especially TCGs. Since I was a new club member, she invited me to join her on this path and gave me a starter deck, a playmat, and other few things for it, so I felt like I had to play along.

“Gathering information about the meta is important because it increases your chances of winning against more opponents. For example, if the current meta is centered around lots of effects that let you pick cards from your deck, you can turn the cards with those effects into so much scrap paper by using cards that prevent that. It’s things like that.”

“...I’m not sure about some of the terms you used, but I think I get the principle.”

“But if you use that deck against someone with a deck that *doesn’t* use those cards, it’s your cards that’ll end up being total scrap. Every tourney starts before the first match even begins, with contestants competing against each other by guessing what decks will be the most popular and how to counter them. You can sometimes use a side deck for changes and corrections, but that’s just more reason to really focus on building your deck.”

Despite saying that deck-building was serious business, she seemed to be having fun doing it.

"If being able to counter your opponent's moves is so important, why not just have a deck with a whole bunch of different counters?" I asked.

"That's not a bad idea exactly, but doing that comes at the cost of stability. Also..." she said before squinting. "There are decks that can't be countered."

"Huh?"

"I mentioned that new combos can be discovered, didn't I? People sometimes take these unknown combos straight into the tourneys. Combos that remained beneath the notice of this information-based society are as powerful as they are obscure. Most of them are found by combining old, forgotten cards with brand-new ones. Overcoming the boundaries of time, these forgotten things—*things you overlooked*—return to bare their fangs at you."

Silence ensued.

"Well, in a more general sense..." she said before pausing for a moment, closing her eyes, and continuing. "In games that involve RNG, you may sometimes encounter deviations in phenomena that thoroughly surpass all your preparations."

She then opened her eyes and looked right at me. "Mukudori, that's exactly what's gonna happen to you in some game three years from now. Be careful," she said.

Prophetic words that came outta nowhere.

"How do you know that...?" I asked, all tense.

In response, she said, "My deck-building fortune-telling says so."

"Wait, this was all fortune-telling?! What the hell?!" I said in surprise.

"I'll have you know it's pretty accurate. When I did a reading for the vice prez, I got it so right I actually freaked him out. It was written all over his *face*. Get it? 'Face'? Like a card face?"

"...I don't know if you should be that proud of that one."

"Well, anyway...be careful three years from now."

As the prez said those words, my dream came to an end.

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I woke up to a feeling of someone shaking me.

"Ray, wake up. You were called."

"All right..." I looked to the side and saw Nemesis placing her hand on my shoulder. She must've shaken me awake.

I checked the time and realized that only about half an hour had passed. Well, the barriers were accelerated and there were fewer contestants for this battle than the first one, so maybe it wasn't that surprising.

"Hm..." I took a moment to think about the dream I'd just seen. Was it a sign? It couldn't be, right? Man, what was up with the dreams I was having today?

"She said it would be in three years, huh..." Three years from the spring when I was a first-year in high school. Wouldn't that be...now?

"Ray?"

"...Don't worry about it." I switched my focus and once again followed the worker to the stage.

No matter how hard I tried, though, I couldn't stop thinking about the dream.

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When I came out to the stage, I once again passed the black barrier. It looked like I'd gotten here first, since I couldn't see the other person yet.

Just like last time, I hopped on Silver and prepared myself. I was still kinda tense, but now I at least had an idea of what I had to do to give myself the best chance of winning. I had to establish dominance using my debuffs and flying, use that time to get a grasp of my opponent, then choose the most effective card I could play. *And that's how I...should win.*

"Ray."

"Yeah?"

"Your expression does not match your thoughts. And even your thoughts feel as though you are trying to convince yourself."

Nemesis's words made me realize that, yeah, my face *was* all stiff. My heart was uneasy too.

"I just...have a bad feeling about this," I said. The dream of the past—the fortune that prez had given me—was coiling around me like some hint or a curse.

I felt like something bad was about to happen and I wouldn't be able to do anything to stop it.

"We are strong now," said Nemesis. "No matter what sort of monster we face, we will not be powerless against it."

Her words were encouraging and empowering, and they helped me relax at least a little bit.

"...Thanks."

Soon after that, I saw my opponent on the other side.

"...Huh?"

The shock I received from seeing this person was incomparable to the one I'd gotten when I'd laid eyes on Lang. I could see her through the clear barrier, and that alone was enough for me to understand that the bad feeling I had was completely justified. The prez's prediction was actually so right it was freaky.

Astonishment overtook both me and Nemesis as our opponent finally entered the stage.

We were now faced with *a Scandinavian beauty in a Chinese dress*.

"Wow! I haven't seen you in so long!"

It was the fourth Superior of the kingdom—Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts.

She was also known as a member of Death Period—our clan.

"...It's been a while," I said, still confused as to why she was here. "Umm...did you register ahead of time?"

"Nope! I just joined today! I got some unexpected time off work, logged in, got into the lottery to take someone's slot and won! It's pretty exciting, huh?! We may get to fight a UBM! I'm pretty excited that I get to fight you too!"

Lei-Lei answered my question with a smile on her face.

...Yeah, that was how it worked, wasn't it? If a Tournament slot opened up, they'd hold a lottery to let someone take their place. A slot happened to open up, Lei-Lei happened to have some time off, and then she happened to win the resulting lottery.

It was all by chance—*a deviation in phenomena*.

I had no words. I'd completely *overlooked* the fact that this could happen.

Lei-Lei couldn't log in regularly, rarely showed herself, and was generally hard to get ahold of. Shu had even told me that she was busy with work recently.

But even taking all that into consideration, the chance of her being in the Tournament *was never zero*.

This had to be what Shu'd wanted to tell me and then decided not to—that Lei-Lei got a spot in the Tournament.

He'd probably thought that there was no point in telling me because the ladder would be revealed anyway and it would only make me more tense.

But now we had this situation. It was just the second battle of the preliminaries, and I was up against Lei-Lei.

The randomized Tournament ladder led to us—members of the same clan—fighting each other.

This was the deviation in phenomena that thoroughly surpassed all my preparations.

Of all the people I could've fought, it had to be Lei-Lei, huh?

"...Ray," said Nemesis. I could tell by her voice that she was shaken too.

Since both me and Lei-Lei were from the same clan, you could say that it was good for us no matter which one of us won...but on a personal level, she was no doubt my greatest obstacle in this Tournament.

"...We got the third one," I said.

"...Indeed."

This would be our third time fighting an Altarian Superior.

The first time was when we'd accidentally ran into Figaro in the Tomb Labyrinth.

The second time was when we'd faced Miss Eldritch after she'd kidnapped me.

And now this would be the third time—where we would fight Lei-Lei in an arena. It wasn't an accident or a crime—it was a struggle to the end atop a duel stage.

This was only my second fight, but I felt like I'd already met The Tournaments' final boss.

If something like this was enough to break us, though, we'd have already been broken long before this.

"I said that we would not be powerless no matter what sort of monster we faced, did I not?" said Nemesis.

"You did."

"We now stand against something far more than a monster, but I have no intention of taking my words back."

"I don't plan on losing either. Let's win this, Nemesis!"

"Certainly!"

Thus began yet another one of our fights against a Superior.

"Twenty seconds." A referee began to count down the time.

Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts. Though I'd met her on my very first day in *Dendro*, I still didn't know much about her. The only time I'd seen her fight was the recording Marie'd shown me, where Lei-Lei had exterminated Goblin Street.

I couldn't really tell what she was doing, though. She was somehow making Goblin Street's Masters melt and explode by just touching them, but I had no idea about the mechanics behind that—neither Shu nor Figaro had ever told me.

"I suppose we can assume that we cannot let her draw close," said Nemesis.

"Yeah..." It was pretty clear that even a single touch from her exposed hands could kill me.

I tried checking her stats using Reveal, but just like in the first battle, basically everything was hidden. I wasn't allowed to know how much AGI or what job she had.

I couldn't help but tense up and gulp.

"This is gonna be our first battle! I can't wait!" Lei-Lei, on the other hand, looked completely relaxed. She was practically *beaming*.

"Ten seconds." We were in completely different states of mind, but we both had the same amount of time until the duel began—and that moment was rapidly approaching.

"Five...four...three...two...one...zero!"

The moment the fight began, I spurred Silver into the sky. I didn't know if Lei-Lei had any aerial combat abilities, but I knew that if I stayed on the surface, she'd get close and kill me instantly. It was best to go with my original plan and take to the air.

"Where is she now...?!" Would Lei-Lei follow after us now that we were in the air? That was the first thing I had to find out, and the result was...

"Wow! Your horse is flying! It's one of those things that are all the rage these days, huh?" she said as she...*began singing*.

She wasn't following after us. Hell, she wasn't moving at all.

She was just looking up at us from the ground and, for some reason, singing a cheerful song.

An extremely pleasant voice began to fill the stage.

"...What the hell?" Was she that confident she'd win or was she just an airhead? I thought the song would give me some debuff, but when I checked my stats, I didn't see any status effects on me.

Well, whatever it was, there was only one thing I had to do here. I had to fill the stage with miasma to create a better situation for myself and close the gap between Lei-Lei and me.

With that thought, I pointed my right hand down at her and activated my skill. "Hellish Miasma!"

"Fire!" Lei-Lei called out.

That was when *my right hand disappeared*.

"...What?" My right arm that was supposed to release the Hellish Miasma, as well as the right Miasmaflame Bracer equipped on it, *had melted away*.

Shock overcame me, and one particular memory rose up in my mind—my battle against Logan. After I'd summoned Gardranda, she'd used Hellish Miasma: Zero to completely melt an armored devil, bones and all.

What had just happened to me looked really similar to that, only I wasn't the one using it.

The fact that even my Miasmaflame Bracer was destroyed made it clear that something was very wrong here.

"Is this...a power that buffs the enemy's attack and sends it back to them before it happens?" I wondered. Powers centered around retribution might've been able to do something like that, but it didn't feel right. After all, Lei-Lei *wasn't doing anything*. She was just singing and looking up at me.

Or was this some kind of preemptive retribution power that only needed her to sing?

That also seemed wrong, simply because it was too absurd and unfair.

"What did she do to—" Before I could finish my sentence, I let out a cough.

"Ray...?!" Nemesis cried. I put my hand to my mouth, and it was instantly painted red.

That wasn't all. While I was preoccupied with my right arm melting off, a disturbing amount of blood had pooled on the saddle.

It had all come from my own stomach. I had pain sensations turned off, so I'd failed to realize that *my stomach had melted open*.

"...What...the hell?" She wasn't near me. She hadn't touched me. I had no idea what she was doing to me.

Despite that, she'd already given me a fatal injury.

Lei-Lei was still doing nothing but singing—but at least I finally realized something.

Even though there were no debuffs on my status window, and even though I had no idea how this all worked, it was clear by now that *this song was her attack*.

I didn't know how, but she was attacking me using sound as the intermediary.

And if I didn't stop the song soon, I'd die.

"MONOCHROME!" As I raised my voice, my Black Warcoat began to move, taking the place of my right arm and forming into a jet-black cannon.

If I had to settle this as quickly as possible while keeping a distance from her, this was the only thing I could use. Shining Despair—one of my most powerful attacks, capable of delivering extreme heat at the speed of light. We were in an arena, but if I fired it downward I didn't have to worry about it breaking through the barrier and damaging the city. It was just like the battle between Figaro and Miss Eldritch.

"Shining..." As I began to call out the skill, heat and light gathered in the dark cannon...and the *Black Warcoat* evaporated under the heat.

I had no words.

This was outrageous. Monochrome was not just the source of the Shining Despair attack—it also had Light Absorption that should've made it immune to lasers. How could its own laser have made it evaporate?

At the very least, this told me a lot more about exactly how this attack worked.

She wasn't sending my attacks back to me before they even happened. If that were the case, Monochrome wouldn't have vanished.

Instead, the phenomenon at play was...

"Resistance...negation!" I gasped.

She was dealing not with status effects, but something *before the status effect had even been applied*.

Resistance to status effects was a kind of hidden stat that was influenced by END and other things—and that was exactly what Lei-Lei's Embryo affected. She completely erased resistances to status effects, as well as to the elements.

No, that wasn't quite right—looking at what had happened, she didn't just erase them. *She brought resistances into the negatives*.

She debuffed the resistances themselves, making it far easier for the target to receive status effects or be affected by changes in temperature. That was why my right Miasmaflame Bracer was melted by its own miasma, and why my Black Warcoat was evaporated by its own burning light despite being designed to absorb it.

It was like they were animals dying to their own poison.

"Such a fearsome power...!" said Nemesis. It was like Miss Eldritch's Kaguya, except focused exclusively on debuffing resistances.

That meant that basically all attacks built around status effects and energy releases would just destroy me before they did anything to Lei-Lei.

If I used my left Miasmaflame Bracer to fire Purgatorial Flames, they'd just burn along with my arm and become Charred.

I looked down at the hole in my stomach and realized that it had actually gotten bigger. And that wasn't all—when I touched the wound with my left hand, the Miasmaflame Bracer released white smoke and began to melt.

"So that's...how you're doing this..."

Negative resistance explained the hole in my stomach too. You could call the wound a kind of ulcer—except in this case, it wasn't just the gastric walls that were failing. My entire body had lost so much resistance to acid that even my own digestive fluids were harmful.

"Basically...she can kill any living creature without doing anything..." I said.

A wielder of a destructive song that made all nearby living beings die on their own—that was Lei-Lei, the Prodigal of Feasts.

To her, living beings were just pieces of *meat* that melted away and became like *drink*, completing the feast.

I had no idea who'd given her the name, but now that I knew its meaning, it just chilled me to the core.

"Ray... Well...? What should we do?" Nemesis asked.

This series of gruesome disasters seemed to have greatly disturbed her too.

That made me realize what I had to do, though.

"...Nemesis. The Halberd."

"...Right away!" She transformed into a halberd with a black flag flying behind it and activated Like a Flag Flying the Reversal. I instantly felt the spread of the hole in my stomach begin to slow down.

"It's not enough to cancel out the effect...but enough to make it less dire." Reversal was also a resistance skill. Though it couldn't flip my resistances back into the positives, it looked like it could make this more bearable, at least.

...It did the same with Miss Eldritch, so I guess it's no surprise it kinda works here too, I thought.

"Nemesis...we're gonna fight from up close."

"...It does not seem that we have any other choice." We'd lost all means of attacking from a distance, so we had to settle this in melee combat. "Why not use Silver to block out the sound?" Nemesis asked.

A dense enough compressed air barrier may have been able to block the flow of sound, but...

"We don't know if it'll stop the debuff that's already on us...and we have no time to make it." I was still losing HP to the hole in my stomach. Time wasn't on my side anymore, so I couldn't waste it by just waiting and seeing—or by making the Wind Hoof Bomb. "Also, we were watching out for her touch at first, but that probably doesn't actually mean much."

Lei-Lei's hands must've had some sort of debuff on them.

Certain jobs in the boxer grouping had this skill called "Poison Hand." By itself, it was just a debuff attack, but when delivered to a body with negative resistance, it became a skill that killed instantly.

Also, it could've been that her Embryo was activated by the sound the attack made when it touched the body. If Poison Hand actually had that kind of synergy with Lei-Lei's Embryo, it really was a fearsome combo.

However, none of that meant anything if it didn't touch me.

"I'll flank her and try to attack her then." Assuming that she was going all out in that recording I'd seen, I might be able to counter her—and I still had my Counter Absorption uses.

It was a shame my Reveal couldn't see her stats, but I had no choice but to do this anyway.

"Though...I don't think I have the attack power."

"Indeed...the damage counter might as well be empty."

My biggest problem now was that I had no means of finishing her off. The negative resistances made my Miasmaflame Bracers and Black Warcoat completely unusable, and all the damage I'd received so far technically came from me. Lei-Lei hadn't actually *damaged* me—she'd only lowered my resistances—which meant that I couldn't use Vengeance, Payback, or Chaser. And I doubted that I had enough power to defeat her with basic Flag Halberd attacks.

I thought that maybe Grand Cross would do the trick, but to use it, I had to descend to the surface and stand in place for a moment. She might have been able to take advantage of that, and if her level was high enough, it might've not been enough to kill her anyway.

I had few cards I could play, and my odds of winning were slim.

As things were, it looked like the only thing I had that could finish her off was...our new friend.

"You intend to gamble on that?" asked Nemesis. Well, we were already screwed. If we wanted to turn this around, this was our only chance.

"Yeah...let's do it!"

"Very well!"

We rode Silver straight toward Lei-Lei.

Accelerated by gravity, we slightly shifted our trajectory as we approached. She was still singing, but she was paying close attention to our movements too.

"GRAAAHHH!" When I was close enough, I let out a roar and swung my Flag Halberd at her. However, she dodged it by merely throwing her upper body back.

The moment my blade passed her, she went back to her previous stance, then charged right at me. Silver was trying to get us away from her, but she was able to instantly close the distance anyway.

I had no idea if this was the result of some skill or if it was just her own stats. Regardless, I was now in range of her deadly hands.

Still singing her heart out, she thrust her poisonous claw toward me.

"Counter Absorption!"

But that was when Nemesis switched to her human form and created a barrier of light. It deflected the lethal hand and stopped Lei-Lei in place for a moment.

"NOW...!" I seized the opportunity, raised my left hand above my head, and used Instant Equip.

And thus, I took out the nameless axe covered in the black cloth.

I had a feeling that this weapon was powerful enough to defeat her. Even if merely swinging it once blew away my arm, it didn't change the fact that I *could* still swing it.

Lei-Lei didn't stop singing, but I could see her eyes slightly widen.

"HIYAAA...!" I began swinging the axe, and after it had only moved a few centimeters through the air, I felt something off.

It was as though something was flowing through me, with my left hand as its source.

After that, a change overcame my body so fast that I couldn't even react to it.

It was just like what had happened to my right arm when I'd sparred against Rook, but with *a far greater reach*.

My entire body was turned to dust.

And as I felt myself shattering, my consciousness faded away.

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Next thing I knew, the stage’s barrier was undone.

In actual time, the battle had ended before even half a minute had passed.

I’d participated on the first day of The Tournaments...

...and was knocked out after my second battle.

Chapter Three: The Next Stage

Paladin, Ray Starling

After the second match, I went back home to the eighth arena.

Just like I had this morning, I was now lying on the stage and watching the clouds pass. I heaved a heavy sigh.

“Kshoo? (Are you...feeling down?)” Smol Gar asked as she sat on my forehead and lightly slapped my face.

“Honestly...yeah, I am.”

“Kshaa. (I see...)”

After the match, Lei-Lei’d told me she had fun fighting me. I didn’t know if she was just being nice or if she’d actually enjoyed it.

She’d also said that if she won and got the right to challenge the UBM, she’d invite me and some other clan members into the battle, though, and added that she’d try her best to come out on top—not that I could really imagine her losing. So, as far as the clan was concerned, this was kind of a good outcome. I’d even told everyone who was going to come to cheer for me to go cheer for her instead.

But on a personal level...yeah, I wasn’t taking this too well.

“Hrm...” I knew Lei-Lei was a Superior, but I’d lost to her with almost no effort on her part.

Honestly, this left me pretty shocked. Sure, this wasn’t the first time I’d lost like this. I couldn’t even count how many times someone had made quick work of me during sparring, but despite that, my defeat had hit me way harder than the time Marie had first killed me, or the time Miss Eldritch had overpowered me in her base.

That had to be because until I’d lost to Lei-Lei I’d actually believed I’d grown stronger since those incidents. Nemesis was now a high-rank Embryo, plus I had Silver and three MVP rewards, along with a general increase in my stats. And then there was all the experience I’d built up during my many battles here in *Dendro*. I’d thought I was way better than I’d used to be, and that was why it had stung extra hard that Lei-Lei had beaten me so easily.

Considering that she'd shut herself up inside the crest, Nemesis must've felt the same way.

Still...

"...Ksha? (...Are you broken now?)"

I didn't need Smol Gar asking me questions like that to realize it—I could see my feelings clearly with just a little introspection. However, the pain and shock I was feeling now...none of it was anything I couldn't recover from.

"...No," I said. "I'm just a little bent."

I could see this feeling for what it was: a pain meant to make me stronger.

The shock was something else, but I hadn't been *broken*. Lei-Lei had crushed me in the battle, but I'd still gained something from the whole experience. I was really an idiot, thinking I'd already gained enough power and that I had enough tricks up my sleeve.

It was exactly *because* I'd been defeated that I could once again clearly see what I had to focus on in order to grow stronger. And now that I'd realized that, it gave me the drive to stand up again.

"If you are bent, then we must simply hammer you back into shape," Nemesis said as she appeared from the crest. She'd had the exact same thoughts as me.

"Yeah. There's still time until night falls and the final match ends. We should do some training before then," I said.

"Indeed!"

It was pretty clear that Lei-Lei would win this Tournament, and the winners had the right to pick the day on which they'd fight their UBMs.

Since Lei-Lei had schedule issues, though, she'd almost certainly want to fight her UBM right after the winning match. I didn't think I could become the MVP with her fighting alongside me, but UBMs were powerful, so fighting it was a good way to get some combat experience nevertheless.

"I guess we should do some leveling to prepare for that... I'd like to do some tests on this thing here too, but that will probably take some time, so I'll save that for later."

As I said that, I reached into my inventory and took out a weapon—the nameless axe.

Nemesis jumped in shock at the sight of the weapon.

"*What*?! Ray! You still intend to use it?! But it turned you into dust!" For some reason, she was full of indignation at this. "It scattered you into pieces at the worst possible time—right before you could deliver the decisive strike!" Apparently, she was really upset by the way the battle had ended. Nemesis was a weapon herself, so she must've not appreciated the results.

"But, Nemesis...it's not like it was the axe's fault."

She was right that I'd basically lost to myself rather than Lei-Lei, and...yeah, it was because of this axe. But that defeat had allowed me to notice something about the weapon and finally understand it.

While sparring against Rook I'd only lost an arm, but in the Tournament I'd lost my entire body. I could kinda see what had caused this difference now, and it was all because my enemy was Lei-Lei.

The effect that had destroyed my arm and body wasn't just simple physical damage. That was why it had become way worse after Lei-Lei had reduced my resistances.

I didn't know what was the power that had flowed through my body, but this was a big hint.

If I had some sort of resistance item that directly countered this effect—similar to Monochrome's Light Absorption—I might have been able to wield this axe without any consequence.

"This axe isn't some crazed monster—it has its own rules. What happened was just the result of that."

"Hrm..." was Nemesis's only response.

I was thinking I could use the barrier at our base to try and find out the nature of the effect this axe inflicted upon me. Getting all the resistance gear would probably be difficult, and the testing would take a lot of time, but I at least had an idea what I had to do now.

"But...what if this had nothing to do with Lei-Lei's skill, and the axe merely made the effect worse because it was in a bad mood?" Nemesis suggested.

That...could be true, I guess... Wait, could it? No. There's no way...right? I'd talked to the axe a bunch of times this morning, but I really doubted that would put it in a bad mood.

"We're cool...right?" I tried asking it, but the axe obviously didn't respond.

“Well...let us put that aside for now,” said Nemesis. “More important right now is the leveling. Where do you intend? Gideon’s surroundings are too crowded for that.”

“Oh yeah, that’s true.” Thanks to The Tournaments, a whole lot of Masters had come to Gideon. Many wouldn’t be participating until the later days, and from what I’d heard, a bunch of them were currently leveling or adjusting their builds by killing whatever monsters they could find around the city.

I also wanted to avoid any unnecessary attention, so I didn’t want to level anywhere with too many other players.

“And I can’t use Hellish Miasma wherever there’s people,” I added, following this line of thought.

“Ksha. (It’s really...useful.)”

“...I feel you are becoming too reliant on it,” Nemesis said.

Well, regardless, if I was gonna level, I’d have to do it in a zone that didn’t have many people, was right for my level range, and was close enough to let me come back by night.

And, well, I actually know of a place like that, I thought.

“You do?” Nemesis answered me, out loud.

“Shu told me about it. It’s about an hour from here by Silver, and it’s just right for me to level solo. It’s actually at the very south edge of the kingdom, and it used to be a buffer zone between Altar and Legendaria.” Apparently, it had been dominated by a powerful UBM at some point, but after Shu had teamed up with someone to beat it, the area was annexed by the kingdom. “It’s a mountainous area with almost no roads going through it, but Silver can fly, so that’s not a problem. It’s also on the opposite side of the Border Mountain Belt from all the Skydragons, so we probably won’t run into any of them either. And if something happens in the air, we can just flee to the surface. It’s perfect, isn’t it?”

“I see. It does sound like it.”

“Rook said that he leveled there too.”

“You began at about the same time, yet your levels have grown so far apart.” Rook had always been a fast leveler, but while I had to reduce my login frequency because of college, he’d started power leveling like crazy and was way ahead of me now.

“His three girls have become stronger too,” I added. Apparently, they were close to becoming Pure-Dragon-tier.

It’d depend on who he was matched with, but I was pretty sure he could win his Tournament.

The only difficulty he had in duels was the time he needed to prepare the Union Jack. You could get on mounts and take out your tamed monsters as long as they didn’t exceed your minion capacity, but preparing skills before the start of the fight was a no-no.

“Ksha? (Instead of thinking about others, you should focus on improving yourself...right?)”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

“Very well.” I took out Silver and jumped on him. Nemesis sat behind me like she had earlier, while Smol Gar got on the top of my head.

I hope she doesn’t fall off, I thought.

Anyway, I refocused myself and went to level at the Altar-Legendaria border to the south—in the area once occupied by the UBM known as “Divine Disks.”

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Gaol

This was a place meant to contain Masters who’d broken the law and was currently a realm of death.

Three days ago, the Superior known as King of Plagues, Candy, used his Embryo Resheph to infect it with a deadly virus that killed nearly all the prisoners. That had turned it into an uninhabitable space where merely logging in meant infection and a consequent death penalty that banned you from the game for three days. The few survivors had also been massacred by another Superior—Gerbera—who’d been excluded as a target of the virus.

This extermination, which had continued for nearly three days now, had left the gaol empty of everyone but the Superiors, and nobody could even log in because of the death penalty.

All this was merely part of Sechs’s plan to take the members of Illegal Frontier out of the gaol. The other Masters inside it were uncertain variables that could interfere with the prison break, so they had to be removed as preparation.

And now, the actual prison break was barely an hour away.

"Phew. So this is the last time we'll drink this tasty coffee here," said Candy.

"Yeah...but it's not like we won't ever get to drink the leader's coffee again... Oh, leader—don't forget this dolphin glass."

They were all sitting at the counter in Sechs's café, Dice, and shared their thoughts while enjoying the last coffee they'd have here inside the gaol.

The café had been cleaned up and now looked empty, like a home before a move. April, AKA Diamond Slayer—the café's employee and Sechs's property—had also been stored away into his inventory.

"I feel like a lot of time has passed since I was sent here at the start of April, but the month isn't even over yet...I really can't keep track of the time here."

Gerbera felt as if she'd always been in the gaol, her perception no doubt affected by the tripled time.

Candy seemed to share her sentiment. "I feel like it's been forever ago. I was just *getting some XP* in the great outdoors when suddenly some weird-looking meanie in shades fell from the sky and made me drop. I figured I'd just level up in the gaol, but Sechsy got in the way and Hanny the big-legged forever-bachelorette crushed me."

Remembering every detail, Candy looked back at his first days here.

Those words reminded Sechs of something. "Figaro actually proposed to her shortly after she was released."

"*What*...?! Uh, I mean...oh, really?" Candy was so shocked he broke character for a moment—that's how big a surprise it was for him.

"Yes. This is info from a reliable source too."

"Wow. Just...wow. Hanny was my tea-drinking bestie, but I always thought that thing she had for him was one-sided..."

"I believe everyone besides Hannya and Figaro themselves thought the same thing."

"Human relationships make my head spin. Not even a *god* like me can understand them!" Candy said, throwing in a random wink and pose.

Sechs showed no reaction to Candy's theatrics and maintained his usual smile. "I'm glad Hanny's happy though. I graciously forgave her for crushing me and forgot all about it, so she can have my blessings!"

The very fact that Candy mentioned it at all meant that he'd neither forgotten it *nor* forgiven her for it, but it did seem like he was genuinely in a celebratory mood.

"Hrmm...that got me thinking though. Hanny's already gone, and our jolly crew's about to leave too, so...be honest with me, what'll happen to the gaol?" Candy went on.

"The prisoners will probably split into small factions and fight for dominance. This will last a while—maybe even a very long time. It may even become a completely lawless area and remain like that forever."

The existence of the Superiors was a pacifying force here. The prisoners sent to the gaol had fewer ways to enjoy *Dendro* to begin with, but the overpowering presence of the Superiors had made them go further and keep a low profile to avoid being marked. The regulars who weren't trying to avoid their notice wanted to act like Illegal Frontrier's underlings, but the overall effect was the same.

Once the Superiors were gone, they would most likely start having fun by fighting for dominance.

"What about that shut-in?" Candy asked.

"Fu'uta?" Sechs replied. "I don't believe he will do anything soon."

"Why does he even log in to *Dendro*, anyway? What's so fun about just staying in that hole at the edge of the gaol? Plus, my viruses don't reach him for some reason, and I just dunno what that's about."

"That's exactly what he's doing there—nothing."

Fu'uta had been in the gaol since before both Sechs and Candy had arrived. He was sitting in a dungeon, but he wasn't even doing any leveling.

In fact, he couldn't level up even if he wanted to—he didn't even have a single job.

He also didn't gather any items or interact with anyone else. He completely refused to have fun with the game and just stayed in that one place.

"Nothing? If you ask me, reality is a better place for that."

"He is waiting for his preparations to be done."

"Preparations?"

"Time is his ally. He will slowly encroach on the Resources comprising the gaol, and then finally eat his way out of it by himself."

Candy furrowed his brow at these words. They made Fu'uta sound like a malignant disease, which Candy felt was supposed to be *his* thing.

"And then? What'll he do when he's outside?"

"I did not speak to him for long, so I am unsure myself. However, I do remember the words I heard him whisper once."

Sechs had tried to invite Fu'uta to Illegal Frontier several times in the past, but Fu'uta had refused every time, and had continued rejecting him even after Sechs had given up on recruiting him and simply wanted to become better acquainted. Despite such limited interactions, however, Sechs was actually the Master who was closer to Fu'uta than anyone else.

That was why he'd been able to hear this whisper.

"Apparently, it's 'For dad.'"

"...Dad?" Candy couldn't make sense of that. "He's being a shut-in and preparing to break out of jail for his papa? I don't get that at all. It's even more confusing than Hanny's relationship!"

"You aren't wrong. I suppose he must be driven by some feelings nobody else can understand," Sechs said, taking a sip of coffee and thinking back to the time he himself acted on nothing but his own inscrutable motives. "Anyway, the situation means that Fu'uta will not influence the state of the gaol after we leave. It will become a place where the more cunning prisoners—or pre-Superiors such as Gakido—play a game of domination."

"That sounds kinda fun too," Candy said—ironically, since his presence was part of the reason such a conflict had been impossible up until now. What meaning was there in a battle for control of the gaol when there was someone who could completely destroy the whole place around?

"That made me wonder...what's gonna happen to this café?"

"I decided to transfer control of it to a prisoner. More specifically, after we leave, the ownership will go to the first person who visits it."

"Well, lucky them. Hm...?"

Candy tilted his head in confusion. Normally, this would be the part where Gerbera, being the downer she was, would say something along the lines of "this place is basically cursed and haunted, so I'm not sure if whoever gets it is *lucky*. That person would be our leader's successor, kinda, so they'd probably be targeted over ownership of the building."

However, Candy realized that Gerbera was no longer at his side.

Where did Gerby go? How long was she gone? he wondered. Gerbera had been with them, enjoying her last drink in this café—but now, all that was left was the dolphin glass she liked so much.

She'd vanished so naturally it was shocking. Her control over her skills was far above what it had been before. While Gerbera's self-confidence had dropped, she had become so much more competent that it was beyond comparison. Her behavior had actually changed precisely *because* her self-worth had dropped, and as a result she'd become more careful and cowardly.

On that front, Sechs could only thank Shu for sending her here, and Rook for taking her down a peg despite being less powerful than her.

It seems she is preparing for it, Sechs thought. Gerbera acting like this was part of the reason why their prison break would surely be a success.

"Anyway, we finished our coffee, so...let us begin." Sechs washed their glasses, put them away, and looked at Candy as well as the observer of the gaol, who was surely watching them from somewhere.

"And now, we leave," Sechs declared, as if it was already a settled matter.

King of Crime would now escape the cage maintained by an Infinite Embryo.

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"...It's about to begin." In a control AI workspace surrounded by countless windows, the observer of the gaol and control AI no. 6—Red King—adjusted his glasses as he spoke.

One of the windows showed Sechs, standing at the edge of the gaol.

Red King had known this day would come soon. Sechs had asked him if he could break out, and Red King had given him permission. The criminal was free to try it.

Red King had also added that he wouldn't go out of his way to bring Sechs back here either.

Masters were sent to the gaol only if they came back from a death penalty without any usable save points. However, after the prisoners returned from their death penalties, they could log in and out normally. If they logged out *after* breaking out of the gaol, they would be able to log in at the same location they'd been when they logged out.

They would be free the moment they took a single step outside the gaol.

Red King wouldn't send anyone to chase them down. If they happened to get the death penalty again after escaping, they'd be sent back to the gaol—but until then, they'd be completely free.

"No one has successfully passed this test of mine. I wonder how he will rise to the occasion."

Despite having given them permission, Red King had no intention of just *letting* them escape. Anyone trying to go from inside the gaol to the outside would be obstructed by Space Fixation.

This was the power mimicked by the pre-ancient superweapon, Acra, and the wall of fixed space it created was so tough that no amount of simple physical force would be enough—not even King of Beasts would be capable of it. The power and scope of this Space Fixation far exceeded its copy.

The wall also could not be influenced from the outside. The gaol was located at a certain set of coordinates within *Infinite Dendrogram*, but it *couldn't be touched*.

You couldn't even see it from the coordinates it occupied. Even if someone outside passed right through the place where the gaol was, unlike those inside, they wouldn't hit any walls and would simply move right through.

The gaol was an isolated area that was almost impossible to escape. The only ways you could do it was by using King of Destruction's Right of Destruction; the Primeval Blade, Altar; or an Embryo that could manipulate space itself, just like Red King could.

And still, not even those methods would be a guarantee.

"Sechs has many cards he can play. I'm not aware of all of them...but it should still be a difficult task for him."

King of Crime had declared that he would break out of the gaol, but Red King did not know the means by which he intended to do it. Red King was the warden here, but not even he had a full grasp of the many and varied abilities Sechs had in stock.

But even if Sechs had some resource or ability that Red King was not aware of, breaking out would still be a challenge no matter what.

"Especially when there's three of them..." To escape as a group, they would have to break the gaol's wall on a large scale.

This had not been impossible for Sechs at an earlier point. If he'd used his ultimate skill to transform into King of Destruction, Shu Starling, then used Split Spirit to divide into six, and *then* used Right of Destruction to attack the wall, he may have forced open a hole that would've taken longer to fix, allowing all three of them to escape.

But he couldn't do that now. He hadn't yet recovered the levels he'd spent on the battle that'd sent him to the gaol in the first place—and King of Destruction had leveled up since then, already making it impossible for Sechs to transform into him.

What about the other two?

If Candy used the MVP reward he'd gotten from the Irregularity, Disaster Bioweapon, he may have been able to break the Red King's cage—but that only applied if Red King was in an area infected by Candy's viruses.

As long as Red King himself didn't contract Candy's diseases, they would have no effect on him. King of Plagues' powers were effective against living beings and matter, but not against space itself.

Because of this, Candy wasn't a threat to Red King. His role in this prison break had begun and ended with the extermination of all other Masters here in the gaol.

The last one of the three, Gerbera, wasn't even worth considering. Even if she could become invisible and imperceptible, she would still be within the gaol. This Space Fixation had no gaps in it, and slipping through it was impossible. Thus, she couldn't do anything. She had absolutely no means of overcoming Red King's spatial control.

Realizing once again that Sechs was the core of this prison break, Red King remained in his workspace, safe from the viruses, and prepared for the attempt.

The Infinite Embryo and warden of the gaol wondered how they would try to outsmart him and—as imprudent as it was—he looked forward to seeing it.

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Sechs was standing at the edge of the gaol, right next to the Space

Fixation wall separating the inside and outside.

The area around him was covered in marks left by countless assaults. At some places the surface was melted, and large fragments of metal were scattered all around.

These were the traces of the attempts others had made to challenge this wall—the scars left behind by those who'd tried and failed to escape by destroying the indestructible.

Everyone in the gaol knew that there was a wall here, but as of yet, no one had passed through it.

The only one who'd been able to even open a hole in it was Hannya, and it was only after she'd become a Superior. She'd tried to break out many times before her sentence expired, and in the end, she'd been released before she could succeed.

"One could compare this wall to an impregnable fortress. Not that it is a Castle, of course."

Sechs was among those who knew that the control AIs were Embryos.

Based on his observations, he assumed that Red King was originally a Type World mixed with Apostle. And because spatial awareness was a specialty of the Angel type, he guessed that Red King was a Type Apostle-Angel/World.

This meant he had three core traits: space domination, space awareness, and space deployment.

Indeed—the gaol was managed by an Embryo that exceeded all others in his control over space itself. Red King was the uncontested ruler of this realm, and the edge of the gaol was the web that he'd spun.

This was the only exit out of here. Many had approached it hoping to break out.

And unlike regular prisons, there were no punishments for planning or attempting prison breaks. In fact, the control AI actually *recommended* that the prisoners attempt to escape.

After all, it was possible that a strong will to leave the gaol could be the trigger that drove an Embryo to become Superior. That was what had actually happened to Hannya's Sandalphon.

Just like Cheshire—Tom Cat—had once served as the final barrier to the true duel champion, the walls of Red King's gaol were just another trial the control AIs had set up.

Therefore, to break out of the gaol, one had to prepare something more powerful than that wall—not only the barrier itself, but the entire arsenal of the being known as Red King.

Or, alternatively, outwit him using something he couldn't expect.

"Now...considering my current level, I can do this at least once. I may not have enough for a second time." Sechs thought of the person he would now transform into, as well as what he was about to do, and gathered his resolve for what he was sure was his first and final attempt. "Still, the odds are not against us here."

He faced the spatial wall and finally played the ace he had kept up his sleeve.

"I Take Countless Forms—Nu..."

This was the ult that rarely saw use due to its heavy cost of 500 levels. It allowed him to completely transform into anyone who was a low enough level compared to him.

Who he picked was...

"Schwartz Beine."

...a pair of black, towering legs—Hannya's Sandalphon.

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"It is true that the power to destroy space is a must-have in a situation like this. But Sechs..." Red King said as he watched King of Crime, now transformed into Sandalphon. "*That* will not suffice. You saw with your own eyes it does not suffice."

Just like Red King, Sandalphon possessed a power that influenced space, so he may have been an obvious choice for Sechs. Upon becoming a Superior Embryo, Sandalphon had even acquired the "Downfall Screamer" skill, which focused his spatial domination ability into the tip of the legs and then used it to drill through space itself.

It was a power designed specifically to overcome Red King's walls. The evolution had even used ■■■—the emergency mechanism left only in Maidens and Apostles. Because of this, Sandalphon definitely had the power to break the spatial barrier.

However, that didn't mean it had the power to *break out*.

"Sandalphon is just far too large." The Embryo's legs were enormous and, more significantly, they were *long*. Compared to the hole they could bore through the wall, they were simply too big. And as an Embryo that had Gear in its typing, Sandalphon could only be used while mounted. To escape through the hole opened by Sandalphon, the user would be forced to dismount and stop the drilling, which gave Red King more than enough time to restore the wall. That was the reason Hannya herself had never been able to escape.

"Unlike Hannya, I suppose, Sechs is able to create copies of himself," Red King mused.

Sechs's Nu was a Type Body that turned him into a slime. He could split himself into multiple bodies and control the resulting copies freely. Unlike Hannya, he actually *could* attempt to drill and escape at the same time.

"But there's still the problem of the *main one*."

Red King was aware that not all of Nu's splits were equal, with the one that had the most volume becoming the main one. And when the main one disappeared, the one with the second-highest volume would take its place. Also, there was a limit on the distance at which the main and secondary bodies remained linked and able to cooperate. When it was exceeded, the secondary ones would vanish.

That made the power all but useless for a prison break.

"Sechs isn't a core-based Type Body—its main body switches depending on the volume. That is strong in its own way, of course, but...considering the situation and the transformation he chose, it means nothing."

Even if Sechs did manage to get his various bodies out of the gaol, the moment Red King fixed the hole in space and isolated it again, it would sever their connection with the main body. That meant there was no point having only his copies escape. Since it was volume that decided which body was Sechs's main one, transforming into Sandalphon—the gigantic legs—had effectively rendered it impossible for Nu to escape. If he diverted too much volume into the body that he wanted to send outside, he would no longer be able to maintain the transformation into Sandalphon or use his skills.

And even if Sechs somehow broke out of the gaol using his copies, he would be the *only* one to escape, leaving his companions behind.

"What's he planning, anyway? Hm...?"

The moment Red King muttered that to himself, Sechs—still transformed into Sandalphon—*split himself into three*.

This was Split Spirit—the skill he'd used against Shu.

There were now a whole three Sandalphons towering over the gaol.

All of them were a kilometel tall, and looking up at them would no doubt overwhelm the faint of heart—though, Candy, standing at the side, looked like he was enjoying the view.

"Downfall Screamer."

After several dozen seconds, the three Sandalphons used their space-drilling skill, thrusting the tips of their legs, now spinning rapidly, against the space above the deteriorated ground. From that seemingly empty space, there was the faint sound of an impact and something tearing.

A moment later, the space around the tips of the three Sandalphons' legs began to shake.

The shivering space then quickly cracked, creating an opening. Through it, you could see a mountain forest—the scenery that surrounded the gaol.

The tunnel that had just been drilled through space itself was clearly a way outside.

"I see. Hannya was alone, wasn't she?" *Only Sechs can do this,* Red King thought.

While it was too much for one of them, three Sandalphons were indeed capable of creating a large tunnel. This would allow at least Candy and Gerbera to break out. In fact, even Sechs himself could leave.

Looking around, Red King saw *another* Sechs standing next to Candy.

That meant there were four of him—not just the three Sandalphons.

Red King quickly understood the implications of this. "I see you have found your means of escape," he said.

Split Spirit wasn't based on Sechs's self-separation ability as a slime. It was instead caused by his Embryo's last skill—a fearsome ability that allowed him to multiply his ultimate transformation by up to six. It was also extremely high-risk, though, because it divided his HP evenly among each body, and it wasn't restored even after the skill expired and all of the copies vanished.

But that was exactly what had made it such a powerful tool in this prison break.

Right now, Sechs took the form of three Sandalphons and one ordinary

Sechs. The latter version of Sechs wasn't a copy made by his skill, but the main one. While the other three would vanish once the skill expired, he would not.

Thus, if he passed through the tunnel and canceled the effect, Sechs would be completely outside the gaol.

"I see—quite an impressive combination. He even considered the costs."

Sechs had split into four bodies rather than six so that he would have more HP left once he was free.

Since he couldn't use the save points outside, breaking out of the gaol would mean nothing if he simply received the death penalty again and respawned back in the prison. Keeping his HP loss to a minimum reduced the chances of that happening.

Three Sandalphons were just enough to open a tunnel large enough for people to pass through. Sechs must've watched Hannya as she tried to escape and made his own calculations based on that.

"Sechs, I must say...you've used the cards you've been dealt to make a play that surpassed my expectations...slightly." A single Sandalphon would never be able to break out this way, and Red King felt Sechs's scheme deserved a small amount of praise. "It does not, however, surpass my power."

As he watched Sechs's prison break unfold, Red King had transformed into a new form—humanoid in shape, but appearing more like a wire-frame model. In the dark space within Red King's body, there were countless floating orbs that seemed to represent the universe.

This was his form as an Infinite Embryo. He was Type Infinite Apostle, "Infinite Space, Macrocosmos."

Red King watched as Sechs's two allies tried to enter the opening he'd created...

"Ah...!"

...only to be pushed back.

Looking at the hole again, they realized that although they could see the other side, they couldn't physically pass through it. It still let light through, but there was now some kind of lid over the tunnel.

That tunnel—this dimensional hole through space itself—had been opened by the focused power of three Superior Embryos, and closed by only one.

There was no better display of just how much more powerful an Infinite Embryo was than a Superior.

"Did they think I couldn't close it while they were drilling?" Since the moment the three Sandalphons had begun to open the tunnel, Red King had been taking action. "Sechs, Candy...and Gerbera. None of you will pass."

Gerbera had the ability to avoid this fearsome warden's gaze. Red King had assumed that they may have been expecting him to close the opening and thus had planned to get her out as fast as possible, before the Infinite Embryo could react.

However, that had been a pointless exercise. Red King had closed the tunnel the moment it was only one millimeter wide. It didn't matter that he couldn't see Gerbera—she couldn't pass through regardless.

"They set Sandalphon's space destruction against my power of space *fixation*. It all comes down to offense against defense, and there is no scenario in which an Infinite like me would lose."

The three Sandalphons continued their struggle for a while longer, but it produced no results.

This continued all the way until the skill expired—but in the end, they couldn't pass through the tunnel, and once they vanished, Sechs and Candy logged out as though they'd given up.

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Sechs's attempt at breaking out had failed miserably.

Red King, having returned to his previous appearance as a young man, watched it until it was over.

"He'll need a few months to regain the levels for another try," Red King said—and he realized he felt slightly disappointed that they'd failed.

Of course, as the warden of the gaol, he would not benefit from Sechs breaking out. While it was excellent when high-rank Masters evolved while *trying* to escape—just as had happened to Hannya and Sandalphon—Sechs's trio were already Superiors, so to Red King, there was no point in their efforts right now. Despite that, a part of him had hoped that Sechs and his allies would greatly surpass his expectations, so this result was somewhat underwhelming.

As such thoughts were running through his head, he was suddenly contacted by a colleague.

"Hm? A call...? From Alice?"

It was the control AI in charge of avatars. Because of their roles, they were in touch fairly often, but Red King found it odd that she would call him now, of all times.

"Indeed. Is anything the matter, Alice?"

"You're pretty careless, aren't you?" The first words Alice said made Red King tilt his head in confusion.

"What are you saying?"

"You can do everything by yourself, but despite that *and* being one of us, you work by common sense. You're not too good at thinking outside the box or cooking up wild ideas. Well, you also struggled to gather enough Resources to become Infinite, so I guess you also don't like being wasteful..."

"Again—what are you saying...?" Red King couldn't make sense of her words, so he urged her to get to the point, slightly irritated.

"Their prison break was a big success."

Those words gave Red King one of the few real shocks he'd felt in his entire life. "Huh...? How? I've not missed or overlooked anything. I instantly closed the spatial hole Sechs drilled open. I am certain I did not allow them the opening or the time to escape."

"You closed the hole?"

"Of cour—"

"*All of it?*"

"Hm...? Ah...?!" Red King was confused about what she meant for a moment—and when he realized what she meant, it made him shudder.

He could not believe what they had done.

"Imagine telling someone to do that. Imagine actually *doing* it. They both have a few screws loose," Alice commented with a wry smile audible in her voice.

Red King was overwhelmed by the fact that he'd overlooked the truth, as well as impressed by Sechs's trio for making him overlook it.

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A Certain Area on the Continent, Several Minutes Ago

Mountains covered by dense forests stretched as far as the eye could see.

The area linking the gaol's outer edge to the continent was an undeveloped wilderness. No one knew its coordinates, and it was hidden using Red King's spatial manipulation.

And then all of a sudden, this scene where nothing was supposed to be unusual underwent a major change.

Three cones—the legs of three Sandalphons—burst out from seemingly nowhere, drilling open the space itself.

From the inside of the gaol, these three large weapons broke through the spatial masking.

However, the holes in space opened around the drill were instantly closed by Red King's spatial manipulation, leaving not even enough space or time for even a single ant to pass through.

However, the *tips of the drills* were still sticking out of the gaol.

This wasn't unexpected. All of Sandalphon's spatial manipulation powers were focused on that point. This was Sandalphon's greatest offensive weapon, but the one defending against it, Red King, could still focus his own spatial manipulation to prevent all three of the drills from sticking out like this.

However, that would cost a lot of Resources. Because of that, he figured that the more simple and less wasteful method to deal with this was to simply close off the tunnel they'd created. It would still be enough to keep them from breaking out.

Red King was an Infinite Embryo, but he was also a man of reason, so this decision was completely in character for him. It made sense and was by no means a mistake.

But because of this, he'd overlooked one wild plan that was clearly *a mistake from a human perspective*.

The change in the environment was instant. A number of the trees around the drills broke apart, and there was now a trail on the ground as though something large had slid across it.

However, whatever had actually created the trail was nowhere to be seen. The actual breaking of the trees had not been visible—one moment they were standing, only to be fallen the next. It was as though the world itself took several seconds to notice the destruction inflicted upon it.

At the tip of this destruction of nature, a person's silhouette could be made out.

It was Gerbera—bloodied, bruised, and battered.

“Nngh...I thought I was gonna die. Egh...” Her limbs were twisted in an unnatural way, and a mixture of blood and vomit dripped from her mouth. She looked as though she’d suffered a fearsome attack, and that was no surprise—after all, she was actually right near Sandalphon’s Downfall Screamer—*inside one of the spinning drills*.

While Nu could copy people’s appearances and abilities, the copy maintained his nature as a slime. Sechs had shown this during his battle against Shu. Back then, he’d used it to restore himself, as well as move missiles within his body to fire them from a different location. This time, he’d used this quality of slime to put Gerbera—who’d used her ult—into Sandalphon’s drill.

And, after drilling through the space, he’d released her outside.

The centrifugal force of the drill had obviously sent her flying—thus the destruction.

“It doesn’t hurt...but this feels like crap... I feel like I’m gonna die...” Sechs had turned pain off so he could sense Gerbera touching him. Pain or the lack of it meant nothing against Red King, so turning it off didn’t affect their escape plan.

Even if it didn’t make them feel pain, a person spun by a drill could not possibly remain unscathed.

“H-He’s such a liar... He told me that I’d only have to wait for him to transform into Sandalphon and touch it...ueegh...”

Her inner ear was a mess, the insane centrifugal force had broken most of her bones, and the impact after she had been fired out was enough to kill her instantly. The only reason that hadn’t happened was because she’d used her ult to merge with Alhazred. The Embryo had Pure-Dragon-tier toughness, and with it taking most of the damage, Gerbera had managed to get away with *only* horrific injuries.

Alhazred, almost completely destroyed, had returned to the crest. This undid the effects of her ult, so she had appeared again in this state.

“Nnh...I gotta hurry before I die...” Fighting the unpleasant sensations, she reached for the blood-splattered ground and picked up a ring-shaped inventory.

After removing a large number of high-quality Potions, she poured them on herself. That caused her HP to stop falling and eliminated some injury-based debuffs.

The email she'd received from Sechs had said, "Take my inventory, disappear, and touch me after I transform into Sandalphon." She could hardly believe that *that* was all it would take to escape, but she'd agreed regardless.

She certainly hadn't imagined that she'd be used like this, though.

Methods like these were something you'd expect from Sechs's rival, Shu—and in a way, the fact that Sechs had thought of it at all was proof that Shu had had an influence on him.

"...I guess this is one of the reasons I had to go through all that training..." Gerbera remembered the hellish training Sechs had put her through, where he'd made her turn pain back on and damaged her body in many extreme ways. Without that experience, she might've not been able to bear being in the current state, even with the sensation of pain eliminated.

"Ughhh...I hope there aren't any monsters here..." Gerbera kept on pouring the Potions on herself, slowly recovering her HP.

However, her trusted Alhazred was still in no state to protect her, and she herself was a total mess.

"...Oh. Right."

Remembering this, Gerbera reached into Sechs's inventory and took something out.

It was an object much larger than herself—a carriage. Putting this out was one of the orders Sechs had given her in the email.

"There we go... Now the bodyguard..." Then, from the same inventory, she removed April.

"You called, my venerable temporary owner?" she said. Perhaps because they were in a forest rather than the café, she was already in her combat mode and spoke smoothly.

"Keep an eye out for me... I'm a bit groggy, so I'll take a rest until they come. I can't use Alhazred yet, so, yeah..."

"Understood." April looked around for danger while Gerbera leaned on the carriage.

A few minutes later...

"Mmm! The air outside the slammer sure is delici... Well, actually, it smells like puke. I don't like it..."

...she was joined by Candy, who had most certainly logged out in the gaol.

"...Looks like it worked," Gerbera said. Candy's appearance here was proof that Sechs's plan was a success. This was a relief for Gerbera, since she could now just wait for Sechs to come and heal her.

"Oh. Gerby's almost dead! That's hilarious!"

"You are *such* a..."

Candy cut her off by pointing at her battered body and laughing as though it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen.

"Oh, poor girl! You've even lost your boobs... Oh wait—there were never any there to begin with!"

"*You got a death wish, shitlord*?!" Gerbera snapped, so incensed she even tried to stand despite her injured state. She had indeed lost her pads sometime during the spin in the drill or the impact after, but her actual chest was more or less unharmed.

Candy's teasing and Gerbera's angry squawking continued until they heard another person moving within the carriage.

"I am glad you two are well." With those words, Sechs stepped out of the vehicle as if the action was of no significance.

"Total success!" said Candy.

"...Do I look 'well' to you? Heal me already..." Gerbera pled.

"Of course," Sechs said, transforming into a long-haired woman. This was the form of the Special Superior Job he'd acquired at one point in the past—The Saint.

“...Gotta say,” said Gerbera during the treatment. “I’m surprised we could actually use this to escape the gaol.”

She was looking up at the carriage as she spoke. Her Identification gave her some information about it, including its name: “Save Point Carriage.”

“A mobile save point...I heard you couldn’t use these to come back from a death penalty.”

“You cannot. But we did not use it for that, did we?”

There were three steps that led to wanted Masters being sent to the gaol. First, by getting on the wanted lists, they became unable to use save points. Then, they had to receive a death penalty. After that, they would return to the only save point they could access—the one inside the gaol—and were imprisoned there from then on. Even if they saved at a carriage with a save point, that save would vanish at the second step, making it impossible to come back that way. It was explained to Gerbera that the carriages were more like suspending the game and resuming it rather than a proper save.

“We, however, have simply logged out and logged back in again.” They’d saved at the Save Point Carriage while still imprisoned, and by taking it out now, they were able to create a login point that placed them outside the gaol.

“And Red King didn’t notice? He must have seen you save, right?” Gerbera was the only one who’d actually taken the inventory out of the gaol rather than use the Save Point Carriage, so she was curious about this.

“I observed Red King while I was in the gaol, and through my observations, I found out that he only has one visual point. He may be omniscient in the space he currently occupies, but recently, he has been avoiding the gaol itself because of the epidemic.”

“...Oh, I guess that was the other reason for spreading it.” Even if there were many of the monitor-like observation points inside the gaol, the observer couldn’t look through all of them at once. Things may have been different with Cheshire, who specialized in parallel operations, but Red King wasn’t like him.

Sechs had also confirmed that the other control AIs did not involve themselves with the matters of the gaol. He had learned some of this through chats with Red King himself, in fact.

They had also saved at the carriage while Red King had clearly been focusing on something else—Sechs while Hannya was trying to break out, and Candy while Sechs was talking to Red King.

Clearly, this mobile save point had been part of their escape plan for quite some time now.

"...By the way, did I *have* to go through this? Couldn't we have just thrown the inventory out...? We have April, and she's tough." Gerbera figured that if they'd just given April the inventory with the Save Point Carriage, she wouldn't have had to be shot out of a drill into a forest.

Sechs shook his head, though.

"You can make yourself impossible to perceive, but Red King could easily notice April. If he saw her inside the drill, he would have certainly done something about it. This was proved when he closed off the tunnel we used as a distraction. Using your skill was necessary to ensure a more secure prison break."

"And what about *my* security...? Ugh," Gerbera sighed as though she'd given up. "What were you planning to do while I wasn't here, then?"

"I would have hidden myself instead—though I believe that would have been a great deal riskier than having you be the one inside the drill."

Sechs had actually formulated a plan to break out of the gaol before he'd even added Sandalphon to his stock—and even before he'd been jailed. As King of Crime, Sechs had been going to the internet or DIN to gather info about the gaol's workings, then using his findings to build an escape plan. Back then, he'd been planning to use a space-controlling Embryo he acquired before being jailed, but since it wouldn't have had as much power as Sandalphon, the odds of success would've been lower, and Sechs would've lost far more volume—or rather, HP—than he'd lost now.

And since he now had Sandalphon, he'd removed all the other spatial Embryos from his stock.

The reason why Sechs had spent so much time in the gaol was because he was waiting for those outside to prepare, and because he'd thought he could craft a better escape plan by observing Hannya.

He was later joined by Candy and Gerbera, so one could say that his decision had been the correct one.

"I am very grateful that you came to the gaol," he told Gerbera.

"...I see," she replied.

Because he'd used Split Spirit to split into four, Sechs's maximum HP had been reduced to just a quarter of its the original value, but that was still more than he would have had left in his original escape plans. “We have a long trip ahead of us, so I certainly appreciate having more HP,” he explained.

“I haven’t been on a big trip since my XP tour!” said Candy. “Where are we now, anyway?”

“This is a buffer zone between Altar and Legendaria... No, wait—it has recently become part of Altar. Still, I have quite a bit of nostalgia for this place,” Sechs said, recalling the time he *cooperated* with Shu.

This was the very place once dominated by the UBM known as Divine Disks, Spindle.

Sechs had noticed this when he’d watched Hannya try to break out of the gaol. The location he’d glimpsed through the gaps she opened was one that he would never forget, and he instantly knew exactly where in the world the gaol resided. Before then, he’d entertained the possibility that the gaol was somewhere off the continent—or perhaps even in space. That would have made the prison break more difficult. Discovering that it was in a familiar location made it much easier.

Perhaps the Divine Disks developed spatial manipulation powers precisely because Red King had built his gaol here, Sechs wondered. The creation of the gaol—the hidden realm built by manipulating space itself—may have influenced the evolution of the creature that had once resided here, or so he imagined.

“...Phew.” Eventually, Gerbera was completely healed. She then used Instant Wear to replace her damaged clothes and stood up. “So, what now?” she asked.

“No one passes through here, so we will simply avoid any unwanted attention and head toward Tenchi.”

“Is that so...?” *Isn’t that a bit too far to go on foot?* Gerbera wondered. *Well, we have a carriage, so I guess we just need to get a horse or a landdragon or something.*

Suddenly, April, who was standing next to her, looked up at the sky.

Gerbera, Sechs, and Candy all followed her gaze and did the same.

“‘No one ever passes through here,’ huh...? Are you sure about that?” Gerbera asked.

Their eyes were focused on one point in the sky—a black-clad Master, looking down at them in shock from astride a silver Prism Steed. Through coincidence or design, it was someone who had ties to the very person who had sent them to the gaol in the first place.

His name was Ray Starling.

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Gaol

"...I am thoroughly beaten," Red King said as he stood in the gaol, now missing three of its most important prisoners.

Alice had explained to him the process they'd used to escape, and he had understood and come to terms with it. They'd since ended the call, and now, left alone with his thoughts, Red King was looking back on his actions.

"This feeling of defeat is somehow...wistful." Since he'd lost his Master, Red King had rarely been forced to consider his flaws—the moments he had could be counted on one hand.

He'd gained three things from this entire ordeal—an important lesson, a new countermeasure, and a shapeless nostalgia.

"Sechs...I was unable to see your plan, and your thinking has surpassed mine. You deserve recognition for that." The warden earnestly praised the prison breaker who'd risen above him. Red King may have failed to fulfill his duties, but he couldn't help but be honest about this. "However, not even you can see through everything. And because of that...you may very well be back here soon."

The words that he spoke were not those of a sore loser—he genuinely believed what he was saying.

Red King had enough reason to believe that.

"When you were in the gaol, you could only learn about the outside indirectly."

Red King, the ruler of space, could see the *multiple* entities approaching the escapees right now.

To the north, flying from the city of Gideon, was a Master known as Ray Starling. He was one who would be placed on the side of good, and thus he would certainly clash with Sechs, who went out of his way to be evil.

However, he was not a major problem. Ray's brother may have been capable of it, but the odds of Ray himself stopping Sechs were unbelievably low.

But *there was someone else*.

The moment Sechs had transformed into Sandalphon and drilled through space, influencing the outside world, an entity far more fearsome had sprung into action.

Red King checked the surroundings of the gaol—and indeed, there he saw them. From the south of the gaol, from the *domain* in Legendaria, a massive group was on the approach.

“There are many stories that only truly begin *after* the escape.”

Thus, the control AI who had stood against the prisoners began monitoring the events outside. The participant became a spectator, and he settled in to watch the second act.

Chapter Four: Encounters

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

We were on the way to the leveling zone at the very south of the kingdom.

Before heading out, I'd changed my job to Sorcerer. The reason for this was, once again, the axe.

The immense grudge permeating the thing had convinced me that the damage it did to me was curse-based. And since Sorcerer was a job that granted skills that inflicted curses as well as skills that increased resistance to them, I'd picked it up to see if it would have an effect on the axe. If it reduced the damage, great. If it didn't, I'd just drop the job whenever I needed a low-rank job slot.

"I feel as though you are on the path to wielding both Paladin and Dark Knight," said Nemesis.

"...That's not totally out of the question." I'd heard that mixing sorcerer and knight groupings was the path that led to the dark knight job. It seemed like a combo Juliet would love.

Oh, and it would make me kinda like the protag of the fourth entry in a certain retro RPG series, so Shu would probably like it too.

"Perhaps it is not such a bad idea. It might lead you to a mixed Superior Job," Nemesis added. I guess it would be like Xunyu's Master Jiangshi—she got that by combining the Jiangshi job with the Daoshi grouping.

"But I feel like there's a lot of people who've gone down this route. I mean, it's a pretty classic concept."

A champion who wielded both dark and light seemed like a tale as old as time. Someone must've tried it already, and since it didn't seem like anybody had found a mixed Superior Job as a result, it probably didn't exist—or it was a lost job with crazy specific conditions for unlocking it.

"Instead of daydreaming about a still-distant Superior Job, we should focus on the leveling we must do right now."

"Yeah. Let's level until we get the resistance skill."

When we had it, we were going to use our arena to see if the skill had an effect. If it didn't, I'd switch jobs later and level again.

"...Hm?" As I rode Silver through the skies, I heard a strange sound. It was faint and coming from far away, but I could tell that it would be really loud if I were closer to it.

It was a low hum, like something massive destroying something else, though I couldn't tell if it was shattering something tough or tearing apart something soft.

The hum was accompanied by a distant, destructive sound that resembled none I'd ever heard.

I might've been imagining it, but it kind of reminded me of a sound I'd once heard in Gideon—the noise made by Sandalphon.

"Let's check it out," I said. A strange and vague uneasiness was gripping my heart too, so I couldn't help but change course toward the sound.

"I feel as though we are heading toward trouble yet again," said Nemesis.

That's all the more reason to go there, I replied in thought. *This place is pretty close to Gideon, you know?*

And so, we moved toward the sound. We made it there in no time—and sure enough, something had been happening here. I could tell that much even from a distance.

"...That one doesn't look so good," I muttered.

There was a woman lying on the ground, covered in blood. Another woman stood beside her and was working on healing her wounds.

Then, standing right by a carriage with no horse or landdragon attached, there was a woman wearing a maid's uniform. It made her stand out, but I knew a guy who wore a bear costume constantly, so in comparison it didn't seem that weird.

And finally, there was one person I couldn't see fully because there were trees in the way, but glimpsed some girls' clothing at least.

It looked like a party of four women, and something had happened here that had injured one of them. She was being treated now, but even from here, I could see that the unfortunate girl had actually lost some parts of her body. Even a high-rank job would have a hard time treating that. They'd probably need Miss Eldritch to fully heal—

"Huh...?" My thought was cut short as I realized that the bloodied woman was in perfect health now.

Wow...I didn't think there was someone besides Miss Eldritch who could treat something like that so fast, I thought. *Maybe it's an Embryo skill?*

"Oh..." As I looked at them in shock, the women all looked up at me too.

My eyes met the healer's gaze.

I felt that it would be rude to just turn around here and leave, so I decided to make Silver go down to them. Also, one of them had been badly injured, so they might've gotten into trouble they needed help with.

It sort of felt like Silver was paying extra attention to the woman in the maid uniform, but I had no idea why.

"Hm...?" Suddenly, I heard something. Unlike before, it wasn't the sound of something giant. It was more like the sound of many small things moving at once. "What is that...?"

It was coming from the south.

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The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

Seeing Ray descend put Gerbera into a panic. *Why is he here...?* she thought.

She already knew who he was. Back when she had been trying to provoke Shu by framing him for a crime, she'd also looked into his brother. Even if she hadn't done all of that, Ray Starling had become a fairly famous figure after his deeds during Franklin's Game.

She certainly knew more about him than she would about some random duel ranker, and the fact that he'd happened to be here at this point in time was more than a little unexpected.

What do we even do in this situation? she wondered.

There was no doubt that they'd win if they fought him. The odds of Ray emerging victorious in a battle against three Superiors were beyond low. However, fighting him would still have been a bad decision. If they fought, Ray would find out who they were—and since he was close to their enemies, they would learn about Illegal Frontier's escape too. Even if Ray got the death penalty, he'd be able to share info about them via online messages or social media in the real world.

If people found out their approximate location, that would be an absolute disaster for them. Anyone could then prepare a kill squad that could give them the death penalty again—

Sechs currently only had a quarter of his HP, while Gerbera's trusted Alhazred was in no state for combat.

If they were sent to the gaol again, it would be difficult for them to escape using the same means. Sechs had lost his levels, while Hannya must've leveled up since leaving the gaol. It was possible that Hannya would be removed from Sechs's stock of transformations while they were preparing for the second try.

And there was the fact that Red King could have already set up a protection against their trick that would make sure it never worked again.

We could run...but that's a gamble too, Gerbera thought.

They could maybe escape the danger if they all logged out at the same time. However, the logout process required thirty seconds of zero contact with anybody. That was enough time for Ray to remember their faces. Sechs was currently transformed into The Saint, so he was safe from being recognized, but Ray might spot Candy. If that happened, it was possible that someone would just camp this area and wait for them to log back in.

And if they fled normally instead of logging out, it would only make Ray more suspicious—he could even chase after them to find out why they'd run away. He was also riding a speedy Prism Steed, so it was questionable if they even *could* run away from him.

Then how about we just kill him really quick...? Wait, no, that won't work...! In the recent peace talks, it was revealed that Ray had the Death Soldier skill. Even if they killed him, he would stay around for almost a minute—more than enough time to get info about them and take it back.

Also, though Gerbera could only see Ray right now, it was possible that he wasn't alone. He could have friends nearby—maybe even Shu and Rook themselves. Ray was actually all by himself, but Gerbera had just escaped the gaol and had basically no information about the outside, so her fear was hardly unreasonable.

This isn't good... He's the worst person we could've bumped into right now! Ray didn't die right away even if killed, and he had ties to powerful people he could inform about them.

Gerbera had no idea how they had to deal with this, so she decided to leave the thinking to Sechs and Candy.

However...

“...Nhuh?”

...when she looked at them, she saw something that filled her with shock.

Sechs was still assuming the form of The Saint, but in his right hand he held a sword that must’ve been an Embryo from his stock. Candy was in the process of activating Resheph.

They were obviously getting ready to fight.

“Huh? Are we really doing this?! We’re actually gonna fight?!” Gerbera was pretty sure that they—or at least Sechs—would’ve come to the same conclusions she had.

Then again, perhaps they had thought this through even more thoroughly than her and *still* decided that simply killing Ray Starling was the way to go.

“B-But my Alhazred is almost out of HP... I guess I’ll bring him out anyway, though... Umm...will my bowgun reach from here...?”

“Gerby,” Candy said as Gerbera hesitantly armed herself. “That guy who looks like more of a baddie than us? He’s not the one we’re fighting.”

“Huh?”

Sechs, Candy, and April had already shifted their gazes away from Ray.

And Ray himself was looking away from them, as well.

All three people and the one machine were facing the south—the Altar-Legendaria border.

“A domain...” said Sechs.

“Leader...?” Shock overcame Gerbera as she looked at him. The usual smile on his face, which almost never flagged, was now twisted up slightly. If slimes like him were capable of doing so, he would most likely be breaking out in a cold sweat right now.

“How careless of me. This used to be a buffer zone between Altar and Legendaria, and the border is nearby... I should have considered this possibility.”

“Wh-What’s going on...? A domain? Whose?” As panic gripped Gerbera, Sechs gave her a reply.

It was a single word, simple enough, and a common staple of fantasy fiction...but also something Gerbera had never faced within *Infinite Dendrogram*.

It was...

“...An Overlord.”

A moment later, the forest grew restless—and a bizarre-looking horde charged toward them.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

“What the hell are they...?!” Swarming from the direction of Legendaria was a horde of bizarre-looking creatures shining like mithril.

They resembled clay figures crafted by a child, except even more crude. It was like someone took some clay, made a torso, and just slapped some limbs plus a head on it and left it at that.

There were two kinds of these creatures in the horde: flyers who had wings awkwardly attached to them, and walkers who looked kinda like gorillas. They shared some features, but their shapes were so messed up that it was hard to tell if they were the same type of creature.

Unlike Franklin’s mod-monsters, these things didn’t seem to have any degree of intentional design behind them.

Despite looking like a toddler’s first attempt at sculpture, they all had a very strong presence. If I had to guess, they were high Demi-Dragon-tier in power, if not actually Pure-Dragon-tier.

And there were dozens of them—easily over fifty.

They weren’t nearly as numerous as Franklin’s Suicide Series, but if they had such a strong presence and could actually fight, they’d be a real danger.

“Are those just some Legendarian monsters?” I wondered. “But they...”

Things would’ve been easy if that were the case. However, perhaps the strangest thing about these already-strange creatures was that they were all surrounded by an *iridescent* aura.

I felt something powerful behind that—something even more powerful than the creatures themselves.

“Assuming that is not merely a skill that the monsters all happen to have...is it the effect of a Territory Embryo? Or is it one of those so-called Advance types derived from Chariot?” Nemesis asked.

“You might be right...” I said with a nod.

The aura could be the work of an Embryo, but the creatures themselves were clearly monsters of some kind and not just part of a Legion type.

There was one major giveaway that this was the case—there was text above them which said “Thrall.” There were dozens of creatures, all in different shapes, but they all had the same name.

Ten of the winged ones flew toward me, while the rest swooped toward the women below.

I’d gone down far enough to hear the women talk, and they seemed to be far more knowledgeable about this than me.

“They’re pretty freaky... Are they a Legion Embryo?” I overheard one of the women say.

“No. They are the result of a skill granted by a job, most likely Overlord. I have fought Overlord Gula in the past, though, so it cannot be her.”

“Affirmative. They are the servant creatures of Overlord Acedia—the result of the skill ‘Enthrall.’”

“But...‘Overlord?’”

I’d heard Azurite mention an “Overlord Ira,” so I already knew they existed in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Why would someone like that attack us, though?

“I would have guessed you would know about this, April,” said the healer as she stabbed the ground with her sword and used a skill. “Rumbling Treework.”

A group of trees then sprang out of the ground and charged toward the creatures, running on their roots as though they were feet.

“Is this gonna be enough...?”

“No. It will only buy us some time. This skill uses the Resources...or rather, nutrition in the ground, so it is on the weaker side. Though the fact that it can be cast instantly makes it quite useful in spite of that.”

I looked and sure enough, the creatures were absolutely destroying the newly summoned trees.

They really are tough, huh? I thought as the winged creatures approached me.

“Tch! Purgatorial Flames!” I could tell I’d be done for if they got close, so I used Silver’s mobility to stay at mid-range and sent some flames their way.

I couldn’t put out a forest fire if I started one, though, so I made sure to not fire downward. I couldn't use Hellish Miasma either, because that might risk hurting the women we'd come across.

I don't even know if it'd work on those monsters anyway, I thought.

"April, now is a good time for an explanation," the woman with the sword told the woman in a maid uniform as she spawned more tree monsters.

"Enthrall is one of Overlord Acedia's core skills. It turns inanimate objects into monsters."

I could hear their conversation with no issue at all now. I was pretty surprised by that myself, but then I thought that maybe Silver was making it so that their voices reached me. It wasn't in his description, but if he had some control over the air, it was possible that he could do something like that. After all, he did have that mystery skill, and not even Integra could fully make sense of him.

"The power of the monsters it creates—Thralls—depends on the material and SP used. Their material appears to be mithril, and their power is about medium."

Mithril? Well, that explained why the silver shine felt so familiar—it was close to the material Rook's Liz was made of. I doubted these things could transform like Liz could, but I was pretty sure in their current form they were tougher and stronger than she would be anyway.

"Anything else?"

"Thralls obey no one but Overlord Acedia and cannot be transferred to others. In exchange, they take up no party slots or minion capacity."

"Huh? That sounds kinda unfair."

"The price for that is steep, however. With the exception of HP and SP, Overlord Acedia has the lowest stats of all Overlords. Additionally, Overlord Acedia cannot join combat using their own body. All the work necessary for them to secure the Resources to preserve themselves is exported to the Thralls. You could say that these creatures are less like Overlord Acedia's servants and more like their *limbs*."

"...'Overlord' is a pretty fancy name, but that just makes them sound like someone who needs to be in a hospital." I didn't know what I had to be more surprised by: the details of the Overlord Acedia job or the fact that that woman knew them.

I took a better look at the group and realized that the one they called

"April" had ball joints, like a doll. Maybe she wasn't even human? Silver seemed pretty curious about her too, so perhaps she had some relation to the first Flagman? Was she one of the "Prism Persons" that Integra had mentioned?

"Hm..."

"Leader? What's on your mind?"

"A *Sacrifice* that cannot fight on their own...transforms inanimate objects into monsters...that is almost like..."

April's words seemed to have made the woman she called "leader" think about something. As she did, though, the Thralls on the surface broke through the trees and closed the distance between them.

The winged Thralls chasing after me were unrelenting too. They didn't seem to care one bit about being set on fire—they were inanimate objects to begin with, so they didn't even try to protect their own lives. Even as the Purgatorial Flames melted their bodies, they tried to ram into me with whatever was left.

They didn't seem to be using any kind of combat technique either. They were only doing whatever they could to charge and crash their bodies into me. I really doubted that it would be enough to kill me, but I didn't want to find out. "Inanimate objects made of metal aren't a good matchup for a *god* like me, buuut...I'll just spread some little guys that disassemble mithril and see what happens!"

"You made something like that? I can hear every weaponsmith in the world crying right now."

The woman I hadn't seen clearly began swinging a large, blunt object—probably her Embryo. I could hear the sound of something spraying. It must've been spreading something.

Just to be safe, I made Silver create a Wind Hoof barrier to protect us from whatever it was, but...

"...They're not melting."

"Whaaat?" The Thralls on the surface had apparently just been hit by something that "disassembled mithril," but they didn't seem to be affected at all.

"Either the material structure is different, or it's not reaching them. If it's the second thing, then it's gotta be that shiny aura's fault!"

"What is that aura, April?"

“No data found. Overlord Acedia has no skills with such an effect.”

If that wasn’t a job skill, then...it had to be an Embryo, right?

“So it’s a job skill that creates minions and an Embryo that enhances them...? This seems like a standard combo...not what I’d expect from an Overlord,” said the woman with the bowgun as she launched an assault toward one of the Thralls. It didn’t seem to have an effect, though—the creature was just too tough. “Yeah, I don’t have the attack power for this. Mithril and I just don’t get along... Also, is it just me, or are Leader and April the only ones putting up a fight?”

“How about we just leave them to the baddie up there?”

“That’s a great idea.”

They decided to make them my problem like it was no big deal. Also, “baddie”? What the hell? I had no idea why, but hearing that from these women just didn’t feel right to me.

“My friends...and Ray Starling,” said the leader.

“Huh?” I didn’t expect to hear my name here, but...well, the videos had made me pretty famous, so it wasn’t that weird for people to know who I was.

The way this woman talked, though, made me feel like there was some closeness there beyond just having heard of me. Had we met somewhere before...? “Be alert... I believe the main one is coming,” she continued, pointing in the direction the Thralls had come from, where there was now another silhouette.

“What...?” This figure had “Thrall” above its head, just like the others, but it was completely unlike the other Thralls.

First of all, its shape was different. While the others looked like nothing but simple clay figures, this one had a very distinct and proper design. The best way to describe it was “bipedal landdragon.” Its most notable feature was that the tip of its nose, horns, limbs, and tail were all blades.

The shape alone made it obvious that it had care put into its construction that no other Thrall did. But besides that, it also had a different color. It still had the same iridescent aura, but unlike the mithril Thralls, this one shone a brilliant scarlet.

I’d seen this color in Quartierlatin—on the scarlet marionette used by Dr. Mario.

Tom had said that the material was...

"Hihi'irokane!" The Mythical-tier metal...it was pretty much the greatest crafting material in *Infinite Dendrogram*, surpassed only by MVP rewards.

April had said that a Thrall's power depended on the material and SP used. Here, the material was of the highest quality, and I could tell from the shape alone that a lot of SP was used in its creation.

This had to be the Overlord Acedia's heavy hitter. I'd fought Logan's Legendary Gigaknights before, and I felt like this thing was a cut above even them.

Though, this just made me wonder why this Overlord was going this far just to deal with us. Was I the target here? Was that lab coat lunatic involved in this? And if these things were targeting that group of women, was April the reason? Was it all the knowledge she had about this Overlord Acedia? I had no clue. I didn't have enough info to even guess.

While I considered Overlord Acedia's reasons, the scarlet Thrall looked over the others.

And then...

"...G h e."

...made a strange sound as it used its sword-arm to pierce one of the mithril Thralls.

"Huh?" *Friendly fire? What's this all about...hm?!*

"Move away."

"Get back!"

The woman the others called "Leader" and I shouted that at the exact same time. However, the change happened before our voices reached anyone. The scarlet Thrall's sword-arm became even more red and began shining like molten metal.

A moment later, the mithril Thrall that it had run through *boiled* and *scattered*. The intense heat had made it evaporate from the inside and explode.

"Huh...?!" The mithril clad in the iridescent aura was scattered in every direction like the shrapnel of a frag grenade.

Our warning reached them right as the explosion happened. Everyone jumped back, covering their faces. The heat could burn us, but the actual explosion was far enough away that it wasn't that much of a threat.

It was an attack that sacrificed one of their own, but it wasn't enough to be fatal...or so I thought.

“Huh?” Pieces of mithril broke through the Wind Hoof barrier and touched the hand I’d flung over my face.

A moment later, my consciousness began to fade.

“This...is...” I felt dizzy and couldn’t think straight. My vision was hazy too. But despite that, I was able to check my stats and noticed a status effect—Forced Sleep. “...So...that’s...why.” I didn’t even have to think to know what had caused this.

This must’ve been the plan all along—the Thralls had simply charged at us instead of doing anything resembling combat because their goal was to just *touch* us with the aura. Contact was all they needed. And what that aura did was force us to fall asleep, essentially ending the battle right then and there.

When we were finally asleep, Overlord Acedia would be able to do whatever they wanted with us.

“Neme...sis...”

“Of...course...!” Before my consciousness faded, I drank an Elixir, and Nemesis switched to her second form. She was being put to sleep herself, but she was still able to complete the transformation.

However...none of that did any good.

We were still falling asleep. The Elixir had once negated the UBM Gardranda’s miasma, while Nemesis’s second form flipped its effects into buffs. The fact that neither of these things were working could only mean one thing...

“Supe...rio...” I’d recalled the time I’d fought Miss Eldritch and how she’d given me a debuff so overpowering I couldn’t do anything against it.

The realization that the opponent was a Superior was my last thought before my consciousness disappeared.

Below, I could see that all the girls except the one dressed as a maid had collapsed as well.

And in the moment right before my mind vanished, an unfamiliar voice reached me from somewhere.

“Welcome to Dreamland.”

Interlude: An Overlord’s Domain

About the Overlords

The created dungeons built by Red King and other control AIs came in three forms.

First, there was the Tomb Labyrinth—a dungeon built to seal away something left behind by the previous observers and judges of this world.

Second, there was the created dungeon in the gaol. Designed as a means to let the imprisoned Masters still enjoy the game, it didn’t have an official name, but it was filled with many of the same features as other dungeons.

Third, there were the created dungeons of the Overlords. The control AI had built them on top of the Overlord job-change dungeons that were already in existence before they assumed control of this world. Since both the previous as well as the current observers had a hand in designing them, they were extremely difficult to complete, but it was said that the reward for doing so was access to a Superior Job from the Overlord series.

While Special Superior Jobs required special bloodlines or talents, the Overlord jobs were the *direct opposite of that*—they did not need any latent abilities or qualities as prerequisites, unlike other Superior Jobs. They did maintain the limit of one holder at a time, but *anyone* could acquire them as long as they cleared a relevant dungeon.

However, the amount of people who’d cleared any of these dungeons and became Overlords was extremely small.

There had once been an Overlord Ira who’d lived before The Era of the Peerless Three and was ultimately defeated by The Hero of that time, but besides a select few such notable examples, they almost never appeared—or they came and went without anyone ever finding out.

But that had changed when Masters began growing in number—after *Infinite Dendrogram* was released.

It was said that there were seven Overlord dungeons.

Tenchi had the Naraka of Strife, Caldina had the Grave of Unwealth, Dryfe had the Palace of Licentiousness, while the Skycastle of Supremacy had an uncertain location.

The remaining Mountains of Hunger, Depths of Jealousy, and the Exile of Peace were all within Legendaria.

The control AI couldn't have done anything about this unbalanced placement. The dungeons had been in Legendaria to begin with, so they would still be there even if they added on to them. The only way to discover the reason for this placement was to ask the very beings who had originally set up everything related to the Overlord jobs—the previous observers.

In any case, the fact that Legendaria boasted three Overlord dungeons in their territory had never been a big problem. Created dungeons had always been things that were just *there*. They were in remote areas of the country as well, and unlike with natural dungeons, the monsters inside these created ones never left to cause mayhem in their surroundings. Some confident and skilled individuals would sometimes delve into these dungeons in an attempt to become Overlords, but none of them had ever returned.

That was the only significance the dungeons had, and since they were so difficult to conquer, there had been no recorded cases of anyone in Legendaria becoming an Overlord.

And so, their presence in Legendaria would mean nothing as long as everyone there simply let these sleeping dogs lie.

However, that had changed in recent years.

Two things had happened that were catastrophic to Legendaria. First, there was the increase in Masters. The nature of their existence had greatly changed the difficulty of the dungeons. The previous observers had stuffed the dungeons with features that could kill an explorer before they even realized it, making it impossible for all but a few people in history to reach the end of them. However, since Masters only received death penalties instead of permanent death, they were capable of coming back and trying again using the information they'd learned from their previous attempt. Through this, the three created dungeons that had previously been unconquerable by pure power alone had been laid bare.

Second, there were the few who had actually overcome the dungeons. Once information had been gathered, the dungeons could now be conquered by simply being strong enough.

That didn't mean it was necessarily easy. They weren't created dungeons for nothing—their difficulty was so high that simply trying over and over again wouldn't be enough to clear them. Additionally, perhaps due to the dungeons' function in bestowing the Overlord job, their difficulty grew exponentially when multiple humanoids tried to conquer them in parties, basically making it necessary to conquer them solo. This meant that prospective dungeon delvers needed not only information, but also a lot of power as a single unit. Unfortunately, Legendaria didn't have many Masters—Superior or otherwise—who had enough direct combat ability for this task.

That only applied to *those who belonged to the country*, though.

By now all three of Legendaria's Overlord dungeons had been conquered, and it had been done by Masters who were in Legendaria but did not belong to the country—in other words, Legendaria's *wanted*.

The three Overlords were all major criminals as well as Superiors.

They hadn't conspired to make this result. Each of them, completely separately, simply headed out into the dungeons and conquered them. Legendaria was the country with the most first-wave players, and thus also had the greatest number of wanted Masters. It even had more wanted Superiors than Superiors that actually served it—enough that there were still some left after three of their number had become Overlords.

The dungeons that had remained unbeaten for so long had finally been brought down. The monstrous Masters who lived in Legendaria had taken all three of the Overlord thrones in the country.

Having become Overlords, the three went on to live as they wished. They obeyed their desires, consuming, playing, and sleeping—in various different meanings of those words—to their heart's content. They had even found tribes that obeyed them and created domains where they reigned supreme.

Their actions were primal and animalistic, making them seem more like wild monsters than Overlords.

These three also never had any conflicts among them, nor had they ever cooperated. Along with the other wanted Superiors of Legendaria, they had formed a kind of nonaggression pact.

They were not a clan with a united goal, but a cartel with the single rule of mutual nonintervention. As they each expanded their own domains, they were careful not to encroach on the domains of the others. The Overlords were essentially carving up Legendaria from the shadows.

This was the origin of the criminal cartel known as “Desire.”

The criminals weren’t hostile to each other, while noncriminal Masters were entirely unable to defeat them. Legendaria’s nature as a coalition of tribes, as well as the landscape with extremely varied areas that favored the tribes living in them—including the ones serving the Overlords—made overcoming them difficult.

Legendaria’s wanted also had no interest in anything outside Legendaria, so when La Crima had invited them to IF, none of them had even wanted to hear them out.

This isolated fairyland was home to a group of monstrous Masters who were more than a match for IF.

Was it pure chance that the country that was the most fantastical ironically ended up being the one that cast the darkest shadow, or was there some reason that it grew to harbor such evil? Regardless, Legendaria had become a chaotic mix between the main country, led by Titania the Fairy Queen, and several rebellious minor states. It was rumored that the recent assassination of the prime minister was related to these conflicts, as well.

The sole silver lining on this cloud was the fact that despite all the chaos in Legendaria, none of the major cities with save points in them had been conquered by the criminals, Overlord or otherwise.

If that ever happened, the chaos of Legendaria would certainly become the chaos of the entire world—and that remained a distinct threat that loomed over the future.

Despite their lack of involvement with Legendaria’s wanted, IF’s escape from the gaol did have an effect on the situation there, if only by chance.

The domain of one of the three, Overlord Acedia, was located to the very north of Legendaria—right next to the UBM-dominated area that had once served as a buffer zone.

Sechs and his group had broken out of their prison right on the Overlord’s doorstep, and they had achieved the feat through the extended use of Downfall Screamer—the skill of a Superior Embryo.

Overlord Acedia’s reaction to this was...

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Overlord Acedia

The depression. The melancholy.

It was a nice, sunny day, and I'd been getting some good shut-eye when I heard something on the horizon that sounded like Dis *consuming the sky itself*.

I loved this costume for sleeping, but I hated that it didn't block outside sounds for safety reasons.

That meant that this noise was a danger, which just made me more depressed.

"Ugh...what a paiiin..." I was now awake anyway, so I went ahead and sent out some recon Thralls.

It turned out that it wasn't Dis this time—it was a group of four that I kinda recognized and kinda didn't, and I could sense what seemed like two Superiors there.

There were probably three, though. The messed-up-looking one must've been a Superior too—and the one in maid clothing wasn't even human. Thanks to Dis, Benetnasch, and all those other pains in the neck, I could now tell things like that whether I liked it or not.

"Such a paiiin..." Even thinking of how to deal with these bozos was getting on my nerves, and now there was another one. Ugh...he was flying for some reason, but he looked like a real baddie.

Not even G the Bottomless looked like that, and she was the actually Overlord-ish one among us...

Anyway, these four plus the new one were...well, yep. Enemies.

All of them were enemies. Hostiles. They were annoying, they were being a pain, they'd woken me up, and they'd be a danger if they came here, so I'd just have to beat them before that happened. Knock 'em down, you know?

"Uhh...oh yeah...I woke up, so..."

I figured I should ask the maids for dinner. I called one of the sheepkin maids by ringing the bell next to my bed.

After a bit...no, a *lot*...of thinking, I asked for omurice.

Then, without doing much more thinking, I picked some forces to send out. It turned out that Leprechaun B had made a whole lotta mithril Thralls, so I'd just send them and Cardinal A. Go go gooo! I'd based Cardinal A on Benetnasch's Aragorn, but this'd be my first time actually using him. Test, test.

Well, the new face wouldn't change anything. I'd just throw them into Dreamland and get rid of their bodies like always. Kill 'em all.

Anyway, thinking about what I wanted for dinner had forced me to use my brain, so I was getting sleepy again...drowsy.

It was high time I was off to Dreamland too.

And the ones who'd woken me up...would die. Death penalty to all.

"Anyway, good night... Zzz..."

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That was the situation.

The interlopers were noisy, dangerous, hard to ignore, annoying, and wouldn't let him sleep in peace. For him, *that* was enough reason to kill them.

He was part of the Desire criminal cartel—Overlord Acedia, ZZZ the Hypersomnia—and he recognized every single person at the site of the escape as enemies.

Ray was in no way involved in the noisy prison break, but that didn't matter to him. It didn't matter whom he was up against, or even if they were all Superiors.

Acedia had set up a domain here instead of the gaol exactly because he had never been defeated.

Thus, Overlord Acedia had decided to kill them all.

Chapter Five: The Dream-Quest of Unknown Meetings

Night Hunter, Gerbera

"Where am I?" After I'd been hit with those fragments of the mithril monster, everything had faded to black, and next thing I knew I was in this weird space.

I was standing on a long and thin road. Looking around, I saw lots of roads just like it going in every direction. There were no platforms or pillars anywhere—just these thin roads twisting and turning everywhere.

They also weren't black like asphalt or white like a stone pavement. Instead, they were all really colorful and unrealistic. They actually kinda reminded me of the Rainbow Road stages from a long-running series of racing games. I'd played them with dad before, and I'd always hated that track...

"There's...nothing down there," I said as I looked over the side of the road. I couldn't see anything through the dense clouds. What would have happened if I fell? "I...I'm not in the gaol again, right?"

I'd just left that place, so I was really sure it didn't look this crazy. Had the explosion sent me flying somewhere?

I'll just check by opening the map window and...huh?

"It's not coming up," I muttered to myself. I couldn't open the map.

But never mind the map—I couldn't even open the menu or check my stat summary. What the hell was going on?

"Hold on...how am I supposed to log out?"

Am I trapped in the game, like I'm in some 2010-era anime...? No way, right?! Someone tell me I'm wrong!

"What...? I don't see our leader, April, or even Candy here either..." Hell, I couldn't even see my own Alhazred.

This was actually the most confusing situation I'd gotten in since I started *Dendro*, which was saying a lot—I hung around our leader, after all.

"Hellooo...? Is anyone heeere?" I raised my voice, but the only response I got was an echo, spreading through the whole who-knows-how-big space.

Well...it doesn't look like I can do anything but walk...

As I began moving, I thought about the situation.

Before it all faded to black, I'd seen both the leader and Candy get caught in the explosion. If that was the reason I was here now, those two must be here too. I didn't know about Candy, but our leader could do anything, so I was pretty sure he'd know what to do about this situation.

I wanted to meet up with them again, but I couldn't find them anywhere.

"What am I supposed to do by myself?" I didn't even have Alhazred for some reason. What could a non-maxed-out girl like me even *do* here? If I ran into some of those "Thralls," they'd just beat me up.

"Someone...anyone...show yourseeelves... I need a tank! C'mon, give me a meat shield...!"

Right as I mumbled all of that...

"Hm?"

...the surroundings quickly became more colorful.

A mist with an indescribable color spread around me and covered my eyes. I couldn't see anything.

"What the heck...? This is scary!" This was like in one of my dad's horror games! *Will I be okay?! What if there's some creepy monster somewhere in the mist?! What if it's all wriggly and gross?!*

"...Hey."

"EEEEEEEEK!" Someone grabbed my shoulder...!

"Hey, calm down!"

"We are not your enemies."

"Y-You're not?" After hearing the voices, I turned around.

This *was* a weird place where I couldn't know what I'd run into, but if it wasn't an enemy, then I didn't care.

"Yeah. I've been dragged in here too. My name's Ray, and this is my Embryo, Nemesis. Well, your leader knew us...but yeah."

It did turn out to be enemies!

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

I'd touched the aura, gotten the Forced Sleep debuff, and next thing I knew I was in this place.

My trusted mount Silver was nowhere in sight, and my body felt so light it made me kinda uncomfortable. But I still had Nemesis with me and could transform her into weapons, so I'd been able to relax for the moment.

After that, I'd gotten caught up in some weird mist, and then ran into a member of the other party that'd been put to sleep. It was the girl who'd been injured and received treatment.

"I know I said 'anyone,' but...whyyy...?" For some reason, she took one look at me and then started to panic, grasping her head.

Is something wrong...?

"This must be caused by your apparel," Nemesis said telepathically.

I feel like you always blame my clothes for everything, I replied in thought. *There's no way an outfit can be enough to make a stranger act like this, right?*

"Have you forgotten the dismay you inflicted upon those bandits that one time?"

That must've been because of the other three. Yeah, that's it.

"Nngh...this is the worst time to not have him with me..." said the girl.

"You okay...?" I asked.

"Yeah. I am. I just gotta calm down a bit..."

"That's fine." I didn't know if it was my fault or just because of where we were, but she seemed pretty damn stressed. "What's your name, though?"

"My name? It's Gerbera...uh." After answering Nemesis's question, the girl once again grasped her head.

"What a fidgety young lady," Nemesis commented.

"I get it, though. Just look at what's happening."

Gerbera, huh? I'd definitely heard that name before. That was the name used by the Superior that Shu and Rook had beaten. I knew that Gerbera owned a terrifying Sentinel that couldn't be perceived in any way, but besides that I'd been told that she was an overconfident, extremely self-assertive woman.

"Nnh...I'm such a dummy. I'm a complete mess... I really am useless..."

The Gerbera they'd described was the complete opposite of this self-deprecating girl who was freaking out with her head in her hands. That other Gerbera was supposed to be in the gaol, anyway, so yeah—she obviously wasn't the same person.

While I thought of what to say to this girl crouching on the ground, she glared at me with tears in her eyes.

"How are you so calm...? You realize you've been put to sleep and sent to this weird place, right...?" Why was I calm, huh?

Well, the answer to that was the simple fact that I'd actually been through something like this before.

"I was once kidnapped by a cult while I was asleep."

"Whaaa...that sounds so scary..."

Yeah...looking back, that was actually pretty terrifying.

"So you're calm because you're used to dangerous situations that make no sense?" she asked.

"I guess you could say that."

"Is that really something you should get used to?"

Silence. *It's probably better not to, but I did, so...it is what it is.*

There was one other relevant thing I'd experienced before.

"Oh, another reason is that it's not my first time in a space like this."

"Huh...? You know what this mystery zone is?"

I nodded before saying, "We are...in a dream."

Gerbera looked at me like I was talking nonsense, but that was the truth.

"...Weren't we in a *game*? Wait, aren't dive-type VRMMOs already basically like dreams?"

"We're still in *Dendro*, but we're in a dream inside of that—the space you're sent to when your avatar gets Forced Sleep or Faint."

I'd experienced this multiple times before. I'd even gotten to use my avatar in dreams thanks to Gardranda and, more recently, the axe.

"Oh. I see..." said Gerbera.

"Though, normally, there are no other people here but me—even my Embryo isn't here sometimes. This time, though, there's me, Nemesis, and even you. So, this is definitely a dream, but not just *any* dream."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone—probably Overlord Acedia—has connected our dreams."

"What's the point of doing that?" I knew what she actually wanted to say—why couldn't the Overlord just put us to sleep and kill us then? There were still lots of Thralls left. They were more than enough to slaughter us while we were all unconscious.

“I know what you mean. If the Overlord just wanted to defeat us, there’s no need to connect our dreams like this. That’s why I think there’s gotta be more to it...”

Perhaps this space was related to us being put to sleep?

“There’s so many things we just don’t know... Maybe our leader understands something, but...” Gerbera said.

“Oh yeah, why are you alone? You had a party, didn’t you?”

“I’d like to know that myself.”

Regardless, all either of us could do right now was keep walking. I had no idea what this dream-road was leading to, but for now, all we could do was follow it. The silver lining here was that Nemesis and I had found someone to accompany us.

“...This took a weird turn.” For some reason, though, Gerbera followed after me with a complicated expression on her face.

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Inside the Dream

“So you know nothing about this Embryo, huh?”

“I do not. The only Overlord I ever fought was Overlord Gula, Dis Satisfactory.”

Sechs and Candy had already met up in the joint dream that Overlord Acedia had sent them to. They were on a road just like the one on which Ray had met Gerbera.

“All I know is that the skills and Embryos of this one are nothing like hers.”

“They’re both Overlords, but they’re not that similar, huh?”

“Indeed. Overlord Gula is someone who fights head-on instead of using such indirect methods as these. She may be classified as either a solo combatant or a wide-scale exterminator.”

Candy almost asked if Sechs had won, but decided against it. The answer was obvious when you considered that Sechs had not been sent to the gaol at that point, while Overlord Gula was still on this side. *I guess it was a draw?* Candy thought. It wasn’t clear when the fight had happened, but it seemed likely that, at least back then, Overlord Gula was on the same level as, if not above, Sechs himself.

In that case, one could assume that as a fellow member of the cartel and a supposed equal to Gula, Overlord Acedia was also immensely powerful.

“Anyway, back to what we know about this dreamlike place...”

“If our guesses are correct, we are at quite a disadvantage here,” Sechs said.

“My GODly powers are especially useless here.” Candy spun his Resheph and let out a sigh. The sound of something being sprayed out through the Embryo’s holes was audible, but it didn’t seem like it was spewing disease this time. “It’s all empty now...and when I try to make any more, they all just go poof.”

“I suppose bacteria cannot exist here because they have no ability to think.” This was the inside of a dream—a space in which only creatures that dreamed could exist—so Resheph’s bacteria hadn’t been drawn in. Even if new ones were made, they couldn’t stay here, and anything created in a dream did not appear in reality.

Overlord Acedia had certainly not considered this incompatibility, but his Dreamland had completely neutralized Resheph. This might’ve been the reason why the mithril-dissolving bacteria had produced no effect either.

“And Resheph has first-gen bacteria too... It’s kinda unfair how a slime like you can be here. It’s bacteria discrimination.”

“‘Differentiation’ might be the better word for it, and the only way to know the process behind it is to ask Overlord Acedia himself. Speaking of differentiation, April may not be here.”

April had the ability to think, but she was a Prism Person—not a human. The old question posed by science fiction—*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—was irrelevant here, as she was most likely not present in the dream. Even if she could exist here, the only way to enter the dreamworld was the Forced Sleep debuff, which had no effect on her whatsoever. She could enter a “sleep mode,” but it was completely separate from all this.

“But that is nothing but good for us,” Sechs continued.

“...Yeaaah,” Candy said with a nod. “If April wasn’t outside, we’d be sent back to the gaol while still asleep.”

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The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

Saying not a word, April swung the wires in her hands and fought off the charging mithril Thralls.

She was facing dozens of creatures all by herself. This was because Sechs—her owner—as well as Gerbera and Candy had suddenly lost consciousness.

Thus, she now fulfilled her role as a combat-focused Prism Person and fought to protect them.

Running away from here wasn't even an option. Unlike her sister unit, Jet Chaser, April wasn't specialized in high-speed combat. She didn't think she could escape while carrying all three of the others.

With strong movements, she used her Material Slider to bring the defense of the mithril as low as possible, then tore them apart with her wires.

However, even after being broken apart, the Thralls were still coming toward her. Kicking them into the distance, she kept them all away from Sechs's group as best she could. The strong defense of the metal meant little to April, but she was having trouble with their unnaturally high life force.

While she was doing all of this, the Prism Steed in the air carried his sleeping owner on its back while evading the attacks of the winged Thralls. It was a unit April did not recognize, but the design alone was enough for her to tell that they shared a creator—the first Flagman.

They were from different series, so April didn't have much sibling-like affinity for him, but the fact that they happened to meet here, two thousand years after their creation, had made some strange feelings flow through her circuitry.

"Support."

Perhaps that was the reason that she'd expanded her attack radius to include the Thralls in the air and fought the Thralls that were throwing rocks at Silver.

The steed did not respond, but he created a barrier of air to prevent the scattered pieces of a Thrall from hitting Gerbera's unconscious body on the ground.

Their circumstances may have been vastly different, but the ones who gave them orders were currently sharing the same dream.

Thus, April and Silver had decided to assist each other in protecting those they had to protect.

"...Ghe."

The large Thrall—Cardinal A—was simply standing back and watching this happen, though.

It was as though it was waiting for something.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

How long had we been walking in this dream?

The colorful mist covering everything around the roads here was making it hard to tell how far we'd gone. Also, if Gardranda's and the axe's dreams were anything to go by, the time inside them and the time in reality wasn't the same. It was probably flowing faster in here.

"Hell, if that's not how it is, my body could just die." We couldn't open any windows here, so I couldn't check, but it was possible that my physical body was still being attacked by Thralls. In the worst-case scenario, I could die while I was still walking around in this dream and get the death penalty basically out of nowhere. "But I guess we got no choice but to keep moving." Wishing myself awake and even attacking myself wasn't enough to make me snap out of it. Well, this sleep was strong enough to overpower both an Elixir and the Reversal, so that made sense.

I had no idea if this road would lead to the root cause of this deep sleep, but if I wanted to change anything, I had to keep moving.

"Well, *someone's* optimistic..." Gerbera, who was accompanying me in this dream, had a look on her face like she thought she was about to die.

The reason for this gloomy expression wasn't just the fact that we were trapped in here. In this dream, she didn't have her Embryo, and apparently she couldn't even take out any of her weapons.

Why was Nemesis here, but her Embryo wasn't? That was one of the many questions we had no answer to yet.

"Nnh...I can't even fight...and if I get the death penalty, I'll be sent all the way back..."

I guess she saved somewhere far away? I thought.

"Hey, don't worry," I said. "I can't do anything about our bodies, but if we have a battle here in the dream, you can just leave it all to me." I didn't know if there were any enemies here, but I had Nemesis, so I was pretty sure I could at least fight. “Help me out by looking for enemies, though.”

“What...?”

“When I asked, you told me you had some jobs from the hunter grouping, right?”

“Ohh. Yeah...well, okay...”

“Thanks.”

This place made no sense, so I couldn’t even guess what could attack us and from where. It didn’t hurt to be extra careful.

As I resumed walking, a question came to mind.

“By the way, when I first saw you, you looked pretty beaten up. What happened there?” That was before Overlord Acedia had attacked us, so it had to have been caused by something else. But what could have damaged her that bad?

Gerbera said nothing at first and instead looked up at the sky, as though deep in thought. I figured she was thinking about how to explain what had happened, but for some reason her legs were shaking.

Still, she was eventually able to give me an answer.

“...I-I got spun by a drill.”

“That’s a thing that happens?!” *What could’ve led to that?!*

“D-Don’t worry, it’s no big deal... It was just an accidental scrape, I guess—with an Embryo.”

“That’s a pretty scary accident...”

And yeah, there were probably drill Embryos out there... Now that I thought about it, Hannya’s Sandalphon was kinda drill-like. Hannya was in Gideon, though, so she obviously had nothing to do with this.

“You have experienced your share of things, but never a drill,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah. Though my whole body did get broken apart multiple times recently.”

“Whaaa...?” Gerbera seemed freaked out by what I’d said.

I wasn’t lying, though. Thanks to the likes of Behemot, Jubei, and the axe, I was getting blasted to pieces fairly often these days. I was kinda worried that it would have some weird effects on Nemesis’s evolution.

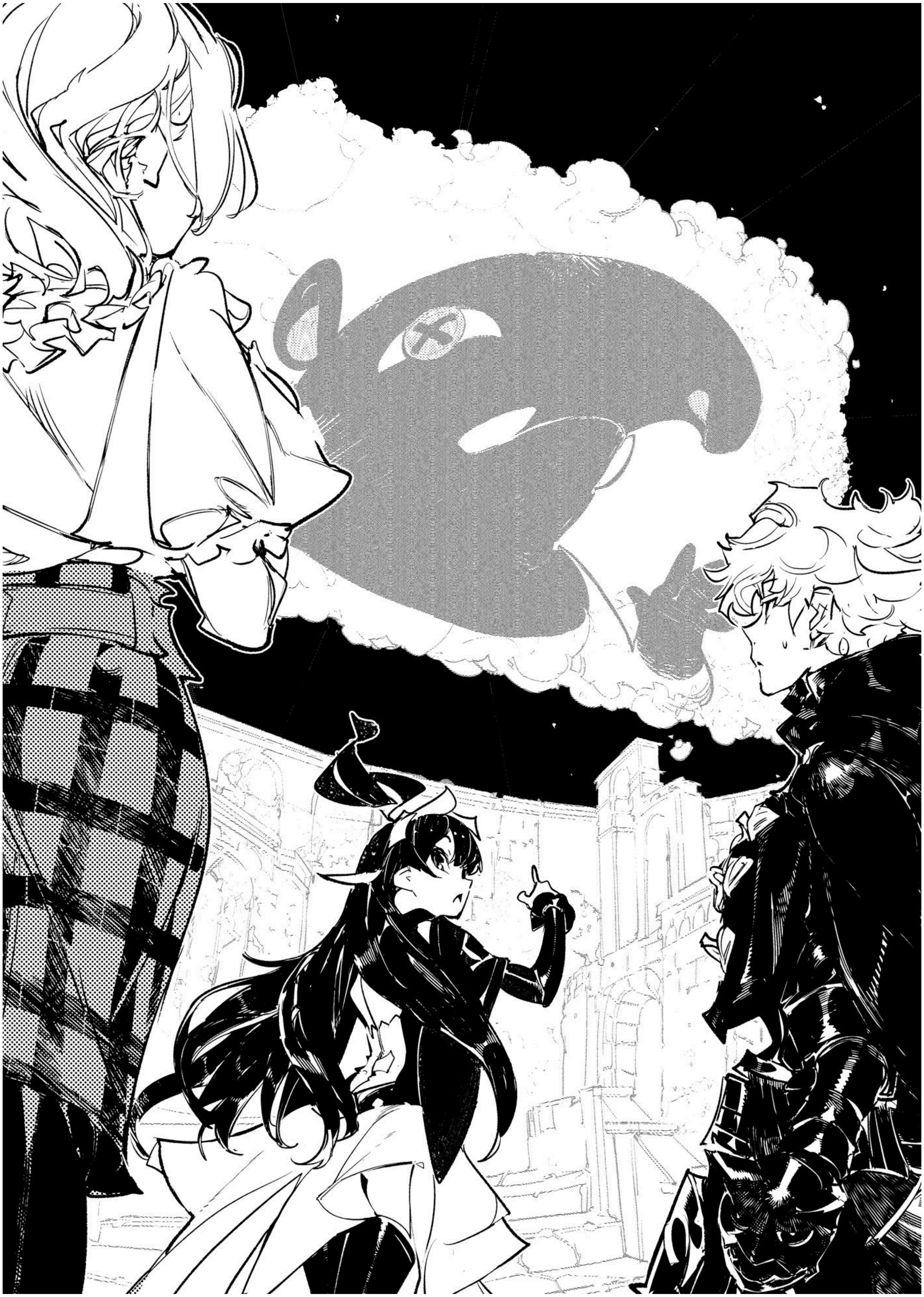
“So our leader isn’t the only one who comes apart all the time.”

“Hm?” Leader? Did she mean that woman? She often came apart? Well, she did seem to have healing powers that rivaled Miss Eldritch, so I guess she could make it work. I could recall Miss Eldritch putting her arm back basically the moment after Figaro removed it.

“Ray, Gerbera...what do you think that is?” As we talked, Nemesis pointed to the right—away from the twisting roads.

Before we’d realized it, there was a rectangular cloud in that direction. The shape was clearly unnatural, and we all focused on it.

A moment later, the cloud began to shine, and then displayed something like it was an electronic billboard.



It showed...a tapir.

More specifically, a person wearing a tapir costume.

I didn't recognize that costume in particular, but it had a familiar air to it—probably because of Shu. Well, him or Carl, maybe.

"Oh yeah, I think Shu actually told me about this." He'd mentioned that there was a Superior in Legendaria who also wore a costume all the time. If I recalled correctly, the name was ZZZ. So, this person in a tapir costume must've been—

"Hello. I'm Doraemon."

Whoops, my mistake.

Seriously, though...what the hell was that introduction? Honestly, it didn't even work as a joke.

"You should only say that if you're dressed as a cat. Or a tanuki, at least."

"Are you an idiot...?"

"Even here I have heard the name 'Doraemon' quite often."

We gave various responses, and the self-proclaimed Doraemon nodded.

"Yes, you're right. I'm *not* Doraemon. I'm ZZZ. Overlord Acedia. Good job. Yaaay. I like dorayaki, though. It's great that we have it here too."

The tapir...or rather, ZZZ spoke like he was delirious, or maybe as though he was just barely awake. I felt like I was listening to someone who'd pulled a bunch of all-nighters in a row and was now in a really unstable frame of mind.

But...

"By the way, if anyone here has Truth Discernment, let me ask you: did it work?"

"...Huh?" Gerbera tilted her head, then opened her eyes in surprise.

I'd heard that the hunter grouping's Trap Hunter was a job focused on setting up traps, but it also had a low-level Truth Discernment meant for trap finding.

Her reaction told me that it didn't activate when ZZZ had used the obviously fake name.

"Okaaay, I'm now gonna explain that and also the other rules of Dreamland. Explanations are a pain, but it's a condition for using a skill. If only I could let someone else do it. Too bad it's gotta be me... What a pain, such a paiiin... I'm broadcasting to all of you at once, but it's still a paiiin..."

ZZZ took a pillow out from somewhere and buried his face in it. He clearly wasn't into this. But then he resumed talking like it was something he was being forced to do.

"First, in Dreamland sense-based skills don't work right. I mean, it's a dream, so yeah. Do your best with your own mundane senses. You're in a dream, so you don't have a sense of pain, taste, or smell, but you don't have to eat anymore. It won't have any taste anyway. But you do have the sense of touch. And sight. And hearing. But this isn't a lewd dream. Nobuta, you peeerv."

Where the hell did *that* come from?

Even if I wanted to say that out loud, he was talking too fast to give me a chance. For someone who obviously wasn't enthusiastic about this explanation, he was talking nonstop.

Or maybe he just wanted this to be over with?

"Next, you can't bring anything that doesn't have a mind. Well, Embryos are fine even if they're just things, but normal gear just looks like it's there and doesn't actually exist. It's like 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' but reversed. Nobuta, you peeerv—part II: Electric Boogaloo."

I couldn't tell if he liked Doraemon or hated it.

"If Embryos are fine, then why isn't mine here?"

"No idea, Miss Padding. Anyway, nextnextnext."

"*Who are you calling 'Padding'*?!"

"Oh. Sorry. The pads are gone too, aren't they? It's great that you look the same though, isn't it? That your chest isn't a sheer cliff here."

"You're *dead*!"

"Calm down! That's just a broadcast! You'll fall off the road!" I shouted. Gerbera had no weapons, but that didn't stop her from trying to square up with ZZZ, so I jumped to restrain her by the upper arms and hold her back. Our stats seemed to be about the same, so it wasn't easy. I might've not been able to do it if it wasn't for the STR bonus from my Miasmaflame Bracers.

Hm? Wait...why does grabbing her arms...feel like I'm just grabbing bare skin?

"If all gear in the dream simply *appears* to be there, then I suppose they *are* like holograms over bare skin..." said Nemesis.

Deafening silence. I gently let go of Gerbera's body, and the fist she'd raised against ZZZ went straight to my face instead.

Welp...

ZZZ gave us a "what the hell are you doing" kind of stare that I could feel through the tapir suit. "Heeey, I *just* warned you. Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you, and I think you probably realized already, but you fell asleep 'cause of my Dreamland. You fall asleep when you touch iiit. It's the weird-colored aura. My eeeyes." ZZZ kept on with his explanation, regardless of what we did. "Dreamland has a limited range. If my creations and I—well, Thralls these days—are gone from the surroundings, you will wake up. You gotta do some search and destroy. But you can't 'cause you're catching Zs."

So the Thralls were like antennae that spread the Dreamland signal, huh? And as long as they were around, they would channel power and make it impossible for us to wake up.

Wait, doesn't that mean that we can't do anything but wait until our sleeping bodies are killed?

"Heh! I got some bad news for you, you sleepy trunk-face! Our April is still awake...probably! She's a robot! A Prism Person! She's really strong! She's making mincemeat out of all your Thralls right now as we speak!"

Despite the situation, Gerbera aggressively pointed at ZZZ. Her depression from before seemed to have been blown away by anger over the whole "padding" thing. Also, she may have been acting confident because she was completely relying on someone else instead of saying she'd do something herself.

"That so?" ZZZ didn't seem to think much of her words, however. His strategy was falling apart, but it wasn't shaking him in the slightest.

Is there more to this?

"Finally, dying in the Dreamland gives your avatar the death penalty."

"HUH?!" Gerbera exclaimed in surprise, but ZZZ ignored her and waved his hand.

"The explanation's over. Goodbye, everyone. I'm gonna get some shut-eye. Goodnight, don't let the bedbugs bite."

The broadcast ended, and the cloud he'd used as a screen dispersed.

Left behind, we didn't know what to say.

"...Even Candy is easier to grasp."

"Candy?"

"Oh...u-umm...well, you know, candy's pretty easy to drop, right?"

As she said that, she couldn’t make eye contact with me.“I understand. It is truly saddening when sand sticks to them,” said Nemesis.

“You don’t eat the candy you drop, do you?”

“...No, I do not.” She was looking away from me. Pretty suspicious. Knowing her, she’d probably think the candy was still good to eat if you just washed it off a bit.

“I gotta say, that tapir really runs his mouth... Only dumbasses reveal their...tricks...” After saying that, she crouched and grasped her head again for some reason. I strained my ears and heard a shaky, “I was such an idiooot.”

Had she messed up in the past somehow?

“Did he say that the reason he said all of that was that it was the condition for some skill, and because this is a dream?”

“Because this is...why?”

“Look around you. Everything looks clearer, doesn’t it?” The clouds surrounding us had dispersed and the bits that had been kinda unfocused were now much sharper.

And though the road was still floating, it had become completely straight.

“I guess that now that our heads have been stuffed with new info, this Dreamland has begun to take shape in our minds.”

It was said that dreams were what people saw when the brain was organizing information. I didn’t know if the dreams we saw in *Dendro* were the same as they were reality, but it was possible that this power that bore the name of “Dreamland” incorporated some of the principles of real-life dreams.

That would explain why he had to give an explanation to use a skill. And now that we were given info about Dreamland, it would start showing what it was actually capable of.

For now, though, I couldn’t see any changes besides the increase in clarity.

“Well, now we know that we’ll wake up as long as we just wait,” said Gerbera.

“Oh yeah, you said something about April? The Prism Person?”

I’d heard about Prism Persons from Integra. She’d said that they were stand-alone combat dolls equipped with AI and built by Flagman himself.

I'd also heard that the Prism Soldiers that had shown up from Quartierlatin's ruins were meant to be mass-produced versions of the Prism Persons—though, I had no idea what had to happen in the mass production process to go from April to those things in the ruins. April looked human at first glance, while the Prism Soldiers definitely didn't. The difference in appearance between them was way bigger than the difference between Prism Steeds and SMPS.

"Yeah. If the tapir wasn't lying, April's gonna take care of the Thralls soon and we'll wake up... I'm really leaving it all to everyone else, huh?"

"But there was a Mythical metal Thrall there." The scarlet Thrall based on a landdragon was obviously way above the rest.

"Mythical or not, if they've got nothing but hardiness going for them, they're easy marks for April."

Gerbera didn't seem to worry about the scarlet Thrall whatsoever. There must've been some compatibility at play that I didn't know about. In that case, maybe we really would wake up if we just waited long enough.

"Hm..." But I couldn't shake off my worries. Would waiting really be enough to get out of this situation? We were up against a Superior and an Overlord—someone who stood upon two summits at once. Could he really be beaten by just having someone around who didn't fall asleep and could deal with Mythical metal? "Also..."

ZZZ himself had clearly said that dying in the dream would result in a death penalty. That meant that this dream had something that could kill us somewhere inside it.

"Anyway, I don't think it's a good idea to just wait," I continued. "We should find out if there's anything we can do from—"

"Ray!"

That was when it happened.

With a voice as sharp as an alarm bell, Nemesis transformed into the greatsword and flew into my hand.

I knew full well what this meant.

"We got company?!"

"Aye! Above us!"

I looked up and saw a tiny silhouette far in the distance. Now that the clouds had dispersed and my vision was unobstructed, I could clearly see it falling toward us.

“Gerbera! Stay back!”

“You don’t have to tell me that...!”

The thing falling from above grew larger as it did. Soon enough, I was able to see both its shape and its color.

I could see it *very* clearly.

“What...the hell...?!” As that question came over me, the thing finally landed several dozen metels ahead.

The dream’s road remained steady, but the area around the landing site was pulverized and cracked.

“...Ghe.”

Through the dust raised by its landing, I saw a giant, scarlet figure. It looked like a dragon with swords growing all over it.

It was undoubtedly the Thrall made of Mythical metal.

“Why is it here...in the dream?”

Something that should’ve been outside had somehow gained an existence within the dream—and now we were its targets.

Chapter Six: Dreamscape Assailant

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

"...G h e g h e g h e."

The scarlet Thrall had suddenly fallen from above. It looked almost exactly like the one I'd seen before I was pulled into the dream, except it wasn't surrounded by an iridescent aura—the Dreamland.

There were no eyes on its face, but I could tell that its attention was fixed on us. It rubbed its arm-blades together, throwing up sparks as it walked closer.

"...Wh-What do we do now?" Gerbera said, beginning to panic.

"We'll just do like we agreed," I said as I took a step forward. "I'll fight. You stand back."

She'd been damaged since before she went to sleep, and she didn't have her Embryo or even her weapons right now. I had to fight by myself.

"But we are not at our best ourselves right now," Nemesis said.

"I know!" My arms, legs, and back...I glanced at each of them and took a moment to think.

"I guess we'll have to figure this out as we go along..."

"Do not rely on your armor! The attacks *will* reach your flesh!"

As we talked, the scarlet Thrall accelerated toward us. Its speed wasn't supersonic, but I didn't have Silver here, so it was still way faster than me anyway. I also hadn't fully adjusted to this Dreamland, so my senses were slightly worse than usual.

"Tch! Purgatorial Flames!" There was still distance between us, so I went and used my left Miasmaflame Bracer.

It released a torrent of fire. No surprises there—Gardranda had a mind, so I could use her inside the Dreamland with no problem.

The flames touched the Thrall as it approached...

"...G h e."

...but didn't damage it.

"That's simply not enough firepower!"

"Man...Mythical metal's a real pain!"

The Thrall closed the distance and attacked me, but I barely evaded it and tried to remember what I'd heard about this material.

First, if converted to END, its toughness was about equal to that of END-focused Superior Jobs.

Second, making anything from it required special techniques available only to the greatest artisans.

And third, it had an extremely high melting point that made it difficult to change its shape with heat.

It was insanely rare for it to melt in combat, with the only things capable of that being the breath of Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria; the heatwaves created by Shinedragon King, Drag-Flare; and King of Blaze's ultimate job skill.

Gloria's case was perhaps the most notable. Upon touching the metal, the breath that made everything evaporate had *only* melted it.

My Gardranda simply didn't have the firepower for this. Perhaps I could've dealt damage to it if I summoned Gardranda herself and had her use Purgatorial Flames: Zero, but it *didn't look like that was an option*.

"Ray!"

"I know!"

This clash just now had left me more drained than usual. Normally, I made up for the MP and SP I used by tapping into and converting the grudge stored in my Grudge-Soaked Greaves.

But now, it didn't look like that was working.

"Looks like Gouz-Maise isn't here." Even though I appeared to be equipped with the greaves, they weren't actually here—just as ZZZ had explained. I couldn't open menus here, so the only way to even know if I had my gear was to try to use it.

And though Gouz-Maise was an MVP reward, I couldn't have brought it here because it had no mind.

Miasmaflame Princess: Gardranda and a bunch of other skills I had were all predicated on using Gouz-Maise's grudge. The fact that I couldn't rely on it now had made me a whole lot weaker.

"Ah...!" Nemesis quickly transformed into The Black Shield and blocked the blade the Thrall swung down. She was able to withstand it, but it left a noticeable crack on her surface.

"I cannot do this too many times!"

"I know...!" Instead of relying on unique quirks I could take advantage of, this Thrall was just another enemy that was simply *strong*. It obviously wasn't on Behemot's level or anything, but it was clearly above Logan's Legendary devils—Gigaknights.

"...Ancient Legendary."

The words that escaped my mouth had two meanings.

First, it was my evaluation of this Thrall's power tier.

And second, it referred to a card I had that could maybe defeat it.

But...could I actually use it?

"G h e..." As I considered my options, the Thrall underwent a change.

Its arms, nose, and tail-blade turned an even brighter scarlet and began to heat up. The same heat that had made the mithril Thrall explode now lit up all of its blades, making them insanely hot. This was an absurd move possible only because the Mythical metal possessed an immense heat capacity.

My instincts told me that the blades had more power than the Swordmaster job's Laser Blade skill. Nemesis's Black Shield form was the toughest of the ones she had, but I could tell that these heated blades would split her in half regardless.

"G h e g h e..."

The Thrall raised its arm-blades up, then swung them down as if going for a Mongolian chop.

I had to move left or right to evade it, but I could tell that this was only a trap—regardless of which side I chose, the tail-blade would swipe toward whatever direction I'd gone and cut me down.

That was why I chose to go right.

Just as the arm-blades cut into the dream path and opened a deep crack in it, the Thrall threw its tail to skewer me.

"Counter Absorption!"

However, Nemesis's Black Shield form didn't preclude her from using Counter Absorption, and she activated it just in time to absorb the damage of the tail-strike. Its arms were left stuck into the ground while its attack was absorbed.

The Thrall was briefly immobilized.

"MONOCHROME!" I didn't miss my chance and called to the Black Warcoat I was wearing.

I won the first gamble—Monochrome actually responded to me. Just like Gardranda, it was actually here in this dream.

It formed its cannon around my left hand.

And then...

"SHINING DESPAIR!"

...it fired a superheated laser toward the Thrall.

This was the single most powerful attack in my arsenal. Even so, I was seriously gambling on it being able to destroy Mythical metal. The laser was more concentrated than the original's, but would it be enough to match Gloria's breath?

The answer to that turned out to be...

"...G h e..."

...yes and no.

The Shining Despair attack did damage the Thrall—and the Mythical metal it was made of. However, the effect was minimal. The Thrall had twisted its body just in time to make the laser aimed at its chest hit its upper left arm instead.

The blast had created a fist-sized semicircular hole there, but *that was it*.

It hadn't been nearly enough to defeat it. The Thrall could even use the arm still, albeit a little bit awkwardly.

"It's working...! Keep shooting...!" shouted Gerbera.

"Hate to break it to you, but one shot of that takes all the juice."

"It's over, then." Gerbera fell to her knees behind me. I could understand where she was coming from, but it was too early to give up.

"Nemesis, status on the damage counter?" Vengeance is Mine ignored enemy defense, so Mythical metal didn't mean anything to it. I could still win this if I used it on the Thrall's head, chest, or some other critical part.

"*... Zero*."

However, I could never have expected Nemesis's response.

"...Nemesis?"

"I sense a faint accumulation somewhere awfully far away, but I sense nothing on this creature before us."

"What?" That didn't make sense. We'd taken its attacks with the Black Shield as well as Counter Absorption.

Was this because it was a dream, or...?

"Ah...!"

Before I could finish my thought, the Thrall swung its heated blade at me. Nemesis couldn't defend against it, so she shifted from the Black Shield to the Black Blade. I evaded it as best as I could, but then I started to feel heat in my left shoulder.

"Ray!"

"I know!" This probably hadn't been intentional payback, but I now had a scorched laceration about where my Shining Despair had hit the Thrall. I couldn't check my stats, but my senses told me that I'd lost probably about 10% of my HP to that.

"So? Where did the damage go?" I asked.

"It seems to have been added to the accumulation in the distance."

I see how it is now, I thought. The damage I took here in the dream was almost certainly being credited not to this Thrall, but the tapir himself—Overlord Acedia. I didn't know whether it was because Thralls were like his limbs or because his Embryo turned the damage within the dream into actual damage, but this meant that I couldn't use my counter skills on this Thrall.

Silver wasn't here, so I'd lost a lot of my mobility. VDA and my accessories weren't here, so I'd become a whole lot more fragile. Gouz-Maise wasn't here, so I was unable to summon Gardranda. Monochrome was here, but Shining Despair wasn't strong enough to be fatal. And now, to top it all off, I couldn't even use Nemesis's counter skills.

"This reminds me of our battle against that lab coated maniac," said Nemesis.

"I was thinking the same thing." I had no intention of giving up, but this felt like a real dead end. This was worse than fighting RSK, and that thing had been the result of metagaming against me.

I'd known that losing all my non-sentient gear would give anything within the dream the upper hand, but this was worse than I'd expected. This Thrall's defense and offense were basically equal, and I had no way of dealing with any of it right now.

"...No. That's not quite right. "

I realized that I *might* have one or two things I could do.

The problem was not only that they'd be a gamble, but also that they were just something...different. Simply trying one of them would have me put my life on the line, while the other—if it was even possible—would have me build up more damage and...

"Buy some more time...!"

Yeah, that, I thought. *Wait, huh...?*

"Gerbera?" I turned around and saw Gerbera, standing away from the battle and calling out to me with a desperate expression.

"If you keep it busy long enough, April should get rid of the Thrall outside...! You need to buy some time until she does that...!"

Oh yeah, Gerbera had mentioned April. I wasn't so sure about that idea, though. As long as we were fighting this Thrall here in the dream, we couldn't know if destroying all the Thralls in reality would actually make us wake up.

Would this scarlet Thrall here really die if the real one was killed? They were clearly the same thing. Were there two of them—one in reality and one in the dream? Maybe the one from reality had simply slipped into the dream? Or perhaps there was just one of them that existed in both reality and the dream at the same time?

We didn't know any of that. As things were, all of those possibilities seemed as likely as the others.

We gotta get more info, I thought.

"We have no choice but to endure," said Nemesis.

She was right—no matter what the truth was, we still hadn't built up enough damage for the second gamble.

For now, all we could do was draw in the Thrall's attacks and wait for a chance to strike back as we restored our HP.

I feel like it's been a while since I had a battle like this.

"We have been stripped of options. It is best for us to return to the basics."

"Yeah."

I brandished Nemesis in her sword form and focused on the Thrall's attacks.

◇◆◇

The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

When Ray was first faced with the scarlet Thrall in the dream, the battle between the Prism weapons and the Thralls was changing.

"Remaining hostiles...one." The mithril Thralls shattered by April had been trying to fight despite being shattered into pieces, but after some time and a few more pulverizing attacks, they had become completely immobile.

The only ones that were left were April, Silver, the four who were sleeping, and...

"...G h e g h e g h e."

...the Thrall that looked just like the one in the dream—the one ZZZ called "Cardinal A."

It had done nothing but watch the fight, and it still wasn't doing anything except rubbing its arm-blades together, releasing sparks as it did so.

Was this some kind of taunt? Or was it preparing for some sort of attack?

"Battle analysis."

April took a moment to think.

During the battle, she'd used an Elixir on her owner—Sechs—but it did not wake him up. Based on that, she'd assumed that he hadn't been overcome by a normal sleeping debuff, but the result of a special skill with conditions attached.

This phenomenon was unknown to her. When it came to jobs, April knew everything that was known to the pre-ancient civilization. However, she didn't have much combat experience against Masters—these newly appeared entities with a multitude of unique powers.

She'd sparred against Sechs and Gerbera, fought Gakido and his Sixth Realm Chaos, and faced the Incarnation of Maelstroms in her last battle during the time of the pre-ancient civilization.

In that final fight, she'd been stripped of all her energy, entered a dormant state, and was then retrieved by the incarnations.

The battle construct believed to be unmatched in physical combat had been easily suppressed and captured.

The mastermind behind this Cardinal A—Overlord Acedia, ZZZ—gave April the same feeling as she'd experienced during that conflict.

"Resuming combat."

No matter how dangerous it may have been, though, she chose to fight Cardinal A to mitigate the danger to her owner.

In but a breath, she closed the distance between her and Cardinal A, aiming to put it within her Material Slider's range.

"...G h e." Coming into contact with the iridescent aura surrounding Cardinal A—the fragment of Dreamland—did not cause any changes in April herself. The Embryo had no effect on her.

That was exactly why what happened next was so bizarre—April's wires were deflected without dealing any damage to Cardinal A.

"...?"

This made no sense to her. April was using her Material Slider—a skill that subtracted END and physical toughness. She'd even used a setting far above the -4,000 she'd used against Sixth Realm Chaos. Anything around her would have their END stat reduced by a whole 30,000. Meanwhile, her own toughness, when converted to END, was over 50,000.

Their clash should have been like steel striking styrofoam. Not even Mythical metal could remain unscathed by this, but Cardinal A was under some kind of effect that negated it.

"Conjecture: toughness increased by additional effects."

April assumed that the Mythical metal's defenses had been enhanced even further, giving it toughness that not even Material Slider could negate.

But there was something she could do against that.

"My silver brother—increase your distance. Incoming hazard," she told Silver, and he carried Ray away from her in response. She then checked where the other three people were and deemed that she could proceed without issue.

If her opponent still possessed toughness that rendered her attacks powerless, there was only one thing she had to do.

"Limiters: off."

She would simply bring the toughness even *further* down.

"Material Slider..."

April was Prism Person No. 2 as well as the first Prism Person designed for combat—Diamond Slayer. Her namesake was an area of total obliteration in which physical defense had no meaning.

The skill's name was...

"Diamond Slaying."

The next moment, an invisible force field permeated her surroundings. Her output was pushed to the limit to make her mod-armaments operate at a staggering capacity.

Affected by the skill, her surroundings began to crumble. The stones and trees were unable to maintain their integrity as solid objects, let alone hold up their own weight, and were ground into dust as they shattered.

Even the coarse earth beneath her was broken down into smaller and smaller particles, quickly becoming sand. Not even the remains of the mithril Thralls were spared as they all disintegrated into silver-colored ash.

Everything in a 50-metel radius was affected by an extreme toughness debuff of *more than 200,000*.

Not even Mythical metal structures could maintain themselves under this effect. There was nothing in the pre-ancient civilization that could withstand this. Even bullets heading for her at the speed of sound would be reduced to nothing before they even reached her.

And, touched by a skill this immense...

"...G h e g h e g h e."

...Cardinal A was still completely unharmed.

"Abnormal variable." Recognizing this opponent as an outlier, April resumed attacking using her wires, but the monster with a body of Hihi'irokane, which must have become as soft as the wall of a sandcastle under her ability's assault, still deflected April's attacks.

It was as though it was truly invincible.

April now understood that this entity's form was maintained by some principle other than sheer physical toughness. Thus, she knew it was a power that she could not overcome.

Assuming the worst-case scenario, April considered a disengagement. She compared stats and calculated how many of the three people she could safely take with her when...

"...G h e..."

...with no prior warning, Cardinal A's left arm was destroyed. A semicircular part of the upper arm seemed to have melted away.

It was *as though it had been hit by a laser*.

The damage obviously wasn't the result of April's Material Slider, but no matter how hard she calculated, she could not find anything in her surroundings that could have caused it.

Cardinal A had received damage from a place that April couldn't observe.

April then reconsidered her decision to disengage and instead chose to buy time to see if she could unravel the secret behind its invincibility.

Thus, everyone facing Cardinal A—within or outside the dream—had chosen to observe.

And as things were, none of them knew which way this would go.

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Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

Sechs and Candy stood on one of Dreamland's roads, not saying a word.

Everything around them had become clear. They had received the same explanation ZZZ had given Ray and Gerbera—in fact, it had been shown to all of them at once.

Unlike those two, Sechs and Candy hadn't commented, opting to merely listen and absorb the information.

They may have even understood it better than Ray had.

"Now *that* was a waste of time," said Candy with a pout. "We already knew that Dreamland only takes in things that have minds, plus it was pretty obvious that dying here totally equals death penalty, and that we had to do something specific to wake up. The info's useless to us, but he now gets to use a skill." Candy let out a sigh and grumbled. "And he didn't even tell us anything about it."

ZZZ hadn't revealed any of the cards in his hand—he'd merely told them something that anyone could have figured out after enough time. He already had the upper hand, and this gave him an even bigger advantage.

"You agree, don't cha?" Candy asked. "...Sechsy?"

That was when Candy realized that Sechs was deep in thought, one hand over his mouth.

"...That is contradictory." It seemed like he was simply scrutinizing the info they'd been given, but that wasn't precisely the case.

"What is?"

He was questioning something far more fundamental. "The fact that the Embryo requires an explanation...as well as this dreamworld itself. I had information about Overlord Acedia's nature as a person. He was a slothful, laid-back sort who desired nothing else but sleep."

"That's pretty much what I heard about him too."

"If that is truly his nature, this Dreamland makes no sense. It contradicts what he *is*."

"What do you... Oh, I get it."

That was when Candy realized it too.

"A person who merely wants to slack off would never like an Embryo that *forces him to work*."

Masters generally didn't end up with Embryos whose powers they actively disliked. Sechs the shape-shifting slime, as well as Candy the bacteria generator, were both fond of how their Embryos were.

With that in mind, would a person who only wanted to laze around enjoy an Embryo that turned his time sleeping—one of the fundamentals of laziness—into *work time*? After all, Dreamland was an Embryo that didn't stop at merely putting them to sleep—it required its Master's explanation to unleash its full potential.

"Our interpretation of one factor is flawed."

Was it ZZZ's slothful nature? Was it Dreamland's ability to pull people into the dream?

Or was there something amiss with their assumptions about both?

This deviation in nature had resulted in ZZZ's Embryo possessing a skill that Sechs and Candy couldn't have anticipated. It was the very power giving severe trouble to April back in reality, and its name was "Nightmare Kingdom—Dreamland."

"We lack the information to truly verify anything, but I believe we should be prepared for the unexpected."

"Okaaay."

The two were about to resume walking when Candy noticed something.

"Sechsy, what's with your finger?" Candy was referring to Sechs's left pinky.

It was *gone*.

Candy hadn't seen it vanish, but it wasn't there now.

"Does he have a skill that makes you disappear piece by piece as time goes on?" Suddenly worried he was being consumed by a giant creature, Candy examined himself.

Sechs, however, simply smiled his usual smile and said, “No need to worry. This is not Overlord Acedia’s skill. I have done this myself.”

“Hm?”

“I suppose that is enough.” After saying that, Sechs extended his left hand back to the direction they’d come from.

A few moments later, a small slime came into view.

“That’s...”

“Yes. This was a little test. I separated it the moment we arrived here.”

The tiny slime jumped into Sechs’s left hand and assumed the form of his pinky.

“Wait, your slimes...”

“Indeed. Though it depends on size, they disappear when there is too great a distance between them and the main body—that is, the one with the most volume.”

That was the flaw in Sechs’s powers that even Red King had been aware of. But...

“However, this slime did not disappear even when the distance surpassed ten times the maximum.”

“So, distance works different here?”

“Either that or it does not matter as long as my physical body is still all connected. Regardless, I believe I can make use of this.”

Sechs then transformed his right hand into a sword-like Embryo...and decapitated himself.

A moment later, the rest of his body split into pieces and became tiny slimes. A number of them even had wings.

“I split myself into about fifty parts,” Sechs said. “I will use this for reconnaissance. If we are lucky, I might find Gerbera or Overlord Acedia.”

The pieces then scattered. Normally, this would’ve been suicide for Sechs, as the pieces would vanish one by one—but if they didn’t, this was an optimal way to gather information.

Thus, the slimes crawled off in every direction. Some of them even jumped off the dream road into the abyss below.

“Hrmm, not even a GOD like me could use a trick this extreme.”

“I do consider the safety margins, of course, so I will bring all of them back if at least one vanishes due to distance. Oh, also, I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“Could you carry my head? I am focusing on controlling the other parts, so it is a bit difficult to move.”

“I guess now I know how April feels,” Candy said as he put on a wry grin and picked up Sechs’s severed head.

Interlude: The Village of the Overlord

Northern Legendaria, Sheepkin Settlement AKA Sloth Village

There was a small settlement hidden in the Legendarian woodlands near its border with the Kingdom of Altar.

Mithril Thralls roamed around it, protecting it from monsters and other uninvited guests. They were set to be semi-autonomous, letting them patrol the area even when ZZZ wasn't logged in.

And in the heart of the settlement that was surrounded by these servants of the Overlord, there was a mansion that looked a bit too humble for someone with such a lofty title.

It was the largest building in the village, but it was smaller than the residences of Altean nobility, even the provincial ones.

"Zzz..." ZZZ was sleeping in the bedroom of this mansion's second floor. His bed was fluffy, and his sleep was deep and calm. In reality, he was dressed in the same tapir costume he wore in the dream, and though it made for a good sleeping bag by itself, there was still a blanket over him.

There was a group of people watching him through the door, not saying a word or making noise. They were all sheepkin servants who lived in this mansion, and their eyes as they looked at him were filled with relief and unmistakable reverence.

It felt like they were looking at a *messiah* rather than an Overlord.

That was only natural.

After all, for the sheepkin, Overlord Acedia was nothing short of a savior.

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The sheepkin were people who had curved horns on their heads and grew woollike hairs on their limbs and backs.

They had settled in northern Legendaria, but that was not where they had originated—it was merely where they'd arrived after fleeing the heart of the country.

Sheepkin hair—especially the fluff of young women—was treasured as a high-grade material for clothing and bedding. Even though they were a humanoid species, this had led to them being targeted by the other races as if they were monsters that dropped rare items. In fact, unlike monsters, they were actually guaranteed to provide the material, making their situation arguably even worse.

They hated being treated like cattle, so they chose to secretly move to the edge of Legendaria and live there in hiding.

Centuries had passed since then.

They did not participate in the Legendarian parliament and lived their lives as a forgotten minor tribe. The country had countless different peoples in it, but their situation was perhaps among the most pitiable.

However, it wasn't all bad for them.

The location they'd chosen to live couldn't have been more perfect, for it was right outside the area dominated by the Divine Disks. Because their settlement wasn't part of its domain, the UBM never asked them for sacrifices, but at the same time it was close enough that other monsters were scared to approach them. This had allowed the sheepkin to live in peace for the centuries they'd spent here.

However, time had eventually brought change.

The Divine Disks were defeated, and the local habitats changed, allowing monsters in the area to become more bold and start to approach the settlement. The sheepkin had no means to defend themselves against them—the tribe as a whole had a low affinity for combat jobs. They only excelled at crafting roles focused on attire—as well as the Sacrifice job, which was thoroughly useless to tians.

Despite that, the monsters that lived in this area were strong enough for it to be recognized as a leveling zone for Masters level 300 and up.

If they didn't find anyone to protect them, the entire settlement would eventually be consumed by the local fauna.

However, though it was near the buffer zone, it was still part of Legendaria, so it had never been annexed by Altar and did not receive their protection. Since they'd lived in hiding for so long, though, Legendaria itself didn't even know the sheepkin existed, let alone had any understanding of their circumstances.

And if they were to reveal themselves, they would only be hunted and sheared once again.

Their choice was between death and becoming cattle again—and, after a lot of thought, they'd chosen the former.

Or, to be more precise, monsters had come into their settlement before they could truly make a decision. They hadn't even had the chance to consider whether or not a life as livestock would have been preferable.

Just as the sheepkin were about to meet death in the jaws of some wolfish beasts, though...suddenly, a group of odd and misshapen monsters came out of nowhere and began mowing down the wolves. These "Thralls" routed the beasts, despite their numbers.

For some reason, one of them was carrying what first looked like a large stuffed toy shaped like a tapir, but it then turned around, revealing that it was actually a person in a tapir costume.

"...I'm not hungry anymooooore..." Ignoring the tapir's sleep talking, the Thralls continued to exterminate the wolves.

And when it was done, the strange monsters stopped in place.

The sheepkin focused on the one carrying the person wearing the costume.

The tapir was a strange creature, but the lack of name hovering above it made it clear that it was no monster.

What was it, then?

Most would conclude that it was a Master, but the sheepkin, who'd been living in seclusion for centuries, had no means of knowing about the recent influx. To them, Masters were something that only existed in legend, effectively synonymous with The Lynx, Schrödinger Cat, who'd lived during The Era of the Peerless Three—when they went into seclusion.

"...G h e." Upon noticing the people looking at the tapir, the Thralls spent a moment thinking how to handle them. However, they were unable to come upon an answer and decided to wake him up.

"Mmnghh...we found people yet?" Upon awakening, the tapir looked around, saw that he was in a village and...

"I'm ZZZ. Overlord Acedia. Nice to meetchaaa."

...introduced himself in that manner. The sheepkin were shocked, for the title he'd presented was yet another thing straight from legend. "I'm almost outta food. Gotta stock up. Huuungry. Uhh, that kinda makes me feel like

Dis. Oh—I got money if you need it. How muuuch?"

He spoke like he wasn't fully awake, but none of what he said triggered Truth Discernment. None of it was a lie—not even the claim that he was an Overlord.

Overlords were nearly mythological figures who had conquered a created dungeon—entities that enjoyed power and fortune far beyond what the sheepkin had ever known.

It was said that those who had acquired these titles had caused a lot of mayhem in the world. But Overlord or not, this one was the sheepkin's savior.

Not saying a word, the villagers looked at each other. They remembered how they'd regretted their decision when the wolves attacked them.

That was why they resolved to make the right choice this time.

"Please...! Take us as your retainers! We are ready to give you everything we have, save only our very lives!"

"Suuure, why not?"

The response to their desperate plea was quick and casual. It was hard to tell if the Overlord even knew what he was replying to.

At least, he certainly did not know their circumstances.

"Gimme clothes, food, and shelter, please. I'll just get some shut-eye. Sleepy." And with that, ZZZ went to sleep once again.

Thus, the hidden village of the sheepkin became Overlord Acedia's domain.

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Because of these circumstances, ZZZ was their savior.

Even after becoming their ruler, he never asked for anything but food and a place to sleep. His Thralls even assisted with security and farming for the villagers, making life there noticeably easier.

The sheepkin could not have asked for a better ruler.

But that also raised a particular question—a question one of the sheepkin maids attending to ZZZ's needs couldn't help but ask. How could someone as unselfish and gentle as him become wanted...and an Overlord?

His response to the former question was "Why am I wanted, huuuh? It's my bad, really. The skill Dreamland got when it evooolved to seventh form had a bigger range than I thought and it kinda fried a city's infrastructure for a biiit...and it's like yeah, I can't blame them for blaming meee. Wanteeed."

While in response to the latter, he said, "Overlooord? Well, uh...I actually have a few buddies: Benetnasch, Dis, and Omega. Friendooos. They all had Superior Jobs, sooo...well, it's not like I was jealous or anything, but I got all sad 'cuz I felt like they were leaving me behiiind. I guess it's like 'Sorry ZZZ. This SJ stuff is just for three.' SJs are one each, though. Solooo. Anyway, that's why I went and took Overlord Acediaaa. It looked like it was gonna be easiest for me since *I'm unbeatable when I sleeeeep*. Star Mariooo. Here we gooo."

Basically, there was no strong reason or desire behind either of those things.

So the maid then asked, "Why *do* you want to sleep?"

It was a question referring to his usual nature...

"...'Cuz I can't."

...and it was met with a casual, but contradictory response.

"I can't sleep in real life 'cuz *this here* doesn't work riiight," he said, tapping his head with his finger. "That's why I just wanna sleeeep here. And if I'm dreaming, I don't even care if I'm lucid or having a nightmaaare. Sweet dreams."

His tone was indifferent, but a profound sorrow could be sensed behind his words. That was why the sheepkin understood that nothing would give him more joy than many hours of peaceful sleep.

Chapter Seven: A Battle He Can Lose

About ZZZ

Overlord Acedia, ZZZ had no real-life memories of the dreams he'd seen while asleep.

When he was little, he'd gotten into an accident which damaged his brain in a way that prevented him from falling asleep naturally no matter how long he closed his eyes or how unbearably fatigued he was. He could only achieve sleep when his brain was forcefully shut down using medication so strong it didn't even allow for dreams. If he had been born earlier and thus had lacked access to these treatments, he may have even languished and died shortly after the accident.

It was inevitable that a person like him would develop a desire to sleep and dream. This was one of the three core needs as a living being, after all, and it was not satisfied for him.

It was no surprise, then, that he would try out dive-type VRMMOs just so he could sleep in them.

However, many of those games outright denied him entry to their worlds. And it wasn't just those that functioned like a dream—games that sent signals to the five senses also didn't work properly with his damaged brain.

He'd almost given up on VRMMOs entirely, but took a chance one final time on *Infinite Dendrogram*. It could be said that he was drawn to it, just like many other players before and after him.

Ultimately, he was able to log into *Dendro* without any issue, and upon receiving a healthy avatar, he'd become able to sleep whenever he was within this world.

Thus, his greatest desire was fulfilled.

But that was exactly what caused a certain *conflict*.

Before hatching, Embryos analyzed their Masters' personalities and desires before assuming forms that were, to varying degrees, based on those things. In ZZZ's case, there was no doubt that both of these were related to sleep. However, he'd acquired everything he'd wanted the moment he first appeared in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Thus, his Embryo developed powers based on him *in a different way*.

Perhaps if he specifically desired *peaceful* sleep, his Embryo wouldn't have turned out the way it did, instead developing abilities that made his sleep more comfortable.

However, ZZZ only wished for *sleep itself*. He was beyond caring whether it was peaceful or not—he'd only wished to fulfill the physiological need he'd always lacked as a living being. This lack of necessity and motivation to develop powers had produced an effect on his Embryo.

This phenomenon was uncommon, but not unheard of.

A particular singer who'd begun *Infinite Dendrogram* was troubled by things such as the gap between languages, her feelings not being understood properly, and her songs not reaching and resonating with the hearts of others.

However, *Infinite Dendrogram* featured flawless language translation.

That alone had solved her problems, and as a result, her Eden, instead of being born as an Embryo that closed the gap between words, became one that just closed gaps in general and let *all things* be conveyed—an Embryo that deleted resistances.

Dreamland was no different.

It wasn't merely an Embryo that put people to sleep. It had the power to protect its owner while he was sleeping. It had the power to *keep* people sleeping. It had the power to prevent reality from influencing a sleeping mind. It had the power to pull anyone it put to sleep into dreams separated from reality.

These were the abilities it had developed as the land of dreams.

Just like Eden, it may have diverged from what its Master intended, but he did not care. He was asleep and he was dreaming. That was enough for him, even if the dream was only an extension of this world's reality.

He never held on to any memories of his actual dreams, but the knowledge that he *was* dreaming—that was enough for him to be at peace.

His core desire wasn't to rest or laze about, but to just sleep at all.

It didn't matter if that sleep wasn't restful. And it didn't matter if someone was caught up in the dream and was exposed to a nightmare.

Thus, the name of his ultimate: “Nightmare Kingdom—Dreamland.”

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Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

How much time had passed since Ray and Cardinal A had begun fighting?

Nightmare Kingdom—Dreamland was a skill that lasted half an hour, so it couldn’t have been that long, but this battle certainly wasn’t short either.

Despite that, Ray was holding his ground.

Cardinal A completely outclassed him in terms of stats. Ray was standing against something above even the Legendary Gigaknights he’d once fought, stripped of one of his MVP rewards and all of his armor.

Switching to Sorcerer had also made all his Paladin skills except for healing magic unusable, yet he kept on fighting. This was made possible by all his experience in fighting opponents who were clearly above him.

However, he was reaching the limits of that skill as well.

In spite of this being a dream, his breathing had become ragged as he got more and more out of breath. The fatigue was weighing him down, and he’d used up all his Counter Absorptions. He had no healing items here, so he had to cast healing magic—but his limited MP was about to run dry, as well.

Right now, Ray was focusing on evasion as he wielded the twin blades of Nemesis’s fourth form to take advantage of their compact size and ease of handling.

Despite that, he was now covered in wounds and his own blood.

“G h e...” Meanwhile, Cardinal A—the Thrall made of Mythical metal—showed no signs of fatigue. Its performance hadn’t dropped one bit since the moment Ray’s Shining Despair had made a hole in its left arm. The counterattacks Ray launched did nothing but leave a few scratches on its metallic surface.

The gap between them was plain to see. No matter how well Ray could fight against opponents that outclassed him, he had clearly reached the limits of that skill.

Normally, Ray and Nemesis could have turned even a situation as dire as this in their favor. However, the specific circumstances didn’t allow that.

This Dreamland was a special place in which Nemesis's counter-skills like Vengeance is Mine had no effect on Cardinal A. Ray was missing the very option that would allow him to win. There was no path that led to victory, yet defeat was unavoidable.

This was a battle that whittled away the heart.

There was something else that Nemesis had noticed, but chose not to mention. It pertained to Ray's movements as he held her.

Ray was doing an amazing job surviving against this powerful foe. He didn't break before the overwhelming difference in power and continued to fight and resist no matter how many gut-wrenching close calls he suffered.

Right now, Ray was standing his ground while giving one hundred percent.

But that was the thing—it was *just* one hundred percent and not *more than that*.

In many of his previous battles against overwhelming foes, Ray had exceeded his limits. If he'd done the same here, he might have taken less damage and inflicted more.

However, it was clear that he was in no state to do that.

One reason for that was that his senses were different because he was currently inside a dream—but there was another, far more important reason.

Nemesis had realized what this was. After all, this factor had been present even in the two Tournament battles they'd participated in that very day.

The thing those duels and this battle had in common was...

This is a battle he can afford to lose, Nemesis thought. Just as his defeat in The Tournaments did nothing but prevent him from proceeding, defeat at the hands of this Thrall *would not mean much*.

As a Master, Ray would simply be given the death penalty. This was not a grand tragedy where mortal tian lives were at stake—not one of the many deadly struggles he'd experienced starting with the battle against that Demi-Dragon Worm.

Thus, Ray wasn't able to channel his true power. He couldn't surpass his limits.

I see. Nemesis looked back at the past.

The majority of his many defeats happened in situations that *weren't* tragedies, just like this one. The battle against Marie, the countless duels, the first encounter with Tsukuyo...and today's Tournament.

He'd only lost battles he *could* lose.

Looking back, the Anniversary was no different. In his first battle against Jubei Kaga, Ray wasn't going all out. As someone who wished to face him in true mortal combat, she'd been disappointed in that and said...

"It did not draw out everything good about Ray Starling. Why? What am I lacking?"

Then, during their second battle, she'd threatened that if Ray lost, she would PK Alto over and over again. The battle thus had his friend's *Dendro* future at stake, allowing Ray to channel his real strength and come out victorious.

Ray was a person who could only exhibit his true power when faced with terrible consequences for losing that could not be undone. Jubei must've understood this as well.

I suppose there's no getting around that central fact, Nemesis thought. Ray was a person who got himself hurt to protect others. That was his nature. He'd surpassed his limits by suffering damage himself so he could keep someone else safe. However, it always came at the cost of saddling him with heartache and physical wounds, and as someone who deeply cared about Ray, Nemesis did not enjoy seeing this in the slightest.

Still, he was fully willing to give so much, and Nemesis knew well that if Ray had let those tragedies come to pass, it would hurt him even more deeply.

That was why, when faced with these dire situations, Nemesis had always supported him and chosen to fight alongside him.

But that was exactly why she now wondered...

Is there any reason to keep fighting a battle he can afford to lose? she thought. This was a situation in which a single direct hit would kill him. Ray himself did barely any damage to his opponent, and there was no telling how long the battle would last. Was there any point in Ray continuing to exert his heart and body here?

Nemesis was even beginning to believe the absurd notion that *losing* may have actually been the best course of action.

That was when...

"Hey..."

...as though someone had read Nemesis's mind...

“Wouldn’t it be better if you lost?”

Ray heard these words from somewhere behind him.

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A short while ago, Gerbera was watching Ray and Cardinal A’s battle. Other than that single beam attack which had damaged the left arm, it was completely one-sided.

There was no way Ray could win this. Even Gerbera could tell that it was turning into a war of attrition that Ray would ultimately lose.

What should I do? If he loses, I’m gonna be next, right...? she thought.

Gerbera was even more powerless against this monster than Ray. She didn’t have any of her weapons or even Alhazred here. All she could do was run, but she could tell that she wouldn’t get far.

I guess it dropped from up high thanks to a movement skill... If this whole space is an Embryo, then it’s gotta have a skill that lets it move around the stuff inside it. And, well, dreams let you go anywhere, don’t they?

Gerbera’s concern was not unfounded—Dreamland did indeed have a skill that let ZZZ control the positions of anything within it.

That was why she hadn’t tried running away. If she did and ended up too far away from Ray, it was likely that she would be deemed as easier prey. Cardinal A would probably then be moved next to her.

He’s trying his best, but it looks like he’ll lose at any moment. I don’t care if he loses, but if I lose, then it’s back to the gaol for me. No, really, what am I supposed to...?

Gerbera was at a loss when...

“Gerbera.”

“EEEEK?!”

...someone spoke from right next to her ear, causing her to jump and let out a strange noise. She turned to the source of the voice and saw *a winged slime floating and flapping its wings*.

“...Leader?” Upon recognizing his voice—and realizing that there simply weren’t any other slimes as strange as this—she spoke to it in a quiet voice so that Ray and Nemesis wouldn’t overhear.

“Yes. I finally found you,” responded Sechs—or a part of him anyway.

After getting confirmation it was him, Gerbera let out a sigh of relief. “I-I’m saved...”

“I see you had a hard time.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe it! I don’t have Alhazred, he touched my chest, I’ve got no gear, I could’ve died at any moment, he touched my chest... It was awful!”

Gerbera unrolled everything that’d happened since she came to the dream. Most of it was just complaining, but...

“No Alhazred? Oh, that must be because...”

...Sechs actually gave an explanation for one of the things she’d mentioned.

Dreamland was supposed to take in anything that had a mind—including Embryos. Why, then, was Alhazred not here? Sechs instantly realized the reason why and explained it to Gerbera, who understood it as well.

“Oh, I see... That doesn’t change the fact that I can’t do anything, though.”

“That is true. It will not be a problem, however. I now know where you are, so my main body is making its way to you. It will be here soon.”

Those words filled Gerbera with even more relief than before. Sechs’s entire body was a Superior Embryo that could transform into many other Embryos, no doubt giving him many means of destroying Mythical metal.

It might even be said that allowing Sechs into this dream could ultimately turn out to be the fatal mistake that would lead to Overlord Acedia’s defeat.

“Hurry up and come over here,” Gerbera said to Sechs, glancing over at Ray. He was still fighting Cardinal A. “I dunno how long he’ll hold it off...”

“Actually, it will be bad for us if he keeps fighting for much longer,” Sechs said.

“Huh?”

“I cannot defeat a Mythical metal Thrall without him realizing who I am. I do not know how much Shu told him about me, but it is possible that he will recognize me by my combat style.”

Ray had already seen Sechs use a sword-like Embryo that had possessed the Rumbling Treework skill. That Embryo was useless against Cardinal A, and the moment Sechs used any other, Ray would realize that he was a unique fighter who could wield multiple Embryos—which could only be

King of Crime, Sechs Würfel.

Thus, Sechs could not fight Cardinal A before Ray received the death penalty.

"Then just wait until he loses and get over here then," said Gerbera.

"Waiting is no good either. We cannot be certain how long April can protect our bodies. Your death would be a great loss to us, and if the Contract deems me deserving, Candy's death could lead to mine."

That meant that it was best if Ray received the death penalty *before* Sechs made it here and defeated Cardinal A.

"He's holding out pretty well, though..." Ray was enduring despite the odds being stacked against him. There was no telling how many more minutes he could keep going.

With that thought in Gerbera's mind ...

"That is why you should stab him in the back."

...Sechs made a suggestion as though it was nothing.

"Whoa whoa whoa, you know I can't do that right now. I don't have a bowgun or even a knife."

"I did not mean with weapons, but with words," Sechs said before whispering something into her ear.

Upon hearing what Sechs had to say, Gerbera nodded in understanding before calling out to Ray.

"Hey...wouldn't it be better if you lost?"

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Ray said nothing in response—he didn't even turn around.

He *couldn't* even turn around.

He was dedicating his entire body and soul to evading each and every one of Cardinal A's fatal attacks.

"Wh-What are you talking about...?!" That was why Nemesis replied in his stead. The perplexity in her voice must have been not only due to Gerbera's words, but also because they matched her own thoughts.

"I mean, it's bad for you if this drags on, isn't it?" Gerbera said. "Your gear and the horse are still outside, right? So...the longer you keep this up, the bigger the chances that your gear's gonna get broken."

"That's..." Gerbera was merely repeating what she'd heard from Sechs, but she herself did believe that this was the right idea. No one within the dream knew the situation outside. April had toughness that surpassed Mythical metal, so she was likely unharmed, but there was no telling what state everything else was in. It was entirely possible that Ray could be met with a miserable scenario in which Cardinal A defeated him despite his efforts, only for Ray's needless extension of the fight to have resulted in the destruction of his equipment and trusty steed.

According to Gerbera, Ray had nothing to gain and everything to lose in this fight, and Nemesis was on the verge of siding with her.

If he lost here, he would lose nothing but some random drops. The chances of him sacrificing his equipment or Silver in that scenario were significantly lower than if he kept on fighting—and the risk of losing something irreplaceable only grew as he persisted.

"That's why you'd be better off if you just took the death penalty." There was a hint of worry in Gerbera's voice as she said that. He may have been her sworn enemy's friend, as well as someone who'd inflicted lots of mental damage upon her since they'd met in this dream, but at the same time, she wouldn't be alive right now if it weren't for Ray valiantly keeping the Thrall busy.

That was why, while a part of her just wanted him to hurry up and get killed, she was also giving him this warning out of kindness.

"Ray..." There was no response from him. Nemesis was unable to find the right words to say, so she'd only called his name.

That was because Gerbera's words had actually convinced her.

This was a situation in which Ray could lose Silver, who was like another partner to him, and the possibility of him actually winning was absurdly low. Not even Nemesis could help him.

That was why even she began to believe that giving up was the correct course of action here.

That was when Ray...

"Nemesis."

...evaded an attack and called his partner's name...

"Why did we come here?"

...before posing a question.

"We..."

"Our last death was against Behemot. Even though we all cooperated, we couldn't carry the momentum until the end. Without Fuso, everything might've been over then and there."

While Nemesis didn't know what to say, Ray continued talking.

"Since then, we've tried to become stronger—and we did. But today, Lei-Lei completely crushed us. We couldn't do anything against her. And *that's why* we came here—to improve ourselves even a tiny bit."

"That is true." They'd traveled to this zone to gain more power. They'd come to the border because today's defeat had made them realize that they were lacking in strength. Their involvement in the clash between Sechs's group and ZZZ may have been random, but there was an overall motive to their presence here.

"This fight against ZZZ just sorta happened. We may have just gotten caught up in something by accident. Losing here may not mean losing anything of value. And fighting may lead to Silver getting damaged or even destroyed."

Ray agreed with everything Gerbera had said. He himself had already known all that. He was fully aware that losing was better than winning this time.

"Even so...I won't choose defeat."

Despite all that, he continued to fight.

"Ray..."

"I have no idea how we can win this. Our odds of winning are slim. Probably far, far less than one percent."

Ray steadfastly declared that he would continue to struggle in spite of everything.

"This isn't a battle I gotta win at all costs...but we'll soon encounter more like that. They're not even that far away. The fights we'll *have* to win are right around the corner."

Ray was speaking about the impending war against Dryfe—the war to end the conflict with the imperium he'd been involved in since his first day in *Infinite Dendrogram*. It was inevitable, and he fully grasped the fact that the decisive war was close at hand.

"That's why I won't choose defeat."

With a bloodied face and a strong will in his eyes, he continued to speak.

"If I looked at the pros and cons of each fight and began accepting 'reasonable' defeats in fights that I 'could' lose, I might start *looking* for reasons to lose the upcoming battles."

Ray knew that when a spirit broke just once, it would forever be covered in cracks that made it easy to break over and over again.

That was why he never chose to break on his own.

He'd lost many battles he could afford to lose.

However, he had never once *chosen defeat*. He'd merely done all he could and been defeated in spite of that.

"As long as the moment of defeat hasn't come, I won't stop trying to seize the possibility of victory."

And this time too, he exerted his freedom and chose to resist until the very end.

"Ray... Ah...!" That was when Nemesis noticed something.

Even while Ray was talking, Cardinal A had continued attacking him. Like the machine that it was, it continued wielding its full power against its opponent.

Despite that, it didn't interrupt Ray's words, and none of its attacks landed.

It was as though death was closing in on him from all sides, yet he was evading it all by a hair's breadth.

"This is..." Nemesis knew this state of his better than anyone else. She'd seen it in the many deadly struggles he'd endured. It was the strength beyond his limits—the power to forge on through the most dangerous circumstances.

It was on the verge of manifesting even in this battle that he could afford to lose.

"And we won't just fight...we'll win."

Even greater power surged through his eyes and each of his limbs.

"I'll surpass who I was... *We* will surpass who *we* were...*and win*!"

He evaded Cardinal A's right arm-blade and slashed it with his twin swords. It only made a scratch, but Ray was not deterred and continued fighting.

He evaded, attacked, evaded, attacked... The damage he dealt seemed insignificant, but this did not drive him to despair. He simply kept on taking these small steps toward victory. He wouldn't give up no matter how many millions of steps he had left.

"I don't care if we're up against an Overlord or Mythical metal...!" As he slashed at the Thrall, he let out a war cry. "We...*we will grow stronger*!" It was the roar of his heart—Ray's will at its purest.

Upon hearing his declaration, Gerbera slightly jumped and put her hand on her chest. As someone who'd once wished to be the strongest, she was affected by his words.

She'd wished to be the strongest, but when confronted with reality, she broke, gave in, and had begun to act as though she was the weakest of all just to avoid any more such heartbreak.

The reason she was morose all the time was because she knew that if she let herself be in high spirits once more, it would hurt even more when she was brought down again.

But even someone like her could not fail to be affected by what Ray said.

Upon hearing Ray's declaration, Sechs smiled. What he'd heard through his fragment made the main body—the head—grin in a way different than usual.

Just like Sechs's dear friend Shu, Ray had turned out to be a person who didn't compromise himself. If Ray had given up at Sechs's suggestion, Sechs wouldn't have spared a second thought for him.

But because Ray remained unbroken...he'd caught Sechs's interest as well.

Upon hearing Ray's declaration, Nemesis smiled as tears ran down her face. This wasn't visible in her weapon form, but she was berating herself for her awful misunderstanding.

She regretted that she had failed to understand this fundamental thing without hearing Ray say it himself.

She reflected upon it, reframed herself, and mentally drew herself up. There was no longer any hesitation in her, and there was no time to look back.

Nemesis once again had a grasp of Ray's desire and will.

That meant that there was only one thing left to do.

His words were "We will grow stronger."

Indeed—it hadn't been "I," but "we." If Ray would reach for victory while surpassing limits he didn't even know were there, then Nemesis also had to become stronger.

Thus, she sought more power, a higher evolution—and a new version of herself.

The XP and Resources that had accumulated deep within her, the combined will of her and her Master, were about to initiate ■■L—the special evolution system left only in Maidens and Apostles—when...

“...Do you seek power?”

...upon hearing Ray’s declaration, *an axe* posed that question.

Chapter Eight: Finest in the Right, Strongest in the Left

A long time ago...

In the distant past, before *a certain world* was even born, one of the previous observers—gods, or "Infinite Jobs," as they could be called—was faced with his creations and overcome by an inner conflict.

This entity called the BLACKSMITH was building the world alongside his colleagues.

Everyone in the group had assumed different roles in assembling this garden—this aggregation of information. One built the world's foundation. One gathered the monsters—including the "gulong" or "ancient dragons." One gathered countless physical materials. One wove the system of jobs. One created the young humanoids who would wield those jobs. One prepared the Archetype System—the control substitute. One set up the trial known as the GAME OVER.

Thus, the program known as "the world" was built by many hands, each responsible for a different aspect.

One of them, the BLACKSMITH, created *only a single weapon*.

It was a weapon meant only for a unique entity bearing a Special Superior Job—a weapon for acquiring this job and a weapon meant to be wielded by it.

It was the possibility that could strike down their trial—The DEMISE—and prevent the end of the world—the GAME OVER.

In short, one could call it the world's strongest weapon.

The BLACKSMITH's brethren entrusted him with the creation of this weapon, and employing all his creative and imaginative prowess, he began forging a masterpiece.

However, he soon found himself in an abyss of indecision.

He was meant to create only *one* masterpiece, yet in front of him, there were two.

All the skill he channeled into this work had led to him creating one weapon too many.

One was a carver of origins—a two-edged blade that transformed the natural shape of all it cut and sliced even through energy itself.

It was the strongest of swords, one that bore the law of absolute severance.

The other was a determiner of all ends—a killing blade, the antithesis of all and everything that heralded certain ruination.

It was the strongest of axes, one that bore the law of absolute annihilation.

A sword of "one." An axe of "all." Faced with these two mighty weapons, nearly finished, the BLACKSMITH found himself lost in thought.

Even with his authority and power, he could only complete one of them, and the weapon that would remain incomplete would not be able to exhibit even a tenth of its projected power. In his eyes, the weapon he did not choose would fall in status from a masterpiece to dross.

Thus, he pondered. He thought long and hard about which of the two he would leave behind.

And in the end, he forged the sword.

Granted the name of "Altar," the blade had appeared in the completed world many times alongside its Sacred Kings and Sacred Princesses. Even after the downfall of the immense pre-ancient civilization, it still found a wielder and returned to etch its name in history once more.

This weapon was the pride of the world—the strongest sword of legend and the symbol of an entire kingdom. It had become so adored that it was the subject of not just biographies, but children's tales as well.

The incomplete axe, on the other hand, was not even given a name. It found itself submerged beneath the tide of history.

It appeared here and there, but was never wielded by one person for long. Occasionally the axe was held by some of the strongest fighters of an era, but they all eventually succumbed to it.

It was a weapon that hurt whoever wielded it. It could rid them of their body parts and sometimes even strip them of their lives.

This foul association resulted in the axe being reviled as a cursed weapon.

History had seen a few Fallen Knights who had thought they could wield the axe without penalty, but its effects were no curse—merely a feature of the weapon—so they had lost their lives all the same.

Indeed, the damage done to the wielder was by design—and both the sword and the axe had actually been the same in this regard.

When used, the *same power* that flowed through their attacks also flowed through their wielders. That indeed made them *seem* like cursed weapons from RPGs—powerful items that could only be used at a steep cost.

Altar, the chosen blade, simply had this effect removed by the BLACKSMITH's final touch—the application of the mechanisms related to the Sacred King job. If the sword hadn't been chosen, it would've become a terrible blade that inflicted the wielder with wounds that never closed.

And because the BLACKSMITH could only finish one weapon, the unchosen axe became nothing but waste and refuse.

It would never be able to display its full potential, for using even 10% of its output was enough for it to blow away its wielder. It harmed all who swung it, making it impossible for it to show its true power.

The moment the sword was chosen over it, the axe's fate was sealed. It became a weapon that would never see the light of day.

The axe itself didn't think much of that fact. It didn't bear any envy toward or grudge against the blade Altar for being chosen, but it still possessed the instincts of a weapon.

It only wished to be wielded by those who sought power.

Though it may have been incomplete dross, it still endeavored to do what a weapon should do.

Thus, it granted power to all those who took it in hand. In exchange for that power, the axe took their limbs and perhaps even their bodies—and because of that, its entire existence was a series of curses it bestowed. The axe became the subject of its wielders' regret, suffering, and despair—and bathed in its victims' grudge and gore. Even those who initially seemed like they could master the weapon eventually died as they drew out more power than they could handle.

This cycle had been repeated countless times throughout its long history. The grudge of those that touched the axe had accumulated and engulfed it in the same manner as it had covered Tenchi's curseblades, and eventually it lost its original white color and became bloodred.

The axe remained the same even after the Incarnations became the managers of this world. Whether due to its lack of name or some other reason, it had not become a UBM. It was still just a weapon that no one could use in any meaningful way.

However, there was a time when things were different.

King of Kings himself had acquired the axe in the wars and took it in hand.

Fearsome as the weapon may have been, he was actually able to use it. He took the damage it inflicted, endured it, and thus wielded the axe's power.

During that time, the axe saw use as the weapon it was born to be—it had fulfilled the purpose of its being.

However, during one battle, the axe lost a piece of itself. Upon seeing this, King of Kings said, "I will not be using this axe again," and stored it away in a vault beneath his capital.

After King of Kings' "disappearance,"' the city in which the vault resided had changed hands many times, but the axe was the only thing in it that had remained untouched. Or, to be more precise, anyone who *did* touch it had died.

However, shortly after The Evil took over the city, one of The Evil's dependents took up the axe. The dependent couldn't wield it as well as King of Kings, but it possessed enough regeneration to make up for the damage the axe inflicted. It also covered the axe in a cursed cloth that gave more direction to the weapon's power, making it easier for the dependent to wield. It channeled great amounts of the axe's potential and struck fear into the hearts of many people, increasing the grudge upon the axe even further.

However, this wielder eventually vanished as well. During the final battle between the Sacred King and The Evil, the axe finally faced Altar—now bearing the subtitle of "Primeval Blade"—and was defeated alongside the dependent that wielded it.

That was the last battle the axe had seen.

By the end of it, the grudge accumulated within the axe had surpassed its limit, covering it in layer upon layer of blackish-red rust.

After that, it was moved to the birthplace of the Sacred King's wife—Over Gladiator, Freymel Gideon. Her home had a vault specifically designed for cursed items, and that was where the axe was stored away.

Since then, many clergymen ranging from mere priests to Hierophants and High Priestesses had tried to uncurse it, but all of them had failed. The axe had remained in the vault until modern times.

During the centuries since, certain information regarding The Evil had purposefully been wiped out, stripping the axe even of its history and reducing it to nothing but a cursed object. This axe which had existed since the beginning of the world could very well have remained dormant in that vault's inventory until the end of time, its history forgotten, no different from any other weapon abandoned there.

...But then Ray Starling took it out.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

"...Do you seek power?" The voice didn't come as a sound—it rang out directly in my head.

At the same time, an insane amount of info flowed into my mind.

I was shown the memory of the axe I'd seen this morning, followed by a bunch of stuff that had happened since that point.

I saw the axe spend countless years hurting the many people who tried to wield it.

I saw people take it up as a weapon, then discard it.

I saw it handled by some monstrous creature who wrapped it in the black cloth I now recognized.

And I saw it defeated by someone wielding Altar—Azurite's ancestor.

And finally, I saw *my own face*, along with the Thrall right in front of me.

"This is...ah! Shit...!" All the info I'd just been bombarded with threw me off and made me stop dead in my tracks for a moment.

I was barely dodging the Thrall's attacks to begin with. There was no way I could dodge the next one now.

"Hm...?"

But contrary to what I expected, the attack didn't hit me.

Actually, the Thrall wasn't moving at all anymore. It had stopped in place while holding up its left blade, ready to swing.

It wasn’t just the Thrall either. Nemesis, Gerbera, my own body...everything besides my thoughts had been rendered immobile. The world itself had also become monochrome, as though stripped of all color.

Only I was different. I looked down and saw my own semitransparent form. It was like I was having an out-of-body experience.

“What...what’s going on here?” Did Overlord Acedia use some skill? He would have no reason to keep my mind free, though.

Then, this has gotta be...

“Indeed. This is a high-speed exchange of information betwixt you and I alone.”

The voice from before...the *axe* explained the situation directly to my mind, like Nemesis with her telepathy.

I couldn’t see it anywhere, though.

“An info exchange...? Was that show from a moment ago part of that too?”

“Indeed. I have conveyed to you the information I possess in a manner you could tolerate.”

It was a high-speed digest that wasn’t even voiced—it was all just some clips and images. I didn’t even know who most of the people were. I only recognized Azurite’s ancestor because I’d seen portraits of him, and I obviously knew it was my face at the end there.

Still, that was enough for me to understand what this axe had gone through—what kind of existence it led simply because it was *incomplete*.

“Now that you understand, I shall repeat the question: do you seek power?” the axe asked me again. “Wielding my power shall bring you harm. It is double-edged in the purest sense—what power is wielded will be returned to its wielder.”

“You...” The axe had told me how it worked pretty clearly. This mechanism had made it hated, yet it remained unbent and unbroken, refusing to change its nature in the slightest.

...This thing’s honest to a fault, huh? I sincerely thought.

“Can I ask something first?”

“I shall permit it.”

“Why did you ask me that *here and now*?” *I mean, you never said anything when I first picked you up or when I fought Lei-Lei,* I added silently.

“There are two reasons. First is the peculiarity of this space.”

“The Dreamland?”

“If your perceptions are correct, then this space welcomes only those that possess a mind of their own. Neither the cloth that binds me nor the mire of grudge that has engulfed me have joined us here. This allows me to act on my own will.”

So this thing was silent in reality because of the cloth and the insane amount of grudge, huh? And it must have really been free to do whatever in dreams, because this actually wasn’t the first time it had tried to communicate with me—I realized our first exchange had actually been the dream from this morning.

“The second reason is *you*.”

“Me?” After a pause that made it seem like it had nodded, the axe continued.

“You wielded me once and had your body broken. You saw the dream and came to know my origin. You suffered defeat, and I brought it upon you. In spite of all that, you have not discarded me. I have brought you harm, yet you continue to seek my power. Such wielders are few and far between. In my entire history, I have witnessed only three.”

I figured the axe was talking about the king-like man, the monstrous creature, and me.

“Thus, I give you this question once more: will you seek my power, though it may shatter your body?”

In response...

“And how *much* power can I get if I let it do that?”

...I asked a question that hinged on a certain decision.

The axe fell silent for a moment.

“Within the memories I received from you, there are words which echo my answer,” it said before continuing with “Enough power that we might defeat this Thrall.”

He must have been talking about the words used by Nemesis.

“Perfect.”

That was why I replied to it the same way I’d replied to her.

I sought power and accepted its nature—that was why that single word was enough of an answer. I chose to wield the axe—to shoulder it, risks and all.

I’d actually been considering using it against the Thrall right from the first. It could have literally cost me an arm and a leg, though, and I didn’t know if it would be strong enough to break Mythical metal anyway.

But now that I knew for sure that victory was within our grasp, I decided I would just gamble on it.

“I still haven’t thought of a name for you, though,” I said. “You okay with that?” I’d promised I’d name it just this morning, but I didn’t have one yet.

“Wait until the moment my true self is unleashed, and you have become my wielder in truth...”

“All right. I’ll think of a good one, then.”

“I shall anticipate it.”

Then, the monochrome world regained its color, and the moment it began to move again, the Thrall swung its blade down toward me.

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Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

Everyone who saw the scarlet blade fall upon Ray was convinced that he’d died.

Ray had stopped moving. He couldn’t possibly evade the strike. The death he’d been narrowly avoiding for so long had finally caught up with him. Gerbera, Sechs, Cardinal A, and even Nemesis knew for certain that the attack had struck home. After all—Cardinal A’s arm had already been swung down. The searing blade of Mythical metal had sunk deep into the Dreamland’s road like it was no more substantial than cake.

Ray was right where it had passed through, and he was certainly split in two now. The bisected pieces of his body were just about to slide apart and collapse pitifully onto the ground.

That was what everyone thought, at least.

“He...EEP!” A moment after that, Gerbera let out a charming yelp and jumped backward. That was because something had flown toward her so fast it had startled her. “Wh-What...huh?” Still shaken, she looked at what it was.

It was a *broken blade*.

The searing-hot Mythical metal had been snapped like a cheap box cutter.

"...G h e?" Cardinal A itself finally noticed that something wasn't right. It looked at its left blade—this part of itself—and realized that it was half gone.

The lower half had sunk into the road beneath, but the upper half that was *supposed* to have sliced its target in half had been sliced instead.

"*The right* will not withstand beyond one more."

"Got it."

And so, the unsevered enemy moved for another *attack*. Though shocked, Cardinal A rushed to protect its head using what remained of its left arm. Its defense power was the same across its whole body, and normally it never had to protect its weak points. In fact, it had never encountered any scenario in which it would have been easily broken.

However, its animalistic instincts, artificial though they may have been, had driven it to shield itself against the enemy's attack.

A moment later, with an ear-splitting crack, what remained of Cardinal A's left arm *shattered*.

It was as though the Mythical metal comprising it was little more than a block of ice.

Cardinal A was overcome by confusion, but the same could be said about Nemesis—the weapon in its enemy's left hand.

"R-Ray...! Your right arm...!"

Nemesis noticed that Ray's right arm had shattered from within. Its bones were pulverized, its blood vessels had exploded, its muscles were torn, and its nerves were sending nonstop signals to the rest of his body saying that something was *very* wrong.

Right now, Ray's right arm was little more than a bag of blood in the vague shape of an arm.

Despite that, it was still grasping a weapon he'd taken out using Instant Equip.

It was a *pure-white axe*.

"...This isn't as bad as it was outside. I swung you twice, but my arm's *still there*."

"Indeed," said the axe. "I am currently able to control myself, and thus I am *only* manifesting enough power to destroy Mythical metal. In the waking world, on the other hand, I am optimized for the hand of my previous wielder. My *Blade-Select* is limited to damage that is physical and aligned to the element of dark, and the power I possess is considerably higher. The price you shall pay to wield me there will obviously be far greater."

In this dream, the pale weapon was stripped of both the deep grudge upon it and the curse-cloth it was wrapped in. But although a single swing of the axe as it was here wasn't enough to destroy Ray's arm, it had already pulverized it enough that it barely counted as a functional limb. The damage upon it was too severe to be undone by anything but jobs from the priest grouping and similar individuals.

A tian warrior would have already been incapacitated, and no one would fault him for reviling the weapon that had caused such great harm to him.

Ray, however, continued to hold the axe with a smile on his face.

Though his body was shattered, he kept on looking ahead, just as he had in his battle against an apex.

"R-Ray...is this...the axe?" asked Nemesis.

"Yeah. I'm switching hands. Hold on so you don't fall."

"...Very well!" Nemesis replied as Ray took her in his right hand and the axe in the left.

She then slightly changed her form so that she was affixed to the damaged arm.

"Anyway, it's now possible for us to beat the Thrall, but my left arm can only swing you twice, huh?" Ray didn't let the axe's power go to his head, nor was he bothered by the state of his right arm—he was completely focused on how he could win.

In isolation, the self-inflicted damage let him swing the axe twice, but he also had Bleeding and other injury-based debuffs that were gradually draining his HP, so it was within the realm of possibility that he would die before he could use those two swings.

Cardinal A, however, still had its right arm and tail.

If it chose to go on the defensive again, it could force Ray to use up both of his swings. Also, it hadn't been evading any of Ray's attacks because it simply didn't need to—but now that it had seen the axe's power, it was likely to take more evasive action.

The axe would damage Ray even if he missed. Trying to destroy a critical part with just the two swings he had left to him was a gamble.

"...G h e." Cardinal A also took a moment to consider its enemy. The Master before him had suddenly found enough power to actually cause it some harm, but it could instantly tell that this power was a double-edged sword—or in this case, an axe.

If Cardinal A chose to run, Ray would likely succumb to the continuous damage from Bleeding and similar debuffs. On the other hand, hitting him just once would end the battle then and there.

The Thrall also remembered the Shining Despair skill that Ray had used at the start of the battle.

The laser and the axe—this enemy had already played two powerful aces up his sleeve.

If Cardinal A focused on running away, it was possible that its opponent would play another one—and for all it knew, it could be something that targeted its creator instead of itself.

It had to prevent that at all costs, so it chose to go on the offensive, flinging out its long tail in a swipe that doubled as a defensive maneuver.

"...By the way, axe."

"What is it?"

"You mentioned something about optimization and being limited to physical and dark damage, didn't you? You're able to..."

Both sides of this battle now possessed a means of destroying one another—and right as they were on the verge of starting the proper fight, Ray posed a third question to the axe.

"...Right?"

"Indeed. Thus my law: 'absolute annihilation.'"

"Okay. In that case..."

Just as the axe's response caused Ray to think of something, Cardinal A made its move.

It used its extended tail-blade to try and decapitate Ray. If this attack killed him, that would be the best outcome for the Thrall. If it forced him to use his self-damaging axe, that would be second best. And if it made Ray evade and break his stance, that was perfectly fine too.

No matter Ray's response, the attack would make the situation better for Cardinal A.

"That means we can do this," Ray said, using the axe to cut off the tail-blade—the second-best scenario for the Thrall.

"Ghe...!" Cardinal A did not miss the opportunity and quickly closed the distance between them. It charged with its right blade forward—if Ray intercepted it with the axe, he would become incapacitated, opening him for a swift death by the Thrall's blade slicing through his head.

But then, Cardinal A suddenly stopped and jumped backward—driven once again by instinct.

The Thrall stopped when it suddenly felt as though it was making a fatal mistake.

The blade of the pale axe had just passed through where Cardinal A's right arm was.

One for the tail, one for this missed attack. That was supposed to deplete the two times Ray could swing the axe with his left arm...*but it hadn't*.

"Yeah. Looks like we *can* do this."

Ray's left arm was still completely unharmed. It wasn't bleeding, and it hadn't shattered.

The only change was that it was entirely covered by *a black cloth*.

"...Ghe?" Cardinal A could not understand. Was the self-damage not a feature of the axe?

But then, it noticed something else.

The cross section of its freshly severed tail was *red-hot*.

It was as though it had been hit by the laser from early in the battle. While its left arm had been shattered, this new injury was the result of unbearably high heat.

"Blade-Select: Light," said the pure-white axe. The weapon responsible for this too. Though it was still pallid, its color was somewhat different than before. Its blade was shining white as though it was under the effect of a Swordmaster's Laser Blade skill.

"It worked..."

Blade-Select.

This was the power that put the axe on the same level as Altar, giving it the potential to be a true masterpiece.

Altar was a weapon of "absolute severance," which let it cut through all and any existence and energy.

The axe, on the other hand, possessed the law of "absolute annihilation."

It *annihilated* anything it hit using energy that was directly opposed to it.

The axe was a counter-weapon against all phenomena, capable of using all elements and attributes—including those unknown to tians and Masters. Even if it didn't employ an opposing element, it could destroy things with the sheer amount of pure energy it delivered.

The power of burning, scorching, evaporating light was no exception, though using it would deliver the same evaporating light upon the wielder, as well.

The self-damaging power of the axe was inescapable. No wielder of this weapon was capable of avoiding this.

However, they could *withstand* it.

"...Look how it all slots into place," Ray said, looking down at his left arm.

The dark cloth enveloping it was the Black Warcoat, Monochrome—the MVP reward that *absorbed all light*.

The two swings of the axe had indeed delivered a blast of damaging energy to the arm that held it, but Monochrome had taken and absorbed it all.

Additionally, the Miasmaflame Bracer on the left hand was the one that fired Purgatorial Flames, giving it a naturally high fire resistance. Combined, these two MVP rewards had effectively neutralized both the light as well as the residual heat that followed it.

This meant as long as the axe was light-aspected, Ray could use it with almost no drawback.

"Now I can fight without caring about the backlash."

And because of this, Ray and Cardinal A had become more or less even.

Both had attacks that could end the other, and victory would go to the one who delivered the killing strike first.

"...The situation has turned so quickly that I am unable to keep up," said Nemesis, unsure how to feel about the speedy and immense—but certainly positive—change the axe had brought. She had only been able to scratch the Mythical metal, but the axe was destroying it with little effort.

She was starting to feel as though it had taken over her position as Ray's weapon.

"I did expect to eventually be joined by a weapon that surpasses me in attack power, but this is nonetheless somewhat difficult to take in," Nemesis said.

"I was designed to be unmatched," the axe said. "It is an inevitability that the power of a novice weapon would be less than mine."

"Who are you calling a novice?! You are the pale newcomer here! Are you picking a fight?!"

"You *are* a novice. It is simply true. And only a contest between equals can truly be called a 'fight.' That does not apply to us. Please explain to me what you mean, umbral novice."

"Why, you little...!"

Caught between the two, Ray put on a wry smile and said, "...Could you two cut it out?"

It also reminded him of something and made him think, *Is this how she is with anything white?*

"B-But, Ray! You're only using that axe now! And I feel that *it* is the reason I failed to evolve!"

"Don't worry." As her Master, Ray also felt that a power had been budding within her, only to go dormant again.

However, that was not a problem. They'd already seized the possibilities.

"We already know how to win this, and we see our new possibilities, don't we?" Ray said. "Isn't that enough?"

All they had to do here was use the cards they had to approach victory.

"But...well...the axe is so immensely strong that... My role..."

Ray laughed at this.

"Stop that!"

"Laughable," commented the axe.

"You be silent too!" Ridiculed by both Ray and the axe, Nemesis was starting to get a bit upset, but...

"That's not really something you'll ever have to worry about, though."

"Huh?"

"I mean, even if this axe here is my *strongest* weapon, of all the things I can wield..." Ray said with a grin, "Nemesis is the *best*, right?"

Ray repeated a familiar phrase—from the heart this time.

"...Yes!" she replied joyfully.

The axe said nothing, only watching the exchange between the longtime wielder and weapon.

It found their bond enviable, and it hoped to experience that someday.

"Aaanyway..." Done talking, Ray faced Cardinal A once more.

After the axe had begun to shine and stripped it of its tail, the Thrall had also drawn back to analyze the situation. It was done with that, however. It seemed to have found a means to defeat Ray, and had rushed forward to face him fully prepared.

But Ray was ready for it as well.

“All right...let’s win this!”

“Certainly!”

“Indeed.”

In Ray’s left hand, clad in light-eating black cloth, there was a pure-white axe that brought annihilation by burning light.

In his right, bloodied and bruised, there was a jet-black greatsword he trusted more than anything else.

His hands, covered by demonic bracers, held both the strongest and the best weapons he could wield.

And so, Ray charged at Cardinal A one last time.

Chapter Nine: The Dream’s End

Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland—the Superior Embryo belonging to ZZZ.

Its ultimate skill, Nightmare Kingdom—Dreamland, was an ability that *switched the dreams and reality* of its Master and any servants he included in the effect.

ZZZ had no knowledge of real dreams. Instead, he thought of them as nothing but an extension of reality. This aspect of him gave rise to an ultimate skill that placed the real body—the player’s HP—into the dream.

Anyone harmed in a dream could not be harmed in reality. Conversely—and through the same principles—the real body of anyone under the effect of this skill was immune to damage.

Though there was an SP limit tied to the number of, as well as additional costs for, extending the skill’s duration, those affected by this skill were invincible in reality. While they were within the dream, they would remain unharmed no matter what happened to their real bodies.

This was what was happening to Cardinal A—the servant of ZZZ now fighting as though it were nothing but its master’s limbs.

Its real body couldn’t be harmed even after April reduced its toughness to absurdly low levels. And as long as Cardinal A’s real body was in the dream, it would remain its guardian—its existence prevented the Thralls imbued with Dreamland from being exterminated, thus making it impossible for those sleeping to wake up.

On the other hand, even if someone within the dream fought with Cardinal A, that would do nothing to deal with the Thralls in reality, which would inevitably lead to their real bodies being destroyed by the Thralls. Someone trapped in the dream would have to somehow destroy all the Thralls in reality *except* Cardinal A, and then defeat Cardinal A inside the dream—which was simply impossible if they couldn’t somehow fight in both the dream and the real world simultaneously.

This was the primary reason that Overlord Acedia, ZZZ remained undefeated.

But now that April had exterminated the Thralls in reality, all of this would fall apart the moment Cardinal A was destroyed in the dream.

And as it happened, there was now someone in the Dreamland who was capable of doing just that.

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The deadly battle between Ray and Cardinal A had now become extremely taxing to both sides.

Ray’s right arm was still bleeding, and even more blood gushed out from countless wounds all over his body every time he swung his blades.

On the other hand, Cardinal A’s Mythical metal body was being carved open every time the axe of searing light struck it, molten metal flowing out as though it were the creature’s blood.

Silently, Sechs watched them fight.

He knew the background of this battle better than anyone else here. From the designs of the white axe, Sechs realized that it had a connection to the celebrated blade of Altar, while his observations of Overlord Acedia’s skill suggested to him that the job was related to The Evil.

He knew this because he had witnessed the powers of The Evil himself—namely, her ability to make monsters out of trees and stones—and felt that Overlord Acedia’s Thralls were far too similar to be a coincidence.

That, combined with his experience with the power of the Overlord Gula, whom he’d fought before—the ability to absorb the Resources of the dead—Sechs guessed that each one of the seven jobs in the Overlord series specialized in one aspect of the skills and traits belonging to The Evil. He figured that they were prototypes for The Evil, or perhaps the other way around.

With that in mind, this fight could be looked at as a clash between lesser versions of Sacred King and The Evil—a strange reflection of the battle that had been waged a few centuries ago.

Ray and ZZZ themselves were completely ignorant of this, but as an onlooker, Sechs saw all of this very clearly. Neither the Sacred King nor The Evil were that important to him, but he thought that there was value in gathering information about them for later.

Even if there wasn't, he was beginning to develop an interest in Ray himself.

Thus, he continued to watch them from the sidelines.

This battle wasn't the only thing Sechs was observing. He also had a full grasp of everything his head saw as Candy carried it, as well as whatever was around all of the tinier slimes he had split into.

He was processing so much visual information it would overwhelm any normal human.

Sechs was a slime and thus did not really have anything that could strictly be called a brain—but on the other hand, it could be said that his entire *body* constituted a brain.

Whether it was the years he'd spent inside *Infinite Dendrogram* or just a natural talent, over time Sechs's mental faculties had diverged more and more from what was strictly "human."

"...There you are." And at that moment, one of his many visual points discovered something.

It was Overlord Acedia, ZZZ himself—the Master was inside his own Dreamland with them.

"I presumed you must be here somewhere," Sechs mused. He had guessed that ZZZ would be inside his own dream—this would be the easiest way for him to explain his skill and use it within Dreamland.

And now, with his body dispersed across Dreamland, Sechs had finally found the Overlord that controlled it.

Currently, ZZZ was using the cloud-screens he'd been seen with earlier to watch the battle between Ray and Cardinal A. With all his attention on those screens, Sechs could easily kill him.

ZZZ was wearing a tapir costume, but it wasn't clear if it offered him any protection, for nothing without a mind actually existed in Dreamland. But even if it did have a mind somehow and functioned as equipment inside the dream, Sechs would certainly be able to deliver a powerful enough attack to break through that. Catching ZZZ off guard and killing him was child's play for Sechs.

However...I will wait a bit.

Despite that, Sechs chose not to assassinate ZZZ yet. That was because he had developed an interest in Ray and wanted to observe Ray's battle a bit longer.

Sechs decided to postpone ZZZ's death until that fight was concluded. Perhaps this was not the most rational choice—but if Sechs was a rational man, he wouldn't have become King of Crime, nor would he have been sent to the gaol.

Sechs Würfel was someone who *followed his heart*—or searched for its desire—and this decision was simply the result of doing just that.

But...this is... After making his decision to keep watching, Sechs actually noticed that the battle had changed somewhat.

Ray was fighting just as he had been before. He used his instincts to evade his enemy's attacks and fight back with the shining axe.

What had changed was Cardinal A's movements. It was acting more and more meek—less aggressive. Despite being a temporary form of life similar to a golem, Cardinal A had become hesitant to attack—almost as though it was afraid of dying. At first it seemed as though the overpowering axe had somehow struck fear into its heart, but...

I see. This is certainly the most efficient way to fight.

Sechs had noticed what Cardinal A was doing and realized that this was something Ray couldn't counter.

Ray, in Sechs's estimation, would almost certainly lose.

"Hey, leader," Gerbera whispered to the piece of Sechs that was currently observing the battle.

"What is it?"

"I'm just guessing here, but..." Gerbera spoke hesitantly and with little confidence, as if she was afraid that she'd guessed wrong. "Isn't that thing just...*buying time*?"

Sechs said nothing in response at first. He didn't show it, but he was actually impressed by what she'd said. It showed that she'd gotten to the point where she was observant enough to notice such things on her own.

"Buying time for what, do you think?" he asked.

"He's fighting that thing because dying in the dream would give him the death penalty, but..." she said as she looked at Ray, still giving it his all, as she thought about what she'd realized—the reason why Ray was actually powerless against Cardinal A's strategy. "That's not the only way to get the death penalty here, right?"

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The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

April instantly noticed the change in Cardinal A's movements.

This was in addition to the many changes in its shape that had happened already.

Its left arm-blade was first broken, then completely shattered, and then the same happened to the tail-blade.

April's attacks did nothing to it, but it was now breaking apart by itself.

This damage was the result of the destruction it had suffered in the dream, but it was accompanied by a change in its actions—more than the effect that the loss of limbs had on its movement.

Though it was still facing April, its focus seemed to be elsewhere.

Thralls had no need for eyes or anything of the sort to begin with. The poorly made mithril Thralls could sense their enemies despite not having any faces, and Cardinal A was no different in that regard—it could focus on something without even looking at it.

As a battle-hardened, combat-focused Prism Person, April noticed detail and waited to see what it would do next.

Was it targeting Sechs? Gerbera? Candy? April herself? She prepared to counter whatever was coming no matter what the creature attacked.

"G h e..." And so, Cardinal A took to action and *fired its head-blade at the speed of sound to sever Silver's legs*.

The two Prism creations were overcome by surprise. The crimson blade that Cardinal A had fired was a kind of hidden weapon it had, and it truly fulfilled its purpose as a surprise attack.

Both April and Silver had been on guard, but there were no lumps of mithril that the creature could have used for the same kind of explosive ranged attack they already knew how to deal with, and Silver was outside its melee range, so they were both unable to counter this new assault.

On top of that, since Ray had suffered heavy damage in the dream just like Cardinal A, that made it even more difficult for Silver to take any intense evasive action.

And thus, the Mythical metal blade that flew toward Silver severed both of his left legs. Silver couldn't actually fly, strictly speaking—he merely made platforms in the air that he galloped on like an ordinary horse would on land. Losing his legs on one side made it impossible for him to remain in the air, causing him to lose his balance and fall.

Despite that, he used Wind Hoof to create an air barrier to cushion the fall and minimize the damage on Ray. Thanks to that, Ray's HP didn't drop to 0 and his death penalty was prevented.

However, the loss of his legs had rendered Silver unable to move anymore—which of course made Ray an easy target as well.

"Ghegheghe..." Cardinal A charged toward them. It was obvious by now that its *target* had already changed. Before, it had been targeting Sechs—the most powerful one here—and April—who was protecting him—but now, it was completely focused on Silver.

Or, to be more precise, Ray's unconscious body which was still clinging to Silver.

That was the realization that both Sechs and Gerbera had come to—the Thrall was now basically treating Ray as he'd been treating Sechs earlier.

Its usual strategy against strong opponents was focused on killing their helpless bodies. Once Ray received an overwhelming power, Cardinal A had given up on defeating him in the dream. The Thrall was still invincible in reality, so now that it had recognized him as the true threat, it had decided to kill Ray's unconscious body there. For the Thrall, the battle in the dream had now been reduced to nothing but a way to buy time—and it was almost done now. Cardinal A's surprise attack had stripped Silver and Ray of any mobility, making it impossible for them to escape.

April's eyes widened as she considered the situation.

Back in pre-ancient times, her role was the protection of VIPs, so having to choose what to prioritize was an everyday thing for her. Her processors quickly analyzed the situation and came upon two possible actions: assisting her brother and his owner, and protecting her *own* owners.

Cardinal A was currently focused on Ray, but it actually didn't have to do that. There was plenty of distance between Sechs's group and Ray, so if April went to protect Silver and his owner, Cardinal A would no doubt go after Sechs instead.

Either way, the Thrall got what it wanted.

It would gladly kill its dreamscape opponent, and it had nothing against killing the other enemies while Ray was being protected. Regardless of whether April helped Ray or not, Cardinal A would be able to kill one of its owner's enemies.

April ran her calculations, taking into consideration every aspect of the situation, and concluded that someone *would* die here. She had no choice but to protect her owners.

Ray's group was cornered—they already had no chance of winning.

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Whimsical Dreality, Dreamland, Interior

Suddenly, Ray felt something strange on his right shoulder.

He was still evading Cardinal A's attacks, but for some reason, he felt as if he'd just been hit by something blunt.

"Oh...I get it now." Ray instantly realized that he was feeling damage his body had received in reality. He'd already noticed the change in Cardinal A's actions and didn't need much time to figure out that it had begun trying its hardest to kill him outside the dream.

That didn't change what Ray planned to do, though.

He couldn't wake up until Cardinal A was defeated, so his only option was to give his all to the fight that lay before him. He had to set aside the fear of being killed in a world he couldn't see and fight in the world he could.

"RRRAAARRGHHH!" He roared and swung the shining axe as he closed the distance between him and Cardinal A. The creature moved to defend itself as though it were frightened by the attack.

The force of Ray's swing with his left pulled him forward, so Nemesis supported him in his right hand to help him maintain balance. He managed to charge at Cardinal A without losing his footing, keeping Cardinal A close even as it tried to retreat to buy time.

"...G h e." Ray's unyielding, unbreakable charge filled the Thrall with panic.

However, the battle was as good as over. Cardinal A had already stripped Silver of any mobility, and it would kill Ray in less than a minute. That meant all it had to do was hold Ray off for that long.

"G h e...!" In order to do that, Cardinal A employed the same secret weapon that had severed Silver's legs—the fireable head-blade.

The blade flew toward Ray as he tried to charge at it yet again. The surprise attack could surely have been fatal, but Ray's instincts allowed him to evade it, however barely.

Still, it made him lose his footing.

Ray's eyes widened as he raised the axe in his left hand, bracing for Cardinal A's follow-up attack.

However, it never came.

In fact, the Thrall had put even more distance between them—it had actually turned away and was now running *away* from him.

Using all the AGI it had, it was speeding off on the dream-road toward the horizon like a startled rabbit.

In its mind, it would've been great if the surprise attack had actually hit—but even now that it hadn't, it could use the distraction the attack had caused to run away.

That had been the *actual* purpose of the attack.

Even if Ray lost his balance, as long as he had the axe, there was still a chance that he would retaliate. But if it just ran away from him as it was doing now, the speed difference between them would make it impossible for Ray to catch up. Even if he used the same laser attack he had earlier, the Thrall could avoid it by just looking in the direction of the cannon.

Cardinal A had considered what was most likely to result in a victory and had chosen to buy time by running away. It was the kind of utilitarian conclusion that truly arose from a mind that was both living and inorganic—the mind of a Thrall.

Alas, *it was a critical mistake*.

"Nemesis, stop it *halfway*."

"Form Shift—Shooting Wheel." Nemesis responded to Ray's words in an instant. Fixed to Ray's right hand, she changed into her third form β—the Shooting Wheel.

At the same time, she sped up and began to spin.

It seemed like a meaningless action. The Shooting Wheel was a form focused on the ranged, homing counterattack called Payback Beyond the Stars. However, because of some trait of the Thrall or Dreamland itself, Cardinal A couldn't add to Ray's damage counter and thus couldn't become the target of the skill. Because of this, Ray's counterattack skills didn't work against Cardinal A.

However, this Shooting Wheel seemed different.

Normally, the transformation from The Black Shield to the Shooting Wheel made the shield bloom like a flower or a star before taking on a shape similar to a windmill. But now, although its handle had grown, the Black Shield wasn't open.

It looked as if it had failed to transform.

Ray then fixed his eyes on the enemy in the distance and touched the dream-road with the semi-transformed Shooting Wheel.

The next moment, *Ray disappeared*.

"...Huh?"

"Heh heh..." Gerbera lost sight of him, but Sechs had seen everything, so he chuckled.

"G h e?"

Cardinal A suddenly heard something behind it, *and its eyes met Ray's, who was quickly approaching it*.

"G h e...?!"

The Thrall was overcome by shock. It had been certain that this opponent had no means to move that fast.

Its surprise only grew when it looked at down at Ray's feet.

He was *riding* the Shooting Wheel.

The tip of the Shooting Wheel—the shield that was supposed to open up—was still closed and *spinning at an immense speed*.

Obviously, it couldn't fire the shooting star in this state. But even though it was closed, it could still do the preparatory action for Payback—the spinning windup.

That turned the sixty second-long spin into a *wheel* and closed the distance between the two of them like an electric unicycle.

Effectively, it was now a vehicle that could deliver Ray right to Cardinal A at an incredible velocity.

"The fact that you can even think of such *acrobatics* is certainly something," Nemesis said.

"I just looked at things from another perspective. There was one other thing that inspired it, though."

The reason Ray could think of something like this on the spot was actually his first battle in that day's Tournament.

Lang had a motorcycle-like Embryo that he'd used for high-speed stunts. That battle had put the idea of "fast, acrobatic movement on wheels" into the back of Ray's mind—and in this battle, right when it counted, that thought came to the forefront and resulted in the ludicrous idea of "high-speed movement using the skill prep-stage Shooting Wheel."

"You are a reckless sort," said the axe.

"Well, this is simply how he is," Nemesis replied. This really was an extremely dangerous thing to do, though. Ray's right arm was already badly damaged, and it was possible that this ride would've torn it right off, and it wouldn't be out of the question for the Shooting Wheel to end up dragging him straight through the dream-road, finally dealing enough damage to kill him.

However, Ray was able to ride it all the way despite this being his first time trying this kind of stunt.

This action truly showed part of what made Ray who he was, for the flair that could make him think of such moves on the spot was yet another one of his strengths.

"We'll end it with the next one...! Raise your output as high as you can!"

"I shall."

As time passed, the Shooting Wheel accelerated its spinning. Holding on to it, Ray gave the axe an order, and it instantly responded. "Give rise to power: a tenth for light—ten percent."

The light on the axe became even brighter. Though it was limited to just the element of light, it now channeled a tenth of its output—the theoretical limit.

The light coming off the part of the axe clutched in Ray's hand was absorbed by Monochrome, but it was now so intense that it burned Ray's face and body without even touching him.

He still held on to it, however, and watched as the distance between him and his enemy closed.

Cardinal A began to panic as the beacon of heat powerful enough to utterly destroy it drew inexorably closer—but at the same time, it knew that victory was at hand.

Outside the dream, the *real* Cardinal A had approached Ray's sleeping body before the Ray inside the dream had caught up. It had just broken through Silver's final Wind Hoof barrier like it was paper.

Cardinal A now had the upper hand. In the dream, Ray's axe would reach Cardinal A and defeat him in only about five seconds, but the real

Cardinal A would kill Ray in no more than three.

However barely, Cardinal A would win this.

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"G h e g h e g h e!"

Silver faced Cardinal A as it swung its right blade toward his owner. The steed was trying to protect Ray, but his efforts were not enough to stop the blade.

It was already clear how this would end. Cardinal A, April, and Silver had taken into account everything they could see and calculated the outcome.

All of them had arrived at the same result—they'd seen no way to turn this around.

Thus...the situation was saved by *something they couldn't see*.

Right before the final moment, Ray's body—which was most certainly in the trajectory of the blade—*slightly changed its position*.

"...G h e?" The real Cardinal A's blade cut through nothing but the air. Ray and Silver had moved out of the blade's range as though something invisible had pushed them. Because of that, Cardinal A had sliced through nothing.

But despite there being nothing, there were *bits of light* scattering around.

It was as though it cut *something invisible* instead of Ray—as though this unseen thing had come to protect him.

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"G h e...?" The event made so little sense that Cardinal A briefly forgot itself in both the dream and reality.

Two seconds later, the pursuer caught up with the Thrall in the dream.

As Ray passed by the creature, still riding the Shooting Wheel, he swung his left hand and used the shining axe to split Cardinal A's torso and head in one stroke.

Thus, the scarlet Thrall wrought of Mythical metal shattered without ever understanding or realizing why it failed and what it had overlooked.

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Ray and Cardinal A’s battle reached a conclusion.

Cardinal A’s real body was split by immense heat, then vanished from the world of dreams. Death had stripped it of its mind, making it lose its right to exist here.

Ray—now victorious—dismounted the Shooting Wheel, and fell to his knees. He was breathing raggedly, no doubt because of the fatigue and injuries.

Gerbera looked at him with a somewhat gloomy expression on her face. Then, she dropped her gaze to the back of her left hand.

Her Embryo was focused on stealth, so even her crest was invisible. She herself could see it, however, and for some reason she was staring at it now.

“...I see,” Sechs said as he looked at both of them and immediately understood exactly what had happened here.

The real Cardinal A’s attack had nearly reached Ray’s sleeping body, but Ray hadn’t died, and then something unexpected had made the Thrall freeze, giving Ray a chance to finish it.

Ray himself didn’t know what had protected him, and Cardinal A hadn’t understood what had come between it and its opponent either.

The only ones who *did* know were Gerbera and Sechs.

It wasn’t April—she would’ve prioritized protecting Sechs’s group even if Ray was at the risk of dying.

Thus, the thing that had protected Ray must have been Gerbera’s Alhazred—the Embryo that *had remained in reality*.

B-But my Alhazred is almost out of HP... I guess I’ll pull him out anyway...

It had happened when Ray had found Sechs’s group and they had all been attacked by Thralls. While Sechs and Candy had sensed the approaching horde and prepared to fight, Gerbera had also done what she could.

Half-dead though the Embryo may have been, she still had pulled Alhazred out of the crest.

He had been so damaged she hadn’t even made him fight the Thralls—but he’d still been there.

Soon after that, Cardinal A had blown up a mithril Thrall and spread

Dreamland's aura in every direction. This indiscriminate, wide-scale spread had obviously caught Alhazred as well.

Faint though it might have been, he was an Embryo with a mind of his own, which meant that he, too, should've been drawn into the dream.

However, he was a Superior Embryo specialized in stealth. He couldn't be seen, heard, or felt.

That was why not even Dreamland had realized that it had touched Alhazred, and as a result had been unable to pull him into the dream. It simply hadn't even noticed that he was there.

After that, Alhazred had simply stood by his sleeping Master. The Embryo had been left behind by the dream and remained in reality.

That was the reason why Gerbera was unable to use him in Dreamland.

However, when Sechs had told Gerbera his guess about Alhazred's state—that, having been barred from the Dreamland, he was likely still nearby in reality—the situation had changed.

Knowing that he was out there, Gerbera called out to him from the dream and sent him a thought: "protect me."

Normally, he could share his vision with her, but the barrier between the dream and reality prevented that. She couldn't know what was happening in reality and could only give him the vaguest of orders, but Alhazred still did as he was told and stood ready to protect her if need be.

But then the order changed.

When Gerbera realized that Cardinal A had changed its strategy and was now trying to kill Ray in reality, she ordered Alhazred to "protect him" instead.

She might have done this unconsciously, but something within her had asked for this. Upon receiving the order, Alhazred moved to protect Ray.

The prison break had left Alhazred half-dead, so he didn't have the power to fight Cardinal A—but he still did whatever he could to save Ray and Silver from the Thrall's attack—to fulfill his Master's command.

"Hmm." Sechs was in the dream, so he obviously hadn't actually seen any of this. However, he understood what had happened when he saw Gerbera looking at her crest.

She'd sacrificed her Embryo to protect someone else.

This was something that neither the old Gerbera nor the Gerbera that had received Sechs's guidance would have ever done.

That meant that something had happened during the brief time she'd spent here in the dream that had an effect on her. She'd been influenced enough that she no longer wished for Ray to be defeated in this way.

The influence he has on other people may be even greater than Shu's, Sechs thought, wondering about the degree to which they themselves may have been influenced in return. *Anyway...*

However, there was something Sechs had to do first.

The battle was over, but they were still in Dreamland. Though the Thralls binding them to the dream were gone, they could now do nothing but wait until they woke up naturally.

After all, you couldn't wake from a *nightmare* by just wishing for it or struggling fruitlessly.

It would be quickest if April woke them up, but it didn't seem like she was doing that yet.

However, they couldn't stay here for much longer——it was possible that a second wave of Thralls could come before they woke up. For all they knew, more Thralls might already be on their way.

Time to kill Overlord Acedia and escape this Dreamland, Sechs thought, moving his focus to the piece of himself that he was hiding near ZZZ.

He would use the element of surprise to deliver a fatal attack, and that would be the end of this. Though a great many unforeseen things had happened since his escape, that would return everything to its expected course.

They would kill Overlord Acedia, wake up, and leave before Ray realized who they were. Then, they would pass by the defeated Overlord's territory and move to the east of the continent while avoiding contact. And if they could meet Rascal's group in Caldina, they'd be in the clear.

"Hm...?" As Sechs pictured what would happen next, he was overcome by a *strange feeling*.

Actually, it wasn't the feeling itself that was strange. He'd experienced it many times here and even in the gaol.

However, he hadn't felt it once while in this dream.

It was...

"Wind...?"

...the feeling of air flowing across his skin.

The air in the dream had been completely still the entire time, but it had suddenly begun to move.

The source of this wind was the thing in Ray's hand—Nemesis. Even now after they'd chased down and defeated Cardinal A, the Shooting Wheel was still spinning.

The windmill that had been closed for his victorious ride against the Thrall was now blooming like a flower.

"Is he actually...?!" Sechs suddenly realized what Ray was about to do.

Ray wasn't done yet. He might've beaten Cardinal A, but in his mind, the fight was still ongoing.

There was still the enemy who'd actually contributed to his damage counter—Overlord Acedia, ZZZ.

They were up against someone who'd sent a horde of Thralls after them. It was naive to think that nothing else was coming just because they'd defeated the one unique monster they'd encountered.

Thus, Ray was now preparing to defeat the Overlord.

He'd come upon the same idea as Sechs, and as damaged as he was, Ray was in no condition for any more prolonged fights. Instead, he decided to use something that would end it right away.

"Payback..."

The acceleration of the spinning blades topped out, and they reached their highest speed. And so, for the first time since the battle against the Hell General, the shooting star prepared to fly once more.

This was the power Ray and Nemesis had created to reach things too distant for them, as well as the strongest attack currently possessed by the Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis.

The Shooting Wheel wasn't a wheel that blazed on the road...

"...Beyond the Stars."

...but a star speeding through the heavens.

Nemesis became a star moving close to the speed of sound and arced through the clouded dreamscape.

The total damage Ray had suffered at the hands of Cardinal A was easily above 50,000. It was far greater than Ray's current HP—a volume of built-up damage so great it would've killed him if he hadn't used healing magic.

The overwhelming speed it provided was now propelling Nemesis through the world of dreams. She followed her damage counter and went directly toward its source. Her eyes didn't help here, but her unique sense was showing her the way.

The target was, of course, Overlord Acedia, ZZZ.

He was the one who'd sent the Thralls—his limbs—and was thus the true source of the damage inflicted upon Ray.

Just like Sechs, Ray had also realized that using skills in this dream would require ZZZ himself to be here too.

That was why he figured that Payback would be able to reach him.

"There you are!"

Nemesis finally caught sight of the man clad in a tapir suit. However, ZZZ himself also noticed the enemy flying toward him and immediately responded with a skill.

"...Sleepwalking." This was the ability that allowed him to control his army's position within the dream. It was what he'd used to send out Cardinal A, and now he used it to place himself far away from Nemesis. Though it had a long cooldown and only worked within the dream, it was a teleportation skill that let him change positions as he wished.

Using it had placed ZZZ at the point in the Dreamland that was farthest away from both the piece of Sechs and Nemesis. Dreamland had a limited size, but it still put him dozens of kilometels away.

"That should do it," ZZZ muttered. He didn't know anything about Ray and Nemesis, and she hadn't gotten the chance to show many of her powers in the battle against Cardinal A. He obviously didn't know how Payback worked, but its homing range was limited to just a tenth of the total damage counter. The range of this flight was just about 5,000 metels, and now that the distance had increased, Payback couldn't reach him anymore.

ZZZ had made the right move...

"...Still coming after me, huuuhh?"

...or at least, he would have, if this hadn't been *a dream*.

5,000 metels. 10,000 metels.

Nemesis surpassed her maximum range and continued flying.

The reason for this was simple—this was a dream.

It was the same principle that had allowed Sechs to spread his divided body without limit—in a dream, the concept of distance simply didn't exist, though it was unclear if this was just a general property of dreams or because none of them had actually moved in reality.

However, ironically enough, this facet of the dream worked against its own Master.

“You will not escape me this time...!” Nemesis continued to chase after ZZZ. She flew without limit, following the source of the damage counter, not slowing down her spin one bit.

Eventually, she had ZZZ in her sight once again.

“Found agaiiinnn...” ZZZ drawled, realizing he couldn’t escape a second time. Sleepwalking could only be used on the same target after a 30 minute cooldown. If it didn’t have such a limitation, he would’ve used it to support Cardinal A when it had tried to run away to buy time.

The cooldown applied to ZZZ himself as well.

Overlord Acedia also had some of the lowest stats in the Overlord series of jobs. All but a few of his stats were below Cardinal A’s, and he had no hope of evading the coming attack.

ZZZ let out a sigh and looked at Nemesis as she flew toward him. Then, he raised up his arms to cover his head and heart.

“Dreamland...” He spoke to his Embryo—this very space itself.

And right when he was about to deliver an order, *the Shooting Wheel pierced into the arm covering his head*.

The very next moment, the tripled damage from Payback was delivered upon him.

The pure damage flowing into ZZZ’s right arm was starting to shatter it, when...

“*Self-destruct*.”

...he finally issued his final order.

At that moment, Dreamland lost its color. It lost its sound...and was finally undone.

Epilogue: Alone in the Dark

Northern Legendaria, Sloth Village

ZZZ woke up in his bedroom and, following a brief moment of silence, slowly got up.

The sheepkin maids attending to him were surprised, as it was rare for him to wake up before dinnertime. But then, they realized that blood was seeping through the right arm of his costume, dripping to the ground. There was so much of it that it made a puddle.

"Master Z?!" The maids began to panic, hastily taking out some healing items and rushing to treat him. "We will treat the wound! Please remove your clothes..."

"...'kay." Urged by the maid, ZZZ took off the tapir costume, revealing his true form and avatar—a youth with a face that would be handsome if not for the bags under his eyes.

ZZZ let out a rather gloomy sigh. It wasn't the treatment or the need to take off his clothes that was bothering him, but the enemies he'd faced in the dream.

If it had hit a critical part of his body, that final attack would've actually killed him. He had no means of preventing fatal damage—nobody could bring Lifesaving Brooches to the dream, and he was no exception.

However, he'd only used Dreamland's *last skill after he received the tripled damage from Payback—not before*.

The reason he survived was because he'd covered his critical body parts with his arms, and because he just had massive amounts of HP.

As far as Overlords went, Overlord Acedia had staggeringly low stats. Despite being a Superior Job with nearly 1,000 levels, his STR, AGI, and similar stats weren't much higher than a maxed out high-rank's would be.

However, when it came to HP and SP, he was far above the average Superior Job.

His HP was easily above 6,000,000, and his arm was able to preserve its shape even after Nemesis damaged it for 150,000.

If that damage had been dealt to his head or chest, though, it would've inflicted him with injury-based debuffs that would've surely killed him eventually.

This battle was actually dangerous to ZZZ himself. It had been a while since he'd almost died in the dream.

Or maybe... ZZZ knew that the Shooting Wheel may not have been the only attack he'd had to watch out for. And he was completely correct—Sechs had come extremely close to assassinating him. *I hope they all retreat now, at least...*

The Dream's End was Dreamland's last skill, usable only at the expense of Dreamland destroying itself.

It had two effects.

First, it canceled the Sleep and Forced Sleep effects on those trapped in Dreamland and everyone around ZZZ in reality.

And second, it reduced the MP and SP of all affected creatures by an amount equal to ZZZ's own SP.

That was the other stat besides HP that Overlord Acedia excelled at, and since most skills relied on MP and SP, The Dream's End made most of them unusable. There were consumable items that restored MP and SP, of course, but the amount they could restore at a time was limited and depended on item quality.

Because of this, The Dream's End guaranteed that those affected wouldn't be fit for much more combat.

This skill that destroyed the land of dreams was like the concept of awakening given real power. It may have been a reflection of the person ZZZ once was—someone who wished for sleep and didn't seek much else.

"...Man, but it's sure been a long time since I used it." The Dream's End was one of the aces up ZZZ's sleeve, as well as the reason why he'd become wanted. While testing his skills one day, he'd used it in the city he'd been staying at.

There were two things he'd failed to consider back then.

First, there was the fact that it was a skill that temporarily destroyed Dreamland.

Second, the range of the effect was far greater than ZZZ had expected, engulfing half of the city.

The infrastructure of Legendarian cities depended on magic to function, so the resulting loss of MP was the equivalent of a blackout, if not worse.

Intentional or not, ZZZ had committed an act of terrorism, and though nobody had died, it placed him on the wanted list.

He hadn't used the skill since, both because he simply hadn't needed to and because it made his Dreamland self-destruct and become unusable for a few days until it was restored. ZZZ hadn't even been Overlord Acedia back when he'd first tried the skill, and he had gone against his own wishes and chosen to spend the time until Dreamland refreshed logged out—in the world where he could not sleep.

Brief or not, the destruction of Dreamland was a major loss to him.

Though...I have other ways to fight these days... He'd sent dozens of mithril Thralls to fight today, but he still had several times more than that placed around the settlement. He also still had one party's worth of custom golems which he'd used before the Thralls became available to him.

And then there were the special Thralls besides Cardinal A—the ones made using UBM MVP materials.

He wouldn't send them out, as they were part of his defensive forces, but for the most part they would be enough to intercept and defeat any attackers. But if someone did manage to break through to the village, ZZZ would have a problem.

Based on what he'd seen in the dream, he already knew that his current enemies were capable of that.

In the past, ZZZ would have just fled if he encountered a situation where he couldn't use Dreamland.

But now he had a reason *not* to do that.

He looked over at the sheepkin maids earnestly treating his wound. They were all people who could only live here because of ZZZ, and they were the real reason why he'd chosen to intercept the group of Masters that had appeared.

If these enemies of his went on to bring harm to these people, he would...

"Umm, is anything the matter?" One of the maids looked up at him with worry in her eyes.

He quickly assumed his usual relaxed demeanor and said, "All's fine, all's goood. Don't worry, no probs heeere."

ZZZ had been living in this settlement for a while now. He'd stumbled upon it shortly after becoming Overlord Acedia, and over two years had passed in *Dendro* since then.

ZZZ had entered *Infinite Dendrogram* in search of nothing but the sleep he lacked in reality, hoping to finally live a life that included true rest.

There were only two other things besides sleep that he cared about—the few friends he'd made here, and the sheepkin living in this village.

The Overlord who treasured the people around him had already decided that if necessary, he would use *his final power as the Overlord*.

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The Southernmost Edge of Altar, A Mountain Forest Near the Border

Sechs's party woke up right after Dreamland collapsed.

They quickly checked their stats and realized that their MP and SP were at 0.

Immediately, each one of them realized that ZZZ must've done something to them when he'd canceled Dreamland. They all tried to recover a bit using the items they had on hand, but it was far from enough healing to make them fully ready for combat.

"Ughhh...well, that's awful," said Gerbera, downing a bitter potion. She was talking both about the taste and the fact that she had now confirmed that Alhazred had vanished in reality. Then, she glanced downward and spotted Ray, lying on the ground bloodied and still unconscious. "...Why isn't *he* waking up, though?" she asked.

"Looks like he just Fainted," said Candy. "Nothing to do with any weird dream stuff. I guess he just took a little too much damage."

"Ohh, I see," said Gerbera.

The damage Ray had received in the battle against Cardinal A had been immense. It couldn't have made him Faint in Dreamland because he was already unconscious, but it was so severe that the moment Dreamland's Forced Sleep was dispelled, he seamlessly shifted to Fainting.

Even Nemesis was nowhere in sight, either in human or weapon form. She must've been so fatigued that she was forced to retreat to the crest to recover.

"This is good for us, though," Candy said. "This way, he won't find out who we are."

All Ray knew about them so far was Gerbera's name and that the woman who'd treated her—Sechs wearing The Saint's skin—was their clan leader. He didn't know Sechs and Candy's names, jobs, or even the name of their clan. He lacked the knowledge to conclude that IF had broken out of the gaol, and since IF didn't exactly want people to know about *that* yet, this was a good outcome for them all.

Gerbera continued looking down at Ray, not saying a word.

He was bleeding and steadily losing health—he would surely die if ignored. Ray's battle with Overlord Acedia would effectively end in a draw, and he would remain clueless about who they were.

That was the most convenient outcome for IF.

However...Gerbera sighed as she took out a potion and poured it over him.

It was low-quality and had no effect on his broken bones and other more serious injuries, but it did stop the Bleeding effect.

Once she confirmed that was the case, Gerbera tossed the empty bottle aside.

“Gerby?” asked Candy, who was starting to feel that Gerbera wasn’t acting quite like herself.

“We should probably leave. Let’s go,” said Gerbera, who was thinking the exact same thing. She began walking off into the woods.

“What? Did you fall for him or something?” Candy asked as he caught up.

“Keep saying stupid stuff like that and I’ll kill you in your sleep,” Gerbera replied with a terrible scowl.

Indeed—it certainly wasn’t love or anything that she was feeling now. Gerbera wasn’t lying about that.

If she had to say how she felt about Ray, she would probably say that she found him “dazzling.”

She was overwhelmed by the radiance of a man who refused to break before an overwhelming foe and never chose defeat. When she compared him to her current self—which was the result of compromise—she couldn’t help but be dazzled by Ray...and admire him a little.

Noticing this change within Gerbera, Sechs followed her and Candy into the forest.

Behind him was April, who seemed to be communicating with Silver. The Prism Person and the Prism Steed may have had something to talk about.

However, when Sechs and his party walked off, April excused herself to Silver and followed after them.

Once they were far enough away from Ray, Sechs said, “It appears we will have to change our plans a little.”

“We got out of Overlord Acedia’s dream, but we won’t go through Legendaria and Caldina like we planned, huh?” asked Candy.

“We cannot take that route because Overlord Acedia is still alive, yes. Though we also did not know about his domain to begin with, so...perhaps he lived in a hidden village of some kind?”

Their original plans had involved going south and heading toward their destination while avoiding well-populated areas and Desire’s domains. La

Crima had gathered the relevant information for this back when he'd tried to recruit them.

However, Overlord Acedia's domain—the hidden settlement of the sheepkin—was in a location they hadn't accounted for. ZZZ never left the village and thus had never been encountered by La Crima, so they obviously didn't know its location.

They'd all made a mistake there, but Sechs was concerned that not killing ZZZ in the dream would turn out to be an even bigger error.

"But we won, didn't we?" asked Gerbera.

"Yes, but we did not *kill* him." Overlord Acedia was defeated, but not dead. That was the biggest problem for them now. "We do not know if we have seen all of that Embryo's abilities. Also...April?"

Sechs urged April to reference the records of the pre-ancient civilization—the Overlord data recorded in the history predating even her—and reveal more about the job.

"The Overlord series of jobs all, without exception, have a *final* ultimate skill," she said.

"A final...ult?"

"The final ultimate of the Overlord Acedia is 'The End of Sloth.' It removes the user's combat restriction and turns them into 'a terrifying monstrosity bearing the combined stats of all Thralls the user has ever made.'"

It was a skill that would birth an anomalous being that had the stats of Cardinal A *and* all of ZZZ's other Thralls. This would no doubt raise him past Mythical-tier and perhaps even give him the stats to match the ultimate form of the Physical Apex herself.

"It's like the second form of some evil overlord from an RPG..." said Gerbera with a scowl before putting on a wry grin and saying, "Wait, that's *exactly* what it is..."

"He would surely use it if we give him a reason to," said Sechs. "The battle we just had must have put him on high alert."

ZZZ's unbeatable strategy had fallen apart, while he himself had received damage and was functionally forced to retreat. If there was a second round, he would certainly use forces far above the ones he'd deployed this time.

"Even if we decide to use Candy's diseases to defeat him from a distance, his monstrous transformation would render viruses that attack humans utterly useless, would it not?"

"What a pain in the butt." Candy's diseases were terrifying in their capacity for wide-scale extermination and suppression, but they had no effect on targets he knew nothing about. He could do something while Overlord Acedia was still human, but he certainly didn't have any data on the monstrosity he would become if he used The End of Sloth.

In fact, it was questionable if *anything* Candy had could work on ZZZ if he was clad in Dreamland's aura either. Overlord Acedia couldn't deploy Dreamland at that moment, but the group had no way of knowing that.

"Because of all this, we should continue on while avoiding his domain in northern Legendaria. This will make the journey longer than planned, and the meeting with the others as well as our arrival to the destination will be delayed by quite a while. We are left with no choice, however."

Sechs only had a quarter of his maximum HP, Candy had compatibility issues, and Gerbera's Alhazred was completely gone. They weren't at their best, so fighting ZZZ was far too risky. Even one of their deaths would be a major blow to the whole group, so it was better to stay away from him, even if it meant that their arrival would be delayed significantly.

"I must say, it really is something that a wrench was thrown into our plans so soon after we broke out. He certainly did not intend to do this, but...still. Quite impressive."

Thanks to Ray getting caught up in all this, they had defeated ZZZ with little effort on their part. However, they would've likely won even if Ray hadn't been there. They had April protecting their defenseless bodies in reality, and inside the dream they had Sechs on their side.

Sechs would have been able to defeat Cardinal A before his real body was killed, and it was even possible that he could have assassinated ZZZ before the Overlord used his final skill.

But thanks to Ray persevering as he had, the battle ended with ZZZ still alive.

One could say that Illegal Frontier's plan had been so heavily delayed *because* Ray happened to be there.

I could have killed ZZZ instead of watching... No. I wanted to see what happened. I suppose it is what it is, Sechs thought. If his curiosity had negative consequences, Sechs would accept that.

He seems to possess a fate that invites such chance meetings. Does it run in the family...Shu? Sechs thought of his friend and true rival's face and put on a wry grin before turning to Candy and Gerbera and discussing the new route with them.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

"This place is..." Before I realized it, I was in a place different from Dreamland—a space that consisted mainly of roads above the clouds.

Right now, I was in complete darkness, but I could stand on my own two feet and see my own body. This was the place I occasionally visited while Fainted or Unconscious.

Well, this wasn't Dreamland, at least.

How had the battle ended, anyway?

"It looks like...you won?" I turned to the source of the voice and saw Gardranda—not the smol version, but the standard one.

"I have confirmed the collapse of the space from moments ago. *This* is a space within yourself. No one else is connected to it," said the white axe, floating a bit away from us.

I guess that's pretty easy to believe when it's coming from you two. You mess with my dreams on the regular, I thought.

"Where are we, if I may ask?" It seemed that this time, though, Nemesis was here too. This was new—she hadn't been in any of these dreams before.

Was this because of Dreamland, or was it something else? I wondered.

"Until now...I was closing her out..."

"As was I."

Oh, so they were leaving her outside on purpose. *Man, they really did mess with my dreams however they wanted, huh...?*

"Hm...?" I noticed Gardranda looking up at me, and her eyes had a hint of bitterness in them.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I didn't get to do anything...this time." Oh yeah, now that she mentioned it, I didn't use the Miasmaflame Bracers for much the whole time I was in the Dreamland. Purgatorial Flames couldn't do much against

Mythical metal.

As for the powerful Miasmaflame Princess, Gardranda herself...

"I don't *personally* have enough MP to summon you." Without the Grudge-Soaked Greaves, I had no way to cover the skill's exorbitant costs.

That had all added up to the bracers basically being useless this time.

Honestly, I felt like the root cause was really that I'd been fighting way too many enemies who were above me. Both the Miasmaflame Bracers and the Black Warcoat had been adjusted in a way to help me fight stronger opponents, making them poorly balanced and hard to use in a lot of situations.

Most of my gear only really became useful through some sort of synergy between them. The thing with the axe and the Black Warcoat was a good example of that.

"We didn't even get to use Big *or* Small this time..." said Gardranda. "Maybe...next time?"

"Speaking of which, if I used it and called you with Maximum...it would obviously increase your stats and the cost of summoning, but what about the drawbacks? Would it make them worse?"

She quickly turned away from me and said, "...Dunno."

"HEY!" *Look me in the eyes when you say that! Are you trying to scare me?!*

"Ray, if I may ask... Is this a good time for such tomfoolery? What about your wounds?" Nemesis asked, clearly worried.

Oh yeah—the battle with the Thrall had left me pretty battered. I didn't get the death penalty, but I could still Bleed to death while Fainted.

I became a bit uneasy when...

"The wounds are deep, but not fatal. Your bleeding has ceased as well. You will awake in a while."

"Really?"

"It is certain." The axe told me all of that as if to dispel my worries.

Nemesis and I didn't know what was happening in reality, but the axe somehow did.

I now know its origin, but it's still full of mysteries, huh? I thought.

"This knowledge is not important enough to be seen as a mystery. I merely happen to possess a function that allows me to sense the state of my wielder. It is meant to enable me to reference your remaining life force and adjust my power output in a way that would not kill you or bring you close to death."

Well, that made sense. Knowing how it worked, with the whole self-damage thing...yeah, this feature was probably necessary.

"There is more knowledge I must impart upon you before you awaken," the axe said.

"Yeah?"

"Though you were able to wield me in the dream, you will be unable to wield me in reality for some time."

"Yeah, I figured..." Dreamland was a space that excluded anything without a mind, so the axe was free of the grudge binding it—but all of that was still there in reality, and it remained too dense for Gouz-Maise to uncurse it.

"As long as the grudge and the curse-cloth lay upon me, I cannot choose the nature of my power nor control my output. Unlike King of Kings or The Evil's dependent who came before, you are not yet powerful enough to withstand the price of wielding me. Swing me, and you will find yourself destroyed."

The reason why I could use the axe in that battle just now was because the axe could control *itself,* and I could use Monochrome to minimize the damage to myself. If I used it in reality, I'd just be repeating what had happened this morning.

"All right. I guess I'll be using your powers some other time, then."

"Indeed."

"Until then, I'll keep on absorbing the grudge and look for a way to remove the cloth. Oh, and think of a name for you, of course."

"I shall anticipate it." The axe said the same thing it had said right before I'd wielded it against the Thrall.

"That aside...it seems that you have become a Sorcerer for naught," said Nemesis.

"...Ohh." I'd taken the job thinking that I could use it to let me wield the axe, but now I knew that it wouldn't help with the self-damage much. Based on what the axe had shown me, even Fallen Knights were helpless against that effect, so when I needed to open up a low-rank job slot, Sorcerer would probably be the first to go.

"Indeed. The sorcerer grouping does not contribute to the act of wielding me. However, you should not purge Sorcerer. Or, to be more precise...you should not close off a future possibility."

"Huh?" The axe *itself* was suggesting that I keep Sorcerer. But why? It just said that the job was irrelevant to it.

"You have chosen Paladin and Death Soldier, you wield fire, and you know near-death experiences. I did not see this in your memory, exactly, but this degree of alignment did not feel like a mere coincidence..."

"Wait, what are you talking about?"

The axe fell silent for a good moment before saying, "*A mixed Superior Job.*"

My eyes widened. While SJs like King of Destruction were unlocked through focus on a single grouping and the likes of The Unsheath were available to those with one transcendental technique, mixed Superior Jobs were the result of mixing jobs from multiple completely different groupings. A good example of this was Xunyu's Master Jiangshi.

"That...exists? There's an SJ like that?"

"Indeed. It is currently unclaimed, and your memory tells me that the conditions for attaining it appear to be lost. That is understandable, as they are peculiar even by the standards of mixed Superior Jobs."

"Do you know them, then?"

"I do. However, I cannot reveal them in detail. There is a restriction upon me."

A restriction...?

"While I was created by the BLACKSMITH, jobs were arranged by the FINDER. Those who satisfy the conditions are granted even greater power—that is the grand principle. The more difficult and peculiar the conditions, the more obvious this becomes. Thus, I cannot reveal them. To be more precise, we are not *allowed* to describe the conditions of unclaimed Superior Jobs."

Well, looking at it from the perspective of the person who created the jobs, it made sense that you wouldn't want anything going around and giving away the answers.

I listened as the axe continued. "Thus, I am incapable of imparting to you the name or conditions of the Superior Job at the end of the path you walk. I can only reveal what you have already achieved. What you have already heard from me is the limit of what I am permitted to say."

That stuff about Paladin, Death Soldier, and Sorcerer, huh...?

"I have a question," said Nemesis. "Can you reveal the conditions of taken Superior Jobs?"

"Indeed I can. There is no such restriction for occupied Superior Jobs."

...Really?

"Wait, you're able to tell if a job is taken or not?" I asked.

"Indeed. It is one of my functions."

This thing sure has a lot of features.

"To make it brief," the axe added, "it is a derivation of the function meant to create a link with a job, akin to the one between Altar and Sacred King. As there cannot be two Sacred Kings at one time, we are capable of seeing whether Superior Jobs are taken. However, as I am incomplete and was never linked to any specific job, this function of mine will never see proper use."

I guess that makes sense, yeah.

"Then...what is the most difficult condition for a taken Superior Job?" Nemesis asked, clearly out of mere curiosity.

The axe said nothing at first—it seemed like it was thinking. I couldn't tell whether it was checking if the jobs were taken, comparing conditions, or both, but eventually, it gave an answer.

"The most striking is the Superior Job with the following condition: 'While fighting alone and without having any high-rank jobs or Superior Jobs, kill 10 Superior Jobs whose total level and combined STR, AGI, and END are at least 10x your own.'"

"What the hell kinda condition is that?" That meant you had to kill 10 SJs while still only having low-rank jobs yourself—and since the combined stat thing focused exclusively on physical stats, you couldn't satisfy the condition by using surprise attacks to kill people with more vulnerable magic or crafting jobs.

It was also "at least 10x," but knowing the difference between people who got Superior Jobs and those who only had low-rank jobs, the odds of the stat gap being *just* 10x were pretty low.

Hell, because it was "at least 10x," that also meant you could only take like one or two low-rank jobs before you started to risk raising your stats too high to find enough SJs to qualify on top of that.

And back when there were just tians, everyone going for it would have been literally putting their lives on the line, so there would've been no SJs who'd just let themselves get killed. No matter how I looked at it, this condition seemed absurdly difficult.

"The kills are only recognized as such if the Superior Job becomes vacant. Thus, it does not count the use of barrier devices and deaths of your kind, who revive when slain and maintain their Superior Jobs."

Now I was sure the condition was totally impossible. I felt like FINDER had to have thought up this condition knowing that it would never be fulfilled.

"Hm...?" *Wait, hold on,* I thought. The axe had said that it could only reveal the conditions of *taken* SJs, right? Someone...had actually fulfilled it?

"So, what is the Superior Job that has this deranged condition?" Nemesis asked.

In response, the axe...

"The job belonging to one of my previous wielders—*King of Kings*."

...brought up a legend from six hundred years ago.

"King of Kings..." I'd seen him in the axe's memories—he was the wielder who'd mastered the weapon. Even before I'd seen the memories, I'd heard that six centuries ago, during the Era of the Peerless Three, King of Kings had been a dominant, nigh-unstoppable hegemon who had split the world in two before disappearing at the end of that era.

"This is my conjecture, but I believe he is most likely still alive. While I was without an owner, I often looked into it, and King of Kings has never once become vacant."

I didn't know what to say. I'd heard there were long-lived humanoids, but was he actually still alive somewhere? After disappearing six hundred years ago?

"What if this is a sign of even more immense trouble in the future?" asked Nemesis.

"Don't say stuff like that. You're tempting fate." This day and age had plenty of problems already. I really didn't want the guy who split the world in two to come back and make things even worse.

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“...Hm?” I’d been talking to the three when I suddenly found myself looking up at the sky.

Apparently, I’d woken up.

The sky above was being veiled by night. I looked to the side and saw Silver, lying on the ground and staring at me.

Both of his left legs had been severed.

“You didn’t have it easy either, huh?”

All silent, Silver brought his nose to my face and returned to my inventory on his own.

“...You did good.” I didn’t know if Silver’s legs were accounted for by his self-repair function. If they weren’t, I’d have to consult Integra and her knowledge of the pre-ancient civilization, or Blue Screen at the SMPS factory. Gold Thunder had suffered worse damage than this and had still been successfully repaired, so I wanted to believe Silver would be okay too.

“Hm...?” I felt something hard touch my fingers.

It was an empty potion bottle, lying on the bare ground.

I also realized that my body was a bit wet.

“I guess they gave me first aid.”

I couldn’t see the women anywhere. I figured they must’ve walked off after giving me the potion.

I still had no idea who they were—but, for some reason, I felt like we would eventually meet again.

“Anyway. Looking at the time, I’m guessing the Tournament today is about to end.” Silver couldn’t move, while I was injured all over. The many status effects on me included binding-type debuffs stemming from damage. This prevented me from returning to Gideon by logging out.

It didn’t look like I could return to the city before Lei-Lei won the Tournament and it was time to fight the UBM. Lei-Lei was a busy person, so she probably had to beat the UBM as quickly as possible. I had to use a comms magic item to tell Shu that I wouldn’t make it.

Also, it’d be nice if I could get someone to come pick me up.

“...Phew.” I had to get in touch with someone in real life, but before I did that, I let out a sigh and looked up.

The sky was completely dark and my surroundings were all quiet. I couldn’t hear any flying birds or even insect noises anywhere in the dark forest. Nemesis was still asleep, the axe wasn’t speaking to me in reality, Silver was stored away, and I hadn't summoned Gardranda.

I was alone, sitting in a dark and silent forest.

"This whole thing...was hard in a different way than usual."

Through that battle in the dream, I managed to feel like we'd grown somehow. It wasn't growth in terms of levels or numbers, but something more abstract.

And this growth might've been exactly what I needed right now.

In silence, I looked to the north. I pictured what was in that direction: Gideon, Altea...and the land of Dryfe that I'd yet to see.

I remembered the words I'd said in the dream.

"...'The fight we'll *have* to win,' huh?"

It was no doubt drawing ever closer.

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The Gaol

The gaol was awfully quiet.

Three Superiors imprisoned there had broken out, while all the other Masters were killed by Candy's viruses, and there had never been any tians here to begin with.

The gaol was now a ghost town where death reigned supreme.

However, somewhere away from the town, there was a single person who was still alive.

It was a boy sitting on the bare ground, not saying a word.

At his side, there was a humanoid Embryo whose stature as well as face were hidden.

One sat and the other stood, but they were both immobile.

However, a keen observer might notice that they weren't exactly doing *nothing*.

Gradually and ever so slowly, the boy's Embryo was consuming the gaol. He eroded the Resources comprising it, adding them onto himself and slowly breaking it apart. It was like digging a tunnel with a spoon—the old-fashioned method of breaking out of prison.

Yet this was what the boy and his Embryo had been doing all this time. He'd been imprisoned before his Embryo was even born, and since the moment it hatched and throughout all the evolutions leading to Superior, they'd been doing nothing but this.

They'd continued this even as other Masters wandered in and became their prey.

And now...the end was in sight.

This would take only about a year more, if not less.

He alone would do what had required the power of three Superiors to achieve.

His name was Fu'uta.

He was the first prisoner of the gaol and the first Master to become a Superior. Unshaking, undoubting—he was a being who existed for one purpose alone.

There was no Master who enjoyed *Infinite Dendrogram* less than he did.

"...It's so quiet today." Fu'uta noticed that he couldn't hear anything outside the dungeon.

At this moment, he was the only person still alive here. Red King was working on removing the viruses inside it, but until then the prisoners would be unable to log in.

The silence of the gaol gave Fu'uta a slight bit of hope. He'd thought that maybe everyone got bored of *Infinite Dendrogram* and quit.

He'd *hoped* that they did.

However, the reality he knew told him that it wouldn't happen.

This entity known as *Infinite Dendrogram*, which presented—*misrepresented*—itself as realistic, was not something that could end that easily. Even if there was no one here in the gaol, there were still many outside of it.

That was why Fu'uta didn't stop.

"Set time passed." Suddenly, Fu'uta's Embryo—Apocalypse—began to speak. "Thirty days have passed since the previous order. If you wish to continue, present the order once again."

With a mouth fully hidden by a plain mask, he spoke to his Master. For a Type Apostle, his words were extremely mechanical.

"...Erode, break, rebuild," Fu'uta answered, annoyed.

"Present target to absorb-destroy."

"I don't need this world." Fu'uta didn't change even now that he was all alone in the gaol. He continued to stay in the prison, eroding it and gathering Resources while waiting for that day to come.

He imagined the day he would escape from the gaol and destroy *Infinite Dendrogram* itself.

He wanted to deny everything—to delete *Infinite Dendrogram* entirely.

With nothing but that in mind, as contradictory as it seemed, he continued to remain inside the game he hated.

“Present target to rebuild into.”

The thing he was reaching for...

“Just NEXT WORLD.”

...was the next world, lost long ago.

“Affirmative.” Apocalypse spoke, then resumed standing in silence.

While the Apostle stood there like a scarecrow, Fu’uta was sitting on the ground...and clenching his fist. The boy who sought the next world sat with his arms around his knees and waited.

Eventually, he knew he would have to fight—and win—against every single person who valued the world as it was *now*.

Afterword

Cat: “Time for the afterwooord. This time it’s brought to you by me, Cheshire the Cat, and...”
Bear: “Shu Starling the Beaaar.”
Cat: “The standard duo’s back, eh? I feel like it’s been a while since it was just us two.”
Bear: “Yeah. I took a break last time, and befur that the bear wasn’t me, but Carl.”
Cat: “Speaking of Carl, this volume gave us another character in a costume.”
Bear: “ZZZ, huh? Honestly, fur him it’s less like a costume and more like a sleeping bag.”
Cat: “First Carl, now that guuuuy...this is the second time we’ve gotten somebody in a costume who’s kinda invincible. These costumed types sure like their weird combooos. Tenchi’s Bachigo Futae is another one that comes to mind.”
Bear: “Really? I’m a costume guy too and I’m pawsitively normal.”
Cat: “A guy who uses a giant robot to break space itself isn’t normal at aaall.”
Bear: “Actually, does *Dendro* even have any tough guys who don’t use any combos at all?”
Cat: “Good point. Jobs, Embryos, and MVP rewards—these three systems are all intertwined with each other. I can’t deny that things go crazy when they’re mixed in just the right (or wrong) waaay.”
Bear: “Three systems?”
Cat: “Jobs are the foundation, since they were here from the very

beginning. Then there's the Embryos we brought, and after that we've got the MVP rewards, which are the result of us meddling with, modifying, and further processing the non-humanoid inhabitants. That one's actually the system we did the most work on. We didn't even touch the other two."
Bear: "Hrmm. I feel like you just dropped some impawtant info like it was nothin'."
Cat: "There's gear that's stronger than even these MVP rewards we worked so hard on, though. The axe from this volume is a prime example of that. As far as weapon tiers go, that thing is actually above Gloria. And it's as dangerous as it is powerful. It's gonna be a long time before Ray can use it without any problems. He only managed it this time because it was a dream. It's like he got a preview of the gear you get in the endgaaame."
Bear: "I've thought this for a while, but...you *really* talk more than you should, huh?"
Cat: "I hear that a lot from my colleaaagues too. Then again, I'm the Embryo of a Master who wanted companionship, so you can't blame me for being talkative, can youuu?"
Bear: "Look at you, em-bear-acing it."
Cat: "That's it for the chat, though. It's time for the author's commeeents."

Greetings, dear readers. Thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

In this volume, you saw Ray grow in some way to win a battle he could afford to lose. With this, he has finally overcome one of the weaknesses he's had since the very beginning.

This story is a long one, and many of its characters change and grow as it moves along. A good example of this is Gerbera, whom you saw accompany Ray in this volume. It would give me much joy if you dear readers continue to watch how the characters change as the story keeps moving forward.

With that in mind, the next volume will be focused on Hugo/Yuri. She is another character who is in the process of changing, so please look forward to seeing what kind of trials await her. Volume 10 of the manga is currently out as well, depicting Hugo's battle against Rook with all the quality you have come to expect from that adaptation. Please do take a look at it.

That said, with the next release of this light novel, it will be twenty volumes long. As the author, I can't help but be overwhelmed by how far we have come.

You all are the reason this series has continued for this long, and it will definitely keep going, so as always I will do my best to make it into something you, dear readers, will enjoy.

And because breaking the twenty volume mark is cause for celebration, we plan to try something different for it. I am personally looking forward to it, so I think you won't go wrong if you get excited for it too.

Nothing would give me more joy than seeing your continued support for *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Cat: "Anyway, time to announce the next voluuume."
Bear: "The announcements were months off multiple times in a row now. You sure you're good fur this?"
Cat: "Heh heh heh. Don't worry—I have an idea...VOLUME 20 IS SET TO COME OUT IN WINTER SOMETIME!"
Bear: "He wussed out of actually naming the month!"
Cat: "If you're gonna miss the release date, then just don't say it in the first place! Simple!"
Bear: "But what if it comes out in March? Saying 'winter' doesn't account fur that, does it?"
Cat: "It...probably won't come out that late! And even if it does, if it's cold, it's still winter!"
Bear: "Well, whatever happens with the next volume...please look furward to it."

Bonus Short Stories

Bags Under the Eyes

2044, Legendaria

"Knead knead...knead knead knead...knead knead..."

Colossus Meister, ZZZ—the one who would eventually become Overlord Acedia—was kneading clay in an abandoned Legendarian graveyard.

He was using his own clay instead of what was found at the graveyard, but it was an eerie sight regardless. Combined with his looks—particularly, the pronounced bags under his eyes—his actions made him look like an undead monster or some kind of deranged Necromancer. He'd actually been attacked by a number of Masters who had assumed that was exactly what he was, but he'd used Dreamland to put them to sleep.

"A bit more...just a bit more..."

ZZZ's strange behavior was just part of the process of making a combat golem. Golem construction depended on the builder's stats and the natural magic in the environment, but those weren't the only factors that went into the final product. For example, golems built in places dense with grudge had a chance to come out with the ability to deal damage to ethereal, spirit-like monsters—and that bonus was exactly why ZZZ was building one here in a desolate graveyard.

The reason he needed a golem with this power was simple: peaceful sleep. He'd recently discovered an isolated area that was perfect for sleeping, but for some reason, a powerful spirit monster had begun wandering around the location. It was immune to physical attacks and couldn't be put to sleep using Dreamland's effects, so ZZZ was now playing the golem-building gacha to create something that could fight it. He was a man who spared no effort to sleep soundly.

ZZZ quietly continued his work—albeit with lots of mumbling—when...

"Excuse me. Can we talk for a bit?"

...someone called out to him from behind.

When he turned around, he saw two people. One of them was a girl with purple hair and clothes, but the one who had spoken was a young man with a gaunt frame, a bad complexion, and bags under his eyes. That was a trait he shared with ZZZ, but while ZZZ had added them in order to make his avatar match his real life appearance, this young man's tired expression was just the result of the life he lived here. In that regard, he was the direct opposite of ZZZ, who could sleep all he wanted here in *Infinite Dendrogram* and thus would not normally look so exhausted.

As for why this person had called out to him...

"So he really *was* alive..." said the young man, sounding slightly surprised.

"As I told you, Master Dearest," said the girl with a sigh.

Apparently, this newcomer had also thought that ZZZ was undead. Unlike the others, though, he didn't attack ZZZ on sight, so he seemed more rational, at least.

Hrmm...maybe I should wear a cutesy animal costume or something? Doubt anyone would think I'm undead then, ZZZ thought, perhaps not realizing that someone just standing around in a graveyard wearing an animal costume was terrifying in its own right.

"Oh, I'm sorry..." said the young man. "I just heard that there were dangerous undead in this area. I'm Benetnasch. My job is King of Tartarus."

"And I am Master Dearest's Embryo. Persephone is my name."

"I'm ZZZ. As you can tell, I'm a Colossus Meister just building a goleeem." The two newcomers tilted their heads, as though unsure if that was really as obvious as ZZZ thought it was, but that was all the introductions they were going to get. "Sooo...why are you in this creepy plaaace?" ZZZ went on, still working on the golem.

"I'm traveling around and extinguishing grudge."

"Whaddya mean?" ZZZ asked.

It didn't seem to be a secret, so Benetnasch went on to explain that the grudge of this world changed the nature of its dead. Under its influence, corpses became zombies or skeletons, and even the souls of the dead could be transformed into wraiths.

Because of this, Benetnasch traveled all over the world to purge all gatherings of grudge before they corrupted the souls of the dead...before it was too late for them. It was a kind of philanthropic work—just one that wasn't focused on helping the living.

"What do you think of my activities?" Benetnasch asked as he wrapped up his explanation.

"They seem fine to me," ZZZ answered.

He didn't know if Benetnasch's efforts would bear fruit or if there was even any point in them to begin with, but he was honestly amazed that the young man could continue to do something so unrewarding and torturous. ZZZ himself would never want to do anything like that, and he felt as if he was looking at a person—an actual living being—who was fundamentally different from him. Nevertheless, he found it admirable.

Everyone's got their own values, so...yeaaah, ZZZ thought. As one whose dream, so to speak, was restful sleep—something most people took for granted—he was extremely aware of that.

But if he had to say one thing...

"I guess I don't really like that you're losing sleep because of iiit."

...he had a problem with the bags under Benetnasch's eyes, clearly caused by fatigue and lack of sleep.

"Do tell him that. He must hear it," said Persephone with a strong nod.

"Ha ha..." Benetnasch chuckled with a bitter smile.

The truth was that Benetnasch didn't actually like sleep. To be more precise, he was afraid of being too late to do something because he had wasted too much time idling. The day he'd first entered this world, he'd found himself too late to save a girl from starving, and that had left him traumatized. That was another reason he might have begun avoiding sleep—he was likely to remember such things in his dreams.

Regardless, ZZZ and Benetnasch had a completely different outlook on sleep. The former sought it endlessly, while the latter avoided it out of fear.

One could say that they were diametrically opposed to each other, but since neither of them was the type of person to force their values on others, this didn't result in a clash of any kind.

They would both become Superiors in time—but mellow ones, as far as Superiors went.

"Oh. I'm dooone."

As they were talking, ZZZ completed his golem. Being constructed in a graveyard had given it a dark purple hue reminiscent of grudge as well as the ability to attack spirits, just as ZZZ wanted.

"Yaaay. I got iiit. I'm gonna call you 'Violet GB.'"

"And what does the GB stand for?" Persephone asked.

"Ghostbusteeer."

That made a particular tune play in Benetnasch's head for a moment, but then he said, "Speaking of which, why were you making a golem in a place like this? And why does it have to be able to attack spirits?"

"A strong undead started popping up around my sleeping spooot. I needed a guaaard."

Benetnasch's expression darkened. "Can you tell me more about this monster?"

"It's got three arms, two heads...it's all floaty and has no lower body...and it's also very aggressive and it even eats other spirits."

Upon hearing that, Benetnasch and Persephone looked at each other and nodded.

"Could you show me to this place? That monster may be my target."

"Sure thiiing. If we're gonna go beat it and get my peaceful sleep back, I'm ready to let it all hang out toooo. Wow, how lewwwd."

"Lewd...?"

The extended hours of work had left ZZZ sleepy and in a strange state of mind. Carried by the newly created Violet GB, he began leading Benetnasch to his sleeping spot—the place where they would fight the undead monster.

◇◆

Thus ZZZ met Benetnasch, cooperated with him against a powerful foe, and became his friend. This relationship endured and they had many similar experiences together—all stories for another time.

Getting Content

Self-Proclaimed "Small-time Baddie of the Gaol," Tasteman

Good day or evening, ladies and gentlemen—this is Tasteman, coming to you with another tasteful video.

Recently, I've been doing nothing but streaming everyone's favorite monster-hunting game, so it's been a while since I touched *Dendro*. It's a shame you can't really stream that one.

Anyway, since most of you can't go here yourselves, this is gonna be another video where I show you around the gaol and tell you stuff about it.

Last time, I told you about the created dungeon set up by the devs, and this time, I'll tell you about the Masters here. First, you should know that they can be split into two groups: small-time baddies and big-time villains.

This is because of how save points work.

As you all know, the gaol is the place where Masters are imprisoned when they get on wanted lists and run out of save points they can use. You can also have a "backlog" of save points, so even if you're wanted in the most recent country you visited and can't use their save points anymore as a result, you can still log back in using your save points in countries you visited previously where you aren't wanted. This works even if you're coming back from a death penalty.

That's why there are two kinds of people who run out of usable save points: small-time baddies who never even left their starting country, and big-time villains who've been all over the world.

The former are done the moment they get on their country's wanted list. They get sent here not because they're such notorious criminals that every country's out to get them, but because they don't even have what it takes to travel out from where they started.

The latter, on the other hand, are these terrifying bad guys who've got save points in multiple countries, but *still* did enough to get on all their wanted lists. They're much less common than the former, though.

This means that the mid-level criminals who are only wanted in *some* of the countries they've been to are still at large—but personally, I feel like that's a problem with *Dendro*'s international laws rather than anything to do with the game mechanics.

Anyway, that's why the gaol's Masters are either local small-time baddies or global big-time villains. I myself am a small-time baddie who never left Legendaria and got on its wanted list for theft.

I swear I didn't kill anyone, but what I stole was valuable enough to send me here. I should've known that a cup used by Her Majesty Titania was, like, some kind of national treasure.

Please promise to learn from my mistake and don't commit crimes as casually as you would in a conventional game. If you want to experience the gaol, though, just keep watching my videos.

That aside, have you noticed?

I've been recording throughout the entire explanation, but nothing has happened yet.

Normally, someone would've called out to me or dragged me into some trouble by now...

Actually, I don't see anyone anywhere. It's a total ghost town. Usually, this place is packed with thieves—or worse.

I feel like I'm making an abandoned village exploration video.

I don't want to restart the recording, so I'll go look for villager—I mean, *prisoner* number one. There's a popular café in here, so I'll start there. Its hours are all over the place, so hopefully it's open right now...

Oh. And there it is. That's the café...and there's a piece of paper on the door.

If it's closed, they normally just put up a sign. What's this about...?

"The first one to visit will receive the rights to the store."

...W h u t?

◆◆◆

A few days had passed since King of Crime, Sechs Würfel and his clan IF had escaped from the gaol.

The rights to his café, Dice, went to the prisoner by the name of Tasteman, who'd just happened to miss everything that had happened here.

After this, he started the "Gaol Café Series," covering the various incidents surrounding the establishment left behind by the King of Crime, but that was another story.

The Oddballs

April, 2042, Reiji Mukudori

"Hey prez, you gathered all the EGRS members personally, right? Like you did with me?"

"Yes. I made the club, and Vice Prez Sauda was the first member. We didn’t have enough people at first, though, so it was just an association back then...but the name was the same as it is now. ‘Electronic Game Research Society’ sounds better than ‘Electronic Game Research Club.’”

N High School of N City in the N Prefecture—the school I went to respected its students’ independence and made it really easy to start new groups and the like. That meant there were all kinds of clubs, and EGRS was one of them.

“...What standards did you use while scouting us out?”

Our club was a place you could call “a den of oddballs.”

First we had President Koyomi Hoshizora—a girl from a wealthy family who was crazy about card games and had a gacha addiction. She told people’s fortunes by building decks, drawing cards, and doing other things that didn’t seem like they’d actually work. The only problem was that she got things right so often it was scary.

Next there was Vice-President Elmo Sauda—the tall and silent hit man. His pseudo-VR (that is, VR with only video and audio) FPS skills were so insane he could completely hide his presence and shoot his enemies from point-blank range before they even realized he was there.

Then there was Yubu Munegami—the biggest and scariest-looking guy in school, but who was actually a gentle giant who did volunteer work at least three times a week. When it came to gaming, he was an all-rounder who placed high in tournaments for anything ranging from fighting games to puzzle games.

Then we had Molly Forester—the virtual madwoman who thought messing with people in games was the best thing in the world. She enjoyed tricking people in Mafia-like and trap battle games more than she enjoyed getting her three daily meals.

And finally, we had Hitsuji Kata—my perverted classmate who freaked out the entire class when he, as part of his introduction, said that he was more aroused by lips than by an actual naked body. He was also a fairly popular content creator.

With me included, that made six of us—two from each school year. That was the current EGRS member composition.

“I feel like everyone besides me is very...colorful,” I said.

“The fact that you’re excluding yourself makes it clear that you’re not looking at this objectively...wait, no. It’s more likely that your standards are just ridiculous. Please don't use those around you as a baseline. Especially your sister."

Good point. Compared to my sister, the EGRS people were pretty normal.

Not Kata, though.

"Anyway, to answer your question...I invited you based on my gut instinct."

"Oh, so it wasn't fortune-telling?"

"No. I just picked people I sensed had a common fate and thought would be fun to have around."

"And you invited me at the most perfect time..."

She'd invited me right when I was looking for a club that wouldn't mind if I quit after the first year.

My dad had given me a condition I had to meet if I wanted to move to Tokyo—I had to pass UTokyo entrance exams in my last year of high school. After all that had happened with my older siblings, he was really apprehensive about letting me move out, so he gave me this insane condition hoping I wouldn't manage it. Not like that would stop me. If the possibility was there, I'd do everything to seize it.

I'd thought it would've been difficult to do it if I didn't go all-in on studying once I was in year two, though, so I'd been looking for a club that would have been fine with me quitting after the first year. That was when prez invited me, literally saying, "Would you like to join us for just one year?"

Thanks to Shu's influence, I played retro games and the like pretty often, and when I found out she was talking about a club where we'd play games, chat, and attend tourneys for genres we were good at, I felt like it was fun and had direction too, so I didn't hesitate to join.

"Besides profit, the only reasons people ever get together are gut instinct and a common fate," she said.

"You think so?"

"Yes. If that is your fate, you might eventually create a group like this yourself."

"...A group of oddballs, you mean?"

"Odd or not, if the group is fun, that means it's a good one."

◇◇◇

I hadn’t thought much of that back then, but now that I had Death Period, looking back at the president’s words filled me with a kind of awe.

Could she actually see the future?

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 19
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

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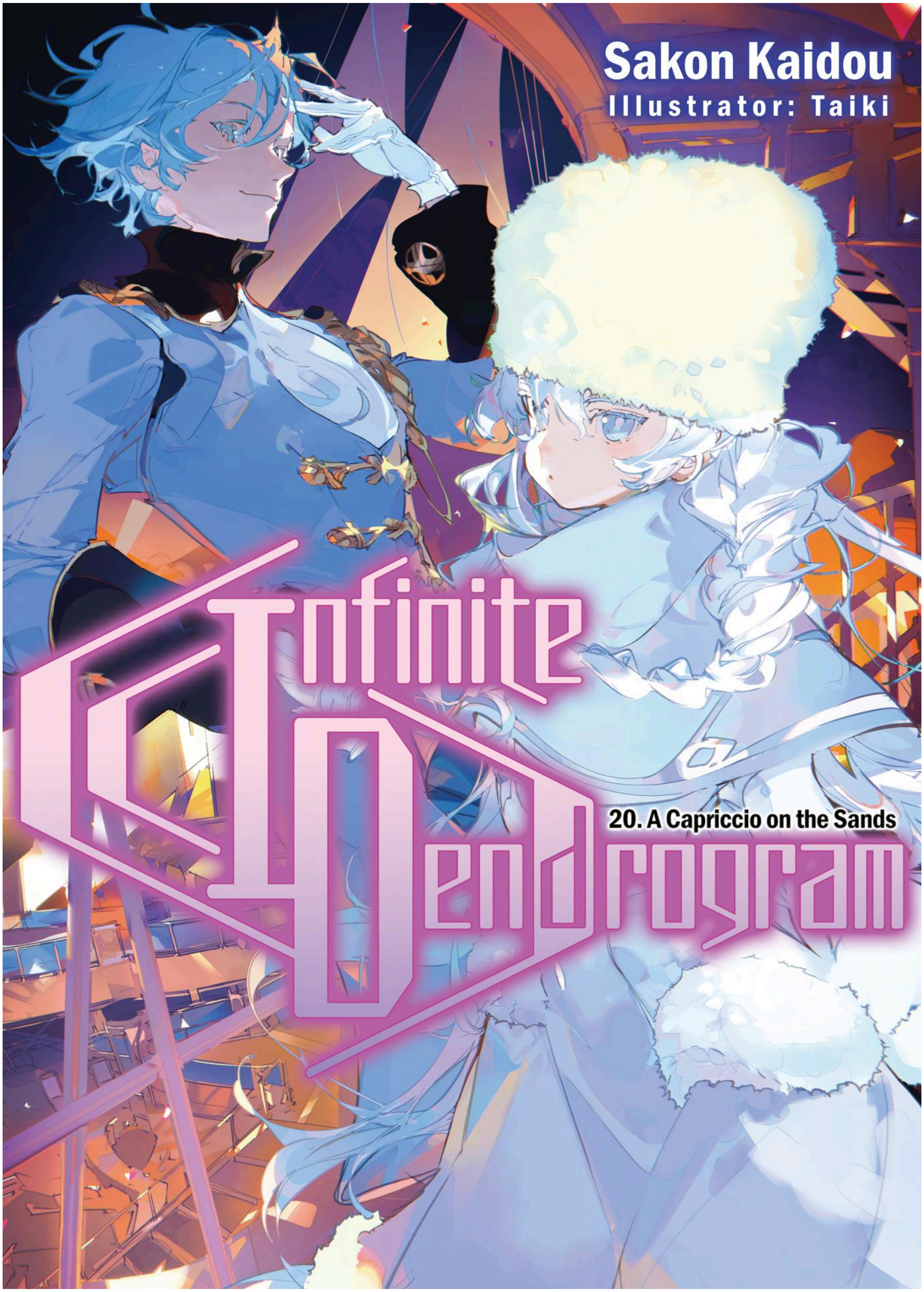
Ebook edition 1.0: February 2023
Premium E-Book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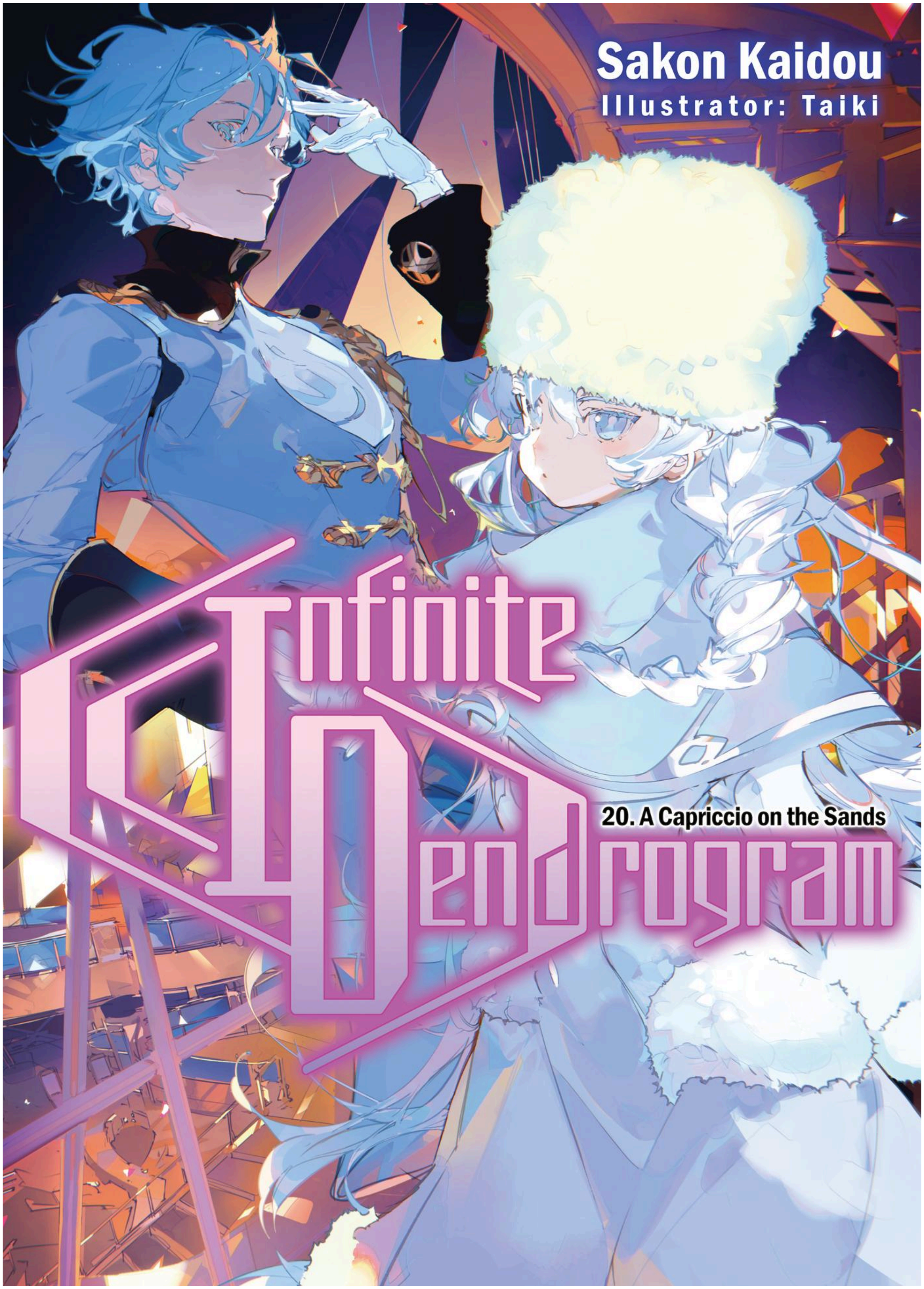
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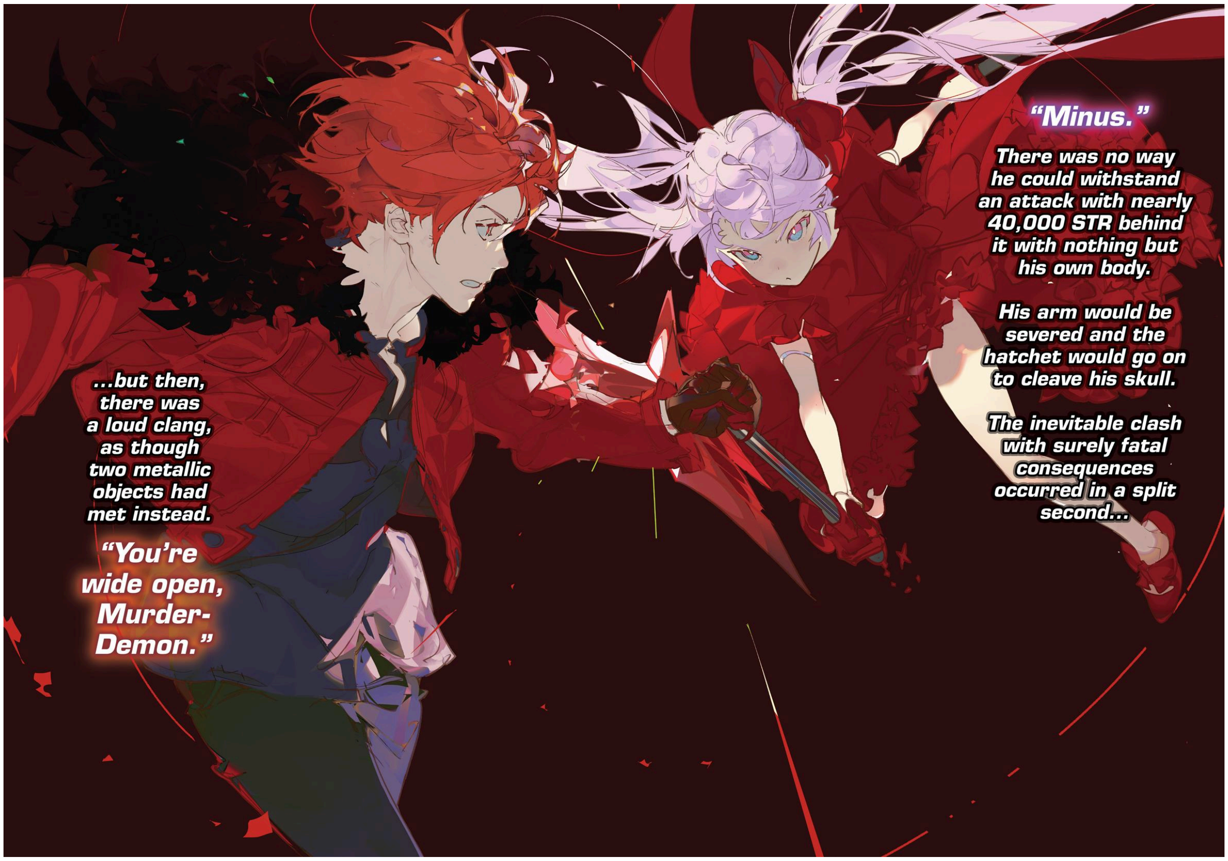


"Minus."

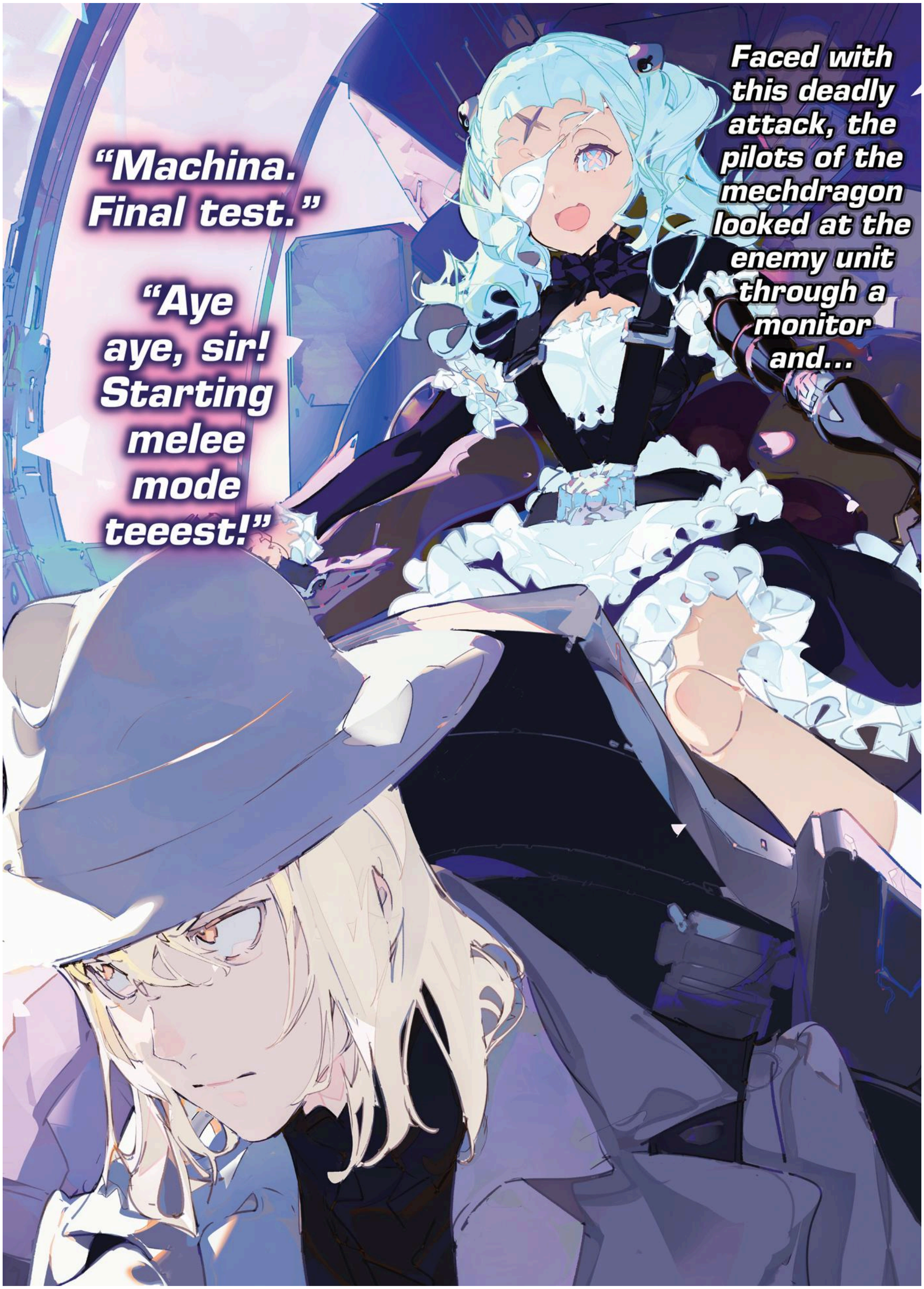
There was no way he could withstand an attack with nearly 40,000 STR behind it with nothing but his own body.

His arm would be severed and the hatchet would go on to cleave his skull.

The inevitable clash with surely fatal consequences occurred in a split second...

...but then, there was a loud clang, as though two metallic objects had met instead.

"You're wide open, Murder-Demon."



Faced with this deadly attack, the pilots of the mechdragon looked at the enemy unit through a monitor and…

“Machina. Final test.”

“Aye aye, sir! Starting melee mode teeest!”

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Prologue: The Three’s Circumstances and a Single Stage

Yuri Gautier

“Yuri...where does all the money go?”

“What? What’s this about?” It was nearly the middle of April, and I was sitting in the cafeteria of the prestigious Lorraine Girls’ College when my friend—and fellow *Dendro* player—Sonya posed that question to me. This was a pretty wealthy school, so her words felt like they came out of nowhere and didn’t really make sense to me.

I could only think of one reason someone like her would be laying her head on the table and whining about her finances.

“You wasted your money again, didn’t you? In *Dendro*, I mean.”

“Nooo, I didn’t *waste* it... There was a gacha machine at a shop in Gideon. I saw someone roll a really nice piece of interior, so I tried rolling for something like that myself—and before I knew it, my wallet was empty!”

If that wasn’t “wasting” her money, I didn’t know what was. “Gideon’s gacha has a possible drop range that increases depending on how much money you put in, doesn’t it?” I asked. “There’s basically no restriction on the kind of stuff it can give you, so I really doubt you can get what you want from it.”

“I know that, but... Wait, I didn’t know you’d been to Gideon.”

“O-Oh. I mean, that’s what I heard, anyway.”

I need to be more careful. I didn’t tell her that I was involved in Fran’s scheme.

“Ughhh... Moments like this make me wish I could trade real money for *Dendro* money...”

“You can’t. RMT is forbidden worldwide.”

“NNGHH! BUT WHYYY, THOUGH?! I HAVE SO MUCH ACTUAL MONEY THAT I COULD TRADE FOR LIR!”

The Real Money Trading Ban—I felt like the full name of the law was slightly longer than that, but it had been in effect all over the world since the 2030s. It banned all and any exchange of in-game virtual currency and property for real currency and property or vice versa. The law was put in place shortly after the announcement of the first dive-type VRMMO, *NEXT WORLD*. Many people believed that the law's purpose was to make it so that the wealth earned in these kinds of games wouldn't have a strong impact on the real economy, since these new virtual worlds had the potential to become second homes for a lot of people.

While *NEXT WORLD* hadn't lived up to such expectations, *Infinite Dendrogram* had greatly exceeded them, so it was now widely believed that creating this law was the right move.

You had to make your own *Dendro* money even if you were wealthy in real life, and you couldn't trade your lir for real money even if you were rich in *Dendro*. And this allowed both reality and *Dendro* to have stable economies...at least according to Fran.

"Looking at you makes me glad we have that law," I added.

"Come ooon! Don't you get it?! It's not like I can go shopping in the dorms! I can't get that much new stuff! I can only really cut loose in *Dendro*, but I can't even bring my actual money there!"

"Whoa, calm down." My friend's frustrations with a lack of shopping and money in her life were obviously really getting to her, so I wanted to help her relax. "Teachers use this cafeteria too. You don't want to attract Miss Nina's attention, do you?"

Our sociology teacher was very strict—the true picture of the "ice queen" kind of instructor. She was also extremely serious about proper behavior, so she would definitely give Sonya a talking-to if she saw carrying on like this.

"Why's the school so strict about leaving the dorms, anyway? I wanna escape..."

"You really shouldn't do that. Going outside without permission will get you suspended."

We had soundproof private rooms where we were free to perform music, build models, and even log in to *Infinite Dendrogram*, but as a trade-off we were strictly forbidden from going outside. This was because one of the school's goals was to prevent the young ladies here from interacting too much with the wrong kind of people.

"*Gnrhh*...I guess I'm only really free in *Dendro*... Ugh, but I'm so poor there. The Love-Duel Festival is right around the corner, but I won't have enough money for anything."

"The Love-Duel Festival?" That name really didn't conjure the image of happy couples.

"It's an event in Gideon based on some romance from a long time ago. My party came to the city for some quest related to it...but my wallet isn't ready."

"Romance?"

"Yep. It's an event where you go on dates with a special someone and maybe even confess your feelings. You know, typical love festival stuff."

A love festival, huh? I thought. *Wait. Hold on. Why did Ray and that Rook guy who verbally abused me just pop into my head? No! No way! That's out of the question!*

"Yuri?"

"D-Don't mind me. I'm fine. Anyway, who are you going with?"

"I'll enjoy what the festival has to offer and do some quests on the side, but I don't plan to go on any dates."

"Not even with your party members?" Sonya was in a three-person party with two guys, and she'd told me lots about them and everything they'd done together. Granted, a lot of what she'd said were complaints, but the group seemed to get along despite all of that, so I thought there was a chance that something more had grown between them.

However, Sonya looked like she didn't know how to react to my question.

"Hrmm...Asuma is a kind, capable, and reliable gentleman with a good heart, but he doesn't talk and pushes around a baby carriage, so I'm not sure how a date with him would even work. And Grimms is just a scumbag."

Wow, her opinion on the two sure is uneven, I thought.

"Speaking of Grimms, you won't believe this! He recently told me that he's actually the second prince of some country and that he's only a NEET now because it became a republic. I get wanting to brag, but 'prince'? Seriously?"

"Uhh...I get what you mean." If someone had told me that, I would've just been weirded out.

"I wish I'd used Truth Discernment. I'm sure it would've gone like, 'BEEP BEEP BEEP.'"

"Is that how the skill works?" Well, even though she called him a scumbag, at least they seemed to get along well enough to crack lighthearted jokes about it.

"That reminds me that while I was losing my money at the gacha, Grimms lost his at the arena. Asuma sure got mad at us for that...I'm glad he still gave us enough to cover our daily spending after that."

Poor Asuma...you two should really fix your lives so it makes his a little easier, I thought.

Sonya planted her face right back on the table and resumed her whining. "Aaahh... I'm so brooooke... I need more *Dendro* moneeeyyy..."

"Come on, now—oh." With Sonya's head out of the way, I was able to see the person standing behind her—Miss Nina, the infamously strict teacher obsessed with propriety. She was looking straight at Sonya, who was still whining about having no money.

Sonya's really in for it now, I thought. I could already imagine Miss Nina approaching Sonya and saying something like "What do you mean, you 'have no money'? Did you break the rules and leave school grounds?"

However, contrary to what I expected, Miss Nina just stopped looking at Sonya and walked away.

"Uh...huh? Yuri? What's wrong?" asked Sonya, clearly unaware that she'd just escaped Miss Nina's wrath.

"Nothing," I responded, and shortly after that, breakfast time was over.

The rest of the day went by in the blink of an eye, and soon the day's classes were nearly at an end.

"That will be all for today's lesson, but we still have five minutes of class time left, so I will continue a bit further," said Miss Nina as she concluded her sociology lesson and looked us over. "Today, I talked about how climate and geopolitics influenced the history of industry and commerce all over the world. However, industry is not the only thing that changes in response to its environment."

She then went on the computer whose display was being projected for the class, opened a paint program, and began drawing something. When she was done, the screen showed two...*bears*: one big and one small.

"The polar bears inhabiting the cold arctic have grown larger to retain heat, further supported by their thick fur. On the other hand, you have the sun bears, which have developed smaller bodies and have short hair better suited to the warm tropics."

Bears seemed a little out of place as the subject, but Miss Nina's drawings captured the quirks of the species. Personally, I thought they were very cute. My classmates probably thought the same, but then Sonya whispered, "Regional forms," making a few of the girls chuckle.

"These wild animals developed different features because of the environment they lived in. And this is doubly true for humans. Just like animals, we have certain broad traits we developed over a long time because of our natural environments, but we also have individual personality traits developed by the social environment we grew up in as individuals."

Social environment and personality traits... I felt that this was the main subject that Miss Nina wanted to get to.

"In modern society, you are oftentimes required to adopt a personality that is suitable for the social environment you are in. People in roles like teacher or nun must possess the bare minimum amount of dignity that one would expect of someone in that profession. And the 'bare minimum' for students of this school is far higher than it is for boys and girls in society at large."

Though it had become more relaxed since the previous century, Miss Nina emphasized that this was still a prestigious, serious school for high-class ladies.

"Last week, one of our students left her dorm late at night to fool around with male students from another school. Thankfully, it did not lead to any illicit sexual relationships, but it was still a serious violation of the dorm's rules. Thus, the student in question was severely punished."

Students who left school grounds without authorization were punished with suspension. I'd told Sonya that very thing this morning.

Miss Nina had gotten there in a roundabout way, but now it looked like the point of this whole thing was to give us a preachy warning.

If Fran were here, she'd probably say something like "Miss Nina drew those little bears and talked about them just to draw you in and trap you in a goddamn sermon."

Wait, that was more like Fran when she was role-playing

Franklin...though honestly, I felt like my mental image of her was really starting to take Franklin as the default.

"'Blend it with vermilion and it will all turn red.' That's an oriental idiom similar in meaning to the quote 'he that toucheth pitch shall be defiled therewith.' You must remember that the environment you are in is the Lorraine Girls' College, and that your role is to be a student of this school. Please make an effort to live with modesty, propriety, and fidelity." She looked over us again, her gaze lingering an extra long time on Sonya.

That was exactly when the bell of the in-school church began to toll.

"And there's the bell. That concludes today's lesson."

Having said what she wanted with precision timing that almost seemed intentional, Miss Nina ended the lesson.

"Finallyyy..." Upon returning to my room, I jumped right onto my bed. It probably wasn't good for my uniform, but I'd be handing it over for cleaning soon anyway, so that didn't matter.

This was the last day of school before a short break. The week's lessons were over, and I could finally relax.

I grabbed my dog plushie next to the bed and rolled around a bit with it clutched tightly to my chest.

"'Blend it with vermilion and it will all turn red.' Hmm..." Somehow, the first words out of my mouth once the week's fatigue had started to subside were the exact ones said by Miss Nina.

Then, I remembered my current environment in *Dendro*. Modesty, propriety, and fidelity—there was a huge vermilion stain in my life there that was completely the opposite of all those things.

And by that, I really just meant Teach.

"I don't think she's rubbed off on me yet." There were things about her I found cool or worthy of respect, but I'd never, ever try to be as unscrupulous as her. Yeah—on that front, she was kind of an example of how *not* to behave.

"Well, we're separated for now, anyway." Teach had told me that she had an urgent matter to attend to and that we couldn't work together during my break. To make up for it, she'd offered me a part-time job. Apparently someone Teach worked with needed some help with something, and she suggested I take the job since it would also be a learning experience.

"She also said 'he's a piece of work, but he pays well.'" I wasn't sure what to expect from someone whom *she*, of all people, would call a "piece of work."

Unlike Sonya, I wasn't in desperate need of *Dendro* money, but maintenance for Fran's White Rose was more expensive than for Marshall II, so it wouldn't hurt to have more funds.

"And I'll be working on a fancy sand-cruiser..." Even though it was in *Dendro*, this would be the first part-time job I'd ever had.

And with the location being so luxurious, I was actually pretty excited for it.

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2045, April, Arizona

The hospital was located near mountainous forests, away from any urban area. The exterior of the building was spotless and well maintained. In fact, it was practically overflowing with beauty and cleanliness.

However, since there were no towns nearby that could provide it with patients, it could be argued that it didn't fulfill its fundamental purpose as a hospital. The moment anyone noticed the high walls and multiple fences surrounding the grounds, though, that impression would completely change.

The building looked more like a mix between a hospital and a prison, and a sign on the entrance read "Buer Mental Hospital."

That alone made the reason for its location obvious. This was not a place for emergency patients, and it was not a place meant to be seen by ordinary folk.

The facility's main gate—as secure as everything else about it—opened up, and a luxury car entered the hospital grounds. There were signs at the roadside, but the driver clearly had no need for them. The way the car headed straight for the underground parking lot made it obvious that they'd been here many times before.

"I'll be there for about two hours, as usual. Wait for me here," a young man in a nice suit said to the driver as he stepped out of the car. His apparel would not be out of place for a patient at a regular hospital, but this was a mental facility for people who had both sufficient wealth and circumstances. Knowing that, his clothes took on a different meaning—he wasn't someone who came to be admitted, but rather someone who had made it so that someone else was.

"Hello, Craig. We've been waiting for you," said a doctor who'd been waiting at the entrance for the appointed visitation time.

"Hey, doc. Thanks, as always," said the youth in response, his tone friendly. "Anyway, let's get down to business. How is she?"

"She's doing quite well. Her symptoms have subsided and she hasn't had any episodes."

Although it came at a great monetary cost, this hospital guaranteed state-of-the-art facilities, treatments, and privacy. The girl that the young man had hidden away here also had circumstances that made it necessary to conceal her from society at large.

Guided—and observed—by the doctor, the young man was led to a visitation room. There, a girl waited at the other side of the special glass that divided the space.

Upon seeing the young man, her face lit up.

"Rascyal!"

"Hey, Emily. I came to visit you." The girl—Emily—called out to the young man with a face full of joy and the inflection of a child not quite used to speaking.

However, the word she used puzzled the doctor. He knew this young businessman's first name, and "Rascal" wasn't it.

The young man—also known as Rascal the Bloodonyx, a sub-leader of the Illegal Frontier clan in *Infinite Dendrogram*—noticed the doctor's confusion and, with a wry grin on his face, said, "It's like a nickname."

"I see," the doctor said in response. *It sure is a mean one,* he thought to himself, but didn't say it out loud.

He then left the room, leaving only Rascal and Emily, still separated by the glass.

"It's been a while since we met here," said Rascal. "You got any requests?"

"Shooboost!"

"Shooboost...? Shoe? And boost? You want rocket boots or something?" *That seems like something more to Machina's tastes,* he thought. *Well, she definitely could make a pair in* Dendro*, but I don't think they have those in the real world. Or were they already talking about making something like that on the other side...? It wouldn't be the first time that piece of scrap has* *used my money and mats to make new stuff.*

Rascal's thoughts drifted to the one-eyed robot maid that he owned. She was in charge of the clan's tech, but she was so goofy and gave him so much trouble that just thinking about her caused a look of exhaustion to cross his face.

"No. It's not boots, but *sweets*!" Emily said, shaking her head.

"Huh...? Oh, do you mean 'chiboust'?" Chiboust meant a cake covered in what was called crème chiboust—a mix of custard and meringue—that had its surface caramelized by scorching.

"That!" said Emily, her smile growing deeper from getting Rascal to understand her. "Gerberya made some and it was very very tasty!"

"That dumba—that *simple girl* is delicate enough to make pastries?" Rascal muttered in surprise. He'd only known Gerbera before Shu had sent her to the gaol—though she'd actually had that particular skill even back then, before Sechs's instruction. "All right. I'll bring some next time we meet."

"Yaaay!"

"Anything else you want? Doesn't matter if it's here or there."

"Umm...I wanna..."

The two went on to speak with each other for about an hour.

"We'll meet on the other side next time," Rascal said as the conversation ended and he went to walk out of the visitation room. "And I'll see you here again next week."

"See youuu!" said Emily with a wave of her hand.

Instead of going straight for the exit, Rascal went to the doctor's reception office. He sat down on the sofa, and the doctor waiting there handed him a collection of documents—the clinical files of the girl who had been here for over a year.

"These are her records for the latest month."

"Still a long way to go until she's fit for society, huh?"

"The episodes may have stopped, but her mental age is still only about half of her actual age..." Physically, Emily was just slightly shorter than an average girl her age, but her manner of speech still seemed unusually childish. However, both her mental age and height were not a result of something innate—they were something she acquired.

"Her condition isn't just the result of the incident, but also the many years she spent in that family environment. It is not something that can be cured simply with antidepressants or sedatives. It seems quite clear that what she needs most of all is time."

"No changes there, huh?" Rascal said, his face troubled and his eyes closed, before nodding and saying, "Very well. Please continue as you have. And please continue with the treatment that I've suggested."

"The VR game? Her condition has certainly improved since she began playing it. It does seem that meeting other people is a plus for her, even if it's in a game."

"Yes. I'm sure it is."

The doctor didn't play *Infinite Dendrogram* himself and didn't inquire about the details. He thought of it as little different from the video games he used to play in his own childhood.

"And she can't exactly kill anyone in a video game, can she?"

"...Yes. That is true."

The doctor's careless words didn't even make Rascal change his expression. He merely nodded—after all, the doctor was half-right. At the very least, as long as she was logged in, the real Emily would never decide that someone was a "minus" or *commit any more crime*. Not even if, on the other side, she was the Murder Princess herself.

After talking to the doctor, Rascal returned to the parking lot and walked back to his car.

The driver fired up the engine. Rascal, seated in one of the rear seats surrounded by bulletproof and soundproof glass, took out a tablet device and scrolled through it, focusing on data files that had been added or updated.

"Nothing of note, huh?"

The data files were a map of a world and the happenings within it. However, it wasn't a map of the Earth, but the world in *Infinite Dendrogram*, and the data on it had been gathered by Illegal Frontier's supporting Masters.

"Dryfe's preparing for those peace talks I heard about. Altar too, but they've also got the Love-Duel Festival. And Caldina's...initiating negotiations with Granvaloa."

Rascal had been prioritizing the info related to Caldina—the country that currently hosted his and Emily's avatars.

"More localized info says that the armed organization calling itself 'Dryfe's Legitimate Government' is becoming more active, and that *Eltram*, a luxury sand-cruiser that Crys Fragment worked on, is gonna be put into commission..." To Rascal's eyes, he'd spotted a handful of sparks that could catch into a roaring fire.

"I wonder what the best course of action is for our clan's development...and for Emily," he said to himself. "For now, though..."

Rascal put away the tablet and took out the device he used for his real job. Though he had IF to worry about, there were also living expenses and hospital bills to pay, so Rascal couldn't neglect his real company either.

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A Story from a Civil War

It was November of 2044 (reality time), and the imperial army base located in the outskirts of the imperial capital of Vandelheim was aflame.

The army that had sworn to protect the imperium had been torn in two, and now it was at war with itself. The burning base was littered with corpses of soldiers and the broken remains of disabled weapons.

And in the heart of it all, a battle raged between one giant machine and countless human-shaped entities.

The former was a Magingear with a generally humanoid body plan, but it stood out among the conventional Marshall II units because of the unusual feature fixed on its torso—a draconic head that made its overall silhouette look more like an upright dragon than a person.

The creatures it faced were wooden marionettes equipped with firearms.

"SMTF Captain...no...Marquis Barbaros! Your conspiracy with Reinhard ends here and now! Missile Darts!" The dragon-headed unit pointed its left arm at the marionettes—and then the armor on its forearm rose up to fire numerous missiles at the wooden marionettes, reducing many to splinters.

"Major General Eldona. You know the rules of inheritance established by the previous imperator. The throne of Dryfe now rightfully belongs to that child. There is nothing to be gained from any more fighting amongst ourselves."

The marionette soldiers responded only with more gunfire, cooperating as though coordinated by but one mind.

The dragon-headed machine's pilot continued. "The gall! My cousin, first prince Gustav—his son, Hallon...how dare you say that after killing them and so many other members of the imperial family...?!"

"I..." The machine pilot's words had robbed the marionette commander of any ability to respond.

"Or are you simply arrogant because your side has King of Beasts, yourself, and Lady Claudiah?! Do you truly believe your power will be enough to claim this land?! With the exception of Dryfe's strongest soldier, SMTF Commander Mord Machiné, you all *are* the strongest individual combatants in the country. However..." The dragon-headed unit thrust a close-range weapon behind it, skewering a marionette soldier that had tried to approach it from behind. "Not a single weapon here surpasses this unit I drive, nor is there anyone whose piloting skill exceeds my own!" The unit continued to destroy each and every single marionette that came too close, and it moved with flexibility and finesse that made humans look dull, fighting with technique that could pass for art.

"As long as I exist, our true imperium will never fall!"

"You were given that unit so you could *protect* this land. How shameful that you would instead use it to fuel a civil war."

"If this isn't protecting this land, I'd like to hear what *is*...usurper!"

"I know that trying to find any justice in this war is a fool's errand—and I suppose that is why we have no choice but to fight. But surely you know there is one thing at which I am truly unmatched. And that is *numbers*."

The marionettes around the dragon-headed unit had all been destroyed—but they were but a fraction of the entire army.

The marionettes dispersed throughout the base were starting to gather at the site of the battle, and new ones were being made from the metallic remains of the weapons scattered about. These innumerable puppets moved as one to overwhelm and destroy the hostile unit.

The strongest pilot in Dryfe—Over Pilot Curtis Eldona. The wielder of a Mythical MVP reward—Zero General Gifted Barbaros.

This was a deadly clash between the two extremes in the imperium's army: quality and quantity. It would all come down to which one of them would break through the other's offense and claim the life of his opponent. The two knew full well that it would be over for them the moment their enemy's attack reached them, so they gathered their resolve and prepared to face death when...

"The SMTF forces who assaulted the false imperator have been destroyed! And when the Superior...I mean, when Splendida realized that, he stopped restraining King of Beasts and ran away!"

...Curtis received news from his forces that brought the battle to a sudden end.

"What...?!" Curtis could ask for no clearer indication that his side had been defeated. The soldier's words had revealed the harsh truth—they had gambled everything on this operation, and they had failed.

"This is it, Major General. Let us end this civil war."

"No! It's *not* over yet! This doesn't mean our ultimate defeat...!" In his heart of hearts, Curtis wished for the battle to continue, but as an army man, he understood full well the choice he had to make now that his forces were being overwhelmed. "I will retreat...for now!" Curtis said, activating the smokescreen installed in his unit.

"Major General!"

"Marquis Barbaros!" Even as Curtis retreated, he gave voice to the will still burning within him. "We will not accept the reign of a usurper! Never forget this moment, and one day, we will surely free..." Here, one of his words was drowned in the noise of an explosion. "...from your vile grasp!" Curtis cried before finally disappearing from the scene.

Those who heard Curtis's words presumed the inaudible word must have been "Dryfe," but the truth was unknown to all except the man who had said it.

Whatever his declaration might have been, the civil war sparked by the inheritance of the throne had reached its end, leaving behind only this one smoldering ember.

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April, 2045, Caldina

Curtis Eldona woke up inside his unit.

"...Another dream of that day." It was more like a nightmare, really—the detestable memory of his escape from his homeland. "I suppose it's on my mind because we're preparing for a major operation."

After losing the civil war that day, the group Curtis commanded—

Dryfe's First Armored Battalion—had moved their operations to Caldina. Reinhard or his pawns would have easily found them had they remained, and Caldina was the only place where they could procure supplies.

These days, the Battalion did their maintenance themselves, obtaining the required parts from the Caldinan black market by either purchase or theft.

"Major General? Are you awake?" a subordinate asked him over the comms.

"I am. I must say, though, as dear as this unit is to me, it is certainly not designed for a pleasant night's sleep," Curtis replied, only half-serious.

"There's no need to sleep in the cockpit every night, is there? Why not use a bed?" the subordinate replied, sounding concerned.

Curtis was well aware that a bed would be preferable, but there were reasons he always chose his unit over a bed.

"Every warrior is at his most defenseless when asleep. If I am to die, I want to rest here, within this machine. *This* will be my coffin...my Inventory."

Merchants making long journeys, adventurers undertaking jobs given by the combat guilds, career soldiers, and other people in a similar line of work were at high-risk of dying far away from home. Because of that, it was customary to store their remains in time-stopping Inventories when the worst came to pass and bring them back to their homes for burial. That was what Curtis's odd choice of words referred to.

Another reason he chose to sleep in the cockpit was that he was especially wary of some *specific* people coming for his head in his sleep.

His group—known as Dryfe's Legitimate Government or DLG—was a known anti-government force in Dryfe and an armed militia in Caldina. As it was a nuisance to both countries, there was a high chance the group's leader would become a target for assassination.

"Very well. Also, I am sure you are aware, but the briefing is in ten minutes."

"I know."

Curtis cut the comms and opened the cockpit. A leader like him had to look at least passable, so he stood in front of a mirror to get himself ready and caught sight of the look in his own eyes—haggard, so unlike how he'd looked when he was still in Dryfe.

“I certainly have sunk low,” he said in self-derision.

Curtis had lost count of how many crimes he’d committed here in Caldina in order to maintain his group and its power—but he had a goal he had to achieve no matter the cost.

“We will bring down Reinhard. And then...”

For the sake of the desire that he refused to name out loud, Curtis had resolved to accept a particular task.

Ten minutes later, the members of DLG had gathered in the warehouse that doubled as their briefing hall. There were hundreds of them, and they all wore the same clothes—the uniform of the Dryfean military. They were forming orderly lines, and before them stood Curtis’s unit—the majestic dragon-headed Magingear.

“Comrades, we are about to commence our biggest operation since we moved here to Caldina.” Curtis spoke to his subordinates, his Magingear behind him.

A moment later, multiple pictures were projected on the warehouse wall.

“Our target is the desert liner, *Eltram*. We will break into it, take the passengers hostage, and claim our target object from the energy block. An inside sympathizer has arranged the infiltration process for us.”

The projection showed the ship’s exterior and a sketch of its design, along with a photo of some sort of large device. Curtis used a pointer to indicate specific parts of the picture and lay out the details of the operation.

“If we keep going as we are, we will lose a large amount of our supplies. Because of this, I have sent Lieutenant Colonel Berlin’s squad on a routine supply mission. Now, I am sure you have realized this by now, but this operation will endanger more civilians than any we have undertaken before.”

That last sentence was received with nervous gulps from a few—if not more than a few—of his subordinates.

“But as you know by now, Caldina is our enemy. Do not let their casualties distract you,” Curtis continued, his voice hardened with absolute certainty. “While the false imperator Reinhard was a fool to start a war with Altar in the first place, Caldina intervened in it by attacking only Dryfe, directly contributing to our homeland’s dire situation. And this was not their only hostile action. They ceased food exports to Dryfe while our people were going through a famine and used that opportunity to hoard wealth for themselves. As far as the imperium is concerned, they are evil!”

Curtis justified their upcoming actions out loud in order to alleviate the psychological burden his battalion might carry as they embarked upon their mission. He’d been doing this since they’d begun taking people’s supplies by force.

“And this operation will reward us with something we *must* have! Something that will grant us power and will be indispensable in taking back our homeland! Indeed—this will be a weapon against the murderer of first prince Gustav and his son Hallon! The blade that strikes down the vile, tyrannical false imperator Reinhard!” Curtis’s assertion of their justice was deceitful, but he didn’t let them realize it—and if they did regardless, they simply looked away from it.

If they didn’t believe themselves to be just, they would be unable to carry out any military actions so far away from their homes.

“To empower our justice and to secure a future for Dryfe, we must make this operation a success even if it means sacrificing all who stand in our way!”

And so, the battalion replied with a passionate roar.

“This operation will bring us closer to our true goal! Victory to the true Dryfe!”

“VICTORY TO THE TRUE DRYFE!” The soldiers of DLG saluted in unison, and Curtis responded the same way.

They would soon carry out their operation—to them, it was righteous, but to others, merely criminal.

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Thus the capriccio set on a sand liner was about to begin.

Chapter One: The Part-Time Job and the Man Who Calls Himself Vulgar

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Eltram was a newly built desert liner that had just set off on its maiden voyage. Focused on providing a safe and pleasant trip to its wealthy passengers, it was equipped with a casino, a shopping mall, a pool, a theater, and a lot of other fancy amenities. It reminded me of the cruise ship we'd gone on in reality for a family trip back before our parents divorced.

There were two big differences between that ship and *Eltram*, though.

First, when looking outside, I didn't see a blue ocean, but instead a white desert—this ship was moving on the sand. This would have been an impossible sight in reality, so this view had a pretty big impact on me.

The second difference was on the sides of the ship, and in a way, it was even more startling than the first.

This ship was equipped with rows of cannons. That was *definitely* something that a real cruise ship didn't have, because it didn't have to deal with monster attacks, obviously.

The cannons were there to deal with giant worms and other aggressive creatures that would undoubtedly approach *Eltram*. In addition to that, this ship was accompanied by a convoy of many smaller sand-ships ready to protect it if necessary.

This was a world where a "safe and pleasant trip" basically meant there would be a lot of force at the ready to protect you.

"Tasteless, isn't it?" said a person sitting at the same table as me, bringing my attention back to the inside of the ship.

I was seated at the best table in the ship's open-air restaurant. The man with us had said that we'd talk business once we'd eaten, and invited us here for a meal.

"It is. Can the passengers actually relax like this?" I asked.

"The tians can. They were born and raised in a world full of man-eating monsters. They understand the necessity of protective power on a level we can't comprehend. In fact, don't you think that all these cannons would make them *more* relaxed?"

Good point, I thought. *This might look extraordinary to me, but I guess tians see it as completely normal.*

"But we aren't like that. Even if the taste of food doesn't change, these cannons make the *feeling* of the flavor a bit empty. Next."

Despite complaining about the impact the defenses may have on food, he'd polished off the meat on his plate and was now asking for the next dish.

"Phew. This ship's chef isn't an SJ, but this still tastes great. Then again, skills generally don't have a strong effect on cooking."

"Really?"

"Cooking is a sense skill that lets you create food of taste you want to make with a degree of perfection based on the skill's level. In the end, it all depends on your own sense of taste. If yours is awful, you will make terrible food even if your Cooking level is high. Conversely, if you have the technique, you can make delicious food even if you don't have the actual skill. For example, my Isara here is also an excellent cook."

"Thank you for your kind words," said Isara—a tian woman and the man's bodyguard.

"I see..." I said.

"There are exceptions, though, like the leader of our clan... Ah, next," the man added as he emptied another plate.

It was strange how he could speak so fluently while eating. He didn't even make any chewing sounds.

"Hmm. You're not eating much," he said. "Is there something in the food you don't like? That slutty AR-I-CA girl told me that you're a vegetarian and your companion here has a strange diet of only white things."

"O-Oh, this is very good. It's just...I'm a bit overwhelmed by how fast you're eating."

I'd already seen how Nemesis ate, and I wouldn't have expected anyone to compare to her, but this man certainly gave her a run for her money. Also, with Nemesis, I could handwave it as one of those eccentric diets Maidens tended to have—but he was a Master, not an Embryo.

He didn’t really look like any Master I knew. He was, well...how could I put it...?

“You’re eating *too* much, fatty.”

“Yes, you’re very corpule...wait, CYCO?!” *That’s too blunt even by your standards! You do realize he’s our contractor and a Superior, right?!*

“Hmm. ‘You’re eating *too* much, fatty,’ eh? It’s true—I can’t deny it. Don’t you agree?”

“I do. You are indeed a gourmand, sir.”

Unaffected by Cyco’s verbal abuse, the man exchanged a few words with Isara.

Well, he was clearly obese. Coupled with his rather short height, it almost seemed like he was wider than he was tall. His stomach area was especially big. It looked like he was hiding a ball under his shirt...no, it was more like his whole torso was one huge ball.

But despite that, he had a pretty face. It felt like he'd made a pretty-boy avatar and then gone on to get fat afterward.

"Umm...did you make yourself look like that in character creation?" There were people out there who gave themselves silly features like huge mohawks, and Fran and I myself were so different from our real selves we weren't even the same sex, so maybe it was a similar situation with him.

"Heh heh heh. No, actually. Be careful—if you eat too much and don't get a death penalty for long enough, you'll end up like this too. I'm actually the only person I know whose avatar got fattened up to this point, but it's not like I did it *just* to see what would happen."

Okay, yes, I'll keep that in mind, I thought. *This is another person whose mistakes I can learn from, just like Teach.*

"And even though it might sound like it contradicts the advice I just gave you, when you're on this side, don't be afraid to enjoy food to your heart's content. Unlike in real life, overeating and overdrinking won't affect your health at all, and even if you do die anyway, you'll just come back from the death penalty exactly as you were before."

That was an interesting way to think about it...

"Oh, and in *Dendro*, you can also have as many lovers as you want."

"...What?"

"No matter how many people talk behind your back about it on this side, it doesn't mean anything in real life. And there's many more beauties here than over in the real world. I have lots of lovers myself. Isara here is my favorite, though."

"Heh heh...and I wonder how many of the others you've said that to, hmm?"

Ohh, so that's the situation with these two. I get it.

"Ugh, how vulgar."

"Cyco! Don't just *say* that!" The way she just pointed straight at him as she insulted him shocked even me.

Yet, again, he didn't seem bothered whatsoever.

"Indeed. I *am* vulgar. I basically play *Dendro* just to eat lots of incredible food and spend my nights with beautiful ladies. I don't see it as anything to be ashamed of. I have the money for it, after all."

He claimed to be vulgar—essentially *boasting* about it—and didn't seem to feel any guilt or shame over it. It felt as if he was completely true to his job's name.

After all, he was King of Revelry, Moneygold.

Just like Teach, he was a Superior who belonged to Sefirot.

She'd told me that he was "the man who'd created the most wealth" and that he was a person of debauchery and vulgarity—but on that second point, he was even worse than I'd heard.

"And if the RMT ban didn't exist, I'd be better off in reality too..."

Sounds like he's got the exact opposite problem of Sonya's.

After saying that, he once again resumed eating as if to distract himself from something.

"Hungry, hungry, lewd fatty," said Cyco.

"Indeed! Speaking of which, are you interested in being my lover as well? My starting offer is ten million per month."

"Hey! That's my Embryo you're talking to! Don't make proposals like that!" *He dropped that bomb like it's nothing! Even Cyco is so shocked she's practically frozen solid!* "And why her, anyway?! Are you into little girls or something?!"

"A beauty is a beauty. Age is irrelevant. In fact, I believe that even species doesn't matter. Legendarians and even some nonhumanoids aren't off-limits for me."

How is he so open about his sexual proclivities?! "Are you *sure* you're not one of Legendaria's Superiors?!"

"Don't joke like that. That'd make me a colleague of LS Ergo Sum. I'd never want to be grouped with that degenerate."

My threshold for "Legendarian perverts" just keeps going higher, I thought. *Also, I'm pretty sure Teach said pretty much the same thing as him.*

"Wait, are you and Teach like that too?" I asked. She'd said that she was into both men and women, after all...

"Huh?" But despite what I expected, Moneygold made a *very* disgusted face. "Even *I* have some standards. Just imagining sleeping with that dumb slut sends a chill down my spine..."

Oh. I see how it is, I thought. When talking about Moneygold, Teach had told me that he was “a piece of work,” and now I knew why—these two were just too similar to get along. At least when it came to sexuality, they were basically the same type of people.

“Oh, and unlike her, I have no interest in homosexual encounters, so I won’t be offering a lover’s contract to you.”

“I wasn’t planning on asking!” Actually, I really couldn’t tell if he was worse or better than her. As he continued to weird me out with every new sentence that came out of his mouth, we finished our food and moved on to enjoying some post-meal tea. Cyco had also recovered from her shock and was now drinking a drink that looked like lassi.

“Anyway, let’s get down to business. There’s actually two matters I’d like to discuss,” said Moneygold.

“Two?”

“First is the part-time job AR-I-CA told you about, while the second is just a trade offer. Let’s start with the job. What I want you to do is protect me.”

“Protect?” A *Superior* was asking for my protection? “Do you actually need that?” I asked.

“I do. I may be part of Sefirot, but when it comes to combat, I’m one of the weaker ones—just like that dumb slut, in fact.” One of the weaker ones in Sefirot—and similar to Teach? “My stats are especially low. I can’t keep up with people moving at the speed of sound, so someone with that capability would kill me right away. That’s why I have Isara, a combat SJ, as my bodyguard and lover.”

“Heh heh. Exactly,” Isara said with a smile and a nod.

This made sense. For a noncombat-focused Superior like Moneygold, the best bodyguard was a tian like her, since unlike us Masters, they were around all the time.

“But that seems like even more reason you don’t need me...” I said.

“We’ll be dealing with one of the Orbs here.”

“Ah!” I instantly knew that he was referring to one of the Orbs that had UBMs sealed within them. When one of them had been broken recently, it had released a giant monster in the middle of Cortana...

“Someone obtained the Orb by chance, and this ship is where we will negotiate a transfer to us. Now...it’s not clear how relevant she was, but Murder Princess Emily Killingston was involved in the Cortana incident, wasn’t she?”

“Yes...” The immortal Superior, Murder Princess Emily—the girl who had killed an unthinkable amount of people, though I didn’t know why. Just remembering her made my heart feel heavy, and I couldn’t help but wonder what her reasons were.

“Are you okay?”

“...Yes.” I supposed thinking about Emily had made me look so down that Moneygold had gotten concerned.

If you ignored his vulgarity and debauchery, he was probably a decent person after all.

“Then I will continue. The presence of the Orb here makes it possible that the Murder Princess or someone associated will show up here too. I heard that she is immortal, and it’s clear that not even my Isara can overcome such absurd odds. My matchup with her isn’t exactly good either.”

Murder Princess Emily could come back from the dead over and over, and she grew stronger every time she committed murder.

Logically speaking, there really was no way to win against her. But if anyone had a chance, it would be...

“Absurd as she is, though, there is one Master who *does* have a good matchup against her—you.”

“So...you’re hiring me in case she shows up?” Cyco could unconditionally freeze targets based on their kill count of their own kind, while White Rose had Boucliers Planetes, which would prevent Emily from committing suicide—both of which were a direct counter to her abilities.

“Exactly. Will you do it?” Moneygold asked.

I hesitated for a moment. I wasn’t sure if it was really a good idea to fight against Emily. But if she started a rampage on this ship like she had in Cortana, *someone* would have to stop her. And if I was the only one who could do it...

“I will.”

“It’s settled then. Thank you. I’ll prepare a reward that I’m sure will satisfy you.”

“Thank you. So, what was the other thing? A trade offer, right?”

“Yes,” Moneygold said before taking a sip of his tea and looking right at me. “Once you’ve done your job here, would you be interested in selling your White Rose to me for ten billion lir?”

“No.” The trade suggestion came suddenly and out of nowhere, but my response was even faster. I was pretty sure it was reflexive at this point—faster than my actual thoughts—and that I would’ve said the same even if his offer had been a hundred times bigger.

He was already offering more than White Rose had cost to produce, but it wasn’t a matter of money. The Magingear had been Fran’s birthday present to me. I could never, ever sell it to someone else.

“Didn’t even have to think on that one, eh? All right, I’ll give up on that.”

“...Huh?” I knew that I was the one who’d refused, but it surprised me how quickly he backed down.

“Are you surprised that I gave up so easily?”

“Well...yes.”

“I have principles—one of them being that I seek out anything I can get with enough money, but give up on things I can’t. I may make a bigger offer if I think it will work, but that’s not the case here, right? And I would never, ever try to take anything by force.”

He really was kinda like Teach. She also made a lot of propositions, but if they clearly weren’t interested, she never got aggressive about it.

“I’m satisfied with just things that I can actually buy. It’s also the reason I’m in Sefirot.”

“Hm?”

“So AR-I-CA never told you this, did she?” Having no idea what he was talking about, I shook my head. “We Sefirot are a clan of Superiors gathered by demand of the Caldinan congress. Even those of us who were unaffiliated with any country before are now under this country’s management. We have to do personalized quests like this one, so we lose some freedom, but in exchange we are granted certain privileges.”

I did know that Sefirot was created by Caldina’s decree, but the fact that they’d gotten anything out of the deal in return was news to me.

“In my case, I got the right to participate in rare auctions and exclusive markets available only to certain merchants...though, I do limit my spending there. Overbuying causes problems and makes a lot of enemies. I want to be a buyer whom the sellers can appreciate.”

“Is that what Teach got too?”

"I wouldn't know—that's no concern of mine. Prying into the perks the other members got would only cause trouble. I'm only revealing mine because I'm satisfied with it, and also because it's relatively tame."

Teach always seemed like such a free spirit. What could she have wanted that was worth joining Sefirot?

"Anyway, that's it for business. Your period of employment starts tomorrow, when we'll do the Orb trade, and ends when we make it to the final stop at Drac-Nomad."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes. That's when the party we'll negotiate with will get on the ship. That means today is basically a day off for you, but if you can, use it to get a grasp of the ship's structure."

Moneygold then handed me a comms device.

"If anything happens, use that to contact me. You can judge whether or not something's an emergency. Oh, and tell me if you have to log out to eat or bathe or anything else that takes a while."

"Okay."

"All right. I'll be counting on you." Moneygold then left me the key to our cabin and walked out of the restaurant. From what I could see, he paid for everything the both of us had eaten.

"That fatty's lewd *and* lavish, it seems."

"Yeah. He's, well...quite the character."

He also wasn't shaken by Cyco's insults, so it seemed like he was pretty bighearted too.

"His heart's not the only thing that's big."

It felt like Cyco was even more harsh with him than she was with Fran. Was she bothered by his offer to become his lover? No, she'd been acting that way before he'd said that.

"Anyway, we have work to do until we make it to Drac-Nomad. Let's do a good job."

"Oui, ma'am." Someone could come after the Orb. We had to be on high alert.

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Eltram

The day Hugo boarded *Eltram*, it made a stop at a particular city after it got dark. There, it picked up some new passengers and resumed its voyage.

On the deck, a group of three people who had just boarded were engaged in a conversation.

"We...actually made it on here, leader."

"Yeah. We were clear even by the standards of a luxury liner. Looks like Caldina doesn't even have us on their secret wanted lists... I guess that's because they didn't see our faces even when they defeated us."

"That means we can do our thing without worryin' about nothin'! Caldina really is the best! There's so much money here! Oh...this actually kinda reminds me of when we went to Granvaloa and our ship broke and we all drowned. Hope *that* never happens again."

It was a trio of one man and two women. They were all Masters, as indicated by the Embryo crests on the backs of their left hands.

One woman was a spectacled beauty with a stern expression, while the other was a girl whose scarred face gave her the look of a true bandit.

And finally, the man they called "leader" was a youth with fiery red hair. He was wearing a crimson jacket lined with fur that looked like a lion's mane. While the red of his hair was a natural color, his jacket looked as though it had been painted in blood.

"Let's find out how this thing's built, then find what we're here for. Niala, Fey."

"Yes."

"Roger thaaat!"

The man then faced the two...

"This is where we'll start rebuilding Goblin Street."

...and spoke his will as King of Burglary, Eldridge.

Chapter One: The Luxury Liner and Its Troublesome Passengers

About Goblin Street

Goblin Street had once been an Altarian PK clan that was infamous even by the standards of PK clans. Unlike other well-known PK groups like Mad Castle or K&R, Goblin Street had not hesitated to rob tian merchants as well.

Of course, this had gotten them on the wanted list, but the clan had been composed of high-level Masters and boasted King of Burglary, Eldridge as its leader. His great power as a single unit was evident, but he also excelled at analysis and was a skilled tactician.

Because of that, Goblin Street had been a PK clan that many knew and feared.

However, it had since suffered through five failures that had reduced the clan into the dirt.

First had been the counterattack to the blockade at Altea they'd put up alongside other PK clans. While Eldridge was away, they were attacked by a Superior, Lei-Lei, Prodigal of Feasts, who destroyed the clan for the first time. However, it hadn't been a fatal blow to the group. Though many members who didn't have save points in other countries were lost to the gaol, about half of them were spared. On top of that, it wasn't as though Lei-Lei had defeated Eldridge—the strongest among them. Eldridge was a match for Superiors, and his clan still believed that he could win against them.

That belief had died with their second defeat, which came soon after they'd moved operations to the border between Caldina and Altar.

The members of Goblin Street had spotted a group that possessed a mobile save point carriage—an immense luxury only a few in Altar could boast. This treasure had both practical and monetary value that they simply couldn't ignore.

Because of this, Eldridge and the rest of Goblin Street had tried to attack them, but luck hadn't been on their side. As it turned out, the group was accompanied by one of Huang He's Superiors—Xunyu. Her ultimate was a sure-kill skill that had torn out Eldridge's heart and quickly given him the death penalty.

The other members had not stood a chance after that, and Goblin Street was destroyed for the second time.

This was when people began to leave the clan of their own accord.

After that, their third destruction came when they simply happened to be too close to The Earth, Fatoum, as he was making his way back home to Caldina. The Superior had sunk them along with an entire mountain—a luxurious burial, no doubt.

This defeat had led to people quitting the clan en masse even if they hadn't been sent to the gaol. Whether they'd lost faith in Eldridge or simply noticed that their luck had run dry was uncertain, but there were still a few who stayed.

The next time was when they acquired a ship and tried their hand at piracy in Granvaloa.

However, right after they started, they stumbled upon another Superior, Great Admiral Antimicrobic Soy Sauce. The man nicknamed "The Human Bomb" had used his explosive powers to deliver Goblin Street's fourth destruction. With that, the clan had lost almost all of its members, leaving only Eldridge himself, Niala, and Fey.

Then, they got their hands on another ship and tried to ply their trade in a part of the South Sea close to Tenchi—an area where Granvaloa had comparatively little influence. However, by some accident—which was starting to look like an inevitability—they encountered The Slash, Saki Muryo-Taisu, as she was rafting to the continent. This meeting ended quickly, with the Tenchi Superior splitting them in two along with their ship.

This was their fifth destruction.

All of these defeats came at the hands of Superiors, which made this entire sequence of events quite unusual.

Regardless, it had left Goblin Street absolutely destitute. Not only had they lost their ships and dropped items upon each death, they were also forced to buy replacements for what they lost and repairs for the items they kept. By the fifth defeat, they had almost completely run out of funds.

Without money to buy a new ship, they had no choice but to travel by land to Caldina and spend some time making money through normal quests and monster hunts.

Odd as it might have been at this point, they suffered no absurd Superior encounters while doing this.

This had caused Niala to put on a contemplative face and speak of “karma” and “retributive justice,” something she called an “eastern proverb.” Of course, this wasn’t really a “proverb” at all, but a concept originating in Buddhism.

Eldridge had spent those days lost in negative thoughts. He’d been killed in an instant so many times now that he was questioning if he was worth anything at all. Up until now, he’d been able to analyze the strengths of his enemies and figure out a good way to counter them. However, Superiors kept killing him so fast he had no time to cook up any kind of plan. His self-worth had dropped so low that he began to believe that he was only strong by pre-Superior standards, and that he had no chance against the Superiors themselves.

He’d also started to feel bad for the two women that continued to stick with him even after all these failures.

They stay with me cause they believe Goblin Street can make a comeback, but what if I don’t actually have the power to make that happen? he wondered. *Maybe the best thing to do here is to follow that armor-clad Barbaroy’s example and just end the clan.*

In reality, the reason Niala and Fey continued to stick with Eldridge despite his recent failures had nothing to do with the clan—it was because of entirely different feelings. They would stay with him even if the clan stopped all its burgling activities entirely, but he had no way of knowing that.

Blind to their thoughts about him, Eldridge continued to worry about his *Dendro* future.

“Maybe I should talk to them about disbanding the clan. They’d probably be better off somewhere else. With a leader that’s not as pathetic...”

If he’d actually said that directly to them, the two might have revealed the actual reason they stayed around, and their relationships might have changed. Coincidentally, this was right about the time when their old country of Altar held the Love-Duel Festival.

Before he could actually convey any of that, though, something intriguing had reached his ears.

It was information that something of high value would be brought to the sand liner known as *Eltram*.

Eldridge had his doubts about the veracity of the rumor, but he also couldn't deny that the implications if it *was* true were tempting.

Since this particular item would certainly be worth a great amount of money, claiming it and selling it off would help revitalize the clan and finally let him make up with the two girls who had put up with him for so long.

With that thought in mind, Eldridge entered the ship, ready to take its treasure.

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The first night since they boarded had passed, and the three were now at a relatively cheap café here on the ship.

Last night, they'd split up and gathered information, but they had yet to find out where they'd find what they were looking for. Then again, it was possible that it just hadn't yet been loaded onto the ship.

Or maybe the info I got was false. Eldridge thought. If that was true, then there was no chance Goblin Street would make a comeback here. They'd have to return to doing simple guild quests again, and Eldridge feared that that would finally make the girls lose patience with him.

"Leader, I'm sure it will work out."

"...Thanks, Niala." Her encouraging words genuinely made him feel a bit better.

"This place is so big, though... It's like a real luxury cruise ship," said Fey.

"It's so luxurious that even the third-class tickets cost us most of our savings," said Eldridge. "This café is the cheapest here, but even that is so expensive I'm not sure we'll have enough for all three of our daily meals."

Their awful financial situation made the three of them sigh heavily.

"That's exactly why we gotta get what we came here for, though.

There's still two more days left until we arrive at the final stop—Drac-Nomad. Everything will be fine as long as we find it before that...hm?"

Eldridge suddenly looked off in another direction.

"Leader?" Saying nothing, Eldridge signed to them to be quiet and crept closer to the pillar next to his seat, keeping his eyes fixed on one particular point.

There, he saw a Master who had a pretty face and a round, corpulent body.

That face, build, and crest... That's Sefirot's Moneygold. Eldridge was a man who gathered info about known Superiors and rankers so he could come up with ways to counter them. He'd obviously heard of Moneygold.

Why is he here? Is he after the same thing as us? No, I doubt it. But whether his goals were the same or not didn't matter. What did matter was the fact that there was a Superior on this ship.

We go back to burglar stuff for the first time in forever and immediately, this happens... Maybe karma really does exist.

Overcome by a bad feeling and sensing an oncoming headache, Eldridge let out a deep sigh.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

It was the second day since we boarded *Eltram*—the day Moneygold would negotiate for the Orb.

Currently, we were having a conversation over a late breakfast.

"By the way, do we actually know anything about the Orb itself?" I asked. Since they'd already discussed a possible purchase, it seemed likely they'd been informed about the particulars.

And as I expected, Moneygold replied with a nod.

"We do. Apparently, it's sealing a UBM that turns nonhumanoids into humanoids—monsters into tians, basically. And they say that the resulting tian is always beautiful."

"That's a very...specific effect."

"The previous owner of the Orb was a slave dealer who allegedly sold monsters he'd turned into humanoids. I guess turning common Little Goblins into attractive men and women must make for some incredible profit margins.”

“The previous owner...? So you’re negotiating with someone who *isn’t* that previous owner, then?” I asked. Moneygold nodded again, his chin wrinkling as he did so.

“Turns out that the transformation is temporary, and the humans turn back into monsters in about three days. Of course, that made the buyers very upset, which put the other slave dealers in hot water. And so, as punishment for messing with the market, the other dealers sent a hit man after the scammer, and that was that.”

“That’s...wow.”

“It also could’ve been a disgruntled buyer who sent the hit man, though. If a beauty turned into a goblin while we were doing the deed, I’d be mad too. That would be *traumatizing*.”

How am I supposed to comment on that? I thought.

“Anyway, the one who offered me—or rather, offered the Caldinan congress—the task of taking the Orb from him is someone who actually worked for the late scammer. In the chaos after his boss’s death, he grabbed the Orb and skipped town. Problem is, he didn’t know what to do with the thing, and it could make him a target, so he wants to sell it as soon as possible.”

“I see.” It seemed like this person had the right idea—the thing at Cortana made it obvious that the Orbs could cause some serious trouble.

“What will you do with it after you buy it?” I asked.

“Bring it to the congress. That’s my job here,” Moneygold replied. “Huang He would be pissed if we beat the monster inside it and turned it into an MVP reward, so we gotta be careful. I really don’t think they should act so big when they’re the idiots who let the damn things get stolen and spread all over in the first place, though.”

Looking somewhat irritated, Moneygold took out a cigar, and Isara, who was standing next to him just like last time, cut the tip using her *fingers* and lit it up with a lighter. The cut part of the cigar was completely smooth, so I could only assume that was because of a job or skill she had.

“It’s such a pain,” he went on. “Cortana’s change of mayor and rebuilding efforts and whatever else caused their auctions to shut down for the foreseeable future, so this Orb business affects me too, damn it...”

Moneygold took a long draw of the cigar and let it out with a sigh.

Caldina had had nothing to do with the Orb theft in Huang He, so you could say the country was just an unfortunate victim. Cortana was a major trade center, and now thanks to the mayor's death and the giant hole in the city, it couldn't fulfill that function anymore. That clearly made Moneygold upset.

"The congress is still negotiating with Huang He. If it goes well, maybe we'll get to do whatever we want with the Orbs."

"But there's no demand for that lewd Orb, is there?" Cyco asked.

I'm pretty sure the human transformation Orb can be used for other things, I thought.

"On the contrary—the demand for lewdness will exist as long as humanity does. If we were allowed to break it, I'd want it for myself," said Moneygold.

"I thought this yesterday too, but...aren't you just a *bit* too open about stuff like that?!"

"Perverted, fat freak," Cyco said.

"What I'm worried about is that AR-I-CA would probably want it too," Moneygold added.

"You're not wrong!" I said.

"So many perverts..." Cyco said. "I hope you all die."

The power to create lots of beautiful men and women? I thought. *Teach would be all over that! And if they both want it...what if we get another Clash of the Superiors over something this stupid?!*

"Well, moving on," Moneygold said. "If Caldina gets permission to break the Orbs, we'll be able to make up for the losses they caused us. That's why I hope our prez comes out on top in the negotiations."

"I really don't think a bunch of MVP rewards can make up for the casualties..." In the end, MVP rewards were just equipment and materials usable by only one person. A few of these couldn't possibly be enough to cancel out the damage suffered by Caldina's largest trade center being put in such a dire state.

"Oh no—they *will* pay for themselves and then some. We'll eventually acquire lots of new trade routes thanks to them."

"Hm?" *Trade routes? Did one of the Orbs have a power that makes it easier to travel on the desert?* I wondered.

"Anyway, I have a question too," he said, as if he was trying to change the topic and bring the conversation closer to the job at hand. “Did you memorize *Eltram*’s structure?”

“Yes,” I said. “I spent yesterday walking around everywhere that’s not off-limits and got a good idea of what’s where.”

“Well done.”

“It made me wonder, though...how many people are powering this ship, anyway?” *Dendro* was a world with magic and, specifically, magic power—usually known as MP. MP was a colorless type of energy that could be transformed into heat, electricity, wind, and many other kinds of energy, which meant that technological advancements were also generally powered by magic. Caldina’s sand-ships, Granvaloa’s powered vessels, Dryfe’s Magingears—everything like that required MP to run. Some larger ships were equipped with charged MP tanks, but if not that, the source of their energy was generally *people*.

And the more massive the thing was, the more MP it required to stay operational, so with *Eltram* being as big as it was, I couldn’t even imagine how much magic power it was draining.

“Zero,” said Moneygold. “This ship is powered by a restored core from the pre-ancient civilization.”

“Huh? They actually found a core?” That was really rare. I knew that the pre-ancient civilization had advanced technology that enabled them to build cores that produced magic power by themselves, but I hadn’t seen one since Ray’s Zephyrus Silver. Even that had been a small one, though. I definitely had never seen one large enough to move a ship this big.

“I didn’t even know they could be restored,” I said.

“There’re engineers that specialize in that,” said Moneygold. “The specialist who restored this ship’s core is particularly famous, though. If I remember right, the name is...Crys Fragment.”

“You mean people like that actually *do* exist?” I suppose Dryfe wasn’t the only country with skilled engineers.

“This person is mysterious and pretty damn weird, though. Crys has a knack for restoring all kinds of pre-ancient civ items and selling them to people right when they need it the most. For example, the large ship core installed here was sold to the biggest transportation company in Caldina. It’s high quality and barely needs any maintenance. Crys even went the extra mile and threw in a blueprint with ideas on how to improve the ship itself."

Moneygold then took a break in favor of another smoke from his cigar.

"There were always plans to build gigantic sand-ships that would transport both passengers and cargo, but they were always scrapped because no one could solve their energy problems," Moneygold went on. "Even I was surprised that someone restored and brought in a core that fixed it right away... Crys *really* should've sold it to me, though."

His expression as he said that was the same as it was when he'd offered to buy White Rose from me.

Talking about this energy core made me think, though. If I had something like that—a smaller version, at least—wouldn't it solve White Rose's energy problem? Fran had made the robot for me, but because of its heavy Mythical alloy armor and focus on defensive skills, its biggest flaw was that I didn't have enough MP to keep it running for long.

"You look like you'd like one too," said Moneygold. "Be careful, though. The name 'Crys Fragment' is so famous that Caldina's full of scammers using it to sell garbage."

"I'll keep that in mind." I didn't have Truth Discernment, after all.

This reminded me that Fran and the others in The Triangle of Wisdom had actually told me that they'd worked with a pre-ancient civilization energy core once.

Before the civil war, the army recognized the clan's achievement with Marshall II and its mass production. They came to The Triangle of Wisdom with a well-preserved core that they had stored and requested that they create the strongest ever Magingear. They also provided limitless funding, letting the members go all out on their design...to which they responded by going *too far* and overloading the robot with gear and functions.

While my White Rose and Teach's Blue Opera were experimental units Fran herself had built with Marshall II as a base, that robot was the result of the concentrated efforts of everyone in The Triangle of Wisdom—a *golden unit* I'd only seen in photos from that time. Unlike Marshall IIs, which were designed with mass production in mind, that Magingear was a one-of-a-kind *super robot*.

Unfortunately, it had disappeared somewhere during the mess of the civil war, and both Fran and the other members said that it felt like a big loss.

Actually...I wonder where it is right now.

◇

The ship arrived and stopped at the next city and the other party came aboard, just like Moneygold had told me.

“So what you want in exchange for this is Drac-Nomad citizenship and ten million lir so you can start a business, right?”

“Yes...that is all I want.”

Moneygold was negotiating with a man who was accompanied by a small child—the man’s daughter.

For a moment after I first saw them, I thought that they might’ve been Emily and that man who was always with her, just disguised as father and daughter like they had been back when I’d encountered them earlier. However, Moneygold had used some item he had to confirm that they were definitely the right people.

The negotiations were already approaching their end.

“It’s a deal, then,” said Moneygold. “We’ll also cover your living expenses here on the ship. We have a cabin for you too. You’ll get business funds and a place to live when you sign this and bring it over to a government office in Drac-Nomad.”

Moneygold then took out a coin pouch, a key, and a Contract and gave it to the man.

“You thought of everything...thank you so much,” said the man.

“I should be thanking *you*. I’m glad this went so smoothly.”

The two exchanged a handshake, concluding the trade.

“That’s one thing dealt with,” Moneygold said. The only ones here now were Moneygold, myself, and Cyco—Isara was leading the man and his daughter to their second-class cabin in a different part of the ship.

Moneygold was holding the Orb he’d just bought in one hand, using his other to smoke a cigar.

“You look like you’ve got a question,” he said, looking at me.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s about...the price you paid for that Orb.”

“The ability to open a business in Drac-Nomad, ten million lir in funds to get started, and a place to live sounds pretty good, but I know what you’re thinking. You think I could’ve gotten more for it, right?”

"...Yes."

"Well, here's your answer. The Orb *is* worth way more than that, and I could've paid ten, if not a hundred times more. There's really no limit to how much I can spend, and if he'd been planning to raise the price sky-high, I was ready to respond in kind."

Moneygold took out a wallet-like Inventory and turned it upside-down, letting the contents spill out on the table. The whole surface was covered by a pile of coins—some of them so valuable that almost nobody used them. I couldn't even guess how much money there was in that mound, but a single glance was enough to know that all this was worth many billions of lir.

"But that didn't happen, did it?" Moneygold said. "And since negotiating a price raise on something I'm buying would be stupid, our deal ended exactly as you observed."

"Why didn't that man try to raise the price?" Cyco asked.

"There's people in this world who don't have it in them to be vulgar," said Moneygold, breathing out a cloud of smoke.

"People who can't be vulgar? Do you mean people who are *humble*?"

"This isn't about humility...I'm talking about those folk who can't let their greed take the wheel even when they're faced with the opportunity of a lifetime. The ones who can be charitably described as careful, and uncharitably as cowards."

His words made it seem like he was making fun of the man for his inability to be greedy, but his tone and expression showed a different feeling.

"But that's a kind of virtue," Moneygold went on. "Overall, you'll be happier if you're like that."

"Hm?" Cyco looked at him with a look of confusion on her face, which made Moneygold chuckle a little before he began explaining what he meant.

"Your threshold for happiness goes up as you experience more luxury. More delicious, more fun, more pleasurable, more wonderful... There's no limit to human desires, but satisfying them comes with a price. This is especially obvious with desires you satisfy by paying for them. The amount of money you have to shell out just keeps on growing." The man who claimed to be satisfied with just things that he could buy took one ultra high-value coin in hand. "A person becomes rich, gets a taste of luxury, and their desires spin out of control. Then they reach for luxury beyond their means and are brought down to ruin. That's a common story, isn't it?" he said, now looking at me rather than Cyco—and I wasn't sure why.

"It is," I said.

"And that's why I try to satisfy my desires *here*. In reality, I just came back from delivering newspapers."

I couldn't even begin to imagine this embodiment of vulgarity and luxury as a simple paperboy. The idea left me speechless.

"Over here, I'm the definition of excess. My desires are always out of control—I've completely cut the brakes on them. When you consider that, the guy we just dealt with was much more of a proper human being than me, simply because he still has working brakes he could step on to stop himself," Moneygold said, looking somewhat amused.

If it was true that he was only rich here and his real self was actually living in poverty, those might've been his honest thoughts.

◇

There was something else that Moneygold's words reminded me of.

It was my...I mean, Yuri Gautier's father.

He also satisfied his wishes with wealth, as well as someone whose desires had no brakes on them. He'd amassed great wealth in his own generation, took an actress—my mother—as his wife, and lived an extravagant private life. He'd used more money than he had to, always boasted about it to others, and was satisfied in being like that.

A vulgar nouveau riche—that was how most onlookers saw him. In fact, even mother had described him to me that way.

She'd hated him enough to tell her own daughter that her father was a bad person.

But contrary to those words, father had always been very nice to me. And I'd been told that after Fran disappeared and mother and I ran away, he'd actually changed the way he lived his life. I didn't know if that was because of loneliness or something else. We'd stayed in touch after mother and I had run away, but we'd never talked about that.

I could remember how his voice sounded whenever we talked by phone, and it always seemed kinda happy. I also liked him and I liked talking to him, so I always looked forward to seeing him again.

But the last time I'd ever heard his voice was some time before last year's Christmas.

That was because he...

◇

"This isn't really related, but there's something that bothers me about the guy himself. The one we just traded with, I mean," said Moneygold, bringing my attention back from the past to the present. He sounded more serious than he had when he'd been talking about his desires or himself.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's the fact that he even managed to make it here. The power and presence of the Orb, and the desires and grudges surrounding them are no joke, but he—along with his daughter, might I add—were able to outrun it all and get to this ship in one piece. That confuses me. You know that, right now, both Caldina and its dark underbelly are really sensitive to anything related to those Orbs, right?"

The people of Caldina already knew that the horrible event at Cortana was caused by an Orb that had leaked into the country from Huang He, and that there were several other Orbs throughout the world. Teach had told me that people were already selling fakes that were made using modified Jewels.

"So you think there's something suspicious about those two?" I asked.

"They themselves are fine. I can vouch for that. But..." Moneygold looked outside—toward the town growing distant behind us. "...Someone might've protected and led them here in secret."

◆◆◆

Eltram, Stern, Deck

At the same time as Moneygold was voicing his concerns, a man was looking at the flowing scenery with a comms device against his ear.

He had an appearance that didn't stand out from the crowd here on the luxury liner, but upon closer inspection one would notice that his right arm, hidden by a long sleeve, was completely covered in bandages without even an inch of skin showing.

"Rascal, it seems that the negotiations went through without a problem," he—Great Soul Daoshi, Zhang Zangqi—said to the party on the other end of the comms line.

"I see. So you got them there just fine."

"Yes." The person on the other side was The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx.

The one who'd secretly protected the merchant and his daughter until they'd made it to this ship was none other than Zhang—a supporting member of IF. This was the job he'd been given after he was done with his task in Cortana.

"You stay there and keep on gatherin' data," said Rascal over the comm.

"Very well." From this point, Zhang's task was the same as it had been in Cortana—the Orb would create conflicts, and he was to gather info about the combat abilities of those who gathered, as well as any other valuable data.

"Odds are that our activities as IF will increase in the near future. I'd like to complete our list of unavoidable threats and possible allies while there's still time to do so," Rascal said.

"I am aware." Zhang knew that well, as he himself was one of the people IF had picked up through a conflict caused by an Orb.

"Also, Machina and I are going there too."

"You're going yourself...?!" Zhang was keeping his voice down for the call, but he still couldn't hide his shock. Rascal had entrusted Zhang with everything in Cortana and the protection of the Orb as it made its way to the ship, and yet he would still be showing up here in person—the significance was obvious.

"Why...?" he asked.

"Because there's somethin' there that's gonna cause trouble for us later if we don't completely destroy or retrieve it."

"Why not leave that to me?"

"You'd have no choice *but* to destroy it. I wanna retrieve it if I can. It's precious," said Rascal.

"Huhh?" said another voice on Rascal's end of the line. "But I could probably make it too. It's probably just a Pure-Dragon-type."

"You're the one who said that it'd be 'stupidly expensive.' And this is right after you made *three* of the so-called ‘cheaper’ Demi-Dragon-type versions. Do you have any idea how bad of a headache I got once I saw the recipe? You used up several types of rare mats you can only get in Ruins.”

“OWOWOWOW! STOP GRINDING YOUR FIST ON MY HEAD! THAT’S STRONG ENOUGH TO KILL A SMALL CHILD, YOU KNOW! Oh, wait, maybe don’t sto—OWOWOWOW...!”

“And then you went and said, ‘Oh. Just two would’ve been better for the unit’s balance. We didn’t need the third. Whoopsies!’ Seriously? Are you screwin’ with me?”

“NHHEEAAAAHH...!”

Zhang was conflicted, for he truly did not know whether to intervene in the ridiculous-sounding exchange on the other side of the comms unit.

“Anyway,” Rascal continued. “I’m going there, and that’s final. I’ll take care of some minor business first...and I should be there by tomorrow, early dawn, since it’d be a pain to get there when it’s too close to Drac-Nomad.”

“This vessel is set to arrive there tomorrow at noon.”

“If I get there at dawn, their reinforcements won’t make it. Everyone who can cover large distances fast has already been sent out. The only ones left are King of Toys, Grandmaster; The Fight, RAN; and their leader.”

“Sent out?” Rascal’s words made Zhang confused.

Drac-Nomad was the seat of the Caldinan congress, the country’s most important city, and Sefirot’s headquarters. How could it be that there were only three of them left?

“As you already know, King of Revelry, Moneygold is on that ship with you.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” Since he’d been in charge of protecting the man and his daughter during the negotiation, he obviously knew who they were negotiating with.

“Then there’s the three who were sent to the west. King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser; God Hand, Yumeji Iryo; and God Hunter, Carl Lourlou. They ran into some Legendarians on the way there, though.”

Zhang was wondering how Rascal knew such details, but he quickly figured that IF probably had supporters like him all over Caldina.

“And The Earth, Fatoum; The Cannon, Eve Selene; and The Ace, AR-I-CA are all at Vennsayle the Lake City to the south.”

“Why are they there...?”

"Preparing for war. It's not like they'll activate the War Boundary, though."

Most of Caldina's combat power was focused in its Masters, and there were many clans of all sizes there. Because of that, unless Caldina was given a longer time to prepare than other countries, a sudden War Boundary activation would kick out an unusually high number of Masters. Even if it didn't affect the country's combat potential, it was worth avoiding its use for economic reasons.

"War? With who...? Wait, you said 'south'..." Zhang was briefly befuddled by the sudden outpouring of information, but he soon came upon the answer.

"Yeah. When it learned about the Orbs, Granvaloa landed on Caldina's shores. They actually sent all of the Seven Great Embryos of Granvaloa who can actually do shit on land."

Those words shocked Zhang, since they meant that Granvaloa sent *four* of their Superiors.

"They're negotiatin' right now, but there's no way it won't fail. The south's gonna be a hellscape dominated by wide-scale extermination specialists."

That mental image made Zhang break out in a cold sweat—everyone involved in this conflict was extremely fearsome.

AR-I-CA rode a flying Magingear and used a Superior Embryo that granted foresight. Eve Selene had the Superior Embryo with the greatest combat range currently known. And then there was the man with unmatched magic power—the one the entire world knew as the "Magical Apex," Fatoum.

All of them were known and feared in and out of Caldina. However, Granvaloa's forces weren't any weaker.

Miroslava Swampman had a Superior Embryo that was a gigantic amphibious superweapon. Scala Edwards rode a Superior Embryo that could break the sound barrier several times over, and Maude Edwards fired a Superior Embryo with absolute homing ability.

And then there was the man who could turn any liquid into explosives, making entire patches of ocean vanish. Known as the "Human Bomb" or the "Apex of the Four Seas," he was a man who'd defeated an SUBM—Antimicrobic Soy Sauce.

Zhang had lots of combat experience, but even he couldn't imagine how the battle would unfold. The only thing he knew for sure was that the resulting storm of devastation would be something beyond human comprehension.

"Wouldn't it be better for me to go there instead?" he asked regardless. The destruction that would surely hit the south wasn't bad enough to convince him to abandon his duties. If it was his role to gather combat data, then Vennsayle would be the best place for that after the negotiations failed.

Needless to say, however, there was almost no chance that even Zhang could survive an area being ravaged by Superior wide-scale exterminators.

"You need to value your life more," Rascal said. "Like I said before, if you feel like you're in danger of dying, you're free to abandon your mission. I obviously wouldn't send you into an environment like that—the odds of your survival aren't ones I'd gamble on. I'll leave the south to some Ideas. They can be replaced."

"...Thank you," Zhang said, appreciating Rascal's consideration for his safety.

"Don't mention it. Also, that ship you're on may be attacked by a group of tians. They're probably after the same thing I am. I want you to intercept them if it comes to that."

"Understood."

"Then again, if that happens, Emily might take to action before you do... Speakin' of, is she wearin' the accessory I sent her?"

Rascal was referring to a piece of equipment that one of their go-betweens had delivered to them.

"Yes."

"It's an item Machina made as a counter to the kinda thing that happened in Cortana."

Zhang made a bitter face at those words. Back then, he had been rendered powerless—completely unable to help Emily in her time of need. That had made him even more determined to make sure something like that never happened again.

"Don't worry. Emily has only two weak points, and that accessory takes care of one of them."

Emily had almost no actual weaknesses to speak of. When it came to pure combat prowess, she was no match for the "Apex" Superiors, but she had a limitless ability to revive. Even the Apices would have a hard time killing her until she ran out of lives.

Because of this, there were only two ways to defeat her.

First was long-term binding, like what had been done to her in Cortana. If forced into a situation where she couldn't move or log out, she would have no choice but to forcibly log herself out using the Suicide function.

However, the accessory that Emily had been given completely nullified this weakness.

The other means of defeating her was achievable by so few people it was hard to call it a weakness in the first place.

"I'll take to action as soon as I arrive tomorrow at dawn. Until then, keep an eye on Emily and try to keep her from going on a rampage."

And so, the call ended.

A moment later, Zhang felt something pulling on his sleeve.

"Zhang. Are you done?"

It was Emily. From what he could tell, she'd been waiting for him to finish talking.

Looking somewhat drowsy and a bit gloomy, she was holding on to Zhang's sleeve.

Emily was a wanted criminal, but nobody here on the rear deck was wary of her, for she was wearing an accessory created by Machina that made her look like someone else. They'd also entered the ship by means other than the main gate, so no one had given them a thorough checkup.

"Yes. Rascal said that he's coming here tomorrow too. Let's wait for him in the cabin."

"Okay...I'm sleepy, so I'll take a nap..."

The two then went to the cabin Rascal had prepared for them ahead of time.

And anyone who looked at them walk off saw nothing but a father and his child.

Interlude: The Test and the Mechanical Dragon

Caldina

The second-in-command of Dryfe's Legitimate Government, Lieutenant Colonel Berlin, was currently leading his men on an operation.

This particular excursion was the most common kind of DLG missions—one to secure supplies. The organization had acquired information pertaining to a ship smuggling Magingears and related parts, so they set out to attack it.

Operations like this were not an uncommon occurrence for the DLG. The weapons they used were damaged and sometimes destroyed upon use, so in order to compensate for that, the DLG was forced to acquire any materials leaking out of Dryfe that they could. At first, they'd used the funds they'd brought with them to buy materials, but after Caldina had stopped food exports to Dryfe and invaded it during the war, the DLG had begun seeing that country as a hostile force whose wealth should be plundered rather than purchased.

Thus, this operation really should have been routine.

"What...?"

However, what was currently happening was anything *but* routine.

"What *is* that...?"

It had turned out that the ship they'd assaulted was a trap. There was no cargo, and the crew on it had transformed into bizarre creatures that recent rumors had dubbed "Ideas." These monsters had quickly started to overwhelm the infantry that was supposed to take over the ship.

The Magingear pilots outside the ship were under attack, as well—but not by the Ideas inside.

"What is that?!" At first, Lieutenant Colonel Berlin thought that he was looking at a high-speed sand-ship crewed by either Caldina's guards or a group of Masters.

However, it immediately became clear that it wasn't a ship at all.

It looked like a dragon, but while its silhouette had a long neck and tail like a skydragon, it lacked wings. That would have made some guess it was a landdragon, but that wasn't the case either.

It had a body made of metal, as well as a single sensor-eye. The sunlight falling upon its crimson and white armor revealed a striped pattern all over it.

And finally, its open maw contained not a tongue, but a cannon.

This was no dragon, but a machine that merely looked like one.

The crimson-white machine dragon was *sliding* on the surface of the sand at speeds approaching sonic. And without pausing in its sliding—or maybe *hovering*—its headlike cannon fired at the unit next to Berlin.

"Ah...?!" Over the comms, Berlin heard the brief final gasp of a subordinate who'd been fighting with him since they were in Dryfe. The cannon had torn through the Magingear's heavy armor like it was paper.

The units used by this squad were the Marshall II DC model, where "DC" stood for "Desert Custom." Optimized for desert environments, they were dust-proof, airtight, air-conditioned, and equipped with the ability to hover. For better or worse, the original Marshall II lacked the attention to detail that characterized many player-made designs, and these DC units were a direct attempt to correct that. Their mobility in desert environments not only surpassed many weapons of their type, but also most AGI-focused high-rank jobs as well.

"Lieutenant Colonel! Lieutenant Colonel Berlin! AHH—!"

But now, these units couldn't even run away fast enough. The dragon's cannon fire mercilessly shredded the Magingears' cockpits, scattering the destroyed remains of both robot and pilot across the desert sand.

The DLG's pilots hovered in a zigzag pattern in an attempt to avoid the dragon's assault, but the precision and the speed of their enemy's projectiles was just too great. On the other hand, their own attacks were all sidestepped by the mechanical dragon. It moved as though it could perfectly track every shot.

Before long, the dragon had destroyed five of the ten units under Berlin's command—all while the lizard-like Ideas were busy exterminating the infantry on the ship. The losses suffered by the DLG were already dire.

Is that a Prism Dragon?! Who's it affiliated with...?! Did Dryfe send *hunters after us?! But...!* Berlin's thoughts raced as he tried to make sense of the situation. The creature they were fighting reminded him of something he knew about from history—Prism Dragons.

Believed to be pre-ancient civilization technology, the Prism Dragons were among the greatest weapons of their time. Everyone who was familiar with ancient history, including Berlin, knew what they were.

However, this mechdragon didn't match the descriptions of Prism Dragons he'd found in historical texts.

For one, it was far smaller—only slightly bigger than their own Magingears—and it had no wings to speak of. It also didn't quite possess the fearsome extermination ability the old writings had emphasized.

And most importantly, the name shown by Identification wasn't found in any historical records.

Regardless, the dragon still outclassed the Marshall II DCs they piloted.

"Retreat! I'll bring up the rear!" Berlin ordered, moving out in front of his men.

His unit was a Marshall II HC, where "HC" stood for "Heavy Custom." Equipped with tough armor and immense firepower, it was a unit that would quickly drain the MP of any ordinary pilot.

However, Lieutenant Colonel Berlin was anything but ordinary. Tians were often limited to certain jobs and had level caps far lower than 500, but he was among the talented few who could reach level 500 solely with jobs related to piloting. He was a battle-hardened fighter who'd fought alongside Dryfe's strongest pilot more times than he could count.

"Come on, you foul beast!" he roared, brandishing an axe that was nearly as big as a Magingear by itself. This weapon was called Heatsplitter, Meltdown, and it was an MVP reward from a UBM he had felled.

When faced with this threat, the mechdragon fired its cannon, as though testing its opponent.

However, Berlin saw the projectile's trajectory and cleaved it out of the air with his axe. "TOO SLOW!" he shouted.

This feat of strength greatly bolstered his men's flagging morale. They let out a cheer...

"Wow, you're better than I thought."

...which was accompanied by praise from an unfamiliar woman's voice.

The sound shocked Berlin and put him even more on edge. The voice was coming through a speaker—and its source was the mechdragon.

"Hmph...it was lookin' like this shit...was gonna be just target practice... But it looks like...they got someone good enough for an actual test," said a different—male—voice.

"Master, why do you sound like you're in pain?"

"...'Cause the way you're pilotin' this damn thing...is crushin' my damn lungs..."

"Wait—you're barely breathing!"

The conversation coming from the mechdragon sounded like a joke. Berlin had no idea why they were letting it run through the speakers.

"Anyway, the rest are only good for testing out our weapons," said the man's voice. "Do it."

"Roger that! Rush Missiles!"

Following that command, sixteen missile silos appeared on the back of the mechdragon. Released one by one, the missles soared upward until they reached a certain altitude, where they changed trajectory and descended at supersonic speeds.

They hurtled straight toward the retreating Magingears and infantry sand-boats—Lieutenant Colonel Berlin's subordinates—and immediately incinerated every single one of them.

"They all hit!" said the woman's voice.

"Hold it. I'm pretty sure those were loaded with armor-piercing warheads, so where did the incendiary rounds come from?"

"Huh? I replaced them to make them more deadly."

"You realize they just turned the loot into burning garbage, right?"

"...Oh."

"You're getting penalized later."

"OH NOOO!"

This exchange between the man's and the woman's voices over the speaker seemed as lighthearted as the last, but Berlin—the last one left alive to listen—was in no state to see it that way.

His subordinates—DLG's limited forces—had been reduced to ash in but an instant. He didn't know anything about the enemy or their motivations, and yet they were about to take everything from him.

There was only one thing he could do now—and that was ask the question that consumed his mind. "Who...who are you?! Why did you attack us?!”

“Our goal here’s to test this unit.” One of the people inside the dragon answered as though it were nothing.

“To...test...?”

“There aren’t many places here in Caldina where you can fight Magingears. That’s why we chose to practice on you guys—the DLG.”

Caldina was vast, but it contained surprisingly few groups that chose to use Magingears. DLG was more or less the only one, and that was apparently reason enough to target them.

“You’ve probably realized it by now, but we’re also the ones who sent out word about that ship. We made sure you’d catch wind of it, in fact.” The man inside the mechdragon casually admitted to being behind the trap they’d fallen into.

Ideas disguised as the cargo ship’s crew. A mechanical dragon that attacked right after they came here.

It all connected in Berlin’s mind now. Everything so far had been planned from the very beginning, and its sole purpose was to provide a test for that unit—and falling into that trap had cost Berlin nearly everything he had.

Berlin groaned in despair. “You...you don’t...” The defeat in the civil war. The escape from their homeland. The hardships they’d suffered in this foreign land. The constant stream of terrible news from Dryfe. The hope that the DLG would make their comeback soon. The subordinates who had fallen so far from home.

All of that flashed through Berlin’s thoughts in an instant...

“YOU DON’T DESERVE TO STAND BETWEEN US AND OUR GLORIOUS GOOOOAAAALLL!”

...before he spurred his unit into a suicidal charge toward this bitter enemy.

Hovering at full power, Berlin raised his axe high. The attack he readied had enough firepower to rival the ultimate skill of a high-rank job focused on fire magic, backed by the strength and weight of his custom heavy Magingear. It was enough to split open even the thick shell of the defense-specialized landdragons.

Faced with this deadly attack, the pilots of the mechdragon looked at the enemy unit through a monitor and...

“Machina. Final test.”

“Aye aye, sir! Starting *melee mode* teeest!”

A moment later, sounds of clashing metal rang out in the desert, and the unit armed with a giant axe fell on the sand.

The axe, Heatsplitter, was then retrieved by a control AI and vanished.

There was no better proof that the pilot of that Magingear had died.

◆

After destroying Lieutenant Colonel Berlin’s group, the two people within the cockpit had a conversation.

“Master! We just fought Magingears! Tell me your thoughts!” said the one-eyed girl dressed like a maid—Machina—as she swung around her bare, obviously mechanical left arm.

The person she was talking to—Rascal—was a man in a gray suit and a hat that could have belonged to a gangster. He let out a sigh before answering.

“Using vernier thrusters is fine and all, but it takes a toll on the crew. My avatar’s not as tough as Emily’s or Sechs’s. You gotta be more careful.”

“I made sure to use shock-absorbing seats, though. I guess this baby may be a bit too heavy—or maybe it’s the weight of my love!”

“That so? Then drop the love by at least ninety percent.”

“That’s so mean! Wait, so you’re okay with the remaining ten percent?”

“I got a question, actually. Is it responsive to piloting?”

“Very! It doesn’t buckle even when I’m in control!”

Generally, machines in *Infinite Dendrogram* were controlled by the semi-sense skill known as Piloting. It improved the piloted machine’s stats and provided the pilot’s mind and limbs with awareness of the actions and movements needed to control that machine. Because of this, even Masters who were very ordinary people in real life could control these exotic weapons without a problem.

However, there were also people who could pilot machines without any skills—sometimes with inhuman proficiency far greater than Piloting could provide—and Machina was among them.

“It’s also got two of the landdragon-type cores I made, so energy’s no problem.”

“I see. And? Assuming we’re the ones piloting it, how powerful do you think this thing would be?”

“About as powerful as a solo battle type Superior, I guess. Not counting the Apices, of course.”

“That’s good enough for some controllable firepower,” Rascal said with a nod before looking at one of the monitors.

There, he saw the mass-produced lizard Ideas—Lacerta Idea—preparing to leave the scene.

“I don’t see any problems. Let’s head to *Eltram* and secure their core.”

“Roger!”

And so, leaving this battlefield behind, they moved toward another—their stage.

Once they were gone, the remains of the DLG soldiers were swallowed by the foreign sands. The unforgiving environment would soon claim everything that was left of them.

The desert didn’t discriminate against people based on their ideals, achievements, or even their crimes—but whether that was good or bad remained an unanswered question.

Chapter Three: The Search and the Encounter

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

Now that Moneygold had the Orb, my job as a bodyguard had officially begun. I had to be on high alert until we made it to Drac-Nomad tomorrow at noon.

“Hugo,” Moneygold said. “Cyco can sense the Murder Princess, right?”

“Yeah,” Cyco herself answered. “I can sense that insane *lisper* right away.”

La Porte de l’Enfer was a skill that checked the target’s kill count for their own kind and applied Freeze to them. As an additional effect, Cyco could sense that kill count on anyone in her effective range.

Apparently, this sense of hers used to be more vague, but after she’d met Emily—the person with the highest kill count we’d encountered so far—it had sharpened considerably.

“It’s possible she got onto the ship from the town it just stopped at,” Moneygold said. “You should go on patrol again.”

“All right,” I said. “Will you be okay, though?”

“Looking out for him is *my* job,” Isara answered in Moneygold’s stead. “No need to worry.”

“Yeah. Isara’s pretty used to this,” Moneygold added. “Oh yeah, while I’m logged out, I’ll give the Orb and the comms device to her. When I’m not here, she’ll be giving the orders.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll go look around, then.”

“Bye,” said Cyco. “You fat lunatic.”

“Cyco...” Yet again she insulted him right to his face, but yet again Moneygold didn’t seem to care.

A bit later, Cyco and I were walking through an empty passageway. With just the two of us here, I felt like it was a good time to speak about what had been on my mind since yesterday.

"Cyco, I think you're being too harsh on Moneygold. Sure, he's a bit *too* honest, but he's not actually a bad person—so be nicer, okay?"

In response to my words, Cyco made a slightly grumpy face and fell silent for a bit before replying.

"...It's because that fatty is in *second place*."

"Second place?"

"Second place," she repeated. We were just echoing each other now. Looking irritated, Cyco continued. "My count for him is the *second highest* after Emily." By that, she could only be referring to the kill count of their own kind.

Emily's was by far the highest, and there was no doubt about that. But...Moneygold was the second?

"You mean, he's above Teach, Gideon's duel rankers...and even King of Destruction?"

"Yeah." Her answer made me realize that you couldn't get a kill count that high by fighting just Masters or in duels. It also did a lot to explain why Cyco was being so mean to him.

"That fat is probably a *wide-scale extermination type*. And he used his power on humans many times."

"He doesn't seem like someone who'd treat people's lives lightly. But..."

"Seeming like a bad guy and actually *being* a mass murderer are separate things. The guy with the annoying *succubus* said something similar."

Does that get in the way of him starting a massacre? The words that had been said to me in Gideon came rushing back. At the time, I'd insisted that Fran understood tians were living beings, and he'd said with total certainty that this understanding wouldn't stop her.

Soon after that, Fran initiated the secret Plan C and tried to massacre the people of Gideon with a force of over fifty thousand monsters.

That was proof that even if I didn't *see* her as a bad person, Fran was capable of committing tian genocide nonetheless.

Now that I think of it, Cyco is a lot meaner to her too.

"I bet that pig is exactly the same way—the type of person who won't hesitate to pull the trigger if it serves his goals."

Moneygold had said that he would never, ever try to take anything by force, and I didn't think that was a lie.

However, that didn't mean that he would never use force for anything.

"And I think that..." Cyco began a sentence, but couldn't finish it.

I immediately knew who she wanted to bring up. "You think Teach is the same?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure Sefirot is totally made up of people like that...actually, no. *This entire country* is like this."

A country of people who can eliminate others for the sake of their own goals—looking back on it, I'd found conflict surrounding the Orbs when I'd tracked them down in both Hermine and Cortana. And even though negotiations had been attempted every time, they'd always come with the expectation that they would most definitely fall apart.

"I'm not really fond of this country," Cyco said as she stared at the desert outside the ship. This made me think of all the times she'd complained about the weather here, but I knew this wasn't the same thing at all.

"It's a dog-eat-dog country. Its people's biggest enemies aren't monsters, but other people, and they're probably used to that. This is a country where people want too much."

Caldina was in the middle of the continent, and it attracted more wealth and goods than any other country. Many people moved here simply because they wanted something it had.

"But satisfying them comes with a price."

I remembered Moneygold's words, and by now I was pretty sure the "price" wasn't just referring to money.

"To me, it feels so...oppressive," Cyco said. Cyco's ability to sense people's kill count of their own kind was hers alone—the rest of us could never understand how she felt. The people of Caldina might be hard for her to tolerate. And neither Moneygold nor Teach were exceptions to that rule.

Maybe Cyco had been feeling this way ever since we'd come here to Caldina, and she'd kept it hidden even from me, expressing it with only a bit of foul language.

But now, she was revealing it all.

"But this sense and skill...they're the reasons why I was born as myself."

"Cyco..." The reason Cyco was Cyco... I already knew where she was going with this.

"Hugo...I was born with this power because..."

She stopped in front of me, then looked me directly in the eyes.

“...Because your father was *murdered*.”

We were alone, so I was the only one who could hear her.

◇

My father died near the end of last year.

I learned of it while I was at school, shortly before I was supposed to come home for Christmas.

I’d always felt that my relationship with him was good even after he and mother divorced. He called me every year and invited me for a Christmas dinner with him. He covered the tuition and other expenses to let me go to Lorraine Girls’ College, saying that it was his mother’s—my grandmother’s—dream. He sent me birthday presents every year, always worrying if I’d be happy with what he got me.

He was nice to me—and only me—from beginning to the end.

So, upon hearing that he’d died, I actually collapsed from the shock.

The most shocking thing of all, though, wasn’t the fact that it had happened, but *how*.

The cause of his death was clearly murder. Someone had shot him dead in his own home—the very place I grew up in.

The culprit might’ve been a burglar, or maybe someone with a grudge against him. He’d made many enemies while building his business, so the latter wasn’t out of the question. The case was never solved—in fact, the police were still searching for the murderer.

However, at the time, I just couldn’t believe it.

I couldn’t believe that someone who’d always been so nice to me had been *murdered*.

When the funeral ended and it was time to bury him, not many people remained. The only ones present were his legal team and some people from his company.

And as far as family went, *I was the only one*.

My father’s parents—my grandparents from his side—were no longer with us, and he was an only child. Mother said that she didn’t feel like going, while Fran was still missing after running away from home.

Rain fell as I watched his casket descend into the ground.

After that, the legal team talked to me about the inheritance. Apparently, someone would buy his company, but the money from that and everything else he had would be split between me and Fran.

In France, if there was no will saying otherwise, all the inheritance went to the children. And since he probably hadn't expected to die, father hadn't prepared a will—so according to the law, his immense wealth would be split between us.

That was when he gave me his final present.

The real gift wasn't the wealth itself, but what came with it—a reunion with Fran. Because they had to distribute father's money, the legal team hired detectives and investigative firms in many countries to find her, and when they did, I got to meet her for the first time in years.

That was how we got in touch again, and she ended up inviting me here to Lorraine Girls' College. Even in death, father had helped me with my life.

And that was why I could never come to terms with the fact that he was murdered.

Mother managed it, and even though Fran looked a bit sad about it, she didn't seem very shocked.

But I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't accept what had happened.

Perhaps mother and Fran had many different—and more negative—feelings about him. But he'd been a nice, caring father to me until the very end.

I just couldn't tolerate the idea that someone had killed him.

That feeling festered within me ever since that day.

In my desire to see that culprit punished, a part of my heart became as cold as ice.

And out of that was born Cyco—the frozen hell of Cocytus.

◇

"I'm an Embryo born from your *anger*," Cyco said.

This was the first time she'd ever spoken openly about the reason for her creation, but I'd suspected this was the case from the moment I first met her.

"But however Embryos come out, they're always based on their

Masters."

That was what Fran told me while she was explaining category-based personality analysis to me.

A Master's personality, skills, desires, life, nature...or maybe even their traumas and psychological complexes. Embryos referenced all of these things in order to assume forms and powers that reflected their Masters.

That was why Ray's Nemesis possessed the power to avert any tragedy he saw before him.

That was why Fran's Pandemonium commanded limitless, unrestricted creation.

And that was why Cyco was born as an Embryo that punished murderers—*kin-slayers*.

"And since I'm the one who made you like this, I'm part of the reason you're feeling so uncomfortable," I said.

"Yeah," Cyco answered with a nod.

She didn't hide anything or try to sugarcoat it—she stated flat out that I was the reason she was who she was. The part of me that couldn't accept my father's murder had turned her into a bringer of judgment.

This was the first time she had ever expressed this discomfort, and I was the origin of everything.

"But that *doesn't matter*," she continued. "You don't have to let it bother you."

"Huh?"

"There's something way more important than that," she said, as if to disperse the clouds gathering on my heart, and puffed her chest.

"Something more important...? What do you mean?" I asked. However, before answering, Cyco folded her arms and took a moment to think about something—specifically, it seemed like she didn't know whether she wanted to say something or not.

"No. Not now," she eventually said.

"Cyco..."

"I *will* say it someday—and there's something I wanna ask you too. But now isn't the time, so you'll have to wait for it. For now, just focus on what you have to do."

She was looking right at me as she spoke. As always, her face was expressionless, but I could see a strong will reflected in her eyes. I got the feeling that whatever she wanted to say, it was something she would never compromise on, and that's why she wanted to wait for another time...

"All right." And that was also why I chose not to push it.

"But I can't just ignore how uncomfortable you feel right now," I added. "If you really can't handle it, I want you to return to the crest and rest."

"Mhm." Cyco nodded before touching my chest with her fist. I couldn't tell whether it was her way of saying "I'm fine," or "I'll keep that in mind." For all I knew, it could've been both.

Regardless, I would do as she said and focus on what I had to.

My role here was to reduce casualties in the event that Emily attacked the ship looking for the Orb—to prevent what had happened in Cortana from happening here.

And so, we resumed walking toward the part of the ship where the passenger cabins were.

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Eltram, Commercial Area

The luxury sand liner had many shops and other establishments in it, and there were many that offered the same kinds of wares and services as others. This was because there were several classes of passengers aboard. Those in first and second classes were generally far wealthier than the ones in third, and the establishments targeting a specific class provided quality and prices different from those in other classes.

They might have been on the same ship, but they lived in totally different worlds.

Most passengers knew that well, so they stayed away from shops and services that didn't cater to their own class.

"Ohh..." That was why the scar-faced girl looking into a high-class boutique stood out like a sore thumb.

The girl—Goblin Street's Fey—stared at the expensive clothes with wistful eyes before checking the Inventory she used as a wallet and sadly shaking her head.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh. Niala."

Addressing Fey was a fellow Goblin Street member, Niala.

“Do you have any idea how badly you stand out? What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be looking for the thing our leader mentioned?” Niala went on.

“But that dress is so pretty...and there’s gonna be a ball this evening,” Fey said with a sad sigh. “It’d be so romantic to wear that and dance with him...”

“I have three reasons why you should give up on that,” Niala said, holding up three fingers. “First, while first and second-class passengers have access to the ball covered by their initial fee, we third-class passengers need to buy tickets separately, and we don’t have the money for that.”

“Noooo...”

“Second, we *also* don’t have the money for the dress. I can’t even lend you enough to buy it.”

“Ngh...”

“And third, we don’t have the time. We still haven’t found what we’re looking for.”

“Guh...” While Fey griped and groaned, Niala continued to speak.

“There’s an Eastern idiom that goes something like ‘no leisure for the poor.’”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s a bit like the English ‘no rest for the wicked.’ We don’t have the wealth or the time to go to that party.”

“That’s so painful...” Unable to counter anything Niala said, Fey’s shoulders slumped as she succumbed to despair.

A moment later, her stomach growled.

“I *can* treat you to some lunch, though.”

“Thanks! You’re the best friend and rival I could ask for!”

“Whatever you say.”

By “rival,” Fey meant their role in the competition for Eldridge’s affection.

“Okay, so let’s have lunch at the open-air restaurant with the best food on the shi—”

“Don’t get carried away. We’re eating at the café terrace for third-class passengers,” Niala said, lightly tapping Fey’s head before she began walking. Fey rubbed her head and followed after her.

Once they arrived, Fey wasted no time stuffing a sandwich into her face.

“Mghmgh...thish makesh me feel sho alive...” she said with a peaceful expression.

“Don’t talk while eating. It’s bad manners,” said Niala, politely eating a salad with a fork.

“Hrmm...I’m having a harder and harder time using my brain... I feel like I’m gonna starve and get the death penalty soon...” Fey whined. Niala thought that was definitely an exaggeration, but she also understood that their financial situation wasn’t anything to laugh about.

“There might be more Masters with financial problems than we realize,” she said. “Even in real life, I have a stu—an *acquaintance* who said something like that.”

“We can’t even buy food...and we used to eat so good before! The last time we had a feast was...oh yeah, when we got some delicacies from the port during the Altea blockade,” Fey said, sounding nostalgic.

Those delicacies they’d stolen were actually what had drawn Lei-Lei’s ire and ultimately destroyed their clan, but they didn’t know that.

“That is true,” said Niala.

“Huh? What’s wrong...? Ah! Don’t tell me you don’t even have enough to pay for this food we’re eating!”

“I do. I’m just a bit sad that our leader seems to consider himself responsible for this desperate situation we’re in.”

“Ohh...” Fey nodded in understanding. “Yeah, that guilty face he makes sometimes does make me feel down.”

“I understand.”

“And *down bad*.”

“That’s just you.” Niala smacked Fey’s head again before she sighed and said, “It’s true that we’re going through a rough patch right now, but it’s not good that our leader seems to blame himself for all of it. We’ve just had some unlucky encounters recently—it wasn’t like there was ever a problem with our leader himself. Despite that, he thinks it’s all his fault and feels terrible about it.”

“Didn’t you say something about it being karma?”

“That was just a figure of speech. It wasn’t directed at him. Anyway, what we need to do now is to get this job done so he can regain his confidence,” said Niala.

“Yeah!” Fey said with a nod. “And then I’ll use the momentum to shoot my shot and we'll have ourselves a *Dendro* marriage!"

"I have no intention of letting you have him, but is that a real thing? A *Dendro* marriage, I mean."

"I'm sure it exists. There's probably someone out there who's done it!"

"I don't think it's common enough to be its own thing." This conversation was happening at the exact same time as the Love-Duel Festival in Altar, which had once culminated in two particular people becoming a couple, but that was another story.

"Anyway, if we want to help our leader, we need to hurry up and find the targets," Niala went on.

"Maybe they're not on the ship yet."

"That's possible, but we're arriving at Drac-Nomad tomorrow at noon. I don't think they'd cause an incident right at the doorstep of Caldina's congress."

"Since we're so close and they haven't done anything yet, maybe they already gave up. If that's the situation, we should give up too and just enjoy the cruise... I really wanna go to the ball."

"I'm telling you we—"

"Beautiful bambina and signorina! What's this I hear about wanting to go to the ball?" Suddenly, their conversation was broken by an unfamiliar—and awfully energetic—man's voice.

Overcome with shock, the two looked toward the source—Niala with wariness of how much he'd overheard, and Fey with pure surprise.

They were met with a sight that left them at a loss for words.

"Eugh..." A sound escaped Fey's lips, and who could blame her? The man was wearing a shirt that barely covered his chest and his face was slathered in makeup—he looked like a real pick-up artist that had decided he wanted to really embody the visual kei style. People like him were a rare sight in *Dendro*.

"Perhaps little ol' me can help?! I happen to have a few spare tickets!" he wheedled, tickets in hand, and it was soon clear that this situation was just as outrageous as his appearance. "What do you say, bambinas? Would you accompany me to the ball—as my dates?"

He said those words with a wink, but the two women had no taste for Italian visual kei playboys. They were both into a weird combination of an intellectual and a bad boy—specifically, they were both into Eldridge.

“No, thank you.”

“Not a chance. We’re already interested in someone.”

And so, they bluntly refused.

“Oh, what a shame! I envy whoever has stolen your hearts!” The man gave an exaggerated shrug, but he didn’t seem too shocked—perhaps he was used to rejection. “I see now that my very offer was terribly rude. Allow me to make it up to you with these tickets—as a gift. Ha ha ha! No need to thank me! Ohh, and there are dresses you can rent, so why not give that a try?” he said as he placed the tickets on the table.

“Oh, we really shouldn’t—”

“YAY! Tickets!”

Niala tried to refuse, but before she could, Fey gladly took the tickets.

“Ah ha ha! Well then, ciao!” the playboy said before pompously blowing the two of them a kiss and leaving the café terrace.

Left with no way of giving the tickets back, the two could only watch him leave.

“We got the tickets...! That guy sure was weird, though.”

“Fey, take a moment to think. There’s an Eastern idiom that goes ‘nothing is more expensive than what is free.’ These tickets could lead to something bad down the road.”

“But it makes things so much easier for us. Now we just have to rent dresses and we’ll get to go to the ball!”

Niala sighed, realizing nothing she said would matter. The Eastern idiom “reading the sutras into a horse’s ear” came to her mind, but she didn’t say it.

Still, she couldn’t deny that they’d received a windfall here—a “bean mochi from the shelf,” as another idiom went.

Honestly, I also think the idea of going to a ball with our leader is pretty appealing, she thought. *And it looks like we could actually have enough for the dresses if we rented them...*

On the inside, Niala shared Fey’s desire—she’d only kept her cool because she’d put effort into doing so.

“Anyway, let’s tell the leader about this,” she said. “We’ll go to the ball if he says it’s okay... How many tickets are there, by the way?”

If there were only two, there would be no avoiding a catfight over which one of them would accompany him.

“Three,” said Fey.

“That’s perfect, then,” said Niala. “Wait, *three*?”

That number seemed strange to her.

She could understand if there were two, since Niala and Fey were the only ones here. She could also understand if there were four tickets, since the man might have given them tickets for each of their crushes.

But there being three tickets made it feel like *he knew that they both had a crush on the same person*.

“Maybe it’s his own ticket. These tickets could’ve been the only ones he had.”

“But if he went to pick up more girls after this, wouldn’t he want to keep at least one?”

Or perhaps the number was just a coincidence?

Regardless, there was another thing that bothered Niala.

“That man also seemed kinda familiar...” she said.

“Huh? I don’t think you could ever forget a weirdo like that.”

“No, I just feel like I’ve seen his face somewhere... Also, for a passenger on this ship, his clothes seemed kinda...*cheap*.”

His gear was weak and certainly not made from high quality materials. The design was decent, but ultimately, he was wearing just a shirt and a pair of jeans—the kind of clothes you could buy in bulk.

It definitely didn’t suit the kind of person who would carry around multiple tickets to a high-class ball.

“You definitely have a better thief’s instinct than me...and I *am* a thief.”

“You could just say that I have a keen eye. Anyway, that’s another thing we need to bring up with our leader.”

Niala trusted Eldridge a great deal, so she assumed he would know something.

“All right! Let’s go pick out a dress to rent!”

“...Again, we need the leader’s permission first.”

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Eltram, Interior

While the two women were having their unserious exchange in the café...

What the hell's going on here?

...Eldridge himself was sitting on an empty staircase near the cargo area, hanging his head and whining to himself about the current circumstances. *How am I this unlucky...?*

All of this was because of the people he'd spotted while taking a look around the ship.

It's not just Moneygold. There's also Fullmetal Princess, Isara—one of the best in her field in Caldina. Hugo Lesseps, who's rumored to have stopped the Murder Princess herself. And to top it all off...there's another Superior.

It was this gathering of big names that had caused Eldridge to lose hope. Once, this would not have affected his confidence whatsoever, but now that he'd lost so many times and had been left with only a tiny fraction of his original clan, this situation was an unbearable burden.

Why? Why are all these tough guys on this ship? Did I miss some important info about all this?

That assumption was correct, but Eldridge had no means of knowing what, exactly, he had missed. Regardless, the instincts he'd honed in his multiple brushes with disasters and his natural analytical ability told him loud and clear that this place was dangerous.

Things were looking so bad that Eldridge was starting to think it might be a good idea not to steal anything at all and just disembark at the next stop.

"It'd be real easy if I could do that," Eldridge mused. If they weren't successful here, though, it'd be over for good. His clan didn't even boast enough people to fill a party now, and this was most likely his last chance to fix its financial situation.

Despite that, he hadn't even *seen* his target yet.

If we don't finish this job...

Eldridge was bracing himself to tell the girls that he would disband the clan, if it came to that.

"...Hm?" Suddenly, Eldridge felt something strange and shifted his gaze toward a specific direction.

It was the large door he could see from here—the entrance to the cargo area.

The cargo area was a giant safe, and its inside was full of Inventories—

their combined content no doubt bigger than the ship itself could physically hold. Many passenger ships in *Infinite Dendrogram* simultaneously served as cargo ships.

Focused, Eldridge looked at the cargo area's door.

He felt something strange behind it. The thick door made him a bit uncertain about it, but he could have sworn something else was looking around the area.

Eldridge readied his skills as King of Burglary on both of his hands, wary of whatever it was and ready to fight if need be.

A minute passed, and by that point the strange presence had completely vanished.

Was I just imagining it? Or was there actually an intruder in the cargo area?

It went without saying that *Eltram*'s cargo bay was filled to the brim with expensive materials and goods. If someone was planning to steal something from this ship, that would be the first place they'd go.

However, Eldridge wasn't planning on taking anything from the cargo area. You couldn't put Inventories into Inventories, so if he tried to take any cargo, he would either be forced to pick certain items to store in his own Inventories, or just run out with the Inventories in their entirety. He wouldn't have time for the former because of the number of powerful people he knew to be gathered here, and he didn't have enough allies to accomplish the latter.

And even if he did steal something and managed to flee the ship, he'd be stranded in the middle of the desert.

Things would've been different if he had a ship of his own, but Eldridge no longer had the money for that.

"I'm not suited for it, anyway." Unlike the thief grouping, which focused on stealing through stealth, the burglar grouping that Eldridge belonged to specialized in just taking things directly. If he tried something, he'd probably trigger the alarm right away.

His clan member Fey was a high-rank thief job, but she also didn't have proficiency to not trigger the alarm.

I guess Zeta...King of Thieves could do it, he thought. *That reminds me of the national treasures. Weren't they stolen by King of Thieves, actually?*

It was said Huang He's national treasures—some Orbs holding sealed

UBMs—had been stolen and spread across Caldina, where they were now causing trouble. It was rumored that King of Thieves was behind the crime—and as it happened, those rumors were true.

The Orbs, huh? Not interested. They seem hard to handle, so they probably wouldn't solve our money problem.

Eldridge figured that if they got an Orb and brought it before the Caldinan congress for a trade, they—as Masters and criminals in Altar—would just end up having it taken away from them by Sefirot. Maybe someone on the black market would buy the Orb, but he didn't know anyone who would deal in something so dangerous. He'd only recently come to Caldina and hadn't had enough time to establish himself here.

Not like I'll ever see any of those Orbs anyway, he thought. *This ship sure as hell wouldn't have one, that's for sure.*

Not even stopping to consider the possibility that this assessment was entirely wrong, Eldridge got up from the stairs and left. By then, he'd already more or less forgotten about the strange presence he'd felt from the cargo area, dismissing it as something not worth thinking about.

He then went to meet his clan members at their rendezvous point, where Fey—and even Niala—pleaded for his permission to attend the ball. Uncertain if this job would go well and feeling terrible about all the trouble he'd caused them so far, Eldridge agreed, wanting to give them at least a little hope.

That made Fey jump with happiness and rendered Niala unable to hide her joy, which filled Eldridge with relief and made him think, *They wanted to go that badly? I'm glad I agreed to it, then.*

And he remained as clueless as ever about the true reason for their joy.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

We walked around the section with all the passenger cabins, but Cyco couldn't find Emily anywhere. Had we been worrying for no reason? Was Emily not even on this ship? Or...

"Is she offline?" I wondered. If that was the case, it would be impossible for us to find her at all. And if she stayed offline right up until the moment she did something terrible, there was no way we'd be able to counter her in time.

I thought that we could also try to find Emily by looking for someone she was traveling with, but that proved to be difficult as well.

According to Cyco, she could easily sense and locate extreme outliers like Emily, but Caldina had no shortage of people with kill counts so high they could qualify as mass murderers.

But that was the problem—Cyco didn't know if they actually *were* mass murderers. She couldn't differentiate between tian-killers, player-killers, player-killer-killers, and regular duelists. That was exactly why Fran's plan had placed her against Gideon's Masters.

"The fact that she can't tell them apart won't make this any easier..." Cyco had actually sensed a big number on a Master wearing a crimson jacket with a lion motif, but again, we didn't have any knowledge to guess how he'd actually gotten that kill count.

Only Emily herself had a number big enough to be conclusive evidence that we'd found her. Without that, the only thing we could really do was investigate everyone we found suspicious.

"I don't think I'd be good at that." That seemed like a job for a detective...and that thought made me remember the boy who'd seen right through me, which just made me kinda upset.

"What now?" Cyco asked.

"Let's end the search for the time being," I said. "We'll resume when we stop at the next city."

There was one last stop on the route to Drac-Nomad. If Emily and whoever she was with were planning to get on this ship, that would be their last chance.

Maybe I should talk to Moneygold first, I thought.

"Umm, may I have a moment?" Someone called out to me just as I was thinking through all of that.

My attention instantly shifted to whoever it was—and I jumped in surprise when I saw who had spoken.

"Ohh! Please don't be afraid!" said the person—a petite woman wearing a hood, probably to hide from the sun. Below the hood, wrapped just above her eyes, there was a piece of cloth covered in complicated patterns. It reminded me of some nineteenth-century native costumes from central Asia that we'd seen in Miss Nina's class.

More importantly, though, she had gloves on her hands, so I couldn't tell if she was a tian or a Master.

"I saw you walking and looking around, so I spoke to you because I thought you were searching for something..." she said. "Umm, I'm nobody suspicious, though! I'm not your enemy!"

So I'd caught her attention because I was poking around somewhere that was mostly empty of people. *I'll have Cyco check her anyway, just in case.* I thought.

When I looked at Cyco, though, she said nothing and shook her head. That was her way of saying that this lady wasn't "it." She wasn't Emily wearing a disguise, nor was she a murderer. Cyco even held up her fingers in a circle to indicate that the woman's kill count for her own kind was zero—meaning everything was okay.

"Umm...?" the lady said, probably unsure what to make of our silence.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "Thank you for being concerned. I was just looking for someone."

"Oh, then you should go to the information booth at the mall. If you make a request, they'll use the ship's speaker system to tell whoever it is that you're looking for them and where they should go to meet you."

That sounded like a lost child announcement...I didn't realize this ship had a service like that. I'd be really surprised if Emily actually showed up in response, though, and it felt more likely that making an announcement would just attract other trouble.

"Thanks for the advice," I said.

"Oh, you're welcome," she replied with a smile on her face—but it didn't seem like she was planning to leave.

"Uhh, is there something else?" I asked.

"Sorry if I am mistaken, but are you Mr. Hugo Lesseps? The one who distinguished himself so much during the Cortana incident?"

My heart skipped a beat before I remembered that the Cortana thing had indeed given me a bit of a reputation.

"I wouldn't say I distinguished myself," I said. "I just slightly reduced the casualties, and I wasn't the one who ended the situation anyway. That was King of Tartarus, Benetnasch."

"Don't be so humble! Benetnasch may have prevented the Orb from causing disaster, but *you* were the one who stopped the Murder Princess's slaughter, weren't you?"

She sure knows a lot about it, I thought. Newspapers might've summarized the events, but you'd only know those kinds of details if you'd bought them from DIN or something.

"This is who I am, by the way!" the woman said, handing a business card to both me and Cyco. On it, there were the words "Freelance Journalist: Stal Tune." "These days, I'm following all the incidents happening here in Caldina, and since you were so deeply involved in the one at Cortana, I was wondering if I could get an interview!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm working right now. I don't have time for interviews."

Being a journalist explained why she was so well-informed, but I couldn't spare her the time when I had my bodyguarding job to do.

"Noooo! Umm...are you...*really* sure that...you can't?" Stal looked up at me with teary eyes, and honestly, it made me feel kinda guilty.

"My lady," Cyco said to me telepathically. "We shall stop your tears. I promise that you will greet tomorrow's morning with a smile on your face."

Could you stop bringing up my old lines like that? I thought. *It's true that ignoring a lady's plea is against my code of honor and it's going to make it hard for me to sleep at night, but we have to keep looking around. It's our job!*

"Umm, if just an interview's no good, what would you say to an info exchange instead?" Stal asked.

"An info exchange?"

"Yes. You answer some questions in exchange for my latest information about the incidents surrounding the Orbs! It's all precious intel I haven't even published any articles about yet!"

Okay, I'm a bit interested now, I thought. That information could be useful for my job—and maybe even Teach's Orb search as well. But...

"What do you think I should do?" I asked Cyco.

"You're free to decide yourself," she instantly answered.

"Okay," I said. "We can do the info exchange."

"Thank you very much! Let's go to the mall, then—there's a café with private rooms there! Oh! Don't worry, I'll pay for everything! Go go go go!"

"Uh, wha—?!" Dragged along by Stal, who was all smiles, I found myself led to the ship's mall area.

After almost half an hour had passed since she'd dragged me to the café, I was exhausted.

"Thank you for the interview!" Stal said.

"...You're welcome." She'd spent the entire interview asking me this and that about the Cortana incident, and now it was finally over.

And while I was getting a sore throat from all the talking, Cyco had been enjoying one of those lassi-like drinks again the whole time.

"Anyway, thank you for your time," Stal said as she prepared to walk away.

"Hold on. I never got the info you offered me," I countered, grabbing her hand. She'd almost gotten away with a free interview and I wasn't gonna let her do that, especially after I'd practically lost my voice talking to her.

"Ngh...I thought just ignoring that part of the deal might have worked, but I guess it didn't..." Stal said.

"So, what info *do* you have?"

"Nnghh...okay. I'll talk." she said before sitting back down. "Umm, you're gathering Orbs, right?"

"I'm really just helping with that, but yeah." She'd already known that Teach and I were gathering the Orbs, so when she asked to confirm, I could only nod—especially since she probably had Truth Discernment.

"In that case...this is the info for you," she said, reaching into her Inventory and taking out a document folder. "Take it. It's a copy, so you can keep it."

The document in question was a map of Caldina with six locations marked on it. Two of those were Hermine and Cortana, and another was the city that the man Moneygold had negotiated with came from.

"These are...the locations of the other Orbs?" I'd been told that the stolen Orbs numbered seven in total, and this showed the locations of all but one. This would be totally new information to Teach—and Sefirot as a whole too.

"Yes. These places have eyewitness accounts of Orbs creating strange phenomena."

We'd already found the ones in Hermine and Cortana, and the one from that third city was currently on this ship. That left three more markings on the map.

“Which one of these marks the Orb that turns water into land?” I asked.

“I believe that would be this one,” Stal said. She pointed at one of the markers.

That was the Orb Teach had gotten through a trade with Benetnasch. Now I knew where that one came from, so that left just two.

“Wintersorb the Northernmost City, and Vennsayle the Laketop City...” These two locations were at the opposite sides of the country—one to the north, other to the south. It was possible that the Orbs might have moved since this map was made, but I could confirm that three out of six of these markers were correct. That made it likely that the rest of them were too.

“The Orb locations... This is some really important info,” I said. “Couldn’t you have made a fortune if you sold this?” I felt like this map was worth way more than the interview I’d given.

“Oh, I’m not playing with *that* fire,” Stal said.

“Fire?”

“Imagine if I sold this info to someone looking for the Orbs and it turned out that they weren’t in those marked locations. I’m sure the Orb hunters would get revenge by stealing everything from me, flaying me, and harvesting my organs before killing me outright...”

Well, that made a certain kind of sense—this really was a dangerous game. Four of those Orbs had already left the cities marked on the map, so not selling it was most likely the right call.

“I actually got my information on these events by trading for it with other freelance journalists who were looking into it, and...one of them was found dead recently...” Stal continued.

“That’s pretty scary,” I said. But it all made sense now—I’d been wondering how she knew Orb locations that not even Sefirot had uncovered, but if this was the result of many people’s hard work, I could definitely understand it.

“And that’s why it’s best used for info exchanges like this,” Stal said. “Also, if I give this info to the people who really need it, that might move the situation a little and lead to some events I could write articles about.”

I nodded in understanding and thought, *I guess it’s not just DIN’s Journalists who are like this*.

“So...are you satisfied with this?” Stal asked.

“Yes. Very,” I said. “Can I ask one thing, though?”

"What is it?"

"Do you know anything about the Orbs' powers? There's nothing about them in the document." Even though they weren't listed, when I asked about one of the Orbs by referring to its abilities, she instantly showed me its location. That meant that, even though their powers weren't written down here, she *was* actually familiar with them.

"Very well. Consider this a bonus. The one in the north is said to be a healing Orb, while I think the one in the south has a power related to frost."

"I see...thank you." A healing Orb and a frost Orb. They seemed way more straightforward than the maggot Orb in Cortana or the human transformation Orb here. Well, at least the lightning Orb we got first was pretty standard.

"So that's all the info you wanted in exchange...?" Stal asked.

"Yes. Thank you, Stal."

"Don't mention it. Oh, but I gave you a bonus this time, so do talk to me the next time we meet!"

She then stood up from her chair and left the café, taking the check as she did.

For someone who had been planning to walk away without giving me any of the information she'd promised, she did seem to have a bit of integrity.

"Okay, I guess we should go back to Moneygold and talk to him about this and our job," I said. We had to tell him that we suspected Emily was staying offline right until the moment she planned to do something.

"What a stroke of luck, though," said Cyco.

"Yeah. We got some good information just now. Though..."

For some reason, this brought to mind an incident from the past. Specifically, the time Fran gave Ray a potion spiked with an Animal Ear Drug and a PPS—the Peeping Spy Slime.

"No way, right?" I shook away the worry that Stal might've had some ulterior motives.

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Eltram, Deck

Come evening, *Eltram* stopped at the final city before it set its course toward the end of its route at Drac-Nomad.

Though this journey on the sands would only last until noon tomorrow, there were still many people boarding the ship at this city. Many of them were simply heading toward the capital, while some were the eccentric, wealthy elite who were solely interested in the ball that was set to happen that night.

Thus began the final night of this luxury sand liner's maiden voyage.

The ball meant to celebrate it would be an extravagant event that would leave its participants with no shortage of stories to tell. That was why the first- and second-class tickets that came with an invitation to it were awfully expensive, and the separate ball tickets available for the third-class passengers were a luxury few of them could afford.

"Hm-hm-hmm..." And despite that, there was someone who'd given no fewer than three of these tickets away for free—the man dressed head to toe in visual kei who'd approached Niala and Fey earlier in the day. Right now, he was humming a cheerful tune as he watched the evening sun sink into the desert.

There was no one nearby—which was unsurprising, for he was taking in this romantic view not from the deck full of people, but from the vessel's very topmost roof.

"A trip like this wouldn't be complete if *tu* don't bear witness to something like this and inscribe it upon your memory. The scenery in Dryfe wasn't exactly pleasing to the eye. Indeed, a desert sun deserves a lingering gaze far more than the sun setting over a dying land." The man spoke as he watched the evening sunset with spellbound eyes. "Would *tu* like to join me in watching this scene?" he said without even turning around.

He was no longer alone. There was someone else standing there—a person wearing a long, crystal-colored woven cape and a mechanical mask.

"Unnecessary. This unit has witnessed the Caldinan twilight hundreds of thousands of times."

The mask changed the person's voice to give it a mechanical flavor. Despite that, it could still be construed as feminine.

"*Tu* have sure lived a long time, haven't *tu*?" said the man. "But there is not a day in the world which is not unique, wouldn't you say? And whether *tu* witness each day's passing alongside someone else is important as well!"

"Still unnecessary. The core of your relationship with this unit is transactional, not friendly."

"How cold of *tu*, Crys Fragment," said the man, addressing the person using the name of the elusive engineer said to be the greatest in Caldina.

"Do not use this unit's name lightly. I may be using a deception barrier that prevents us from being noticed by hostiles, but all risks must be minimized," she said, checking the barrier made through imitation of the Incarnation of Dreams.

"Ha ha ha. I am well aware. That is exactly why I *trust* that I can say it out loud!"

"Tch..." the face behind the mask—Crys Fragment—clicked her tongue.

"Oh come now, there's no need to be upset. We've known each other for so long, after all."

"Two years is not long by any means."

"It's still about half of my entire playtime. It's a long, looong time. The people I've been acquainted with longer than *tu* are few and far between. Oh, wait, I guess that's *not exactly true*!" the man said, right before bursting into an inexplicable peal of laughter.

Seemingly irritated by his attitude, Crys said just one terse phrase.

"Progress report."

"I gave the tickets *tu* gave me to a few Masters I thought would make things interesting. I have especially high hopes for the remnants of Goblin Street. Though their leader is among them, so I suppose they're actually the main force now!"

"And the Superior?"

"Moneygold? That walking bag of cash will go to the ball with or without my help. It's a premium event meant to celebrate the last night of a luxury liner's maiden voyage. Someone as vulgar as him will be there no matter what."

"And you?"

"Hmmm? Little old me? Of course I won't attend. I may be here to see the sights—and I do *want* to go—but an evening party is just not it. I'm a morning and daytime person. I get very sleepy when night falls."

In response, Crys said nothing.

"Well, I suppose *tu* are already aware of the real reason I'm refraining—*it isn't safe*," the man continued, raising his hands in resignation. "It is rather unfortunate, though. If only they'd scheduled it for noon. I would've gladly been there in that case!"

"You would not participate even if this unit requests that you do so?"

"Of course not. After all, our relationship *is* a shallow one. I am simply a spectator who goes here and there to see the sights, while *tu* are my sponsor. I tell *tu* of things I see and learn, and sometimes fulfill a simple request like the one *tu* gave me today. There is nothing more between us." The man smiled before adding, "And the information I gather is good enough to make up for it, isn't it? There is no one who can draw out an opponent's power and learn all about it quite as well as little old me. My Apex info is especially valuable, wouldn't you say?"

"...Rebuttal impossible." Her words didn't suggest it, but Crys's mechanical voice held a hint of discontent.

"There is also the next job to keep in mind, so I don't want to stand out too much before that comes. I don't know the details, but *tu* are hiding a few cards, aren't *tu*? Like the *soldier has-beens* or the *thing* hidden in the cargo area."

"You..."

"Of course I would notice! My stance is to enjoy things from *a safe distance*! Though for now, *tu* are the only one I share them with." Silence. "I'm not lying, am I? Unlike *tu*, little old me doesn't have that *handy little feature*, so I can't hide my lies. I don't think I've told a single lie since I got on this ship, actually. That's why, well...I might've actually gone to that ball if I got a date, even if it wouldn't have been safe—and thus would be against my principles," he said, his own words making him grin wryly.

That was when the sun finished sinking into the sands.

"Anyway, looks like it's time for me to log out. I'll come back when the night ends. I don't know what will come of this plan *tu* have, but if *tu* have any simple errands for me then, I'll be ready to accept them."

"I will request as necessary."

"Va bene! Anyway, ciao!" said the man, mixing Italian into his words as usual, before logging out and disappearing from the rooftop...and the world.

Once left alone, the other person—or *unit*, as she herself would say—clicked her tongue in frustration.

Crys saw the other Master as clueless, insolent, and hard to understand. Nevertheless, he was useful as a source of information, so she occasionally had him fulfill tasks for her. She knew that rather than despising all Masters and keeping them all away, it was better to make use of them wherever it was appropriate.

The preparation is complete for the things that will happen on this ship, as well as the things that will follow—the plan entrusted to us by Integra...and the Creator. Caldina's environment and circumstances are favorable for the process of investigation. Though..."IF" was their name, wasn't it? The fools who spread those Orbs throughout this land...

Just like the man who had stood there earlier, Crys looked toward the now-dark horizon.

"It will not be long before they learn what they were playing with...what the Orbs were seeded with."

She looked over the world as though she pitied it.

"A *known calamity* will awaken soon."

Chapter Four: A Party Battlefield and Terrorism

Eltram, Special Ballroom

The luxury sand liner, *Eltram*, was on its maiden voyage. And on its final night, in the vessel’s special ballroom, a lavish, splendid affair would be held.

All along the walls of the ballroom, there were plenty of fancy foods and quality beverages anyone could eat or drink, letting the event function as a standing buffet party.

“Sho good...it’sh sho good... I haven’t eaten thish good in shooo long...”

And glued to one of those walls, there was a girl wolfing down that food.

It was none other than Goblin Street’s Fey. Clad in a rented dress and wearing light makeup to make her facial scars less pronounced, she was, in her own way, enjoying this party.

“Fey...didn’t you say something about how romantic it would be to dance at this ball? Why are you all over the food now?” asked Niala. Dressed up nicely herself, she was rather perturbed by the way her fellow clan member was eating.

“I mean, it’s not like our leader’s here, right? I don’t feel like dancing with anyone else. That’s why I’m storing up energy for when I’ll dance with him. Getting all those SP, you know?”

“‘SP’ stands for ‘skill points,’ not ‘stamina points.’”

“Huh? But that’s confusing, isn’t it? If ‘MP’ is ‘magic points,’ then the opposite of that is gotta be stamina, right? ‘SP’ is also used for lots of physical skills, so ‘stamina points’ just feels right, doesn’t it?”

Fey’s a silly goose, but every now and then, she can be rather perceptive, thought Niala.

Thinking about it a bit more, while it did make sense to “use magic,” it was hard to understand what was meant by “using skill”—as in, not employing individual skill, but some general measure of “ability.” The help section said that SP stood for “skill points,” but what quality did that refer to and what differentiated that quality from “magic”? Beyond the fact that the words used for them were different, she didn’t quite understand the distinction.

Well, it’s probably like that for some game reason, Niala thought. *If everything used MP, then even physical vanguard jobs would have to get high MP somehow.*

“Well, forget about SP and whatever it is,” said Fey. “I gotta prepare for when *he* arrives!”

“If you say so,” said Niala. “By the way...”

“What ish it?”

“Eating too much *can’t be good for your figure*.”

“Huh?” Upon hearing that, Fey looked down and froze as her expression transformed into one of shock. “N-Niala...when we were renting, you said that this dress would look good on me...”

“I did. That is an attractive dress that truly emphasizes a woman’s shape...at least, as long as the wearer doesn’t overeat and end up with too much belly flab,” Niala said as she adjusted her glasses and gave a slightly malicious smile.

“You planned this, didn’t you?! Wait—aren’t you going to eat anything yourself?”

“A ball is no place for a lady to eat. Even if you ignore the risk to your curves, smelling of food when you’re dancing and your partner’s face is close is not ideal. This is common knowledge in the girls’ college I graduated from.”

“So that’s why you took so long to stop me! And what’s with the ‘I’m such a high-class lady’ act?! You show-off!”

“Our leader is a nice man, so he would dance with either of us. But you’re chubby and smell like all the food you ate, while I am slender and smell only of perfume. I wonder which one of us would leave a better impression...”

“You’re awful! That’s playing dirty, four-eyes!” Fey said, terrified of the cunning trap her rival had set before her—or rather, the trap she herself had walked right into.

Oho ho ho, Niala laughed, sounding exactly like a high-class villainess

—in her own mind, anyway.

"I-I'll go buy a deodorant item!" Fey said, dashing out of the room and rushing to the commercial area. She could reenter using the ticket she'd used the first time, but whether or not she could fix herself up before Eldridge returned was another matter.

"...Perhaps I overdid it," Niala said as she imagined her rival's struggle. "Anyway, I suppose I'll be alone until the leader and Fey return...hm?"

Niala looked around the hall, but her eyes stopped on one of the ball's attendees—a beautiful male Master. That wasn't an uncommon sight here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, so Niala didn't understand why this particular person had stood out to her.

He's taller. His hair color and face are different. They're not even the same gender... Niala thought, tilting her head. *So why did he make me think of Yuri?*

Niala...or rather, Nina was reminded of one of the students from the girls' college she taught at.

The man that caught her attention—Hugo—didn't seem to notice her gaze.

He had more important things to worry about.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

After exchanging info with Stal, I reported to Moneygold and gave him the documents I'd gotten. He took a look at the information and used comms to report it to the president.

As far as Emily went, though, he came to the same conclusion as me: that there wasn't much we could do about her now.

Since it was likely that the Orb would attract some sort of conflict, he said that the only thing I could really do was stay by his side—and by extension, the Orb's.

"You said she may come after the Orb, right?" I asked Moneygold.

"Well, it's more like she would cause an incident focused *around* the Orb. What about it?"

Sitting next to him, I was starting to get a bit irritated. It wasn't just because of his words, but the whole situation we were in.

This was *Eltram*'s special ballroom. It was the largest space on the ship, the site of a massive party...and a place full of people just having a good time, totally unrelated to this Orb business.

They were right here next to us—which made them Emily's potential targets.

"Shouldn't we...go somewhere with fewer people?" I asked.

"I get what you're saying. If she came after me or the Orb at this moment, it'd be a real bloodbath," Moneygold said like it was nothing. "This ball is full of wealthy people, celebrities, and the elite. It'd be pretty bad for Caldina if something were to happen to them."

"Then why...?"

"Because this is, overall, the safest option."

"Hm...?" Overall? The safest? I didn't really understand what he was getting at.

"If Emily Killingston and whoever she's with are after the Orb, then everyone here is a poor sap who'll get caught up in all this through no fault of their own. But what if this place gets attacked for some other reason?"

"Some other...reason?"

"Consider the massacre in Cortana. You could assume that she simply lost control in the middle of a Caldinan city, and that it would have happened with or without the Orb. It's possible that they're not after the Orbs at all, but something else instead."

I just sat and listened as Moneygold went on.

"In that case, this ship could *also* be attacked for some other reason. For all we know, they might just be planning to strike a blow against Caldina's wealthy elite by slaughtering those gathered here. If that's the case, they'd attack this very ballroom. And if that happened, we definitely wouldn't want to be far away like you suggested we should be, since we'd be unable to counter that attack in a timely manner."

I was starting to understand what he was trying to say. "So minimizing casualties as much as possible is our secondary goal?"

"Yeah. It's not an all-or-nothing thing where we either prevent everybody from dying or nobody. It's about making sure it's *not as bad as it could be*. That's the choice we're making here."

That made sense...but it wasn't a choice I was comfortable with. It was too much like the decision I myself had made back when I was overcome by doubt—the decision to participate in Fran's plan so I could minimize both Altar's and Dryfe's casualties.

My feelings back then and the feelings I was having now started to blur together, and I clenched my fist.

"Mr. Lesseps, please don't make that face. I am certain it will not be too bad," Isara said, gently reassuring me. "It could be that nothing happens at a —"

"Isara, don't waste your breath on useless reassurance like that. There's no way absolutely *nothing* will happen."

Isara's words were cut short by Moneygold, who sounded stricter than he ever had before.

"I apologize for crossing the line," Isara said before bowing her head and falling silent.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked Moneygold.

"There are three reasons I'm attending this ball. First is security, like we just talked about. Second is that I just wanted to, as a personal thing. And then there's the third reason, which is the most important of all."

"Which is...?"

"*The prez told me to.*" I could detect a hint of fear or awe on his face as he said that. The person those feelings were directed to must've been the president...the head of Caldina.

"How much do you know about the president?" he asked me.

"Her name is La Place Phantasma," I answered. "She's long-lived and has been serving as the head of the Caldinan congress for a long time. And, umm..."

"That she's called 'witch,' 'enigma,' and a whole host of other names, right?" I nodded in response—that was the impression she'd seemed to have left on society.

From what I could tell, though, her skill as a politician left no room for doubt.

"People call her many names, but there's one that hits the mark," he said.

"And that is?"

"'Clairvoyant.'"

"Clairvoyant? You mean, she can see the future? Like Teach's Embryo, Cassandra?" Cassandra foretold the dangers approaching Teach and enabled her to dodge them, and I thought it was the only Embryo capable of seeing the future. That was the first thing that came to mind, but Moneygold shook his head.

"That slut's *nearsightedness* can't compare. I'd call the prez's thing *farsightedness*, but it sounds like something that happens to old people, and that's a comparison I'm too scared to make. My point is that she tends to see things coming *long* before they happen—as far out as years away."

"There's no way..." I said in genuine disbelief.

"I get why you're surprised. *Infinite Dendrogram* is full of Masters doing whatever they want. That should make such a power impossible, but I'm telling the truth. She uses her foresight to entrap many of her political opponents and...well, her political opponents."

Moneygold was probably going to say "political opponents and *other countries*." I'd been told that Caldina's plotting had placed the imperium in an even worse situation than it had been previously. He must've refrained from saying it because he remembered where I was from.

"Anyway, a person who can see that far into the future told me to participate in this ball," he said. "She hadn't said anything like that for any of my previous boat trips, but she did this time. *There's no way something won't happen*."

Those words seemed to be filled with a mix of awe and trust.

"You know, the prez had actually begun preparing to welcome Masters *before the game was released*."

"Huh?"

"Seems impossible, right? Tians don't know about the real world. There's no way they could see us coming. Prez did, though. You know what that means?"

"...That she's part of the dev team?" *Infinite Dendrogram* did have a few Masters like Altar's Tom Cat who were believed to be associated with the devs. Was Caldina's president also one of them?

"That's possible," Moneygold said. "We think she's something else, though... It's not like she told us, or that we asked her. Well, only Fatoum probably knows exactly what she is."

"What do you—?"

Right as I was about to ask him to elaborate, multiple sudden explosions cut my words short.

I heard them from outside this hall—as well as *from within*.

The walls of the ballroom shattered as smoke from the explosion rolled in. And then, multiple towering figures came into view.

They were Marshall IIs—about a dozen of them. Painted to resemble the desert, these units had head shapes and joint covers meant to protect against the sands, which made them look quite different from the original. They were also wielding weapons that were probably made outside of The Triangle of Wisdom. The machines were accompanied by dozens of infantry—some of them equipped with armor-type Magingears.

The shattered wall, the dancing flames, and the menacing presence of these soldiers immediately told the passengers that this wasn't some sort of act, but a real assault. Their screams resounded as they rushed to escape, filling the room with an air of panic.

Isara stood before Moneygold to protect him, while he himself looked at me with an expression that clearly said, *Told you there'd be trouble.*

As chaos overtook the area, words suddenly blared out of the speakers. "We are Dryfe's Legitimate Government. We have an announcement for everyone aboard *Eltram*."

"Dryfe's Legitimate Government...?" I repeated to myself. The group bore the name of my own country, but I had never heard of it before.

"We request that you show no resistance while we do what must be done here. If you obey, we promise no one will be harmed. But if you resist, we will not hesitate to use indiscriminate force—even against civilians."

Those last words were directed at Masters and other passengers who could fight. They clearly stated that if we stood against them, they would start killing any passengers they could—even women and children. It was the kind of ultimatum that could only come from someone truly vile.

And it reminded me that Fran had once said something similar.

"You will be released once we complete our objective. Until then, do not move."

A moment after they said that, the door through which passengers were trying to escape was smashed open, and more units appeared through it. With that, multiple Marshall IIs were standing at every exit, keeping every passenger in the ballroom from leaving. It was probably the same situation all over the ship.

"...Tch. They've blocked it off," said Moneygold, clicking his tongue in frustration as he placed a hand against his ear. I noticed that he had Telepathy Cuffs equipped and guessed that he must've tried to use them, but they hadn't worked.

After a moment of thought, he looked at Isara. Then, saying nothing, he pointed at himself, Isara, and then me.

"Can you hear me?" Suddenly, I heard his voice as though it was ringing inside my head. My eyes widened in surprise. "Don't talk through your open mouth. Just keep it closed and whisper and we'll hear it."

"O-Okay... What is this, though...?"

"We're connected by Isara's osteophony wires. Think of it like a phone made of two cans and a string. Don't touch your temple—that's where the wire is. Even a brush from your fingers would break it."

There was a wire on my head? I really couldn't see it, though...

"Isara's the Fullmetal Princess. That's the earth and metal manipulation magic SJ. This is within her power. Oh, you can still move, though. Isara will adjust the wire's length."

I looked at Isara in surprise, and she gave me a gentle smile.

"Anyway, the trouble's finally arrived," said Moneygold. "That damn prez. I wouldn't be surprised if she actually knew that we'd be attacked by DLG specifically."

"Who are the Dryfe's Legitimate Government, anyway?" I asked.

"The remnants of the side that lost the Dryfean civil war, basically. The ones who didn't die, surrender, or get arrested ended up escaping here to Caldina. And they brought a lot of Marshall IIs with them."

The group's name and the Marshall IIs made it easy to guess, but this confirmed they really were from my country.

"What do we do about this?" I asked.

"What, indeed..." Moneygold said as he rubbed his double chin and hummed. "Isara, how far can you reach?"

"Long-range manipulation is a weakness of mine, so I doubt I can reach farther than halfway through the hall."

"Uh-huh. I see. Anyway, like I said before, Isara is a solo battle type and can't protect large areas in a fight. Conversely...I can only fight in a way that would also harm the civilians."

Those were the major problems with solo battle types and wide-scale extermination types. Fran brought them up pretty often. In a situation like this, where one side had to protect something, the ones that came out on top were wide-scale suppression types—and those who simply outnumbered the other side.

"Could you suppress them all by Freezing them all at once?" Moneygold asked me.

"Cyco's La Porte de l'Enfer can't differentiate well enough." I could choose to target only tians, only Masters, only monsters, or several groups at once, like how I'd targeted both Masters and monsters while fighting Rook. However, there was no convenient setting for just "hostile tians." The skill really worked closer to having me choose who *not* to target—back in Gideon, I'd had Fran and Veldorbell registered as exceptions before we set the plan in motion, making it so that the skill only targeted all *other* Masters.

Compare that to what had happened in Cortana—I hadn't had time to register any exceptions and ended up freezing every other Master along with Emily.

"If I targeted just tians now, some passengers would Freeze too," I said. Like Cyco had disapprovingly explained earlier, Caldinans had a relatively high population of kinslayers. If I froze even a single part of them in this situation, they would be at risk of getting shattered.

This wouldn't be a problem with La Porte de l'Enfer Deuxième, which worked based on the damage the target dealt to me—but if I let them attack me, they would damage the passengers too.

"Well, most powerful skills have flaws," said Moneygold. "Yours could even have some weaknesses that neither you nor Cyco are aware of."

That was entirely possible too. I didn't actually get that many chances to use it in battle, so I couldn't deny that it could have quirks I hadn't figured out yet.

"Anyway, I get the situation," Moneygold said. "We don't have enough people to take care of this while keeping the casualties low. Let's *add* someone, then."

"Huh?"

"Isara. Connect to one more person. Your target is..."

And with that, Moneygold pointed at one of the passengers in the ballroom.

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Eltram, Special Ballroom

Following the assault, everyone in the room was overwhelmed by chaos and confusion—but there was one man among them who was smiling.

...Jackpot! Niala! Fey! The gamble paid off! That man was none other than the leader of Goblin Street, Eldridge.

He was utterly thrilled by DLG's attack on the ship, because this was exactly what he'd been waiting for.

The DLG were Goblin Street's target. The Marshall IIs that the group piloted were luxury items that went for no less than eighty million lir per unit on Caldinan markets, and that was without considering their equipment and other tech they might be carrying. Eldridge had happened upon information suggesting that this prize prey would attack *Eltram* and came aboard the ship to take them. When they'd entered the final night of the trip with no sign of the Marshall II units, he was worried that this was a waste of time—but it seemed the heavens had not abandoned them quite yet.

All that's left is the timing, Eldridge thought. *The situation after I rob them will change depending on when I do it.*

The robbery itself wasn't that difficult. Eldridge had the skills for it, and he'd come prepared with an Inventory which could store many Marshall IIs. Nothing could really stop him from beating the DLG and taking their goods.

The problem was that acting against them would lead to many tian deaths.

Eldridge didn't have much of a problem with that on its own, but it would have negative side effects for him.

If his actions here led to the deaths of any passengers—many of whom were Caldina's upper class—things might go badly in the future. He could even end up on the wanted list, or at least the trader blacklists, which would make it impossible for him to sell the Marshall IIs here in Caldina.

The grudge he'd invoke from killing so many tians might even make him a prime target for hired mercenaries like the Superior Killer.

Taking such risks into consideration, Eldridge waited for the right time to strike with all the care he could muster.

The best time would be the moment the people on the ship begin fighting *back.* As long as he wasn't the first to strike, Eldridge thought, it would all work out.

During the chaos and conflict that would unfold, he would steal as many Marshall IIs as he could.

The best outcome for him would be one where he avoided responsibility for this incident while still profiting off of it.

All I can do now is wait, Eldridge thought. *I wonder where Fey is, though...*

He'd already looked around the chaotic hall and seen Niala, but the other clan member was nowhere in sight.

There's several kinds of jamming preventing us from using Telepathy Cuffs. How should I go about this...?

With timing being an important factor, coordination between them was invaluable. And while Eldridge might've been able to take the Marshall IIs, Fey and her Embryo were better suited for disarming the infantry.

I need to ask Niala or look for her myself...but we've been told not to move, so doing that could set them off, and—

"Hey, you're Eldridge, right? King of Burglary?"

His thought was cut short by a sudden, spine-chilling voice in his head.

"Ngh...!" Eldridge stopped himself from lashing out purely by reflex and slowly looked around.

There wasn't anybody suspicious close to him—everyone was actually cowering right now because of how stern Eldridge looked as he scanned his immediate surroundings.

But then, a fair distance away, he caught sight of someone who was looking right at him.

It was a man with a rotund, corpulent body—King of Revelry, Moneygold. He'd gotten Isara to connect with Eldridge using her wires, just as they'd connected to Hugo.

"I'm talking to you through an osteophony wire. Don't touch your temple and speak without opening your mouth."

That gaze and those words made Eldridge instantly understand how this communication worked. However, there were still things that didn't make sense to him.

How does he know my name? Does Sefirot actually know our plans? Such suspicions whirled around in Eldridge's head, but he needn't have worried. Caldina had been the ones behind the Altean blockade in Altar, and Sefirot had simply been provided with details on all the PKs they'd hired for it—with the exception of the Superior Killer.

That was why Moneygold recognized Eldridge and noticed him in the crowd.

"I have a vague idea of what you're after, but you shouldn't do it just yet," said Moneygold.

"I know," replied Eldridge. Moneygold's words made him even more alert, but as Eldridge himself had no intention of making a move yet, he had no objections to staying put.

"We wanna keep the casualties low, you see. If you're gonna *do it*, match our timing and go after the ones we can't."

With that, Eldridge realized that Moneygold wanted him to join them in the counteroffensive.

That was something Eldridge would do gladly. If he mounted a counterattack on the orders of someone directly serving the Caldinan congress, there was no way Caldina would hold him responsible for whatever happened afterward.

Assuming Moneygold wasn't planning to double-cross Eldridge and make him take the blame, this was a fantastic proposal.

However, Eldridge hid the fact that this would benefit him from Moneygold, instead replying with, "And what's in it for me?"

If there was any advantage to be gained, Eldridge would go for it, and his experience and instincts told him there was still something more he could get out of this situation. In a way, he was letting his greed take the wheel, and in response...

"*You won't make an enemy of me.*"

...he got only a few simple words that still spoke volumes.

The pronouncement left Eldridge speechless. It was borderline blackmail, but it was certainly worth the cost.

Eldridge was currently in a downward spiral after his repeated defeats at the hands of Superiors, and he certainly wanted to keep that from happening again.

Since it was Caldina who'd ordered the Altean blockade that had led to Goblin Street's first failure, though, it could be said that Eldridge's downward spiral had been caused by Moneygold's faction in the first place.

Eldridge, however, had no way of knowing that.

"Of course, that only applies if your group doesn't go after the other passengers. Also...I'll hook you up with a buyer who'll pay full price for the stuff you farm up here."

Eldridge liked *that* offer quite a bit. He still didn't have any contacts in Caldina's black market. If he could get one by cooperating with Moneygold, that would be well worth it.

There was no way Eldridge was going to refuse this proposal now.

"All right...I'll play along."

Thus, Goblin Street and Sefirot formed an alliance.

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Eltram, Commercial Area

DLG had taken control of *Eltram*.

Their primary target was the special ballroom, but many of their members had been sent to the other areas of the ship so they could suppress anyone who wasn't participating in the ball—and take hostages to prevent anyone attempting a counteroffensive from the ballroom.

There was an elevator leading from the cargo area to the mall, and the mall was now occupied by DLG forces. Among them were several Marshall IIs and infantry that had split up and headed out to the passenger cabin area.

And there was someone watching all this unfold from behind one of the planters that decorated the commercial area.

Wow, there's somethin' pretty big goin' on. The one hiding behind the planter was Fey—the girl who'd rushed here to buy a deodorant item. Currently, she was using Presence Manipulation—a skill available to jobs from both the onmitsu and thief groupings—to keep herself concealed. It wasn't strong enough to make her truly impossible to notice, but it was good enough to keep her from being spotted as long as she remained still.

Those have gotta be what we're after. That means we're eatin' good tomorrow too!

The Marshall IIs passing by were beginning to look like bags of money to her—but as things were, she was counting her chickens before they hatched.

Man, they really seajacked this ship, huh? Looks like the info I got in *that back alley wasn't wrong,* Fey thought, proudly nodding to herself over a job well done.

But then she silently gasped and looked up as though she'd just realized something important.

We're in a desert, so this isn't a seajack, but, like...a desertjack, I guess.

As it turned out, what she'd realized wasn't important in the slightest.

What now, though? I ain't very smart, so I don't really know what to do by myself. I wanna go back to the ballroom and ask, but I feel like I'll be found if I move...huh?

As she looked around the mall, she noticed something strange.

It was a golden, dragon-headed Magingear. Accompanied by two other units and some infantry, it was in the process of leaving the mall and moving somewhere else.

That one sure is flashy. It looks like a boss. I wonder if our leader could take it... It's goin' somewhere, though. Hmm...

Fey felt that losing sight of that particular prize would be bad.

I'll make one follow it, she thought before poking the back of her left hand, which was emblazoned with a crest showing countless hands reaching out for something.

A moment later, a semitransparent liquid flowed and dripped out of the crest.

Gespenst No. 1! Follow goldie over there! The liquid shook a little, then slid along the floor in the direction of the golden unit.

Wait—oh yeah. I can use this to contact our leader. I'll make No. 2 send a message.

She poked the crest again, making more liquid drop out of it.

"In the mall. Orders, please." There. This is like a secret message just between the two of us...eh heh heh heh...

All smiles, Fey wrote a short text and placed it on the semitransparent liquid mass she'd called No. 2, which then began to slide toward the special ballroom.

Phew. Now I just have to wait. This is the point where Niala would say something like "There's an oriental idiom that goes 'Fortune comes to those who rest.'"

Fey was satisfied with the work she'd done just now...

"Hey, a slime or something like that just came out of those planters."

"Whoever you are, you better show yourself or we'll shoot!"

...but her satisfaction was short-lived, as she was soon discovered and found herself in the crosshairs of multiple guns.

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Eltram, Special Ballroom

At the ballroom, Moneygold, Hugo, Isara, Eldridge, and Niala—who was added to the communication loop on Eldridge's suggestion—were discussing their plan of attack through Isara's wires.

DLG's soldiers occasionally passed the places the wires were spread, but Isara carefully manipulated them so that they weren't pulled out or spotted.

"So when do we start?" Eldridge asked.

"When conflict springs up in a different area of the ship," Moneygold replied. "If whoever's fighting back is successful, the casualties both here and there will be minimized. And if the DLG's warning wasn't a bluff, we'll know exactly how they'll act."

This plan made it possible for the counteroffensive to begin on two fronts, which would likely result in fewer casualties. And since the conflict would start elsewhere, they'd be able to reasonably say that they were fighting to protect the hostages from the DLG. Both Eldridge and Moneygold had the same thought.

"But there'll still be lots of casualties in every block, right?" asked Hugo, unable to fully accept the plan.

"Who knows?" Moneygold replied. "The DLG is made up of deserters from Dryfe's First Armored Battalion, and Dryfe already revealed their names and numbers. There aren't even two hundred of them in total."

The imperium had exposed the members of the DLG to make it clear that whatever the group would do in other lands, it was unrelated to their country of origin.

"That's not a small number, but this ballroom alone has over fifty of their infantry and a dozen of their Marshall IIs. Considering the importance of these hostages, this must've been where they focused most of their forces, so there's probably not as many of them in other parts of the ship."

Moneygold was right. Purely by numbers, about four-fifths of the DLG was present in this single location. Their strongest—Curtis—might not have been there, but that didn't change the fact that protecting this room would be the safest thing to prioritize if they wanted to minimize casualties.

"And frankly—to Caldina, the people here in this ballroom are way more valuable than everyone outside it."

"Moneygold...!" The Superior's cold and calculating words filled Hugo with rage. It was a miracle that he managed to avoid actually shouting Moneygold's name out loud.

"Calm down. Moneygold, you're acting like an asshole. And Hugo Lesseps, you're getting too worked up."

The one who stepped in to break things up between the two—or rather, to calm Hugo's growing anger with Moneygold—was Eldridge.

"Hugo Lesseps," Eldridge continued. "The reason Moneygold is waiting for someone outside this hall to fight back before making our move is because fewer people are likely to get hurt that way. Otherwise, we would've already taken action. Right?"

Moneygold did nothing but smile with his flabby cheeks, but that seemed like a "Yes."

"More importantly, we should think of what we'll actually do when it's time to act. We can't predict when the conflict outside will start. We need to at least come up with a simple plan before that happens."

"That's true..." Eldridge's words calmed Hugo down, and he nodded in agreement.

I don't know who he is, but he's really composed and has good judgment, Hugo thought. Unlike Moneygold, he hadn't been informed about Eldridge's identity. *Is he the leader of some powerful Caldinan clan or something?*

"I have a good idea of how we'll do this," said Moneygold as he looked at the four walls of the ballroom. "I'll *delete* everyone in front of the walls ahead of me and to my right."

Those words were spoken with absolute certainty.

"I'll also tank their attacks," he continued. "We'll catch them off guard by striking first. While they're out of it, Isara will take the ones behind me, while Eldridge and his clan member will handle the ones to my left."

"Understood," said Isara.

"Three Marshall IIs and sixteen infantry, huh?" said Eldridge. "Sounds good to me. Niala, you take out the infantry that's far away from the

Marshall IIs."

"Roger that!"

We're gonna catch less prey, but we got no choice, Eldridge thought. *The six units Moneygold will go for are gonna be gone, but if I can, I'll also try to grab the three left to the Fullmetal Princess.*

"What about me?" Hugo asked, realizing that he hadn't been mentioned.

"You're on standby," said Moneygold. "Since Cyco's skill won't be effective here, we'll hold it back for a situation where it's useful. They don't seem to care much about the passengers themselves and still haven't noticed us, so that's the best course of action for now."

"You gotta be really careless to not notice a Superior," said Eldridge, who knew firsthand how fearsome Superiors were.

With the DLG, though, this attitude was only to be expected. They only knew Superiors from the civil war, when Splendida—the one they hired—ran away without defeating King of Beasts—and Behemot, too, was unable to defeat Splendida. Because of that, they had a tendency to severely underestimate Superiors in general.

Furthermore, the usefulness of Masters in war had only really become obvious to the world during the First Knight-Machine War, which had been sparked by Imperator Reinhard, whom they hated, after the group had already left Dryfe.

Because of all this, the members of the DLG were in the unusual position of just not realizing how fearsome Superiors actually were.

Once the plan had been laid out and silence settled over them once again, Eldridge thought, *It's a rough strategy, but it should work out. We can deal with the ones we were tasked to handle, and I'm sure the same goes for the Fullmetal Princess. Honestly, Moneygold alone could probably take care of them all.*

Eldridge had realized Moneygold's intentions the moment he said he'd handle the ones before the front and right side walls. Eldridge had already memorized the ship's structure, and he knew that *there was nothing beyond those walls but the outside*.

That alone explained everything.

"So the only problem left is whether anyone else will actually fight back." Eldridge was concerned about the scenario in which no one outside the ballroom launched a counteroffensive, giving them no chance to act.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” said Moneygold. “*Eltram* is surrounded by escort vessels. They’re all made for combat and have hired Masters to protect this ship. Even discounting them, this ship itself probably has plenty of Masters with a strong sense of justice, but not enough brains.”

“...I see,” said Eldridge. The comms jamming alone made it clear to the escort vessels that something was wrong. It was possible that the vessel’s guards would take action—and even if they didn’t, some Master or other was likely to do something. That was always how it went with incidents like this.

“And we can’t forget the *time bomb* that’s probably around here too,” Moneygold added.

“Ah...”

Hugo instantly realized what the Superior meant, but Eldridge didn’t, and the word alone put him on edge.

“The time bomb? What are you talking about?”

“It’s possible that the Murder Princess...Emily Killingston is somewhere on this ship,” Hugo said.

“What?!” That name belonged to the most fearsome PK in the whole continent, and just hearing it unexpectedly was enough to fill Eldridge with shock.

“What are the chances of this happening...? Is this really just karma...? Why would there be *three Superiors* here now, of all times...?”

Eldridge couldn’t help but mumble to himself, and he said something the others could not ignore.

“Three? What do you—” Moneygold tried to ask, but he couldn’t get an answer before *something happened*.

The comms carried by the soldiers keeping watch on the ballroom suddenly blared out an emergency siren.

Everyone’s eyes widened as they instantly realized that it must have been caused by exactly the thing they’d been discussing—a conflict on a different part of the ship.

It’d happened earlier than they expected, but they weren’t about to miss this chance.

They all launched into action before the soldiers could even raise their weapons.

“Do exactly as we planned,” Moneygold said before standing up and rushing to a location in the room that was free of other passengers.

“What?! *Take aim, men*!” The soldiers were quick to react. Moneygold was clearly showing resistance, so they all trained their sights straight at him.

However, drawing their focus was exactly what Moneygold wanted. That prevented them from attacking the other passengers, and let him do *something more important*.

“FIRE!”

Moneygold had no cover to speak of and was fully exposed to the DLG’s weaponry. The Marshall IIs were equipped with pre-ancient weaponry presented to them by their collaborator, Crys Fragment. They fired shells that rivaled Crimson Spheres in destructive power, and all of them were heading straight toward Moneygold.

Those shells would be enough to instantly kill even endurance-focused high-rank jobs, and Moneygold’s END wasn’t any better than his AGI.

He would certainly die if they were to hit him.

“The Untouched Land of Gold—Jipangu.”

But they wouldn’t.

Explosions and smoke surrounded the place where Moneygold was standing. However, beyond the fiery-gray wall, the soldiers saw golden and silver lights.

The sounds of the explosions were mixed with the pleasant sound of metal clinking against metal.

And when the smoke cleared, they saw Moneygold still standing there—completely unharmed.

At his feet there were *piles of gold and silver*.

“Thank you for the *funding*,” he said with a grin spreading across his round face. “But I am already wealthy. I’m not the one who receives, but the one who gives.”

He then took one of his wallet Inventories and turned it upside down.

“So...let me *give* you something.”

The piles of gold and silver around him grew even taller.

Next, Moneygold held up his hand in the shape of a gun. Like a little boy playing a game, he pointed the two fingers mimicking the barrel toward the wall in front of him—and the soldiers before it.

"*Charge: 20,000,000.*" Moneygold stomped on the floor, making the coins around him jump off the floor...

"Treasure Cannon."

...and then fly toward the soldiers ahead.

A moment later, several lights and sounds filled the space—shining gold, sparkling silver, shock waves, tearing, crushing, and screams of death that lasted for but a moment.

In less than a second, the scenery of the hall changed completely.

The wall in front of Moneygold had vanished. Both the soldiers and the Marshall IIs that had stood there were gone, as well. It had all disappeared, leaving nothing behind but a hole through which the desert outside could be seen, covered in the veil of night.

"Wha—huh...?" The scene left the other soldiers paralyzed with shock, and Moneygold didn't miss the opportunity.

"Treasure Cannon."

He fired again, this time scattering the soldiers before the wall to his right.

In just a few seconds, half of the DLG forces present were completely obliterated.

"Flawless victory" did not even begin to describe it—Moneygold had crushed them like insects.

This was all possible because of Moneygold's status as King of Revelry, and his Superior Embryo—Type Another Rule, Impregnable Golden Bastion, Jipangu.

Jipangu was an Embryo from the Territory tree focused on but a single function. The skills it had developed were direct upgrades to the ones it had possessed since its creation, and the ultimate was no exception. In a way, it was like Logan Goddhart's Rumpelstiltskin.

And this sole power that Jipangu focused on was the transformation of damage into money.

This Embryo went beyond mere damage absorption by turning the damage it absorbed into currency. Using it drained a set amount of MP over time, but while it was active, it turned any damage received into money, no matter how great the amount. It was costly and thus couldn’t be channeled for too long, but not a single point of damage could touch Moneygold while it lasted.

This defensive power was among the greatest in Sefirot, surpassed only by that of Carl Lourlou the Multifariously Invincible and AR-I-CA the Blue Sky Songstress.

However, if it only possessed this single skill, that would make this Embryo only good for defense—and even then it would have the glaring flaw of expiring if given enough time.

That was why Moneygold also had a means of attack.

This was the skill that had made the enemies vanish—the ultimate job skill of King of Revelry, Treasure Cannon.

King of Revelry was the Superior Job of the playboy grouping, which focused on spending money, and the effect of its ult was simple—it launched an explosive attack that grew in power depending on the money spent.

1,000 lir created a 1,000 lir attack, 10,000,000 lir created a 10,000,000 lir attack, 100,000,000,000 lir created a 100,000,000,000 lir attack, and so on.

Not even Moneygold himself knew if there was a limit to how powerful it could be.

Defense that could create endless gold, and an offense that grew in potential without end—this was the heart of Moneygold’s power.

“And that’s that,” Moneygold said as he took out a cigar, and Isara—who was already next to him—cut off the tip using her metal-covered fingers.

Isara had already taken care of the soldiers she was entrusted with. She’d used her power over metal to turn the guns they wielded into shackles and the Marshall IIs they piloted into coffins.

And though they were a bit slower, Eldridge and Niala also stole the three Marshall IIs and defeated the infantry they had been tasked with. The Martial II units were sent directly to Eldridge’s Inventory, leaving the pilots poised as if still in the cockpit before they fell to the ground, thoroughly confused.

“You do your job well, huh?” said Moneygold.

“Thanks to the show you put on, I had enough time to load up another robbery," Eldridge said. The King of Burglary skill meant for stealing items, Greater Pickpocket, could be loaded onto both hands at once, but after being used on two of the units, it had to be reloaded.

However, thanks to everyone's attention being focused on Moneygold, Eldridge was easily able to ready another Greater Pickpocket and take the third as well. He even had enough leeway to take some of the infantry's gear too.

The combined panic from the siren over their comms devices and the disappearance of their comrades had made the theft especially easy.

Well, that's the ballroom cleaned up, Eldridge said. *I guess we'll go support the other areas now. It'd be great if we could get some more of those Marshall IIs...*

Three was already a good haul, but Eldridge wanted to make the most of this opportunity.

It's pretty clear that Moneygold's gonna ask me to keep cooperating, he thought as he glanced at Moneygold. As a member of Sefirot—the clan directly serving the congress—Moneygold was explaining the situation to the passengers in the ballroom.

But even if I'm cooperating with him, I don't know what the other two Superiors are planning, Eldridge thought. *If I can avoid it, I really don't wanna fight them...though, I wonder who started that other conflict anyway. If that leads to anybody dying, they could be held responsible...hm?*

Suddenly, Eldridge felt something poking his foot and looked down to see what it was.

It was a familiar Embryo—Fey's Gespenst No. 2—carrying a message in Fey's handwriting that said, "In the mall. Orders, please."

If Eldridge had been speaking out loud, this would've rendered him silent. *What if Fey was actually the one who started the fight?* A cold sweat began to form on his brow.

If that was the case, *they* could be held responsible instead, and his cooperative relationship with Moneygold would fall apart.

Eldrige moved at supersonic speeds as he took the message and waved Gespenst No. 2 away, wordlessly telling it to "Go back! Hurry!"

"Is anything the matter?" Hugo asked, noticing the sweat dripping down Eldridge's face.

"No, it's nothing. Anyway, we gotta support the other areas, right? Let's go," Eldridge replied before he and Niala—who immediately grasped the situation just from seeing his expression—headed straight toward the ballroom's exit.

Hugo had also decided that it was time to check the situation elsewhere, so he followed after them.

They looked back at Moneygold, who responded with a nod and also began to move toward the exit. He was done with his explanation to the people, and he'd entrusted the defense of the ballroom to the other Masters here.

Thus, their first battle on this ship ended as quickly as it began, and they all exited the scene.

However, none of them had any idea that this would be their *easiest* battle within *Eltram*.

Interlude: The Girl and the Spark

Three Minutes Ago, Eltram, Commercial Area

"Whoever you are, you better show yourself or we'll shoot!"

Hearing the voices and seeing the guns directed straight at her completely terrified Fey. *Oh ...! Th-They found me! Wh-What do I do?!*

From what she could tell, she was surrounded by four soldiers. She couldn't see anyone else around, and the two Marshall IIs positioned in the mall weren't visible from where she was.

Umm...uhh...in a situation like this, I gotta...umm...! On the verge of completely panicking, Fey poked her crest over and over. That made multiple semitransparent liquid masses drop out of it until they reached a total of eight.

I'll just put my safety first! Fey then raised her hands and stood up from the planters. "I give up! I surrender! Don't shoot!" she said, asserting that she had no will to fight...

"Truth Discernment picked up a lie! She's gonna resist!"

...only for that particular skill to expose her true intentions.

"AHHH! Seriously, *that* skill?!" she wailed. Most experienced people in *Dendro* always took the existence of Truth Discernment into account, so it was actually fairly rare for people to be caught by it.

And now, knowing that Fey was planning to fight, the soldiers started to squeeze their triggers...

"Steal!"

...just as Fey made use of her AGI advantage and activated her own skill before they could fire.

However, that was meaningless. The thief grouping's Steal was a skill that stole the target's items with a success rate based on skill level and the DEX stat—but it required the user to be close to the target. With there being ten metels between her and the soldiers, there was no way she could touch them.

Thus, this skill was useless for her own two hands...

“Stehlen.”

...but it wasn’t for the *eight hands* that reached out toward her target.

The eight *puddles* near the four soldiers’ feet spoke one single word—the very same semitransparent liquids that dropped out of Fey’s crest.

However, there were now hands sticking out from each of them, and in their palms...

“Hm...? What?”

...were the four soldiers’ stolen guns.

Four hands held a gun each. Three of the remaining ones held nothing, while the last one clutched one soldier’s pants.

“Not a bad result,” said Fey to herself. “Wait, now’s not the time for congratulating myself! Sleeping Fang!”

“Schlafen Fangzahn.” Though satisfied with the results of her arms, Fey hastily used Sleeping Fang—a dagger weapon skill.

The arms then let go of the weapons they held and transformed into blades before repeatedly attacking the soldiers, who were still confused by the disappearance of their weapons.

The damage of the attacks was low, but after a few cuts, the soldiers received the Forced Sleep debuff and passed out. This was Sleeping Fang’s effect.

“Neutralized!” Fey proudly said, having rid the soldiers of their weapons, consciousness...and one pair of pants.

This wouldn’t have been possible without her Embryo: Type Legion, United Barrage, Schiffs Gespenst.

It was based on the Japanese yokai called “funayurei,” or “boat spirits”—hordes of wraiths created from people who had been taken by the water. They stuck out their hands seeking ladles, only to use them to sink other ships and drag their passengers down to join them in their watery grave.

Schiffs Gespenst was an Embryo that used skills given to it by Fey. If Fey used Steal, the ten arms she could create would also use Steal, and if she used Sleeping Fang, they would also use Sleeping Fang.

This was due to the Embryo’s unique skill, Added Hands, which allowed her to multiply the effect of any skill that used her hands. Including her own activation, she could use such skills a maximum of eleven times at once—and she could do it from a distance as well.

These features came at the cost of making each Gespenst weak as far as Guardians went, and if defeated, they required some time to be restored.

Even so, their utility and versatility more than made up for that.

“Heh heh heh! I’ll take these four pricey-lookin’ guns—and the contents of your pockets! It’s the winner’s right!” she said as she began emptying the sleeping soldiers’ pockets, living up to her name as a member of a bandit clan. “I’ll be eatin’ good for a while!”

But while she was doing that, the comms devices on their waists suddenly let out a siren.

“Gaaahhh?! What?! What’s goin’ on?! Was that me?!” Fey was terrified that she was the cause of the siren, just like Eldridge was worrying in the ballroom, but that wasn’t the case. If these soldiers were the ones who reported the emergency, it wouldn’t be *their* comms devices ringing.

The cause was elsewhere, and it had happened before Fey took to action.

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Five Minutes Ago, Eltram, Second Class Cabin Area

“Hic... Sniff...”

A girl was running through the cabin area’s hallway. Tears were streaming down her face and falling on the carpet below, leaving tiny stains.

“Dad...” Her name was Doris, and she was the daughter of the man who’d made a deal with Moneygold.

Her father had long been stuck in a dead-end job as the subordinate of a slave dealer. Although such businesses were legal here, society didn’t look at them the same way as other merchants, nor was the income good enough to make up for the stigma. Doris’s mother had lost all love for her hopeless husband and abandoned him and their daughter a long time ago.

However, things had begun to change for them when the slave dealer Doris’s father was working for acquired the Orb with the power to turn monsters into beautiful men and women. The monsters used as the base were easy to acquire, and the results were still more than good enough to satisfy human cravings.

The slave dealer instantly began using the Orb to make a fortune—but then it was found out that the humans turned back into monsters in three days.

The slave dealer quickly gained a reputation as a scammer, his store was destroyed, and his life ended soon after that.

The Orb that caused all this, however, ended up in the hands of his subordinate—Doris's father's—and he quickly crafted a plan.

Perhaps it wasn't complex enough to be called a plan, though. Seeing the fate of his boss, he had no intention of using the Orb for business—in fact, he wanted to get rid of it as soon as possible.

And that was exactly what he chose to do. Thus, he sent an anonymous letter to the most powerful entity in Caldinan commerce—the Caldinan congress—and offered to sell it to them.

The congress responded with directions telling him to board *Eltram*.

Fearing those chasing the Orb as well as those who weren't satisfied with only punishing the slave dealer himself, he and his daughter desperately rushed to the city *Eltram* would stop at.

And after they'd made the deal here, he'd looked at Doris and said, "I'll finally have my own business...a business in Drac-Nomad, at that. I'll be able to make you happier than you ever were...Doris..."

With those caring words, he gently patted his daughter's head. This had happened a mere six hours ago.

But now, Doris was all alone.

She and her father hadn't participated in the ball at the special ballroom. They'd been on the run for so long that they chose to simply rest in their cabin instead.

But then they were awakened by the DLG's announcement ringing through the speakers.

The sudden voice made Doris's father jump up from the bed as if it put him on high alert, but he wasn't actually processing the situation that well.

A moment later, the door to their cabin opened up, and a military man rushed inside. He was one of the soldiers going around the cabins and gathering the passengers in one place to make them easier to watch.

Doris's father was instantly overcome by terror and panic, so he threw a flower pot at the soldier.

This might've been nothing but an irrational action caused by the residual fear from their life on the run. However, it was enough for the soldier to see him as a threat and quickly fire at him.

Struck by countless bullets, he was mortally wounded.

"D-Doris...run...away...to...M-Moneygold..." Spewing bloody foam from his mouth, he used what little energy he had left to leap on the soldier. Knowing he wouldn't survive this, he did it just so he could give his daughter a chance to escape.

Despite that, Doris didn't move at first...

"GO...!"

...but when she saw the desperation in his expression as he said that final word, she darted out.

"Hic... Hic..." She'd been running since then, sobbing all the way. Her destination was the room in which her father and Moneygold made the deal, but there was no telling how long it would take her tiny legs to bring her there.

The DLG's soldiers scattered throughout the ship would probably find her first. However, she was in no state to think about that and try to hide instead.

She merely listened to her father's final words and ran.

She cried, she ran, and she thought, *We were about to be happy... Why...? It hurts... I'm so sad... Dad...*

The hopeful future her father had told her about was no longer in reach, and the tears in her eyes made it hard to see even what was right in front of her.

That might've been why she soon collided with someone.

"Oh...I-I'm...s-sorry..."

"Oww...I fell on my butt...huh? Are you cwying?"

"...Oh."

The person she bumped into—a girl who couldn't speak very well—commented on Doris's weeping, and Doris raised her hands to her face.

The tears were flowing still, showing no signs of stopping.

"What's wrong? Do you have an ouchie?"

"My dad...was shot... He told me...to run...and..." Through the sobs, Doris tried to answer, but as she spoke, the sadness welled up once more and her tears flowed uncontrollably again.

At first, the girl did nothing but look right at Doris. But then, she abruptly took out a handkerchief and gently touched it to Doris's face.

"It's ok to cry. Cry all you want. Crying is what you do when you're sad," the girl said, talking slightly better than she had a moment before, as she wiped away the tears.

The two had a moment, but then...

"There! There's two children!"

"Get them! And fire if they resist! They could be Masters that just look young!"

...they heard the heavy footsteps of armed soldiers.

"Y-You should...run too...! The bad people...are here...!" Doris said, still scared and desperate. She was terrified that the ones who'd killed her father would also kill not only her, but also this nice girl she'd just met.

However, the girl she spoke to had *a completely blank expression on her face*.

With cold, mechanical eyes, she was *observing* the approaching soldiers.

"Raise your hands! And come with us! We'll fire if you resist!"

The girl then saw them aim their guns at her and Doris.

"*Minus.*" A moment after that word, a helmeted head rolled on the floor.

No, it wasn't just one.

A hatchet flew through the air in an arc, decapitating three of the soldiers.

"Huh?!" Another soldier voiced his shock—but not at his comrades who lost their heads.

It was because a girl raising an axe above appeared before him in an instant—a sight that looked almost like she had dropped several frames in an animation.

"Minus." With that word, she decapitated the soldier. Moving at a supersonic speed the eye couldn't follow, she slaughtered them one by one.

“EE-EEAHHH...!” A nightmarish scene was unfolding before the eyes of the screaming soldiers. A young girl wearing a dress was massacring these well-trained warriors.

But this was something they had predicted themselves: *“They could be Masters that just look young!”*

Indeed. This girl was a Master.

In fact, she was among the worst they could ever have encountered.

Murder Princess, Emily Killingston had deemed them to be minuses.

“E-EMERGEN— Guhhh?!” The very last one pressed the comms device button announcing an emergency, but died before he could explain what was happening.

The siren alone rang out, spreading news of a disturbance, but not what or where it was.

“Emily...there you are.”

As the siren still rang, they were joined by a man with a bandaged right arm—Zhang.

Emily had logged in without warning, and he’d been looking around for her in the cabin area.

“This is...” A single glance at the remains of the soldiers instantly made him understand what had happened here. He’d heard the DLG’s announcement and had a feeling that it would lead to combat on the ship.

I hoped that nothing would happen before Rascal arrived, he thought. However, this was a sudden and unexpected event. Zhang didn’t have much control over it.

Anyhow, he figured that the best course of action now was to take Emily, hide somewhere, and observe the conflicts here unfold.

“Emily...hm?!”

However, he quickly realized that that wouldn’t happen.

Emily was *still in her killing mode*. Despite killing every opponent here, she was still ready for combat.

She’s like how she was in Cortana...but there are no hostiles or neutrals here! Back then, after eliminating the enemies, she’d continued the slaughter by focusing on neutral Masters instead, but things were different this time. The only ones here were Zhang and Doris—who’d fainted dead away when the soldiers pointed their guns at her.

That other girl is the daughter of the person we protected, Zhang thought. *I don't know why she's here, but Emily doesn't see her as an enemy. She would've already killed her if that was the case...*

The fact that the girl was alive at all near Emily in killing mode was the only proof needed that she was no enemy. It slightly confused Zhang, but then Emily did something that confused him even more.

Still in her killing mode, Emily lowered her weapons and gently, with care, took Doris in her hands.

"Wha—?" Zhang was shocked to see Emily in this state do anything other than kill. If he'd been there to witness it, even Rascal would have been left speechless by it.

Then, not saying a word, Emily handed Doris to Zhang.

"Emily?" he said in question, but she ignored him, turned around, readied her weapons again, and walked through the hallway leading to the commercial area.

It felt as though she was saying, "I'm entrusting her to you." The presence of her still-active killing mode was Emily's way of expressing, "I'll go kill some more."

Zhang was more confused by Emily's actions than he'd ever been, but figured that the best thing he could do now was do as she wanted and keep the girl safe.

And so, he sent a jiangshi to watch over Emily and carried the unconscious Doris away from danger.

Thus, a giant spark fell upon the gunpowder keg that was *Eltram*.

Chapter Five: Cascading Chaos

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

After leaving the special ballroom, we split up.

Moneygold went to the bridge where the ship was controlled, while Isara went to the cargo area with all the goods it was transporting. Both were important parts of the ship that had to be protected, and the captain on the bridge needed to hear about what had happened in the ballroom and the situation in general.

The rest of us were tasked with getting rid of the remaining enemies on the ship, starting with the commercial area.

Eldrige was actually the one who suggested we go there first. His reasoning for that was that the DLG had used the ship's information equipment to deliver an announcement, which meant that they had most certainly taken control of the commercial area. That made perfect sense to me, but...

"Hey. What are you hiding?"

...Cyco posed a question to him.

"Cyco?" I said.

"What do you mean?" Eldridge replied.

"You look like you're in a rush," Cyco then explained. "It seems like you've done something bad and are nervous that someone will find out."

Eldridge was silent at first. But looking at him, I felt like I could practically see cold sweat going down his neck.

"...One of my clan members is at the mall. I'm anxious to know if *there are any problems* on her end. Sorry for bringing personal stuff into this."

"It's okay," I said. "You're not wrong about DLG taking the commercial area." It didn't matter that he had his own reasons for suggesting we got there—we had to do it anyway. "Also, it's normal to be worried about your own," I added.

"Thanks. That helps," Eldridge said with a relieved expression.

He really looks out for his clan, huh? What a good leader, I thought.

And with that, we left the hallway and headed into the commercial area.

“And there they are,” said Eldridge. “Get ready!”

We were quickly targeted by one Marshall II—a heavily customized one at that—and nearly ten soldiers. Eldridge instantly swung his right hand, trying to use his Skill to steal the unit, but it didn’t seem to work. Instead, it kept approaching us.

Why? I wondered.

“Looks like it has a high-level anti-theft effect on it,” Eldridge said, answering the question in my mind. “I used Greater Pickpocket twice and it failed both times. It doesn’t just *look* different than the ones at the ballroom.”

It wasn’t uncommon for Magingears to be equipped with modifications that gave them anti-thievery or anti-burglary skills. However, the very best of these protections from theft cost as much as the Magingear itself, so you’d rarely see mechs with such high-level defenses even in The Triangle of Wisdom. My White Rose and Teach’s Blue Opera were about the only ones that came to mind.

“I guess we gotta destroy that before we can move on,” said Eldridge. I could see a hint of impatience on his face—probably because he was so concerned for his companion in the mall.

“Leave them to me and go on ahead,” I said. “Cyco!”

“Oui, ma’am.” I used Instant Release to remove White Rose from my Inventory and immediately jumped in as Cyco merged with the machine.

“All right,” said Eldridge.

“We’ll leave this to you,” said Niala. “Wait...? ‘Ma’am’?”

With those words, the two of them headed in the opposite direction as our enemies.

After seeing them off, I joined the battle.

“Cyco, how’s La Porte de l’Enfer?”

“Good to go. They’re all in the double digits.”

If both the Marshall II pilot and the infantry had a high enough kill count of other people, this fight would not be a problem for me. I’d already marked Eldridge and Niala as exceptions, and I couldn’t see any other people nearby, so I could use it without worries.

“Reduce the effective range to 50 metels. La Porte de l’Enfer.”

The next moment, all infantry within 50 metels were covered in ice.

Some only had it creep into their limbs, while others froze almost completely. A few were lucky enough to avoid getting any ice on them at all, but the situation still threw them off guard.

Those who could retaliate tried to do so, but the bullets from their gunpowder-based firearms were all deflected by White Rose's Mythical alloy armor.

Unlike guns that used magic, traditional guns had the same amount of firepower regardless of who used them. Personal firearms of this type couldn't hope to break through White Rose's defenses.

There was only one foe I needed to worry about.

"The *contents* of the mech didn't freeze," said Cyco.

As if confirming her statement, the custom unit moved to attack us with mobility that was simply impossible for a mech piloted by someone whose body was encased in ice. I'd seen how powerful the DLG's Magingears were when they'd attacked Moneygold back at the ballroom, and I knew that not even White Rose could withstand it unscathed.

That was why I evaded the attacks instead—I wanted to make sure I didn't take any direct hits.

"Thirteen seconds." As long as La Porte de l'Enfer was active, time was on our side. Once thirteen seconds passed, the second tick came, expanding the ice on those who were already Frozen as well as Freezing those who had gotten lucky the first time. Many of them were completely encased in ice now.

Despite this, the custom unit moved just as well as it had before.

"Cyco, what's the count on the pilot?"

"Probably around *80*."

Failing with an eighty percent chance twice in a row was within the realm of possibility, but this still sent a strange shiver down my spine. I felt like something was off here.

"We'll fight the normal way," I said hesitantly.

"Oui, ma'am."

Whatever the reason was, I felt like La Porte de l'Enfer wouldn't work here. Instead, I equipped a firearm and an ice blade before charging in to face the custom unit.

And as I did, Moneygold's words echoed in my head.

"Most powerful skills have flaws. Yours could even have some

weaknesses that neither you nor Cyco are aware of.”

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Eltram, Commercial Area

As the siren blared, Fey took anything worthwhile off the sleeping soldiers.

“It’s so damn loud,” she said to herself. The sound had surprised her at first, but nothing new had happened since. She’d even hid herself again, but it didn’t seem that any reinforcements were coming. That was why she’d begun ignoring the siren and looting the soldiers—but by this point the sound was beginning to annoy her.

“Oh yeah.” She then Stole the blaring comms devices, silencing them forcibly by storing them in her Inventory.

“Having some kinda comms thing sure wouldn’t hurt,” she said. “Heh heh heh. I’m bein’ a real MVP here! The leader’s gonna love this—and *me*! My chubby belly won’t matter at all!”

Fey put on a bright smile and pumped her fist in the air victoriously—until a desert-customized Marshall II hovered into her line of sight.

“Whaa?! But I did a perfect job! Wait, is this *because* of what I did with those sirens?”

“This is where the comms were cut!” The Magingear’s pilot said. It turned out that the enemy had been using the comms devices to track their allies, and upon realizing that the markers here had vanished, someone had rushed to the scene. And of course, it *was* all because Fey put the devices in her Inventory—so much for her perfect job.

Oh. This ain’t good, Fey thought. This wasn’t an enemy Fey could handle. Her build was AGI and DEX focused, and the dagger debuffs she used in combat couldn’t break through thick carapaces or armor. She could try to run, but based on the speed with which the Marshall II had appeared, it had to be faster than her. Likely whoever was controlling it had the Gale Pilot job.

On top of that, Magingears were far too big to be taken using Steal. The only reason Eldridge could do it was because he had access to Greater Pickpocket—a King of Burglary skill.

Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do?! O-Oh yeah! Feeling cornered, Fey quickly bent down and picked up one of the soldiers affected by Forced Sleep.

"You better not attack me if you value his life!" she cried, placing her dagger against the soldier's neck.

It was truly the act of a lowly scoundrel.

Heh heh heh. This should bring that pilot to a stop and...huh?!

The Marshall II stopped moving only for a second before training its gun on her.

"I'm holding your friend here! Don't you see?!" Fey insisted.

"A proud army man would rather die than be taken prisoner by men who fight dishonorably!"

"Hey, you shouldn't cut off your people so easily! And I'm *not* a man!" Her villainous tactic failed spectacularly, and the pilot was about to fire at both Fey and the soldier when...

"Kill your own people all you want...but I won't let you kill *mine*."

...a voice rang out from behind the Marshall II unit—which then *vanished*.

"What?" The pilot was completely unable to process the situation.

"You're wide open now!" said Fey as she showered the unlucky pilot with debuff attacks, putting Forced Sleep on him just as she'd done to his allies.

When it was all over, Fey started to cheer. "Woo-hoo! Justice wins again!"

"Justice? We're a bandit clan... Anyway, I'm glad I made it in time."

Those words made her turn around to see Eldridge—the very person who'd just stolen the Marshall II and saved Fey.

"Leader! I wanted to see you so bad! I was sooo scared!" she said, taking the chance to leap into his embrace.

"I won't allow that."

Niala, however, intervened.

"...Oh. Niala. I wanted to see you too."

"That isn't the reaction you gave *him*," Niala said. "I do understand it, though."

They sure get along, Eldridge thought as he watched his clanmates.

"Anyway, Fey," he said. "Now that I know you're safe, I'd like to ask you something."

"My favorite foods are hot dogs with lots and lots of sauerkraut!"

“Not that,” Eldridge said, and Niala merely smacked Fey on the head. “Did the siren go off before or after you did something?”

“Uhh...” *He’s gonna get mad at me if I tell the truth!* Fey thought. Even she could figure out that much.

“Let me rephrase the question,” said Eldridge, glancing at the soldiers lying on the floor. “Are *they* the ones who activated the siren?”

“No, they’re not! I took them out silently!” she said, speaking quickly as though she was seizing a chance to prove her innocence.

“I see. That means we should get away with it...hm?”

As Fey’s words filled Eldridge with relief, he noticed a change in the surface he was standing on.

The ship just shook... Did its speed change? As he wondered what had happened, Eldridge heard heavy footsteps approaching them.

“Eldridge. Is everything okay here?”

The footsteps belonged to a pure-white Magingear—Hugo’s White Rose.

“Ah! Leader! Another one! Take it!”

“No. That one’s our ally for now.”

Eldridge’s words confused Fey, so Niala pulled her to the side for an explanation of the events that had led up to this moment, while Hugo and Eldridge had an exchange of their own.

“Sorry for leaving you back there,” said Eldridge.

“It’s fine. You had to hurry to find your clan member.”

“Yeah, and I only made it in time thanks to you. Though, uh...” Eldridge instantly noticed the state White Rose was in. The frame was still untouched, but the surface armor was damaged here and there. He could tell it hadn’t been caused by infantry firearms, but by Marshall II weapons. “Did La Porte de l’Enfer not work on it?”

Hugo had told him about this skill back when he registered them as exceptions. It delivered a Freeze effect that grew stronger the more of their own kind the target had killed, with a guaranteed full body Freeze when the number was 100 or above. Eldridge assumed that it would be quite effective on career soldiers who’d been through a civil war, so he didn’t expect Hugo to have this much trouble with them.

“Actually...there’s something I want to ask about that.”

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

The battle ended shortly after I chose to actually fight.

That was because the pilot of the custom unit actually Froze not long after the battle began.

It was on either the fourth or the fifth tick. As we were dealing damage to each other, 80% of the pilot's body Froze, making piloting impossible, and then the next tick Froze the rest. The most obvious conclusion would be that the pilot was just lucky enough to avoid Freezing until then, but I—Hugo Lesseps—was convinced there must be more to this.

I felt that there must've been something that had blocked La Porte de l'Enfer.

That was why I showed Eldridge the custom unit I'd fought. "What do you think?"

The Frozen Pilot had already been removed from it and placed next to the infantry that had turned to ice first. I imagined that I'd have to unfreeze them once we handed them to the authorities.

"This mech's got the highest quality anti-theft defenses," said Eldridge. "And way more comms equipment than I'd expect."

"Comms?"

"My guess is that this is the source of the jamming, and it probably also hosts their whole comms network." The commercial area was close to the middle of the ship, so it must've been the most effective place to set up a comms bypass. It played an invaluable role in coordinating the DLG, and that explained why it was equipped with an anti-theft skill.

However, we still didn't know why the pilot didn't Freeze when I used La Porte de l'Enfer. Anti-theft, comms jamming, and comms hosting—none of this seemed like anything that would affect my skill.

"Did you use the skill on Magingears before?" Eldridge asked.

"A number of times during tests with the clan." If I recalled correctly, that had been part of an experiment led by Fran. I was put up against duel rankers from our clan, and the skill Froze them just fine.

Looking back, it was probably a test to see if it would work on Gideon's duel rankers too.

"Then it has to come down to some difference between then and now."

"Well, that thing's just *different*, right?" said Eldridge's clan member—Fey—as she knocked on the custom unit's chest armor. "It's nothin' like the Marshall IIs I saw on the internet. The color is different and uhh...yeah, it's just real different."

"Looks like they spent lots of money redesigning it for deserts," said Eldridge. "That's good for our purposes."

"You know so much!"

"I just did my research on what I was gonna take. That's all there is to it."

"But how did they modify it this much?" Niala asked. "They're just soldiers who escaped their country, aren't they?"

"They're a bit more than that, Niala," said Eldridge with a shake of his head. "They're deserters, sure, but they're also the First Armored Battalion. Aside from the SMTF with all their super special abilities and lore, they are Dryfe's most elite soldiers. They've been handling, repairing, and modifying Magingears for a long time. When it comes to the power suits and tanks, they're actually better at it than The Triangle of Wisdom. It's really no surprise that they can customize their units to better suit a different environment."

"...I see."

"Since my Greater Pickpocket didn't work, I would've had tons of trouble with it myself. I don't think I can aim for a Greater Takeover without breaking the armor."

Eldridge touched the custom unit's chest-armor exactly as Fey had done.

"By the way, Hugo," Eldridge said, pointing at what looked like a crack in the armor. "Did you cause this?"

"Yes. With this blade," Hugo said.

"Did the pilot freeze before or after you made this crack?"

"Huh? I think it was...after."

"Ah...I guess that must be the reason it didn't work before," Eldridge said as he began fiddling with the unit.

"Have you figured it out?" I asked.

"Yeah. The damage made all the difference. Figure out yourself what that means—you gotta examine your own abilities as best as you can. It's important to have a good grasp of them and not just do things haphazardly. That's what separates the first-rate from the second-rate."

"Wow, you're so right!" said Fey.

"You...know you use your skills more haphazardly than anyone in the clan, right?" said Niala.

"I'd say that's part of what makes her Fey," Eldridge commented. "Embryo traits are based on their users, after all...ah, there we go."

As he talked, Eldridge removed a part of the custom unit—the part responsible for the anti-theft effect.

"Can I have this?" Eldridge asked, and after I gave him a nod, he thanked me and took the unit.

"Anyway, that's the commercial area cleaned up," he continued. "Should we go to the passenger cabin next?"

"Ah! Oh yeah—I just remembered." Fey suddenly raised her voice. "There was a huge, golden, strong-lookin' Magingear that ran by here recently! I made No. 1 follow it, so I know where it is!"

A large golden Magingear? I thought. *Could that be...?*

"Where is it now?"

"Umm..." Fey groaned, poking her temple in an attempt to focus before pointing diagonally down. "Over there!"

"That's...the power block?" I asked.

"Unless the mech's gotten off the ship, yeah," said Eldridge. "And this is just my guess, but that unit is probably the head of the DLG. I heard that they're led by a Magingear that looks like that."

"Should we go find it?" Niala asked.

"I'd like to meet up with Moneygold first. It probably has anti-theft measures on it, so I doubt we could handle it by ourselves."

I nodded to that. It was possible that La Porte de l'Enfer wouldn't work on it, just like it didn't work on the custom unit.

"The cause of the jamming is gone now, so maybe you can contact him?" Eldridge asked.

"I'll try," I said as I activated the comms device Moneygold had given me.

"Hugo?" Moneygold instantly replied. His voice was clear and there didn't seem to be any problems with the device.

"Yes," I said. "We're in the commercial area and we just took care of the unit that was causing the jamming. Also, Eldridge's clan member said that the leader of the DLG went to the power block."

"All right, I see. On my end, I retook control of the bridge. The staff are all safe too. The energy core was deactivated, and the ship's running on residual magic. It'll soon slow to a halt."

"Ohh, that explains the change in speed," Eldridge said as he listened.

"Did the DLG deactivate it?" I asked.

"That's the natural conclusion...but it's strange how they went through the deactivation process so quickly. It's as if they knew exactly what to do to turn it off."

"That's true," said Eldridge. "Maybe it's just because they're Dryfean? Regardless, I'll go there and—what?"

Suddenly, I heard panicked voices on the other side as well as the sound of an explosion, which was followed by an explosion I heard not through the comms device, but with my own ears.

"What...?!"

"The first escort ship was sunk!"

"The second one has been hit!" The people on the bridge were reporting the situation. They must've been talking about the escort ships meant to protect *Eltram* from monsters and the like.

"Forget what I said," said Moneygold. "I can't go there now. Try handling it yourselves."

"Moneygold?" I asked. We couldn't see outside from the commercial area, so we didn't know what was happening.

"The second escort ship's damage is spreading... It sunk!"

"The third one was hit!"

"An unidentified entity is approaching from the horizon at four o'clock!"

But those words I heard over the comms told us that the situation wasn't good...

"I-It's a dragon! A *mechanical dragon* is attacking the escort ships...!"

...and that furthermore, it was about to change drastically.

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Five Minutes Ago, Twenty Kilometels Southwest From Eltram

A crimson and white mechdragon rushed over the sands, veiled by night.

In its cockpit, there was a man and a woman. The man was The Weapon, Rascal the Bloodonyx. The woman was the goofy maid merged with his Embryo, as well as the creator of this unit—Machina.

"Master! We're about to reach *Eltram*!"

"We're here...faster than...I expected..." said Rascal, clutching his hand to his chest. He was doing that because his ribs were cracking—the price he paid for moving at supersonic speeds, which he hadn't planned on doing. When their comms link with Zhang on *Eltram* were cut, Machina had said, "Oh! It's an emergency! We gotta hurry!" and then pushed the mechdragon to break the sound barrier so they could make it there faster.

This had the unfortunate side effect of damaging Rascal's bones.

They'd originally planned to move at a speed he could handle, so after such a massive boost, it was no wonder they'd made it here so quickly.

"Rascal." As the unit slightly slowed down and Rascal administered a high quality Potion to heal himself, he heard a voice over his comms device. That voice belonged to Zhang.

"Zhang? Did comms recover?"

"Yes. I believe the cause of the jamming was eliminated by the ship's forces."

"I see. What's the current status?"

"Dryfe's Legitimate Government has taken control of the ship, but the special ballroom with all the VIPs was liberated by the Superior, Moneygold, and those working with him. They're currently eliminating the rest."

Just as they'd planned, there was a conflict in place that they could use as a chance to analyze the combatants involved. The conflict had nothing to do with the Orb, though, so it hadn't gone *exactly* as they were expecting.

"Emily, however..."

"Did somethin' happen to her?"

"She sees the DLG as enemies and is traveling the ship to eliminate them. Normally, she would have recovered from her kill state already, but it does not seem to be happening."

"I see."

Usually, Emily would return to normal the moment all the enemies in her immediate area were gone. But now she was wandering around and looking for more foes.

This was a definite increase in her combat capabilities, but it was hardly something Rascal wanted to celebrate.

Did her illness get worse? In that case, should I tell the hospital to take off her headset? But that would count as a Suicide in-game, though. It won't help our overall plans if she goes to the gaol, Rascal thought to himself. *If she hasn't overcome this yet, it's not a good idea to stop her.*

"Rascal?" the voice over the comms asked.

"All right, I get the sitch. Just leave Emily like that for now. I'll come pick her up later."

"Very well," said Zhang. "Also...there is something else I feel I should say."

He then proceeded to tell Rascal how Emily had entrusted Doris to him.

"Emily asked you to protect the girl while still in her combat state, huh?" Hearing that just made Rascal lose himself in thought once again.

The fact that she's seeking out enemies makes it seem like she's gotten worse, but this actually looks like an overall improvement. But...then again, is it really? It's hard to tell. I should probably bring it up with her doctor later...but regardless, we should secure the girl.

"Zhang, keep the girl safe," Rascal said. "You can even prioritize her over Emily—I'm sure Emily will be just fine no matter the situation. She'a got the gear for it now."

"Very well." With that order sent, Rascal switched off the comms device.

As if she'd been waiting for that to happen, Machina spoke up.

"Master, we have a teeny bit of a problem."

"I don't exactly *wanna* hear it, but I will."

"Umm, *Eltram*'s power has been cut. The source is probably being removed..."

"Shit," Rascal spat out a swear word he didn't often employ, his face twisting in annoyance "So that's what they're after, not the Orb. Someone's already laid claim to it, huh...? Damn it. Now we've got no choice but to charge in right away. There's no time to observe the situation."

"Uhhh...why?"

"Imagine if the DLG got their hands on that energy core. It'll be enough of a pain if they manage to get away with it, but what if Moneygold defeats them before they can escape? Sefirot will have that core all to themselves, and they'll be able to make *Eltram*'s owners believe that it was taken by the

DLG.”

“That...sounds pretty crooked.”

“And there’s a certain someone with them who can do that without thinkin’ anythin’ of it,” Rascal said, picturing a face known by almost everyone in Caldina—the president. That mental image made him frown like he’d just tasted something bitter. “That’s why we gotta take it or break it before that happens...” After a deep sigh, he looked ahead. “Machina, get ready for a preemptive strike.”

“Aye-aye, sir! Sardonyx is ready to go!”

Rascal’s order received an answer from both Machina and Sardonyx—the landdragon-type Prism Dragon redesigned and freshly manufactured in the modern era. The hum of its energy cores echoed through the desert like a roar.

“Shift from Cannon Cruiser to Over Sniper form,” Rascal ordered. “We’ll use the Horizon Arch.”

“Oh! This is the first time we’ll be using the main cannon since the test! You got it! That ship’s a total goner!”

“Stop. Only target the escort vessels. Emily and Zhang are still on *Eltram*.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” Machina began to enter commands on the keyboard before her at incredible speeds.

That caused Sardonyx to transform.

It still had the shape of a wingless dragon, but its neck was beginning to grow. Eventually it was so long and straight that when the dragon opened its mouth, its overall shape was reminiscent of a rifle.

“Shift complete! Launching survey buoy!”

The back of the transformed Sardonyx released a single missile as though it was a signal flare. Once it reached a certain height, the missile jettisoned its casing and became a sensor floating in place, overlooking a vast area and sending the gathered optical data back to Sardonyx.

“We have visuals. There are two escort vessels facing our direction...oh, wait, three if we really try for it.”

“Destroy them all. Knowing what’ll happen later, it won’t hurt to lower their numbers.”

“Aye-aye, sir. I’ll fix the sights...there we go.”

After she said that, her seat began to transform. It turned around, going from a chairlike shape to a horizontal one. It was as though the rear seat became a mat spread out right above Rascal's head. Machina lay down on it and took hold of a device that came down from somewhere above the cockpit. This device functioned as both a trigger and a sighting device linked to the unit's camera-eye.

She looked through it, but there was nothing beyond it but the desert.

That was what she was expecting—*Eltram* was still beyond the horizon, after all. It was impossible to physically spot it yet. And considering that it was completely obscured, sniping it from this distance was an absurd idea.

However, the eye Machina used on the sighting device was certainly looking at *something*.

"The visual info we got from above is... The current location of the unit... The height of the dunes... The current location of the target...mhm. It all checks out." Machina gathered the visual data from the survey buoy above, as well as the data observed by the camera-eye, then ran them through her internal processor to calculate her aim.

"And here's...the first shot!"

The moment she said that, Sardonyx's angled cannon-maw released its first shell.

It flew slightly upward at several times the speed of sound. Eventually, when it was at a certain point in the sky, the explosives set on the shell went off, changing its trajectory so that it rocketed downward—*straight toward the bridge of the first escort vessel*.

"It hit!"

"Beautiful. Is that what you wanna hear?"

"Eh heh heh heh! Say it again!"

"Hurry up and keep firin'."

"Hey, you could show me some more love, you know!" Machina whined, but she still sounded somewhat happy as she fired the second shot and hit the second vessel.

Horizon Arch—the most unique among Sardonyx's weapons, it was Machina's design for a long-range sniper cannon. Its direct line of fire had a radius of 50 kilometels—an incredible range matching that of a rail gun. On top of that, the shells it fired had explosives attached to them that could be detonated at a preset time to change the shell's trajectory.

However, that was only possible in a hypothetical best-case scenario.

The shell would never hit if it wasn't fired from the right angle at an invisible target, and both the initial firing and the explosives needed to be timed perfectly. Even rail guns from Earth, despite all the fanfare regarding their range, weren't actually all that *accurate*.

However, if fired by Machina a hundred times, all one hundred shells would strike their target.

The aiming angle, the moment at which the trigger was pulled, the timer on the explosives—she calculated all of that herself, and she did so without fault. Her processing power nearly defied belief.

This wasn't so strange for her, though. She was the eldest Prism Person—the DEX-focused Agate Designer often lauded as the pinnacle of them all.

Deactivated two thousand years ago, she'd been picked up by Rascal in one of the Ruins and given new life through a connection to his Superior Embryo—Deus Ex Machina.

And despite all the intervening years, her design skill hadn't dulled, and her handling prowess hadn't degraded one bit.

"The second ship sank. And I hit the third one too. Oh—the cannon's starting to feel the burn."

As a gunpowder weapon with such an incredible range, it suffered immense heat damage every few shots. Extended use of it would eventually cause it to break midshot, greatly damaging the unit itself.

"All right. *I'll fix it up*," Rascal said, touching the armrest of his chair and using a skill. "Rewind Weapon."

With those words, a light washed over Sardonyx.

And when it subsided, the cannon that had been overheating a moment before cooled down—and it didn't have a single scratch on it, as if it had never been fired at all.

This was Rascal's skill as The Weapon.

"That blows my mind no matter how many times I see it!"

"I'm just usin' what I've got." The Weapon was a Superior Job specialized in the operation of weaponry, and the focus of its skills could be summarized in two words: restoration magic.

In other words, it was *a Superior Job that could use healing magic on machines*.

While Mechanics and the like focused on skills that enabled faster repairs through the replacement of broken parts, The Weapon fixed damaged machines magically.

Its abilities could accurately be characterized as "repair magic." It couldn't heal what was completely lost—such as Machina's left arm—but it could take care of dents and cracks in existing parts, as well as instantly tune and stabilize any machines with damaged software that were experiencing critical errors.

This meant that as long as Rascal was riding Sardonyx, neither physical damage nor software failure could break it down.

That was the main reason he was riding it even though he risked breaking more bones in the process.

In fact, this unit was so unbalanced that it would likely be destroyed without Rascal's care.

"The Weapons of the past couldn't use it as well as you do, though!" Machina said.

The Weapon's repair magic was premised on—in fact, it necessitated—the user knowing the full structure of the target machine. But that wasn't a problem. Even if Rascal himself didn't know it, his other half—the Superior Embryo, Deus Ex Machina—did. It was because of this Embryo's ability to grasp the structure of any machine it connected with that Rascal was able to become The Weapon in the first place.

The Weapon, The Earth...it wasn't that uncommon for Masters to fulfill the conditions for the The One series of jobs using their Embryos rather than mastery of their own skills as intended. In fact, Masters who achieved it through pure technical prowess—such as The Unsheath, Kashimiya—were the rarity here.

"And...boom! There goes the third one!"

"Shift back to Cannon Cruiser form. We'll get into *Eltram* and head to the power block."

"Aye-aye, sir!" Sardonyx's extended cannon was retracted, Machina's seat returned to normal, and the unit began charging toward the now-undefended ship.

"By the way..." said Machina.

"What?"

"There's no way Zhang and Emily are on the bridge, right?"

Rascal instantly understood what she was trying to say.

“*Fire*.”

“Aye-aye, sir!”

Rascal’s one word was enough for Sardonyx’s draconic maw to open up again. It was in a short-barreled mobile firing mode rather than long-range sniping mode, but Machina once again used Horizon Arch. Though the target wasn’t obscured by the horizon anymore, she still activated the skill while Sardonyx was moving at high speeds.

That was not a problem, however. Just like she hadn’t missed the Magingears in Lieutenant Colonel Berlin’s squad during the test, she didn’t miss *Eltram*’s bridge.

“A hit...huh?” Despite the clean hit, Machina looked puzzled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it just didn’t deal as much damage as I—evasive maneuvers!” Before she could finish her sentence, she grabbed and pushed the control column to make the unit dodge to the side.

The intense g-force once again jostled Rascal’s body, making his bones creak and blood start to spill from his mouth.

However, he wouldn’t complain about that—a large shining projectile passed right through the space Sardonyx was occupying just a moment ago.

“Treasure Cannon! It’s Moneygold!” The familiar attack allowed him to instantly understand the situation. “So he’s at the bridge. I guess he used himself as a barrier to prevent a direct hit.”

“What do we do now?” Machina asked.

As they talked, multiple shining projectiles worth hundreds of millions flew toward them. Machina had the piloting technique to evade them, but the attacks left many new craters in the patches of desert where they landed. It was clear what would happen if one of the shots were to hit its target.

“Don’t waste our ammo,” said Rascal. “Our attacks won’t work on him when that skill’s active. Other than that, this doesn’t change our plans. Advance. Treat this like an action game instead of a shootin’ game. Look for openings in his attacks and use them to approach the ship. He won’t be able to attack that freely once we’re in.”

Sardonyx was far tougher than the common Marshall II—in fact, it wasn’t even a fair comparison. The firepower needed to destroy it was naturally far greater, and if Moneygold unleashed that much devastation inside *Eltram*, the consequences would be dire.

"It's gonna require some intense movements to get close... Are you sure you can handle it?" Machina asked, worried about her frail Master.

"I'm pretty sure I just told you to 'advance,'" he replied through the blood in his mouth, clearly indicating that she should keep going.

"...Aye-aye, sir!"

That was all that had to be said. Machina obeyed the will of her owner and drove Sardonyx straight into the deadly bullet hell.

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Eltram, Commercial Area

Vibrations shook from the bridge, followed by quakes from the desert in the distance.

The situation moved fast, and Eldridge responded just as quickly.

"Niala," he said. "The *owl*."

"Right away." Niala held up her left hand, which shone brightly. This was followed by six blue windows appearing around her. She touched one of them, causing a single mechanical owl to fly out of its other side.

At the same time, Eldridge stole a part of the wall with his skill, letting the owl fly outside.

A moment later, the window the owl had just exited began to display what was outside the ship's walls.

This was Niala's Embryo—Type Legion, Winged Omnipotence, Simurgh. It was an avian Type Legion with many uses based on which bird the user called forth. There was the survey-focused Spotter Owl that Niala had just used, the Group Crow for causing distraction and confusion, the Message Pigeon meant to deliver messages, the Cargo Pelican for transport, the Fighting Falcon for air battles, and the Genocide Condor meant for wide-scale destruction.

However, despite being a Type Legion, they relied on Niala herself to give them commands and control them, and her ability to do so limited the number of birds she could employ at once. Because of that, she usually used the owl by itself to survey the enemy's location before sniping them.

This didn't affect her ability to control multiple birds at once, but activating the ones with high combat ability incurred high external costs, so her recent financial state was another reason she rarely used them.

"This...looks like a battle," Niala said, perplexed, as she looked at the owl's window.

There was a mechanical dragon approaching the ship, and countless shining projectiles fired from the bridge were trying to stop it. The projectiles caused immense destruction where they landed—a single hit would be enough to sink the ship.

However, they were familiar with this sight.

"I guess a new attacker appeared, and Moneygold's trying to fend them off," said Eldridge. He figured that the attacker was a Superior too, but he wasn't sure about that, so he didn't say it out loud. The fact that Moneygold was having trouble with these new foes seemed like enough proof.

Another Superior...now I can't say we're safe even though we're with Moneygold. Even if we ignore that new one, there's still two others, and one of them's the damn Murder Princess... I thought I'd finally succeeded at a job, and now this happens! Maybe we should look for a chance to pull out.

Eldridge was scared of what would happen if he ended the alliance with Moneygold and ran away, but he certainly didn't want to fight and lose against yet another Superior either.

The head of the DLG down in the power block supposedly has the most valuable mech of them all, though. I can't lie—I'd like to get my hands on it. Acquiring just that unit would make their profits from this venture skyrocket.

Now Eldridge wasn't sure whether to retreat or advance.

"Little lady?! What's wrong?! You're all bloody!"

That was when he heard Fey's worried voice. He looked over to see her approach a little girl in a bloodstained dress.

The girl had a crest on her left hand, making it clear she was a Master. It looked like she'd come from the passenger cabins. Niala and Eldridge both were so focused on the visuals projected by the owl that they'd failed to notice her approach.

At first glance she looked like a victim of the DLG. But a moment later, Eldridge realized what immense danger they were in.

It was because her face and crest were on his personal mental blacklist.

"Leader! She's all hurt—"

"GET AWAY FROM HER!" Eldridge and Hugo shouted at the exact same time.

"Huh?"

However, before Fey could react to the warning...

The girl recognized her as an "enemy" who'd obstructed her path.

"...Minus."

And with that one word, the Murder Princess, Emily, sliced diagonally at Fey's torso.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

I watched as her slender body collapsed to the floor, an enormous amount of blood and viscera gushing out from the wound.

"Cyco!"

"Oui, ma'am."

I quickly did what I had to do—the reason I was on this ship in the first place. The reservations I had regarding Emily had no place in this desperate moment.

Just like during the final attack in Gideon, my body followed my will and moved without hesitation.

"La Porte de l'Enfer!" I jumped into White Rose again and instantly activated my skill.

And just like she had in Cortana, Emily Froze in but a moment. There were no failures like with the DLG's custom unit—she was instantly encased in ice.

"And now...!" I did the same thing as I had in Cortana. Using Boucliers Planete, I trapped the ice sculpture, preventing it from being destroyed by her own axes. I'd done this before, and I could do it again.

The moment that thought passed through my mind, her left shoulder began to shine and *she dissolved into motes of light*.

"Huh?" The bewilderment made my mind go blank, but it did not last for long...

"Minus."

...for Emily was immediately reconstituted and attacked me with her axes.

"Wha—?!" I activated the unit's defense skills at full capacity and assumed a defensive stance. The Murder Princess's attacks seemed heavier than they had in Cortana, and they echoed throughout the cockpit.

This weight of her attacks was the weight of all the lives she took. It was the same thing that let La Porte de l'Enfer trap her in ice, and yet...!

"Second tick."

Thirteen seconds had passed, and with those words from Cyco, Emily Froze again.

However, yet again, her left shoulder shone, she turned into bits of light, and was reconstituted.

"No way...!" I'd anticipated something like this. I'd considered the possibility that she—or whatever allies she had—would create a countermeasure for this specific strategy that had once defeated her.

But I never expected...

"Every time she freezes...*she dies*," Cyco says.

I never thought that she would *die whenever she got a debuff*.

It wasn't a skill. She already had a Superior Embryo, so I doubted that she could gain new Embryo skills, and I couldn't imagine any job would have such a terrible utility skill.

This was probably caused by a piece of equipment that stopped all bodily function in reaction to binding and curse debuffs.

It was an awful item that normally would never see any use. Debuffs were a problem, but they weren't nearly as bad as dying.

But for Emily, it was the other way around. Just dying once was better than being sealed up for a long period of time.

But I wouldn't have expected her to actually come up with something like that.

"Ngh!" Moneygold had hired me to deal with Emily, so this situation was really bad for me. Every thirteen seconds, I Froze her, killing her once.

But I couldn't even imagine how many times she could revive. She would defeat me long before I could stop her.

There was also the problem with White Rose's operating time, which was far worse for me than it had been in Cortana.

"Still...I can't let her do as she pleases." Where would she go if she got past this mall? Would she head to the bridge and attack Moneygold while he was fighting the threat outside? Would she head to the special ballroom and slaughter the people there?

Regardless of where she went, someone would die. Emily would slaughter someone once again.

"That's why we have to stop her here!"

"Oui, ma'am."

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Eltram, Commercial Area

"Fey..." After Fey fell to the floor, Eldridge rushed over and picked her up.

"Fey! Are you okay?!" Niala also dropped her composed expression, pulled out some healing items, and tried using them on her clanmate.

Fey's HP, however, continued to fall. She'd already lost a great amount of blood, and some of her internal organs had spilled out of her body. A high-rank job from the priest grouping would be the minimum necessary to save her now.

Her breathing ragged, Fey looked down at herself.

"My dress is torn... Everyone can see my boobs...how embarrassing."

"Fey, this is *really* not the time..." said Niala.

Fey chuckled lightly before somehow forcing her stiffening face muscles into a smile. Then, she looked at Eldridge, still holding her.

"I'm in his arms... That's one good thing about this. You jealous, Niala...?"

"Ugh, you're so...!"

Fey didn't see this as a touching goodbye. Unlike tians, Masters were immortal. Fey would come back the moment her death penalty expired.

"Oh, but...it's a shame... I wanted to dance with you at the ball," Fey said, looking at Eldridge. Despite her satisfaction with the situation, Fey hadn't gotten the one thing she actually wanted.

The fact that he couldn't even manage something that small for a girl who had always stood by him even at his lowest filled Eldridge with self-loathing.

"Hey," Fey said as she looked at him, smiling despite it all. It turned out she had one more request for him. "I want you to win."

"Win...?"

"I want you to win against *her*."

Eldridge instantly understood who she was referring to—Murder

Princess Emily, the one who had given her this fatal injury. She was the owner of a Superior Embryo that made her immortal, powerful even by Superior standards, and wasn't remotely less dangerous than any of the Superiors who had already defeated Eldridge in the past. "But I..."

Because of that, he had doubts he could manage it—but Fey had none.

"You're strong..." She gave her beloved a natural smile. "*We* believe that not even Superiors can beat you."

With those words, Fey encouraged him to fight.

Eldridge was left speechless. Searching for how to respond, he looked down at Fey, then up at Niala—but both of them only gave him a trusting nod.

At that sight, Eldridge gasped as he recalled how even after Goblin Street's first major defeat by Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts, the two girls had still believed that not even a Superior could beat them if their leader had been there.

However, they continued to lose to Superiors even when he was present, so the members of their clan gave up hope and left one after another.

But there were two left who believed in him even now: Fey and Niala.

Even though one of them was about to vanish, they both continued to trust that Eldridge could win even against a Superior. It was a simpleminded, pure, heartfelt belief that stayed alive despite it all.

And now, Eldridge could feel it clearly.

He then took a moment to think. The thing that he was scared of the most right now was another defeat by a Superior. He was afraid that if it happened again, even Fey and Niala would lose faith in him and leave.

But at this moment, he came to understand something important.

These two had stayed with him even when he lost, and kept on believing in him no matter how many defeats he suffered.

And that meant this was no time to let them see the side of him that was terrified of Superiors.

"Do your best...my leader." With those final words to her beloved, Fey dissolved into light.

"...Yeah."

Eldridge watched her vanish and let her final words echo within him. Once her motes of light were gone, he stood up.

Then he looked toward Hugo and Emily's battle...

"Hugo...we're switching."

...and made a proclamation before swinging both his hands around.

A moment later, blood gushed out of Emily's now-torn neck, making her back away. At the exact same time, another La Porte de l'Enfer tick activated, freezing her right as she reached for her throat.

Her left side began to shine and she transformed into light before being restored to life, but she had stopped in place for a moment.

"Niala. The falcon. Bury her."

"Roger that!" Following Eldridge's order, Niala summoned Simurgh's fastest combat unit—the Fighting Falcon, which was shaped like a fighter jet. The mechanical falcon flew toward the ceiling right above Emily and *crashed into it*.

The ceiling collapsed and buried Emily's frozen form. Even if she revived now, she would still need some time to get out of the rubble.

Eldridge used this time to tell Hugo everything he needed to know.

"Looks like they countered your La Porte de l'Enfer. I'll handle her, then. You go to the power block."

"But if we just take away the item that counters La Porte de l'Enfer..." *I could freezelock her again,* Hugo almost said, but Eldridge shook his head before he could finish his sentence.

Eldridge knew exactly what Hugo was trying to say, but that was also how he knew that Hugo's proposal was impossible.

"That won't happen. We can't steal that item," Eldridge said, intently watching the rubble Emily was buried under. "Notice how the light that shines before she dies always emanates from different parts of her body? And there's never any noticeable gear in any of those places. That probably means the item skill is triggered *under her skin*."

Even while saying goodbye to Fey, Eldridge had paid enough attention to Emily to notice such details.

"What do you mean?"

"My guess is that the item is *inside* her—in her blood. And since I can't see it, not even I can target and take it."

"Inside...?!"

"Either someone injected a super tiny accessory into her, or they gave her a different item with an effect that allowed this one to enter her body. Whichever it was, it was done pretty thoroughly. Whoever set this up countered my abilities so well that I feel like they have to know someone who's also really good at stealing gear. I'm surprised they could even create something like this, but this is *Infinite Dendrogram*, after all. Nothing's impossible."

The item in question was called Euthanasia.

Developed by Machina—also known as Agate Designer, one of the greatest item creators of the pre-ancient civilization—it was a tiny accessory that flowed in the blood.

The purpose of the small size, just as Eldridge had suspected, was to counter theft—a feature based on the abilities of King of Thieves, whom the creator was familiar with. Referencing the skills of that specific Superior Job, Machina designed the item to activate an instadeath effect when the item was equipped and when the wearer fell under the effect of a binding-type debuff.

Though she was unable to include a feature that would hide the sign of its activation, that was largely irrelevant—destroying or stealing it was practically impossible.

That was the piece of gear Emily had been given to prevent any more unexpected defeats like the one she had suffered in Cortana.

"Maybe things would be different if we could incinerate her without leaving a trace, but as far as I can tell, her other gear gives resistance to those kinds of attacks." Eldridge had seen a recording of the battle at Cortana and knew that she barely burned even when hit by a Crimson Sphere.

"That's why there's no chance you can get rid of the item and take care of her afterward. Give up."

"But..."

"I'll say it again: go to the power block. Your La Porte de l'Enfer should be more useful there. Maybe it won't work at first for the same reason it didn't work on the last Magingear, but I know you can figure that out and take care of the problem."

Eldridge told Hugo to give up on Emily...

"Leave the Murder Princess to me."

...and once again declared in no uncertain terms that he would fight the Superior.

He'd been avoiding this battle at first, but he was no longer afraid.

“I won’t make any big speeches about ‘avenging Fey’ or whatever. I’ll be seeing her in three days anyway.”

Masters were immortal. Though most couldn’t come back as quickly as Emily, they could log in once again once their death penalty expired, which was only three days in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m not mad about her getting killed,” Eldridge went on. Despite his anger, his hands weren’t clenched into fists. His combat-ready stance called for him to keep his hands open—and that was his real expression of rage.

“I couldn’t even fulfill that tiny little wish she had. That makes me mad—at myself and at the Murder Princess...and this anger needs an outlet.”

“Eldridge...”

“And if they believe I can win, then I gotta live up to their expectations.”

There was just one last thing Hugo had to ask before giving this battle to Eldridge.

“Can you win?” A Superior and a pre-Superior—the gap between the two was obvious. It was so vast that Marie Adler had been dubbed the “Superior Killer” for merely defeating a single Superior with no aid from anyone else.

Eldridge himself knew well how powerful they were. People who’d been defeated by Superiors as many times as him were rare.

Despite knowing all that, he...

“I have a...seventy percent chance of winning.”

...announced his assessment of the odds as though it were plainly obvious.

The man who’d already lost to multiple Superiors confidently claimed that he could defeat the one who was immortal.

“You go support him, Niala.”

“All right.” Eldridge didn’t need Niala’s assistance in the battle against Emily, and Niala herself knew that she would only get in the way, so all she did was nod.

“Don’t worry—I’ll win this time.”

“I believe you.”

“Anyway, Hugo, that’s the situation as it stands. Leave this to me and go.”

“Very well...may you emerge the victor, then.”

“That makes you sound like a knight or samurai or something, but I’ll take it.” Eldridge gave a faint smile. Behind him, he felt Hugo and Niala take their leave. Hugo didn’t look back. Niala looked back just once, and then they both moved toward the power block.

That was when Emily dug herself out of the rubble.

“Minus.” Her emotionless, lifeless eyes quickly recognized Eldridge as an enemy.

She was a fearsome killing machine in the form of a little girl. There weren’t even that many Superiors who could defeat her.

“Caldina’s strongest PK, Murder Princess Emily Killingston.”

Despite that, the man calling her name showed no fear. He only *reconfirmed* the steps he would take to achieve victory.

He already knew how she fought from that video of her battle in Cortana.

“I’m King of Burglary, Eldridge.”

He calmly gave her his name...

"The man who was once known as *Altar's strongest PK*."

...and his old title.

At one point, that was how Eldridge had been known. With the likes of Sechs and Kashimiya rising to claim that title, though, the number of people who knew that it had once belonged to Eldridge was decreasing.

But there was no lie in his words—he was certainly the *first* person to have ever held that title.

Emily's eyes were fixed on him. It wasn't clear if she was capable of analyzing her enemy's abilities while in her killing mode. However, she was clearly wary of him and whatever he was going to do.

Eldridge also looked at her straight on.

And thus, the goblin bared his fangs against the murder-demon.

Interlude: Pale Death

Eltram, Cargo Area

Several minutes before Moneygold began fighting Rascal, Isara had separated from Moneygold and gone to the cargo storage area.

Normally, a bodyguard like her would always stay by the side of the person she served, but this wasn't necessary while Moneygold was using his ultimate. With enough MP restoration, his defensive skill that turned all attacks into money could remain active for about an hour—and almost no one could harm him while it was up. Isara's role as his bodyguard was focused on preventing surprise attacks and supporting him in other ways. She'd lived as an assassin before, and Moneygold had sought her out and taken her in as a close aide precisely because of the skills she'd developed in that profession.

Her dream had been to create an orphanage in Caldina to save young children from being forced to live the same way she had, and Moneygold had hired her by paying the immense sum of money needed to realize that dream. Isara was deeply thankful for that, since her old job had never been lucrative enough to finance it.

That was why she followed her benefactor's orders to the letter and went to fulfill her role elsewhere.

Eltram had four important places: the ballroom full of VIPs, the bridge that controlled the ship, the power block that supplied all of its energy, and the cargo hold where countless precious goods were carried.

In Caldina, Dryfe's Legitimate Government was known to frequently plunder supplies. It was likely that they'd also gone to the cargo area, and that was why Moneygold had sent her there.

There are clear signs that powered suits have been here, she thought—just as Moneygold had predicted she would find.

They had been heading toward the cargo area, and it appeared there were six of them.

People equipped with guns or wearing powered suits were no threat to

Isara. She held the metal manipulation magic Superior Job, Fullmetal Princess. With no resistances on them, equipment like that was nothing but another weapon for her to use.

It's safe to assume they're already in the cargo area. Preparing to ambush them using her powers, she looked down at the cargo area from the nearby stairs—the very stairs Eldridge had been sitting on recently.

...Huh?

But what she saw left her dumbfounded in spite of her vigilance. She might have even said something out loud if she'd had less experience in combat.

What she saw in the cargo block were items strewn about the floor—specifically, six sets of military clothing and six corresponding armor-type Magingears.

And all of them were covered by piles of white dust—*enough dust to make up a whole human body each*.

Isara's instincts told her that those were human remains, and that they belonged to the DLG soldiers who'd come here for the cargo.

Her eyes widened as she exposed the Mythical metal bracelet under her sleeve, and she instantly used her metal magic to turn the bracelet into a thin wire that she controlled using her mind. Then, she directed it into the cargo area, making the wire even thinner and spreading it out in all directions to create a spiderlike web.

She used the web to scan the space within the cargo hold and look for whoever—or whatever—had killed the soldiers.

However, all she learned from this investigation was that there was nobody moving within.

Isara gathered her resolve, stepped into the cargo area, and examined the remains.

"...Bits of ice?" Immediately she realized that the white powder was the result of a flash frozen body being shattered.

They weren't sapped of just the heat, but also their very life energy, she thought. *The effect is similar to the Vital Squeeze skill used by Blood Cavaliers...Legendaria's vampires...*

Vital Squeeze was a type of HP drain skill which was known to turn those it killed into ash, but the victims here had been drained of life far more thoroughly than that.

And it's just awful inside... Some Inventories within the cargo area had been shattered, and their contents were spread all over. It looked like there were offensive gems among them that had triggered upon hitting the floor and walls, leaving marks on every surface.

"Hm?" While looking around the broken Inventories, Isara discovered something strange. One of them looked like the remains of a common Inventory at first, but a closer look made it clear that it was simply a box designed to look like one—it hadn't been made with the space expansion feature common to actual Inventories.

Did someone sneak it in with all the other cargo? But for what purpose? Besides that, there was something else among the scattered goods that caught her eye. She reached out to an object next to the fake Inventory and picked it up.

"Ah! This is...!" Isara opened her eyes wide as she realized that the object looked like a shard of shattered glass.

A moment later, she was distracted from it by the sound of a massive machine activating somewhere in a neighboring area.

That's...the evacuation zone! The cargo area and the evacuation zone were right next to each other to make it easier to rescue cargo in an emergency. The sound coming from there was proof enough that something unexpected was happening.

Isara turned around, left the now-empty cargo area, and followed the strange noise.

When she arrived at the evacuation zone...

"The ramp...is down?"

...she noticed that the ramp meant to deploy evacuation boats *had been lowered*, and the desert night spread out before her in that direction.

Was that the sound of the ramp being lowered? Since *Eltram* was still on the move, the dunes visible from the now-open bay were quickly flying by. The ship must've traveled a fair distance since the point where the ramp was deployed.

This must've been opened by whoever—or whatever—killed the soldiers in the cargo area. It had come from within the cargo hold, killed the soldiers who'd opened the door, and just recently left the ship from this evacuation zone.

Isara took a moment to wonder whether she should follow it, but her duty was to protect Moneygold and remove any enemies within the ship. She didn't have the authority to abandon that post and chase after some unidentified entity.

Even if that weren't the case, her instincts were telling her that *she would die if she chased it*.

And then, the situation suddenly shifted once again.

"The ship...stopped?" *Eltram* began to shake as it slowed down and finally stopped in place.

What happened at the bridge? Isara thought. Unaware that the DLG had removed the energy core, Isara assumed that something must've happened to the ship's controls.

Considering that and the odd occurance in the cargo area, she decided meeting up with Moneygold would be the best course of action.

With that in mind, she rushed toward the bridge. In her hand, she still held the shard she'd picked up at the cargo area.

Its texture was *exactly the same as that of the object Moneygold had bought yesterday*—one of the national treasures of Huang He, the Treasurebeast Orb.

There was only one thing, she realized, that could have come out of that cargo hold and exited the ship.

Chapter Six: The Goblin and the Murder-Demon

About Eldridge

Eldridge, otherwise known as Leon Philadelphia, had no grand reason for getting into *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Born as the son of one of the leading banking families in the States, he was guaranteed to inherit the business from birth. However, his parents had sent him to a top-class university, and between his studies at school and preparation for his eventual succession, he was left with no time to relax and unwind.

During those busy days, he saw the advertisement for *Infinite Dendrogram's* release.

Of the many promotional taglines it had, the one that caught his eye the most was the claim that triple the amount of time passed inside the game as outside of it.

"If that's true, I'd pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for it." Leon wanted to triple his rest and playtime. It wasn't an uncommon reason, but with how little of his own time he had, he was nothing if not serious about it.

And once he had the product in his hands, he was more than satisfied.

In fact, *Infinite Dendrogram* moved him so much that even the tripled time wasn't enough. It began taking up more and more of his real hours, forcing him to work even harder in real life—which might have been a bit of a miscalculation on his part. He even immediately started assisting his father after he graduated university, so his life didn't become any easier once he was out of school.

He also didn't have a strong reason for being in the burglar job grouping. It wasn't that he felt like taking a job directly opposed to his real one—he simply thought the job sounded efficient.

As he continued to play like that, he joined up with people who did similar things, and eventually created a clan. The analytical ability he'd developed in real life turned him into an excellent leader, and as his skills garnered more respect and awe, he soon found himself in charge.

His methods were clever. He secured save points in other countries, kept his risks low, carefully picked his burglary targets, and made sure to never do anything that would get him on every wanted list. He looked at every bit of information to analyze every situation, and in return he granted wealth and victory to his followers.

It wasn't long until he was feared as one of the game's greatest PKs, and he was deeply respected by his ever-growing clan.

He'd started playing simply to gain some extra time for himself, but now he was spending his *real* time on the game instead—to make himself stronger or think about what more he could do for his group. Spending his time on that, however, brought him far more peace than simply resting his weary bones ever could.

But now, most of that clan and the awe he had once commanded were gone.

Starting with Caldina's Altea blockade, they had continued to suffer defeats as he kept making the wrong decisions. The resulting downward spiral of failures, exacerbated by panic, caused people's opinions of him to drop precipitously and much of his clan left him.

Still, there were two things that had remained.

First was his reason for fighting—the two clan members who stuck by him even as everything else collapsed.

And the second was *why* he had inspired awe.

That had never changed no matter how many defeats he'd suffered. The power that had made him feared was as alive now as it had been back when he was thriving in Altar.

Just like the two women and his own Embryo, it was something that would never leave him.

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Eltram, Commercial Area

The destroyed mall was now host to a battle between a Superior and pre-Superior—and there was someone watching this one-on-one duel.

Eldridge is fighting her now? Not Hugo? The onlooker was Moneygold, who was still at the bridge. As Sardonyx waited for a chance to draw closer to the ship, Moneygold kept his opponent at bay with Treasure Cannon, all the while looking down through the hole Niala had opened in the ceiling of the commercial area.

Did Hugo lose? If that's the case, I might have to fight not just that mechdragon—Rascal, probably—but also the Murder Princess herself...and that's not good at all.

Moneygold had no means to even follow Emily's supersonic movements. As far as Superiors went, he was among the slowest. His perceived time fell far behind those of other creatures in combat.

Things would be different if he could use enough firepower to blow her away with the rest of the ship, but that wasn't really an option for him.

Eldridge's somehow putting up a good fight...but he's not on her level. They both moved at supersonic speeds, and though it wasn't easy for Moneygold to follow, he could clearly see which one of them was faster.

Though Eldridge was an AGI-focused Superior Job, his speed still fell behind Emily's. Thanks to the Kill Leader skill she had as the Murder Princess, the more people she killed, the higher her AGI rose—and it was far above Eldridge's. There was actually not a single stat in which Eldridge surpassed her. By focusing on evasion, he was just barely avoiding suffering a killing blow, but the fact that she cut into his skin regardless was all the proof necessary to show she was the more powerful combatant.

That was when a certain question sprang to Moneygold's mind.

Why isn't he taking out his Embryo? Moneygold wondered.

Back when Caldina had planned the Altea blockade, they'd gathered data on those they would hire. It was extremely detailed, covering almost everything anyone could want to know about the PKs, with only a few exceptions like the identity of the Superior Killer. Moneygold had memorized this info, and he clearly recalled that there was nothing on there about Eldridge's Embryo.

Like Figaro had once been, Eldridge was a well-known Master with an Embryo shrouded in mystery.

If it's a Type Territory, you'd think you'd see some signs of activation. Is it a passive Rule like Carl's? Or does it have conditions like Hugo's?

With Eldridge being weaker than Emily, the only way he could hope to win against her was by using some trick his Embryo had—at least, that was Moneygold’s assumption.

The only MVP reward on him is those clothes. Why’s he fighting with his bare hands, anyway?

Eldridge was a burglar, not a fighter. The fact that he was barely evading Emily’s attacks made it possible that he had a sub-job with a Martial Arts sense skill, but that was no reason for him to not equip any weapon at all.

Even if he had to keep one hand free for his burglary skills, he could still wield something in the other hand. *Does he want to use skills with both hands at once? He can probably do that using his Embryo or that MVP reward...but fighting without a weapon means he has to take every attack with his own body.*

Even though Emily hadn’t landed a direct hit on him yet, given her immense speed advantage, it was only a matter of time.

This concern soon became reality when Eldridge was pushed to the wall, unable to run away any farther.

“Minus.” Emily raised her hatchet and swung it down with the intention of splitting Eldridge’s head in two.

In response, he only held up his left arm.

It was clearly a bad move. There was no way he could withstand an attack with nearly 40,000 STR behind it with nothing but his own body. The arm would be severed and the hatchet would go on to cleave into his skull.

The inevitable clash with surely fatal consequences occurred in a split second...

...but then there was a loud clang, as though two metallic objects had met instead.

Emily’s hatchet—the blade of the Superior Embryo, Youaltepuztli—stopped after sinking a bit into Eldridge’s arm.

“You’re wide open, Murder-Demon,” Eldridge said. He swung his bare right arm and twisted the left that still had the blade embedded in it.

This was so he could use the skill he’d activated on both hands—the flesh-taking Greater Takeover.

Each of Eldridge’s hands took Emily’s opposite ankle, and her legs suffered heavy damage.

Emily’s eyes widened as she quickly pulled the hatchet’s blade out of Eldridge’s arm and jumped back. Blood sprayed from her wounded legs at the motion, but she didn't care about that. To Emily, no amount of damage or spilled blood meant anything. She would be fully healed if she died.

Despite that, she didn't charge toward Eldridge again.

Her attack had been blocked, and that realization made even this perfect killing machine pause and assume a more cautious stance.

The thing that had blocked it wasn't a Brooch. It didn't feel as though the attack had been negated—it most certainly broke the skin on his arm, only to stop without severing it.

"There's a video of your battle at Cortana. I saw it on the internet." As Emily fell still, Eldridge began to speak. "You used your hatchets to attack Hugo Lesseps's mech tons of times, but you never actually managed to break it. That mech's armor is made of a Mythical metal alloy. With skills active, its defense is probably in the 40,000-50,000 range. That tells me that your attack power isn't high enough to destroy something that tough."

Eldridge, who had known all along that he could block Emily's attack, continued his matter-of-fact explanation.

"You've got no shortage of STR. So the problem's gotta be...your hatchets. They've got that insane skill, but their attack power's real low to compensate. A lot of Type Arms are like that, so that's exactly what I expected from yours."

This was still a strange thing to say with such confidence. Even if Youaltepuztli weren't powerful weapons on their own, they were being wielded by someone with nearly 40,000 STR. There was no chance someone who wasn't an END-focused Superior Job could withstand the blow.

However, though Eldridge's left arm was bleeding, it was still connected.

"And that's why, as a weapon, my Embryo has surpassed yours."

The wound was deep enough that the bone beneath was visible. However, the bone wasn't white.

It was covered in blood, of course, but the crimson metal that composed it shone through nonetheless.

That was when Moneygold, still watching the battle, realized something.

I see! So he's just like the Over Gladiator, then.

Indeed, just like Figaro's heart, Eldridge also had an Embryo that was always inside him.

Blade Breaker Bones, Skeleton—a metallic full-body skeleton Embryo.

"My Embryo can easily shatter Mithril-tier stuff, but it looks like your hatchets are still really tough even if they don't have a whole lot of attack power. I wouldn't expect any less from a Superior Embryo. Shattering them won't be easy. I feel like I might *break something* with all the effort I'm putting in here."

Despite cracking a joke, Eldridge didn't even smile or let his guard down. That was because he knew this wasn't an enemy he could afford to show any openings to, and because he himself excelled at survival.

While Eldridge had an AGI-focused Superior Job that let him move at supersonic speeds, his Embryo was as tough as Mythical metal, giving him defenses that equaled those of END-focused Superior Jobs. He was a hybrid build that excelled at both AGI and END—a Master focused on survival, just like Emily.

Recently, he'd suffered defeat from having his heart stolen by surprise, suffocating after being buried beneath a mountain, burning up along with the very ocean around him, and being sliced in half by a ranged attack that ignored toughness. Under normal circumstances, though, death wasn't something that took him easily.

The difference between his END and Emily's wasn't nearly as great as the difference between their AGI, but...

If END is all his Embryo has going for it, then he has no chance of winning this, Moneygold thought as he watched, and anyone would have been hard-pressed to disagree.

Emily still exceeded Eldridge in all stats, even after taking Skeleton into account. Fighting an endurance match with her was a fool's errand to begin with.

Emily looked down at her damaged legs that hindered her movement—before she cut off her own head.

After death, she was reconstituted from her motes of light and emerged unharmed once again.

She still has that, after all. There's no way he can win.

Emily could die over and over, while Eldridge, no matter how long he endured, would be defeated after just one death.

I would understand this strategy if he was just buying time until reinforcements came, but... No one was coming to support him, and that included Moneygold himself. While he could watch how the battle at the mall unfolded, Moneygold couldn't even move from where he was because all of his attention was occupied with keeping Sardonyx at bay.

Emily, perhaps realizing that Eldridge had no one to back him up, rushed toward him yet again.

Thus, they repeated exactly the exchange that had occurred at the beginning of the battle. But this wouldn't last, as Eldridge would surely lose this war of attrition eventually.

Hm...? However, Moneygold realized that something was different this time. Though only slightly, he felt as though the gap in their speeds had become smaller.

Does he have a skill like the Over Gladiator's?

The Over Gladiator, Figaro's Superior Embryo, Cor Leonis, had three skills. One of them was Dance of Anima, which increased his power the longer he was in battle. It was an immensely powerful ability that became known far and wide after he'd fought Xunyu during the Clash of the Superiors.

Moneygold could hardly believe it, but the battle below was strongly reminiscent of that famous duel he'd seen recordings of.

He thought that Eldridge's Embryo must have a similar skill—but that wasn't the case. This phenomenon was caused not by his Embryo, but by his ultimate job skill as King of Burglary—Greater All-Drain.

This was a skill that *stole the enemy's stats based on damage he dealt to them*.

If he damaged his opponent for a tenth of their maximum HP, he received a tenth of their stats.

If he damaged them for half their health, he enhanced himself with half of their stats.

With the surprise attack on her throat and the recent strike on her ankles, Eldridge had taken off about a tenth of Emily's HP. And with this increase—or rather, decrease for Emily—the gap between them became smaller.

If he continued to take her HP, the gap would close further, and eventually begin to tilt in Eldridge's favor.

Greater All-Drain was a skill that ensured Eldridge would come out on top in any prolonged battle. It could only be used once per day and on only one target, but the stats stolen while it was active remained even if the target healed themselves from the damage.

Ultimately, it wasn't any different with Emily's revivals. While that restored her own stats that she'd lost when Eldridge took them, Eldridge still had the stats he'd *gained*.

Since he had never tried this skill on someone who would just revive after being killed, though, not even Eldridge himself knew it would work like this. One of the reasons he'd estimated that he had a seventy percent chance of winning was that he had considered the possibility that the revival would reset his stats as well as hers.

However, it turned out that it functioned in a way that was favorable to him.

Emily was beginning to develop a vague understanding of Eldridge's combat style and skills. She considered the possibility that he would keep growing stronger without limit and realized that she had to end this battle as soon as possible. Her attacks grew more intense as she began to slice through his skin and flesh, avoiding contact with his Skeleton.

"And that's a shortcoming of yours." Evading any fatal attacks, Eldridge downed a pill-like healing item and began to speak again. He considered words to be another technique in his arsenal for managing how his opponents behaved. "The way you fight is way too simple. You put so many Resources into revival that your Embryo itself doesn't have many other tricks, and your Superior Job does nothing but give you some stats. That's why your strategy doesn't go beyond using your immortality for reckless onslaughts. And *that's it*."

Based on what he'd seen, Emily's only other means of attack were her hatchet throws. He'd considered the possibility that she could use an ult, but it didn't look like it was happening—and he was fairly certain that she would never take the most straightforward option and just switch to some other weapon.

"The hatchets have a weak attack and limit the ways you can fight, but you don't switch to anything better. You're strong enough to beat UBMs and get MVP rewards, yet you still use only the hatchets. *Why is that?*"

As he spoke, Eldridge used an opening he saw to use Greater Takeover on Emily to take both her HP and mobility, enhancing himself in the process.

"Many Type Arms Embryos activate their skills through contact with their Masters," Eldridge went on. Ray's Nemesis could only use Vengeance is Mine if she touched him, for example. Xunyu's Tenaga-Ashinaga could only extend and retract when she had it equipped. Eldridge's Skeleton and Figaro's Cor Leonis worked as they did only because they replaced a particular part of their bodies.

Most Type Arms could *only* use their effects when in contact with their wielders.

"And what about that Superior Embryo? Do you have to touch it for it to bring you back? No, you don't. Back in Cortana, you sometimes threw both of them at once. If you couldn't revive if they were both out of your hands, you would always hold at least one. But you didn't."

Eldridge explained his analysis of the combat video he'd watched. Even while under Emily's ferocious assault, he kept calm and examined her.

"Does that mean you don't need them to use it? No. If that was the case, you'd already be using some MVP reward or whatever. You'd throw those hatchets so they auto-attacked while wielding some other weapons yourself. Theoretically, that's the strategy that would make you strongest."

Eldridge had thought about how he would optimize for combat if he was in Emily's shoes—and considered the reasons she might not be doing those things.

The answer had come to him in no time.

"It's because...your *equipment slots* are occupied. If you're not the Over Gladiator or something, you only have one weapon slot for each hand—and both of yours are occupied by the hatchets. You *can* let go of them, but their skills won't activate if you don't have them equipped. That goes for both the throwing and the revival."

Those words seemed to cause an emotional reaction in Emily. She haphazardly swung her axe at him, but Eldridge sidestepped it and tore at her flesh again.

"Your combat ability is too reliant on your Superior Embryo. Without the revivals, you're basically just a wild boar with high stats. That's why it's obvious what I gotta do."

As though feeling a sense of urgency, Emily lashed out with all of her nearly 40,000 STR behind it. She'd abandoned all of her defense to launch an attack meant to break even through his metallic bones.

However, Eldridge didn't defend against or evade it.

He simply opened his hands, preparing to use Greater Takeover and ignoring the hatchet in her right hand coming straight toward his skull.

A moment later, they clashed, and the sound of shattering metal rang out.

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Skeleton. As the name would suggest, this Embryo was based on the creatures from many different mythologies that were all made solely of bone. Skinless and fleshless—they were the remains of the dead who had been *deprived of everything*.

Perhaps because of that, Skeleton's core focus was *empty-handedness*.

Eldridge himself had no idea why his Embryo had turned out like this. He'd started *Infinite Dendrogram* as a way to relax, so perhaps its theme referred to the fact that he'd seen his life back then as a *burden* he wished to let go of. It was even possible the reason was something Eldridge had not discovered about himself yet.

Regardless of where it had come from, this core trait of empty-handedness meant that all of Skeleton's skills required Eldridge to not wield any weapon or shield.

Its first skill, All That Is Left After Death, was a skill that increased the toughness of his metallic frame—Skeleton itself—as well as Eldridge's own END as long as he wasn't wielding anything in either of his hands. As had already been demonstrated, the combined defense matched Mythical metal, and not even the Murder Princess's almost 40,000 STR was enough to break through it.

The second skill, The Dead Have Their Husk and Will, was a skill that enabled simultaneous use of active skills as long as both hands had nothing equipped in them. This was what allowed Eldridge to ready his King of Burglary skills on both hands. As a bonus, it also reduced the skills' cooldowns.

The third skill was the Embryo's ult, and it had two conditions that needed to be fulfilled.

First, just like the other two, it required that Eldridge's hands were completely free. And second, it required him to be in battle for more than five minutes. This was most likely to give him some time to analyze his opponent.

Eldridge had laughed out loud when he'd discovered this particular condition. He'd started playing *Infinite Dendrogram* to gain time, but now he was being forced to dedicate his time to the game instead.

This condition might've been a representation of that change in his point of view.

He'd found that very funny, and had fully understood why his Embryo's ult had come with that restriction.

Similarly, he fully understood why his ult's *effect* had turned out like it had.

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"Return, and Take Nothing to the Grave—Skeleton."

The moment they clashed, Eldridge activated his ultimate.

A moment later, Emily's right hatchet nearly touched his head...*and shattered*.

Youaltepuztli, a Superior Embryo, let out a high-pitched metallic shriek as it broke against Eldridge's arm instead.

Emily looked at its scattered pieces, dumbfounded...

"That's one."

...and Eldridge used Greater Takeover with both his hands to tear out her eyes.

In shock, Emily covered her empty sockets and desperately jumped back. It was an unusual move for her, someone who was always on the offensive and never feared death, but who could blame her? This was something she'd never experienced before.

Although it was just one of two, the Youaltepuztli that ensured her immortality had been broken.

Skeleton's ultimate was a skill that *destroyed the opponent's weapon*.

When the battle lasted for at least five minutes, Eldridge could destroy any one weapon the enemy was wielding in either hand. Nothing was immune—not even Superior metals or Superior Embryos could withstand it.

This was the reason he had once been known as Altar's strongest PK—Eldridge, the Arms Killer.

The driving force behind Emily's immortality was Youaltepuztli's auto-revival skill, Survival of the Fittest. Obviously, if Youaltepuztli was destroyed, her immortality would be compromised.

Although hesitantly, Emily used her remaining Youaltepuztli to decapitate herself.

A moment later, she dissipated into bits of light...and was successfully reconstituted. This restored her eyes and vision, but not the other Youaltepuztli—it was still broken.

"One more left," said Eldridge, declaring that he absolutely would destroy her immortality—in other words, that he could do this *again*.

Return, and Take Nothing to the Grave—Skeleton was an ultimate that could be used *twice* per day. That wasn't an unexpected amount of uses for a skill explicitly meant to destroy each weapon in an opponent's hand. The cooldown between daily uses was an additional five minutes.

That made Eldridge's words a declaration of inevitable destruction.

With shock in her fully restored eyes, Emily stared at the man in front of her.

He was the beloved of the girl she'd killed simply because she stood in her way, and the man who'd used to be Altar's strongest PK—the man who'd taken away half of her immortality.

"Don't underestimate the Goblin...Murder-Demon."

To Emily, Eldridge was an even more fearsome enemy than Hugo.

Chapter Seven: The Jester and the Dragon

About Curtis Eldona

To end the reign of the false imperator, Reinhard—that was the goal of the Dryfe Legitimate Government, and it was also the goal of Curtis himself.

He was driven by a grudge against Reinhard for killing his cousins, among many others, and by a conviction that it was his duty to bring down the warmongering usurper who ravaged his homeland. Such feelings—especially the latter one—were shared by many of those in the DLG.

However, those weren't the only things driving him. The grudge and sense of duty were matched—if not surpassed—by something else.

That was an emotion called "love."

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Six years ago, Curtis Eldona fell in love.

Before the increase in Masters, he was participating in a ceremony to celebrate those who'd taken part in defeating a UBM that had been ransacking the outer reaches of Dryfe.

On the dais stood the elderly, but still living, Imperator Xanafald as well as two more people. One of them was SMTF Captain Gifted Barbaros. As the adopted son of Marquis Barbaros, he had seen many battles and was already considered to be a pillar of Dryfe's military might despite his young age.

There was nothing strange about him defeating a UBM.

However, the person standing by his side was a girl who could not have been more than thirteen years old—and surprisingly, she clutched a red crystal, seemingly the MVP reward, in her hands.

That meant that despite her age, she had contributed to the battle more than Gifted.

“Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe, I commend you.” In Dryfe, it was common for twins to each bear the other’s name as their middle name, which resulted in the girl’s masculine middle name. That combined with the surname Dryfe made it obvious that she was part of the imperial family.

Indeed, she was the daughter of the late third prince and the granddaughter of the imperator bestowing the award upon her.

Though still young, Claudiah already held the title of The Ram.

“Beautiful...” The girl standing on the stage left Curtis enchanted. He himself was extremely talented and had already acquired a Superior Job, so he found himself strongly attracted to her.

Curtis continued to think about Claudiah long after this ceremony was over.

He intently and excitedly followed her activities by newspapers and word of mouth, and he spent many nights thinking how he might approach her and talk to her.

Curtis was like a fan and a young man in love all at once—his heart had nothing but Claudiah in it.

That didn’t change even after Masters came to the world en masse and began to reshape it.

When she became old enough to marry, he began wondering how they could be together. Although of less importance, she was still royalty. The first prince’s mother came from Curtis’s own family—Eldona—and they were fairly powerful as far as nobility went. He was, however, only the second son, so he didn’t know if he would be welcomed into the royal family itself.

That was why, instead of relying on his rank as a noble, he chose to prove his worth another way—by becoming Dryfe’s field Marshall.

The current field Marshall was elderly and would soon need to be replaced, and there were several candidates for the position.

First was Curtis himself. He had come from an important noble family and was the commander of the First Armored Battalion.

Next was the commander of the Second Armored Battalion. He was another man from a strong noble background who was known as a more skilled commander.

The second prince’s faction also had soldiers who, while not as renowned as the two commanders, were still put forth as candidates.

Some also suggested Gifted Barbaros—the stepson of another important noble—but he was already in SMTF, and it was believed that he wouldn't take the role of field Marshall and lead the entire army instead.

Thus, Curtis's biggest hurdle remained the commander of the Second Armored Battalion.

Just like Curtis, he was in the first prince's faction and was no doubt an excellent commander. That might have been the reason that the important diplomatic role of performing joint training with Altar was granted to him instead of Curtis himself.

With many UBM defeats under his belt, Curtis was by no means less skilled than his rival, but that achievement and the power involved was his alone. A field Marshall, however, had to be someone who could manage and lead the army, and even Curtis himself had to admit that wasn't exactly his strong suit.

But just when Curtis began to worry he had no chance at the title, the situation completely changed.

The Second Armored Battalion was completely destroyed.

This was accomplished by the SUBM, Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria. The fiendish golden beast had attacked the kingdom and eliminated Curtis's rival along with his entire battalion.

As a soldier, Curtis was overcome by grief and saw it as a major loss. But as a man, a part of him that was filled with glee that his biggest competitor was gone.

The golden dragon that had brought about so many disasters had actually done him a favor.

Whether it was a blessing or a calamity overall, the fiendish dragon had greatly changed the course of his life and Dryfe as a whole.

And in order that he might never forget this fact, he christened his new unit with a name based on the creature.

With that, the only barrier between Curtis and the seat of the field Marshall was gone. There were some candidates in the second prince's faction, but they were not a problem.

The next imperator was going to be selected soon, and the most likely candidates were First Prince Gustav and his son, Hallon. Regardless of which one it would be, though, Curtis would be the highest-ranking soldier in their faction, and would be given the title of field Marshall.

And once he had that, he would be able to take Claudiah as his wife.

Thus, while the next imperator was being decided in the Imperstand—the pre-ancient civilization fortress at the heart of the imperial capital—he merely waited for the future he expected to arrive.

However, it never came—for the throne was taken by the son of the late third prince—Reinhard.

And with the exception of Reinhard's younger twin sister, Claudiah, the imperial family all ended up dead. During the meeting to determine the imperial inheritance, both the first prince's and the second prince's factions were massacred.

The means by which this was accomplished were nothing short of vile. As the Superior Job of the mechanic grouping, King of Machines, Reinhard had been put in charge of maintaining the Imperstand—a position he'd used to transform the fortress meant to protect the country and the royal family into the weapon that killed them.

It was as though he'd been planning all along to take the throne by violence.

And to make matters worse, he'd given the role of field Marshall to his relative and confidant, Gifted Barbaros.

This outcome was so unexpected and terrible that it left Curtis at a loss for words.

His cousin had died, his future had fallen apart, his country was now in danger... There were so many things on his mind, but once he finally collected his thoughts enough to process what had happened, the first thing he felt was *rage*.

"What kind of joke is this?! Reinhard...what have you been doing all this time?!" *While your sister was out in public, fulfilling her role as a noble and fighting monsters all over the country, you didn't even bother to show your face! You spent all your time messing around with machines!* he thought.

Reinhard had pushed his sister into dangerous roles and used dirty tactics to claim the throne for himself. To Curtis, as well as everyone else who knew as much as he did—in other words, most of the other nobles—Reinhard was scum of the worst kind.

"This...this is unacceptable!" Most of all, Curtis felt awful for Claudiah, who had been born alongside this filth of a brother. Reinhard had used her as his pawn, forcing her to commit vile deeds against her will. Merely imagining how Claudiah must have felt in her heart during all this brought Curtis to tears.

Even if she would never choose him, he silently swore that he would do anything to at least set her free.

And so, he stood with many nobles and military men to bring down Reinhard.

Thus began the Dryfean Civil War. In it, he defeated many soldiers who'd sided with Reinhard, as well as Masters with Superior Jobs that the usurper had hired. The only thing Curtis feared was the vile Reinhard sending his beloved Claudiah against him—but for better or worse, this never happened.

As a single unit, Curtis weathered the civil war without suffering a single defeat.

However, his side was the one that lost.

Many of the nobles were defeated, the all-or-nothing operation by SMTF had failed, and even his own family—his elder brother—gave up after their father was defeated.

The Civil War ended with Reinhard's side victorious.

However, Curtis didn't—*couldn't*—accept this defeat.

Still burning with a desire to bring down the imperator and free Claudiah, Curtis left for another country to gather strength so he could one day try again.

But even now that it had come to this, there was still something that he didn't know.

Completely unbeknownst to Curtis, Reinhard and Claudiah were actually the same person. This was Claudiah's greatest secret, known only to her and the Marquis Barbaros family.

Curtis couldn't possibly have known this, for he had never met her when she was "Reinhard." Perhaps if he had, his love for "Claudiah" might have helped him realize who Reinhard really was.

However, the only things he knew about Reinhard were his name, his appearance in photos, and his actions. Thus, he had no means of knowing that his two goals were at odds and that his actions and desired future were utterly contradictory.

And that was why Curtis Eldona was truly a jester with no equal.

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Eltram, Power Block

"Engine deactivation completed."

"We will proceed to remove it from the vessel." DLG soldiers clad in armor-type Magingears were hard at work in front of the core installed in *Eltram*.

Watching over them were two Marshall IIs and a golden unit with a dragon's head.

"Make haste. It appears that the situation is shifting against us."

From his cockpit, Curtis silently but firmly urged his soldiers to rush.

Their situation was growing dire. The comms devices suddenly blared an emergency signal with no one to respond and give reason for it, and the ones they'd sent to occupy the special ballroom—a key location—were now unreachable. They'd also lost the unit that had jammed the standard frequencies and hosted their secret comms bypass.

It was clear that they had enemies here, and furthermore that they would soon come to this area.

But those weren't their only problems—before their secret comms were rendered unusable, they'd suddenly become unable to contact the soldiers in the passenger cabin and the cargo areas. Before commencing the operation, they'd also tried contacting Lieutenant Colonel Berlin outside, but received no response.

It was obvious that their situation wasn't good.

"Major General, completely removing it will require at least ten minutes... Wouldn't it be better for us to retreat?"

Curtis received this message from one of his accompanying Marshall IIs.

In this situation, a tactical retreat to prevent even more casualties could not truly be considered a mistake, but...

"Why not give up on the core and kidnap passengers to demand a ransom for them instead?"

This question from the pilot of the other Marshall II present made Curtis wince a little.

"A foolish suggestion. Never make it again."

With those words, the golden unit thrust its lance into the Marshall II unit.

"Aieee...?!" The tip of the lance had only missed the pilot's head by around 10 centimetels. Curtis had missed on purpose, since it was only meant as a warning, but there was more to his attack than just that.

Besides the hole in its chest-armor, the Marshall II was *completely undamaged*.

The attack didn't trigger any shocks throughout the rest of the unit—it only punched a small hole through the mech's body, missing anything vital to place the tip of the lance into the space right beside the pilot's head.

Such a strike required unimaginable precision as a pilot, yet Curtis had enough skill to do it as though it was nothing.

"Neither a change of plans nor a retreat are viable options for us."

Tactically, a retreat wasn't a mistake—but strategically, it was something Curtis would never do. If they didn't secure this energy core, this assault would have all been for naught. They would have accomplished nothing except losing most of their forces. At that point, their hope of making a comeback would be as good as gone. They would need at least a decade to recover, if not longer.

Delaying Dryfe's liberation and Claudiah's salvation by that long was something Curtis could never accept.

"The forces we've already lost make it even more vital that we secure the core to make up for them. If we don't, Dryfe's Legitimate Government will be over here and now. Do you understand?"

He pulled out the lance and calmly but firmly posed that question to the other pilot.

There was only one way the soldier could respond.

"S-Sir, yes, sir!"

"Good. Continue to keep an eye out."

Curtis then cut the external speakers and let out a sigh.

Curtis's thoughts drifted to his old rival, the commander of the Second Armored Battalion. "*He* probably could've led them without any threats or deception," he said with self-derision. Though he had once been Curtis's biggest hurdle on his path to becoming field Marshall, Curtis had deeply trusted him as a soldier. Perhaps they would've won the Civil War if he'd been alive for it. And even if they'd lost regardless, Curtis was certain that the DLG would be in a different, better state than the one it was in now.

As a man driven mad by love, Curtis was happy the Second Armored Batallion's commander had died—but as a soldier, he felt the loss heavily.

I suppose I cling to a plan like this exactly because I know I lack the ability to keep up with him otherwise, he thought.

This plan to steal the core had been suggested to him by a collaborator. This *engineer* had taught Curtis the structure of the vessel, how to handle the core, a way to sneak his soldiers inside, and even promised to use the stolen core to build a large mobile weapon for them.

It was a suspicious offer that seemed too good to be true. This collaborator clearly had some ulterior motive. However, Reinhard's forces were so strong that Curtis had no choice but to accept it.

That was why Curtis had to win—to make this operation a success.

"They're here." And with that, the sensor eye on his unit's draconic head moved at high speeds before focusing on the door leading into this area, where it picked up something behind it.

"This size and pattern of magic use... It's another Magingear!" Almost as soon as Curtis said it, the door was broken down, and a pure white Magingear covered in frost rushed in.

"La Porte de l'Enfer!"

Upon hearing that skill activation, Curtis quickly assumed a defensive stance. However, the skill produced no attack, and instead of an impact, he heard screams from one of his accompanying pilots and the soldiers working to remove the core.

The camera on his unit's back saw men equipped with armor-type Magingears panicking as most of their bodies were encased in ice.

A wide-area freeze skill? But there's been no significant change in ambient temperature. One of the accompanying units is unaffected too.

The only one of Curtis's pilots who was screaming was the one whose armor he'd punched a hole through.

Curtis hummed questioningly, but as he did, he pressed something on the panel next to the control column and activated one of his unit's extras.

A moment later, the golden mech's sensor eye—the attached Epic MVP reward, Glaring Third Eye, Drac-Sight—modified its vision and observed the surroundings for changes.

By doing this, Curtis noticed that there was some sort of energy being released by the enemy unit, and that heat energy was flowing *toward* it from his Frozen soldiers.

The unit is generating a strange energy field. It seems similar to the power of the Scorchdragon King that I felled—the incineration skill that only worked on living beings. I suppose that must be what's causing the freeze.

He looked at one of his accompanying units and saw that the strange field was flowing into its cockpit through the hole in its chest. However, for his own unit and the other one accompanying him, it only flowed on the armor's surface, not making its way in.

The difference lies in...the airtightness.

◇

"Tch...!" The result might have been expected, but Hugo clicked his tongue in irritation nonetheless. *They're not freezing...!*

After hearing Eldridge's hint, Hugo had been able to guess why La Porte de l'Enfer hadn't worked on the Magingear in the mall.

It had something to do with airtightness.

The infantry outside the unit had become Frozen, but the pilot within had not. However, the pilot had succumbed as soon as Hugo had broken the Magingear's armor.

That meant that his targets had to actually come into contact with air that had been affected by La Porte de l'Enfer in order for the skill to be effective.

Hugo could guess the reason for that.

Cyco's La Porte de l'Enfer not only Froze its targets, but also accumulated the lost heat energy within Cyco herself. That heat was meant to be used in her second skill, Purgatorial Slash, but that made it necessary for the heat energy to actually *move*.

And Cyco had no ability to absorb heat without consideration of the intervening space. She wasn't a Type Territory, after all, and could not bend spatial laws. Instead of influencing the surrounding space, she transferred the heat energy from the enemy to her *using the air as the conduit*.

Thus, her skill couldn't reach anyone who was completely separated from the outside air.

As long as Cyco and the target shared a common air, she could even steal the heat of someone like Bishmal when he transformed into fire—but if they didn't, she would never be able to affect them.

And I know exactly why I haven't realized this until now, Hugo thought. Back when he had still been a member of The Triangle of Wisdom, Hugo, with Franklin's supervision, had taken part in various experiments related to La Porte de l'Enfer. Among these tests were a handful done on people inside Marshall IIs.

Since it had worked on the pilots back then, both Hugo and Franklin had assumed that La Porte de l'Enfer always worked against Magingears, as well.

But the reason it didn't work on the DLG units now was...

"...because our units weren't completely airtight."

Hugo recalled the day he'd left The Triangle of Wisdom.

The pool they'd used for experiments was occupied by an experimental amphibious unit. It had sunk to the bottom, its cockpit had filled with water, and everyone around thought it was a complete failure. If they couldn't ensure an airtight seal on an amphibious unit, *there was no way they could've done it for units meant only for use on dry land*.

The Triangle of Wisdom was a group of Masters, many of whom were engineers and the like in real life as well. They had even achieved something that had previously been thought impossible, creating the first humanoid Magingears.

But in the grand scheme of things, when it came to Magingears, they were still amateurs.

On the other hand, the DLG—the First Armored Battalion—were pros at handling power armor and tank-type Magingears. In terms of the knowledge of magic technology, they were true veterans—the absolute elite—and if they wanted to make their units airtight for desert environments, they could do it flawlessly.

While they may not have had the same creativity, the DLG were unmatched when it came to technical prowess.

And compared to the data I saw...that golden unit has been modified too.

With the exception of the one that already had a hole in it, it looked like the pilots of the other two units weren't freezing. However, unlike the battle in the mall, Hugo had anticipated this result.

“What now?” Cyco asked.

“We do as we planned!”

A moment later, a hole opened up in the body of the Marshall II that was still unaffected.

“Hit.”

The sound sensors of the machines picked up a faint voice from behind them. It belonged to Niala, who was lying on the floor as she aimed an extra long gun.

The weapon in her hands was a *magic* sniper rifle.

Unlike gunpowder guns, which didn’t change in power no matter who wielded them, magic guns grew stronger according to the amount of magic put into them and the skill level of the user. When charged with enough MP and fired using an appropriate skill, they could break through Demi-Dragon carapaces—and that included the armor of Demi-Dragon-tier Magingears.

Niala was doing exactly as she and Hugo had planned while they were making their way here to the power block. If the enemies didn’t freeze immediately, they decided they would simply have to do as Hugo had done in the mall and puncture the mechs’ armor to let the skill through.

Niala had assumed the sniping position and prepared to fire before White Rose had even broken through the door.

“Ngh...!” The pilot of the unit Niala had fired at tried to groan in pain, but before he could do so, the second tick of La Porte de l’Enfer came, Freezing his entire body. He must’ve had a higher kill count for other humanoids than the other pilot.

The second tick also finished Freezing those who were only partially Frozen.

And thus, silence fell over the power block.

The energy core was deactivated, now surrounded by ice sculpture and two units that weren’t moving an inch. Nearby stood the pure white unit that had done this, and outside the area Niala was still taking aim.

And finally, there was the golden unit that had stood still and focused on observation. Despite witnessing his soldiers being functionally eliminated, Curtis himself had never moved.

“Well...I have a question.” This had to be emphasized—it wasn’t that he couldn’t move; he simply *didn’t*. “Since you didn’t attack me first...*is it only* *the two of you*?"

The moment he said that, Niala's second shot hit the golden unit's chest armor. However, her eyes widened as the bullet only made a faint metallic clink as it was deflected.

"I assume this Freeze requires you to break the cockpit's airtight seal. The reason the sniper didn't aim at me first was because you didn't know how tough this armor was. Thus, you used the first shot on the Marshall II, which was more likely to break."

Curtis verbalized almost exactly what Niala had been thinking.

"If there were another sniper or a different attacker with you," Curtis went on, "you would not have missed the chance to ambush us all at once. The fact that this did *not* happen makes it clear the only ones here are you, with your Freeze power, and the sniper behind you."

Curtis matter-of-factly described the extent of the opposing forces.

"Now, another question," he said. "Why did *you* not ambush me when you had the chance?"

Hugo said nothing in response, but Curtis himself already knew the answer. "It's because *you know this*. When you broke through the door and saw this unit, you instantly realized what it was. You are the kind of person who knows my Imperial Glory...in other words, you must be from Dryfe."

These words made Hugo's eyes widen. Indeed, Hugo knew of this golden, dragon-headed unit that went by the name of Imperial Glory. He knew it as the strongest unit ever built by The Triangle of Wisdom—a Magingear created at the Dryfean army's request and equipped with an energy core. And it was because Hugo knew how powerful it was that right upon seeing it, he failed to implement the planned ambush.

"And you have ties to The Triangle of Wisdom as well. I can tell by your Magingear—it's an experimental unit that isn't mass-produced. The quirks in the structure and the inadequate construction makes it obvious that it's their work."

Hearing his opponent disparage The Triangle of Wisdom's work—the work of Hugo's own sister—made Hugo slightly irritated, but he couldn't bring himself to move. He had a feeling that if he did, it would only make the situation worse.

"Based on its toughness, I assume it's made of Mythical metal. No—Hihi'irokane is scarlet, and your unit is white. It's an alloy with mical ore, then. In Dryfe, both are mined solely within the borders of the Barbaros March. I see how it is... Damn you, Reinhard."

Despite not even touching or attacking White Rose, Curtis had gotten everything right. He spoke to himself and arrived at an answer, which made him click his tongue.

"This means he provided it back when Glory was being produced—he knew we would be enemies even back then? Was he planning to claim the throne for that long? That *filth*..."

The way he was vehemently cursing someone who wasn't even here made Curtis look as though he'd dropped his guard.

"Now is a good time to attack," Cyco told Hugo telepathically. "His kill count's high enough for him to Freeze with a single tick."

Hugo nodded in response. He didn't have to destroy the unit—he would win the moment he broke its airtight seal. A slight distortion in the armor was all it would take.

Thus, Hugo rushed White Rose toward the golden unit...

"Ohh, if this is as fast as you can go, you made the right choice by not ambushing me."

...and was instantly stopped.

The lance had pierced through White Rose's right elbow and reached all the way to the floor, pinning the arm down and rendering it immobile.

Shock overcame Hugo. Curtis had thrust the lance into his unit with movement reminiscent of a martial arts master—except it was done not by a nimble human, but a bulky, humanoid giant robot.

It was a sight too outlandish to be written off as merely the result of skilled piloting. Moreover...

"How did he break through Rose's armor?!" Made of a Mythical metal alloy, White Rose had the highest defensive power of any Magingear that existed.

How could anyone have pierced through that with such ease?

"This lance is an MVP reward of mine. It's called Pinning Death, Drac-Stinger. I can reduce the diameter of its tip to as small as 0.1 millimetels, and it never breaks. It's a weapon I find very useful."

Curtis casually revealed information about one of his weapons—the MVP reward he'd received from the Pindragon King. He did this because Hugo had ties to The Triangle of Wisdom, and because he believed Hugo already had information about Imperial Glory and Curtis himself.

However, that didn't seem to answer Hugo's question. So what if he could change the diameter of the lance's tip? How did that enable him to pierce through White Rose's armor?

As though anticipating that question, Curtis let out a sigh.

"As I said, the construction is inadequate." First, Curtis repeated himself...

"There's a *large* 0.2 millimetel gap in the elbow joints."

...and casually said that he'd easily pierced through a hole smaller than the eye of a needle.

Blind to reality and unwittingly pursuing contradictory goals, Curtis Eldona was no doubt a jester.

However, if that was all he was, Curtis would not be standing here today.

He was the man who'd hunted down countless landdragons and Dragon Kings that approached Dryfe from the neighboring Harshwinter Mountains.

He was the continent's strongest pilot, Curtis Eldona the Dragon Kingslayer, and he piloted a unit named after the most fiendish dragon of all—Imperial Glory.

Hugo was now facing the strongest pilot in the world, riding the world's most powerful Magingear.

Chapter Eight: The Three-Way Fight and the Final Choice

Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

The enemy was turning out to be far more trouble than I'd expected.

He'd used his lance to pin Rose through a gap in the armor of its right arm. I tried moving it and pulling the lance out, but nothing budged.

This was due to the immense gap between my unit's output and his. While my Rose had a Pure-Dragon-tier output, his was clearly above that. It easily earned the title of "Dragon King-tier Magingear."

"It's above its specs on paper...and they were already high..." I mused. That must've been due to the pilot.

That Drac-Stinger mention brought a certain name to mind.

It was an MVP reward that had belonged to the most famous pilot in Dryfe—one who had made a name for himself before I'd even begun playing *Infinite Dendrogram*—Over Pilot, Curtis Eldona.

"Fran said that she didn't know who took it during the civil war, but..." The answer to this mystery was now more than apparent—the one who'd taken the reward was the same person who had it now. And since he had a Superior Job from the pilot grouping, his unit's abilities were greatly increased.

The situation was looking pretty bad for us. Curtis was far above us in both piloting skill and unit specifications.

The biggest advantage he had over us, though, was in the *uptime*. We could only fight for about ten minutes, and even that was halved if I activated the second battle mode and Boucliers Planetes. Meanwhile, his unit had a pre-ancient civilization energy core that could keep it running essentially indefinitely.

He could win this battle just by keeping me pinned like this.

"Still..." Despite that, I had three advantages.

First, there was White Rose's incredible toughness—the combined result of its Mythical metal alloy construction and my own defensive skills. Second, there was La Porte de l'Enfer. As long as this skill was active, I could win by simply breaking his cockpit's airtight seal.

And third, there was Niala. It was two versus one right now. If we used our numeric advantage and stuck to the strategy we'd agreed to before we came here, we could still win this.

"You're going to have to remove the spear first if you want to do that, though," said Cyco, in response to my thoughts.

"Yeah." I couldn't win this if I couldn't move, after all. If it came down to that, in a worst-case scenario I could free myself by purging the right arm from the elbow down, but I really needed the hand for what would come next.

"Let's start by separating you. Then we can talk." However, while I was thinking of how to escape, the hostile unit aimed its left hand at the entrance we'd come through. "Missile Darts."

And with those words, the left forearm's armor rose up, exposing many holes—tiny missile tubes—which then fired. They all struck the ceiling right above the entrance, burying the door in rubble. That blocked Niala's vision, making this a one-versus-one.

"Tch...!" With one of my advantages gone, I clicked my tongue. But...what did he mean by "then we can talk"? Why did he attack Rose's elbow joints first? If he could target the tiny fault in there, he should've been able to find some fault in the cockpit and just kill me outright...

As I was pondering that, it seemed like Curtis had something to ask as well. "Now that we are ready, I have one...no, two questions," he said.

"What?"

"They are simple. I'm certain you know the answers."

What? What did I know that the leader of the terrorists who'd taken control of *Eltram* would want?

"First question...how do you disable *this*?"

"You mean La Porte de l'Enfer?" Well, I was the only one here who knew about that, so it made sense he would want to know. However, he then shook his unit's head and spoke before I could answer.

"Not that. Not now. This question is about *my* unit," he said. "Being from The Triangle of Wisdom, you must know the way to disable the *limitation* placed upon Imperial Glory."

Hearing that made my eyes go wide. *That thing's already overpowering Rose. And you mean to tell me it's doing all of that with some sort of limitation in place?* I thought. *What kind of beast did the guys create here...?*

"Do tell me if you know," he said as the golden unit's draconic head came closer. "How do I turn off its voice-based weapon activation?"

"...Huh?" *Voice activation?*

"The nonsensical limitation that you must speak a weapon's name in order to use it. The unit doesn't even care who says it, so it cannot even act as protection in case of theft. What is the purpose of this feature?"

Curtis's question reminded me that just a moment ago, he'd actually said "Missile Darts" out loud. Unless they were especially quirky, Magingears didn't usually require their pilots to say anything in order to fire their weapons—the Marshall IIs I'd piloted before had been the same way.

Imperial Glory was different, though, and I actually knew the reason.

It was a one-of-a-kind super robot The Triangle of Wisdom had built around a pre-ancient civilization energy core. There had to have been at least one person there who'd said something like, "Hey, if it's a super robot, the pilot has to shout the names of all its attacks, right?"

"Why must they be named to be used?" Curtis insisted. "It isn't simply *pointless*—it's a clear negative. There is absolutely no benefit to doing it. The direct link between the words and weapons makes it impossible to feint or bluff. What were its creators thinking? Was it a way of getting back at me? I thought we had a good relationship when Glory was being built, but was Reinhard involved even back then? I find that very plausible. Without this feature, I might even have won against Barbaros!"

Hearing his speech made me feel like the feature must have been a huge problem for him, but there had never been any real reason behind its inclusion. The Triangle of Wisdom was just a group of hobbyists—many of whom happened to be the sort to prioritize beauty of form over function.

"The unit was built before I entered the clan. I don't know how to turn it off," I said. Perhaps I could've cut some kind of deal for the answer, but I actually didn't have it, so that was all I could say. Knowing the clan's members, I honestly wouldn't have been surprised if it was actually impossible to turn it off.

"...I see," Curtis said, clearly disappointed.

Had he only let me live so he could ask that question? In that case, my situation was now even more precarious than ever.

“Next question, then. The main one,” Curtis said.

Oh, so that was only a preface to the main question. I would get to live for a bit longer.

“Is the Freeze on my men removable? I confirmed their vital signs, but its state and waveform are different from a standard Freeze. Can it only be undone by your will? Will it vanish upon your death, or will your death make it permanent instead? You are still alive precisely because I have no idea which is true.”

So it really was all about La Porte de l’Enfer.

Cyco’s Freeze certainly was different from the normal version—as long as the target fulfilled the condition, it ignored resistance items and couldn’t even be treated by restoration items. And it stayed active for an entire hour even if I deactivated La Porte de l’Enfer or got the death penalty. The only way anyone could be freed immediately was if I removed the Freeze myself.

“Answer me—and be wise not to lie.” That seemed like he was implying that he had Truth Discernment.

“If I die, it will be undone in an hour,” I said.

“That is too slow.” The Frozen soldiers had been working to remove the core—probably engineers that had been brought here for that very purpose. If their goal was the core, they couldn’t get it as long as those people remained Frozen.

They probably couldn’t afford to stay here long enough for La Porte de l’Enfer to expire. “But the way you said that makes it seem as though you have other ways of releasing them,” Curtis added.

“If I will it, they will be freed right away.” I didn’t lie. I didn’t have to.

“So the only ways to free them are to kill you and wait an hour...or strike a deal with you.”

“Exactly.”

From his perspective, I’d essentially taken his people hostage. Waiting an hour wasn’t an option for him—he was already aware of the problems happening all over the vessel.

I didn’t know how much he knew about the situation exactly, but he must’ve been keenly aware that they had to hurry.

"I will ask just as a formality," Curtis said. "What are your conditions?" he asked.

"Leave this ship immediately. Take nothing, kill no one—just retreat."

He now had the choice to abandon his goal in exchange for saving his men. If he gave up here and ran, he wouldn't be any worse off than he was now.

When they all got outside, though, they'd probably be attacked by Moneygold, and his explosive attacks would likely exterminate them all as they tried to retreat. It felt like I was leading him into a trap. It seemed like something Fran would do...but if I showed them mercy here, that might lead to the death of a lot of innocent people. And that would make it hard for me to sleep at night.

That was why I chose not to lie and presented this offer—or rather, this trap. I would free his men and they would retreat before...

"Hm...?" My train of thought was interrupted by a realization "'As a formality'?" What did he mean by *that*?

"Yes, I expected an answer like that. I suppose I have no choice then," Curtis said in a slightly annoyed voice as he *aimed the unit's left hand at his other soldiers*. "Missile Darts."

The small missiles spewed fire as they flew toward the Frozen soldiers at subsonic speeds, breaking them into pieces just like the ceiling he'd fired at earlier before the remains were burnt to ashes.

"Wh-What are you...?!"

"Paint Napalm." When he said that, the dragon's tail extending from the back of the unit—the balancer—swung around.

The tip of the tail was covered in some sort of fiber, dampened with some sort of liquid. As it moved, the liquid sprayed out over the two other Magingears—the ones with Frozen pilots in them.

Two seconds later, the liquid caught fire, thoroughly burning both the Magingears and the frozen statues within their cockpits.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Why did you—?! They're *your* people...!" I didn't understand what he was doing. I didn't *want* to understand.

"You ask me *why*?" After I voiced my confusion, the dragon-headed Magingear's strange-looking sensor-eye focused on me. "Because we fight for a cause that must be fulfilled even if it costs us our lives."

Those words sent a shiver down my spine.

“If we fail—if we do not take this—we will not fulfill our goal. I will remove the core by force. That might damage it, but if a *certain someone* is as good as they say, fixing it should not be a problem,” Curtis said, looking at the core.

He’d eliminated his own subordinates simply so he could get his hands on that thing.

“Weren’t they your brothers-in-arms...?!”

“It is exactly *because* I command them that I must weigh their lives on a scale. The core and the weapon it would create is far more important than the people or machines we may lose during this operation.”

I was too shocked to speak.

Curtis, however, was still speaking. “I would sacrifice whatever it takes to end Reinhard’s reign. My men joined me in this assault precisely because we share that sentiment. The necessary sacrifice ended up being their lives, but there was no other option.”

The way he stood before the corpses of his own people brought back a memory. It reminded me of one of the two leaders of the Gouz-Maise Gang—namely, Gouz himself.

He was my enemy back then—and the kind of man who hadn’t hesitated to eat the remains of his own followers.

Curtis was nothing like him on the surface...but I felt like deep down, they had some similarities.

“You...!”

“I have no more questions. There is no more reason to keep you alive.”

With those words, he swung the tail balancer. It was clear he was going to incinerate me while I was still pinned and immobile.

“Ngh! Boucliers Planetes!” I quickly ejected the armor on both shoulders, turning them into floating shields I used as weapons to attack Curtis.

“I thought you’d have a gimmick like this. I could tell by looking.”

However, he caught both of them using his own unit’s arms.

“This too...?!” I thought I’d caught him off guard, but he countered it perfectly! I tried to control the floating shields, but his grip on them was too strong for them to move.

“Farewell, Pilot of The Triangle of Wisdom. I will get my answer to the first question once I make my triumphant return to the imperium. Paint

Napalm."

And so, the golden unit swung the tail covered in liquid fuel...

"Hm...?!"

...but then suddenly jumped backward, retreating with everything it had. He even pulled out the lance keeping my unit pinned.

A moment later, countless missiles rained upon White Rose.

"Huh...?!" Explosions battered the armor, shook the frame, and caused static to appear on the internal monitors.

"Nghh..." After Cyco let out that brief sound, the ice armor shattered and White Rose collapsed to the ground.

"Cyco?!"

"...I'm okay. We can still move..."

She was right—while a lot of the ice had broken, the monitors told me that White Rose under it hadn't been damaged much. Perhaps due to the Mythical alloy plating, it could still function.

The explosive pressure had traveled through the insides, though, so fixing it would take a while.

"Turn off La Porte de l'Enfer. Keep the shattered pieces as they are."

"Oui, ma'am." Cyco obeyed my order and canceled the skill. Thanks to the shattered ice armor, anyone looking at White Rose would probably assume that it had been disabled due to heavy damage.

It wouldn't convince anyone that I'd gotten the death penalty, but deactivating La Porte de l'Enfer would give the impression that I'd at least Fainted.

"But...what were those missiles?" I wondered. They clearly didn't belong to Imperial Glory. And though they were primarily aimed at Curtis, the fact that whoever fired them didn't seem to care about me made it obvious that it wasn't an ally either. So...who could it be?

"What a quick reaction! I guess whoever's inside has a Superior Job!"

My question was answered by a voice coming from a hole in the ceiling. That must've been where the missiles came from, and now a giant object used it as an entrance.

The voice was that of a cheerful lady, but what came through was nothing like you'd expect from hearing it.

It was a *white and crimson mechdragon*.

"That's..." I recognized it right away—it was the thing shown by Niala's owl’s screen.

The mechdragon that had been fighting Moneygold had arrived at the power block.

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Eltram, Commercial Area

It was shortly after Eldridge had shattered one Youaltepuztli.

Emily was silent. Her Superior Embryo was lost. She still had the one in her left, but if she lost that one too, she would be unable to come back and be in danger of actually dying. And her enemy, Eldridge, was using his ultimate job skill as King of Burglary to close the gap in their stats.

To Emily, still in her killing mode, this was both unprecedented and more dangerous than anything she had ever encountered before.

She’d already recognized Eldridge as something worse than a mere “minus”—a *hostile*. He was now “bad”—someone who had to be eliminated at all costs, even if it meant using her ultimate skill.

Thankfully, it was currently night. The conditions for the skill had been fulfilled, and having just one of the two hatchets wouldn’t stop her. And when she used it, this entire ship would be crushed by her wide-area extermination.

However, on this ship, there still was Zhang—an ally or “plus”—and Doris, whom she had temporarily marked as “good”—someone to protect. It was because she created such hard separations between her enemies and allies that she couldn’t—or wouldn’t—attack any of her friends.

But that didn’t change the fact that using the ult was the only way to deal with Eldridge—this natural enemy before her. If she wasted too much time, his ult’s cooldown would end, and he’d destroy her second Youaltepuztli.

This situation was worse than any she’d been in so far. But that was when...

“Qi!” That single word rang out—carrying the meaning of “rise”—followed by the sound of something large crawling on the mall’s floor.

Naturally, this caught the attention of both Eldridge and Emily.

There, they saw a monstrosity that resembled a giant worm—a Pure-Dragon-tier worm jiangshi with a Fu on its forehead. Eldridge understood with a single glance that it must've been on Emily's side, come to help her out of this unexpected predicament.

Indeed, the Drac-Worm Jiangshi had been summoned by Emily's ally—Zhang. He'd used one of the few powerful entities he'd put under his command after Mirage's destruction. The jiangshi followed the order inscribed on its Fu, recognizing Eldridge as an enemy and attacking him.

However, not even this Pure-Dragon-tier jiangshi was a threat to him. He was greatly empowered by the stats he'd stolen from Emily. And...

"There you are." Eldridge swung his right hand at the jiangshi. The skill set on it wasn't Takeover, but Pickpocket.

A moment later, the Fu on the jiangshi's head was gone. The creature crashed to the floor of the mall, causing the whole area to shake.

Jiangshi weren't autonomous—they were undead controlled by the Fu placed upon them. Thus, Eldridge knew that it would be rendered powerless if he simply took that away.

The Drac-Worm Jiangshi ended up only buying a little time, which meant nothing when Eldridge had all the time in the world.

That would only apply if this Drac-Worm Jiangshi was the only one here, though, and the jiangshi that had attacked Eldridge wasn't alone. The first one was merely bait meant to distract this major threat.

"What...? More jiangshi?" The second one was crawling on the deck and approaching the bridge where Moneygold was still battling Sardonyx to keep it at bay.

The jiangshi was approaching him as if it intended to stop him. Moneygold had the ability to destroy it easily, but he couldn't do that right now.

The simple reason for this was the angle he was currently standing at—firing at the jiangshi meant firing *down*, which would mean destroying this ship.

"Zhenhuo Zhendao Xuanlongba." And after his hesitation, the jiangshi in the mall and on the deck swelled up from the inside.

They then burst, releasing countless Fu.These were all the kind of Fu that daoshi made ahead of time in order to use their job ults. Filling jiangshi with Fu meant to activate his ultimate was Zhang Zangqi's signature move as Great Soul Daoshi.

The skill he used was a powerful wind spell that cut apart everything in its range—Zhenhuo Zhendao Xuanlongba. The scale of this one was smaller than the one he'd used on AR-I-CA, but it happened in two places at once. One of them briefly kept Eldridge in place, while the other diagonally cut *off* the bridge where Moneygold stood.

With a loud sound, the bridge collapsed, falling onto the deck and the desert.

Thanks to his Superior Embryo, Moneygold was completely unharmed by this. However...

"Ohh, this is bad." While he didn't sound like he was bothered too much, he thought he was in a really bad situation.

The collapse was too fast for someone with his AGI to react to, and after he fell along with the remains of the bridge, he crashed onto the desert and found himself buried under a large pile of debris. It didn't harm him, but it limited his movements. He couldn't even use his attacks to blow the debris away, since he might accidentally hit the ship and its passengers.

Incapacitated and closed off in a cage of sand and rubble, he was effectively removed from combat.

This, naturally, removed the hail of attacks keeping the enemy at bay.

"...Now." The obstacle in their path had been removed, and Machina wasn't one to miss this opportunity. The vernier thrusters fired at full throttle, making it hard for her to even change course. Moving at supersonic speeds, the unit instantly closed the distance between it and the vessel, using the momentum to break through the wall and enter.

They headed straight to the mall, where Eldridge and Emily were fighting.

The mech's sudden arrival would have startled anyone—Emily, Eldridge, or both of them—into silence.

Regardless, Zhang's job ultimate had rendered Eldridge immobile. Not missing this chance, Sardonyx fired an incendiary shell at him.

Eldridge had defense that rivaled Mythical metal, as well as stats taken from Emily. But the shell hit him precisely in the stomach—opening up a gaping wound and incinerating everything inside.

Now the only thing linking Eldridge's upper and lower bodies were the remains of his spine.

The wound was devastating, and Eldridge coughed blood as he collapsed backward. As he did, he used Pickpocket on the unit that had just broken in, but it didn't work.

They countered it, huh? Must be pretty tough... he thought.

Though the wound was very close to fatal, he was still alive for the moment. However, that wasn't exactly a good thing. If this attack itself had been fatal, it would've been negated by the Brooch. But since this was just a heavy wound that left him barely alive, the damage over time from the injury-based debuffs it laid on him made his death an inevitability. The Brooch was useless in situations like this.

However, this was no accident—Machina had done this on purpose.

"Guess this is it." Eldridge tried thinking of something he could do before his time expired, but nothing came to mind. His ult's cooldown wasn't over yet, and with the crimson-white mechdragon standing between them, he couldn't use Takeover on Emily.

Eldridge realized that he'd done everything he could do here.

Another loss against a Superior, huh? It was no doubt a defeat for him.

However, IF had only defeated him because they had *two* Superiors and one tian Superior Job. If even one of them hadn't been here, Eldridge might've lasted until his cooldown expired and might have actually finished off Emily.

She was the strongest PK of all time—effectively immortal—and he'd come closer to actually killing her than anyone else.

In a way, that feat may have been more impressive than merely defeating a Superior.

"...King of Burglary, Eldridge, right?"

And there was someone here who acknowledged that.

Sardonyx's high-speed movements had greatly damaged him, but he was still able to assess the situation through the outside monitors.

One of Emily's Youaltepuztlis was broken. He knew that this man lying before him was the one who'd cornered her like this.

Eldridge's name had been on his list, and he was aware of what King of Burglary had achieved thus far. Eldridge had led a notable PK clan, and his keen mind and leadership skills had brought them many achievements. However, his failures since the incident in Altar had left him mostly abandoned by his clan. Eldridge looked to be a man well past his prime.

It seemed as though Sardonyx's pilot would have to reevaluate that impression.

“Eldridge. I’m Rascal—Rascal the Bloodonyx of IF.”

Eldridge was familiar with that name. He was a wanted Superior who was functionally in charge of the world’s strongest criminal clan.

“I have an offer for you.”

“What is it?” Eldridge was wondering what this man could possibly want from him.

“When your death penalty’s over...join IF.”

It was an invitation.

IF was causing all of these incidents in order to gauge the abilities of unaffiliated people. Given their compatibility, Eldridge had been able to gain the upper hand against Emily, who was far above him in status—and he possessed an instinct that had led him to this ship seeking something that very few could even see coming. There were many past achievements attached to his name, and what he’d done here was proof that his skills hadn’t dulled one bit.

Rascal caused these incidents to specifically analyze the participants, and he’d deemed Eldridge to be someone they should add to their team.

“To your clan?”

“You’d start as a supportin’ member, but we’ll make it official once you’re a Superior. Emily’ll see you as an enemy for a while, so I’d have you work somewhere other than Caldina, but we can promise to support you with all the funding and items you need.”

Eldridge said nothing as Rascal showed him the deposit he would receive. It was far more than anything he’d earned even when Goblin Street was in its golden age.

This wasn’t a bad deal by any means. If anything, this was much more than a man on a losing streak like him could ever expect. One could say that luck was finally turning in his favor.

“*...Not a chance.*”

However, he rejected the offer without hesitation, shaking his head.

The faces of two women came to mind.

“There’s only one clan...I’ll ever have.”

Fey and Niala had supported him all this time, and not even this excellent offer could begin to outweigh their value to him.

Rascal said nothing for a moment. He’d thought that Eldridge might refuse, but there was less hesitation in his voice than Rascal had ever expected to hear.

“That won’t change...even if I lose.”

After admitting defeat, Eldridge’s body dissolved into light, and IF were the only ones left in this devastated mall.

“Shame,” Rascal said as he watched the lights vanish. He truly believed that it was unfortunate they couldn’t recruit Eldridge, and at the same time, he felt a little defeated himself.

But then he switched focus. This wasn’t the time to wallow in feelings like those—he had something important to do.

After Eldridge vanished, Emily was standing there with an empty expression on her face. She was neither in her killing mode nor her normal mode. Instead, she was in a state Rascal had never seen before.

Maybe she’s mentally exhausted or something? On this ship, she’d done a few things she’d never done before, and Rascal didn’t know whether this would be good or bad for her.

Regardless, he thought it was best to prevent her from fighting any longer. The odds of it were extremely low, but if there was another person aboard with a weapon-destroying skill, it would be over for her.

And so, Rascal decided that she had to leave here immediately. He called Zhang over the comms and told him to take Emily and retreat. The escort vessels were all silent, and with jiangshi protection they could leave with no trouble.

“What about you...?” Zhang asked.

“I’m goin’ to the power block. This thing here was unexpected, but I still gotta do what I gotta do there.”

After such a disaster, this voyage would definitely be *Eltram*’s first and final one.

That made it likely that the Caldinan congress would seize—or even buy

—the energy core, and that was something that Rascal wanted to avoid at all costs.

"Hurry up, Machina."

"Aye-aye, sir!" And so, they went to the power block, where they clashed with two Magingears.

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Armored Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

"Master! That's probably a really strong pilot!" The crimson-white mechdragon unit projected a cheerful-sounding woman's voice.

"Imperial Glory...and Curtis Eldona...huh? That name was...on the list."

The female voice was followed by the voice of a man who sounded like he was injured. It looked like there were two people inside it. It might've been a unit piloted by a Master-Embryo pair, just like ours.

"A unit that mimics a Prism Dragon...what *are* you?" Curtis's voice as he asked the intruder to identify themselves was stiffer than when he talked to me. Maybe that was just his pilot's instinct.

"It ain't worth explainin'. I don't have business with you," said the man's voice.

"Huh? He's a Superior Job. You aren't going to try inviting him?" the woman replied.

"We don't need people who are *just* strong. We have Ideas for that kind of thing."

That conversation made no sense to me and probably didn't to Curtis either, but I could tell that they were being fairly disdainful of him.

That only made Imperial Glory's intimidating aura intensify.

"Oh, Master! I just checked and noticed something!" the cheerful woman said as though she couldn't care less how menacing Glory was. "That golden thing has a landdragon-type core too!"

"Ah, shit. This ship just can't stop wastin' our time," the man said, displeased, as the mechdragon began to move.

"Intrusion, insults, and such hostility...I see no reason *not* to presume you are my enemy." And with that, Imperial Glory also began to move.

The golden dragon-headed unit's and the mechdragon's cores roared as they faced each other...and clashed.

The tiny point of Imperial Glory's lance stabbed forward into the mechdragon. As though seeing it coming, the mechdragon used its front left leg to push it aside. Imperial Glory then used that rightward momentum to swing its tail balancer to the side, releasing the still-active Paint Napalm onto the mechdragon.

As the liquid fuel flew toward it, the mechdragon lowered itself and activated its vernier thrusters to avoid the barrage, igniting the fuel as it sprayed behind Imperial Glory instead.

The golden mech, though, had already turned to face its opponent, and was now aiming its left arm at the mechdragon.

"Missile Darts."

"Rush Missiles."

The Imperial Glory unit fired countless missiles from its left arm, and they were answered by a multitude of missiles launched from the mechdragon's back.

The two barrages clashed in the air, creating explosions that engulfed them both and drowning the area in an explosion of wind and destruction.

The fires were still spreading when they moved toward each other again. With thunderous sounds, they exchanged a new round of blows.

"Oh...!"

"N-Not bad!"

Over the sound of the clash, I could hear the rather gleeful voices of the pilots.

The two were equals—or at least, that was how it seemed to me. They seemed so evenly matched that I felt they might have exchanged countless attacks already that were just too fast for my eyes to follow.

Regardless, it was clear that I stood no chance against either in a proper battle.

"Hugo...can we win?" I was silent. The odds weren't high, but they weren't zero either.

If we could stick to *the plan* that Niala and I had laid out and use my advantages to their fullest potential...then yes. We *could* win this.

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Eltram, Power Block

“We’re at a slight disadvantage, huh?” While Machina used incredible piloting techniques to hold off the enemy, Rascal gave his evaluation.

When it came to their power cores, Imperial Glory lost out to Sardonyx even though it had been constructed without any regard to balance—Sardonyx, after all, was the work of Machina, the embodiment of the pre-ancient civilization. If anything here was unusual, it was truly Curtis’s skill—not many could pilot such an unbalanced and unwieldy unit so well.

“Normally, he wouldn’t have had a chance against us simply because of these power cores...but he’s got one too.” The biggest advantage the dragon-shaped Sardonyx had over other Magingears was its pre-ancient civilization cores. The energy cores of normal magic-based machines propelled them by transforming the MP of the rider into kinetic energy based on earth magic or electricity based on sky magic. They were more like converters than true energy cores, and that was why the output and uptime of those machines was strictly limited by the rider’s MP. Hugo’s White Rose was a prime example of this, being a true energy hog, but even normal Marshall IIs couldn’t last all that long in combat. Even the tanklike Geists only managed to extend their uptime by minimizing MP loss by employing crews where each individual focused exclusively on one area, such as movement or weapons. As far as modern cores went, the most efficient one was Blue Opera’s, but in exchange it produced an extremely loud noise while running—and it was an accidental creation that could not be reproduced.

However, even that one couldn’t compare to Flagman’s energy cores. Instead of converting people’s MP, they provided their own magic and converted it into usable forms. Only the first Flagman knew where the magic was being drawn from—not even the Flagmans that had followed him and supposedly inherited his knowledge had actually had the relevant theory passed down to them.

Despite knowing how to build them, not even Machina—or more properly, Agate Designer—knew why they came out the way they did. In fact, there was a safety feature that specifically prevented her from knowing.

Because of all that, it wasn’t just the large skydragon-type cores used in original Prism Dragons that were obscenely rare—even smaller landdragon-type cores were uncommon too, and Magingears equipped with them had an immense advantage over those that didn’t.

However, it just so happened that both units present were equipped with landdragon-type cores. One had a core created two thousand years ago, while the other’s were newly created by Machina, but the difference between their performance wasn’t significant.

“We’ll be at a disadvantage if he notices...” Rascal said. Though Sardonyx had more cores, they were more or less equal. In fact, Sardonyx was gradually being overwhelmed.

That was mostly due to the presence of a Superior Job.

Machina was incredibly skilled—in fact, she’d worked on the base piloting data for all of Flagman’s rideable pre-ancient civilization weapons.

However, she wasn’t human, which made it impossible for her to claim any jobs. Her piloting had absolutely no support from job skills or anything like that. She was riding with The Weapon, of course, but that was a job focused solely on making sure the unit’s offensive capabilities were up and running. It had little effect on anything else.

Meanwhile, Over Pilot, Curtis had skill level EX Piloting, as well as skills that boosted his unit’s stats.

If this battle dragged on too long, Sardonyx would win because it could be healed. However, if it was over quickly, Imperial Glory had a strong chance of defeating them.

Curtis had yet to grasp the full extent of Sardonyx’s abilities and thus didn’t try to finish things right away—but if the battle continued, he would surely begin to understand and go for the kill.

Rascal knew how bad it would be for them if Curtis used his ult first.

“Machina, we’re usin’ *Heilige Trinität*.”

That was why he decided to play his most dangerous card.

“Are you sure?” Machina said in surprise, still battling Curtis as she spoke.

“Do it. Both that tasteless hunk of golden scrap and the core here gotta be destroyed, anyway.”

Perhaps Deus Ex Machina—his Superior Embryo—might have been able to retrieve both with a touch, but that was impossible while Imperial Glory was active, and approaching the ship’s core wasn’t an option with Curtis here either.

No matter what he did next, Rascal had to destroy Imperial Glory first.

"Roger! And the limit is...?"

"*Just stop before I die.*"

"Aye-aye, sir!" And so, Machina gathered her resolve...

"Setting up melee mode! Heilige Trinität...activate!"

...and she entered something into Sardonyx's console.

"To think that someone could match me at mobile weapon combat," Curtis said. "Not even Dryfe had anyone of this caliber." He didn't show it, but the fact that Sardonyx could keep up with him had left Curtis astonished. He'd been piloting Magingears for nearly twenty years.

He'd sat at the helm of Geists that had been modified to be used by one person, Outrail—the half-humanoid, half-vehicle Magingear left in Eldona March—and the Marshall II HC that he'd given to Lieutenant Colonel Berlin.

And now, this Imperial Glory.

Curtis had controlled many units in his life, but he'd never met a pilot who was truly his equal. He couldn't have imagined that he would run into one now, of all times.

It wasn't just the technique that moved him—the unit itself was perfectly constructed. He'd found a tiny fault even in White Rose's heavy armor, but he couldn't spot anything like that in Sardonyx.

"If this were an ordinary battle, my heart would dance..." However, Curtis had to destroy this enemy as quickly as possible and claim *Eltram*'s core. He was weighing his joy as a warrior against the weight of his goal.

And when his goal was placed onto the scales, it was obvious to which side it would tilt.

He wouldn't relish this battle as a warrior, but instead defeat his enemy as a soldier.

"And since it seems you have a core of your own...I will claim that as well." Based on the output and the fact that it showed no sign of weakening, Curtis had realized that the enemy unit must have a pre-ancient civilization core too. This wasn't a foe he'd expected to face, but if he could gain something from the confrontation, he would welcome it.

After that thought crossed his mind, he began to figure out a strategy that would defeat the mechdragon...

"...Hm?"

But then, a change in the enemy made his eyes go wide with shock.

The front legs...the claws that until now had only been used for anchoring the unit had grown in length, becoming obvious offensive weapons. The overall form had changed as well, with its limbs now elongated and its thruster placement adjusted to match.

However, the most obvious change was the color.

The unit was crimson-white before, but now, the white parts had heated up until they glowed, making it a mix of crimson and bright red.

"What are y—?" Before he could finish what he was saying, Curtis quickly tilted the unit to the side, acting on subconscious reflex.

A moment later, something red flew right by him, too fast to see—and there was now a *claw mark* on the golden unit's shoulder armor, marking that the dragon had passed and touched him.

Curtis's eyes widened. His enemy was now so fast he struggled to describe it, and the claw strikes didn't end at just one attack, instead slashing at him many times over.

The unit bathed in bright crimson was attacking him at speeds that greatly exceeded anything he had seen so far. During this assault, Curtis had swung the tail balancer for both defense and retaliation, but that had left it damaged and rendered Paint Napalm unusable.

"Th-This is...!" The unit's current level of mobility was so high it almost seemed as though it had been merely toying with Curtis before. *A job ultimate?! An MVP reward?! Whatever it is, they pulled out a true trump card...!* Despite this extreme change in the nature of his foe, Curtis cracked a smile as he reconsidered his earlier choice to finish this quickly. His conjecture was mostly correct. This power was undoubtedly one of the aces up Rascal and Machina's sleeve, but it was accomplished by neither a job ult nor an MVP reward.

Heilige Trinität—the Holy Trinity. Just like their mother ship, Tetragrammaton, it used a concept from Earth's most widespread religion as its name—and it was not a skill, but a *combination*. Emphasizing the concept of a "trinity," this was a combo that employed Sardonyx's power, Machina's piloting, and Rascal's job skills *all to their fullest, all at the same time*.

Both the cores ran at an output that could cause them to exceed their limitations and explode. The mechdragon's control column was now being jerked to and fro so intensely that it had begun to shatter.

And all the damage this combination did was being fixed by The Weapon's repair and error deletion skills, forcefully keeping the entire thing together.

Basically, they were *stabilizing the unit within its danger zone*.

As long as there was a balance between the self-inflicted damage from exceeding their own limits and the skill's ability to repair, this functioned as an extreme improvement to its performance.

"Ngh...ghhh...!" However, the many quick movements and collisions at supersonic speeds would ultimately be fatal to Rascal and his frail body. Already he was spitting blood, and more of his skeleton started to fracture with every passing moment.

This combination couldn't be used without Rascal and his job, The Weapon, but Rascal himself was its greatest weak point. Who would die first—their enemy or Rascal himself?

Heilige Trinität was a double-edged sword.

"Master...!"

"Don't mind me," Rascal said, swallowing a healing pill along with a mouthful of his own blood. "If you don't want me to die, just beat goldie already."

"...Aye-aye, sir!" Machina said with a nod as she continued the relentless, limitless barrage.

"Heh...heh heh...heh HA HA HA HA HA...!" Curtis could feel the armor on his limbs peeling away, but despite that, he found himself laughing.

His heart was dancing. This was an encounter with a powerful foe that was the same as he was. This wasn't someone who wielded a spear in their own bare hands, the commander of a puppet army, the master of a powerful beast, or an entirely robotic killing machine.

This was his first time meeting someone who piloted a mobile weapon like he did—someone could match him at it.

Reinhard's defeat. Claudiah's salvation. Suddenly, Curtis found himself with a goal that matched those two obsessions.

His fighter's nature had caused him to instantly fall in love with Claudiah and her unfathomable talents—and now, he was drawing close to savoring this battle with the primal purity of a warrior's soul.

"Hah...hngh...!" But when he noticed himself laughing and enjoying this, he quickly restrained himself.

He wasn't here to have fun. He had a goal he had to fulfill as both a soldier and a man who loved a woman.

That was the reason he'd killed so many people on this ship, including his own subordinates.

He couldn't allow himself to fight for enjoyment alone.

The only words in his mind now were "Victory to the true Dryfe."

"Man-Machine Interface...activate!" Gathering his resolve, he used a power that was restricted to one use per day—the ultimate job skill of the Over Pilot.

A moment later, Sardonyx's claws approached Imperial Glory's torso. However, Curtis used his spear to deflect them and sent a knee into Sardonyx's chest armor.

This time, Machina was the one whose eyes widened.

Imperial Glory's movements were nothing like before. And it wasn't just in terms of pure speed. The golden unit's steps and attacks seemed even more well-timed and elegant than they had a moment ago.

This was the power of the Over Pilot's ultimate job skill—Man-Machine Interface.

It was an active—rather than passive—enhancement skill that tripled the STR and AGI of the user's unit.

However, that wasn't the skill's most valuable effect by a long shot.

Man-Machine Interface was Piloting perfected—the ultimate form of the skill that allowed the user to control a war machine however they wished.

Now, the unit moved exactly as he willed it. He didn't even have to touch the control column anymore.

At this moment, Curtis himself *was* Imperial Glory. He moved it as if the unit was his own flesh and blood. It followed his commands instantly, without any input lag.

"I can see! I can see them! I see your movements!" His mouth wasn't moving—Curtis's voice came directly from Imperial Glory's outer speakers.

The metallic unit easily broke the speed of sound, yet its movements flowed more beautifully than any human being's could.

"Adjusting enemy unit threat level. Forming patterns. Testing various counter plans."

Machina responded to this by focusing all her processing power on combat and ran through all kinds of tactics meant to destroy the man united with the machine.

Once again, they were more than a match for each other, but both of them had time limits.

Though both units had cores that could keep them running semipermanently, there were certain things that couldn't last. The damage sustained by Imperial Glory brought it ever closer to the limits of its endurance, while the vivid red mechdragon was at the risk of losing Rascal. Both of them wanted to end this as quickly as possible.

But if not even the trump cards they kept up their sleeves could create a gap between their capabilities, the two combatants had but one choice—an all-or-nothing gambit.

"Charge completed. Changing sniper cannon barrel to energy mode. Target...within range."

The bright red mechdragon aimed the sniper cannon that doubled as its head straight toward the enemy...

"I will end it with this!"

...as the golden unit opened its dragonlike maw wide...

...these two dragons faced one another...

"Blast Flare!"

"Draconic Burn!"

...and *both their heads* released superheated energy beams.

As an intense light flooded the power zone, the immense heat exploded between them.

Both of them widened their eyes in surprise. They had both fired a weapon that converted all the magic provided by the landdragon-type core into heat and launched it from a close-range. The word "armament" hardly seemed appropriate for something so powerful, so they were each shocked to find that their opponent also wielded such a power.

Machina had installed it on Sardonyx as a secret weapon against those who assumed that the mechdragon's head was only good for sniping shots, while the golden Glory had it simply because its creators were enthusiasts who felt that a super robot just wasn't complete until it could fire a huge beam.

And as strange as it was, they were more or less equal in this area as well.

Sardonyx was clearly the superior unit in terms of conversion efficiency and output simply because it was equipped with two cores. However, Imperial Glory's output was enhanced by the Over Pilot's skills.

As a result, their equally matched weapons clashed, and instead of instantly killing the other like they'd each hoped, the balance was yet again maintained.

However, they couldn't *stop* firing these beams. If either of them did, they would surely be hit by the enemy's shot.

And as a result, they were both gambling on the enemy unit running out of energy before they did.

As this deadly balance was maintained...

"...Cyco."

...the silent Rose saw its one chance at victory.

The pale unit stood up, covered itself in ice, and activated La Porte de l'Enfer once more.

The other two widened their eyes yet again. The third unit—White Rose—had more or less vanished from their thoughts by now. That was why they were in no position to counter it in a timely manner.

Neither Sardonyx nor Imperial Glory could make a single careless move while facing each other. White Rose, on the other hand, didn't have much besides La Porte de l'Enfer and its toughness. It was undoubtedly far less powerful than the other two units here, and it was unlikely that it had anything that could take both of the other units out. Even if it did possess such a power, White Rose didn't even reach speeds at the subsonic level, meaning that it could never hope to land a hit on these two mechs that had surpassed all limits.

That was why at this point, both Curtis and Machina saw White Rose as nothing but set dressing.

However, that soon changed...

"*Niala!*"

...when Hugo called out, causing a *fourth* unit to fly in through the hole in the ceiling.

All eyes widened yet again.

The two clashing units both spied a bomber plane that looked like a condor. The Genocide Condor was part of Niala's legion—Winged Omnipotence, Simurgh—and it was the one with the highest firepower.

Niala herself was also at the edge of the hole in the ceiling. After Imperial Glory had destroyed the entrance, she'd gone through the ship's hallways to arrive at that very gap.

And now, she'd fired her Condor, just like she and Hugo had planned.

"CAAAAWWW!" With a roaring engine that sounded like the shriek of a bird, Genocide Condor descended straight into the center of the power zone at an incredible speed...*and exploded*.

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Before Entering the Power Block, Eltram, Hallway

Just before Hugo, Cyco, and Niala entered the power zone and assaulted the DLG, they explained their combat capabilities to each other.

"My Embryo is a varied Legion," said Niala. "Though only two of them are specialized in combat, and I already used one of them—the jet fighter, Fighting Falcon. That just leaves the bomber, Genocide Condor."

"How destructive is it? Compared to, say, King of Destruction's battleship."

"Well, you could have picked a more reasonable point of comparison..." Hugo had looked into his memory and brought up the weapon Embryo with the greatest firepower that he'd seen yet, but it made Niala put on a strained smile. "It's a sixth-form Embryo that's also split among multiple functions, so it can't really match a Superior Embryo. It probably wouldn't do much damage to White Rose's armor. That's a Mythical alloy, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Taking defensive passive skills into account, the damage would be very light. That isn't a bad thing, seeing as there's the potential for friendly fire...but even if the target is made of lower-ranked material than yours—Ancient Legendary metal, for example—it still wouldn't do too much damage if they assumed a defensive stance." Niala had experimented with her Embryo in an arena, and she had a decent idea of how powerful it was. "It is powerful enough to destroy a regular Marshall II completely, though."

"I see."

"And that's it for what I can use in battle."

"Thank you. That makes it easier for me to come up with a plan."

"So, what do you intend to do if your skill doesn't work on these enemies just like it didn't on the one in the mall?"

"I've mostly figured out how all of that works." They'd already talked about what they would do if La Porte de l'Enfer didn't work on the enemies. Hugo had already guessed that it was because of the units' airtight seal, so he continued his explanation. "This is just a guess, but I think it didn't work on the DLG Magingears because they were fully airtight. That's why I believe I shall ask *you* to do something about that."

“Me?”

“You can take care of that by sniping Marshall IIs. And if we encounter someone with stronger armor, please use the Genocide Condor you mentioned.” Niala did not immediately respond. “Holes made by sniping, damage done by bombs—if we break that seal, La Porte de l’Enfer should work...assuming I’m right about the reason it failed earlier, anyway.”

Niala’s face had twisted into a bitter expression when she heard Hugo’s plan. “I can do the first easily...but there’s a problem with the second. The Condor has a high cost, so I can’t use it carelessly. Our financial situation will be better now that we took some equipment from the terrorists, but I’m hesitant anyway.”

They still didn’t know if Eldridge would be able to actually turn their spoils into money—and even if he could, the money they’d earned here was meant to be used for the clan’s revival. Personal payout would be something they’d talk about later.

“How much *does* it cost?”

“About ten million. It’s already charged and I can use it, but...”

While significantly less than the costs some Superiors incurred, it certainly wasn’t cheap. They were already budgeting their meals, so Niala wanted to avoid using her Embryo.

“Please use it during our upcoming battle in the power zone. I’ll pay for it.”

“...What?”

In response to Niala, Hugo took ten million lir from his Inventory. This was part of the reward he’d split with Ray for defeating the Gouz-Maise Gang. He’d been using it to buy parts for repairs and the like, but even now could spare ten million lir.

“Are you sure?”

“I believe it will be necessary.” Hugo seemed to have no doubts.

“...Very well. I’ll take it, but I promise I’ll give it back if I don’t use it.”

“All right.”

“I’ll leave the timing to you, but how exactly are you planning to deploy Genocide Condor? Will you bombard enemies that have too much armor to snipe?”

“That is the plan. But...”

“But...?”

"I don't think it will be enough."

Holes opened by sniping. Damage made by explosions. Somehow, Hugo felt that even those measures might not be enough to overcome some foes.

"That's why I'll prepare a third assault."

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Eltram, Power Block

With its crash, all the bombs within Genocide Condor were set off.

The power block was fairly cramped for Magingears, and the resulting destruction was enough to start a firestorm and drown everything in a chain of explosions.

However, the golden unit and the mechdragon were both made from Ancient Legendary metal. They could avoid fatal damage if they simply braced for it.

The blasts caused them to cut their energy beams at the exact same time and assume a defensive stance.

And White Rose was rushing toward them.

Plated in a Mythical armor stronger than the other two and controlled by a pilot with a job that boosted its defense further, White Rose could charge through the explosions without the need to actively defend itself.

And the other two didn't—*couldn't*—see its approach. The explosions engulfing the power zone had made optical and sound sensors unusable. Even Drac-Sight's energy sensor was overwhelmed by noise.

The two units *couldn't see anything*. They might've been the Over Pilot and Agate Designer—the two strongest pilots in the world—but even they couldn't react to this. Perhaps AR-I-CA could've sensed something with her ability to foresee danger, but these two had no such ability.

However, the same went for White Rose. The unit's sensor was overwhelmed, showing only pure white static as though it were plowing through a blizzard.

Despite that, White Rose knew where the two units were.

After all...

"Forward. Six steps."

...Cyco's unique sense could clearly see Curtis and Rascal's immense kill count of their kin.

Even in this blinding, burning hell, this intuition that sprung from the core of her being allowed her to know the exact location of those she had to defeat—those murderers.

"Right. Seven steps." Within this blinding, deafening blizzard of fire, the white unit charged without hesitation, led on by the words of a girl who was the pilot's mount, friend, and true other half.

"Both sides. Now." Thus, White Rose used a skill—its own ace up its sleeve.

This was its second skill, Purgatorial Slash. It used the heat gathered by La Porte de l'Enfer and released it as a heat energy blade—the Embryo's only purely offensive skill.

It had been gathering heat since its last use in Gideon, and all of that would be released right here and now.

"Purgatorial Slash!" Blades of fire extended from White Rose's both hands, piercing the cockpits of the other two units.

If sniping wasn't enough to break the airtightness, they used bombs. And if that wasn't enough...they'd use a Purgatorial Slash. This was the three-layered plan Hugo had thought up.

The difference in defense, the fact that Niala was with him, and Cyco—

Hugo had used all the advantages he had...and as a result, his blade reached his targets.

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In silence, Curtis looked at his blacked out external monitor, showing a reflection of his own body.

The black screen that now served as a makeshift mirror displayed him as a frozen statue...with a hole where his stomach ought to be.

The heat energy blades that had pierced the chest armor of his unit had burned it out. The Freeze that followed instantly stopped the bleeding, but once that was undone, he would inevitably die.

Curtis quickly grasped the uncomfortable truth—this was the direct result of his carelessness.

However, Imperial Glory was still moving. Man-Machine Interface made him one with his unit, letting him move it even if his body was frozen.

Curtis could continue this battle—but fighting and surviving were two different things. Even if he could move his unit, the wound he'd suffered was so grave that he could not hope to escape death.

Curtis was a soldier. He'd killed dozens...no, hundreds of people, so he knew full well what was going to happen. His life, suspended by Freeze, wasn't long for this world. If the effect expired or Hugo realized that Curtis had been fatally injured, the Freeze would stop and he would die. Curtis already knew that Hugo was capable of that.

There was nothing that could be done—Curtis's death was now assured.

This realization made several different feelings well up in his heart.

His desire for combat. His shame toward his subordinates. His yearning for Claudiah. His hatred for Reinhard. All of these emotions mixed and swirled within him, and the coming death narrowed his thinking.

The number of things Curtis had to weigh was rapidly decreasing. The exciting battle with his equal was over, and a dead man had no future with Claudiah.

That was why he made one final choice and placed it on the scales.

Perhaps this was inevitable. It was the goal he'd rallied for, and the flag beneath which his men died.

"Very well! I will die here! I accept it!" As his death was unavoidable, he accepted it. This beloved unit would be his coffin...

"*I leave the rest to you*, Glory! MACHINE SOUL, ACTIVATE!"

...and Curtis used the *final skill* of the pilot grouping.

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Machina saw that moment.

While all of Sardonyx's sensors were overwhelmed by explosions from the bomber, a white unit had approached them. The heat energy blade it launched just barely surpassed Sardonyx's laminated Ancient Legendary armor.

The energy blade entered the cockpit right next to Rascal's seat and burned off his right arm.

"Master...?!" Switching back from her combat focus, Machina let out a scream.

However, a moment after Rascal lost his right arm, his entire body

Froze.

A moment later, Sardonyx's monitors were overwhelmed by errors.

With The Weapon, Rascal incapacitated, Heilige Trinität could no longer function.

"Ughh...!" Machina instantly returned the unit to its normal mode. Right after that, she quickly chose to leave the power zone entirely.

As a Prism Person, Machina was unaffected by La Porte de l'Enfer. However, Sardonyx required Rascal's skills to function in its unoptimized state. With him incapacitated, continuing this fight wasn't an option, and Machina cared far more about her disarmed and Frozen Master than any battle or core in front of them.

She fervently set the escape route and fled *Eltram* without showing any care for anything else, leaving behind the White Rose unit that had hurt her Master, the woman who had summoned the bomber...and Imperial Glory, which was about to become something else.

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After Sardonyx retreated, Imperial Glory—which now had a large hole in its chest—retaliated against White Rose with maneuvers surpassing those it had performed while Curtis's ultimate job skill was active.

Imperial Glory was punching relentlessly. Combined with the damage Rose had already suffered, this was enough to break off the white unit's right arm and damage the leg joints.

A destructive barrage with overwhelming speed and precision—its power had increased more than it had while Man-Machine Interface was active, and it was now great enough to destroy even Mythical metal.

"Ngh...?! Wh-What...!"

"Looks like my *transformation* has made your Freezing powers useless."

Imperial Glory spoke with Curtis's voice. However, it felt functionally different than it had when he was talking through the speakers with Man-Machine Interface.

It was as though the one speaking was *the unit itself*.

"Hugo...he's already *dead*," Cyco said, as though to confirm what Hugo suspected.

"What?!"

"His *kill count is gone*."

Curtis had died within Imperial Glory's cockpit. His Frozen vital functions had ceased completely, and even the Over Pilot job he held had been released from his body. He wasn't attacking with the spear, Drac-Stinger either—because it was *gone*. Like all MVP rewards, it had vanished with its user's death.

Curtis Eldona had most definitely died here in *Eltram*'s power block.

Yet *Imperial Glory was still moving*.

"Indeed! I have abandoned life as a human! I *had* to!" Imperial Glory itself responded to Cyco's words, its voice full of conflicting emotions.

All of this was happening because of the skill Curtis used right before dying—the *final skill* of the pilot grouping, Machine Soul.

If Man-Machine Interface was what waited at the end of the road that was Piloting, this skill was what happened if you strayed from that road. The pilot gave up their life, inhabiting their unit with just one goal—one dying wish—and greatly enhancing its power.

Originally, it was a skill used by a pilot who was low on magic in order to complete one last job—a sort of final command that lasted until the unit's energy expired.

However, the core was providing Imperial Glory with semiperpetual energy that erased such limitations. And as long as the unit remained indestructible, its goal would be as well.

"Now, I-I-I can control this body far better than I did befo-o-o-re!" The Imperial Glory inhabited by Curtis's dying wish laughed as if to display its power, but its voice was starting to be overcome by static—though it was unclear if this was caused by the short-term skill being unnaturally extended or some kind of incompatibility between the skill and the core that sustained it. "I don't have to make a new weapon with the co-o-re! I-I'll incorporate it into this body, keep enhancing it, and kill everyone who stands in my wa-a-ay! I will become the machine-god protector of my homeland and defeat Reinha-a-a-ard!"

The one goal Curtis had granted to the unit while he still lived was Reinhard's downfall. Even if Curtis himself died, the unit entrusted with his will would carry that out.

"I feel so much more po-o-o-owerful than when I was alive! I will de-ee-finitely beat him like no-o-o-o-ow!”

As he was now, Curtis didn’t remember Claudiah. The unit had Curtis’s final will, but not his soul.

“KillKillKillKillKillKillKlililiillilil!”

As Imperial Glory kept moving, the consciousness within began to fade. Soon, it wasn’t clear who was speaking anymore—Curtis or the unit itself.

This was a machine given the sole directive of eliminating Reinhard. Carrying only the shattered fragments of a man’s grudge, it was a true monstrosity...

[Discovered a monster that fulfills the conditions to be set as a Unique Boss Monster.]

[Confirmed that there are no similar specimens within the records. Contacting UBM control AI.]

[UBM control AI’s agreement received.]

[Setting the target as a UBM.]

[Increasing target strength, applying post-death MVP reward transformation.]

[Target is Epic-tier. Corpse Dragon Mech, Imperial Glory will be its name.]

...a monstrosity that the world itself acknowledged as neither man nor machine.

Chapter Nine: The White Rose and the Corpse of Glory

Eltram, Power Block

The current situation was the result of multiple factors.

A landdragon-type semipermanent energy core. A unit built by the wealth of the imperium and The Triangle of Wisdom's technology—their Embryos included. The unprecedented development of a mind through the use of Over Pilot's final skill.

The combination of these had turned Imperial Glory into a monstrous creature like no other.

Being recognized as a UBM hadn't changed its appearance. After receiving the UBM designation, it still had the hole in its chest, along with all the other damage, and maintained the exact same functions as it had possessed before.

However, the Resource injection had increased its output even further.

This UBM was only a fledgling, but it was already far too strong for Hugo and Cyco.

Still...I can't just let it do as it pleases, Hugo thought. There was also something that flashed to his mind as he looked at Imperial Glory—the UBM made of the grudge and flesh of the dead—Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

He felt that the golden unit was now—a murderous machine-soldier driven by a dead man's grudge and powered by an inexhaustible source of energy—extremely similar to that horror.

There was nothing for Hugo to hesitate about here. He knew he had to stop Imperial Glory right here and now.

"Rose...!" Hugo's unit had been heavily battered by the barrage, but he somehow forced it to stand up again. Cyco also manipulated her icy armor to support the damaged White Rose. The injuries on its legs were so extensive that they were only questionably capable of supporting the unit's weight—and yet they did.

It was as though Rose itself was trying to heed Hugo's will...as though it also wanted to prevent the rampage of its "sibling"—a fellow mech built by The Triangle of Wisdom.

"D-Do you think th-th-th-that hunk of scrap can d-d-defeat me?" Glory asked.

"I dunno," said Hugo. "But I can't just ignore you. Doing that would make it hard for me to sleep at night."

The power gap between their units was vast.

Imperial Glory was stronger than it ever had been. On top of that, Hugo's La Porte de l'Enfer was useless against it, and he'd already used Purgatorial Slash.

He had no advantage over Imperial Glory this time, but Hugo simply couldn't choose to *not* fight.

Think...! There has to be something...just one thing that might let me win...! he thought, but Glory attacked him ceaselessly regardless.

Glory threw its fists at Rose, fully intent on destroying it. This was an onslaught of pure power that didn't need any MVP rewards or armaments to be devastating—the attacks weren't even delivered with the incredible skill that Curtis had displayed in life.

"GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA!"

But despite all that, he and his unit were the strongest they'd ever been—and it wasn't even close.

One swing, and the Mythical metal alloy bent. Another, and it shattered.

There was no skill or special weaponry aiding anything here. The attack was nothing but pure STR—and it now exceeded White Rose's defensive capabilities.

A single hit would be enough to turn generic Marshall IIs into piles of scrap. Rose may have been the toughest Magingear, but not even it could withstand a hundred hits of that strength.

I need to...fight back...! Hugo thought in desperation. Alas, this monster *had just been born*. With its kinslayer count at 0, not even La Porte de l'Enfer Deuxième could work against it.

He tried taking out and firing Rose's weapons, but they seemed to do nothing. They didn't even make it flinch, and it retaliated with another relentless assault.

Then, Glory grabbed and held up Rose by the head.

The sound of creaking metal filled the space as it began to bend.

“Damn...it...!”

“Mmrrgh...” Hugo and Cyco tried resisting, but swinging the ice blade in White Rose’s left hand didn’t seem to do anything. They hit Glory with it a number of times, but it broke before dealing any damage.

“I-I-I-It’s o-o-o-o-over...!”

And with that, Glory pushed its left hand—the barrels that fired its Missile Darts—against Rose’s cockpit.

A brief silence followed. And then, inexplicably, it retracted the tubes, straightened its hand into a spear-point, and raised it, ready to swing it down.

In only a moment, those metal fingers would most certainly pierce White Rose’s chest armor and kill Hugo.

But, in that moment where Hugo thought it was all over for him...

“G h e?”

...as though they had arrived just to stop this attack, several silhouettes fell over Glory.

The shadows belonged to a flock of mechanical birds. There was an owl. There was a murder of crows. There was a pigeon. There was a pelican as big as an airplane.

“That’s...!” Hugo cried. The birds were all Niala’s Embryo, Simurgh.

“D-D-Don’t get in my way!” As the giant pelican tried to swallow Glory up into its mouth, the golden unit swung the left hand, instantly splitting the bird in half.

“Hugo—now!”

“Yeah...!” Cyco took that moment to undo the frozen armor she’d placed over the unit’s head and Hugo took control of Rose, using that opening to free its head from Glory’s tight grasp.

But at the same time, Simurgh’s flock continued to dwindle. The combat-oriented Falcon and Condor were already gone. The birds that were left could do nothing but buy time.

But that was exactly Niala’s plan.

She was standing at the edge of the hole above, aiming the magic rifle in her hands. As the metal birds distracted the hostile unit, she fixed her sights on it and pulled the trigger.

What she fired was an explosive bullet—the sniper round with the highest damage potential.

It sped between her birds' many wings before striking its target and exploding on Imperial Glory's head and neck area—the "barrel" from which it fired Draconic Burn.

Though it was heat-resistant, this location didn't have the tough protection of its Ancient Legendary outer armor, and the explosion was enough to make it crack.

"G h e g h e g h e..." But even this critical hit wasn't fatal. Seemingly unfazed by this damage, Imperial Glory turned and jumped.

A moment later, it appeared right in front of Niala, over the hole she was standing next to.

Niala sighed. The sight of the mech made it obvious to her that getting the death penalty was inevitable.

That was when she began to wonder why she'd gone out of her way to help Hugo. She could've easily escaped if she tried.

However, she found her answer soon enough.

"You go support him, Niala."

She was doing the job given to her by her dear clan leader, of course. But there was another reason—when she watched Hugo and talked to him, he somehow reminded her of a student she taught.

Because of that, helping him came naturally to her.

He's not even the same gender, Niala thought with a wry grin on her face. But as absurd as it seemed, she didn't regret her actions whatsoever.

A moment later, Imperial Glory swung its arm down, instantly crushing her.

"Niala!" Hugo screamed.

As she vanished into bits of light, so too did the remaining Simurgh mechbirds. With the nuisance gone, Glory once again landed in the energy area.

"I-I-It's o-o-o-ver-ver...!" Repeating itself, the golden dragon-headed unit once again approached White Rose.

Hugo's defeat, briefly delayed by Niala, was swiftly approaching yet again. The gap between them was evident. There was no area in which Hugo outmatched it.

"Still...!" He knew he couldn't give up here. The chaos this creature would cause if left unchecked was unimaginable.

More importantly...

"Ray...*he* didn't run!" Hugo's newbie friend had not only stood his ground against a powerful UBM, but also turned aside the tragedy it threatened to unleash.

That's why...I won't run either...! Hugo—Yuri—had already decided not to hesitate on this point.

Thus, he thought about how he could seize victory against this monstrous machine.

"G h e, GHA-GHA-GHA-GHA...!" Even so, the massive dragon-headed unit approached him, bringing certain death with it.

From its maw, Hugo saw sparks flying—the result of the damage from the explosive bullet.

"Hm...?" Hugo was on the verge of realizing something, but Glory then struck Rose, the blow deforming the chest armor.

A rain of attacks followed, shattering White Rose's armor further in a frenzy of utter destruction.

Why...? Hugo wondered. *Why is it only using its arms?* Weathering the onslaught, Hugo realized that ever since the transformation, Glory had been fighting using only its fists. Part of it was because its MVP rewards had vanished, of course—but it wasn't using the items it had installed either. Even when it had tried to use Missile Darts, it had stopped for some reason.

"G h A a a A h H!" With a roar, Glory thrust its left hand into Rose's right shoulder.

"I-It's...!" The arms of the dragon-headed unit possessed overwhelming attack power that could pulverize even Mythical metal.

However, even they were now cracked either from Genocide Condor's bombings or the battle against Sardonyx in Heilige Trinität mode.

The damage was immense, and it had affected the Missile Darts mechanism. Glory had realized that before firing and chose not to use it.

This meant two things...

As it is, Imperial Glory can't use its installed weapons...and it didn't know that until it saw for itself!

Hugo didn't know many details about the creature now that it had become a UBM, but given what he'd just seen, he could now assume that it couldn’t gauge the extent of its damage through pain like living creatures did.

Even as a UBM, it’s still a machine, so it doesn’t feel pain, Hugo thought. *What else is there...?*

Hugo felt as if he was overlooking something important, but while he tried to remember what it was, Imperial Glory swung its shattered tail to attack Rose’s torso.

The unit’s chest armor suffered more damage, finally falling away. Even the internal armor holding up the outside monitors detached, and Hugo now saw Imperial Glory with his own two eyes.

“Ah...?!”

“H e h, H a h A h a h A h a H A h a h A h a H a!”

Glory laughed as it threw a sideways fist toward the cockpit. Hugo’s eyes widened before he quickly pulled up Rose’s left arm, where Cyco then focused her ice armor.

The sound of the impact reached Hugo’s ears at the exact same time as the sensation of floating washed over him.

After a flight that lasted less than a second, Rose crashed back-first into the wall of the energy zone.

“Guhh...!” Air rushed from Hugo’s lungs. He didn’t fall out of his seat thanks to the harness strapping him in, but the powerful attack still hurt him. It also damaged the internal systems, and the cockpit was now full of sparks.

Even so, Hugo made Rose stand up and face Glory. Even with hazy vision and fading consciousness, he looked straight at the enemy.

Just like Rose, Glory had a large hole in its chest area. Beyond it, Hugo could see its pilot—Curtis’s corpse. He was already dead, and even the will he’d entrusted to his unit had begun to bend and shatter.

The dragon-headed unit was no longer his dear combat companion, but a monstrous creature—Curtis had become his own casket. The remains within had been heavily damaged by all the combat that had happened thus far.

At the sight of the corpse, Hugo was lost in thought for a moment.

Curtis was someone that he had to defeat at all costs. That man was behind the terrorist attack on this ship that had resulted in many deaths already, and his DLG had almost certainly caused a great deal of destruction since it was formed.

Hugo didn’t regret fighting him and fatally wounding him at all. However, Curtis knew about The Triangle of Wisdom and used a unit that they’d made. To Hugo, he was nothing but an enemy—but to the Triangle’s members, he must’ve been something else.

Thinking about that and seeing Curtis dead in the exposed cockpit, knowing that he had dealt the final blow, filled Hugo with a sense of bitterness. And though he felt rage toward Curtis for murdering his own soldiers, Hugo definitely understood his complaints about the antics of The Triangle of Wisdom.

Perhaps this was the only way things could have played out between them, but Hugo couldn’t help but find it disheartening.

That may have been what made Hugo think back to their conversation from when Curtis was alive...

“Ah...!”

...and sudden realization, caused by the memory of that conversation and what Curtis had said, snapped Hugo back into the present like an electric shock.

“Wait...! Is it actually...?” Hugo strained his eyes to look at the console near Curtis’s body.

As someone with a pilot grouping job, Hugo possessed enhanced eyesight—and because of that, he could see the words “Installed Armaments. Currently Used: None.”

Barely a moment later, Hugo took a deep breath and let out a scream.

“*PAINT NAPALM!*”

He shouted *the name of his enemy’s weapon*, and his voice traveled through the hole in the armor and reached the console near Curtis.

“Ghe...?” The dragon-headed unit was confused by the strange words at first and stopped for a moment...but then, its shattered tail made an activation sound.

The console within it now read “Installed Armaments. Preparing to Use: Paint Napalm.”

Indeed, it had actually reacted to Hugo’s words and began powering up the weapon. Obeying the voice activation, the tail of the dragon-headed unit tried to release its liquid explosives.

That had come up in the conversation Hugo had remembered—the words Curtis had said while still alive.

"It doesn't even care who says it, so it cannot even act as protection in case of theft."

The weapons were activated by voice—and *it didn't matter whose*. This was the intentional "bug" left in the mech by the hobbyist engineers of The Triangle of Wisdom.

Hugo wasn't sure it would work, as it was likely that becoming a UBM might have resulted in the loss of this function.

And yet, the "feature" was still active. Perhaps that was only to be expected, though, as it had been there since before Imperial Glory attained a will of its own—since its very creation.

UBMs that were "set" as UBMs typically did not change their essential natures.

And thus, Hugo's voice could reach Glory's cockpit and control its weapons.

"Wh-W h a t...?! S...Sto-o-op!"

But it could not be stopped. The Triangle of Wisdom engineers who'd installed the armaments hadn't even *thought* about how they'd be stopped.

Perhaps Curtis himself might have been able to counter this somehow, but Glory wasn't Curtis—only his shattered fragments. He was already dead—just a corpse inside his golden UBM coffin.

The knowledge needed to deal with this situation had already been destroyed, and the empty box that flailed its fists like a feral animal wasn't able to replicate it.

Thus, Paint Napalm activated.

The tail balancer had been broken in the battle against Sardonyx, and the liquid fuel couldn't even reach its tip because of that. Instead, it began spraying out through the cracks in the shattered balancer, flying in every direction.

The napalm quickly covered Glory itself and was set ablaze by the fires left by Condor's bombing.

"Gh, a h...A a aA a aAa A aaA AA A AAA!" The fuel seeped in through the broken cockpit and ignited the remains within. The golden unit itself was starting to melt away.

"Paint Napalm!" Hugo spoke the weapon name, activating it once again. Even more liquid fuel began spraying out as the fires followed it back to the tank and began burning the internal systems.

"G h oOo oa OOo OoA aAa A aA a Hhh HH h...!" Imperial Glory let out a sound that resembled both a dying scream and the howl of an engine. But despite looking like the victim of some hellish torment, the golden unit still charged toward Rose.

The flames didn't stop it. It still sought to fulfill its swiftly crumbling goal, and would do whatever it took to destroy its enemy—this obstacle between Glory and its objective.

Imperial Glory raised its fist, ready to deliver the most powerful blow yet. However, the white unit braced for a strike...and withstood it.

It was as though White Rose itself was declaring it would not fall beneath Imperial Glory's fist.

"Draconic Burn!" Hugo spoke and activated another weapon. A moment later, the golden unit transformed the energy in its core into heat.

However, the repeated battles and the roaring flames had left its internal systems heavily damaged, and perhaps most importantly, Niala's explosive bullet had left a crack in the head cannon's "barrel."

The heat began to worsen the damage, spreading in every direction.

"G o o O oOoA AaA aaa A Aa aaA AA!" However, the Epic-tier Corpse Dragon Mech was able to prevent an explosion.

Despite being on the verge of death, it somehow retained control over its own body. The amount of heat should have been enough to obliterate the unit, yet it was somehow able to keep it at a manageable level and even subdue it.

Hugo gasped. Imperial Glory's weapons were not equipped with a means to stop them once activated, but Draconic Burn was the sole exception. As it had done when it had clashed with Sardonyx's Blast Flare, this weapon *could be stopped at any specific time*.

Intense heat spread wildly throughout Glory's frame, but it managed to restrain its spread.

The Corpse Dragon Mech was now like a dam ready to burst.

Hugo silently watched it for a moment. This was the watershed moment.

If he didn't finish it off right now, the golden unit would overcome this flaw, most likely by destroying the voice-activation system.

Or perhaps the flames and the energy leaks had destroyed it already.

Either way, this was his final chance.

"Cyco! White Rose! Let's go!"

"Oui, ma'am!" Cyco replied with an unusual level of energy, while Rose responded with a roar from its engine.

And so, despite their exposed cockpit, they rushed toward the golden unit, now surrounded by overflowing heat.

Frozen armor covered the cockpit just as it had during the final battle in Gideon, but the immense heat quickly melted it all away.

And when the heat began to rush into the cockpit, Hugo's skin began to burn.

"Hugo...!"

"Not yet!"

Hugo had a friend who pushed on forward despite the flames raging all around him. That was why Hugo also couldn't—wouldn't—stop. He chose to keep moving ahead.

And this time, he wouldn't hesitate or doubt anything.

As Hugo moved, the damage on his unit exceeded the tolerable limit. The legs, heavily damaged by the Corpse Dragon Mech, finally lost their function.

"BOUCLIERS PLANETEEEES!" Before his unit fell to its knees, Hugo activated his skill.

The next moment, a floating shield that had fallen off returned to Rose. The pale mech then grabbed it with its left hand—the last limb that was still functioning.

"This...is the end!" Before its legs shattered completely, Rose poured the last of its power into them...and jumped. "*Fly*...White Rose!"

The force of the unit's final jump combined with the propulsion of the floating shield to grant it the power of flight, like a petal on the wind. It flew straight, carrying all its weight and power straight toward the golden corpse.

"Ghe, gha, gha..."

The attack was weak—it couldn't even compare to the golden unit's ordinary punches. However, this attack that they had gambled everything on was enough to finally unleash the heat it had stored up.

"GhaAaAaaaAaaAAaAaaAAA!" With this final push, the Corpse Dragon Mech's maw and every other part of its body released immense amounts of energy. Impossible to hold back, it consumed the entire unit...

And, as though it were in the center of a fiery rose blossom, the UBM that also served as a coffin was dragged into a burning embrace.

This was the end. The heavily damaged unit didn’t have the strength to withstand its own firepower, and the remains it carried were claimed by the inferno.

And with this act of cremation, the incident on *Eltram* reached its conclusion.

Interlude: The Third and the Crystal

Eltram

The long night was finally over, and the light of dawn fell upon the desert.

The ship was already devoid of people. Shortly after the incident, while it was still dark, rescue had arrived in the form of sand-ships and Pure-Dragon aviation services that took the passengers to the nearest city. They were on their way there now.

With its escort vessels gone and its own cannons rendered unusable after their energy source was deactivated, *Eltram* was now nothing but a tomb on the sands. If it happened to be targeted by something like a swarm of worms, there would be no hope for anyone left behind.

Thus, while the cargo was salvaged, the ship's hull itself was abandoned where its progress had halted.

That was when a certain Master logged in on board it.

"Well, this place sure got a lot less lively." The speaker was a man wearing makeup and a shirt that exposed his chest—the same Master who'd given gala tickets to Niala and Fey, and who had had an exchange with Crys. "Either they were all destroyed, or I've been left behind by the rescue operations."

As he walked through the inside of the ship, he saw a large informational poster on the wall. It was directed at Masters who were logged out while the rescue was taking place, and it said that the people of this ship had been evacuated. If anyone wanted ticket refunds, they had to visit the offices in any city.

"Ha ha ha! And how do they expect me to...ohh, wait! It's obvious!"

Masters were able to log out and log back in at a city's save point. That didn't apply to those on wanted lists, of course, but they didn't deserve consideration. And that was basically it.

"What a predicament for little old me. I can't go back to any city...oh, woe is me. This means I'll have to walk through the desert." Thanks to

AGI, crossing deserts in *Dendro* was faster than it was on Earth, but it would still take a while. “I’ll lose quite a bit of time. It doesn’t look like I’ll make it to those peace talks mentioned in the letter. But I guess it was never certain I would be there anyway!”

He reached into his Inventory and took out a piece of paper.

It was a letter addressed to him from Reinhard—the imperator of Dryfe. It offered him a place in Dryfe’s military and, if possible, asked him to arrive in time for the peace talks that were set to happen soon.

“I would like him to remove me from the wanted list, but I suppose a down payment is a bit too much to ask!” This man had been involved in a rebellion against Dryfe, and that had landed him on every wanted list.

That was why he couldn’t use any save points at all.

However, Reinhard knew how useful he was in battle, and that was exactly the reason he’d extended the invitation.

The man felt that it was a very bold move by the imperator, but nevertheless was thankful for it.

“Very well—I will simply walk there. Traveling on foot is nice every now and then.”

He turned away from the poster and began walking into the desert when...

“Oh no, you’re not *traveling* anywhere.”

...his legs were blown off.

“Oh?” Having lost everything below the knee, the man collapsed on the floor.

Then, another man came into view, looking down at him—an obese man holding high value coins in both hands.

It was none other than King of Revelry, Moneygold.

After Zhang had buried him under the ship’s debris, Isara had rushed to free him. Then, for his own reasons, Moneygold had decided to stay on the ship.

“Well, well, well. Were you also left behind just like me, Moneygold?” Despite losing his legs, the man showed no worry or distress as he spoke.

“As if. I was just waiting for you,” Moneygold replied.

“Waiting for little old me?”

“Eldridge said that there were three Superiors—me, the Murder Princess, and one other. And since Rascal only showed up later when the whole thing was already underway, it couldn't be him."

"Yes, yes. And?"

"I didn't have time to ask Eldridge who the Superior was, but I had a feeling it was you."

"Ohh! And why's that?" The man was excited to know Moneygold's reasoning...

"Because the people who attacked the ship were the DLG—Curtis Eldona."

"Hm...hm?" Those words made the man tilt his head in confusion...

"Isn't that right, *Splendida the Evergreen*?" And hearing his own name, the man—Splendida—adopted a stumped expression.

"You joined them at one point and participated in their failed plan to assassinate the imperator. That's why I guessed that if the DLG were going to act now, you—someone connected to them—would act too."

"Your calculations are a total mess in the middle, but you arrived at the right answer... I'm not sure how to react!" He was indeed Splendida the Evergreen, and he'd once joined forces with the Eldona family, taken part in the assassination plot, and bought time against King of Beasts. That was all true.

However, the reason he was on this ship had nothing to do with the clients from back then. He was here to simply see the sights and run some errands for a different client—Crys Fragment.

Since it was Crys who'd led the DLG here by acting as their cooperator, though, that meant he *was* a little involved. This situation was very messy from his perspective.

"But I basically had nothing to do with this! Your time is wasted on little old me! You're a busy man, aren't you?"

"Even so, there's value in making you tell me what you do know." Moneygold's Truth Discernment hadn't activated, so he knew Splendida wasn't lying, but that was a separate matter. He had no reason to let someone go who clearly had information about what had happened here.

"You're so violent..." Splendida muttered.

"I have a question."

Splendida let out a sigh. "Well, let's sit down and talk, then. I don't have legs, you see." He pulled himself into a sitting position on the floor and waited for the question.

“So...*what did you put on this ship*?” Moneygold asked, taking out a single fragment—the Orb piece Isara had found.

“We’ve already interrogated the DLG survivors, so we know that Crys Fragment was the one who led them through a secret part of the ship. But why did Crys cooperate with them? And why did you put a *UBM* in the cargo area?”

Just as Isara had confirmed, the content of the Orb from the cargo block—the UBM—had killed the soldiers who were there before escaping outside. It didn’t even involve itself in the other battles, so it was unclear why it was even on the scene in the first place.

“Based on the state of the remains in the cargo block, this must’ve been the Orb of frost—which was said to be in Vennsayle. That means this Orb was already on the ship back when we learned about it. And...Vennsayle *vanished* just a while ago. We were informed that it was blown sky-high right before the talks with Granvaloa. How much of this was *your or your group’s* doing?”

Moneygold was certain there had to have been something more to this incident than the clash with DLG or IF.

“Heh heh heh...whatever do you mean?”

While Moneygold was convinced Splendida was involved, he acted like he had no idea what Moneygold was talking about...

Going through Splendida’s head right now was *I have no idea what Moneygold’s on about.*

He really did have no idea at all.

Splendida knew that Crys had brought something to the cargo area, but he didn’t know that the thing inside was a UBM, and this was the first time he heard about Vennsayle’s disappearance at all. He felt like she could’ve just told him about this, but a part of him understood not trusting him with such information.

Splendida’s assistance had been limited. For the most part, he was just a spectator. Still, he had managed to notice a few things.

“If there’s something you can learn from little old me...it’s that I don’t think even my current client has all the information you want,” Splendida said. He found it especially doubtful that she’d been involved in Vennsayle’s disappearance. She’d certainly taken the Orb from there several days ago, but she had no reason to destroy the city afterward. That must’ve been someone else's work. "This 'game' has many 'players' making their moves, after all. There's my current client, my next client, your boss, and the devs," he said, referencing Crys, the imperator, the president, and the control AI, respectively. "With so many intertwining motives on the board, it's impossible to predict what will happen—and that's what makes it *interesting*."

Splendida had the same tone as someone looking down on events as they transpired from somewhere far above.

"Anyway, I still have many things to see, so if you don't mind, I'll be leaving now," Splendida continued...as he *stood up on his own two feet*.

His legs, blown away by Moneygold's Treasure Cannon, had already returned. His shoes and any clothing below the knee were all gone, but everything else was exactly as it had been before.

"Oh dear. This means I'll have to walk in the desert barefoot."

As Splendida laughed about his situation, Moneygold fired his Treasure Cannon once again. Not just once, however—he fired over and over, like a far more destructive Gatling gun.

Splendida's head, arms, torso, and his entire body was reduced to nothing.

In his battles against Rascal and the DLG, Moneygold had been forced to limit his powers, but now he attacked without caring if the ship was utterly demolished in the process.

With this firepower turned upon him, there was no doubt that every bit of Splendida had been destroyed completely. However, Moneygold's expression remained serious as he looked around, coins at the ready as though there was still a threat present.

After a few seconds of silence...

"'I'll destroy him until there's nothing left!' Everyone who's confident in their firepower tries that kind of thing at least once!"

...Splendida's voice spread across the area.

"If that was enough to kill me, though," Splendida's voice continued, "*she* would've done that too!" he said, referencing his encounter with King of Beasts.

Eventually, *a head grew* in the place where he'd once stood. Then, the head sprouted a torso and then a set of limbs, spreading out like a tree growing branches or roots.

Eventually, Splendida stood before Moneygold once more, completely unharmed but lacking any of his equipment.

"This is why I can only ever wear cheap clothing. If only my gear were restored as easily as me," Splendida casually remarked, his face now devoid of makeup. That had been vaporized along with the rest of his head, and his face was now revealed exactly as it appeared on his wanted poster.

"Tch..." Moneygold clicked his tongue and fired Treasure Cannon again.

The last remains of the ship were obliterated, and Splendida's body vanished once more...only to be recreated yet again.

He seemed completely removed from the very concept of death.

"An Embryo that makes you immortal, huh?" Moneygold said.

"I suppose you could say that. Though it works differently than little Emily's...it's more like a combo."

"How are you coming back from having your HP reduced to 0, stacking up enough injury debuffs to kill you instantly...*and* even getting completely obliterated?"

"Try and guess. Treat it like a quiz."

"Tch..."

Splendida was alive even after having his body reduced to nothing. Unlike Emily, he had never transformed into bits of light. That meant he had never even died. While the Murder Princess was immortal because of her inexhaustible extra lives, Splendida was incapable of dying by some other mechanism.

This time, Moneygold fired a *low-power* Treasure Cannon. Instead of killing Splendida instantly, he tried targeting the heart, the lungs, the brain—parts of the body that, if damaged, would impede the activity of the rest.

However, even those wounds quickly closed.

"Don't you get it? That won't work. Right now, little old me is impossible to kill."

Despite being exposed to this devastating onslaught, Splendida maintained a smile...

"My Tír na nÓg will not fall."

...and claimed, with certainty, that he was as safe as can be.

"Your defense, though, has a time limit, though," he added. "You can't win against little old me right now...but will you still try?"

"I will. I can't just ignore you."

"I see... By the way, where is *tu*'s lady bodyguard?"

"I gave her a job and sent her back. I couldn't keep her here without knowing what kind of *thing* you were." And as it turned out, Splendida was far beyond what Moneygold had expected.

"You made the right choice, then! Continuing this battle might be a mistake, though!"

Splendida then spread his arms and released a cloud of poison from his palms as branch-like wings sprouted from his back and a wooden mask covered his face. "I suppose I've got to go on the *offensive*, as well."

"So you're *just like* Carl in that regard, huh? I guess that's just how survival-focused builds end up looking." Moneygold pulverized one of his Inventories, scattering the coins on the floor.

All right, let's do this, he thought. *If I can at least figure out the cards he's holding, this won't be a total waste of time.*

A battle would help Moneygold discover Splendida's strengths and weaknesses—perhaps giving him a hint toward eventually defeating him.

With that in mind, Moneygold faced Splendida, who stared back at him. Ready for battle though he was, Moneygold had already considered the possibility of defeat.

Two hours later, only one silhouette rose from the shattered ship. It turned and began walking toward the distant imperium.

◆◆◆

Caldina

In the desert, a good distance away from the ship that had played host to a DLG terrorist attack and a UBM release, there stood a single mobile weapon.

It looked like a crustacean, somewhat reminiscent of the Acra that had appeared in Quartierlatin, and riding it was the one behind this incident—Crys Fragment.

Wearing a mechanical mask, she was examining the surrounding monitors and checking the data they presented. This information had been gathered by the many observation devices she'd installed on *Eltram*, and everything was related to her objective in causing this incident in the first place.

Crys was silent, but despite that and the mask on her face, it was plainly obvious what her feelings were.

“*That isn’t a good look on your face.* I can’t blame you, though!”

The one who said that was someone who was riding this mobile weapon with Crys.

She was a woman too, but unlike Crys, she wasn’t wearing the mechanical mask. Instead, she was wearing a forehead covering reminiscent of nineteenth-century central Asian native garb and gloves on both of her hands.

She was the journalist who’d interviewed Hugo, introducing herself as Stal Tune.

“Affirmative. I expected much better results from the Orb you retrieved from Vennsayle.”

Those words had huge implications—they meant that while Crys Fragment had lured the DLG to *Eltram*, it was Stal Tune who’d placed the Treasurebeast Orb on the ship.

This entire incident was born from their cooperation—they had deemed the results inadequate, though.“The ship’s core, the Over Pilot’s core, and the cores brought in as extras—the ones made by our foolish sister who betrayed us and sided with a lesser Incarnation,” Crys said, thinking of Agate. “I’d anticipated that the energy they provided would have been optimal in resurrecting the calamity...in allowing it to regain the power it had lost during its confinement. And yet...”

“There are two things we didn’t expect! First was Huanglong Renwai’s thoroughness!” Stal spoke the name of the Draconic Emperor before the last one—the one who had sealed away countless UBMs and left them in the world as Orbs.

Her gaze then focused on one of the monitors that showed a recording of the cargo and the surrounding areas. Specifically, it showed the moment the DLG soldiers had all their life and heat sapped away by a UBM.

“I didn’t think he sealed the Irregularity after *splitting it in half*!” Stal said.

The UBM looked like just a silhouette of a person split straight down the middle. This bizarre creature that only had its left half also only possessed half a name. It was called ■■■■-Pale Death-■■■■, ■■■■■■■-Almera.

It was as though its body, its name, its *very being* was only half of what it should be.

“Looks like not even six hundred years were enough for us to get a full measure of him!” Stal’s voice sounded cheerful, but it was warped by a slight hint of displeasure. It was as though she was saying, “He’s *always* caused trouble for us.”

“The second thing we did not expect was that half of the calamity prioritized escape over energy acquisition,” said Crys. “Is it heading toward Huang He, the place it hates more than any other? Or does it seek its other half? Predicting its movements from now on will be difficult.”

“That’s true. Unlike some entities I could name, we can’t see the future. Well, things like this just happen! This victory is all *hers*, I guess. Not like *she* is necessarily our enemy, after all.”

“If we take the most optimal path, she *will* be our enemy. Or our greatest ally, if we focus on our *second best* option.”

“Her worst enemies are the High-Ends like the imperator and King of Kings. For us, it’s the Incarnations. How we interact with the other players on the board depends entirely on our current stage of progression.”

The conversation they held was incomprehensible to almost everyone in the world. A moment later, Stal clapped her hands as if to signal that it was time to change the subject.

“We should talk about what we’ll do next!” Stal said.

“Indeed. On top of our usual activities in Caldina, we will be tracking that half of the calamity. I propose we separate for now. Do you agree?”

“I can handle Caldina by myself. After what happened today, operating here won’t be easy for you, will it? That’s why you should go support Integra. She’s an Altarian public figure now, so it must be hard for her to do covert operations there.”

“Reasonable.”

“Reconfigure your personality, though. Make it closer to mine. She doesn’t know that we are *us*.”

Crys nodded in response to Stal’s words, took off the mechanical mask, and put on a bright smile.

“Okay! Is this good?” Crys said. It was as though the mechanical woman from a moment ago had never existed at all—Crys’s words and expression were full of humanity.

However, her face was also now *exactly the same* as Stal’s.

“Perfect! Anyway, good luck in Altar, Crystal Tuner!”

“Thanks! You have your work cut out for you too, but do your best, Crystal Tuner!” With the same face and the same personality, the two smiled and gave each other a high five.

“All by the will of The First,” they said in perfect unison. Within their foreheads were crystalline structures—the energy cores that powered them as Prism People.

Thus, the Crystal Tuners—the perfected, mass-produced Prism People—made their next move as the representatives of the first Flagman—one of the most ancient players on the board of this world.

Epilogue: One Incident, Three Futures

Tetragrammaton

Tetragrammaton—the giant battleship IF used as their headquarters—cut through the desert sands.

After being Frozen during the battle in the energy zone, Rascal had barely escaped with his life. He was currently in his room on the ship. The Freeze had worn off about an hour after their retreat.

"Man, nothin' about that went right. We couldn't destroy *or* take the core. We got some good combat data, but we couldn't get that guy to join us, which is what actually mattered. Emily lost one Youaltepuztli, so now she's basically useless until it comes back. All the armor on Sardonyx needs replacement. And I got *this*..."

Rascal was sitting in the chair, leaning his head on his left hand. However, the right sleeve of the fresh suit he was wearing was just dangling empty.

Though the Freeze had worn off, his right arm, cut off by the Purgatorial Slash, hadn't come back. He'd taken meds that made the wound close up, but it was lost from the elbow down.

"Looks like I'll have to wait until Sechs escapes the gaol to treat this," Rascal said. Complete loss of a body part could only be treated by the healing magic of Superior Jobs or respawning after taking the death penalty. But as a wanted man, Rascal wanted to avoid the death penalty at all costs, and the only Superior Job holder he could ask for a heal was Sechs, who was still in the gaol.

"Oh, right. He has The Saint, doesn't he? I never actually met this 'Trans Sexual Slime,'" said a voice right beside Rascal.

"Don't talk about our leader like he's a new monster type." Rascal frowned; the way she'd phrased it, it kind of did sound like something that might exist in *Dendro*. "According to La Crima's reports, our plans for Tenchi are progressin' smoothly. Sechs should also get out before the season's over. It ain't comfortable, but I'll deal with it until then."

“Your leader also has my sister, doesn’t he? Diamond? Then I look forward to the day he and Gerbera escape.”

Prism Person No. 2, Diamond Slayer, was Sechs’s property and was currently in the gaol with him. As No. 1, Agate Designer was looking forward to meeting her sister for the first time in two thousand years.

“Oh. But can’t La Crima heal you too? She can even give you more arms than you had before, right?”

“Just so you know, I *do* care about how I look,” Rascal said as he thought of King of Flame, Lazburn, who’d been turned into the four-armed Ignis Idea, or King of Raids Morter, who’d become a humanoid bat with membranous wings.

If Rascal let La Crima treat him, ending up with one nonhuman arm would be the best possible result. Getting extra arms would be a bad one. And regardless of how it came out, they would do it out of the kindness of their heart.

“Body modding...big muscles...you could withstand my piloting...and have a body so tough we could go all night long!” Ignoring Rascal, who looked obviously unenthusiastic, Machina continued her delusional rambling.

“Well then. If ya got time to say stupid shit like that, maybe you got time to go out and scrub *Tetragrammaton*’s armor?”

“Whaaa?! C-Come ooon, I-I was just joking. Please don’t make me clean a three-hundred-metel-long battleship... With all the sand getting on it, I’ll never be done with it...”

“Fine, fine...anyway, ya done with the thing I wanted ya to do?”

“Oh—yes. Just a little finishing touch and...there! Done!”

Machina faced the work table again before turning around and showing Rascal what was on it. Lying there was a mechanical arm—the kind that would replace a lost arm of flesh—at the exact length to match Rascal’s missing limb.

“Anyway, here’s your prosthetic!” Machina said. “It’s very easy to use! You can move the fingers without even connecting it to your nerves. You just put it on!”

“That so? Good to know I won’t have to open up the wound, at least.”

Urged by Machina, Rascal took off his suit and put the prosthetic up to the stump of his right arm. A moment later, he had control of it. Moving it felt as natural as using his own hand.

"The skill and speed of your craftsmanship is as impressive as always." Only about an hour had passed since he'd ordered her to make this. The quality and speed of her work was almost shocking.

"Feel free to praise me more!"

"Wow. Nice. Good job."

"YAAAYYYY! A GLOWING REVIEW!"

"That's good enough for you...?" Rascal asked. Machina had reacted so strongly to his lukewarm praise that it actually made Rascal feel a bit guilty.

"Oh! I have a good idea!" Machina said. "If we mechanize your entire body, you could handle my piloting and—"

"Don't." As Machina's train of thought took a dangerous turn, Rascal stopped her with the most serious expression he could muster. "Let's forget about that," said Rascal. "By the way, do you want anythin'?"

"Huh?"

"I wanna thank you for this arm...and for helpin' me escape after I was incapacitated. You're my property and all, but that doesn't mean I can't reward you."

"Is that love?! You're finally showing me love! WOO-HOOO!"

"...So you want the reward or not?"

"I do! Just let me think!" Machina put her finger to her forehead and began to think intensely.

"Se...no, slee...no, lay with...no..."

"Are your circuits fried or something?" Everything out of her mouth was lewd, which actually made Rascal a little concerned.

Machina continued to think until...

"I got it!"

"That so? What do you want?"

"Please go on a date with me!" Machina clasped her hands in front of her chest, the stereotypical image of a girl summoning up all her courage.

"A night date?"

"You're such a perv! Ugh! Is that all you ever talk about?!"

Silence. It took a lot for Rascal to stop himself from saying, "I'll throw you overboard, ya piece of scrap"...and then actually doing it.

"I meant a normal date!" Machina insisted. "One where we dress nice, eat something tasty, and see pretty sights...a *normal* date!"

"That's good enough for ya?"

"Yes! I've never been on one!"

"That so?"

"Does that make you think that I'm some unlovable hag who couldn't get a date for two thousand years?"

"It doesn't. Fine, I can do that. That'll be your reward."

Wouldn't you be more like an antique than a hag, anyway? a part of him thought, but he didn't say it out loud, instead simply agreeing to fulfill her wish.

"Huh? Seriously? I didn't actually expect you to...YAAAAAYYY! SUCCESS!" Machina began jumping up and down with her arms in the air, expressing her joy with her entire being.

"A date, though, huh...? Well, I guess it's doable if we just get more disguise accessories."

With Machina's item creation ability, they could easily make things that would be rare finds otherwise. And since the ones she'd made previously were now proven to work, there was no need to worry about any new ones.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Machina stopped jumping, faced Rascal again, and pointed at the prosthetic. "That arm has an extra feature."

"A feature?"

"Bend the index finger twice and the pinky thrice."

"Hm?" Rascal did as told and bent the fingers.

A moment later, the hand detached itself from the wrist and sped forward like a rocket, slamming into the wall facing the hallway and leaving a dent.

Silence. Rascal looked at the now-handless prosthetic, then at the damage on the wall before thinking, *What the hell?*

"The hand can fly. I call it the 'rocket hand'!"

"And the point of it is...?"

"It's a hidden weapon!"

"You know there aren't that many people who can be hurt by a weapon that just *dents* a wall, right? It's barely a distraction." Rascal was actually quite surprised, but he did his best to remain calm as he said that.

"Oh. No no no, you got it wrong. Now try twisting the arm right two times and left four times."

Silence. *I really don't wanna,* Rascal thought, yet did it regardless.

A moment later, a ray of light burst from the wrist, melting a hole in the wall.

"The wrist fires a beam!"

"That so? And? What are ya tryin' to turn me into? Ya wouldn't even see prosthetics this crazy in a kid's comic."

Using his remaining arm, Rascal pinched Machina's cheek and looked at her with a steady gaze.

"B-But I made it so we match..."

"Your prosthetic does this too?" Rascal was aware that Machina had made herself a left arm to replace the one she'd lost while deactivated, but he had no idea that it could deliver rocket punches and fire laser beams.

Rascal looked at her, not saying a thing.

"U-Umm, does this mean you'll punish me by...?" *...Canceling our date?* she finished her sentence in thought, shivering and looking up right back at Rascal.

"Nah. It's still happenin'. Fix this arm, though. The activation motion is too simple. I might trigger it by accident."

"Ah. Okay."

"Fix the wall too. And clean up around it."

"R-Right!" With a salute, Machina instantly moved to clean and fix everything she'd been instructed to. *He's so nice today,* she thought. *Maybe it really is love? He even promised me a date.*

Shortly after Machina began cleaning up, the bell at his door rang.

Rascal gave permission to enter, and Zhang stepped into the room. He'd come here to report about the girl he'd secured from *Eltram*—Doris.

While taking Emily and retreating, Zhang had also picked up Doris. Emily had entrusted him with her, and at that point, he'd believed that it was dangerous to leave her on the ship with the situation being what it was.

He hadn't made the wrong choice by any means. A battlefield that involved a wide-scale extermination Superior, the remnants of the DLG, and the collapsing ship—there were multiple things that could endanger the girl's life. Thus, he'd chosen to take Doris's unconscious body away, thinking that he could just hand her in to some office or facility later.

"And? What's she up to now?" Rascal asked.

"She woke up not long ago. She panicked at first, but some calming incense helped. Emily talking to her may have also played an important part in that, though.”

“Emily, huh...?”

“It turns out that the soldiers killed Doris’s father back there.”

“I see...” The two fell silent.

There was no way to sugarcoat it—IF had played a part in her father’s death. They were the ones who’d spread the Orbs, and once he had his hands on one, they were the ones who had led him to the ship that became his grave.

Without them, Doris’s father would’ve avoided getting involved in this whole incident. He might even still be alive.

“Don’t let it bother ya,” said Rascal. “The mission to protect him ended the moment he was on the ship. Ya didn’t mess up.”

“...But I still feel responsible,” said Zhang. “Making a girl that young into an orphan... I myself was like her once. And so was the lady I used to serve.”

Zhang spoke of the head of Mirage—the organization he had once been a part of. Zhang couldn’t help but be reminded of the group’s young boss, who must’ve been either imprisoned or executed by now.

“You know...for someone who was part of the criminal underworld, you’re way too much of a good guy.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so, those words apply to you as well, do they not?” Zhang had gotten the feeling that Doris’s misfortune had affected Rascal as well.

“I wouldn’t say so,” Rascal replied. “I’m a miscreant who’ll put his goals over the lives of tens of thousands of faceless, nameless tians.”

After saying that, he looked through the window. Beyond it, there lay a vast desert—the land of Caldina. It was the land throughout which IF had spread the Orbs—the cause of many casualties. “I put the wishes of those dear to me over the lives of those same faceless, nameless people.”

“Rascal...”

His words might have seemed cold, but they weren’t. They meant that Rascal did feel a sense of responsibility toward those whose names and faces he knew. But his expression said that there were still things that had to be done, and he wouldn’t hesitate to do them.

“So...what will we do with Doris? Put her in an orphanage...?”

“Let’s not. She’s seen too much. And it’s possible that Caldina has an

Embryo that can peek into tian memories."

What would they do with her, then? The many years Zhang had spent in the underbelly of society made him imagine having to "silence" the little girl. He tensed up. "How's Emily with her?"

"To put it briefly: she's attached to her. While Doris is still somewhat perplexed, Emily is already treating her like a good friend."

After hearing that, Rascal took a moment to think...

"Look after her, then. A friend that age may be exactly what Emily needs to develop properly."

"Very well..." Zhang said, somewhat confused.

Rascal was mindful of Emily's development, yet he sent her to dangerous situations where she could kill people or be killed herself. Zhang felt that this was extremely contradictory, but also that there was more to it—almost as if these two things were linked somehow.

"And when we're ready to leave this land...we'll hand her over to someone trustworthy," Rascal said.

"Very well." Having decided how to handle the girl, Zhang turned around and left Rascal's room.

This makes me wonder, Zhang thought as he left. *What is Rascal's relationship with Emily, exactly?*

It was clear that she was more than just a clan member to him. He obviously treated her differently than others. Rascal had first described the girl as if she was some kind of volatile material and regularly sent her to dangerous places. But by now, Zhang had watched them enough to know that Rascal was genuinely concerned about Emily.

Perhaps...the "wish" Rascal mentioned has something to do with her? Zhang wondered.

After Zhang left, Machina stopped the cleaning she'd been doing the entire time he was in the room. "By the way, I've been wondering about this for a while..." she said.

"Hm?"

"What is Emily to you? On the other side, I mean." It was a similar question to the one Zhang was pondering, except it was focused not on their relationship here, but on their reality as Masters.

"What do you think?"

"Umm...uhh...ah! Wait! Is she your wife?!"

“Do you think I’m a goddamn sex offender...?” Rascal said with a thoroughly dumbfounded face.

“What is she to you, then?! I’m *very* curious!”

Machina’s question made Rascal think for a moment. He thought about whether or not to answer, and decided that he would.

“She’s a little sister...not mine, though.”

“Hm?”

“She’s my close friend’s little sister.”

“You had friends on the other side too?”

“Are you tryin’ to make me mad?” Rascal said, but it didn’t seem like he was any bit upset by the comment—even though he would be perfectly justified if he was. Instead, there was a wry grin on his face, and it seemed as though he was slightly taken by nostalgia. Perhaps the word “friend” was one that had a strong effect on him. “I was actually pretty social back when I was a student. Had no shortage of friends and acquaintances.”

“Well, I might’ve guessed.”

Rascal was by no means a bad communicator. If he had been, he wouldn’t be able to serve as the functional leader of a criminal clan or negotiate with various organizations.

“Still...there was only one person I could’ve called a *close* friend.” It was clear by now that this one close friend was Emily’s older brother.

“And this friend is...?”

“Already dead.” Rascal answered almost instantly—maybe he knew Machina would ask, or maybe it was the sort of memory that would’ve left him speechless if he let himself dwell on it too long. “He was *murdered* a few years ago.”

“So, you...”

Rascal said nothing more. As silence fell over the room, they could hear the faint voices of Emily and Doris drifting through the hole in the wall.

◇◇◇

Yuri Gautier

“Sonya...where does all the money go?”

“Didn’t I say the exact same thing recently?” It was Monday morning, and I was whining to Sonya while we ate breakfast.

“Wait, didn’t you say you were well off in *Dendro*?”

“That was in the past...” Ray had given me a share of the money he’d gotten for defeating the Gouz-Maise Gang, but that had finally dried up. This was because I’d given Niala ten million lir so she could use her Genocide Condor.

I still had *some* money on me. I personally could get by without the reward money just fine—but the sum wasn’t nearly enough to pay for Magingear repairs.

My White Rose was a luxury, one-of-a-kind Magingear, and now it was damaged so badly that I couldn’t even begin to describe the extent of it. Not a single part of it had escaped unscathed, so every ready-made part had to be replaced.

That alone was bad enough, but the real problem was White Rose’s original parts. When building it, Fran had given it a modest self-repair function, but this was so bad that it couldn’t fix itself completely.

That was why I couldn’t even *imagine* how much fixing it was going to cost.

“Don’t you have any way to make money?” Sonya asked.

“I’m gonna get paid soon...but I have no idea how much it’ll be...” Moneygold had said that I would be rewarded for my job as bodyguard, but I hadn’t asked the exact amount. He said that it would “satisfy” me, but I didn’t know if it would be enough to cover White Rose’s repair costs.

I sighed deeply. With my unit’s destruction and everything else, the whole incident had been a huge ordeal. However, I had at least gained something from it. By defeating the UBM, I’d gotten an MVP reward—an energy core called Mechdragon Heart, Imperial Glory.

I checked what it did and realized that it had two skills.

First was Perpetual Engine—Life and Death. The name was a bit unsettling, and I couldn’t read parts of the description because I apparently needed a special skill for that, but what I could read told me that it acted as an energy core that produced MP on its own.

Yes—it was just like the thing Imperial Glory had been equipped with before it became a UBM. I didn’t know the volume of the MP it produced, but equipping it could help solve White Rose’s energy issues.

The other skill was Mechsoul, and I couldn’t read it at all, so I’d put it aside for now.

I was really happy to get a core of my own. But there was another reason I was happy—one that had nothing to do with the MVP reward's abilities.

It was the fact that the *name* survived. Imperial Glory—the result of the creativity and imagination of everyone from The Triangle of Wisdom. The name lived on, even as it became an MVP reward. I was a little happy that their hard work didn't completely disappear.

And I felt that the MVP reward itself was proof that I didn't give up...just like Ray back then.

"Hrm...you look pretty happy for someone who's out of money," said Sonya.

"Maybe I do... Oh! Breakfast time is almost over. We got sociology with Miss Nina first. Let's hurry there."

I tried to quickly clean up our tableware, but Sonya told me to slow down and said, "We got a message saying that we've got self-study in the library before that."

"Why?"

"Because Miss Nina's out today."

"Huh?! Is she sick or something...?" I couldn't imagine any other reason a teacher that strict wouldn't come to work.

"I dunno. Heh...maybe she's out on a date with some guy?"

"Hmm...I really doubt that." Miss Nina, the serious and diligent ice queen, skipping work to go on a date? Yeah, I really couldn't imagine that. But...

"But if it is that...it would be a pretty lovely date, huh?" I mused.

"Right?! There'd be so much passion in it!"

Sonya and I let our imaginations run wild.

◇◇◇

Caldina

It was the fourth day since the incident, in *Dendro* time. Eldridge was standing in a particular city in Caldina.

Though it was part of this desert country, it wasn't one of the cities *Eltram* had stopped at. Goblin Street had agreed to save in this city and gather here at a set time if at least one of them got the death penalty. They'd settled on a place that wasn't one of *Eltram*'s stops to make it harder for anyone investigating what had happened to track them down.

Surrounded by a crowd, Eldridge walked toward their meeting place as he thought back on the battle.

Fay had asked him to win, and Niala had truly believed that he would.

And yet, Eldridge had lost. He'd kept the upper hand throughout his entire fight against Emily, but when Zhang and Rascal got involved, he'd been instantly defeated.

He didn't have any excuses for it, nor would he make them. It wasn't a duel, but a PK battle. Third parties and unknown variables were a given.

He *had* been defeated. This was an unwavering truth.

Eldridge sighed. This was yet another one of his losses against a Superior—a betrayal of those who believed in him. If he was the man he was before he'd gotten on the ship—the man who'd felt cornered after all his recent defeats—this loss would've completely broken him.

But strange as it was, this particular defeat didn't make him feel any self-loathing.

This must've been because he knew for sure that he'd fought using everything he had. His previous encounters with Superiors ended before they could even begin.

But this time, things had been different. This time, he'd managed to give his all for victory.

What dominated his heart now wasn't the *result* of his defeat, but the *process* of the fight he'd given everything he had.

"Next time..." Eldridge muttered without even realizing he was speaking out loud.

But before he could finish that sentence, he spotted the terrace where they'd said to meet. It wasn't yet the time they'd agreed on, but Niala and Fey were already there, having some tea.

"I wonder if he's comin' soon," said Fey. "Wait, didn't you have work today?"

"I took a break for personal reasons—for the first time ever."

As they talked, Eldridge called out to them.

"Niala, Fey...sorry to keep you waiting."

"Leader!"

"Good morning, leader."

"Yeah...ngh..."

Eldridge stopped and thought about how to tell them that he lost. He considered apologizing, telling them he was sorry for not living up to their expectations, but Fey spoke before he did.

"Hey! *You won, didn't you?!*"

Her words didn't seem to have a single shred of doubt behind them.

"What makes you think that?" Eldridge *hadn't* won, and he had no idea why Fey was assuming otherwise.

Fey then puffed out her chest and gave her reason.

"I can see it in your face!"

"My face?"

When Eldridge touched his face, Fey put on a smile and said, "You look just like you did back in Altar! So full of confidence!"

Those words made his eyes widen. That was something he himself had failed to realize. Eldridge had no idea that the repeated defeats against Superiors had affected his appearance that much.

And these two stuck with me even though they could clearly see how unconfident I was, huh? he thought, which almost made him tear up.

"What do *you* think?" he asked Niala, careful not to sound like he was about to cry.

"Well..." Niala spent a moment thinking...

"Me too. *I like you* as you are now."

...and said that, mixing in a somewhat different meaning.

"Huh?! No fair! Me too! I like you too!" Feeling like Niala was running off, Fey also hurriedly revealed her feelings.

"Thanks, you two..."

The fact that they looked up to him so much almost made him tear up again, so he covered his eyes with his right hand.

That reaction made them realize that he didn't understand that they were trying to describe the kind of affection a woman might feel toward a man.

But they didn't care that much. After being down for so long, Eldridge was once again in high spirits. The two were simply happy that this trio had a future.

"I'd like to hear how you beat her!" said Fey.

"I didn't, actually...I lost."

Eldridge wiped away his tears, corrected Fey...

“But next time, not even a Superior will beat me.”

...and said those words with a smile on his face.

It was the smile of a person with nothing to be ashamed of—one more confident than ever before.

“You will!” the two girls said in unison, smiling themselves.

This day, they had no doubt made a comeback.

END

Afterword

Cat: “It’s time for the afterwooord. This one is brought to you by me, Cheshire the ‘Caaat.’”

Six: “And me, ‘Six’ or Sechs Würfel.”

Cat: “Oh. Haven’t seen you in a whiiile.”

Six: “Rascal and Emily were deeply involved in this one, so I will represent them here.”

Cat: “I seeee. Let’s start, then. Do you have any questions?”

Six: “I do. The afterword of the previous volume said that this one will come out in winter of 2023. Isn’t it March now?”

Cat: ...

Six: “Cheshire?”

Cat: “IT’S STILL SNOWY WHERE THE AUTHOR LIVES, SO THIS STILL COUNTS AS WINTER.”

Six: “I don’t feel it’s necessary to say that in all caps...”

Cat: “Anyway, stuff happened and you had to wait six months for it, but we believe that the quality of volume 20 is worthy of such a milestone! It’s the first one that places Hugo and Cyco on the cover! It has illustrations for many characters who never had one! And it even has something we’ve never done before: a mecha design illustration at the very end of the volume!”

Six: “Yes. It seems like something you would see in *Fullmetal Panic*.”

Cat: (He just went and named another company’s work like it was nothing...he truly is King of Crime.)

Six: “Now, let us move on to the serious comment from the author.”

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

This work has finally reached its twentieth volume. This is something that wouldn't have been possible without you and everyone else involved in ensuring every release.

Dendro will not end anytime soon, so I would be deeply grateful if you'd stay for the ride.

Now, those of you who read the webnovel may have noticed this, but this volume went through a lot of editing. I have updated the writing to better represent my current ability and added things to it that I felt needed to be written. The updates include certain sections focused on the DLG, while the additions include Rascal and Emily's background in the prologue.

What is at the heart of that won't be revealed for a while, but Rascal is an IF member too, and he chose to commit crime in *Dendro* for the sake of a goal he wished to fulfill. *Infinite Dendrogram* is a place where the feelings of many people intertwine, and it would give me great joy if you stayed to witness where they lead.

On another topic, this volume is one that puts my personal obsession with mecha content front and center.

That of course includes the cutesy, goofy robot maid, Machina, who was drawn in this volume by Taiki's skillful hand, but it certainly doesn't stop there. The very climax of this volume is a three way fight between giant mechs. The editor, K, even suggested that we might as well add a mech illustration. That, combined with the fact that this was a milestone volume, made us decide to approach someone known for their mecha work.

That was none other than Tomofumi Ogasawara—the artist who provided the art for *Gundam W: Haisha-tachi no Eikou*. I actually had the MG Sandrock (Armadillo Unit) that appeared in this work.

Out of all the works he was involved in, the one I find especially memorable is the *Gensou Senki RuLiLuRa* reader-driven experience that was released in Hobby Japan's *Game Gyaza* magazine.

It was a play-by-mail type game where you wrote your characters and their actions on a card that came with the magazine, then sent it to later receive the character's results and achievements.

Back then, I was in middle school and a regular Gyaza reader who always filled in and sent the cards.

At that time, I couldn’t have ever imagined that future me would release a novel through Hobby Japan or have the person behind *RuLiLuRa*’s art provide me with a mecha design.

That, as well as the fact that an avid *NEEDLESS* reader like myself could get Kami Imai to draw the manga adaptation of my work, left me in awe of all the ways that memories of the past could come back to me. Volume 11 of the manga, by the way, is set to come out on the same day as this novel volume, so please do check it out. It also includes an original short story.

I feel like I say this a lot, but *Dendro* is a product that can only continue to exist because of the support and effort of a great many people.

Allow me to once again say “thank you” to you all.

And please continue your support for *Infinite Dendrogram*.

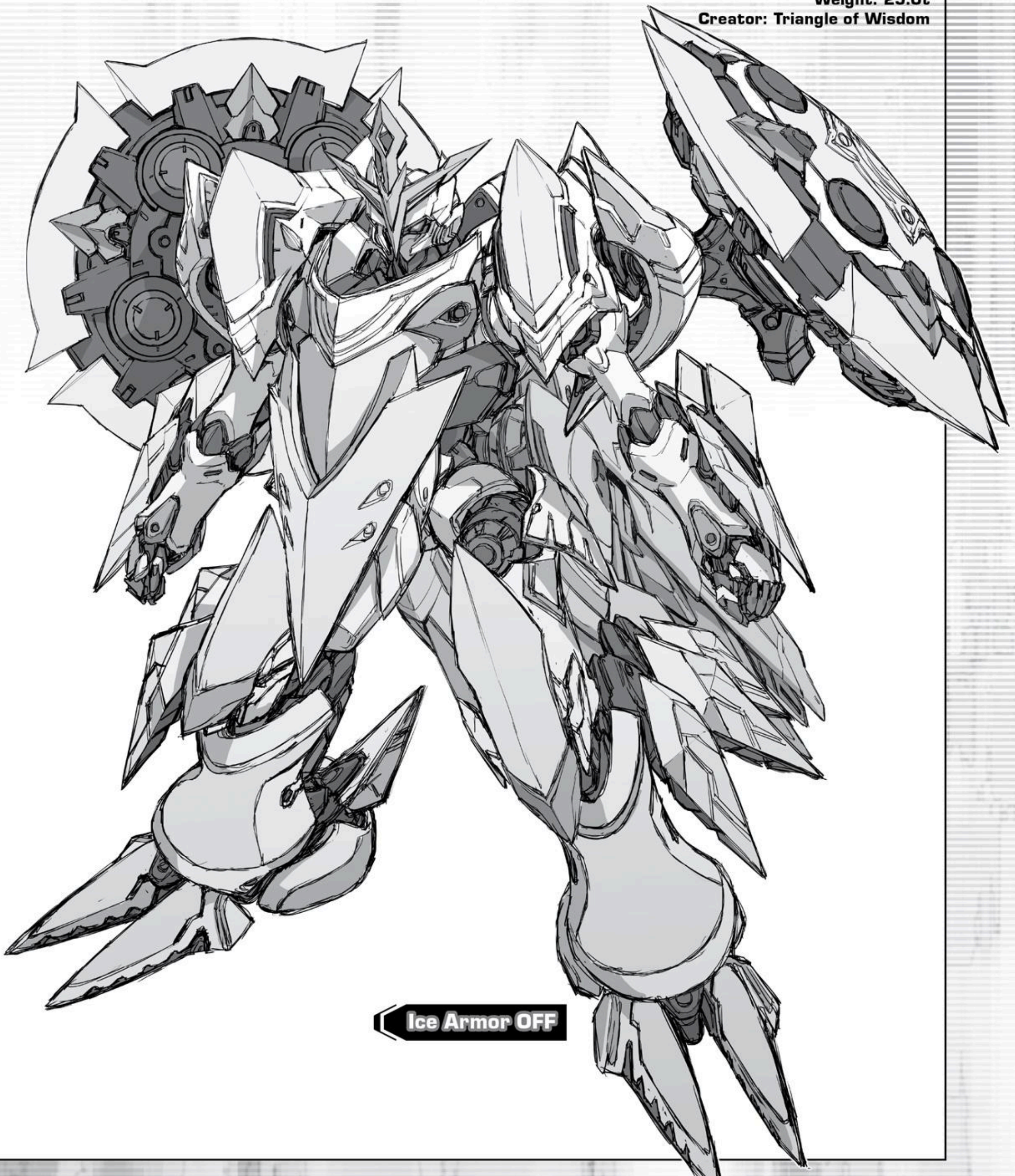
Sakon Kaidou

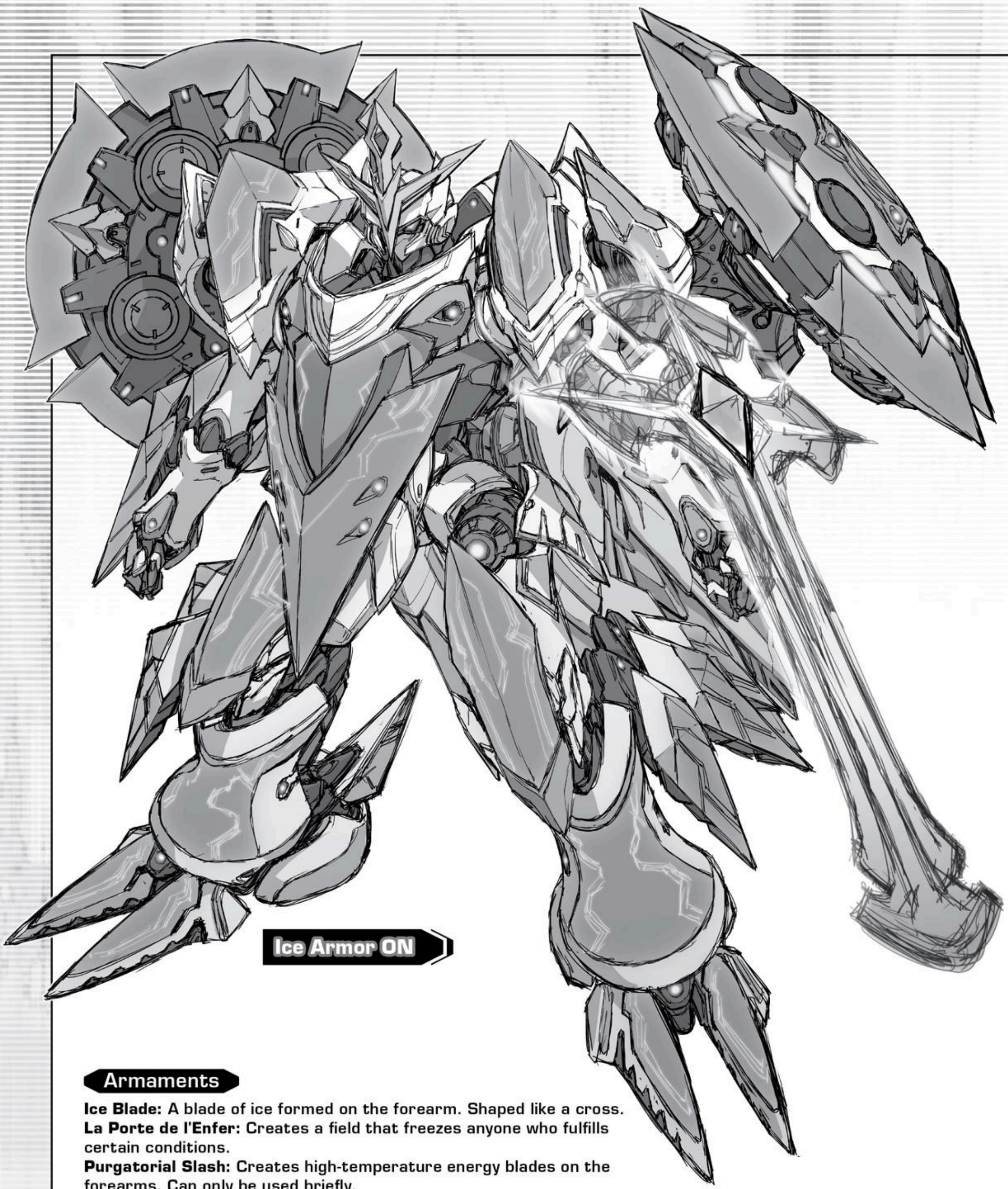
Cat: “Anyway, time to announce the next ooone.”
Six: “IS IT OKAY TO ANNOUNCE THAT IT WILL COME OUT IN SUMMER, 2023?”
Cat: “...Why is it a question?”
Six: “Because these announcements have been off for a few volumes in a row now.”
Cat: “You’re not wrong...”

MGFX-002

White Rose

Height: 6.0m
Weight: 25.0t
Creator: Triangle of Wisdom


Ice Armor OFF



Armaments

Ice Blade: A blade of ice formed on the forearm. Shaped like a cross.
La Porte de l'Enfer: Creates a field that freezes anyone who fulfills certain conditions.
Purgatorial Slash: Creates high-temperature energy blades on the forearms. Can only be used briefly.

Traits

A heavily armored unit built for defense.
Its shoulders are equipped with round active shields that can be ejected and made to float.
The ice armor fits over the pre-existing armor.
Built by Franklin as a gift to his sister, this is undoubtedly the sturdiest Magingear yet.

Bonus Short Stories

The Singularity

Tetragrammaton, Workshop

Tetragrammaton—the amphibious battleship that IF used as their HQ. Managed by Rascal, it contained rooms for its members—official or supporting—as well as various facilities like a workshop for Machina.

Currently, Machina was using the workshop to improve upon Sardonyx's design after it suffered heavy damage on *Eltram*, and Rascal was there to support her with the abilities he possessed as The Weapon.

"Oh. I'm done there. Please close it."

"All right."

As Rascal used his skills where Machina directed him, he was using his free hand to do some work on a tablet device. One of Machina's creations, this tablet contained information and reports about the trade organizations Rascal owned here in *Infinite Dendrogram*. It was clear from only a glance that it was far more technologically advanced than was standard for this world.

"This should make it much safer than before!"

"That so...?"

Machina's work was truly impressive. She had not only repaired the severe damage to Sardonyx, but also used the recent combat data to improve it over the original design.

"The singularity, huh...?" Rascal said, looking at ever-improving mechdragon.

"Hm?" Machina tilted her head in confusion.

"That's a term describing the birth of an AI that can improve itself infinitely. More specifically, we call it the 'technological singularity' because that's supposedly the point where machines will be totally independent of humans. They'll start makin' their *own* advancements."

Earth was already experiencing a kind of technological revolution in the real world thanks to the existence of control AIs. These AIs could communicate in a humanlike manner, they possessed creativity, and they were capable of managing all the data produced by a small country. In some ways they were a sort of direct upgrade of mankind. Some experts claimed that the reason *Infinite Dendrogram* was so astounding was because it was run by a whole thirteen control AIs—though Rascal was already well aware that *Infinite Dendrogram*'s control AIs and regular control AIs were somewhat different. In fact, a part of him believed that the regular control AIs might have been introduced into society and made common knowledge for the express purpose of preparing it for the "control AIs" present within the game.

Whether or not that was true, artificial intelligence had certainly already surpassed human intelligence.

"Watching *you* improve Sardonyx—somethin' you created yourself—just made me think...it's happenin' here too, huh?"

"Umm, is that praise?"

"Yeah. For your skill, at least."

"Wow! You'll make me blush," Machina said, looking bashful for a moment before her expression changed. "Though...that's not quite right," she added. She looked suddenly rather serious, as though she was reflecting on the past. "What I did here isn't exactly *improvement*. It's more like *optimization*. The necessary technology itself was already within me, you see. That's just how advanced we were back in my era."

"The pre-ancient times?"

"Yes, yes."

The pre-ancient civilization was the advanced culture that had thrived thanks to a combination of magic and science, using magical energies to bring all kinds of dreams to life. Their civilization had also been the one to fall apart during the war against the Incarnations, leaving behind only fragments of their shattered existence. One of these was Machina—the gynoid also known as Agate Designer.

"I know lots about technology," Machina went on. "But most of it was either installed in me by the creator as base knowledge during my production phase, or something I learned during that era. I still remember all of that knowledge, and I can put it to use by combining it or improving it based on gathered data. Really, it's all just an effective application of what

I’ve been given.”

“Then I guess your creator—the first Flagman—must have been a genius like no other, huh?”

Someone who created an AI that could effectively apply knowledge and who actually developed and provided it with so much technology had to be an incredibly gifted individual, Rascal thought.

“Uhh, I wouldn’t say that either,” Machina said, looking doubtful.

“What do you mean?”

“As his assistant, I feel like he was probably *just like me*.”

“...Huh?”

“It felt less like he actually discovered and developed all his theories and technologies, and more like just put them into practice or reproduced them... It’s like he *borrowed* it all.”

“You’re sayin’ that this Grand Artificer’s technology wasn’t actually invented by him either? That he just got it all from somewhere else?”

But where could he have possibly gotten all of that? Who could have taught the greatest engineer in history everything he knew? These were the questions running through Rascal’s mind.

“Flagman himself regularly said something like ‘The real genius isn’t me, but Mr. Philips. It’s people like him who should be recognized.”

“And this ‘Mr. Philips’ is...?”

“He was a famous golem meister and alchemist. He had three crafting Superior Jobs—tians tend to be limited by their job affinities and talents, so he was a real rarity in that regard. My creator had all the limelight back then, so Mr Philips ended up getting outshone... Apparently, he spent his final years making some super amazing gargoyle, though. I wonder if he finished it...”

Those words made Rascal think for a moment. While Flagman’s name had survived the devastation of his civilization and lived through the two millennia that followed, this Philips was someone who seemed to have been forgotten instead. Despite that, the Grand Artificer himself had considered this person his superior.

“Well, anyway, that’s how it was,” Machina said. “Flagman didn’t value himself that highly. ‘The technology I have is beneficial to mankind, so I have no choice but to spread it for the well-being of the people. Though...I believe that originally, the technology cultivated by this world must’ve been of their own design.' That's what Flagman said before the Incarnations attacked...when he was still just a popular technician."

"Huh." Rascal felt like Flagman's words contained something that sounded like *guilt.* It almost seemed as if it wasn't just that it was not his own technology, but that he had *appropriated* it from some time and place where it had already been cultivated.

"I see... I see."

Perhaps the earth was no different in that regard, though. At a certain point in the past, the powerful control AI technology had rapidly spread throughout the world. And depending on what the *source* of it was, it might be hard to say for certain that the real world's AIs had indeed achieved a singularity.

Rascal was lost in thought for a bit.

Infinite Dendrogram and the Earth both had countless secrets whirling within them, and perhaps this little chat with Machina had revealed a little bit about the secrets this world had to offer. Machina and her deep knowledge of Flagman was just one of the many leads Rascal had in *both* worlds that could lead him to unraveling many such mysteries.

However, none of them held that much meaning to him.

He had absolutely no intention of finding out the truth. It was never his goal to chase after the long-buried mysteries.

"Rashcal. Machinya. Are you dooone?"

"U-Umm...we made tea..."

The sound of voices drew Rascal's attention to the workshop entrance, where he saw Emily, all smiles, and Doris timidly standing behind her.

"All right. We've done enough for now. Let's take a break."

"Roger that!" said Machina.

And so, Rascal and Machina left the workshop.

"Over here!" called Emily as they followed after her.

This girl was Rascal's current goal—one that had been left behind by his closest friend.

Altar's PK History

Caldina

"A toast to our success."

"Cheers."

"Cheers!"

Following the events on *Eltram*, the three members of Goblin Street came back from their death penalty and held a little celebration at a bar. While all of them had died, they had still managed to get the Marshall IIs that they had come for—and thanks to the deal with Moneygold, they had even managed to find a good buyer for them.

This was their first success in a while, and they chose to celebrate it with the money they had right now.

As they enjoyed a feast that was luxurious by their current standards, Eldridge, pestered by Niala and Fey, told them how the fight played out.

"Huh? But that's basically a win for you. You'd have totally had it if they hadn't butted in. IF weren't playin' fair," said Fey upon hearing the story, clearly upset.

"It wasn't a duel. PK battles really aren't the place for fairness," Eldridge said, readily accepting the result. He himself ambushed others on the regular, so he really felt like he couldn't complain if it happened to him. "But man...IF, huh? I can't say I expected to fight Sechs's clan like this," he said, his thoughts wandering to the past.

"Speaking of, did you ever fight Sechs Würfel directly?" Niala asked.

"I did. I stood no chance, though, so I backed out before it was over."

Sechs was the one who had first taken the title of "Altar's strongest PK" from him.

"You stood no chance? Whaddya mean?"

"He's a slime, so taking his body parts is pointless, and there's nothing for me to gain from it."

"Ohhh..." Niala and Fey said in unison.

"Since physical attacks don't work on him, I tried using Gems, but he blocked the one with Crimson Sphere in it using some heat-absorbing shield he copied somewhere. I realized that I couldn't win an endurance match against him and backed out...and some time later, everyone started calling *him* 'Altar's strongest PK' instead. That's how it went."

With Eldridge having a bad matchup against him and Sechs being a Superior, the public opinion quickly shifted. Soon enough, Sechs was widely considered to be the most powerful PK in Altar.

Looking back, Sechs might've actually been the first in Eldridge's long chain of unfortunate encounters with incompatible Superiors.

"Even if I wanted to come up with a plan and try for round two, Sechs was the one who gained more levels and abilities as time went by. Ultimately, I realized that going up against him was just a waste and started sharing info with B3 and people like that so I could keep track of where he was active and avoid him."

Sechs was a man who committed crime for the sake of crime—a man whose means and goals were one and the same. Even to PKs, he was an entity who didn't make any sense whatsoever.

Going anywhere this absurd individual was active could mean getting caught up in whatever villainous acts he might commit. Because of that, they took to treating him like a rabid bear best avoided—though "bear" was probably a better description of Sechs's rival rather than Sechs himself.

"Then Sechs was sent to the gaol, and when I thought it was gonna be between just me and B3..." Eldridge paused, emptied his glass of booze, put on a bitter face, and let out a sigh. "...Kashimiya came from Tenchi."

"Ohhh..." Niala and Fey said in unison.

And then there was the rabid...or rather, the vorpal hare. Most duelists and standout PKs had experienced having their heads lopped off by Kashimiya, and Eldridge was no exception. Not even Skeleton could save him from that fate.

Because of that, once Sechs left, the title of "Altar's strongest PK" went to Kashimiya. That was also around the time when King of Light's obsessive search for reference material began to stand out.

Eldridge fell silent as he reflected upon the past and thought, *With the kind of PKs they have, Altar may have been even more of a hellscape than Caldina*.

About La Crima

Tetragrammaton

"What kind of person is La Crima?" Zhang asked Rascal one day as he was watching some lizard-like Ideas going about their various tasks. The sight must've made him curious about their creator.

"You're from Caldina's underworld. You must've heard of them, right?"

"Well...I heard they're the inspiration for *The Song Princess and the*

King of Indestruction." That was the title of an opera—a tragedy—performed in Caldina. Zhang had never seen it himself, but he had heard that it was based on a true story.

La Crima's role in it was that of the villain.

"Ohh. That's about the event that got La Crima on the wanted list, so I guess if you know them, it would likely be through that. Well, the writer of the opera didn't do quite enough research, but it *was* definitely about illicit love."

"Hm?"

"Anyway, after that whole thing got them on the wanted list, our leader tried to recruit them a bunch of times before he got sent to the gaol—and after he was out of the picture, I took over the job and actually did manage to get La Crima to join. We really needed them on the team."

"Is that because of their ability to create soldiers? The Ideas?" Zhang asked as he pointed at the mass-produced Ideas at work.

"That's part of it. Idea—La Crima's Embryo—modifies people as long as they have 'materials' and provide the 'concept.' Even if La Crima doesn't have the required knowledge, the Superior Embryo just makes it happen."

While someone like Rascal needed Machina to be able to design things, for La Crima's Embryo took care of it for them.

"It's a power that lets them create tons of freakish combatants...but its most effective power is the ability to heal."

"I see," Zhang said with a nod. That alone was enough for him to understand what was going on with them.

"They can use the human body itself as material to create a healthy version of it. Even if its something as serious as a terminal tumor or a neurological disorder, as long as it's not a missin' part like my arm, La Crima can fix it up."

Basically, Rascal's explanation revealed that Idea was an Embryo that healed diseases or wounds not by magic, but by surgical and internal medicine.

"La Crima's treatments saved a whole bunch of tian lives. And that means that indirectly, many worlder Masters who were close to tians are indebted to them too. Embryos that can be repurposed for healin' are pretty rare, after all."

And since the main Superior Jobs with healing skills were currently in the hands of Sefirot, the cult in Altar, and Sechs, there was a lot of demand for abnormally powerful healing abilities. La Crima often claimed to be a merchant of life rather than a merchant of death, and that wasn't an entirely incorrect claim.

"La Crima's got lots of sympathizers because of that. They're part of our clan, but they command enough forces to be the head of their own org. Even if you disregard the Ideas, nearly half of our supporting members answer to them. La Crima isn't actually that good at leadin', though, so they make up for it with all their Ideas that handle business for them."

Along with Rascal, who was managing multiple front companies, La Crima served as one of the wheels that kept IF running.

"Ah..." said Zhang. "But is it really a good idea for the organization to have someone who commands forces that match yours? Wouldn't this lead to conflict between the subfactions?" he asked, thinking back on the leadership of Mirage.

"Ha ha..." Rascal replied with a cold chuckle. "Well, besides me and La Crima, *everyone in the clan is either a combatant or an agent*."

His expression made the significance behind this statement obvious: without La Crima, Rascal's workload would be so immense it might kill him.

With that, Zhang came to know the biggest reason La Crima had been invited into their clan and thought, *Those who run organizations never have it easy, do they?*

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 20
by Sakon Kaidou

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Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2023 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2023

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21. Godslayer

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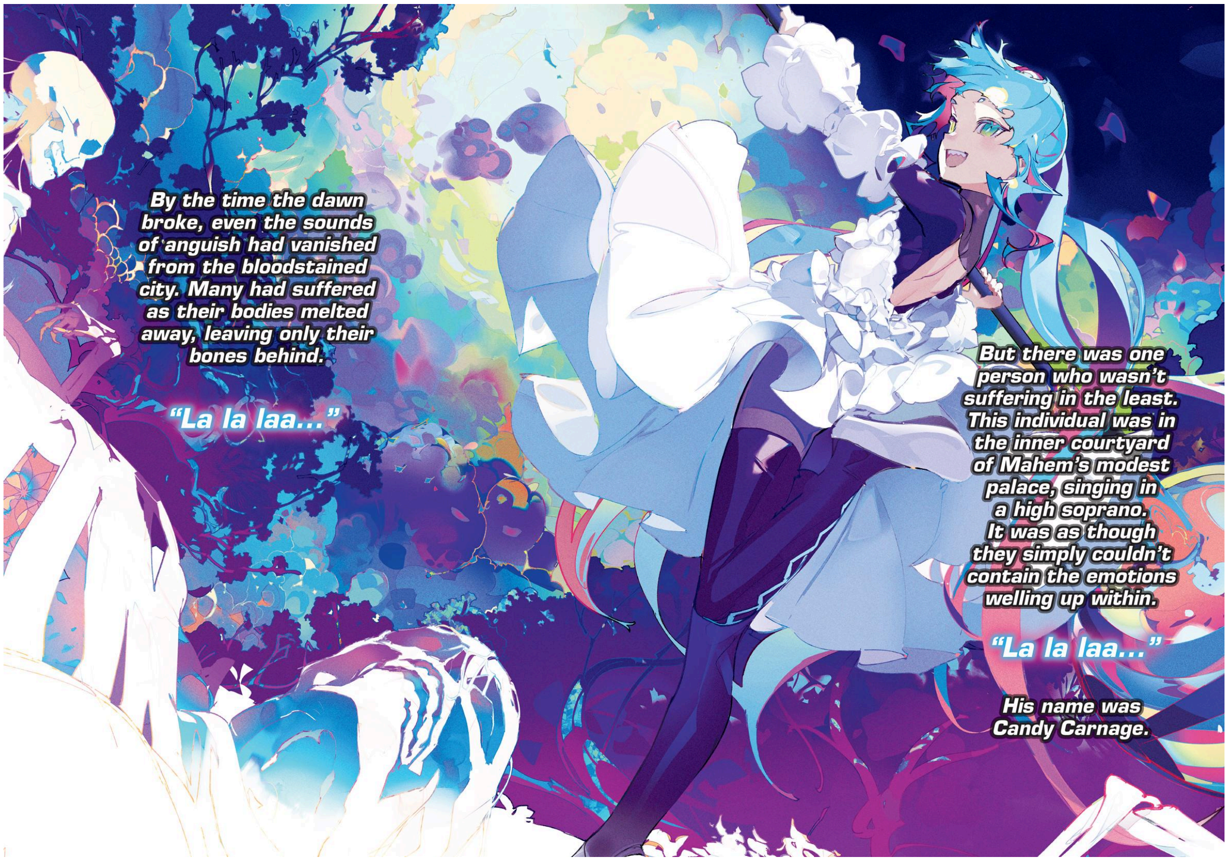


By the time the dawn broke, even the sounds of anguish had vanished from the bloodstained city. Many had suffered as their bodies melted away, leaving only their bones behind.

"La la laa…"

But there was one person who wasn't suffering in the least. This individual was in the inner courtyard of Mahem's modest palace, singing in a high soprano. It was as though they simply couldn't contain the emotions welling up within.

"La la laa…"

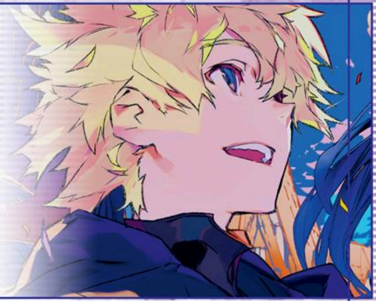
His name was Candy Carnage.

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

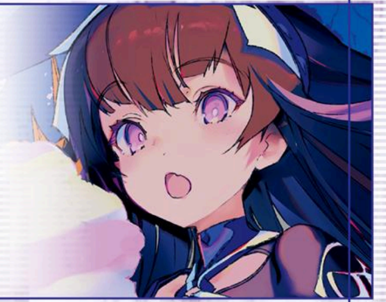
A college freshman who gets caught up in various incidents within *Infinite Dendrogram.* Though he is generally mild-mannered, he has a strong will that causes him to fight for his goals and never give up on them.



Nemesis

Nemesis

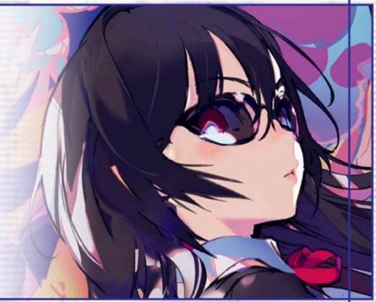
Ray's Embryo manifested as this girl. Nemesis acts as Ray's weapon by taking up the form of armaments such as a greatsword, halberd, shield, pinwheel, mirror, and twin swords. She is also a notable glutton.



Marie

Marie Adler/Nagisa Ichimiya

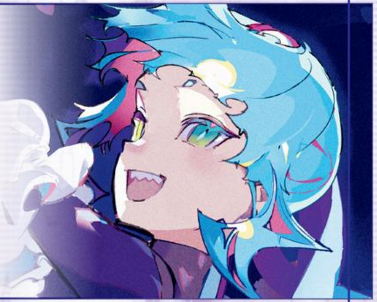
A player who accumulated a wealth of knowledge through her work as a Journalist for DIN—the Dendro Information Network. She is role-playing as the main character of her own manga, *Into the Shadow*.



Candy

Candy Carnage

The King of Plagues who destroyed a country and shook the world of *Infinite Dendrogram.* Though this act sent him to the gaol, he recently broke out alongside King of Crime.



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Prologue: Day Two Tournament

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

It was the day after Lei-Lei thoroughly defeated me, and I'd somehow ended up fighting an Overlord.

I'd gotten my clan to come pick me up from the forest and had a Bishop of the national faith treat the wounds covering my body. I still had some lasting injury-based debuffs after all the treatment, but apparently they'd go away in a few days if I just used healing items regularly. The men of faith there said that the Lunar Society's clinics could treat my wounds better than they did, but I was afraid of getting deeper into debt with Miss Eldritch, so that was a "no" from me.

Also, I couldn't help but note how magnanimous they were being. Not everyone would recommend their clients go to their direct competition.

So yeah, my wounds didn't end up being a big deal, and Silver had suffered so little damage that it was covered by his auto-repair—he'd be able to gallop again in just a few days.

The way we'd been thrown into a sudden predicament had gotten me pretty worried for a bit there, but I'd say it ended well.

Anyway, I would be watching The Tournaments starting from today—which was day two.

The member of our clan participating today was B3, and she was currently waiting for the duel to start, clad in her usual combat gear—full-body armor and shields in both hands.

I was also familiar with her opponent—a wolf-eared woman dressed like a barbarian and holding a spear.

"This is the finale of The Tournaments' second day! It's Rosa the Bone-Eater versus Barbaroy Bad Burn the Crushing Canopy!" said the announcer.

Yes—B3 was up against the subleader of Altar's third place clan, K&R—Nobushi Princess Rosa.

"I know these two well," I said.

"Indeed," said Nemesis. "We've fought alongside B3 many times, even before we formed our clan, and we fought Rosa once before going on to watch her fight Juliet."

Nemesis and I truly knew what the two combatants were capable of.

"Fight!"

But that was exactly why I gasped at their immediate movements following that announcement.

Rosa used Gashadokuro's ult to equip an exoskeleton that enhanced her STR and AGI, and followed it up with her job ult as Nobushi Princess—A Kill Supreme, the super powerful attack that could only be used as a first strike.

However, B3 saw it coming and used Heaven's Weight to shave off some of Rosa's power and speed. Then she used Astro Guard to increase her defense and ultimately sacrificed her shield to protect against the attack.

As Rosa's movements became sluggish, B3 used Atlas's ult to retaliate with an obscenely powerful strike using her remaining shield. However, Rosa avoided it by using the MVP reward she'd used in her fight against Juliet—the one that let her evade fatal attacks and teleport—to get behind B3 and attack her with Backslayer, a skill which enhanced attacks from behind.

As though she'd been expecting it, B3 aimed her left arm behind her and used Gauntlet Trigger—a skill possessed by her full-body armor MVP reward, Magnum Colossus—to fire the gauntlet and offset Rosa's attack.

With a loud clash, the two were flung apart.

Not even a minute had passed since the duel had begun, but the battle was already at peak intensity as they played each and every ace they had hiding up their sleeves. They each knew the cards that the other had on hand, and as a result they didn't hold anything back.

This was an exchange of blows where a single mistake could spell the end of the duel, but I felt like they'd expected everything that had happened so far. They only used moves they were both aware of, making this battle kinda align with standard shogi tactics.

And so, I expected that from this point on, they would abandon that standard and start to use moves their opponent hadn't seen.

"GRAAAH!" Once again, Rosa was the one to move first. Using Instant Equip, she summoned a spear into her empty hand and threw the newly equipped weapon at B3.

Given the choice between evasion and defense, B3 chose her usual approach and braced herself to endure the attack. She also used Instant Equip to take out a new shield—a massive shield meant for giants that she'd used before—and held it up like a wall straight in the path of the spear hurtling toward her.

When the attack and defense met, the audience—myself included—expected a loud, high-pitched clang...but it never came.

The source of the sound had *vanished*.

My attention still fixed on the stage, I saw B3's eyes widen in shock.

This was something that I wouldn't normally be able to see, since her head was always completely hidden by her helm.

Basically...her face was fully exposed now. Her shields, her armor—all of her equipment had been removed.

"A spear that removes gear?!" I exclaimed. Was this a new MVP reward? Maybe an item custom-made from rare materials?

Rosa's spear had vanished—but in exchange, all of B3's gear had been removed and was now lying on the stage.

B3, now clad only in her underwear, was completely defenseless. Rosa accelerated toward her.

B3's Armor Giant and Shield Giant were sturdy tank jobs, but they relied heavily on the defense of her equipment. With all of that removed, her toughness was greatly reduced.

Rosa had been planning since the start to end this battle with this gear-removing weapon. She'd played the known cards in her own hand to bait out B3's—including her Embryo ult—and then used the spear. Rosa must've guessed that if B3's armor was removed from the equation, their respective job configurations and her own Superior Job would give her the advantage in sheer physical ability, and that would allow her to win.

As Rosa approached, B3 held up both her hands as though putting up whatever meager resistance she could manage, but...

"Oh," Nemesis and I said in unison, knowing full well what that stance meant. We also understood the look on B3's face, which had shifted from shock to a savage grin.

Thus, Rosa came within just three metels of B3...

...and, still leaning forward in her charging stance, she was slammed straight onto the floor of the stage.

“HUH?!” Now, Rosa was the one overcome with shock. The spear that was supposed to run B3 through had instead been shoved to the ground, along with the arm holding it. Try as she might, she couldn’t raise it up—in fact, it just continued to sink farther.

I could tell by Rosa’s expression that if she were able to, she would’ve said the extra gravity from Heaven’s Weight should be easy for her to overcome.

But this wasn’t that—or rather, it wasn’t the Heaven’s Weight that Rosa knew.

This was the result of Territory compression—a trump card passed down to B3 by Fuso, and one that she’d used during the peace conference, in the battle against King of Beasts...and Rosa had no idea it existed until now. With its range narrowed, the gravity field greatly exceeded the normal five hundred times multiplier—making the gravity five *thousand* times stronger.

Faced with such an immense increase in weight, even a vanguard SJ like Rosa was stopped in her tracks and afflicted with the Binding debuff.

B3 looked down at her opponent, saying nothing. Using this compression technique also fixed her in place as well.

But the duel was already as good as over.

“Nnghh...ugh...ghhh...?!” Rosa spat out blood and sank farther down onto the stage.

Unable to put up any resistance against the massive increase in gravity, her body was gradually being destroyed.

Back when this effect was used on King of Beasts, it had slowed her down, but ultimately didn’t have much of an effect. That was because King of Beasts was an exception among exceptions. The bodies of animals weren’t that tough normally.

Nobushi Princess might have been an SJ, but she was specialized in ambushing and thus didn’t have the toughness to withstand this level of gravity.

Rosa wasn’t the only one who’d been trying to force her enemy to play everything in her hand.

B3 must’ve been planning to end the battle like this from the moment Rosa shed the STR-enhancing exoskeleton she created with her ult. Rosa might’ve been able to weather the five thousand times stronger gravity if she’d still had it on, but alas.

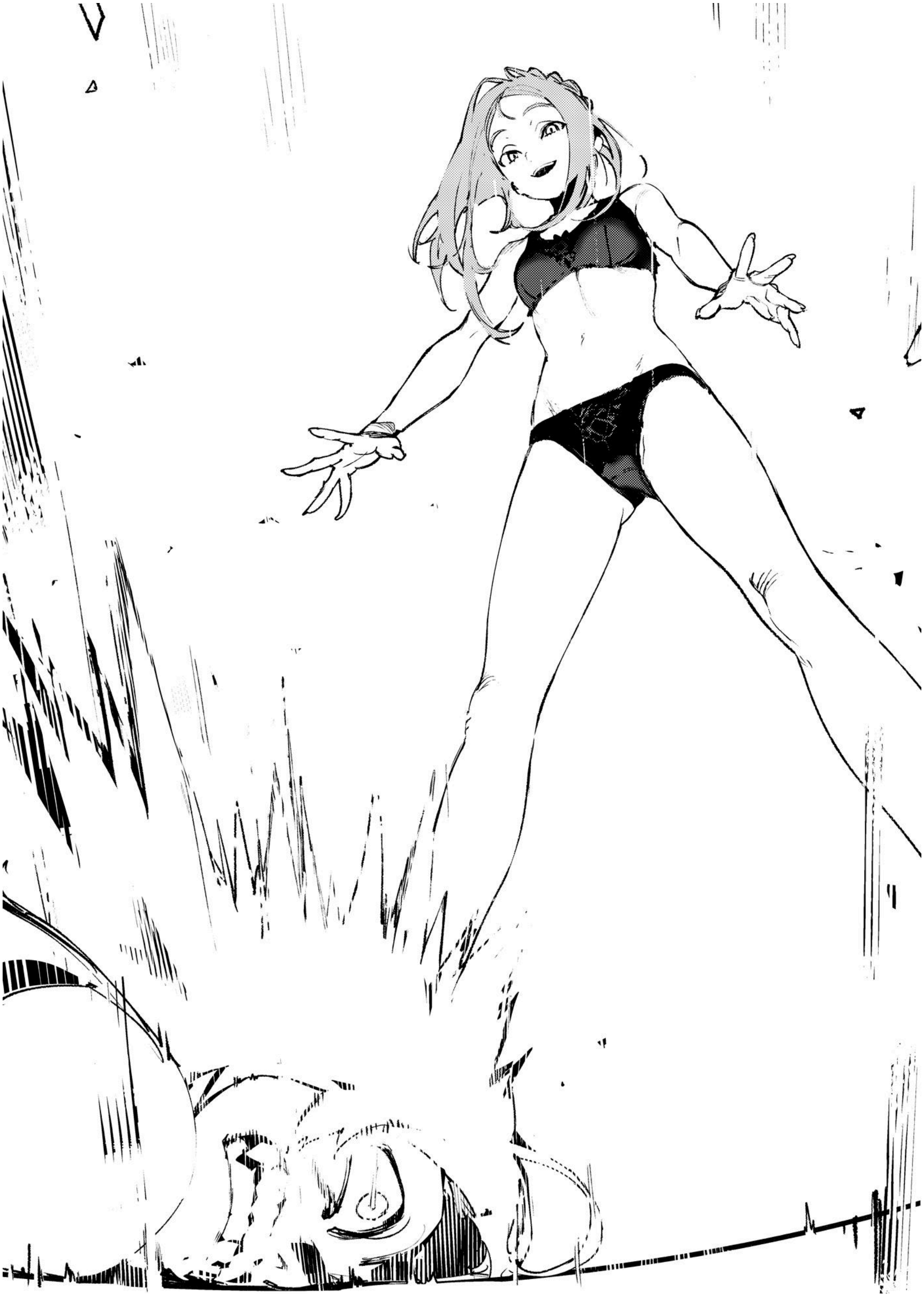
Both of them had been hiding aces up their sleeves.

However, while Rosa’s was meant to bring her closer to victory, B3’s was meant to *ensure* her victory.

You could say that that was the real deciding factor...

“Down, doggy.”

...and, following that insult from B3, Rosa was crushed to death.



◇

“Is it just me, or did Rosa go out wearing the kind of face you should never show in public?” Nemesis asked.

“That clearly made her snap,” I said. “Though B3 was also stripped to her underwear in public, so they’re kinda even, I guess.”

“Hrmm...both of them just keep getting their prides wounded.” This would probably be added onto the long list of grudges between them. From what I could tell, a lot must’ve happened in their shared past as PKs.

The duel’s over, but they’re still holding their weapons and glaring at each other, I thought.

“Dear me...hm? Ray, what is that in your hand?”

“A betting ticket. I put money on B3.” Just like you could at every event in the City of Duels, you could also gamble on who would win The Tournaments.

In standard duels involving just two people, you would only bet on one or the other right before the match began, but for The Tournaments, the betting took place when the preliminaries ended and the finals started. You essentially voted on who of those remaining would be the ultimate winner.

Here on day two, the absolute favorite to win was Rosa, since she was a high-ranking duelist and an SJ—but the actual winner was B3.

As a result of betting on someone who wasn’t a favorite, I got a pretty big payout. Specifically, the hundred million lir I bet became over five hundred million.

“I fear for our financial sense,” said Nemesis.

“Well, I still had a good bit of the lir I got by selling that metal material,” I objected.

“You are *so*... How many times have you spent such large sums on gambling at this point?”

“I mean, if I save up enough money, I might be able to actually buy the base we’re just renting right now.”

“You do understand that claiming you will save up money to buy a house via *gambling* is blatantly absurd?”

“Good point.”

Regardless, with B3 securing victory without issue, there would now be a closing ceremony for day two, after which we would form a party with her and challenge the UBM she won.

“We were unable to make it to yesterday’s battle. Let us make up for that today.”

“Yeah.” There were eight more Tournament days left. I didn’t know how many times we—Death Period—would get to challenge the UBMs, but I would give my all to help the members who were doing what they could in this contest.

Silently, I reaffirmed that the best we could do right now was improve ourselves as much as possible. That was what was necessary to seize the future we wanted in the coming rematch against Dryfe.

Chapter One: Tournament Day Three

Gideon the City of Duels, Central Arena

The results of the first and second days of The Tournaments were, to put it bluntly, within the realm of expectation.

The person who had won the right to challenge Stern Face-Tender Heart, Sasage, on the first day was a *Superior*, Lei-Lei the Prodigal of Feasts, who had gone on to fight it right away and won the MVP reward with little effort on her part.

On day two, the right to challenge Fortcrushing Mawdragon, No Mercy, had just been decided in a heated battle between two of the kingdom's strongest PKs. Ultimately, the combatant who'd managed to eke out a victory was Barbaroy Bad Burn.

In the UBM fight after that, she fought alongside her clan leader, Ray Starling the Unbreakable, and four other Masters who seemed to be newbies. They went on to win and acquire the MVP reward.

Indeed, there had been two UBM battles so far, and both of their MVP rewards had been claimed by Death Period.

Because of this, not to mention the way Lei-Lei and Barbaroy had fought, the power and fearsomeness of the clan became known across the kingdom. On account of the name and their combat style, though, a lot of people mistakenly assumed they must be a pretty shady group.

But despite all of that, common opinion held that there was no chance of Death Period winning on the third day too. After all, the Master they'd sent to fight on that third day was nothing like the two who claimed victory in the others.

He was neither a *Superior* nor a well-known PK—merely a Master who could still be called a newbie. He may have won the four preliminary battles and made it to the finals, but most thought that he wouldn't go beyond that.

The third day's final lineup boasted names like AT WIKI, holder of the magic-focused Superior Job King of Glaciers, as well as Adham "The

Thousand and One Night," and Bolhead "The Mythbeast Circus."

Because of this, the odds of this nameless Death Period member winning were believed to be low—and the possible payout for anyone who bet on him was so high that he could have been considered a potential dark horse.

However, almost nobody thought he was capable of defeating anyone else in the finals.

Interestingly, though, a few people were still placing large bets on this nameless member of Death Period.

One of them was the clan's leader who'd won big on the previous day—Ray Starling.

The others were four Masters who had no connection to Death Period.

All of them had been defeated by this same nameless Master in the preliminaries.

◇◆

A caster clad in a white robe panted with ragged breath, deeply drained by his battle against the opponent before him.

But it wasn't his body or his magic that had been down the most—it was his mind.

The white-robed man was King of Glaciers, AT WIKI.

He was the leader of the fifth-ranking clan—Wiki Editors: Kingdom of Altar Branch. Just as the name suggested, this was a branch of the clan that had set up shop in many countries for the purpose of editing *Infinite Dendrogram's* wiki. As someone who'd reached as high as sixth in the kill rankings, AT WIKI was no doubt a force to be reckoned with.

He had also managed the impressive feat of forming a party that went all the way down to the 45th floor of the Tomb Labyrinth—and recently, after the throne of King of Glaciers was suddenly vacated, he'd taken up the mantle and acquired the power of a Superior Job.

AT WIKI possessed a wealth of combat experience and knowledge, and thanks to his status as an SJ and an impressive set of gear, he was a combatant who could rival any common vanguard. In today's Tournament, he was undoubtedly the favorite to win.

And yet, here he was, at a loss for how to proceed against a nameless newbie.

Nine attempts, all of them failed, he thought. *Trying to affect his vision did nothing.*

He knew that he was up against a member of a high-ranking clan, Death Period. But according to his investigations, Death Period was a clan that was so high up because it was made up of—no, because it just *had* a few elite members.

Four *Superiors*. Famous PKs. And the Unbreakable, who stumbled across unusual incidents and had so far been lucky enough to deal with them.

The other members were either excess baggage or simply there to inflate the member count—newbies who only joined the clan because they simply happened to be accompanying the leader during Franklin's Game.

However, this particular member—the one AT was fighting right now—was nothing like that.

"White Field." The moment AT prepared to use a spell, his opponent snapped his fingers.

That single action made the ultimate skill of the high-rank Cryomancer job vanish like mist.

"I'm sorry," said AT's opponent—a boy so beautiful you could mistake him for some kind of snow fairy. "I'm not very fond of ice."

Clad in brass-colored clothing, accompanied by his Embryo—a succubus Sentinel—and commanding a landdragon called Hexahorn Grand Dragon, the boy was smiling.

"It reminds me of a rather unpleasant person...and more importantly, if you used that on me, I would lose."

He maintained that likable smile even as he said that, but it made AT's insides freeze.

He has no trouble shutting down even a high-rank job ult, huh? This wasn't the first time the boy had canceled AT's magic. He'd done this a total of ten times now.

AT knew that he was capable of this feat because of the MVP reward on his hands. He couldn't read any details of the item with Identification, but it was clear that it canceled magic whenever he just snapped his fingers.

If that was all it was, though, AT would be able to counter it. The move didn't cancel magic automatically—instead, the user had to deliberately perform an action to use it. This meant that AT could circumvent it simply by casting magic when his opponent didn't expect it.

The gap between their stats was obvious, and a single spell that connected would be enough to snowball into complete victory.

However, that one single spell AT needed to connect hadn't done so even once.

His opponent somehow grasped when he was using magic even if AT didn't say a word—even when he cast after using an item skill that hid him from sight, the boy still snapped his fingers at the most optimal time to make the magic scatter.

He was reading AT like a book, forcing him to waste MP over and over. *How does he know exactly how I'm playing my cards...?!*

"I knew you would climb up the ladder of this third Tournament, so I watched every single one of your matches up until this point," the beautiful boy replied as though he *read AT's mind*. "Unless you use something you haven't used in any match so far, don't think you can outsmart me."

AT was silent. It was clearly a provocation, but he knew he couldn't act on it.

After all, AT had also seen his opponent's matches—and *in all of them, this boy was the one who negated the enemy's attacks and emerged victorious.* The boy's combat style could be described as "antioffensive."

In competitive card game terms, he played with what was called a "lock deck" or "permission deck." That was how much he restricted his opponents' freedom in combat.

AT could clearly see that in the three battles he'd witnessed, starting with the boy's fifth. In that battle, the boy's opponent was Bolhead the Mythbeast Circus, a High Tamer who commanded monsters, just like he did. The monsters Bolhead had were slightly stronger than the boy's, and he also had an Embryo that enhanced tamed creatures.

Everyone felt Bolhead would come out on top if they clashed directly...but they never did.

The boy made the first move and Charmed Bolhead's own monsters into killing him.

His opponent in the quarterfinal was Pyromancer Adham the Thousand and One Night.

After seeing the previous battle, Adham entered the arena equipped with gear that countered Charm. However, he had his magic negated, just as AT was experiencing right now, and was trampled when the boy's succubus and landdragon closed the distance between them.

In the semifinal, he fought Pound Boxer Hellmask, who'd been a nobody before this Tournament, but showed great prowess as he clawed his way up the ranks. He had a fighting style focused on closing distance with nimble footwork and pulverizing the opponent's head. Like Adham, Hellmask had also equipped something to counter Charm, and it was widely believed that the boy would certainly lose this time.

Clad in body-enhancing Type Arms armor, Hellmask flanked the boy and threw a single punch that could kill him instantly.

However, the fist was stopped by the boy's brass-colored coat—or, rather, the Orichalcum Armory Slime that was disguised as an ordinary coat.

The liquid metal slime negated physical attacks completely and stopped Hellmask's hand. It couldn't be destroyed even by this deadly fist.

That was when the succubus showered Hellmask in a multitude of debuffs besides Charm—and when they had all affected him, the slime sliced him apart.

Thus, the boy reached the finals.

And now that he was actually facing him, AT clearly understood...

It's better not to think of this as fighting a newbie. This boy read his opponent's moves ahead of time, stole the pawns his opponent brought to the field, canceled magic, blocked physical attacks, showered his enemies in debuffs, and finally finished them off.

He was a monstrous being who crushed his enemies before they could even show a fifth of their power.

He was a monstrosity who might not have had a Superior Job, but had truly taken his place in the realm of pre-*Superiors*.

In a way, he might've been even less like a newbie than the Unbreakable.

I need to carefully look for a way to win, AT thought. *I still have the stat advantage.*

There was no need to respond to the boy's provocations, and the debuffs that he'd used on the previous opponents wouldn't work on AT.

AT's Embryo was called Pale Night's Falling Light, Tianren Wushuai.

It was based on the five signs of a heavenly being's decay described in Buddhist scriptures, and its core trait was countering debuffs. A Type World Embryo, Tianren Wushuai negated all debuffs afflicting AT himself and five nearby targets selected by him. Additionally, it built up the debuffs and *returned* stronger versions to the ones who sent them.

Tianren Wushuai was debuff-focused retribution-type Embryo in its sixth form. This Embryo was what had allowed his party to make it so far down in the Tomb Labyrinth, which was full of fearsome debuffs.

And because AT had this Embryo, using debuffs on him was a mistake that would ensure the aggressor's defeat. The main reason he'd even gone after the Orb offered on day three was because he thought he could win against the monster contained within it, which used curse-based debuffs.

However, it was *because* the boy knew AT had this power that he didn't use any actual debuffs. You couldn't fall into someone's trap if you knew what they were capable of.

Thus, the battle between Masters had turned into a repetitive exercise. AT used magic in the hopes of finally landing a blow, while the boy prevented him from doing so.

The only thing that could break this equilibrium were their monsters, aiming straight for them.

"MHOOOOOO!" One creature let out a bellow, while the other was silent. The landdragon tried to charge toward AT, but a giant lump of ice stopped it.

The ice was actually a Permafrost Golem AT built using a skill. Golem creation as an art was the forte of jobs practicing earth magic, and this was the ice version of that. This golem was on the higher end of Pure-Dragon tier in stats and was specialized in endurance, making it capable of acting as a wall against the landdragon's attacks.

AT WIKI's magical attacks were negated, but so were the physical assaults of the boy's landdragon.

One could say that this battle was a stalemate, and that they were equally matched.

The succubus, the landdragon, the slime... I see that their stats are enhanced, but even with the buffs, they don't surpass Permafrost.

Just like the boy's passive skills enhanced his creatures, so too was AT's ice golem, Permafrost, enhanced by AT's passives as King of Glaciers, and he could heal it by transferring some of his own magic to him.

Additionally, Wallvisage Mind, Banwall, an MVP reward he'd acquired a while ago, had a skill that enhanced the defense of anything defending him.

AT silently looked at his opponent. AT was the head of the fifth-ranking clan and specialized in group battles, but even as a solo unit he was a jack-of-all-trades who could fulfill the roles of tank, attacker, and healer.

And that was exactly why the boy, who could fight him as an equal, was so menacing.

Based on what Identification tells me, he's not hiding much in terms of gear. Besides the antimagic MVP reward and that slime, every item just gives a bonus to his minion capacity. Makes sense—without those, it would be difficult for him to field two Pure-Dragon-tier monsters.

Duel rules prevented using party slots for monsters—any creatures used in duels had to fit within one's minion capacity. With The Tournaments being no different in that regard, the boy's gear was heavily focused on increasing minion capacity to overcome this problem.

If you take away what they got from buffs, the two monsters have stats that are below average for their species, AT thought. *They must've only recently evolved into a higher form.*

During the stalemate, he used Reveal to read the boy's cards as thoroughly as he could.

I know about his jobs. The only mystery...is that Embryo.

The succubus standing at the boy's side—she could fly, but didn't seem to be using that ability to fly over Permafrost to attack AT. She was only casting healing magic on the landdragon.

But she was wary of AT and would be prepared if he came close.

She used Charm, healing magic, and a bunch of other skills, didn't she? Her core trait isn't clear. Maybe she has a learning or stocking skill? That would make their power pretty low, though...

Embryos had a tendency to lose output strength in compensation as they became able to do more things. And if they didn't become weaker, they began demanding higher costs from their Masters.

So far, it didn't look like the boy was paying much of an external cost, which made it safe to assume that the skills themselves had a weak output.

Is he hiding something? The Embryo hadn't done much in the matches so far, but that was exactly why AT suspected she was holding something back. This was the final, so AT also expected the boy would play some trump card related to her—perhaps a skill that required time before it could be used.

In that case, I should probably act first. This means responding to his provocation...but I have no choice.

AT extended his hands toward Permafrost's back—as well as the landdragon and the boy behind it.

The boy prepared to snap his fingers, but then stopped.

He realized that AT *wasn't casting a spell*.

A moment later, something scattered before the boy's eyes.

It was the slime that the boy wore as clothes. It had moved to protect him, and a part of the creature had been blown away.

"...I see," the boy said in sudden understanding, looking at AT's hands—and the things that were clutched in them.

AT had used Instant Equip to take out two guns.

They were not normal guns, however—they were *magic guns*.

The job that had focused on crafting these kinds of weapons had been lost to time, so they were in limited supply—a treasure that could only be unearthed as archaeological finds from ancient ruins.

And AT was now holding such a rarity in each hand.

The one on the right fired light magic—lasers—while the one on the left fired wind magic—invisible bullets.

He'd acquired these magic guns using the money he'd earned from countless quests and kills, and there were two reasons why he'd gone for weapons imbued with elements that weren't ice, his usual speciality.

The first reason was that he wanted to be prepared against anyone his element didn't work on. Second, he wanted to have a means of attacking in situations where magic itself was unusable.

And as had just been proven, the boy wasn't able to stop these magic guns from firing.

This meant that AT now had a means of attacking him.

It was worth keeping these a secret until now. Even this won't be enough to finish him off, though.

The gunfire had basically taken the boy by surprise, but he'd remained unharmed himself by getting his slime to protect him. This meant that even if he couldn't negate the actual firing, he was still able to read what AT would do.

AT kept firing, but with the slime going all in on the defensive, his attacks seemed to have little effect. It was a metal slime that carried the Orichalcum name, so it must've had a high resistance to magic attacks—or maybe the MVP reward with the magic-negating skill also came with a bonus effect that increased the boy's magic resistance.

AT could keep firing like this, but it didn't seem to be nearly enough firepower to take the boy down.

Which was why...

I guess I'll try something else. The technique is still in the experimental stages, but...

...AT fixed his eyes on the boy and began circulating his magic.

The boy responded by snapping his fingers, but nothing happened.

Magic overflowed from AT's body, quickly reducing the temperature within the dueling barrier. It was as though he'd managed to actually use the White Field spell that the boy had canceled earlier.

"This is..." The boy's expression became puzzled. Of course it would. After all, unlike the guns, *this* was clearly cryomancy.

And yet, he couldn't cancel it. The temperature continued to drop.

This was because it *was* magic, but it wasn't a magic *skill*.

After spending lots of time experimenting with various things here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, AT arrived upon a certain bit of info. Job skills were basically guided processes that were automatically activated when you chose to use them. The job system provided assistance so that everything would occur as directed.

However, he knew that it was possible to achieve effects *without that guidance*—to use your MP, the magic in your body, without using a job skill.

It was said to be the pinnacle of technique, arrived upon by tians who took jobs from the The One series—the modification and creation of magic.

At the end of his testing and information gathering, AT had been able to take a step into that realm and craft an awfully simple original spell. What he was doing right now was the equivalent of a "Hello, World!" script—the most basic of all basics.

He merely converted MP into cold.

It had no amplification, no fixed direction, and not even a form. And it wasn't even worth comparing its efficiency to using magic through a job-assisted skill—it was outrageously expensive.

It was too primitive to really be called magic at all, and so simple it didn't even have a name.

But that was exactly why those gloves couldn't break it apart.

Perhaps they could negate a magical effect at the moment the boy snapped his fingers, but AT was continuously turning magic into cold. It could be said that he was essentially using an extremely primitive spell with a short recast time over and over. There was no point in stopping just *one* of them.

That MVP reward likely targets and cancels individual skills. That means that it can't prevent this quick, repeating casting!

AT WIKI was entirely correct.

Cold filled the barrier, but the boy didn't snap his fingers again. He also understood that it wouldn't work against this new strategy.

And so...frost began forming on the landdragon and the face of the boy protected by the slime.

The boy was silent. As he began to freeze, the beautiful young man looked even more like an ethereal snow fairy.

However, the cold was bringing him closer to death. He wasn't like AT, who had a passive skill for cold resistance as King of Glaciers, or an Embryo that made him immune to the Freeze debuff.

If the temperature continued to plummet like this, AT's victory would be guaranteed.

"I see that top rankers really aren't people to be trifled with. I'll admit—I didn't expect this."

In this enclosed world, now so cold it felt like his very breath might freeze, the boy still spoke the same way as he had before.

"You have a lot of cards in your hand. I thought the same about King of Beasts when we recently fought, but those on the top really do have a huge variety of options at their disposal. How enlightening."

The boy smiled...

"I myself haven't shown everything I've got either."

...and the succubus followed up his words with a skill activation.

"Union Jack—Dragon-Devil-Man." At that moment, the boy disappeared.

In his place, there now stood the imposing figure of a man. He had devilish wings, and in his right hand he held a lance that looked like a tangle of dragons' horns.

His species and build did not resemble the boy's at all, but he still wore the golden clothing, the MVP reward was still equipped on his hands, and his beauty had not changed even though he seemed to have aged in the blink of an eye.

A Sentinel fusion skill! He, the landdragon, and the Embryo had become one.

AT instantly understood that the three's stats were combined to create a single entity stronger than the base.

This is bad! The moment that thought crossed his head, an intense clang rang out.

Permafrost, which had been able to withstand the landdragon's attacks, began to crack from just a single hit from the fused Dragon-Devil-Man.

It combines their stats—and even their skills! That includes his passives as a tamer and the Sentinel's self buffs! No, it's not just that... The Enchanter single-unit buffs are there too! Normally it was pointless for anyone with a job in the tamer grouping to have Enchanter among their sub-jobs. Skills from the enchanter grouping couldn't be used when you had a tamer grouping job set as your main. That was because they weren't generic skills, but instead specific to different groupings.

However, if this fusion skill had the effect of joining the stats of the fused creatures *and* making all their skills usable...it would enable the use of job skills from different groupings too. That would mean that he'd be buffed by his passives as a tamer, the Sentinel's self buffs, *and* Enchanter single-unit buffs...

This is bad. He's completely surpassed my golem! The Dragon-Devil-Man's stats were overwhelming Permafrost. AT was still releasing magical cold, but with the Dragon-Devil-Man being as powerful as he was, it would take some time to freeze him to death.

There was no doubt that he would destroy Permafrost and kill AT before that happened.

AT tried firing the magic guns to keep him away, but the Dragon-Devil-Man defended against the shots by just turning the handle of his lance without even looking at him.

Neither the guns nor the cold could kill him.

AT might've been able to stop him in place and eventually destroy him if he could use his cryomancy as King of Glaciers, but that was a bad move as long as his opponent still had that MVP reward.

But then, AT's eyes widened as he realized something.

The Dragon-Devil-Man was holding the handle and swinging the lance with *both* of his hands.

I could do it now! At this moment, AT WIKI realized he might be able to make an early move and cast a spell before he was defeated.

Ice Age—the job ult of King of Glaciers—was still unavailable to him due to his lower level, but with some enhancement from another skill, White Field should be able to deliver a similar amount of power.

"Magic Power Magnification...!" AT put away the gun he held in his left hand and began focusing magic in that hand instead. At the same time, he fired a volley of lasers using the gun in his right to keep his opponent busy.

If the spell went through, that would be fine by him. And even if the opponent canceled it, he'd be forced to free his left hand and snap his fingers to do so—an obvious opening. AT would use that to allow Permafrost to recover and restabilize the battle.

With that in mind, he cast the spell.

"White Field!" AT's voice rang out.

Hm...? But the moment he activated the skill, he noticed the state of the Dragon-Devil-Man's left hand.

He'd let go of the lance—AT had expected that much.

However, the hand was in a different *shape*. Instead of snapping his fingers, the Dragon-Devil-Man was spreading his left hand open wide.

And then...he grasped it shut.

At that moment, AT's body exploded from within.

"Wh-What...?" AT instantly suffered a fatal amount of damage that scattered his entire body, immediately reducing his HP to 0. He was defeated without even knowing what had happened in the end.

There was, however, one thing he did understand.

His opponent had been laying a trap for him from the moment he started using the lance with both hands.

And as though to prove this point the victorious enemy was smiling.

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Tournament Day Three
Reward: *Name Unknown (Presumed Type: Undead)*.
Core Traits: *Poltergeist, Curse-Based Debuffs*.
Winner: *Lost Heart Rook Holmes*.

Interlude: Tournament Day Four

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

Yesterday, the third day of The Tournaments, victory was claimed by our guy Rook.

We didn't fight the UBM he won though. He said he would fight it by himself once he was ready, and he was busy preparing for it today too. Rook was determined to do it solo and seemed to have his reasons, so all I could really do was pray it worked out for him.

Since he was a dark horse, though, my bet on him won me so much money that I went and bought him a dozen Brooches, Elixirs, and High Spirit Waters. Hopefully they would help him against the UBM.

Anyway, today was the fourth day, and the member of our clan participating this time was Io. Since she was heavily specialized in physical attack power, if she landed a hit, she could do heavy damage even to those above her.

But unfortunately...

"Pulverized. Cracked. Blasted... I was the one who ended up shattered..."

She was now laying her head on the restaurant table, clearly in low spirits.

"You did your best. It was a pretty bad matchup, huh?" I asked.

"Whatever was I to do against an opponent such as that...?"

"Wow, the fight was so one-sided it's making you talk weird," said Fujinon.

Io had lost on her third fight, and the player who'd beaten her was Phara, a K&R member who used a barrier that deflected weapon attacks. This barrier negated all and any attacks from Io's Five-Ring, letting Phara fire arrows from relative safety and not giving Io a chance to do anything.

Io could've gotten through the barrier if she'd just used her hands instead of weapons, but that would've reduced the fight to a simple comparison of levels and combat experience. Winning against a battle-hardened Tenchi warrior without using any weapons would've been a challenge.

So yeah, Io had ended up suffering a total defeat and was really down now, so her friends and I were holding a little consolation party for her.

"Heh heh heh...our clan's winning streak has been ended...by *me*. I am easily the weakest woman in Death Period...a real disgrace, I am..."

"N-No, you're not..." said Kasumi.

"Again, why are you talking like that?" said Fujinon.

Mm-hmm...Io's not acting anything like she did when we celebrated Rook's win yesterday, I thought. *Also, her words kinda sting. I mean, I dropped out on my second fight...*

"And this was a matter of compatibility," Fujinon continued. "Though I really didn't expect it to be *this* bad based on what I saw last time."

She and Kasumi continued to console Io, but something she said caught my attention.

"Last time?" I asked.

"Some time ago, the three of us participated in an arena event. Our first fight was against Juliet's team, though, so we were completely crushed and lost right away."

Oh, I'd actually heard about this. If I recalled correctly, it was an aquatic battle event where participants had to wear swimsuits.

"The final match was between Juliet's team and a K&R team," Fujinon continued, "which included Phara, so..."

"Oh, I see." Even though Io knew what Phara was capable of, it hadn't helped her when they'd fought.

"If only I was matched with the K&R member who protects against magic instead of weapons..." Io said.

They had that too? I thought. *No surprise there, I guess. K&R is a big clan.* "Anyway, that's it for Death Period's fourth day attempt, right?"

"Yeah, and with none of us taking part tomorrow or the day after, our next appearance will be Marie on the seventh day," said Fujinon.

And with there being ten days of The Tournaments, this meant that the first half of the entire event was over for us.

"I've got college, though, so I won't be able to watch her fight," I said.

"We've got school too." In Japan time, the seventh day of The Tournaments would take place Monday afternoon, so no decent student from that area of the world could stay around and watch it.

I wonder if I can still gamble, though. Maybe I can message Shu when the betting begins and get him to buy a ticket for me?

"I guess those of us who are likely to win in the remaining days are our teacher and Figaro, right?" asked Fujinon.

"Yeah. Ray's brother and Hannya aren't participating, so..." said Kasumi.

"Hrmm...Figaro is one thing, but I don't think Marie stands a chance," I said.

"*Huh*?" the two girls said in unison. I knew very well how powerful Marie was. I mean, she actually gave me the death penalty once.

But the thing about Marie's powers was that...

"HMPH!" My thought was cut short by Io raising her head. "I'm not gonna forget 'bout this loss! I'll get strong enough to break through *any* barrier!" Well, it looked like she went back to normal. She even stopped speaking weirdly.

"That's the spirit! Do your best," I encouraged. "For now, though, just order and eat whatever you want. It's on me."

"Oh, I'll be feastin'!"

"C-Can we really...?" Kasumi asked, somewhat worried, but there was nothing to be concerned about.

"Thanks to The Tournaments, my wallet is pretty fat these days. Also..." I said, glancing to the side.

There, I saw a black mass, ravenously consuming what was probably many times her weight in food.

It didn't even have to be said that this was my partner Nemesis. She'd been here the whole time, but instead of taking part in the conversation, she was doing nothing but eating.

"It's nothing compared to how much I spend to feed *her*."

"Ah ha ha..."

The amount Nemesis consumed seemed to be growing as she evolved. If it was this bad after she just became high-rank, how would it be in the future?

I probably needed to make more money, just to be on the safe side.

With that in mind, I'd resolved to bet on today's Tournament too.

I was pretty sure that the winner would be Juliet.

Chapter Two: Tournament Day Six — He Who Lost His Other Half

City of Duels, Gideon, Central Arena

Tournament: Day Six.

Reward: Name Unknown (Presumed Type: Dragon [Eastern]).

Core traits: Tornado, lightning, and explosion generation (Uncontrollable in its Orb form).

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After Death Period claimed The Tournaments of days one, two, and three, the fourth was taken by Fallen Knight Juliet, who also went on to defeat the UBM she won.

On the fifth day that followed, the reward was a UBM with the core traits of "fatal damage negation followed by time-limited body enhancement," and the possible MVP reward attracted many powerful individuals to fight for it.

However, one of them was a *Superior*—Tsukuyo Fuso.

She was a significant obstacle even for the strongest, and in the end she was the one who claimed the popular reward offered on day five.

That marked the halfway point of the ten-day event—and today, day six, was the beginning of the second half.

The way this day's contest progressed was, in a word, expected.

The reason for that was the involvement of the player who held second place in the duel rankings—The Unsheath Kashimiya.

Indeed—instead of going for the popular Orb offered on day five, this individual, who was among the kingdom's strongest, went for the sixth day's unremarkable Orb. This one seemed to have effects based on sky magic like creating flame and lightning.

Anybody who went for this one because they assumed that the strong

Masters would avoid a reward this boring turned out to be completely wrong. As a result, Kashimiya cut down each and every opponent he was matched with and, as anybody could have expected, made it to the final battle.

And now, those who bet money on him—and everyone else who was certain he would win—were now waiting for the last duel to begin.

“I thought that Masters had worse technique than tian Superior Jobs, but it looks like there’re exceptions to everything!”

And among this audience, there was *someone who wasn’t human*.

It was the technician who’d operated in Caldina under the name of Crys Fragment, and whose true identity was that of a mass-produced Prism Person, Crystal Tuner.

After the incident aboard the luxury liner Eltram, she’d separated from her sister-unit and arrived in Altar to support Integra. Now busy with work as a court magician, Integra wasn’t able to leave Altea much, and Crys took it upon herself to act in Integra’s stead and gather information that might be relevant to their activities.

However, there wasn’t much of note so far.

We need to truly understand the powers of the Masters who will side with the kingdom. That will prove invaluable in controlling the situation. Splendida was invited into Dryfe and will look into their side, and I have other...connections besides him. But when it comes to Altar, it would be best to investigate personally.

Crys thought back to the *Superior* she regularly made deals with—the man who sold various bits of info to her. Apparently, after that incident, he’d headed to Dryfe on foot, but he must’ve arrived by now.

“Ngh...” As she watched the second semifinalists—one of whom would end up as Kashimiya’s victim—Crys downed a concentrated MP potion.

Being Crystal Tuner, she represented an immense success of Prism Person mass production, but there was still something about her that put her at a disadvantage compared to the five made before her.

Specifically, it was the magic shortage caused by lower core quality.

Crystal Tuners were preceded by mass-produced Prism People—if they could even be graced with that name—called Prism Soldiers, who had compensated for their lack of a core by increasing in size and using living beings as parts, a clunky and inelegant solution. And while not as extreme, Crystal Tuners had a similar problem. The magic provided by their cores was less than that provided by those in the original Prism People. If the biological parts of Crystal Tuners didn't regularly ingest potions, they would be unable to use their weapons to their full potential.

This was a problem caused by the necessary materials being inaccessible, and not even Flagman could ultimately overcome it.

However, the Crystal Tuners themselves believed that this was their only flaw.

Okay, time for the finale. Kashimiya's opponent had been decided, and day six of The Tournaments would end soon. Crys had been active for nearly two thousand years and had seen many strong individuals—but even to her eye, Kashimiya was clearly a huge step above.

Thus, she was certain that he would instantly claim victory.

Thinking that seemed almost like it would jinx it, but her thoughts had no effect on the expected outcome.

The duel was over in a flash—before even a single second could pass.

Once the commendations and other formalities ended, the audience would be asked to leave for safety reasons while Kashimiya challenged the Orb.

"All right. Now..." This was when Crys's job for the day truly began.

She had to confirm that today's reward was what she thought it was. If it was what she expected, their plan would have to be heavily reworked.

It's not just a matter of combat potential. It's proof of a history that Huang He wants to erase, she thought. *I find it hard to believe that they would present it to another country, but the way they handled the left half makes it likely that they've simply lost the knowledge of it.*

Soon enough, the ceremony ended. Crys stood up from her seat alongside the rest of the audience.

I wonder what will come out of it... Well, actually, if I'm right, I know exactly what's going to happen.

In her place, she left a drone so tiny it was little more than a speck. Before The Tournaments, she had gone around placing these drones in various areas of Altar.

I hope I get the information I want.

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After the audience left the central arena, Kashimiya stood upon its stage.

As he waited for the battle to start, he examined the many blades he employed while fighting. He was surrounded by five K&R members—the volunteers he'd gathered to form a party. Since there were only five available slots, there was an intense conflict in the clan over who would get them, but Kashimiya had no means of knowing this.

This probably didn't have to be said, but none of the others were after the MVP reward—they simply wanted to be in a party with Kashimiya.

"Darling, why'd ya pick this one, anyway?" Rosa, who had taken her slot as though it were a given, posed that question to Kashimiya.

She had multiple reasons for participating in this fight—venting her anger over losing to B3 on day two, helping Kashimiya in the struggle, and simply getting the UBM battle she'd missed out on, among others.

However, she had no clue why Kashimiya had gone for this Orb rather than any other.

In response...

"Intuition."

...Kashimiya said just a single word—a reason which did not seem enough of an answer.

"Intuition?"

"Yes. I somehow felt like today's UBM is the *strongest*."

Rosa didn't know what to say. As far as tiers went, the strongest one was obviously the Mythical on the final day.

However, Kashimiya's intuition had led him to today's UBM instead.

"Also, if the situation is right, this one might actually *come out* too," he continued as he caressed the red sheath of the odachi—the large sword—at his side.

Not even Rosa knew what that odachi was. It was something he hadn't had back in Tenchi, and by the time they'd reunited in Altar he'd already acquired it. She believed it was an MVP reward, but it seemed to reject Identification and the like.

However, it was clear that it was one of the aces he kept up his sleeve.

"We have prepared the barrier," said a worker managing the arena's barrier function as the optimization concluded. Covering the stage as usual, it had been put up without the setting that restored the combatants once the duel was over. It also had the feature that prevented escape from within while still being tuned for maximum toughness.

And, in case of an emergency, Shu and Hannya—*Superiors*—were standing at the ready right outside the barrier. If it was broken and the UBM began a rampage in the city, they would do what they could to destroy it. Even if they hadn't been there, the waiting room contained the Masters who had achieved second place and below in today's Tournament. Normally, they would have their turns against the monster if Kashimiya failed—but if something happened, they would rush in and destroy the UBM before it caused damage to the city.

The barriers were reliable enough, though, that not a single UBM had escaped thus far.

And at that moment, a pedestal with an Orb on it was brought to the middle of the stage.

This was the reward for winning on day six—the Orb containing a UBM with an unknown name.

"Starting countdown until we destroy it with a remote explosive. Ten, nine..."

At those words, Kashimiya's party readied themselves.

The supporting jobs already put up their buffs, while Kashimiya assumed an unsheathing stance. Rosa used her Embryo ult to consume bones focused on STR and AGI, then hid herself and prepared to deliver her job ult as Nobushi Princess, A Kill Supreme.

Two pre-*Superiors* focused on swift strikes—the battle would surely end the moment the UBM was released.

"Three, two, one...ignition!" The pedestal exploded, shattering the Orb on it. Kashimiya and Rosa instantly sprang into action.

The moment he did, Kashimiya's eyes widened. In his unsheathing stance, the Godlike Unsheathing skill raised his AGI all the way to 500,000.

Because of that, the moment the Orb shattered, he was able to see what appeared out of it.

The UBM's presumed type was dragon—specifically, the usually serpentine, wyrm-like dragons often associated with the east. However, it certainly didn't look the part. While its body was covered in black scales, its shape was that of a human.

But it wasn't a full person—it was only the *right half* of one.

Above its head, there was text that said Blue-■■■■ ■■■■■-Turn, Heilong-■■■■■■.

That was an awfully odd name for a UBM. It was as though it had somehow lost half of it along with the other half of its body...

But however warped it may have been, a humanoid was easier for Kashimiya to cut than a dragon. He could now simply approach and lop off its head as he always did.

But then, he widened his eyes even further. Kashimiya stopped unsheathing his blade.

It wasn't the UBM's appearance that made him stop his approach, but his own instincts.

Rosa, however, did *not* stop.

"A Kill Supreme!" She left her ambush state and activated her job ult as she jumped behind the UBM.

It was a combination of her Embryo and job ults, and the damage she could deliver with it was so immense it could fell a standard UBM in just a single hit, and this UBM had just appeared from the Orb and didn't seem to fully grasp the situation, let alone notice or see her coming. The battle would be over in a flash.

And it most certainly *was* over...

...when Rosa was turned to dust by a bolt of blue lightning that struck her.

"You gotta be kiddin' me," Shu said in shock as he watched all of this happen from outside the barrier.

The lightning was the UBM's counterattack. While the monster seemed to show no reaction to her, it had retaliated against Rosa's attack without even turning around.

However, what shocked Shu wasn't that, but what happened *afterward*.

Rosa had two means of avoiding fatal damage: the MVP reward she used even in duels, and a Brooch that wasn't normally allowed in them—and yet she turned to dust despite that. This meant that the retaliation didn't come in the form of just *one* attack.

What happened to Rosa could be explained like this.

Rosa had been hit by lightning, but she'd survived thanks to her Brooch breaking and had continued to try and deliver her job ult.

In response, the UBM had instantly fired a second lightning strike. Thanks to her MVP reward, she survived that one as well and went on to teleport herself.

However, as if it had instantly known exactly where she would move, the creature had fired a third lightning bolt that had finally turned her to dust.

Rosa possessed two means of evading fatal attacks, but not even she could do anything against this blue lightning that not only killed her in one hit, but struck multiple times.

Fired with lightning speed that allowed no evasion, the bolts ensured her death the moment she got close.

Blue and Turn. The visible part of the name... I see how it is, Shu thought as he came to understand this UBM's power.

The creature had most certainly *not even noticed Rosa*. In fact, it had no idea what was happening and was actually very confused.

But even in this state, that skill had activated and attacked Rosa.

A fully auto counterattack, Shu concluded. The blue lightning wasn't fired by the UBM consciously, but targeted Rosa automatically. The fact that it struck not just once, but until she was dead meant it repeatedly activated on any hostile that was close enough to it.

That lightning ain't easy to dodge. It's gonna be hard to beat this if you're a vanguard who just fights in melee... I guess it's specced to specific conditions. But that power level makes it seem like we got a Mythical-tier absurdity on our hands.

Shu readied himself as he analyzed the UBM's abilities. Although it was humanoid, Kashimiya was woefully badly matched against it. However...

Well, speaking of absurdities, the little guy ain't far behind, is he?

When the lightning struck, the UBM wasn't the only thing that surprised Shu. Now that the UBM had instantly killed Rosa, the K&R members were on high alert.

One could even say that they were *frightened*.

However, Kashimiya was different. He remained calm and didn't seem to be the least bit perturbed.

At some point, he'd switched from the odachi he'd had initially and now had the one in the red sheath. The moment the Orb was broken and the UBM released, he realized that the other odachi—even the marvelous ones made of Mythical metal—wouldn't be good enough.

And in his other hand there was the red sheath's odachi...*already* *unsheathed*. This sword that seemed to choose its opponents so carefully was now baring its edge.

And it hadn't *just* been drawn.

It had, in fact, *already cut something*.

There was no blood or flesh sticking to it, however, so what exactly had it cut?

Nothing less than *the lightning itself*.

The moment Rosa was hit by the auto-counterattack, Kashimiya was struck by lightning too.

This was a lightning strike that the UBM called for manually when its instincts registered him as a threat, and its power surpassed even that of the blasts that had turned Rosa to ash.

And yet, Kashimiya had cut it with the odachi of the red sheath.

On Earth, there were multiple legends of blades being used to cut lightning or the gods that wielded them. But what happened here was no legend—it was done right before everyone's eyes.

A single slash from this blade was able to nullify the power of a lightning strike that could easily turn people to dust.

Was this truly possible? Yes, it was.

It could be accomplished by combining Kashimiya's Godlike Unsheathing technique with the power of the red sheath's odachi—which was a fragment of an SUBM, Prototype Horobimaru-Star Sword.

Kashimiya returned the odachi to its sheath, then put a little power into his fingers to see if he could take it out again—and just like that, with little resistance the sword of the red sheath showed a bit of its blade.

This self-conscious, capricious odachi was awfully obedient today.

This meant that even the sword itself recognized this opponent as one *worth cutting*.

Kashimiya maintained his unsheathing stance, looking out for the right moment to cut down the UBM. However, before he could, something rather odd was happening with the UBM in front of him.

"...Ah..." This UBM, a creature of just the right half, let out a sound as it reached for *its left half*.

But as one could clearly see, there was nothing there for it to touch.

"Al...me...ra..." It looked around and spoke a name as it searched for its other half, but needless to say, it was nowhere to be found.

There was nothing here except for the strange UBM with only a right half—Heilong.

“Where...am I...?” As reality began to sink in, Heilong’s consciousness gradually regained focus.

Kashimiya noticed that change, and his expression shifted slightly. “I failed,” he murmured.

Kashimiya understood that *he could no longer cut the creature*.

It wasn’t because his opponent had suddenly spoken human words—that wouldn’t even slow his blade, let alone stop it.

It was simply because the UBM had grown stronger.

The creature’s presence was now on a different level than it had been when its consciousness was still vague and unfocused.

Kashimiya instantly understood that Heilong possessed fearsome powers that he had barely begun to show. In the back of his mind, he could envision himself being struck down by this opponent’s attacks.

It was possible that whatever trump cards Heilong had could be cut down by Kashimiya’s Prototype-Star Sword—but this would not allow him to claim Heilong’s head.

Perhaps he could prioritize decapitating Heilong even if he was killed in the process? As a Master, Kashimiya could come back from death. Trading one of his countless lives in exchange for the one and only life of a monster or tian could be considered a victory.

But I can’t say the idea is appealing, Kashimiya thought. He didn’t want a victory achieved through something other than his own blade and technique. If he were to cut, to win, to *kill*, he would pick and choose his methods.

He would cut through head-on, win decisively, and kill absolutely.

Kashimiya was the asura of unsheathing, and this was his line of thinking.

Heilong also understood that it now faced someone who *could cut it down*.

The odachi of the red sheath that Kashimiya held was able to remove Heilong’s head—something which couldn’t be said about any common blade. The sword had the power, and Kashimiya had the technique needed to make that happen.

The blade hadn’t actually touched Heilong yet, but it wouldn’t be out of the question if its head flew clean off its neck the very next moment.

While neither of them knew what the other was truly capable of, they had already read that their opponent could surely kill them. Each combatant possessed godlike technique that allowed them to understand that much.

That was why Heilong chose not to fight Kashimiya.

“I have...no business...with any of you...” As it said that, Heilong’s body was enveloped in light. Then, it held up its only palm—the right one—above its head.

The next moment, it released a *pure-white beam of light*.

This attack was reminiscent of Xunyu’s Zhenhuo Zhendeng Baolongba, though it was shining with a heat many times greater than that skill.

It was a light unknown to Kashimiya, and even Shu did not recognize it. Certain other duel rankers like Figaro and Riser, though, would’ve had a certain name spring into their minds.

Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

This attack was like the beam of the fearsome dragon—not the one fired by Figaro’s Gloria α, but one that matched the Overdrive possessed by the original Gloria itself. It was akin to the power of the one-horned head that was defeated before Shu had fought the dragon.

The light that carried this immense power struck the arena barrier, and though it had been optimized for toughness, it didn’t even last a full second before it was broken.

If it had been fired horizontally, it would have devastated Gideon. Instead, it formed a pillar of light that rose up into the sky.

The shattering of the barrier was a clear emergency, and a number of people leaped into action. Shu switched to his Godcloth, and Hannya called Sandalphon.

Those watching feared that this was the beginning of a battle that could reduce Gideon to dust.

But that didn’t happen.

Once the pillar of light disappeared a few seconds later, Heilong was no longer there.

It was clear that after breaking the barrier, he’d instantly flown off like the wind.

The UBM inside the Orb that served as the reward for day six had escaped from Gideon.

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After that, the arena was buzzing with activity—an obvious reaction, seeing that the barrier that had contained every UBM so far had been rendered meaningless and allowed this one to escape. This created a great many problems that needed to be addressed and tasks that needed to be done, such as launching the search for Heilong or figuring out what countermeasures needed to be put in place for the remaining Tournament days.

However, those directly involved—Shu included—understood that this was the optimal choice in the conflict and the best result they could've hoped for.

Heilong could have used the light to escape, or it could have used it to destroy Gideon and be decapitated by the others present as a result. The pillar of light meant that it had picked the former option.

Even if Kashimiya hadn't been there, the forces currently in Gideon were capable of killing Heilong. Thus, the UBM chose to escape, and that was nothing but a blessing to the people of Gideon.

While the prize might have been gone, the city narrowly avoided suffering any damage from a UBM with attacks that seemed to rival those of Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

The only problem left was the question of where Heilong had run off to—and that was something that nobody knew.

After all, although he'd escaped, even Heilong itself hadn't been sure where to go.

Indeed—it knew nothing that awaited it beyond its flight.

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Former Nowest Canyon

This was the land that was once called the "Nowest Canyon."

Its ecosystem had been thoroughly destroyed in the Big Three's battle against Gloria, and then its landscape had been ravaged in Shu and Sechs's fight to the death. There was nothing left here besides a wasteland created by incredible amounts of unfettered energy.

But now, there was also a UBM here—Heilong had landed here from his flight.

He'd only cared about escaping from Gideon, and flew off without thinking about where.

Thus, one could say that his arrival here was a mere coincidence.

If not that, he may have subconsciously thought that this place, so flooded with immense energy, would be where he would find a hint that would help him search for his other half—a being who consumed energy without end.

But Heilong's other half wasn't here. There was nothing in this place, and coming here was a complete waste of time.

...No.

"Hm...?"

There *was* a single person here, seemingly blending with the scenery. Clad in tattered gear and covered in sand and dust, this person looked somewhat like an old scarecrow. However, he was certainly a human male. He just stood in place all by himself, his gaze fixed slightly upward for some unknown reason.

He wasn't looking at the sky, though.

It was more like he was looking up at something that was once there—an afterimage of the massive, fiendish dragon that had been defeated here.

Heilong looked at the man. Unlike Kashimiya, he didn't seem to give off a menacing aura.

Instead, what Heilong felt from him was...unease.

The man made Heilong feel as though it were looking at a pit trap or something of the sort—an abyss so deep he couldn't see the bottom.

"Who's there?" With those words, the man turned to Heilong.

He could now see the man's face, and the sight of his eyes *really* made Heilong feel as though he had glimpsed some kind of abyss.

The man's eyes were fixed on Heilong, but they weren't looking *at* him. His brain received the visuals, but he had no thoughts about what he was seeing.

He seemed to care neither about Heilong's bizarre form, nor about the immense power within his half a body.

The man felt nothing, and Heilong saw the emptiness in his heart.

"A UBM? You look like you might be a tian too, but...not like I care."

The man wasn't merely saying that—he truly, from his core, believed that Heilong wasn't deserving of any regard.

The UBM's eye widened. It thought back to the time before it—or maybe *he*—was sealed by the Draconic Emperor, before he became a UBM and was one of the gulong ren—ancient dragon kin—and he couldn't think of a single instance where anyone had looked at him this way.

The man before him had his eyes fixed on Heilong, yet saw nothing positive *or* negative. He didn't run away in fear or attack him for the MVP reward. Unlike those Heilong had faced upon waking up, this man wasn't even wary of him.

He looked at Heilong as though he were but a strange part of the scenery.

"Why are you looking at me? I clearly don't look as peculiar as *you* do. Ha ha..."

As if amused by something, the man cracked a faint smile. Though minor, the change in the man's expression somehow filled Heilong with dread.

That must've been why his eye widened and, before he even realized he was doing it, Heilong had fired a white beam from his right hand—a beam that carried enough heat to easily destroy Gideon's barrier and enough power to match even the Overdrive skill that had once burned the very ground they stood on now.

It wasn't something one single man could weather—he too would certainly vanish without a trace when the light struck him.

"Ohhh. Now that brings back a *bad memory*."

That was only true, however, if the man were unarmed.

At some point a single sword had appeared in his hand. It was his other half—his Embryo.

"*Næġling*."

The core trait of this Embryo was "surpassing." Going beyond even those who stood above its wielder, it was the embodiment of transcendence.

"End Breaker." The sword spoke with a girl's voice as the man swung the blade and *cleaved apart* the beam of intense heat.

Indeed—that single strike not only split apart a laser as powerful as Overdrive, it also cut straight to the source of the beam and carved a deep wound into Heilong's body.

"GHA...AGHH...!" For the first time in centuries, Heilong felt pain.

After he'd become human and he and his other half had become a UBM, the only time he felt pain was when they fought the Draconic Emperor.

Almera—the other half that was the heart of their defenses—wasn't with him right now, but even so, slicing through Heilong's attack and sinking a blade into him was an inhuman feat.

With the pain of the wound, Heilong realized that the fear he'd felt wasn't unfounded.

He shouldn't have gotten involved with this man. He had stepped directly into a pit that would send him to the abyss of death.

The man said nothing, glancing at his own sword. Then, he turned to look at the trajectory of Heilong's split beam—it had melted everything in its path.

He seemed to have thoughts about both the UBM's attack and his own retaliation.

"Well. No matter." With those words, the man began approaching Heilong, sword in hand. Heilong backed away in fear.

He was the half of what was once called an Irregularity, and yet this man had just brought him to the brink with a single hit. That was fearsome even lacking his other half and weakened by his many years sealed away. The beam he'd fired was his most powerful attack, and yet the man dealt with it like it was nothing. There was no chance the automatic lightning strikes would do anything to him.

Heilong imagined himself dying, and the idea of leaving his other half behind terrified him more than his long years of imprisonment or even his own doom.

"Almera... ALMERAAAAAAAAA!" Heilong then found himself shouting his other half's name. He called out to her, but it was a call that could never reach anyone.

However...that call did stop the man in his tracks.

Still holding the sword in one hand, the man stood in place...and asked a simple question.

"Is that *a woman's name*?"

Though perplexed by what was happening, Heilong answered with a nod.

"Is she your beloved?"

In response to this follow-up question, Heilong nodded instantly. There was no hesitation—his very body moved to answer.

"...I see." Upon seeing Heilong's reaction, the man took a moment to think...

"*Go*."

...and pointed his sword toward the horizon.

The man said that he would *let Heilong go*.

The UBM was still perplexed, but hoping to survive to meet his other half—Almera—he obeyed the man's order. He flew off, just as he had when escaping the arena, and disappeared into the distance to search for her...and to never again encounter the man with those terrifying, empty eyes.

The man watched as Heilong vanished.

As he did, his sword left his hand. After turning into sparks of light, it assumed the form of a girl in her late teens, her red hair tied in a ponytail.

"Captain..."

"I'm not 'Captain' anymore," said the man, rejecting the words of Næġling—his own Embryo.

"That was a UBM... Are you sure we should've let it go?"

The man he used to be would've certainly defeated this UBM—and he wouldn't have done it solely for the MVP reward. It was a UBM that launched attacks before talking. A creature like that would no doubt endanger tians, and this man would've certainly wished to eliminate it.

Yet he'd chosen to let this UBM go.

That was something the man he'd once been would never have done.

"Neither the MVP reward nor the tragedies matter to me now..."

However, he himself had insisted that he was no longer that man.

Næġling understood that too. The shape of her Master's heart simply wasn't what it had been before.

And that was exactly why she herself was different too.

After all, Næġling was now a Superior Embryo.

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Evolution into Superior Embryos was a matter surrounded by a great deal of uncertainty, and the conditions for it to happen were thought to be unknown.

Even the control AI associated with it—the Infinite Embryos—didn't have a full grasp of it. That was because it seemed like they had things in common, while at the same time shared absolutely nothing.

However, there was a hypothesis that the reason it was a mystery was not because it was caused by some universal factors that people did not yet understand—but because the *trigger* for each Embryo was different.

Basically, besides the Resource absorption that the Masters would perform through combat and other means, evolution required that an Embryo also undergo some sort of mental catalyst that would act as a trigger—and this mental catalyst was different for every Embryo.

Some achieved it through mortal combat, others through idling about. Some achieved it through vanity, others through self-denial.

This hypothesis wasn't proven, but it was widely believed that it would explain the differences in Embryo evolution.

That was exactly why the control AI, who believed this hypothesis to be correct, brought about SUBMs and other disasters. They knew that such things would steer emotions in a number of extreme directions, either by making the Masters stand up to protect something important...or by making them lose it.

And for Næġling, the breaking blade, this "trigger" had been *despair*.

She'd overcome the final wall because of the despair her Master had felt upon losing everything.

Today, the moment he logged in for the first time in a while, she began evolving into a Superior Embryo, and the power she gained because of it was exactly as demonstrated.

With it, he would've been able to sever even Gloria's Overdrive.

The blade he now wielded was capable of repelling the disaster that attacked his town of Claymill. He had gained the power to protect what was dear to him.

But what was dear to him—the one he loved—was already gone.

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For Næġling's Master, the fact that he was now a *Superior* held no meaning. He saw no value in it, nor was he happy she had evolved.

"Cap— I mean, Master, what will you do now?" Claymill's save point was gone, so when he'd logged in, he appeared in Altea.

From there, instead of going to Gideon where he'd once competed with his friend, he went to the place where the monster that had taken everything from him had met its death.

"I'll go to Claymill's ruins. I'll leave flowers for her...and that's it."

He'd go to the now-obliterated city and offer flowers to his late wife. He'd finally gained enough willpower to do at least that much, and it was the only reason he'd logged in today.

He figured it was the last time he'd ever log in.

Næġling was silent. She didn't say anything to argue.

This was the first time in a while that she'd met her Master, but she couldn't stop him from leaving again. She believed that it was *her* fault he'd become a broken man. She hadn't had enough power to prevent it—all of her strength had arrived too late.

Thus, she and her Master—King of Swords, Foltesla—exchanged no more words and left what remained of the canyon...

"Found one. A *Superior* who could oppose the Incarnations."

...and neither of them realized that a minuscule drone was watching them leave.

Interlude: Lunchtime

Reiji Mukudori

It was Monday afternoon. I was in the college cafeteria, having lunch with my fellow freshmen—Soprano Natsume and Dragon Kasugai.

Kasugai was wearing sunglasses and sporting a mohawk, and Natsume had a spot of face paint on her, so we stood out pretty hard. I could feel the passersby looking at us, probably wondering, “What kinda group is this?”

We’re just talking about our lessons and Dendro, though...

“Hey, Mukudori, I heard about some big gamblin’ goin’ on in Altar. Izzat true?” Kasugai asked.

“People gamble on it, sure, but it’s a dueling event at its core. It’s gonna go for ten *Dendro* days straight.”

“Shiiit, man, that sounds fire!”

“I’m sure it’s *very* intense. If only *she* went to an event like that too...”

Kasugai’s eyes gleamed at the prospect, but Natsume seemed kinda tired.

“Did something happen to you in *Dendro*?” I asked.

“I guess you could say an asura forced me to play a game of tag.”

Is that some kinda horror-themed event? I wondered. “Are those the kind of things you do in Tenchi?”

“Well, the place is pretty wild even at the best of times,” said Kasugai.

“Oh, don’t mind it too much,” said Natsume. “I can consult you if I need to, right?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Roger!”

They were in Tenchi, though, so I didn’t think that I could get involved in whatever they were talking about. If only events like The Anniversary happened more often. It’d make it easier to meet up with them.

“But back to the duels... Why’s Altar holdin’ the event, anyway?” Kasugai asked.

“Oh, well, basically...” I went on to explain Altar’s current situation and that they needed to strengthen their forces and prevent further terrorism.

“Izzat so? That reminds me that the daimyos in Tenchi did somethin’ similar.”

“Really?”

“Uhh...you’re talking about how when the power of Masters started getting recognition, the daimyos began gathering anyone thought they was hot stuff, right?” said Natsume.

“Yeah, that. They held a whole buncha fights they watched personally, and the big shots who won got hired with some good terms. That’s how most people working for the big four houses got their place.”

My impression of Tenchi was that it was a lot like Sengoku Period Japan, but this seemed closer to what you would’ve seen in the Edo Period.

Hold on, I thought. “Wait. From what I heard, Tenchi doesn’t even *have* that many arenas.” This was something Xunyu had told me, but Gideon in Altar was a huge exception when it came to how many arenas a country had available. Other countries had around three at most. “Not everyone had a place to hold these matches in their own territory, right?”

Most daimyos must not have had an arena, and I doubted that those who did would lend theirs out so their enemies could grow in power. In response to my question...

“They do them without them,” the two girls said, nearly in unison.

“Huh?” They’d said it loud and clear, but I still thought I must not have heard correctly.

“They just went at it without any arenas.”

“Oh... Well, dead Masters only get the death penalty and come back in three days, so...” It was a reckless solution, but if they had no arenas, it made sense to resort to that.

“Tians do it too, though,” said Natsume.

“Hell, these matches have been part of their culture since before we Masters came floodin’ in,” said Kasugai.

“I get that it’s the ‘land of strife,’ but *man*...” The value of life in Tenchi was even lower than I’d imagined...

Then again, the country had produced people like Kashimiya, Rosa, and Jubei, so it felt like...yeah, that situation made a whole lot of sense. Tenchi’s asuras were something else.

There was also Juliet and Chelsea’s friend, Max, though. As far as

Tenchi people went, she was pretty reasonable. I also felt kinda sympathetic toward her as the rational one of the group.

“Well, guess ya can say that everyone in power is crazy ’bout buildin’ up their forces,” said Kasugai.

“That’s true in both Altar and Tenchi,” Natsume added.

“Well...I guess you’re right.” It would be hard to argue that the only difference between the two countries was simply that Altar had an ample amount of arenas, though, enabling them to do this kind of thing without loss of life. After all, the arena count must’ve been one of the circumstances that influenced the character of the land.

“Speakin’ of buildin’ forces, that Dryfe place you’re up against must be doin’ that too, doncha think?”

Kasugai’s words made me think a bit. She was more than likely correct—actually, it’d be weird if they *weren’t* doing that. Even at the time the peace talks were being held, Dryfe already counted King of Thieves and King of Chariots among their *Superior* roster. And with the next war just around the corner, it wouldn’t be unusual if they were trying to get more of them.

There was something else I was curious about, though.

“I was reborn! I’m now so powerful that I’m nothing like what I was before.” That was what a certain *Superior* told me right before the peace talks.

Hell General Logan Goddhart—a man I once fought and defeated.

During the peace talks, after he spoke about how much stronger he’d become, he went on to instantly die to Fuso’s Fatal Field combo.

But that left me with a question...

“What, exactly, was this power-up that he got?” I mused. We still didn’t know the details of his newfound strength or how much trouble it could give us.

Chapter Three: Miss Zeta's Expository Lecture—Job Builds

Imperial Capital, Vandelheim, Noble District

In the heart of Vandelheim, surrounding the pre-ancient fortress of Imperstand—the symbol of Dryfe—there was a district full of noble residences. In recent times, though, many of them were inhabited by people other than nobles—specifically, Masters.

The reason for this was the recent civil war, which had killed many nobles and freed up their lands and mansions. Reinhard's faction was a small one and had little support among the nobility, so this was a somewhat expected result of their victory.

However, they'd made the best of this situation and used these now-vacant mansions as a way to win over *Superiors* and other powerful Masters. They had served as an example of the luxurious rewards Dryfe would present them for their performance in the previous war.

And one of the Masters granted such a mansion was Logan Goddhart.

He was very pleased with it. The gaudy mansion and the many servants that came with it had more than satisfied his vanity. In a way, Dryfe's plan to win over Masters had been more effective on him than anyone else.

However, the state of his mansion had recently changed completely. The beautiful residence fit for the highest nobles had undergone changes that at first glance did not make a great deal of sense.

And it wasn't just its appearance that had changed.

The sound of boiling emanated from Logan's room day and night, and the scent of blood traveled even beyond the closed door.

To top it off, occasionally a saddened voice would say, "Not enough... It's not enooough..."

These frightening occurrences didn't sit right with the servants. Over half of them had already quit, fleeing the manor before the horrors within overtook them. What had happened to Logan Goddhart, exactly?

Answering that would mean going back to the moment right after he and Zeta made their deal...

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2045, Early April

Logan was one of Dryfe's *Superiors*, as well as their top-ranking duelist.

However, his standing had since dropped all the way down into the dirt.

His first failure was his defeat at Quartierlatin.

Logan had lost against King of Orchestras Veldorbell, followed by Ray Starling the Unbreakable. This was also recorded and made public in a video that made it seem as though he'd lost to Ray Starling alone, leading to him being ridiculed as the *Superior* who was beaten by a newbie.

Ray had also defeated Franklin before that incident, but Franklin wasn't a combat job and it was well known that most of his firepower—his monsters—had been taken out by King of Destruction before Logan overcame him. This made Logan's defeat stand out even more.

But Logan would go on to lose to Franklin later on—and *after* the Giga Professor had lost to Ray Starling.

His second major failure was Logan's loss of his duel champion status.

He was defeated in a duel against King of Thieves Zeta, which cost him his first place rank. Logan had been using his status as champion to keep his spirits up despite everything, but with this, he had lost even that.

This finally broke him to the point that he considered quitting *Infinite Dendrogram* altogether, but he was stopped by Zeta—the very person who'd defeated him.

She invited him to join her clan—Illegal Frontier—and offered to make him stronger in return.

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Logan was in his room, and before him was a bandaged woman—Zeta—standing in front of a whiteboard. The whiteboard had been brought by Zeta herself.

"Awareness. I am sure you know this, but when it comes to wide applicability, your Embryo is among the most powerful of all."

Logan was silent. He found himself unable to even nod in response to that. After all, how “powerful” was it really when it had set him on such a losing streak? And this argument just wasn’t convincing when it came from one of the people who beat him.

“Job. It multiplies 10 values in your usable job skills by 10. The increase in total strength that it can provide doesn’t need to be explained.”

The core trait of Logan’s Embryo, Rumpelstiltskin, was “job skill modification.” No matter what the job skill was, as long as it had numbers in its description, Rumpelstiltskin could overwrite them. When it came to the variety of things that could be done with it, this Embryo was definitely near the top.

“Explanation. I will tell you about an effective build, but let me preface this by saying that Hell General’s synergy with other jobs is absolutely awful.”

“Huh?” Zeta had just come out and said that Logan’s SJ was no good. He did know about the importance of synergy between main and sub jobs, though. He’d spent a lot of time looking into it personally.

“General. The General series is very quirky even by Superior Job standards. First, they allow you to operate with armies that number in the thousands—far beyond the party slot limit. Second, they have active buffs that they can give to everyone in their army,” Zeta explained as she wrote down these job details on the whiteboard.

Even mass buffs from the enchanter grouping weren’t able to affect so many individual units at once. Not even the Over Enchanter Superior Job was an exception to this.

“Loss. The General series pays for this by losing some degree of versatility.”

Logan was silent, and Zeta continued. “Specialization. You might have tried this before, but you can’t use any Creature Enhancement-type skills from your sub jobs. This is because Hell General is a commander specialized exclusively in leading devils. Skills that buff other monsters too are outside its synergistic scope.”

He was indeed familiar with this fact. Logan had been able to use such skills before he became a Superior Job, but when he made Hell General his main one, they had become unusable. That had been disappointing for him, since if this synergy existed, he would’ve been able to enhance his devils’ stats by as much as 600% with just one of Rumpelstiltskin's ten multipliers.

Now, however, it had turned out that this wasn't just another case of main and sub job incompatibility, but a flaw in the job itself stemming from its place in the General series.

"Unbuffable. Other Generals, however... For example, while Bug General has a level EX Insectoid Enhancement skill that buffs all their forces by 100%, Hell General has nothing like that."

"HUH?! I knew Hell General didn't have a skill like that, but other jobs *do*?!"

"Compensation. In exchange, you can summon your devils instantly."

Logan fell silent. He'd abused this feature of the job enough to be quite familiar with it. He did find it unfortunate, though, since if he had access to the same kinds of buffs as the other Generals, he'd be able to increase his army's power by 1,000%. On one hand, there was summoning armies from nothing—but on the other, there was greatly enhancing the army one already had.

Most people would probably be unable to say which one was the better option.

"Incongruence. While many Generals sit at the top of the tamer grouping, they lack versatility. Because of this, they have bad compatibility with many sub jobs. I suppose you tested that yourself."

Logan said nothing, but she was completely right. He'd thought of picking up some job with armor or shield skills that cut damage by 10% and multiplying that tenfold to make it 100%. With his High Tamer job having become useless to him, he'd picked up a shield-focused job and actually tried it, thinking he'd be invincible.

However, that had gone nowhere, as the skills of the shield-focused sub job stopped functioning whenever he had Hell General as his main. His other such attempts ended the same way.

"Why is it so incompatible?"

"Role. Generals are commanders—not martial artists who wield their skills on the battlefield."

"But history is full of generals who were good at fighting one-on-one!" Logan blurted out, thinking of the military commanders of ancient China and the like. Logan himself was a Hell General who commanded devils, but that didn't stop him from standing on the front lines either.

“Compatibility. There are Generals that *are* compatible with such skills, but only the Generals that command humans.”

“But I... Hell General has good growth in physical stats too! Why is it not compatible with direct combat?!”

“Agreement. I also think it should be. But this is how it has been set within *Infinite Dendrogram*’s job system. Hell General doesn’t even count as a tamer, but a summoner, so that’s all the more reason it is the way it is.”

“The devs really don’t get it, huh?! Why didn’t they give growth to other stats, then?” Logan expressed his rage at the developers for the way his job was configured—though from the perspective of the control AIs, everything about jobs had been set up by their predecessors, so it was something they couldn’t do anything about. If they could, they would’ve started by adding more Superior Jobs and given all of them more slots to motivate players to grow and evolve. But they couldn’t even do that, which spoke volumes about their power to affect this particular area.

“Exception. There is a sub job with a damage reduction skill that even a General can take.”

“Oh? Which one?”

“Paladin.”

The name of the job made Logan freeze.

Paladin was a high-rank job from the knight grouping—and it had Paladin’s Aegis, a skill that cut damage by 10%. And in the current state of the world...it was a job exclusive to Altar.

It was also heavily regulated, so there was no chance that Logan, being on Altar’s wanted list, could ever get the job for himself.

And most importantly, he had bad memories associated with it and thus was averse to the job on an emotional level.

“Knight. Then again, according to historical writings, it was in a Knight General’s build, so it might be that it’s a limited combination acceptable only in this particular case.” In other words, it was an example of the Generals that commanded humans which Zeta had mentioned earlier.

“Ohhh, so that’s how it is. Then I guess it doesn’t matter to—”

“Unrelated. Well, the bigger problem is that Hell General is a devil-focused job derived from the satanist grouping, so there’s no chance a holy job would ever work if you had it as a sub. The incompatibility at play here is worse than any caused by it being a General job.”

“Then why’d you get my hopes up in the first place?!” Logan barked again, betraying a little bit of the player’s true nature. He felt that there was no reason for Zeta to have even brought up Paladins at all.

“Understanding. I believe this explanation helped you understand something.”

Silence.

“Incongruence. Rumpelstiltskin and Hell General currently have poor compatibility.”

“Yeah! I can tell!” Rumpelstiltskin’s core focus was job skills, but all ideas for enhancing Logan’s build had been crushed by Hell General’s lack of synergy with other jobs. The General series itself was lacking in versatility and had a narrow range of jobs it meshed with well. Perhaps due to its Resources being focused on instant devil summoning, Hell General was especially bad.

In fact, it could be said that Rumpelstiltskin was the only reason Logan was able to get any use out of it at all.

“There’s nowhere for me to go from here!” Logan yelled. “What am I supposed to do?!” First he got on a terrible losing streak, and now it was clear that his job was no good. Once again, Logan contemplated quitting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Zeta looked at him and thought—wondered—about the abnormality of the Hell General job.

Even if you ignore all those factors, she mused, *Hell General is still more unbalanced than the other jobs in the General series.* Zeta felt as though the job was...lacking an important piece. *Then again, Hell General has advantages exclusive to that job, so perhaps the system’s designer just placed more value on those things. Still...the base costs are far too steep. I’ll think about this at a later time, alongside our leader and Rascal.*

Zeta once again looked at Logan, who was feeling miserable again. He looked like the broken man—or rather, elementary school boy—that he had been before Zeta came to negotiate.

“Advantage. One of the advantages only Hell General has is that you can summon your devils instantly.”

“...But other jobs do that too. Summoner, for example...”

“Denial. Summoner and elementalist groupings have to prepare their summons ahead of time. They might need a medium for summoning or an area abundant in the appropriate kind of natural magic. Meanwhile, Hell General’s instant summoning can be used again and again as long as you can cover the costs. And that cost is just the number of Resources that you have to provide.”

The monsters summoned by the summoner grouping had their info and concept stored in mediums. Summoning them involved making them materialize by sending magic to that medium, and if they were defeated, you had to wait until they could be summoned again. Of course, there were summons like Balloon Golem which specialized in quick recovery, but that was besides the point.

Meanwhile, the elementalist grouping, represented by the likes of the fairy queen Titania, summoned elementals that had preferred environments based on their element and couldn’t be used to their full potential if summoned away from them.

In contrast, Hell Generals could summon their devils whenever, wherever, and many times over. As long as the costs were covered, they could be summoned right as the previous batch was defeated, and there would be no end to them.

An inexhaustible army—an advantage that perhaps made it as good as any other job in the General series.

“But it’s not like I can pay for the costs forever. Especially when summoning Zero Exceed.”

Indeed he was correct—but even ignoring the Mythical Zero Exceed that could only be summoned by sacrificing an MVP reward, summoning many Legendary Gigaknights wasn’t cheap either. Logan could multiply the rewards of each sacrifice by 10, but it made little difference to him.

“And it’s not like the devils I summon are guaranteed to win either. Zero Exceed lost against him.”

He’d always thought that Franklin was beneath him, yet the Giga Professor had easily beaten Logan’s trump card—the enhanced Zero Exceed. This dealt a huge blow to Logan’s self esteem.

However, Zeta shook her head.

“Unrelated. The power of the individual devils has nothing to do with the heart of the problem.”

“What?”

“Forte. The combination of Hell General and Rumpelstiltskin is undoubtedly a wide-scale suppression type build. It should not try to depend on the power of just one devil...to stand in the same field as solo combat builds or wide-scale extermination builds."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Calculation. Ten times twenty is greater than one hundred, so you should just summon lots of Gigaknights. As many of them as your Soldier Devils...enough for them to compose your army."

"What?" Zeta's explanation had become so absurd that a single word was all Logan could manage in response. He knew what she was saying, but it was like they weren't on the same wavelength.

"Combination. Put the summoner grouping in your sub jobs and learn Mass Simultaneous Summoning. This synergizes with Hell General and can be used when subbed. You can probably multiply the simultaneous summon count too. You will be able to instantly summon lots of Legendary devils. Maybe not a thousand at once, but still enough to fill the slots of a few summons. Even a tenth of that might be overkill though."

"Were you listening?! I told you that I can't cover the costs!" Logan himself had considered the combination with Mass Simultaneous Summoning. However, it only increased the amount he could summon at once—and the cost grew accordingly. Even as a *Superior*, Logan didn't have even a fraction of the wealth needed to summon thousands of Gigaknights like he did Soldier Devils.

And despite having to eat these costs with every summon, he wasn't making enough to cover them.

Dryfe gave him something for his expenses whenever they had a task for him, but the battle in Quartierlatin had pushed him beyond the provided amount. It had been a financial loss as well as a physical one.

Logan was about to lose his temper at Zeta's nonsense, but...

"Question. Why do you even have trouble covering the costs? Knowing your abilities, there is *no way you should*," said Zeta, her tone full of confusion. "Switch. Then again, it is precisely because you haven't realized it yet that I can present this to you as a way to make you stronger. I have a plan to optimize your somewhat incompatible Hell General."

"Again, what do you want me to do?"

In response to that question, Zeta put her hand on Logan's shoulder...

"Change. Become a *crafting job*."

...and said something that Logan had never once considered.

“Why would I ever be a...?” Logan said, clearly apprehensive, the image of Franklin looming in his mind.

Zeta ignored him and continued. Writing words on the whiteboard, she finally reached the heart of her lecture.

“Resemblance. The logic behind it is similar to the ‘Gem crafting-storage-barrage theory.’”

“Gem crafting...?” As Logan tried to remember what that was, Zeta went on to explain.

The Gem crafting-storage-barrage theory was one proposed candidate for the strongest build, coming from a time before the Guardian-Jaguarman theory when Masters only had high-rank jobs and Embryos.

Crafting jobs in the gemcrafter grouping created Gems by filling them with spells from their magic sub jobs. The Gem crafting-storage-barrage theory was based around making plenty of high-rank offensive spell Gems before combat and throwing those in alongside your actual spells in combat. Though producing the Gems was costly, they enabled the users to spam spells nearly as powerful as high-rank job ults instantly and without MP costs, making it quite a fearsome build.

However, when AGI-focused combat jobs that moved at subsonic speeds became commonplace, the theory declined when its users began dying before they could throw enough Gems. It also stood no chance against the stat-focused Guardian-Jaguarman theory. Still, it had once been quite well known.

And Zeta was about to bring it back.

“So you want me to make Gems?”

“Denial.” No—she was about to make Logan *evolve* in a way that only he could. “Gold. Start by making some gold. Or metal, rather.”

“Huh?” Logan tilted his head. Zeta held up her index finger and, somewhat cheerful in a way her mummy-like face couldn’t hide, said this...

“Alchemy time.”

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Infinite Dendrogram had many kinds of alchemy.

Some specialized in the creation of magic items, others specialized in concocting medicine, and yet others focused on the production of homunculi. There were many and varied approaches to it.

Among them, the closest thing to a basic approach to the science of alchemy was the concept of “transmutation of lesser materials into greater materials.”

An example of this was the Mithril Transmutation skill.

It was a skill that had a different description depending on the user. For example, an Alchemist who had Mithril Transmutation at skill level 1 and DEX at 100 would see this:

“Transmutes the Silver used into Mithril with a mass ratio of 10 to 1. Has a 100 (DEX) x 1 (skill level) ÷ 100% chance to succeed.” The skill description included the calculation and success rate, which was based on the owner’s DEX.

In a way, crafting jobs cared about such equations even more than combat jobs.

Most metal transmutations in alchemy were like this, with the numbers being the only difference. They transformed a higher amount of lesser materials into a smaller amount of greater materials with a success rate based on DEX. This meant that alchemists without high DEX or skill level would only end up wasting the base material.

However, this was what the skill would look like with Rumpelstiltskin involved:

“Transmutes the Silver used into Mithril with a mass ratio of 10 to 10. Has a 1000 (DEX) x 10 (skill level) ÷ 100% chance to succeed.” Basically, it would transmute *all* the lesser material into Mithril with a 100% success rate.

It was an absurd kind of alchemy—literally like making money out of thin air.

By simply using the skill, Logan could increase his wealth and create something to cover the costs of his skills. With just a little funds and stats, he could snatch Resources from the world itself without end.

Zeta had realized that he was capable of this almost immediately and wondered why he hadn’t been doing it before now. After all, Logan was already using Rumpelstiltskin to inflate the points he got from items or sacrifices. In a way, it was a real mystery why he hadn’t hit upon the idea to inflate the number of the sacrificial items themselves.

The reason he’d never noticed something so obvious was simply because he had never considered becoming a crafting job at all. It wasn't like he would face them in battle, so he hadn't even looked into them to know what they were about.

Another reason was that, to put it lightly, he didn't exactly have the best impression of Dryfe's top crafting job.

Regardless, Logan went on to become history's most efficient Alchemist.

Of course, alchemy grouping skills were unusable with Hell General set as his main, but he could simply change his main job whenever he had to do alchemy. And since his MP and DEX stayed the same even when he had swapped Hell General to a sub job, he had more than enough MP and DEX to use for alchemy. Obviously, the efficiency of his alchemy would only increase as his job and skill levels grew—and when he achieved that, he would never need to worry about costs ever again.

This was what made it similar to the Gem crafting-storage-barrage theory.

The fusion of crafting and combat jobs. He would sacrifice the results of his inexhaustible work as an Alchemist ahead of time to cover the costs of using Call Devil Gigaknight to summon dozens or even hundreds of Legendary devils whenever it was time for combat. There was no need to use any tactics, to worry about being wasteful, or to pick and choose which devils were right for the situation—he would easily crush most enemies with an army of powerful devils.

It was a brain-dead build centered around using immense resources to summon wave after wave of potent minions.

If it were named like the theory Zeta had likened it to, it would be "alchemy storage-legendary-barrage theory," and it could be realized by Logan alone.

After being taught about this build, Logan immersed himself in alchemy. His skill level grew, and eventually he wasn't producing just Mithril—some of his transmutations were a huge success and produced High-Quality Mithril. He sold part of what he produced and used the earnings to buy lesser materials to do more alchemy.

Soon, he had amassed a vast amount of points for devil summoning.

Zeta looked at him, saying nothing. Logan became stronger, just as she'd intended, but it did bring a thought to mind.

As a low-rank Alchemist, the best Logan could do was Mithril, but High Alchemists had a job ult that made it possible to make even Mythical metal. Normally, the success rate for that was extremely low and burned through a huge amount of the lesser materials used, but that wouldn't be a problem for Logan.

Mythical metal was extremely valuable. It not only fetched high prices on the market, but also had immense amounts of Resources stored within. It was the peak of all metals mankind could currently create and was often used as material for weapons whose legends were told for centuries to come. Some of these weapons were so powerful that they exceeded even Epic MVP rewards.

When you think about it like that... Zeta thought. Mythical devil—until now, Zeta had assumed it was called that just because it was a Mythical monster.

But now, she thought that perhaps it had gotten the name because it could only be summoned by sacrificing a sufficient amount of Mythical metal.

It had the "pay with a single sacrifice" condition, but if a hunk of metal could be used for that purpose, Logan could build toward it again and again.

In that case, it wasn't out of the question that Logan could eventually make armies composed not of Gigaknights, but Zero Exceeds.

Imagining that, Zeta felt that she might've given him a bit *too* much of a boost. At the very least, it was clear that she had to keep him reined in as a member of IF.

Regardless, this build had inspired Logan so much that he'd actually gone on to reset most of his low- and high-rank jobs. He rushed to have them replaced with jobs from the alchemy and summoning groupings. Despite that, he was so focused on transmutation that he hadn't leveled them much. He'd also avoided alchemist guild's job quests to keep his new powers a secret.

He didn't think it was much of a problem, though—and when the peace talks came, he'd gone there with the intention of overwhelming the enemies with lots of Legendaries.

However, Tsukuyo Fuso had acted first—and because his level was too low, her Fatal Field had killed him instantly.

And that was why his "alchemy storage-legendary-barrage theory" had yet to see the light of day.

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Imperial Capital, Vandelheim, Noble District

Some time had passed since Logan became an alchemist.

Following the instakill incident, he'd gone on to level up, and now...

"Not enough... It's not enoooough..."

...he was muttering all of this with a pained expression on his face.

In his room, there was a still with alchemical pure water boiling inside and a pile of base alchemy that gave off the bloodlike smell of iron.

"It's not enough materiaaals..."

And as he continued his alchemy, Logan also continued to whine.

He was currently working on the High Alchemist ultimate job skill, Hypothesis: Ars Magna. It was a crafting skill that produced rare and special metals, Mythical metal included. And, as the Hypothesis in its name suggested, this High Alchemist skill was incomplete. And this was despite the fact that it was an ult.

Specifically, greater metal transmutation demanded a lot of materials, as well as many catalysts. And to top it off, the skill didn't give complete control over what metal it would produce. It wasn't unusual to set which metal you wanted to create, only for the transmutation to give you something else.

That in itself wasn't a problem for Logan. His Rumpelstiltskin was capable of influencing the chances of getting what he wanted.

"I ran out of materials and got almost no Mythical metal for it..." Logan's problem was that he wanted to create Mythical metal, but Hypothesis: Ars Magna didn't allow him to set it as the goal. He had no choice but to try getting it by accident.

As a result, he was now struggling with a lack of materials—and the alchemy gacha. Thanks to Rumpelstiltskin, he hadn't lost much metal and could just pour most of it back into the gacha, but the same couldn't be said about the catalysts.

"Apparently, King of Alchemy has the non-Hypothesis, proper Ars Magna..." Zeta had told him that that version of the skill could probably set Mythical metal as the goal. "But I'm not getting the message that I fulfilled the job conditions...”

However, Logan had yet to do whatever was necessary to become King of Alchemy. In fact, he didn’t even know if the throne was open or not. It wouldn’t matter much if it was a tian but if it was a Master, he’d never be able to get it.

“And I’m about to use up all the catalysts Zeta left...” The items that King of Thieves had been providing for him hadn’t seen a resupply since the day he’d gone to the peace talks. This was because Zeta herself hadn’t returned to Vandelheim yet.

“I dunno where she is or what she’s doing, but I hope she comes back fast,” Logan mumbled. “That reminds me that *the new Superiors* are about to arrive...”

He’d heard the rumors that Dryfe had invited several independent *Superiors* and that *some* of them had accepted.

The fact that Zeta and Murdoch weren’t enough for the imperator and that he was securing more forces had shown Logan one thing: the imperator planned to finally end it this time.

“I dunno who they are or where they come from...but I hope they have better personalities than Franklin, are less introverted than Behemot, and can handle enemies I can’t...”

At one point, Logan would’ve certainly said that he could take Altar all by himself. However, his losing streak had left him broken, and the things he’d learned through Zeta and alchemy had changed him.

He considered the risks of playing solo, thought of compatibility, examined the costs, and was mindful of social disposition.

In real life, Logan Goddhart was nothing but an elementary school boy.

But now, the effect that his growth would have on the world remained to be seen.

Chapter Four: The Invited Immortals

Dryfe Imperium, Micalos Wasteland

The imperial capital of Vandelheim and the Barbaros March to Dryfe's southeast were separated by a vast wasteland.

Though it had once been a heavy producer of grains, the region had recently become barren—just like the rest of Dryfe—and now not even the most basic vegetation would grow there.

Now, the desolate soil was being showered with rain. The downpour and the clouds formed a thick veil that smothered most of the daytime light.

And yet, despite these unfavorable conditions, there was a caravan of ten dragon carriages making their way through it.

They were transporting people to Vandelheim.

The imperium's capital was currently hiring a wide range of individuals in preparation for going to war with foreign powers. Some of the people in the carriages were rural folk who wanted a job simply to avoid starvation, while others sought to advance some sort of cause. Among those driven by their goals, there were youths who loathed Altar for turning their backs on Dryfe and vigorously claimed that the country *must* be defeated—as well as one elderly woman who hoped that the two lands could somehow be on good terms like they had been in the past.

Various conversations could be heard from the train of carriages cutting through the wastes. No one really knew which view was right, nor did they have anyone to guide them, creating a chaotic atmosphere that permeated each carriage.

"Hmm-hm-hmm..." But there was someone there who clearly seemed dubious.

In one of the wagons there sat a person wearing a mask made of intertwined wood and dressed in cheap-looking clothes, humming quietly.

Such an appearance would normally make people uneasy, but the crest on the back of the person's left hand made everyone disregard all of this as just the typical quirkiness of a Master.

Under the mask, the man himself was wearing a smile.

He—Splendida the Evergreen—was simply enjoying this turbulent mood.

Following the incident on *Eltram*, he'd crossed the blazing heat of the desert, arrived at the Barbaros March, and hopped on this dragon carriage.

The imperator had invited Splendida to join Dryfe in the coming war.

As always, the scenery here isn't much to look at, but the people's expressions sure are colorful, he thought. The air around him was one of chaos caused by an imminent war, but Splendida found it nothing but delightful.

In the real world, he would never even think of heading to a country that was preparing for such a conflict—after all, he could die.

However, Splendida's body was an avatar, and couldn't die permanently even if it were killed. In fact, his avatar couldn't be killed in the first place.

And because of this, he could enjoy what was happening purely as a game.

No matter where, when, or what—to Splendida, all of *Infinite Dendrogram* was an event.

Everything's better when you take it easy, he thought. There were people in this world like the imperator and Crys. The former had invited Splendida despite the fact that he'd taken part in an assassination attempt, and the latter had struck deals with him despite the fact that he was a Master.

They were both people driven by a sense of duty toward their country or the world, but Splendida had no such feelings. He accepted the invitation simply because he wanted to watch a fun event from a front row seat.

He wasn't like King of Beasts, who gave her all for the sake of a friend.

He wasn't like King of Swords, whose spirit had been broken by love.

To him, *Infinite Dendrogram* was, from start to finish, nothing but an exciting game—an MMO so well-made that you could mistake it for reality, except that you could play without risking your life.

The chaos in this dragon carriage was just another thing for him to watch—an attraction he would observe from *a safe vantage point*.

And the war he would take part in was no different.

In a way, he was the healthy kind of ludo.

This reminds me that Altar should be having their Tournaments right about now. I was interested in that too.

The idea of a tournament that rewarded its winners with UBM fights was an enticing one, but he'd ended up accepting Dryfe's invitation instead.

But even if he'd gone to Altar, he couldn't have won The Tournaments anyway—because they were focused on duels.

Splendida could only use his powers in a real battle, for that was the nature of his combo.

Anyway, the imperator decided to let bygones be bygones and called little old me over to him. While I didn't make it to the peace talks, the invitation is still valid. And I got a follow-up invitation through DIN too. Did he have any reason to call someone like yours truly instead of any other freelance Superior*?*

Part of that might've been that the imperator knew Splendida's powers, but he felt that there had to be more to it.

Well, whatever it is, I finally made it to Dryfe. All that's left is to meet the imperator and accept the request. That'll take me off the wanted list.

That was the reason Splendida was wearing the mask. While tians tended not to comment on how Masters were dressed, things were different if the Master was wanted.

I gotta say, though, this carriage sure is cramped.

While Splendida looked dubious, none of the other passengers were actually avoiding him. That was simply because there was no space to do so. There were people seated on every space available—including the ones to his sides—as well as on the floor in the middle. This caravan had ten carriages, but that wasn't enough to prevent this overcrowding.

Splendida turned his masked face to the side. "Eek...!" The tian lady sitting there uneasily let out a yelp and shrank back. Who could blame her?

How sad! I'd usually try to pick up a cutie like that, but I really can't take my mask off here! Just as he enjoyed various incidents like they were merely in-game events, Splendida was a Master who courted women far more casually than he did in real life—unlike they did there, such actions didn't come with the risk of social damage in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"U-Umm...what is the matter?" the lady asked, somewhat unsettled by the masked man staring at her without saying a word.

"Oh! Sorry about that! I was just wondering why this carriage is so crowded! Though that's not to say that *tu* did not catch my eye with your beauty, bambina!"

“I-I see...” The words Splendida wove from under his mask made the lady feel overwhelmed, but also somewhat relieved. Perhaps she felt that he might have been more amiable than he appeared.

“Umm, this is just a rumor I heard, but...” According to the lady, this row of carriages belonged to traders and thus carried not just people, but cargo. And since there was more cargo than usual today, the amount of inventory left less space for people.

“Mm-hmm. I see.”

If something was being brought from the Barbaros March, it would be either products of mining or goods smuggled from the neighboring countries of Altar or Caldina. And whether that was food or plant-based potions, they were precious here in Dryfe’s current situation.

Ohh...that would explain it... Splendida thought.

And the moment that thought crossed Splendida’s mind, *an explosion shook the dragon carriage*.

The Demi-Dragon pulling it cried out, and the passengers screamed. Mixed with those sounds, there was the distant roar of an engine.

“Dr— B-Bandit attack!”

“They’re after the cargo...!”

The words of the coachmen reached Splendida’s ears.

“Well, it wouldn’t surprise me if Dryfe had those too...”

He’d heard rumors that some people in Altar were fed up with the country and decided to steal a fortune before fleeing the country. Splendida thought it wouldn’t be that strange if Dryfe had people doing the same thing. Even ignoring the coming war, Dryfe was on the verge of running out of resources.

“But...what he said...” Splendida was still hung up on that one coachman’s exact words. It felt as though he’d wanted to say something else at first, but then hastily changed it.

However, the situation didn’t give Splendida much time to dwell on it.

“Th-The ground ahead was blown away! There’s a net too... It’s an ambush!”

“Where’s the bodyguards...?! Didn’t we have a group of Masters in the back?!”

“Dunno when this happened, but they’re gone!”

The sudden attack filled the dragon carriages with a chaos quite different from one before. Some people were desperately jumping off the vehicles and running on the muddy wasteland, only to slip and fall. Some carriages tried to force their way ahead, but the net that had been laid out overturned them.

The entire caravan could no longer move, and the screams of the people under attack echoed all around.

"Ah...ahh...!" The lady next to Splendida was shaking so much that she was frozen to the spot. Not saying a word, he put his right hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

But a moment later, the carriage they were in was turned over as well. Up became down as the people inside were tossed about.

"AAAHHHHHH!" Splendida quickly took the screaming lady in his arms and crashed into the ground through the carriage's cover.

A multitude of pained voices could be heard coming from inside the flipped carriage.

"Are *tu* all right, bambina?" With a slightly hoarse voice, Splendida questioned the girl he'd saved.

"Y-Yes. Thank you...!" the girl said, gazing at her savior...

"Ohh, that's good to hear."

...only to see that his neck was tilted at a right angle, clearly caused by a fierce impact with the ground.

"Ahh..." At this sight, which might have been straight out of a low budget horror film, the girl fainted dead away.

"Well, anyway..." Splendida grabbed his head with both hands and snapped it back into place. His neck was broken, and the muscles had been torn, but it was instantly reconstructed. Compared to the attacks he'd weathered from Moneygold, this was but a scratch.

Splendida recovered in no time, and walked out of the carriage.

Straining his eyes to look behind the curtain of rain, he saw a group armed mainly with guns.

They must've seen this rain as an opportunity. A horde of what must have been nearly a hundred people rode buggies and replica Prism Steeds as they approached the caravan in a crane wing formation.

"Hrmm...as I'll soon be working for Dryfe, I'd like to do something about this, but I suppose that's a bit difficult."

If he fit into any specific category, Splendida was a solo combat build—

or, to be more precise, a solo *survival* build.

He was specialized in *his own survival*, and when it came to facing opponents who outnumbered him, he was even less potent than the usual solo combat build. He could spread his poison, but this was an outdoor battle with tian passengers littered about, making that more risky than it was worth.

Even if Splendida somehow got to fight them individually, he didn't have a high enough AGI. It would take time, and the bandits would easily be able to loot whatever they could and run—and it was hard for him to use the escape-preventing MVP reward that he'd used on King of Beasts.

Mm-hmm. If I say so myself, all that little old me can really do is buy time in a one-on-one fight... Why is the imperator inviting me, again?

As far as combat capable *Superiors* went, Splendida was definitely on the weaker side, so it begged the question of why the imperator would take him in and even go so far as to take him off the wanted list.

But as this thought crossed his mind, these supposed bandits were only coming closer. There clearly wasn't much he could do by himself, and as Splendida wondered how he would handle it...

"If you're not a bandit, get down."

...he heard these words.

The passengers were already on the ground and shivering in fear, Splendida was standing in place and thinking, and the armed attackers continued their approach, seemingly not hearing the voice.

It was a chaotic situation—and this chaos was torn asunder by a thunderous sound reminiscent of an electric chainsaw—the sound of a *Gatling gun*.

The bullet storm that followed tore through the cover of the rearmost carriage and turned the attackers—along with Splendida—into mincemeat.

"Oh, my." Some of the bandits dissolved into sparks of light, while Splendida immediately recovered even from being torn in half.

Unfortunately, it was his top half that regenerated, so his lower half ended up completely exposed. That was embarrassing, so he chose to cover himself up with branches that he grew out of his body.

"They turned into bits of light, so I guess the bandits are Masters too. Oh, and my clothes are ruined again!" Splendida must've been used to this, as being split in half only made him laugh.

"I *said,* if you're not a bandit, get down!"

"Ohh, my bad. I was slow to react! So, who are *tu*?" Though it wasn't intended to be an answer to this question, the owner of the voice then showed themselves from beyond the torn cover.

What came out was a large suit of mechanical armor wearing a sand-colored cloak. In its chest area there was something luminous, and as it shone in the smoke, it looked like a single giant eye.

"A Magingear? No, it's not that..." At first glance, the figure looked like a Dryfean Magingear, but it was definitely something else.

The human-shaped machine was larger than Marshall, but smaller than Marshall II. It seemed to be right in the middle in terms of size, which wasn't standard for Dryfean weapons.

And most importantly, it had no headpiece. The shape made it seem as though its head was buried in the chest, and Splendida had never once seen a unit like that, customized or otherwise.

"May I have a name? Ohh, and Splendida's good enough for me." In response to that, the mechanical construct said, with a voice slightly colored by static...

"Y'golonac." This was a name from the Cthulhu Mythos, belonging to a god who had no head.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, though, it had another meaning.

"So *tu* are the Unfaltering."

Y'golonac the Unfaltering—that was the name of a *Superior* who didn't serve any country, just like Splendida himself.

"Were *tu* called here by the imperator, as well?" Splendida went on. The mechanical armor seemed to reject both Reveal and Identification, which made it unclear whether "Y'golonac" was the name of an avatar or an Embryo, but regardless, it was well known that the name belonged to a freelance *Superior* who had defeated many monsters and and acted as a capable bodyguard all over the land.

Thus, Splendida assumed that someone like that had come to Dryfe for the same reason as he had.

"I see we're alike in that regard, Evergreen." And Y'golonac seemed to have heard of Splendida too.

Somehow, these two *Superiors* summoned by the imperator had ended up in the same caravan.

"If that's the situation here," Y'golonac said, "I suppose that makes *them* the unfortunate ones."

Could a mere hundred armed men win against two *Superiors*? The Gatling gun Y'golonac had just used to blast some of the attackers was a good display of the firepower they needed to overcome those odds.

"Then you can just leave the carriage protection to little old me. Wipe them out, if you don't mind."

"Roger. I'm on it."

Agreeing with Splendida's suggestion, Y'golonac leaped into action. The construct discarded the Gatling gun, replacing it with two missile launchers that it placed on its shoulders before immediately firing them at the mass of attackers.

Targeted by homing missiles, the opposing force was gradually reduced to glowing lights. Someone among their ranks defended against the assault using a floating shield Embryo, but Y'golonac switched to an anti-tank rifle and blasted right through it.

At that moment, an AGI build Master drew close and swung at the construct with a long naginata-shaped Embryo, but Y'golonac switched to an even longer Greek-style spear and impaled the attacker for an instant kill.

The opponent seemed like a fairly high-level Master, but the way this unfolded seemed one-sided.

I guess it's a powered suit Embryo with powers focused on weapon switching? Rather plain for a Superior*, but it's sure got a lot of utility. I feel like I'm looking at an FPS character,* Splendida thought.

It seemed that Y'golonac also had a good balance of STR, END, and AGI—and so far, there didn't seem to be any major flaws to it. This was in stark contrast to Splendida, who was hyperspecialized and could only really do one thing.

It looks like he'll take care of it if I just leave it to him...hmm?

As that thought passed through his mind, Splendida's eyes caught a silhouette that didn't belong to a buggy or a Prism Steed replica.

It looked somewhat like a dragon carriage, but it wasn't that either. It was being pulled by what looked like an upper Pure-Dragon-tier landdragon, and it wasn't a passenger car, but a platform.

On the platform there was a giant cannon—one that looked like a railway gun.

“It did feel like they had more firepower than you’d expect from ordinary bandits, but this—” Splendida’s whisper to himself was cut short by a loud noise in the distance.

The railway gun, or whatever it was, had fired at Y’golonac. However, Y’golonac noticed it, read the shot’s trajectory, and quickly moved to evade it.

Just as he expected, the shell was heading toward a patch of ground over ten metels away from him...but right before it landed, *it turned horizontally to the side*.

Assuming an impossible trajectory, the shell flew straight toward Y’golonac, piercing right through him. It broke through the powered suit—supposedly a Superior Embryo—like it was paper, blowing away the top of the torso. A large section of his body gone, Y’golonac swayed back and forth before collapsing forward.

If he was a robot, the shell would’ve destroyed his core circuitry; if this was a powered suit instead, whoever was inside would certainly have died instantly.

“Whaaat?” Splendida looked down at the collapsed Y’golonac.

The expression under his mask was a dubious one, and the thought behind those eyes was *Seriously?*

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A man below the giant gun was watching as Y’golonac collapsed. Clad in a thick army coat and a multipurpose visor the shape of sunglasses, he let out a sigh.

“A confirmed hit.” The man—King of Magic Cannons Heldine Rockzapper—muttered his observation of the results.

He knew the attack would hit.

Heldine Rockzapper held a Superior Job specialized in the use of magic cannons, and its ultimate, The Freeshooter, fired shells that never missed. He set the target using his sight, and the shell he fired continued to home in on it until it landed.

Heldine’s artillery also couldn’t be defended against. His Embryo and weapon, Gun-Goddess of Collapse, Fenrir, completely negated all and any defense.

Neither defensive skills nor attributes meant anything to it. Like the god-consuming creature from which it took its name, Fenrir would slaughter anything it hit.

Guaranteed hits and defense negation—this attack-focused build of his was exactly what had landed Heldine in high positions on both kill and clan rankings of Dryfe.

“What are the losses?”

“The powered suit took out like twenty percent of our guys.”

“More than I expected. I guess we really are up against someone pre-*Superior* or higher.”

Upon hearing the casualty report from the subleader, Heldine analyzed the opponent’s power. The reason he didn’t assume Y’golonac was a *Superior* was because, just like Splendida, he thought Y’golonac looked too plain for that. Still, the construct was a force that couldn’t be ignored and seemed to cause trouble for Heldine’s clan, so he’d gotten involved personally and had attacked Y’golonac.

“But, man, to think they only just hired firepower like that,” Heldine said. “I suppose it’s all to bring *that* to the capital...?”

“We did the right thing by getting involved. The war with Altar is just around the corner. We can’t turn a blind eye to the seeds of any future trouble.”

Their conversation didn’t sound like it was coming from a group of supposed bandits.

“That leaves...just that masked man.”

“He has impressive regeneration. He may be an endurance-focused pre-*Superior*.”

As they talked, Heldine focused his sights on Splendida.

“I don’t know how many times you can keep regenerating, or how much.” He used his visor’s zoom function to glare at Splendida’s mask...

“So I will keep you in place until my subordinates fulfill their objective.”

...and Fenrir—the cannon bearing the name of the godslayer—fired once again.

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Mechanical remains were scattered on the muddy, rain-swept wasteland.

"Well, what do I do now?" The enemy's artillery had completely destroyed Y'golonac. Splendida guessed that the attack's trajectory and power were the result of some skill combo. Being a solo survival build *Superior*, he'd weathered countless attacks and had gotten quite good at analyzing their nature.

Not every *Superior* was like Splendida or Emily, and it was entirely possible for them to die. Even if the attacker was weaker, a critical hit could easily cause what had just happened to Y'golonac.

"Whoa."

And, as he looked at Y'golonac's state, a shell struck Splendida and completely pulverized him.

He instantly began regenerating from the head down, but another shell came flying in to put a stop to that.

Oh dear. I can't do anything like this.

While Splendida couldn't die, destroying his body over and over would incapacitate him, and his poison-focused attacks couldn't reach someone attacking from over two kilometels away.

Meanwhile, keeping their distance from Splendida and the bombardment focused on him, Heldine's subordinates were approaching the dragon carriages. They weren't holding back, but there was a certain refinement to the way they operated.

Hrmm...I feel like they might not be bandits after all. The thing that the coachmen said is bothering me too...

Even as he was being scattered into pieces over and over, Splendida never stopped thinking.

After an obscene amount of explosions, Splendida's head was blown off and landed next to Y'golonac. The two *Superiors* were now lying next to each other like good friends.

Oh? It just hit me that Y'golonac hasn't disappeared, Splendida thought. He himself had a combo that made him immortal, so it was a given that he wouldn't be vanishing. But why was Y'golonac's body staying around as well?

"Hm?" Splendida, reduced to nothing but a head, realized that he could hear something faintly over the noise of the rain.

Y'golonac's broken remains were releasing a sound that crackled with static.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Y’ggy’s broken! Get a grip, Vito!”

“Stop talking! There’s no way I could’ve seen that coming!”

“The attacker is about two kilometels away. That’s outside the effective range.”

“Now’s not the time for that, Micchi! Shit! Okay, time for the super long-range artillery gear...”

“No. We’re probably dealing with a pre-*Superior* who specializes in long-range combat. We’ll close the distance as soon as we recover. Large, prepare your active skill.”

“O-Okay!”

“Roger that, Hikaru! Don’t mess up this time, Vito!”

“Shut up!”

The sound was a *conversation*.

This is... Just when a certain thought was about to cross his mind, Splendida’s head was hit by another one of Fenrir’s shells, blowing him to bits. It seemed that the type of shell had been changed, and this one created an explosion big enough to engulf the surroundings.

The smoke it spread and the dust it flung up from the ground covered the bodies of both Splendida and Y’golonac.

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“Is it done...?” Heldine had switched from shells that ignored defense to ones focused on explosive firepower and effective area.

At the heart of the explosion, Splendida had been blown to smithereens.

Heldine didn’t know if his opponent’s regeneration was tied to how damaged his body was, but he thought that this would at least serve to buy some time.

“Hm...?”

However, when the torrential downpour scattered the smoke, he was met with a strange sight.

It was *not* Splendida, who was currently regenerating even from the immense explosion.

“Resuming combat.”

Heldine was met with the complete disappearance of the remains scattered about, as well as *Y'golonac, standing there without as much as a scratch.*

He spoke with the same voice as he did before his supposed destruction—a voice unlike any Splendida had heard.

A moment later, the construct vanished and reappeared right before Heldine and Fenrir.

"Ah...?!" Heldine was shocked—an enemy that had been far in the distance only a moment ago had just appeared right in front of him.

This was enough of an opening for Y'golonac to equip submachine guns in each arm and fire toward him.

"Ngh...!" Acting faster than Y'golonac in response, Heldine blew a whistle and ordered the Pure-dragon pulling his platform to leap in front of him.

The Pure-Dragon became a shield, bearing the bullet storm using its natural defensive power and a damage-reduction skill.

A moment later, the Pure-Dragon vanished, going back into a Jewel through Re-Call.

Behind the vanished meat shield there was Fenrir, now in a smaller form, and Heldine, brandishing it like a lance.

"FIRE!" Instantly shifting focus to retaliation, Heldine fired at Y'golonac from a close range. Though this smaller form had a lower range, its defense negation was still active.

This second hit on Y'golonac also opened a hole in his chest and scattered his limbs—instant death for a person, and irreparable damage for a weapon.

Suffering such catastrophic destruction, Y'golonac was reduced to pieces...

"Reactivation."

...only to instantly recover and resume attacking.

"This one too?" Heldine clicked his tongue. It was unclear whether the thing before him was a powered suit or a robot, but he now understood that it and the masked man were birds of a feather.

Indeed, they both were *solo survival builds*, boasting immense regeneration.

Y'golonac also possessed far more methods of fighting and much more mobility than Splendida. He had both firepower that made him a capable solo combat build and the ability to respawn an indefinite number of times.

He was so powerful that Superior Embryo didn't seem like enough to accomplish this feat.

"Fen! Cluster fire!" In response to Heldine's words, Fenrir changed the barrel's shape and began firing buckshot meant for close-range encounters.

Y'golonac responded by switching from the submachine guns to a large shield, which he threw at Heldine—a shield that was large enough to not only block his line of sight, but also crush him to death.

"Ah!" Heldine fired repeatedly to knock the weapon away before it struck home.

Not missing this opening, Y'golonac vanished once more and thrust a spear at Heldine from a blind spot.

Heldine turned his body and evaded it, however barely. While midair, he fired more defense-ignoring shots—but without Heldine's ultimate job skill backing them up, Y'golonac was able to dodge it.

It was a true back-and-forth. In close range combat, the two were more or less equal.

However, while Heldine's only lifeline was a Brooch and his own HP, there was no telling how many times Y'golonac could get back up. It dawned on Heldine that the situation would only get worse for him.

Still, he couldn't retreat here.

"Leader!"

"I'll keep him in place! The rest of you, secure the cargo and the coachmen!" Brandishing Fenrir, Heldine roared as he continued to engage Y'golonac.

And so...

"Don't let this gang smuggle their drugs to Vandelheim!"

Silence. Those words made Y'golonac freeze, stopping in place like a game character that had ceased responding to controller inputs.

"Hm...?" Finding that strange, Heldine went on high alert when...

"What did you just say?"

...Y'golonac let out several voices that couldn't have belonged to Y'golonac.

Watching the battle from a distance, Splendida nodded in understanding as he mused to himself, "Ah...I get it now."

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A few minutes later, Splendida and Y'golonac were sitting on the ground before Heldine.

They were currently in the Japanese "seiza" sitting posture—an apologetic pose that Y'golonac had assumed instantly. Splendida had looked at Y'golonac, thought, *Giapponese seiza?*, and mimicked it.

"Oh dear, we almost ended up taking part in something bad." Splendida spoke with the tone of someone who wasn't feeling the slightest bit guilty, while Y'golonac maintained a silence.

The order of events that had led to the current situation went something like this:

A group within the Dryfean underworld received illegal substances—namely drugs—through Caldina. With Dryfe being in the gloomy state that it was, it was a good place to sell such items for a major profit. But since bringing them in just like that would get them caught immediately, they chose to deliver it by masking their caravan as a passenger transport service.

However, Dryfe was aware of this, and requested Fullmetal Wolves—Heldine's clan and the second in Dryfe's rankings—to seize the drugs and capture the criminals responsible.

What had made it a more complicated task than expected was the presence of two *Superiors* on the caravan who'd been invited by the imperator.

When Heldine told him all of this, things finally made sense to Splendida. It explained why the coachman's shout about a "bandit attack" had felt so off. He'd probably wanted to shout something like "Dryfe inspection," but caught himself at the last moment.

"I apologize for getting in the way of your duties." Y'golonac bowed deeply to express his regret.

Y'golonac was a Master that the coachmen had hired as a bodyguard. He'd been invited by the imperator and was heading to Vandelheim anyway, so this job was just right for him.

And so, he and Splendida had ended up fighting Fullmetal Wolves, oblivious to the fact that they were both backing up a very shady group of people.

Y'golonac had Truth Discernment, but the criminals could circumvent it by saying things like "we would like a bodyguard for a caravan carrying people and cargo" or "we're bringing pharmaceutical products to Vandelheim," *neither of which were lies* per se.

Though, for some reason he also *hadn't heard* the coachman's words.

"Fortunately, the only human casualties were Masters. No real trouble at all... Though, we'll have you make it up to us in the war against Altar."

Splendida and Y'golonac both showed their invitation letters and explained themselves, and though they weren't completely innocent, the fact that they hadn't disrupted his work on purpose was enough for Heldine to not hold them responsible.

In this operation, nobody had died besides a number of Masters from Fullmetal Wolves. The criminal group responsible had all been apprehended. There were some coachmen who'd tried to force an escape and caused their carriages to topple, but though that caused some injuries, none of the passengers had been killed, and their wounds had already been treated.

In fact, the one who'd suffered the worst injury from a toppled carriage was Splendida himself.

Incidentally, when the lady he'd protected had woken up, she'd just kept muttering, "The neck, the neck..." in pure confusion—but when Splendida showed himself, fully healed and *naked*, she instantly fainted yet again.

Regardless, though there had been a few complications, Fullmetal Wolves had fulfilled their objective, and it was decided that they would escort the caravan to Vandelheim. Heldine didn't seem to like the idea of leaving the innocent passengers in the wasteland.

Splendida and Y'golonac would be accompanying them as well. Some might say this was Fullmetal Wolves escorting "VIPs invited by the imperator himself," while others would characterize it as "persons of interest" being dragged away.

"The road had some twists and turns, but it looks like we're back on track," said Splendida. The platform that had supported Fenrir was now covered in order to transport Y'golonac.

For some reason, though, Splendida was sitting right next to him right now.

"By the way, *where* are you controlling that from, and *how many* of *tu* are there? Is ‘Unfaltering’ the name of your party?”

“...I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Watching the battle had given Splendida an idea of how Y’golonac worked, but the latter still feigned ignorance.

Well, if he just went and admitted it like it’s no big deal, it’d just make me worried. About the war and stuff, Splendida thought despite putting on an exaggerated and disappointed expression. *Little old me and Y’golonac. I see the imperator’s inviting survival-focused Superiors. Maybe this war won’t be your typical one.*

Splendida realized that the Dryfean leadership had some sort of plan to win the upcoming conflict, and that inviting them was part of it.

Well, anything’s fine by me. If that’s how it’s gonna be, I’ll probably get a front row view of all the highlights.

The *Superior* whose goal was simply to do some sightseeing—the immortal tourist—pictured the coming event.

“Heh heh heh...” Splendida chuckled merrily—not realizing that Y’golonac was staring at him, just a little creeped out.

Interlude: Tournament Days Seven and Eight

Gideon the City of Duels, Central Arena
Tournament: Day Seven.
Name: Unknown (Unable to Speculate).
Core Traits: Short Distance Warping (Presumed).

◇◆

The city of Gideon would soon begin the seventh of its ten Tournament days. A UBM escaping the day before had certainly been an emergency, but it hadn't stopped them from commencing the event as planned.

Albeit not quite as much as day five's, today's reward seemed like it would be quite useful in combat, and thus it had attracted many powerful participants.

And the person Death Period was sending in to fight for it was none other than...

"So it's finally *my* turn, huh?" A shady-looking lady in shades—Marie Adler.

She was the bearer of the onmitsu grouping's Superior Job, Death Shadow, as well as the infamous PK who carried the nickname "*Superior* Killer." However, only her clan and a few others knew her secret.

"Well, Ray, Fujee's trio, and the armorhead are all in school, while Rookie's busy with his prep..." Shu and Hannya were still around, working as security, but the clan members Marie felt closest to weren't present to see her bout. That had left her feeling a little bit down.

"I get that they have to put their education above everything...but whether it's sports or anything else, it's always best to see the win happen in real time."

Marie spoke as if she'd already won—she was really counting her chickens before they hatched, though she might have had more than enough reason to be so confident. Aside from the *Superiors*, she was among the strongest Masters in Death Period—and perhaps in the entirety of Altar. In anything-goes fights, Marie could beat just about anyone.

On top of that, none of Altar's *Superiors* were taking part today. Lei-Lei had participated in day one, Tsukuyo Fuso had gone for day five, and Figaro was slated to fight on the final day. The remaining two were only involved in the event as security. And among powerful non-*Superiors*, the kingdom's strongest—Kashimiya—had already participated on day six. B3 and Rosa had also had their turn on day two. Juliet, as well as many other well-known duel rankers, had all chosen other days too.

With Marie being as powerful as she was and day seven lacking any notably strong opponents, she had reason to be confident in her victory.

"Guess I'll just get in there and grab that win!"

Thus, Marie Adler the *Superior* Killer challenged The Tournaments and...

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Sorcerer Ray Starling

I logged into *Dendro* after coming back home from college and found myself on day eight of The Tournaments.

The Death Period member participating that day was Fujinon. Her Embryo multiplied her spells, and with today's reward UBM being able to split itself, Fujinon figured that if she performed well, she could gain the ability to multiply her spells two additional times.

"For a caster, Fujinon's a real musclehead!" said Io.

"Huh? Io, you're the last person who should say that..." Kasumi replied.

"To be fair, casters in general do seem to have a strong focus on raw firepower," Nemesis commented. The Pyromancer job's Crimson Sphere was a good example. It was very powerful even by the standards of high-rank job ults, and I was under the impression that it was used pretty often because of that.

I kinda felt like I saw people who used it get defeated all the time, though.

"Anyway, looks like she made it through the preliminaries," I said. Now we'd be able to watch her matches. Seated in the box we'd reserved for the entire ten day period, I waited for Fujinon's turn alongside Nemesis, Io, and Kasumi.

"Heh heh heh... Fujinon sure is something, huh...?"

Actually, there was one more person here with us.

"I have nothing more to teach her," the other person continued. "Then again, my teachings are probably worthless anyway..."

Sitting on a chair next to me, her head hanging and in awfully low spirits, there was McBlackJack—better known as Marie.

"Don't worry, teacher! I get you *lost in the first match*, but don't beat yourself over it!" said Io, who was also sitting next to Marie. Io patted her on the back.

"Io?!" Kasumi exclaimed, shocked by her friend's insensitive remark.

Though...well...yeah, that was it.

Ignoring the *Superiors*, Marie was among the strongest in our clan. And yet, so far she was the only one of us who had lost in her very first fight.

"You got matched with the eventual winner, so don't let it get to you," I said. "That's what happened to me too."

Yeah—she'd fought the winner of day seven right off the bat.

Since it was the preliminaries, there hadn't been an audience, but if I had to guess, I'm sure it had been one hell of a duel.

From what Marie herself had told me, it went like this...

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Marie's opponent was King of Storms Caydence.

He was the leader of Welkin Alliance—the fourth in the clan rankings—and a pre-*Superior* often counted among the top five most powerful Masters in the kingdom. Boasting wide-scale extermination power matching even King of Destruction—a *Superior*—Caydence stood alongside the likes of Kashimiya, the strongest melee fighter; King of Light, the strongest ranged fighter; and Catherine Congou, the strongest tamer.

And the fifth among these was the *Superior* Killer—Marie. In battles where anything was permitted, including ambushes, she was definitely up there with the best.

The reason someone like that would lose her first fight was simple—The

Tournaments were far from an “anything goes” environment.

First of all, a battle that began with a countdown and the fighters facing each other didn’t allow for staging an ambush. Marie couldn’t preemptively hide her presence, create copies of herself, or catch the enemy off guard, which left no room for her onmitsu style of combat to breathe.

And to top it all off, there was her Death Shadow ult and her strongest means of evasion, Art of Vanishing. Since its effects were equivalent to disappearing from the world entirely, the barrier treated it the same as dying. Marie had been forced to fight someone who was her equal match, all the while unable to use her trump card or any of the strategies she excelled at.

Still, she may have been able to win using just her high AGI, ability to split herself up, and her Embryo Arc-en-Ciel—but unfortunately, her opponent was too strong this time.

Caydence used his power as a wind magic Superior Job to flood the arena with a storm the moment the fight began. Moreso than the mundane weather phenomenon, the winds of this magical tempest brought unbridled physical destruction. Prevented from dispersing into the atmosphere by the barrier, the storm ravaged everything within.

The duel stage became a vortex, and the deadly winds made short work of the copies Marie created.

She herself watched the flow of the storm and tried to move in a way that minimized the damage, but she couldn’t entirely prevent it. Gradually, her health was chipped away. On top of that, the storm carried a poison debuff that afflicted her and further accelerated the DoT.

In the end, she tried to turn it all around with a bullet that killed without fail—but before she could, Caydence finished his preparations and cast a spell that destroyed the entire stage, leaving Marie with no room to evade. Finally, she was defeated.

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“An attack that covers everything within the barrier... Whatever could I do against the likes of *that*?” said Marie.

“Now you’re talking like Io was...” said Kasumi. Apparently, losing after barely being able to fight back had hit Marie pretty hard.

I know how that feels, I thought.

"It appears that she was overcome by both her lack of compatibility with her opponent and the rules of the event," said Nemesis.

"Yeah." If she'd been able to use Art of Vanishing, Marie might've survived the final attack and delivered her certain death bullet. After all, she'd been inside Noz Forest while Shu bombarded it and lived. Caydence was nearly as much of a destructive force as Shu, so being unable to use that one skill had put her at a major disadvantage in that matchup.

That one skill's usefulness didn't mean that Caydence wasn't a fearsome foe, though. He'd covered the entire stage in a storm while simultaneously preparing a spell that was even *more* powerful. Whether that was his own prowess or the work of his Embryo was unclear, but it took some awfully refined magic skill. As a caster he was considered the same tier as King of Light, and I could clearly see why. I'd come to know every *Superior* of the kingdom, but this made me realize once again that they weren't the only powerful people out there.

"But it's a good thing you dropped out in the preliminaries, huh?" said Io. "Now you can't damage the *Superior* Killer's name."

"Well, that's...good? I'm not really sure," said Marie. "I mean, most people don't know that Marie Adler actually is the *Superior* Killer anyway. B3 does though, and she sure made fun of me."

B3...is she still holding a grudge against Marie for ambushing her? I wondered. *No...I think they're just not compatible as people.*

"B-By the way, teacher, why do they call you the '*Superior* Killer?'" Kasumi asked.

"Huh?" Io tilted her head and answered before Marie could do so herself. "It's because she beat a *Superior* despite not being a *Superior* herself."

"B-But our leader's beaten *Superiors* too, hasn't he?"

Well, it was true that I'd beaten Franklin and Logan, but...

"It wasn't like I did it by myself," I said. I couldn't have won against Franklin without the help of the three here—and many others—and I would've completely lost against Logan if Veldorbell hadn't destroyed so much of his forces.

"You beat your *Superior* all by yourself, and that made all the difference, right?" I said. The "*Superior* Killer" name was created because she'd defeated a fearsome, wanted *Superior without* anyone's help. That was my assumption, anyway...

"Hrmm..."

...but Marie herself was making a somewhat dubious face.

"Marie?"

"Well, I was certainly the only *person* who beat it, but...how should I put this...?" Whatever it was she wanted to say, Marie wasn't being clear about it. "And honestly, being solo or not wasn't really relevant to why I got the title."

"Hm?" We were so curious that question marks were practically popping up over our heads, but Marie remembered something that put a tired expression on her face.

"The reason I'm called the *Superior* Killer is because the one I beat left *that* big of an impression. Yes, even by *Superior* standards."

The Superior *she defeated was...King of Plagues, right?*

"It happened before you three began *Dendro*, so I doubt it means that much to you, but the King of Plagues incident is among the biggest catastrophes that have ever happened in *Infinite Dendrogram*. It was actually on about the same level as Gloria."

"Huh?" I said, shocked. That was the name of a mighty, fiendish dragon that had attacked Altar—an SUBM that had brought immense devastation to the kingdom and required the combined efforts of Altar's *Superiors* to defeat. Was I really supposed to believe that a single Master had been able to do something similar?

"You can find the details about the event in the back issues of the DIN newspaper. I put them all in the library of our base in the Eighth Arena. Go look at them if you're curious."

"Oh yeah! I almost forgot that DIN also releases actual newspapers!" said Io.

"Personally, I remember them better as the group that held an event with the truly nonsensical name of 'Ba-Thump Kyahah'..." said Nemesis.

"Hearing about that already makes me feel kinda nostalgic," said Marie. "Enough about the past though—let's cheer for Fujee. The first fight's about to— Oh. Looks like she's going first."

The conversation seemed to have made Marie feel better, and she suggested we focused on the duel.

"Whoa! That's awesome! Get them, Fujinon! You can do iiit!"

"Oh. Looks like she's up against Riser..."

"Huh?! For real?! Get her, Riser! You can do iiit!"

"Io..." She'd instantly switched from cheering on her friend to cheering on her fave. From what I'd heard, after cooperating during the recent attack on Altar, Io had become a big fan of his.

Yeah, I'm not surprised that Io likes Riser's battle style, I thought.

I wasn't saying a word. My eyes were fixed on the stage, but my brain was focused on the King of Plagues incident.

A Master had caused a disaster that matched Gloria itself in scale. You could barely compare that to common crimes or even actions taken during wartime.

What had happened back then? And why?

I felt like that was something we Masters had to know.

Chapter Five Opening: The King of Plagues Incident

February, 2045

In the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*, there existed nations that were referred to as the Seven Great Countries.

Altar, the Land of Knights.

Dryfe Imperium, the Land of Machines.

Huang He, the Empire of Hermits.

Tenchi, the Land of Blades.

Legendaria, the Fairyland.

Caldina, the Mercantile City-State Union.

Granvaloa, the Maritime Fleet.

All Masters, without exception, were required to start out in one of these seven, but that didn't mean that they were the only countries that existed. If they were, they wouldn't be called the Seven *Great* Countries, but just the Seven Countries.

The world of *Infinite Dendrogram* had a number of smaller countries besides these, and they were either in extremely remote locations or situated along the borders of the Seven. They were nations that the Seven had never seen any reason to conquer, or ones that were left alone because it was better *not* to claim them.

A good example of the former was the remote settlement said to exist within the Harshwinter Mountains—a tiny country with a name unknown to most.

It was a place widely thought to be trapped in a hellish world of ice and snow, menaced by ferocious landdragons and avians. The texts of old claimed that it existed, but no one from the Seven Great Countries had yet set foot in it. After all, there was nothing to be gained from invading it. Nothing could grow there, it wasn't known to be rich in ore, and attempting to enter the area could provoke the local landdragons, potentially leading to the same dire fate northern Caldina had once suffered.

Thus, the tiny nation's existence continued to be ignored.

After Masters had grown in number, though, some of them set out to these remote lands with the goal of simply exploring it. And while the unimaginably unwelcoming environment had forced most of them to retreat or given them the death penalty, there were rumors that a few adventurers had actually arrived at the settlement.

Even then, that place was still of no consequence to the Seven Great Countries.

On the other hand, there were countries that *were* known to all the Seven, yet unclaimed by any of them. These were largely city-states situated right on the borders between two or more of these mighty nations—countries composed of but one city and the small villages surrounding it. Even when put together, each of these tiny places controlled less land than a single city of the Seven. They had almost no military power to speak of, and if a war broke out between them and any of the Seven, they would certainly be annexed.

However, that had yet to happen.

This was because the benefits of keeping them around outweighed the benefits of conquering them.

For the Seven Great Countries, laying claim to one of these city-states would be seen as encroaching upon a border. That was bad enough when the small country in question was between just two larger nations, but it was even worse when it bordered three.

Simply invading even a tiny country like that could make an enemy of the two greater ones it stood next to.

Because of this, rather than risk provoking the other countries over such small patches of land, it was more beneficial to simply leave them as they were.

Mahem was one such tiny city-state.

Being one of the small lands situated right where Altar, Legendaria, and Caldina's borders met, it was an agrarian nation with idyllic scenery. Though they did not have much land, their farming—enhanced by earth magic and alchemy—allowed them to produce enough food to feed themselves a thousand times over, and they made a decent amount of money by exporting their excess food to their three neighbors.

Mahem had existed for centuries since the collapse of King of Kings Rockfell Adrasta's rule, and it hadn't changed even as the world was shaken by the recent increase in Masters. Even if these Masters stopped in Mahem from time to time, almost none of them stayed.

Or, rather, staying here was difficult for them.

This was because Mahem and other small countries like it *had no save points*.

The reason the Seven Great Countries were called that wasn't just because of how much land they controlled or their power as nations—it also referred to the fact that they had cities or even villages with save points.

Meanwhile, the small countries didn't have them even in their capitals. They were not only small in size and influence, but couldn't even function as hometowns for Masters.

On the other hand, though, this meant that Mahem's land was incredibly fertile without the need for the environmental benefits of a save point, so perhaps it wasn't so bad after all.

The country also wasn't subjected to very many monster attacks. It could perhaps be described as a haven of peace on a turbulent continent.

The people of Mahem believed that they would always live like this—that this life would never end.

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"I'm sooo bored." The day was calm and clear. Sitting atop a hill in a field of grass, a young boy muttered these unremarkable words to himself.

The boy's name was Mahr.

He was the second son of a rancher living in a village belonging to the nation of Mahem, and he'd just turned ten years old this year.

He was currently watching over a number of Cotton Sheep—sheeplike monsters they raised—while they feasted on the grass in the field. He was helping with the family business, which was an activity that had become all too familiar for him a long time ago.

Lying down next to him, fast asleep, there was a Demi-Dragon-tier monster, Demi-Drac-Hound. It was a tamed monster that Mahr's father had bought from a traveling merchant from Caldina, and they now used the creature as a sheepdog. A single glare from it was enough to make the

Cotton Sheep fall in line, and it was strong enough to deal with most of the wild monsters that might attack them. The same applied to any potential sheep thieves, though these were quite rare.

The Demi-Drac-Hound had a menacing name and visage, but with no danger in sight or work to do right now, it was just sleeping at Mahr's side. Still, if the sheep tried running away somewhere, it would certainly wake up and instantly set them straight. It was very well trained and attached to its owners.

"I'm sooo bored..." Mahr repeated.

It wasn't an uncommon thing to hear out of him, and it only made him feel more melancholy. Mahr believed that he would spend all his years helping with the family business.

However, being the second son, he wouldn't even inherit the ranch. He would either live his whole life as a farmhand here, or marry into some other ranching or farming family without any sons.

"I heard there's lots of *amazing things* happening in the big countries..." The village Mahr lived in was a small one, but the occasional merchants and bards that stopped by informed them of the things that happened in the Seven Great Countries.

They would present them in the form of foreign newspapers or bard songs, among other things.

The stories Mahr heard had surprised him greatly.

A massive white whale monstrosity that had attacked the country floating on the sea.

A three-headed golden dragon that had terrorized the kingdom.

A civil war in the imperium, fought for the imperator's throne.

And lastly, the war between Altar and Dryfe.

While these stories filled the adults and the girls with dread, Mahr was overwhelmed with excitement.

After all, such terrifying stories always came with some real *heroism*.

The explosive Master who slew the white whale.

The three top-rankers who defeated the three-headed golden dragon.

The gargantuan beast that had been instrumental in both the civil war and the true war behind it, shattering even a meteor.

Upon hearing the stories of such champions, Mahr found himself wanting to become like them.

However, he wasn't a Master, but a tian, and he didn't know how he could become a Master. In fact, he didn't even know that there *was* no way for tians to become Masters.

As a child, he couldn't even embark upon a profession of his own, and it wasn't clear if he had the talent to become a champion.

I doubt I have what it takes anyway, Mahr thought. While he did wish to become a hero like that, he wasn't quite childish enough to think that he could actually accomplish that goal without any evidence he was capable of it. But this just gave him more room to think.

The stormy world of champions and his unchanging daily life.

His dream to live as a champion and the reality which wouldn't allow it.

Simply making such comparisons filled Mahr with sadness. It made him realize just how *narrow* his future was.

"...guess I'll head back now." When the sheep had eaten their fill, Mahr stood up.

The Demi-Drac-Hound also woke up, let out a bark, and rushed toward the sheep before leading them to follow after Mahr.

This wouldn't have been necessary if they simply put the sheep in Jewels like tamed monsters, but they didn't.

In fact, these sheep weren't even actually tamed.

The reason for that was simple—there were too many of them. Since they numbered in the dozens, managing them using one's limited party slots and minion capacity was difficult, especially if you weren't a combatant.

Because of this, instead of taming them and using Jewels, the sheep were simply domesticated and kept on the ranch. This came with the added benefit of the monsters still dropping items if they died.

This method had been taught to people long ago by a person known as "Farm Cat." Living after the destruction of the pre-ancient civilization, he was an important figure who'd spread the knowledge of this new stock farming method to the entire world.

Would I have to do something this boring if he'd never existed? Mahr wondered, venting his frustrations on what was clearly the wrong target.

When Mahr and the sheep returned to the village, though, he found it in a bit of a stir. However, it didn't seem like they were panicking. Instead, the people looked surprised and happy. It reminded Mahr of how it looked like when traveling merchants or bards stopped by.

"Ah! Mahr! What took you so long?!" Upon noticing Mahr, his brother—three years older than he was—ran up to him.

"What's happening here?"

"The village has a guest again, but it's a big deal! Someone amazing! Someone special!"

Mahr couldn't understand what was amazing or special here. His brother was so excited that he didn't even manage to say the most important bit.

"What's amazing?" Mahr asked.

"I'm telling you, we got someone *big*!"

As Mahr considered blurting out "Just tell me who," his brother finally calmed down and said...

"The Hero has come!"

Indeed...that was certainly someone special.

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The Hero.

That word held a special meaning to tians.

It referred to a Special Superior Job that had appeared many times throughout history—a person who possessed immense power.

The Heroes were granted that strength from the moment they were born into this world. Wielding blades, using magic, and blessed with prodigious skill, they were said to be both well-rounded and incredibly powerful.

Another notable thing about The Hero job was that it wasn't *picky*.

While Sacred King, Imperator Machina, The Saint, and Draconic Emperor could only manifest within certain bloodlines, The Hero didn't discriminate, letting even the children of the most lowly people become *special*. It was possible for anyone to be born with the mantle.

Because of this, tian commoners—and even some nobles—saw The Hero as a symbol of hope.

And that was why, when the current bearer of this job arrived at Mahr's village, everyone there welcomed him with open arms. They even held a welcome party in the village's only hall, where every inch of the table was covered in food.

Not a single villager missed the chance to participate, and Mahr was no exception. He intently listened to everything The Hero had to say.

“Oh! So you’ve arrived here all the way from Tenchi?”

“Yes. I’m on a journey to train and broaden my horizons. My current destination is the western end of the continent.”

The Hero, who was staying with the village chief for the time being, was a youth not even two decades old. His long black hair that he kept tied back and his name—To’ori Kusanagi—spoke of his origins in Tenchi. Mahr couldn’t even begin to imagine the length and magnitude of his journey.

“What will you do when you get there?” a child asked, excited.

“I will then turn toward the south and head to Legendaria,” The Hero kindly replied. “And once I’ve arrived...I believe I will head to the Harshwinter Mountains.”

Those words were met with expressions of astonishment.

The traveler was as courageous as you would expect someone called a hero to be. Most common folk would think his journey impossible, but he was the kind of person who made everyone believe he could accomplish such a feat.

“Hey! Hey! What kinda places have you been to?!”

“Have you seen deserts?”

“What about the sea?”

“Very well,” The Hero said. “I will tell you of my journey. Upon leaving Tenchi, I...”

Seemingly accustomed to people begging for stories of his adventures, he began to speak—and described sights the likes of which Mahr and the other villagers had never before witnessed.

There was the warrior he’d encountered on the Strait Sea separating Tenchi from the continent, right after taking off, who was nothing more than empty armor.

There was the martial artist he’d met in Huang He’s mountains—one whose skills were so overwhelming that his lack of a weapon meant nothing in combat.

There was the magic he’d seen in Caldina, so immense it shook the earth and blocked out the skies.

It wasn’t only battles that he spoke of. He also described the beauty of the sea when he looked back at his homeland after crossing it, as well as the majesty of the mountains in Huang He. And when he mentioned the dragon he’d met and tamed during his journey, the children began pestering him to show it.

He described all of this in language so eloquent that the listeners felt as though they could see everything with their own eyes. Perhaps The Hero also would have been quite qualified for the Bard job.

One strange thing about his stories, though, was that he spent most of his time praising those he'd fought and the sights he'd witnessed. Instead of elaborating on his own achievements, he spoke of the wonderful things he'd found throughout his journey. But because his stories had a sense of presence that would put actual bards to shame, his listeners simply became enthralled regardless, expressing no complaints with anything he said.

By the end, nearly every villager was satisfied. Because it was turning late, the welcome party came to a close.

Following the special night they'd just experienced, the villagers returned to their homes, all of them wearing happy expressions.

All, that is, except Mahr.

◇

"Ngh..."

Upon returning home, Mahr got into bed, yet found himself unable to sleep. His head was a mess, he felt queasy—overall, he was in no state to rest.

This was all because he was jealous.

The Hero To'ori Kusanagi. A man who was nothing like Mahr.

It wasn't just the job he'd been born with. To'ori's manner of speech, his behavior, the path he'd walked thus far—all of it made him the spitting image of Mahr's ideal champion.

Up until now, Mahr had only heard of such heroes in stories. Now that he'd finally encountered someone truly special, though, the difference between the two of them made Mahr want to cry.

Lying in complete silence, Mahr began to feel like staying in bed would only end up making him sweat, and that would make it even more uncomfortable.

That was why, careful not to wake up his brother on the top bunk, Mahr slowly snuck out of the house.

Caressed by the chilly night wind, Mahr walked around his home. It was all he could do to try and cool himself off, if only a little bit. Thankfully, it was a clear night with bright stars and the moon high in the sky, both shining upon Mahr's path through the darkness of the night.

He walked without direction until he stumbled upon a small bridge over the village's river.

"Huh?"

Ahead, Mahr saw another person with starlight cascading over them.

He'd assumed everyone would've been asleep at this hour, but then he remembered that this was a special day where they'd been visited by The Hero. Perhaps the figure was just someone who drank too much and stayed up.

Should I say something? They could fall in the river if they're too drunk. Or would they just get mad at me for walking out at night?

As that thought ran through Mahr's head, he drew closer, only to realize that it wasn't a drunkard—in fact, it wasn't even a villager.

"...Mister Hero?"

"Oh?" Standing on the bridge, looking down at the river reflecting the night sky, was none other than The Hero from a distant land, To'ori Kusanagi. "I believe I saw you in the crowd earlier. What are you doing out so late at night?"

Despite his audience being but a single child, To'ori spoke as courteously as he had back in the hall.

"Taking a walk," Mahr replied, his expression unreadable.

"Ha ha...as am I," To'ori said, not minding the look on Mahr's face. "The beautiful night scenery inspired me to walk around a bit."

The sights around him had long since become completely mundane to Mahr, and The Hero's words made him feel a little dejected. He began to wonder if all of this simply looked different to someone as *special* as To'ori.

A brief silence followed, soon broken by To'ori. "Would you like to talk a little?" he said as he beckoned Mahr closer.

Mahr hesitated for a moment, but then he realized what an incredible opportunity it was to talk to The Hero one-on-one.

Mahr nodded before approaching him. Silence resumed as the two of them looked down at the river.

The Hero said nothing. It was as though he was waiting for Mahr to talk first.

Perhaps the only reason To'ori had invited Mahr to talk was because he was worried about the boy walking out at night all by his lonesome.

Unable to bear the silence, Mahr eventually broke it—and what he said first could easily pass for idle grumbling.

He spoke of how his daily life was a repeating chain of boredom.

He pointed out how amazing things straight out of legend were unfolding outside the village, yet nothing like that was happening within it.

When he talked about how he was nothing but an ordinary child, the tone of his voice contained a bit of his jealousy toward The Hero.

Finally he concluded with the thoughts he'd had while looking after the sheep at noon—the lament that his future was too narrow.

To'ori did nothing but listen to Mahr, but then...

"You're *special*, aren't you?" Mahr quietly asked.

"I am," To'ori replied with a nod. "The Hero is a vessel of talent."

"A vessel?"

"One of the skills I possess as The Hero is called Almighty. It grants me the ability to wield any low- and high-rank jobs, and it lets me claim up to a hundred of each. Along with that, I also have Full Link, which allows me to use skills from all sub jobs."

"HUH?!" To'ori's words filled Mahr with shock. The adults had told him that the most any person could have was six low-rank jobs and two high-rank jobs—and even then, that only applied to those with talent. Those without it would have even fewer than that, and the jobs one could pick were always limited by one's aptitude. Because of this, the number To'ori just said was simply outrageous.

"So you can take *any* job?"

"Indeed. I currently have over eighty low-rank jobs. High-rank jobs have conditions for claiming them, so I only have eight of those. For most of the low-rank jobs, though, I haven't done much *more* than just take them, so my total level is only slightly above 1,000."

"But that's..." *...Unfair,* Mahr thought.

To'ori could take dozens of jobs, no matter what they were. The difference between him and everyone else was so staggering that it bordered on injustice. And this gap was decided merely by whether you were born as The Hero or not.

This uncrossable divide had existed between Mahr and To'ori since the very moment they had both come into this world.

"That's true. It *is* unfair," The Hero said, as though he'd read Mahr's mind—or perhaps his many jobs contained skills that indeed enabled him to do something like that. It was notable, though, that his manner of speech was more relaxed than it had been before. "It's an extraordinary talent. Nothing is impossible to The Hero, and the level I can reach is unimaginably high. I can do anything. I can freely choose how to live my life."

Mahr had no response to that. Those words sounded so much like boasting that they made him feel uncomfortable. However, what To'ori said next greatly surprised him.

"But back when I was in Tenchi, I really *couldn't* do anything at all, nor choose my own path."

"Huh?" Mahr turned to look at To'ori's face, and saw that he wore a somewhat sad expression.

"My homeland...Tenchi is a place constantly embroiled in conflict. There's always some dispute between daimyos, and even individual martial artists regularly compete with one another. It's a country where people keep killing each other to gain power or display that power to the world. This is because they know that killing people is the easiest way to become stronger. You kill people to gain strength, then people kill you because you've become so strong. This is why people often call Tenchi the land of strife—the land of asura."

Mahr was already aware of this. He knew Tenchi as a very distant land full of warriors, and such portrayals of the country stirred his imagination and filled his heart with excitement...

"I had many people try to claim my life...and in turn, I claimed theirs."

...but To'ori didn't seem to feel that way.

"I'm not fundamentally against such battles to the death," To'ori continued, "but if that's all I have, then...the future seems awfully narrow, don't you think?"

"Huh?" That was the same word Mahr himself had used.

"I happened to be born with great power as The Hero—a power that makes anything possible for me. However, while in Tenchi, I had only one way to use my abilities—only one future I could see for myself. I could only walk on the path of strife and battle. I might have been special, as you say, but I couldn't choose my future."

In a brief silence that followed, Mahr realized that despite their circumstances being nothing alike, To'ori was troubled by a problem similar to his.

"I didn't like that," To'ori muttered as he looked up at the night sky, as though revealing the true depths of his heart. "I thought that if I trained myself some more, traveled the world, experienced more things, and then came back home...I might've been able to see a future I hadn't seen before."

In some ways, this seemed like just another path of strife, but in other ways this was the complete opposite of the life To'ori had lived.

"You *thought*? What do you think now?" Mahr asked.

"I don't know at the moment. My journey isn't over yet. Though I do wish that I could find the answer and choose my own life someday."

"I see." Just like Mahr lived with dreams of champions and heroes, To'ori too might have always yearned for something different. He'd dreamed of the world outside Tenchi, thinking that he would find an answer if he left. But just as he'd described in his stories, there was ample combat outside his homeland too.

He hadn't found an answer yet, but he continued his journey, still searching for his own way.

The silence returned, giving Mahr time to think. He was just an ordinary boy, while To'ori was more talented than anyone else.

Despite this, he felt like there were similarities between them. To'ori must've felt the same way—perhaps that was why he'd talked so much about himself.

"Tomorrow..." Mahr began to speak.

"Huh?"

"Tomorrow, I'm gonna take the sheep out for grazing. If you've never done that...you can come with me."

Mahr had thought about what he could do for To'ori and had come upon that suggestion—one that would perhaps point The Hero toward a path he had yet to try.

"Oh, I certainly will," To'ori nodded in response, his joy evident on his face.

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A week passed, and To'ori stayed in the village for the entirety of it. It was longer than he'd planned to stay, but he was nonetheless enjoying the idyllic life alongside Mahr and the other villagers. Times this peaceful were rare in his homeland, and he wished to experience it to its fullest.

Still, he could not stay here forever. This was the last day before he would finally head off again.

The Hero or not, traveling in this world was dangerous, and it wasn't clear whether he could ever visit this village again. That was why he wanted to spend his last day here without regrets.

"All right. It's harvest day today, isn't it?" To'ori had grown close to Mahr and the other villagers, and he emerged from the room he'd been staying in looking forward to experiencing what might be the last memory he'd make with them all.

"Good morning, Chief."

"Ohh, Sir To'ori. Good morning."

Even the village chief now addressed him by name. It was yet another sign of how familiar he'd become with this village.

For some reason, though, the chief was looking through the window with a somewhat perplexed expression.

"What's the matter?"

"Well...today's morning newspaper hasn't arrived yet. That's unusual, because the press in the capital is usually quite early," the chief said, his hands held up in resignation.

The village being as small as it was, the newspaper company didn't have a branch there, so newspapers were brought in by avian creatures specialized in stealth.

"I suppose it could just be that the delivery monster took the wrong turn, or maybe it dropped the newspapers somewhere. Regardless, now that you are awake, let's have breakfast."

Saying that with a smile as broad as a jester's, the chief urged To'ori to sit at the table, which was already covered in food. To'ori did as he was told, joining the chief, his wife, and his children for breakfast.

By the time they were done eating, they heard the flapping of bird wings outside.

“Oh? I suppose it’s finally arrived.”

“Hm?” While the chief simply assumed that the newspaper was late and went outside to pick it up, To’ori felt as though something wasn’t right. The flapping was very unsteady, and the breathing accompanying it was awfully wheezy.

The next moment, To’ori heard the chief let out a fearful shout.

Not wasting a second, To’ori sprung to action, using Instant Equip and Instant Wear to ready his gear before rushing outside. While his perception skills didn’t activate, the chief’s reaction was more than enough for him to understand that something serious was happening.

However, when he went outside, he didn’t find any threat that warranted him gearing up for combat.

“Gh...gegh...geeyui...” What To’ori found was a single bird, spitting blood and other fluids as it flapped its wings in utter derangement.

The bird had a bag with a newspaper company’s name attached to its leg. It flew—or rather, fell—as blood from its mouth and feathers from its wings rained down.

Soon enough, the bird let out a pained noise, and its life expired. The blood, the feathers, and everything else that remained of it vanished into bits of light.

“Th-This is...!” The fasteners on the bag attached to it were undone, and the newspapers inside had fallen out.

All of them were covered in blood that hadn’t disappeared—tian blood.

And among it all, there was a single piece of paper, covered in hastily written text, containing information that someone must’ve used their last strength to write.

It said, “DEADLY DISEASE SPREADING IN CAPITAL. DANGER.”

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Minor Country, Mahem, Capital, Three Hours Ago

Mahem was a tiny country.

Compared to Altar, all Mahem had was a single midsize city and villages so few they could be counted on one hand. It was likely smaller than Gideon Country, and that was only a part of the great kingdom of Altar.

Still, because it was blessed by a temperate climate, Mahem had always been home to many tians.

Its location between three large countries and powerful monster habitats had made expansion impossible, but it had existed as a very peaceful country ever since the end of The Era of the Peerless Three a few centuries ago.

It had become part of Mahem's culture to live steadily and earnestly. Everyone from the king to the lowest peasant had always thought that if they merely did that, they would continue to exist even if the rest of the world fell apart.

That was why none of them anticipated an *end* like this.

That day, a man working at the newspaper company woke up in the dead of night coughing, with an uncomfortable feeling in his mouth. He went to his workplace after taking some medicine that improved disease resistance, but it seemed to have little effect—in fact, his condition only got worse.

He looked around and noticed that less than half of his coworkers had come to work, and all of those who did seemed to be feeling just as terrible as he did.

"Is this...an Epidemic?" That was the first thing that came to his mind. Epidemics were diseases that took communities by surprise, negatively affecting people regardless of their stats or resistances.

They always affected some people more than others, but this one seemed worse than most. "Do we have time to replace the front page article with one about this Epidemic?" he said, punctuated with coughing. The Secretaries with printing skills were already using them to produce the morning newspapers, but he felt that it might've been better to warn the people of this danger as soon as possible.

Maybe we could add it into the blank spaces on the page...? He thought of how to convey this information, only to see the sun begin to rise outside.

"Damn it. We didn't make it in time."

As a Tamer working for the company, he was supposed to send out the newspaper delivery monsters before dawn, but the disease had left too few people for them to accomplish that in a timely manner. The morning newspaper would most certainly be late now. They would have to add an apology as well.

As that thought crossed his mind, blood began to well up deep in his throat.

"Huh?" He stared blankly down at his own crimson blood, staining the newspaper on the desk.

It wasn't just him. Everyone within the newspaper company was now vomiting blood.

No—it wasn't just his colleagues either.

The few people he could see outside were all collapsing with blood gushing from their mouths, just like they were.

"Th-This is...fatal...?!" The disease that at first manifested as discomfort and coughing at most had become significantly worse with the rising of the sun.

It was too late, but the man finally realized that this was a far more potent disease than he'd first thought.

I-I should at least...warn the...surrounding villages...! He took a paper and hastily wrote down "DEADLY DISEASE SPREADING IN CAPITAL. DANGER" before throwing it in a newspaper delivery bag. Then, he removed a tamed monster from his Jewel, doused it in Elixir, and sent it to the nearby villages.

The only thing he hoped for now was to keep the villagers away from the capital.

Urged by his sense of duty as a member of the press, he'd sent out this dying message, not knowing who it would reach—or *if it would even make it in time*.

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Mahem, Village

A bird that had died before their eyes, and the message from the bag.

To'ori instantly understood the meaning behind the words, as well as the obscene amount of blood, and his face went pale.

This is bad! It's contagious...! Considering the possibility that the blood itself could be a carrier of the pathogens, he instantly cast a flame spell, creating a fireball that incinerated the bag.

He acted fast—the bag was set alight and disinfected the instant he saw what was written on that piece of paper.

"Did that do it...?" Saying that, To'ori checked by using his Full Link to activate another skill.

It was Disease Eye, a skill that came from his job as Plaguemancer, which he'd picked up at one point because it was useful in helping people. It was an active skill that let him perceive harmful pathogens by tinting them a reddish color.

He used it to observe the area around the incinerated and sterilized bag.

"Ah...!"

However, *the entire scenery besides that patch* was covered in red.

"Wh-What?!"

A swarm of disease was encroaching from the horizon like blood flooding the world. It grew and multiplied explosively, engulfing the entire country of Mahem.

The base of his feet was already bright red, and when he turned around, he saw the wave of sickness covering nearly the entire hill on which the village stood—and it showed no signs of stopping.

With that, To'ori realized that the flying monster might not have been infected by the minuscule amount of pathogens in the bag. Instead, it might have been overwhelmed by the flood that had crawled over all the way from the capital.

What that meant was...

"*Cough, cough*...!"

"Ah! Chief!" The village chief, standing behind To'ori, suddenly began to cough up blood and fell to the ground. A steady stream of red flowed from his mouth as he stared with unfocused eyes and clawed at the air, looking for something—or someone—to help him.

In other words, he was looking for To'ori.

The Hero rushed over to him immediately before dousing him in one bottle of Elixir, letting him drink another, and casting a healing spell.

However, he was too slow. The Elixir seemed to have little effect, and the damage being done to the chief's body outpaced the healing from the spell as he continued to cough.

To'ori used every means of recovery available to him, but they barely even slowed the disease down.

And so, within just ten seconds or so, the chief's life was snuffed out.

However, it didn't stop at that.

Unlike monsters, who disintegrated as soon as they died, tian bodies remained untouched.

Or rather, that was how it was *supposed* to work.

And yet, the chief's body was now being disassembled—as though countless tiny creatures were tearing it apart and consuming it.

The flesh on his body vanished with terrifying speed, leaving only his blood, bone, and hair.

"This...this is...!" As To'ori voiced his horror at the scene, he heard similar sounds coming from the chief's home. His family must've just died in the same way.

And it wasn't just them.

To'ori looked over the village, painted red by his Disease Eye, a clamor of pain and anguish now reaching him.

If those shouts were caused by the same thing that he had just witnessed, then he might as well have been gazing at hell itself.

"Gh...!" Blood began to well up in the corners of To'ori's mouth, signifying that he might have been infected. It had a minor effect on him, but that was only because of his Poison Resistance skill and vast HP provided by his over 1,000 levels. If it weren't for those things, this disease would've claimed him just like the others.

"No...this isn't..." To'ori muttered to himself. Indeed—this was no mere "disease."

This was a deliberate attack.

To'ori had lived in Tenchi, the land of strife, for nearly ten years, and that allowed him to sense this fact clearly.

"The Resources are *moving*." People killing other people resulted in a greater movement of Resources—XP—than when the killing was done by monsters, and any martial artist who was proficient enough—by Tenchi standards, at least—was able to perceive this movement.

Now, To'ori was able to sense that movement. He could feel the Resources from the chief who'd died right before his eyes flowing into the distance—to the one who'd killed him.

"Instant Wear." With those words, a piece of equipment appeared on To'ori head.

It was a helm called Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet—the piece of equipment he'd acquired while crossing the sea between Tenchi and the continent, where he'd encountered and defeated a suit of empty armor—the

SUBM, Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru. This item had a curious skill that allowed him to see his enemies—a skill called Anti Stealth.

He activated this power and viewed his foe with perfect clarity. In Mahem's capital, there stood a boy, sneering with unadulterated glee.

With the enemy's presence confirmed, this was no longer a natural disaster but a massacre enacted by human hands.

"The foe is in my sight."

To'ori stared at the person who'd slaughtered the people who had welcomed him with open arms.

They had to be avenged.

That was the law of Tenchi, which still held him in an iron grip. He'd lived within that law for most of his life. He'd killed those coming for his head because of his immense strength—his status as The Hero.

He was then targeted by the families of those he killed. And when he dealt with them, he had been confronted by their friends.

The more he tried to wipe away the sparks of conflict falling upon him, the more violent his life became. He'd left Tenchi exactly because he found himself hating the fact that his future—the path laid out for him—was stained in blood.

But in this moment, To'ori realized that he was still a true man of Tenchi. His very soul was roaring for him to kill this wretch who laughed as he slaughtered innocents.

With a face of an asura forged by strife, the kindhearted Hero fixed his eyes on the capital—and the evil he had to purge.

He poured all his strength into his legs, ready to dash toward the city at supersonic speeds...

"Ah!"

...but then something stopped him.

The image of a person flashed into his mind. It was Mahr—the boy he'd formed a connection with.

To'ori's memories told him that his house was beyond that hill.

"Please be all right!" he cried, turning around and rushing to cross it. He was too late to help the village chief and everyone else on this side of the hill, but he thought—*prayed*—that he could maybe save at least someone.

Moving faster than sound, he cleared the hill in the blink of an eye—but the red wave had already arrived here, consuming the house that doubled as a ranch. From within it, he could hear a multitude of disturbing sounds and anguished voices.

The despair left To'ori speechless and barely able to stand.

But before he fell to his knees, he realized that *there weren't as many voices as there should be*.

The disease had reached the ranch, yet he didn't hear the cries of the many animals that lived there.

Rekindling his hope, he once again fixed his eyes on the horizon. There, beyond the red wave, he saw Mahr, watching over a number of peacefully grazing sheep.

"Ah!" He could still make it.

The moment he realized that, he gathered all his strength and jumped beyond the red wave.

This mighty step was the combination of The Hero's countless skills and high stats—a method of closing distance that was faster than everything in Tenchi except the draw of The Unsheath Kashimiya.

To'ori used that skill to finally outrun the red wave, landing right between it and Mahr.

"Huh?!" Mahr exclaimed, surprised by To'ori's sudden appearance, as well as his combat-ready attire. However, The Hero paid no heed to him and looked up at the sky.

"All right," To'ori said. After confirming something, he held up the Jewel on his right hand, then spoke to the being inside.

"My friend—I release you. Our shared journey ends here."

"I see," the one inside replied, in a voice heavy with sorrow.

"I have one last request..."

"No need to say it. I understand. The kingdom, yes?"

"Yes. Release."

Following this exchange, To'ori released the monster within the Jewel into the open air.

It was a single lightning dragon. Specifically, it was a dragon of the species High-End Lightning Dragon, and it was a friend To'ori had met on his journey. It was a curious sort of dragon who'd willingly let To'ori tame it after the two of them had traveled together for a while.

"Huh? What...?" To'ori's sudden appearance and the dragon's release—

Mahr couldn't understand what was happening here.

However, To’ori no longer had any time to explain anything to the boy. The red wave behind him was getting close, and his own infected body was gradually shedding on the ground around him. Because of this, he couldn’t take Mahr with him and run.

The only one who could accomplish that was the lightning dragon, who’d avoided infection first by being in the safety of the Jewel, then by taking to the air, where the disease could not reach.

That was why To’ori had no choice but to entrust this task to the dragon. He knew he could count on him, and thus he didn’t hesitate.

Not saying a word, To’ori used wind magic to lift Mahr’s body into the air while keeping his distance from him.

Gently, like a balloon, Mahr’s body rose upwards.

“Wh-Whoa!” As the boy levitated, the lightning dragon gently grasped him in hand. “M-Mister To’ori! Wh-What’s...?!”

What was it that the boy tried to say in his confusion?

The red wave has already swarmed past To’ori’s feet.

The many animals, including the Demi-Drac-Hound they’d used as a sheepdog, were soon claimed by disease and vanished amid screams of anguish, spewing blood from their mouths.

The sudden event filled the boy with fear, but To’ori didn’t say anything to calm him down. He wished he could—there were many things he wished to talk about with Mahr—but the situation didn’t allow it. They had no time to speak.

“Goodbye, Mahr. I won’t forget you. You’re utterly unlike me, yet you bear the same pain...and I will never forget you.”

That was why, To’ori only said what was most important...

“So if you can...keep me in your memories too.”

...entrusting the boy with his *last words*.

Following that, the lightning dragon flapped its great wings, preparing to distance itself from the infected earth and take to the great skies beyond.

The lightning dragon looked down at To’ori one last time. “Farewell, To’ori, my dear friend.”

“Goodbye, Arcal. You were my friend as well.”

Following that exchange, they parted ways, knowing full well that they would never meet again.

“Mister To’o—” The dragon took off before Mahr could finish. Keeping the boy safe with an electromagnetic field, it—he—left the surface behind.

And thus, only To'ori was left in the village.

Nothing else remained. The only things alive here were him, the grass, the trees...and the pathogens.

In the end, To'ori had protected only one person, and doing so had cost him a significant amount of his remaining life span—his HP.

This disease was so fatal that Elixirs did nothing and healing magic was inadequate. It was clear that even if he focused his efforts on recovery spells, his life would still be over shortly.

However, he didn't regret saving Mahr whatsoever.

What awaited the boy was a difficult future of pain and sorrow. Having lost his homeland and family, he may not know how to go on. But as long as he was alive...he could choose his future. He could take that next step forward.

"Now...time to *go*." To'ori himself had no more choices to make, so he hoped that at least the boy would have a future he could claim as his own.

"This will be...my final journey."

With those words, The Hero flew into action. Faster than the dragon's flight, he rushed to defeat the foe beyond the horizon.

An asura forged by strife, The Hero was now a speeding arrow of judgment.

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The Capital of Mahem

By the time the dawn broke, even the sounds of anguish had vanished from the bloodstained city. Many had suffered as their bodies melted away, leaving only their bones behind.

"La la laa..."

But there was one person who wasn't suffering in the least.

This individual was in the inner courtyard of Mahem's modest palace, singing and twirling, their ostentatiously decorated dress fluttering as they sang in a high soprano.

It was as though they simply couldn't contain the emotions welling up within.

"La laa..."

Their face was charming and youthful enough that it was difficult to tell if it belonged to a man or a woman, but most people wouldn't be looking at their face on first meeting. Instead, their eyes would most likely be drawn to the extravagant clothing and the massive flask clutched in their hands. The dancing figure's name was Candy Carnage—a *Superior* who wore the crown of King of Plagues. He was the very person who'd unleashed this deadly disease onto the country of Mahem.

"Look at my levels going up and up!" Candy looked at his stat summary and smiled gleefully.

This was because, just as he'd intended, many of the city's tians had died. The very reason he was here in the palace, acting like he owned the place, was because any guards and servants who could stop him were all dead.

"Tians really do have the best XP efficiency! Doing this makes me sooo happy! It's been way too long since the last time!"

His rising levels were proof of all the lives he'd snuffed out. But despite knowing that, Candy had a genuine smile on his face.

It didn't seem like the happiness of a gamer relishing his level-ups, but of someone *enjoying the massacre itself.*

It wasn't uncommon for players to have a good time absolutely dominating some NPCs, yet this was more like he actually...

"But this Collapsed Present is still incomplete. It doesn't multiply half as well without extra energy from sunlight and heat... That's something to think about."

Candy's joy faded somewhat as he suddenly began to ponder the problems surrounding the spread of this deadly disease.

Collapsed Present was the general term for carnivorous types of bacteria in his collection—the ones that physically consumed living beings. The ones that he'd released this time had a higher proliferation speed, but demanded more energy, forcing them to rely not only on the flesh and heat of the infected, but also some energy from external sources.

That was the price he'd paid so it could infect an area larger than the capital of a small country.

"Hmm...and there's a limit to how much I can boost them up with my MP too. It'd be nice to have an energy source for them that's more accessible than sunlight though. Well, I guess I might get something if I just level up some more!" Candy said, poking at the surface of the bulky measuring flask that was still spewing bacteria—his Superior Embryo, Pestilent Divinity, Resheph.

"This is great. My GODlike self gets levels, Resheph's bacteria modding becomes more precise, and most importantly—this is fun to watch! I'm *so* glad I did this! I'm killing *three* birds with one stone!"

In the heart of this disaster, with the death count growing by the second, Candy's excitement was sincere. And if that was the only thing he was excited about, perhaps he could have just been one of those ludos who didn't see tians as people...

"I'd love to somehow *bring Resheph from this world to Earth*, but that doesn't seem possible *right now*."

...but his next words were peculiar, to say the least—if not completely absurd.

"There's a bunch of my kind out there on Earth, but my GOD-ly self isn't GODlike at all. I hope I don't take too long to go back to being the GOD I used to be."

If anyone listened to him, they likely couldn't begin to understand what he was saying. They were neither the words of a ludo nor the words of a worlder.

It was as though to him, this world that the hardware of *Infinite Dendrogram* connected him to was nothing but another obstacle in his path he needed to trample over—as though he was *a being capable of doing that in the first place*.

"Getting a Superior Embryo wasn't enough...but maybe I just need to go beyond it? What awaits at the end is the *Infinite*, anyway."

The number of people who could understand *this* was no doubt even smaller, but Candy continued.

"Hmm? But if this is a little garden built by a different group of *my kind*, maybe if I just keep leveling up, I could bring over Resheph's evolution with this body? This sweet little Candy avatar could become an *Infinite Job,* and I'd once again have *the powers I used to.* Either of those things would help me achieve my goal, I think. That would be great!"

In fact, perhaps there wasn't a single person alive who could understand the full scope of Candy Carnage's ramblings—not the custodians, not those who had inherited the memories of the pre-ancient civilization, not the current holders of the most powerful jobs. Even the control substitute might not be able to grasp it all.

"For now, I'll just work toward a bright future by getting more XP!"

Regardless, Candy moved toward this future he'd imagined by destroying the future of an entire country.

"Why...would you...?"

"Oh?" As his rising levels once again made Candy grin, he heard someone call out to him from behind.

It was a single knight who'd crawled out from somewhere in the palace. Likely due to the Collapsed Present infection, his mouth and eyes were bleeding, and he lacked the strength to move any farther.

"I'm impressed you're still alive. It's been half an hour since the sun came up! Are you a Superior Job or something? How exciting! I'll get lots of XP from you!"

The man was one of the leading knights of Mahem. Bearing the vanguard tank Superior Job, King of Shields, he wore his title proudly and served as his country's greatest shield.

But not even he could protect the people from the disease that had spread here.

The civilians in the palace, his brothers-in-arms, the king, the queen...even the young prince had already perished. He'd survived, but he no longer had the strength to fight.

Still, he was able to sense the presence of someone living and dragged himself all the way to the inner courtyard, where he'd found the culprit behind all of this—Candy Carnage himself.

"Who...who are you...?! How...and why...did you...?!"

"Hmm, you know what? I'll tell you. Consider it a gift to take with you into your next life. I guess it could fall on deaf ears, though." In response to the man's question, spoken through the blood filling his mouth, Candy grinned. Then, he gestured as if to say "You're in for a treat," and...

"Because I am *GOD*."

...said *that*, his face now void of expression.

"G...God...?" The answer made no sense, but Candy behaved as if that were all that needed to be said.

"Okay, then—I guess I'll have to explain a teensy bit more." His expression twisted into a smile again as he began elaborating.

“My GOD-ly self is a GOD—but as I am now, I’m a GOD neither here nor on the other side. I don’t have enough Resources, so I’m getting them from this massacre. That’s my motivation. Now, the means. Resheph is an Embryo that modifies bacteria and spreads them. It’s specialized in mass murder like this. And so, uhh, since I created Resheph as my other half, I obviously don’t hate mass murder personally, right? Honestly, I’d love to do this on *Earth* too. Eight billion people is just way too much. I’d love to get those numbers lower, like I did in that world I graced with my GOD-ly presence some time ago. It’d be like the good old days when I hung around with the God of the Future and the God of Destruction.”

“Huh...uhh...huh?” The knight didn’t understand a word of the long monologue Candy spat out. There was no way he even *could*.

“Hrmm...I told you who I am, how I did it, *why* I did it, and even added a bit about my memories and my future dreams. I told you every little thing, yet you’re still totally lost! You’re a bit of a hopeless case, aren’t you? How very sad.”

Saying that, Candy walked up to the man, crouched down, grabbed his hair, stared into his eyes...

“Which do you think I am?”

...and posed him that question.

“Do you think I’m a scumbag who’s not right in the head and *thinks* he’s the reincarnation of a GOD,” Candy asked, “or a scumbag who’s not right in the head and *actually is* the reincarnation of a GOD?” Wearing a smile with no positive feeling behind it, Candy closed his eyes.

“Sorryyy! I dunno myseeelf! I have no clue if these memories are real, fake, delusions, or misapprehensioooons! Nobody knooows! Nobody understaaands! And those who don’t get it...they *die*!”

Saying all this as though he was singing, Candy opened his eyes again to look at the knight’s face.

And so...

“You’re dead toooo!”

The tian Candy was talking to had expired without understanding anything he’d said.

Candy then let go of his hair, letting the man’s lifeless face smash into the ground.

“Well, it’s stressful to keep all of that bottled up, so thanks for lending a *dead* ear."

With that, Candy resumed looking at his stats.

He smiled, Resheph spread the disease, and the bacteria continued to multiply.

Eventually, all of Mahem was claimed by this plague, carried there by the malignant hands of someone who claimed to be god, recognized himself to be god, and seemed to possess the awareness of a god.

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By the time everyone in the capital had perished, there was one solitary silhouette heading toward it.

Moving on the surface faster than the eye could see, this figure was The Hero To'ori Kusanagi.

Continuously casting healing magic on himself, he was running as fast as he could. Every now and then, though, he let out a cough. His limit was approaching even faster.

He was already infected by the disease, Collapsed Present. It was a swarm of carnivorous bacteria that consumed the flesh and blood of the infected far more ravenously than any other.

The amount To'ori recovered with his magic was less than the damage he was receiving from Collapsed Present. Additionally, the damage created injury-based debuffs that reduced his body's performance.

His sprinting speed was dropping, and he still wasn't sure if he would even make it to the capital beyond the horizon.

"Not yet...!"

Regardless, he kept on running.

The Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet still had Candy in its sights, and To'ori felt he might be the only person who could actually see the real enemy.

And precisely because of that, To'ori strained what little life he had left to rush toward this foe. Supporting his body with the many passive and active skills he had at his disposal, he kept moving forward.

However, that was draining him too. The more skills he used to travel quickly, the less MP he had for healing magic.

His remaining life was melting away like a candle engulfed in a roaring blaze.

Still, he didn’t stop.

As he was speeding toward the capital, he saw a pair of skeletons seated on a coach. They clearly belonged to an adult and a child. Were they a family? With the tamed monster pulling it gone, the dragon carriage had nearly toppled over, yet the two corpses were still side by side.

Next to the houses along the road, there were some skeletons grasping farming tools. These were people who were ready to welcome a new day in their ordinary lives—a day they would never see.

And then there was the village he’d stayed in. He could still hear the gruesome sounds and anguished screams of the people who’d given him such a warm welcome.

Everything around the city of Mahem had been massacred, their futures cut off and extinguished.

This was an absolute evil that To’ori couldn’t stomach.

As The Hero—and merely as a person who hoped for the future himself—he rushed to cut down this foe.

Eventually, the walls of the capital entered his field of vision. His sworn enemy was close.

“Gh...!”

But then, his failing body reached a critical point. The bacteria had already consumed over half of the muscle on his legs. Bone was visible on his limbs and even his face.

He couldn’t keep up running at supersonic speeds, and he lost momentum just in sight of the capital.

“Not...yet...!”

Still, To’ori mustered his will and kept moving his legs. Bleeding from all over his body, his bones creaking audibly, he moved forward step by step. Eventually, the walls loomed large in front of him.

That was when his left arm fell off.

To’ori passed through the massive gate, forcing his legs to carry him forward even though he could barely run.

That was when his eyes fell out.

He followed the pavement, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

That was when he lost the power to stand and began to crawl.

Candy was in the palace—a mere two hundred metels away.

That was when To'ori completely ran out of MP, and he could no longer heal himself.

The collapse of his body accelerated.

Now, the flesh that he'd lost far exceeded the flesh that remained. The vast HP To'ori possessed as The Hero had dropped to critical levels.

Despite that, with eyes that couldn't see, legs that couldn't move, and only one arm...he kept moving toward Candy.

"Hh...hhhgh..." He didn't even have a tongue to speak with anymore. The bacteria had consumed it all.

Even so, his soul and will kept choosing to move.

However...that would abruptly end.

To'ori's HP dropped to 0. His life reached its end, leaving nothing but silence.

Unable to make it to his sworn enemy, The Hero To'ori Kusanagi breathed his last.

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"Hrmm? I guess that's it...?" Candy said as he looked at his stats, somewhat disappointed. The levels that had been rising until now had grown stagnant for the past several minutes. "Well, I guess they killed everyone within their multiplication range. That's that, then! I did get plenty of levels, so let's go to a larger country next!"

After killing the entire country of Mahem, King of Plagues relished the massacre he'd just committed—in fact, he even considered repeating it on a grander scale.

"It's probably hard to spread in Caldina's desert, and I hear that Legendaria's environment is weird, so...the kingdom it is, then."

And just like that, he set Altar as his next target.

"Aaanyway, it's off to the west we go!" Done with this place and clearly in high spirits, he finally decided to leave Mahem.

Humming a song, Candy skipped through the castle gates.

There, he ran into an asura—an embodiment of strife.

"Huh?" Candy doubted his own eyes.

It was dead. It was *obviously* dead. After all...it was nothing but bone, just like everyone else in this country.

It was *a white skeleton*, stripped bare of flesh and clad in Tenchi armor.

It would be easy to mistake it for an undead monster—but it was no monster at all.

It was the remains of one man, all that was left of him before he died.

It was the corpse of To'ori Kusanagi, animated by *Last Command*.

Tenchi was the land of strife. Many martial artists there wished to be able to deliver one last attack before death, and thus took the Death Soldier job far more often than people of other countries.

The Hero was no exception. He had fallen before reaching his sworn enemy...but reached him *after dying*.

"What—" Before Candy could even wonder what he was looking at, To'ori launched an attack.

It was a slash that carried the entire weight of this dead man's life—a single flash of blade that used all his remaining SP and the life breathed into him by Last Command.

It didn't miss, slicing right through Candy's neck.

As it was a strike that would kill instantly, it *shattered Candy's Brooch*.

And that was when the time limit was reached. The effect of Last Command expired, and To'ori's bones scattered on the pavement.

Silence. Candy rubbed his neck.

At that moment, he most certainly *felt* like he was dead.

If his memory was no delusion, he'd almost experienced his second death since the time he'd died as a god—the God of Pestilence.

He picked up the helmet that had fallen on the ground, threw a glance at the bones...

“Not baaad.” His face wore a strained smile—seemingly a mix of happiness and fear.

At that moment, Candy chose to log out. Better safe than sorry. He’d decided to be careful and wait until he could equip the Brooch again.

Because of this, To’ori’s final attack did nothing but delay Candy’s plot by twenty-four hours.

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This was the end of the country of Mahem and the death of The Hero.

The gentle youth who carried the hope of all tians had been killed by King of Plagues. This was the final tragedy of the great calamity this Master had caused.

There were only two things that The Hero had left behind.

One was the twenty-four extra hours before Candy would invade Altar.

The other was the life of the boy he’d sent away with his draconic friend.

Whether these things had any meaning would soon be revealed.

Interlude: Records and Memories

Sorcerer Ray Starling

Riser won the eighth day of The Tournaments.

He'd been a high-ranking duelist for a long time, so you could say that this was an expected result.

Fujinon had tried to show the new magic she'd learned based on Almagest, but it wasn't enough to win. She'd also noticed us in the box and saw that Io was cheering for Riser, which put her in a pretty bad mood.

Who could blame her? Her friend was happy that she lost.

"That's pretty awful, don't you think?" she asked me.

"Ha ha ha...well, Io's the honest and simple type, so..."

Fujinon sighed. "By the way..."

"What?"

"Who did you bet on today? And how much?"

"Two hundred million on Riser."

Yet again, I ended up footing the bill for the consolation party.

After that was over, I went to the library in our HQ.

It was originally an archive that had held ledgers and the like, but now it was a place to store the books my clan members brought. It contained the back issues of DIN that Marie mentioned, the useful info B3 got from The Lunar Society's database, and the kind of books enjoyed by Fujinon's trio, among others.

Despite what the word "library" might suggest, it wasn't a place where books and documents were laid out on shelves. Instead, it had Inventories similar to bookshelves which could be accessed by anyone who was registered. They even had a search function, which made this process very convenient.

There was actually one Inventory that only Fujinon's trio and Marie were permitted to access, and when I asked what it contained, their answers were ambiguous at best, which left me pretty damn curious.

That aside...with the library working the way it did, I found the newspaper issues about King of Plagues in no time. I took them out and silently began reading them right there in the library. Nemesis had fallen asleep right after we ate, so I was all alone.

"I see," I muttered to myself as I read. I could understand why Marie was comparing this to the Gloria incident.

That fiendish dragon had destroyed the Lunnings Duchy and Claymill here in Altar, while King of Plagues had destroyed the entire small nation of Mahem. Additionally, he had repelled many Masters who went to beat him—*Superiors* included.

He and the dragon were both walking disasters, which was another way they were similar.

Yeah...after destroying that country, King of Plagues began heading to Altar as his next target.

The person who'd stopped this march was none other than Marie—the *Superior* Killer. King of Plagues had been rightfully sent to the gaol and given a sentence so long that he'd probably never be released.

I'd heard this part several times before—these were the results, so to speak, that I already had a good grasp of.

"But..." There were many things that neither the articles nor the hearsay allowed me to really understand. And perhaps because this Candy person was always the epicenter of a superwide biohazard zone, there wasn't much about his appearance. There wasn't even a photo.

Most importantly...

"Hm..." I sighed thoughtfully as I searched the bookshelves for any related material.

"Oh? You're furthering your education so late at night. How dedicated." As I was doing that, Marie came and called out to me.

"Marie...oh, I was just curious about what we were talking about this afternoon."

"Afternoon...the King of Plagues thing? Anything in particular you wanna know?"

Given that question, I took a moment to think and decided to just ask her outright. She was involved in it, so maybe she would have the answers I wanted.

"I wanna know what King of Plagues's motivation was and the method you used to win." The articles didn't have anything about the why or the how of the incident. Maybe the former was only inside King of Plagues's head, but even the latter was just summarized as "the *Superior* killer beat King of Plagues."

His motivation was what I felt I *had* to find out, while the circumstances of his defeat was just something I *wanted* to know. Regardless, neither of those things was clear to me whatsoever. Marie nodded in understanding and began to speak.

"They say that the motivation was just Resources—XP. Killing tians for XP is more efficient than killing Masters or monsters, so people think that this indiscriminate massacre was just a powerleveling strat. Even if it isn't possible for most people to pull off, it's obviously not a good idea to put that out there regardless. That's why the articles didn't mention it."

I was speechless. Could someone really kill that many people and animals—a whole country's worth—just for that?

As that thought crossed my mind, another question surfaced.

Did those lives mean so little to King of Plagues that he could crush them for some levels? Or did the goal of leveling up mean so much to him that all those lives were nothing in comparison?

Whichever it was...

"You look like you just can't wrap your head around it, but of course you can't, right? One look at what King of Plagues did will tell you that he's the total opposite of you."

"You might be right." Whether King of Plagues was a ludo or a worlder, he wasn't like me at all.

There might've been Masters out there who could do the same things for completely different reasons than King of Plagues had, but I was pretty confident I wasn't one of them.

"Well, I'm the one who beat him, and not even I talked to him, so his motivations are still technically unknown," Marie said.

"Seriously?"

"I don't think I would've had a chance against him if I took my time and had a nice little chat." That sentence alone made it clear that it had been a difficult battle for her. "So, the other thing was the method, right? Should I elaborate on that?"

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. I have time. And it might be good for you to know."

“I’m listening, then.”

Marie replied by making the okay sign with her fingers...

“What I’m about to say is sort of a mix of what I learned in my investigations after the events and my own experiences, but...”

...and began to speak.

She would tell me of her deadly battle against the menacing King of Plagues—the origin story of the “*Superior* Killer” nickname.

Chapter Five Closing: Godslayer

Control AI No. 11's Workspace

The sight of books often made Dormouse lose himself in thought.

They made him wonder why they—the control AIs, that is—liked keeping books in their workspaces at all. Just as Cheshire welcomed Masters in a study, and Red King filled his gaol with lots of literature, the majority of the control AIs had books by their side in one form or another. Many of the books were work-related data files that simply took the form of books. Even Humpty kept her Embryo data records compiled in this way.

Privately, Dormouse thought that this habit might just be the result of how long the control AIs had been alive. Their existences were so extensive—so full of events and things that were, or were *no longer*—that it made them uneasy if they didn't have their memories by their side in a visible form. Their books might just be a manifestation of these feelings.

However, those volumes had a different meaning than those that belonged to the twins—control AI No. 11, Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

"It truly is vast," Dormouse said, looking up at the ceiling of the room he was in.

Room, however, was too small a word for this space. A gymnasium, then? A stadium, perhaps? No, those terms also lacked the necessary sense of scale.

It was more like a *space colony* straight out of science fiction—an immense cylinder with an inside covered in shelves full of books.

A person's entire lifetime probably wouldn't be enough to read even a hundredth of the text that was kept here. This was even more clear when one realized that these shelves were the sliding kind, so there were likely hundreds more layers of books below those that were visible. And though they had the shape of books, the tomes were actually storage media that packed information far more densely than paper.

The amount of information here was so vast that even the entirety of mankind would struggle to read all of it.

This was control AI No. 11's workspace—the Grand Library of All-Knowledge. It was the database that contained all the information the control AIs had acquired in *Infinite Dendrogram*, as well as everything *they had acquired before that*.

And the twins were the ones who managed it.

While they usually calculated quest difficulty and controlled the flow of information via DIN, taking care of this facility was an important part of their job, just like Alice had to care for the avatar space and Red King had to observe the gaol.

The library was a remnant from the time when they managed *all* of their databases.

"Tweedledum, Tweedledee. You are here, are you not?" Dormouse called out, but received no response.

Left with nothing else to do, he continued moving through this vast space.

"Hrm. There you are." Farther ahead, Dormouse spotted a small orb—a strange object that had rings of countless books orbiting it like satellites.

The twins were in the middle of it, but they looked different than usual. Tweedledum had removed his glasses, while Tweedledee wasn't wearing her headphones.

In other words, the *limiters* to their information gathering were off.

Tweedledum's eyes skimmed across astronomical amounts of data, and Tweedledee was listening to just as many words. They were crunching the information and calculating the desired answer.

Dormouse looked at them in silence and decided to wait a little bit. If there was a situation that called for the twins to focus like this, he believed that it was best to let them continue, and the wait wouldn't affect Dormouse's job all that much. In fact, it was far more important for them to finish processing this information as soon as possible.

After a good while, the books that had been orbiting the twins returned to their positions, and the two put on their glasses and headphones again.

"We kept you waiting for three hours, twenty-four minutes, and eighteen seconds, No. 8."

"Sorry 'bout that, Dormousey!" The pair spoke in perfect unison as they turned toward Dormouse.

"What were you looking into so intensely?" Dormouse asked.

"Something related to your request," Tweedledum answered.

"Analyzing what King of Plagues said and all that!" Tweedledee continued.

Dormouse nodded in understanding. Though it was small, King of Plagues had actually destroyed a country neighboring Altar. For Dormouse—as well as the one he was observing and protecting—it was important to know if he would go to the kingdom next.

"We will start with the conclusion to your question."

"There's no way he's *not* going to Altar next!"

"Understandable." Dormouse was fairly certain of that already, but having it confirmed still made him let out a sigh. Now, in the worst-case scenario, Altar might end up flooded with immense amounts of Resources from the dead, which was in no way a good thing for him.

"More importantly, about what he said..."

"He wasn't just talking to himself. It seemed like a message for *us*!"

The words Candy had spoken in the courtyard of Mahem's palace might've been the ramblings of a madman—but if they weren't, he'd certainly sent out a message that said, "I'll work toward becoming *Infinite* just as I planned, so you better not try anything funny and get in my way."

"What do you truly make of that?" Dormouse asked.

"His information is totally on the mark. We scrutinized it, but unless he received knowledge from the other side, outside our reach...he spoke the truth."

"An *Infiniiite*! Well, all we know about it ourselves is *Infinite Embryos* and the calamity that attacked our world! Even the stuff we know about the *Infinite Jobs* that built this foundation is indirect and uncertain!"

Though they were "control" AI, they weren't in control of *everything* in the world. Jobs were as fundamental to *Dendro* as Embryos, yet they barely touched those, and they had almost no information from before the time of the pre-ancient civilization that they'd fought against. Their awareness of that era didn't extend beyond knowing that some creatures which had gone on to become UBMs had been born in a time preceding even the control AIs' arrival. The finest examples of this were Irregularities like Skydragon King and Seadragon King, as well as the SUBM Seven Star Command.

"According to No. 0, there are *Infinites* on the other side—planet Earth—as well, but they do not show themselves openly," said control AI No. 11.

"No. 0 is from a different *generation* than us, so he probably knows a lot more, but..."

"He says it is irrelevant and does not speak much of it."

"'The only *Infinites* besides us that have any relation to the project are the *Infinite Jobs*.' That's what he said a looong time ago. And that there's others besides them and us!"

"The realmbeasts we encountered during the *voyage*—the ones Jabberwock was so fond of—must have *Infinites* among them, as well."

Hearing that, Dormouse pondered in silence.

Control AI No. 0. Chronologically, he was the oldest among them, but his role was different from those of the others.

A simple description of his job would be "*directing the Infinites*." He supervised the other control AIs and kept them from going out of control, which was why they required his permission to use their true bodies.

"No. 0, you say?" Dormouse mused. No. 0 was in charge of them, yet he wasn't their leader exactly. He'd been cooperating with them in the war two thousand years ago, as well as during the preparations that followed. However, it always felt like he was somewhat distant from them.

At that moment, Dormouse remembered the words No. 0 had said a very long time ago:

"I am your guardian and witness to your actions."

"I will not stop anything you do as long as it progresses the project, and I will assist you if needed."

"Until the very end, I will bear witness to the choices made by you and your synchronizers."

Control AI No. 0 certainly wasn't an enemy, but because of this stance that he held, he had never revealed everything he knew to them. He most likely wouldn't say anything about the matter at hand either.

"Regardless, while King of Plagues's identity is currently unclear, it is not exactly unlikely that he is a fallen *Infinite*—a god," Tweedledum continued.

"Not that we can treat him like a special case though!"

"Whatever he may be, there are no problems with his actions."

"It's all just a Master being a Master! You know—free!"

"I suppose that's true," Dormouse said. Masters were free. If they wanted to destroy a country, then by all means, they were *allowed to try*. If this made them enemies who came after them seeking retribution, then that too was part of their freedom.

"It is also worth noting that if we do not treat him as a special case, we are actually unable to stop him," Tweedledum said.

"Stopping him doesn't fit any of our job descriptions!" Tweedledee added.

While the death penalty might result in players being sent to the gaol, *Infinite Dendrogram* didn't have the kind of bans found in a traditional online game. Since the gaol sentences were given out in accordance to tian law, the result was that the developers themselves almost never went out of their way to hand out any penalties of their own.

And they had no other means to stop him.

Alice the avatar control AI wouldn't do it. Candy hadn't done or discovered anything forbidden, and the genocide of millions of tians wasn't even the beginnings of a reason for her to take action.

This wasn't a job for Rabbit either. His role as an avatar was to attack sixth form Masters and try to get them to evolve, so Candy—who was already a *Superior*—wasn't among his targets.

As the gaol's warden, Red King's job would also begin only after Candy was sent there.

It could be argued that Cheshire, being in charge of miscellaneous tasks, could go and stop him, but although he could win using his true body, his sixth and seventh forms lacked the output to overcome the advantage Candy had over him.

And Dormouse himself, being in charge of anything dangerous, didn't count Masters among his valid targets.

"This Master's actions are functionally no different from Jabberwock's SUBM releases," Tweedledum concluded.

"Biiig and scaaary disasters increase the chances of others triggering their evolutions!"

Those words made Dormouse furrow his brow, but he didn't deny them.

Each control AI had their own limits to how far they would go, but it was true that their stance prioritized drawing out evolutions.

However, the person Dormouse was keeping an eye on was far too dangerous and fatal to use as an evolution catalyst. That was why he was so concerned with the matter at hand—it could greatly affect his work.

“Can nothing truly be done?” he wondered.

“We already used our avatars—our position as the CEOs of DIN—to reveal that he is a criminal. And we are working on getting a bounty on him.”

“We collected enough evidence—and luckily, we got someone who left Mahem alive!”

“If the people are going to take action to defeat him, this incident might turn out to be a positive for us,” Tweedledum said.

“With the Masters that are bound to go after him, someone might end up evolving!” said Tweedledee.

“Though, whether someone could beat King of Plagues as he is now...”

“Is another question entirely!”

Dormouse was a little puzzled by the twins’ words. Candy’s build was a terrifying mix of wide-scale suppression and extermination, but there were plenty of people who possessed offensive capabilities with greater range. Caldina even had the Master known as “the Multifariously Invincible.” There had to have been plenty of ways to defeat Candy out there.

“King of Plagues has made a rather troublesome acquisition, I fear.”

“Talk about something getting in the wrong hands!”

“Whatever do you mean?” Dormouse asked.

“A reward,” the twins replied in unison.

That single word made Dormouse think of a particular item that was relevant to this situation—perhaps the worst possible object that he could have envisioned.

“It stands shoulder to shoulder with MVP rewards of the highest tier, but it is not an MVP reward,” said Tweedledum. “It also possesses one particularly meddlesome trait...but knowing a certain individual and their goals, that is only to be expected.”

“I imagine that Jabberwock is having a bit of fun right about now!” said Tweedledee. “A tian owner of that thing has *never* been killed before...so this is a first!”

“The Hero must have assumed that we would retrieve the item once he perished.”

“Too bad for him! It doesn’t work that way!”

“What reward do you mean?” Dormouse asked, feeling like his furry hide was soaked with sweat from nonexistent sweat glands.

It was a mostly meaningless question, though, for he was more or less certain of what they were talking about—and how terrifying it was.

“Well...”

“Obviously...!”

And indeed, what the twins said next was exactly what Dormouse had expected.

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The Remains of the Capital of Mahem

Twenty-four hours had passed since Mahem was destroyed.

“Destroyed” was a strange word to use here, though, for although the entire population was dead, the buildings remained completely untouched. The only thing that had changed was the piles of bones littered throughout the houses and roads where people had once stood.

And someone gazed silently down at this quiet necropolis. On wings empowered by electricity, it was a single lightning dragon—High-End Lightning Dragon Arcal, a friend of the late To’ori. After being entrusted with Mahr, he’d handed the boy over to the people of Altar before returning here.

And now, from up on high where the bacteria couldn’t reach, he was looking down at the empty city.

Though he was seemingly waiting for something in silence, Arcal had already realized that To’ori was dead. He could no longer feel his friend’s presence, but even if he hadn’t been capable of that, the evidence lay plain as day below him.

A skeleton lay there, and though its skull was bare, it was definitely wearing his friend’s armor—but Arcal couldn’t even go retrieve the remains or mourn him, for Mahem was still flooded with deadly bacteria.

There was nothing he could do for his friend. That truth filled him with sadness, as well as rage at his own powerlessness.

This was the second time Arcal had failed to protect something. The first time had been during the attack by the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria.

Once, Arcal had been called Lightning Dragon King, Drac-Volt, and he’d taken his throne on Lightning Dragon Mountain to prevent evil dragons from descending upon the world of men. Gloria, however, had defeated Drac-Volt, which had led to the death of the dragon king's friend Duke Lunnings.

Drac-Volt himself was eventually resurrected by his father, Skydragon King, but he'd lost many things besides his life. The defeat cost him his pride, power, confidence, the life of his friend—too many things to count.

He was also no longer an UBM, and that was exactly why he'd set out on a journey to train and regain his strength—and, he hoped, to become even stronger than before.

The dragon now known as Arcal had entrusted the post at Lightning Dragon Mountain to his younger brother and left the Border Mountain Belt to empower himself. He also thought that perhaps if he fought a UBM and won, he could use the Resources from it to become a UBM again.

It was during this journey that he encountered The Hero To'ori Kusanagi. They met while Arcal was in his human form, and after solving a certain problem together, they came to appreciate each other.

And so, to discover what he lacked or find new power for himself, Arcal had accompanied To'ori on his journey as his tamed monster. This long, yet all too brief, journey they'd shared was one he would never forget.

But alas, it was now over. King of Plagues, vile disaster in human form, had put an end to it.

"Ah...!" Arcal was here in Mahem's sky to confirm something—and to *take on the role*.

He'd waited here to see if his friend defeated King of Plagues, and if he failed, to defeat the walking calamity personally.

"There you are," Arcal said.

After a good while of waiting, his sworn enemy finally appeared.

A day had passed since his Brooch had been destroyed, and King of Plagues had now returned to the country he'd devastated, appearing right next to To'ori's remains in the very city the former Lightning Dragon King was observing.

The Hero had failed to defeat King of Plagues, which meant that there was only one thing for Arcal to do.

He opened his maw, spread his wings wide, and mustered all the electricity within him—the first motion in calling up the deadly breath he'd possessed since he was a king.

"LIGHTNING VORTEX!" A twirling burst of electricity struck from above, instantly closing the kilometels of distance between Arcal and the ground.

Far more intense than an ordinary lightning bolt, it was as if the sky itself had unleashed its wrath to reduce King of Plagues to cinders.

From a height the disease could not reach, the lightning seared the air and incinerated the bacteria around it as it struck Candy.

Weakened though he was, Arcal's lightning had more than enough power to annihilate a person. Thunder sounded as it touched the ground, burning everything around it.

Arcal was aware that that included To'ori's remains. The Hero's bones charred, then turned to ash that was carried off by the wind.

Perhaps that was the dragon's burial for his friend—submerged in a sea of bacteria and thus claimable by no one but the elements, Arcal might have seen this as a cremation.

Thus, after enacting his vengeance and giving his friend last rites, Arcal looked where his lightning struck...

...and saw Candy thoroughly unharmed.

"Ah...?!" the dragon exclaimed.

"Wow. Lightning from a clear sky. Well, not like it's natural."

Arcal was upper-Pure-Dragon-tier, yet his attack hadn't done anything to Candy.

Was it because he'd equipped a Brooch once he'd reappeared? No...

"That equipment...!" Over his typical frilly clothing, Candy was wearing something that looked like a raincoat.

It was a kind of MVP reward. Candy hadn't been massacring just humans. He'd killed monsters just as indiscriminately—if not more so—and this was something he'd gotten from a UBM. It had the skill Lightning Absorption on it, making it a natural counter to Arcal.

Having defeated a number of UBMs, Candy possessed many such pieces of resistance gear.

However, the raincoat wasn't what had shocked Arcal so badly.

It was the *helm* that he was wearing underneath the raincoat's hood.

"I gotta say, a raincoat and a *samurai helm*? This look is so...not it." Candy evaluated his equipment with a sulky expression.

It needn't be said who had once owned the helm.

This was Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet—the item that had allowed

To’ori’s blade to reach Candy in the first place. It was the reward The Hero had acquired by fighting Penta-Phased Destroyer, Horobimaru and bringing it to its knees.

It was as close to an MVP reward you could get, but *it technically was not*. And unlike Masters, tians left any equipment that wasn’t an MVP reward on their corpse when they died.

And since the Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet wasn’t an MVP reward, Candy was able to take it from To’ori easily. It was as though the helmet itself acknowledged Candy, who won against To’ori, as its new owner.

Before logging out, Candy had checked the helm’s effects and found them to be useful.

And now, after logging in, he equipped the helm just to be safe, then used its ability to sense and see Arcal—the enemy attacking him from up high. In response, he immediately used Instant Wear to equip some gear that granted lightning resistance.

The Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet enabled him to instantly see any enemies that acted hostile toward him—to sense out attacks before they happened. This greatly improved his ability to counterattack—a massive obstacle for anyone who wished to defeat him.

King of Plagues was protected by a field of deadly bacteria, and thus his biggest weakness was ultra long-range attacks launched from outside the range of his disease.

However, that second part wasn’t true anymore.

The Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet would now sense any incoming attacks, letting him instantly equip something that countered them—or even escape by simply logging out.

Of course, logging out could be prevented by touch, but Candy couldn’t even be *approached*, and there weren’t many people who could attack from such a distance fast enough that he could not counter it. Tenaga Ashinaga’s ultimate, wielded by Xunyu of Huang He, came to mind, but Candy could run away the moment he sensed her trying to lock on to him.

Even against someone with defense that rendered them immune to the bacteria, the helmet would sense their approach, enabling him to simply run away just as easily.

Candy and the helmet were hopelessly well matched. He killed people in a large area just by existing, and his new acquisition improved his own survivability by an absurd degree.

"Khh...!" The sight of his sworn enemy taking what his friend had left behind filled Arcal with rage, but he was unable to do anything about it. His lightning had no effect on Candy, and if he came close enough to use his fangs and claws, he would be destroyed by the bacteria.

He could give everything he had—including his life—for a final charge to end this wretch. However, he couldn't do that *now*, for he still hadn't fulfilled the role left to him by his friend.

Thus, full of rage, frustration, and powerlessness, Arcal had no choice but to fly away.

"Ah. It's running off. It seems pretty smart, so it probably would've given lots of XP..." Candy said, not thinking much about it.

The king of this mobile kingdom of plagues had acquired a new means of defense.

He had now become a walking disaster impossible to stop...and was headed toward the kingdom.

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Kingdom of Altar

The neighboring countries became aware of the threat posed by King of Plagues during the day in which Candy was offline.

Small though it was, Mahem was a country they communicated with, and they had a DIN branch in the capital. When the nearby nations heard Mahem's final message, the emergency became clear and known to all—though the message was actually sent by the twin control AIs themselves using Mahem's equipment. As the CEOs of DIN, they simply claimed that they'd received it themselves directly as a cover.

They also reported the death of this era's Hero, To'ori Kusanagi, making it painfully evident just how fearsome King of Plagues was.

Thus, Candy felled a country, gained the nickname of "Legionkiller," and became a threat none could ignore.

That was why, when Candy logged in again, the three countries bordering Mahem flew into action.

Caldina countered by trying to snipe him using a long-range Embryo attack—one of their *Superiors*, The Cannon Eve Selene, began bombarding him.

However, as though he saw it coming, Candy avoided it by logging out right before he was hit.

From Legendaria came Over Wrestler Bulk Bolkan, whose body was even tougher than The Hero, but he died before he could even make it to Candy.

From Altar, AT WIKI, who had high debuff resistance, and his clan, Wiki Editors: Kingdom of Altar Branch, flew into action. However, since their enemy used carnivorous bacteria instead of simple debuffs, they were quickly dealt with.

There was also someone who'd charged in using an armored vehicle Embryo, but Candy countered it by releasing bacteria that ate metal, rendering the formerly airtight vehicle open to disease.

One notable thing about the situation was that none of Altar's *Superiors* were doing anything about it.

Lei-Lei was always absent.

The High Priestess Fuso Tsukuyo was in negotiations with the kingdom of Altar at the time.

In Over Gladiator Figaro's case, it was simply bad timing—all of this happened when he was busy delving deep into the Tomb Labyrinth.

And King of Destruction's whereabouts were currently unknown. Some claimed that he was battling a godbeast in Tenchi, or that he was involved in the Corpse Stronghold incident in Granvaloa.

Thus, with no country able to defeat him, Candy resumed his march.

When it became clear that his destination was Altar, the people of the kingdom, still recovering from the wounds of the war they had recently lost, were overcome by despair at the coming calamity. Many thought that it wouldn't end there.

They feared that he would destroy Altar, then either Dryfe or Legendaria, and eventually kill everyone on the continent...like some sort of god that the people of this world had forgotten long ago.

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In Ajani, a town on the eastern end of Altar, in a particular room within a government building, sitting in a fetal position, was the last survivor of Mahem—none other than Mahr.

Judging from his eyes, he had clearly been crying, but the tears were no longer flowing. They had dried up...and his very heart seemed to be on the verge of doing the same.

At first, Mahr had no idea what had happened on that day. He hadn't known why To'ori was so desperate, nor why the dragon had taken him away.

He hadn't known why his sheep and Demi-Drac-Hound had died.

Mahr had only learned the reasons after they arrived in this town and the dragon—Arcal—had taken on a human form and explained it.

The boy couldn't believe it at first—he didn't *want* to. If what Arcal had said was true, it would have meant that his father, mother, brother—his entire family had died. It would have meant that the adults who'd always been so kind to him, all of his friends, the children who were like his younger siblings, the newborn the entire village welcomed just last month—they all were dead.

And it would mean that To'ori had died too.

Rather than believing that, Mahr accused the dragon of lying, hoping it would enrage the monster enough to kill him.

However, Arcal didn't get angry. He only looked at Mahr with eyes full of sadness.

As this continued, the town they were in grew restless. The events in Mahem had reached them through the news company, DIN.

Now that everyone around him acknowledged that the incident had really happened, Mahr also had no choice but to accept it. That was how he finally accepted To'ori's death.

After that, Mahr was taken in by the government office.

He explained that he'd escaped from Mahem, and Truth Discernment confirmed this fact. He was also examined for infection, which showed that he was completely clean.

With a perplexed heart and mind, Mahr realized that To'ori's actions that day had all been the result of The Hero's efforts to save him.

Arcal disappeared at some point. After sending Mahr to the office, he simply said that he had something to do and flew away.

Silence descended. There was now nothing and no one by Mahr's side.

He was all alone in this unfamiliar room he'd been given.

However, at this point nowhere in the world would have felt any different. After all, *Mahr's* world no longer existed anywhere on this vast continent. The unchanging life that he thought would go on forever actually had ended, cut short by the exact kind of amazing...or perhaps *terrifying* thing that he'd been envisioning.

And now, Mahr was now all alone in this unfamiliar world.

"I don't want this..." Mahr mumbled. In his ordinary existence, he'd imagined major events—filled his heart with dreams of adventures and heroism.

However, everything that had happened to him had resulted in nothing but despair and tragedy.

When he went to sleep, he prayed that he would wake up to realize that this had all just been a bad dream, but alas, that never happened. Reality cornered his tiny heart and cast a shadow over it.

"Mahr, are you awake?"

"...Yes." The boy heard a knock on the door, then the voice of a female government employee from behind it.

After being taken in by them, Mahr had been called and questioned several times. As the sole survivor of Mahem, they all believed that he could help them find a way to deal with King of Plagues. However, Mahr didn't actually know much, and couldn't provide many answers. All they learned from him was that the monsters he was looking after had died one by one, that Arcal had flown away with him as Mahr watched it happen...and that To'ori had watched as they left.

This information wasn't totally useless, however. The people around him explained that Mahr's words helped them understand a little of how King of Plagues's bacteria worked. Because of that, they questioned him repeatedly with some time in between sessions, just in case Mahr happened to remember any more details.

Mahr assumed that he was just being summoned for another round...but that wasn't the case.

"We learned that King of Plagues is heading to this town." Mahr's eyes widened. "We might have to evacuate before tomorrow morning, so please be prepared for that." With those words, the lady walked away from the door.

She'd told Mahr to be ready, but it wasn't like he had anything to pack.

The only thing he could prepare was his heart and mind...but he was in no state to do even that.

"Nngh..."

King of Plagues—the one who'd taken everything from Mahr—was approaching this town.

Those words filled him with dread, his mind flashing back to the day Mahem fell. He felt as though the despair he'd narrowly avoided was coming to claim him after all.

"Wh-Why...?" Mahr lamented to himself.

Fear. Sadness. Rage. Helplessness. Regret. Everything came together to pin Mahr right where he was.

◇

The government offices of Ajani were now packed with journalists from various news companies.

Ajani County, where the city stood, was on the eastern edge of Altar, and thus was closest to Mahem. That made it King of Plagues's most likely target, and the members of the press were all here to inform the continent if the count declared a state of emergency. There were journalists from news companies of all sizes, and some of them were Masters.

"Hrmm..."

Among them, there was a woman whose appearance turned a few heads. Wearing a suit and black sunglasses in the fantasy-themed Kingdom of Altar made her stand out a little—no, it made her stand out a *lot*. The armband she wore signified that she was part of DIN—the news company with the largest information network as well as the one that had first reported on King of Plagues. She was here waiting for an announcement just like the others, but for some reason she was drawing something in her sketchbook.

As she did so, another woman with a DIN armband peeked over her shoulder.

"Marie, what are you drawing? More naked men?"

"No, no, no, nooo! I'm just compiling information!"

The journalist in the suit—Marie Adler—was drawing a very odd image.

It was a diagram that was extremely short on its vertical axis, but featured a long semicircle off to the side as well as a few numbers here and there.

However, for some reason there was a bird drawn above it in cute mascot style.

“By the way, how high do the avians from the Ajani branch go?” Marie asked.

“About six thousand metels, I believe.”

“How tough are they?”

“Demi-Dragon-tier, I think.”

“It would be quite the gamble, then.”

As Marie mulled it over, her tian colleague could only assume she was planning something strange. Marie and other Master journalists served as a kind of special correspondent, often tasked with using their unique abilities for equally unique jobs. Being immortal, they could even bring back information that they gave their lives to obtain.

The fact that a Master like Marie was here in Ajani likely held some significance. The people who were in charge of Masters within DIN—the twin CEOs, that is—might’ve known the reason she was here, but as an ordinary journalist, Marie’s colleague had no idea what it was.

“Oh?” the tian journalist said.

As the two talked, they were joined by employees of the government office, as well as Count Ajani himself. The fact that he’d arrived to make a personal declaration told the two journalists that their hunch had been right on the mark—and just as they’d expected, the count told them that King of Plagues was coming, and that they would evacuate to the west.

However, while the count struggled to overcome his grief to make this announcement, Marie was, for some reason, looking in another direction. There was a wall there, but it was almost as though she could see through it.

Then, Marie whispered into her colleague’s ear. “Sorry, I’m leaving for a sec.”

“Huh?” When her colleague turned, Marie was already gone. She’d vanished as though she was never there to begin with.

Though the tian journalist was confused, she wrote it off as just a Master being a Master and turned back to the count.

◇

While Mahr was lying on the bed in a fetal position, he heard a knock on the window.

"It is I. Please, open."

The voice was a familiar one. With unsteady steps, Mahr approached the window and opened it. There, he saw a well-built youth with lizard-like eyes. At first glance, one might assume he had Legendarian blood, but it was actually the one who was once Lightning Dragon King—Arcal in human form.

"First and foremost, allow me to apologize. I failed to defeat King of Plagues."

Hearing that, Mahr realized Arcal had left him to defeat this sworn enemy. The news also made him realize that neither To'ori nor this dragon had been able to overcome this menace.

"He is approaching this town, and his miasma will surely reach it by tomorrow. You must evacuate before that."

Mahr said nothing in response.

"May I ask what you wish to do?" the dragon said.

"What I...wish to...?" The boy didn't understand what Arcal was asking.

"To'ori has entrusted me with your safety. If this town is to be drowned in disease, then I must have you leave at once. You may flee alongside your fellow men, but my wings would carry you faster and farther. I could even take you to the country upon the sea. The disease might not reach there."

Mahr said nothing at first. Arcal was trying to honor To'ori's wish by saving Mahr, who had been a fellow friend of his. Thus, he gave the boy a choice between leaving with Arcal or with the people of Ajani.

However, Mahr...

"I'll...stay here."

...chose neither.

"Why?"

"I mean, even if I'm alive...I have nothing now." His family, friends, home, and homeland—all that made him *him* no longer existed. He'd lost sight of himself, but was unable to find a solid foundation to help him build a new life, leaving him with nothing but resignation and despair. "Neither you nor Sir To'ori were able to do anything against King of Plagues. He'll kill every living person on this continent...so I'd rather join them early..."

"Young one, you..." When Arcal was about to tell him something...

“Then what if I prove that King of Plagues *can* be defeated by human hands?”

...an unfamiliar voice rang out through the room.

The voice was a strange one. It wasn’t clear if it belonged to someone young or old, to a man or a woman. This ambiguous voice, which had obviously passed through some kind of filter, reached their ears as though it were seeping into the room.

Arcal’s eyes widened as he turned to the source and saw something that was just as odd as the voice itself—a black mist. How long had it been there? Before Arcal even realized it, a black, human shaped mist had appeared next to the door. The fact that this entity was capable of sneaking up on him put Arcal on edge.

“What are you?” he asked. In response to that question, the figure looked at both Arcal and Mahr before saying...

“I am a shade.”

It took a step toward the boy. Though it wasn’t clear which part of the black mist was the face, it was obviously looking right at Mahr.

“I am the reflection of your despair—the mortal phantasm to pull the source of your grief into darkness.”

The mist continued speaking in a rather theatrical tone...

“*Into the shadow*.”

...and said that as it spread its arms as though it were performing on a stage. Its behavior made it seem as if everything it said was of the utmost importance.

Silence. The unusual aura surrounding the entity claiming to be a shade left Arcal speechless.

However, Mahr, who was standing behind him...

“The source...of my grief...?”

...singled out the words “pull the source of your grief into darkness.”

They could mean that the mist would kill Mahr to end his sadness, but if that wasn’t it, then...

“You mean...you would kill King of Plagues?” Mahr asked.

“Yes, if that is what you desire,” said the silhouette with a nod.

“Are you truly capable of that?” Arcal asked. He had doubts that this strange shadow could succeed where both Arcal and To’ori had failed.

He doubted it—yet it seemed that the mist was confident.

“I require something in exchange for this job,” the shade said.

“Exchange? Is it wealth you want?” replied Arcal.

“No. I require cooperation. I would need your assistance...dragon.”

The words left Arcal bewildered. He would gladly cooperate to defeat his sworn enemy, but that alone seemed to not benefit the shadow in any way. “Would that truly be enough for you?”

“Well, yes. To me, what holds meaning is simply the *role* of someone who accepts such requests and carries them out.”

Silence. Arcal didn’t understand the full meaning of those words, but it was clear to him that the shadow wasn’t lying. It was just operating under a logic only it understood, according to its own mysterious values.

“Very well,” the dragon said. “I will work with you.”

“Excellent. Now...the rest is up to you,” said the shadow, looking at Mahr again. “Before *I* take action, I need a client. What do you want to do?”

This too must’ve been part of the shadow’s personal logic and motivations. The question was a presentation of choice—for the shadow, it most likely didn’t matter what option Mahr would pick now. It wouldn’t care if he chose not to answer, or if he fled or stayed. If that happened, the shadow would find a collaborator other than Arcal, and a client—a motivation—other than Mahr.

However, it had come to Mahr first because the boy had more reason to *make this request* than anyone else in the world.

In silence, Mahr thought back on the plain everyday life he’d lived—the golden days that would never return.

He remembered his mother’s warmth and her cooking, so delicious he felt he could never get enough of it.

He remembered how reliable his father was, as well as his back as he carried Mahr when he was too exhausted to walk.

He remembered his older brother’s kindness and the times they’d walked hand in hand.

The memories of his family flowed back to him. Along with them, he recalled the scent of the bleating sheep, the fields of wheat caressed by the wind, as well as all the other vistas of his homeland, now forever lost.

And Mahr remembered the face of his friend whose life was nothing like his, but whose feelings had been the same.

“...them...” Tears once again flowing from his eyes, Mahr looked up at the shadow and opened his mouth to give voice...

“P-PLEASE...AVENGE THEM...!”

...to the righteous anger welling up from deep within his heart.

“Of course.”

Upon hearing the request, punctuated by loud sobbing, the shadow turned around.

“That’s why *I* exist,” said *Marie Adler*.

Thus, the Master bearing the name of a professional killer from another story took to action—to kill a self-proclaimed god.

◇◆◇

Old Mahem

“Hm...hmm...” Candy strolled through the now uninhabited land of Mahem, heading toward Altar and using his bacteria and Star Helmet to effortlessly repel anything thrown at him.

Since he was traveling on foot, Candy hadn’t even made it to the border yet, but as he walked westward, the range of his deadly disease followed him like a moving storm.

His bacteria crawled on the ground and multiplied to the extent that they had destroyed an entire country, but as they were now they couldn’t extend much farther than that. However, there were theoretically no true limitations to their spread. The bacteria were animals, and as such they could multiply and proliferate without end. Given enough generations after being released from Resheph, they could theoretically exist as an independent new species even if Candy logged out.

However, to have the properties Candy wanted them to have, they had ended up with a structure that was extremely bizarre for any living being. Without backing from King of Plagues, Candy and his Superior Embryo, they easily fell apart in about a day’s time.

Currently, the skills he had enabled these bacteria to spread to a maximum range of around 50 kilometels. Because of this, as Candy moved westward, the bacteria in the east end of the area were busy destroying themselves.

The very buffs that sustained them were the reason the bacteria that hadn’t come directly from Resheph—and were instead the descendants of those that had—were able to contribute Resources to Candy with their kills.

These bacteria might be able to mutate in a way that let them live despite their abnormalities and spread the disease to an even wider area, but any microorganisms outside his influence didn’t provide Candy with Resources. This meant that diseases too many generations removed would only become competition, so he’d actually taken measures to prevent this from happening.

“Hrm...this isn’t *that* tiring, but I’d love to have a better way of getting around,” Candy grumbled. “Maybe a Prism Steed?”

Any monsters would certainly die of his diseases, so Candy thought that his best option was some sort of machine—though even those would be gone the moment he spread his metal-eating bacteria. “Operation: Candy the Pale Rider is a go...! But I’ll have to find the horse first...” Candy spoke to himself, referring to the figure often said to be the embodiment of pestilence.

But then, he suddenly looked up at the sky.

“You again?” As he whispered to himself, the Star Helmet showed Candy his enemy.

It was the same dragon that had recently breathed lightning on him.

And after opening its maw, it did the same thing yet again.

“Hm...?” And just like last time, Candy withstood it by using Instant Wear to switch to his Lightning Absorption raincoat. The destructive bolt from the sky once again accomplished nothing.

Why’s it just doing the same thing? Candy was curious why this monster would bother repeating an attack that had so blatantly failed before.

However, as the assault continued, extending beyond the 10 seconds it had lasted before, Candy’s confusion turned to understanding.

It’s still going. This attack was far longer than the first one. It had already lasted for double the amount of time and didn’t seem like it would end soon. *I see. It thinks my defense doesn’t last long or has some other limitation. Sorry about that, sweetie, but this is a passive skill.*

Lightning Absorption was active for as long as Candy wore the raincoat. He could equip the item as long as it wasn’t broken, and it would negate any lightning attacks as long as he had it equipped. Even if the dragon kept the attack up forever, this defense would never fail.

I won't be able to log out if this drags on too long, but it's not like it's just gonna keep going indefinitely, right? Candy's assumption proved correct, for the lightning strike ended after about 40 seconds.

The dragon, as shown to him by the Star Helmet, seemed greatly fatigued.

Nice try...hm? The moment that thought passed through Candy's mind, the Star Helmet's display changed.

It now showed an unfamiliar woman in a black suit...

"Huh?"

...as well as *Candy himself, standing right next to her.*

◇

About ten minutes ago...

"I guess he really *does* have an item like that, huh? I had a hunch. It's the only thing that explains it, I'm afraid."

Marie's voice could be heard from Arcal's back as the dragon flew through the sky. However, she could not be seen.

The obvious assumption was that she'd somehow become invisible to the naked eye, but that wasn't exactly the case. Instead, she'd merely covered herself in a fabric with a chameleonlike effect that caused her to blend into Arcal's back.

Like something straight out of an old ninja manga, she was hiding herself using her onmitsu grouping skills.

She was no longer clad in the black mist she had worn in their first meeting. While the mist was a potent asset that could conceal her identity from perception skills, it also stood out and could make her position easy to pick out visibly. The dark mass would certainly stand out when contrasted with Arcal's body, and even if it didn't there was a chance that the Star Helmet would perceive her because of the difference in output.

A brief silence ensued. Arcal had just told Marie about the helmet To'ori had once possessed, and the fact that it had been claimed by King of Plagues. However, Marie had already assumed that this menace had some means of spotting his enemies—that was why she'd hidden herself like this. Such a power was the only thing that would explain King of Plagues's unusual ability to deal with anything thrown at him.

"You said that he can see," said Marie. "Is it like clairvoyance? Far sight?"

"That is how To'ori described it, yes," Arcal replied.

"Then there's no problem. If I just stick to you like this, he'll probably only see you—and I've still got my job ult too."

Hearing Marie's explanation, Arcal let out a doubtful grunt. "Are you certain about this?" he asked.

"Of course. I mean, it's not like I could reach him by running on the ground."

Thanks to the efforts of all those who had died trying to defeat King of Plagues, the maximum effective radius of his deadly bacteria had been determined. However, even with Marie's supersonic speeds, it would take her a few minutes to reach him, and that wasn't enough—she would *collapse* before getting close to him. And this estimation didn't even account for any obstacles that could slow her down and make the situation worse. Even if she could reach him before the disease claimed her, King of Plagues would have more than enough time to notice and escape by logging out. This was why even Caldina's "Multifariously Invincible" hadn't been able to destroy him.

"But I know I can make it if I use the *shortest path*." Another silence descended. Arcal seemed to have questions still, so Marie began her explanation.

"There are three ways King of Plagues reacts to his attackers. First is by ignoring them. Since his enemy is going to die anyway, he just doesn't do anything and lets it happen. That's how most people he's fought have fallen to him, with Legendaria's Over Wrestler being the most obvious example."

King of Plagues's always-active defensive web would simply kill most attackers and provide him with Resources—that was the easiest scenario for him.

"The second is by countering the attack. As we can see from him equipping something that negates your lightning and spreading metal eating bacteria against that tank, he sometimes deals with trouble by taking some specific defensive actions."

Arcal silently listened. King of Plagues had killed many UBMs and claimed their rewards, and he possessed possibly hundreds of bacteria of all kinds. The fact that he possessed countermeasures for everything thrown at him so far made it quite clear that his defense was rock-solid.

"And his third strategy is just *evacuating*. He runs away by logging out and waiting for things to blow over."

That was the approach King of Plagues had taken after having his Brooch broken, or when he was being targeted by The Cannon from Caldina. Though Marie was not yet aware of this, he also logged out at night, when Collapsed Present—his carnivorous bacteria—became inactive.

However...

"He also prioritizes these actions in precisely that order. It seems like he wants to avoid logging out to prevent anyone from camping and waiting for him, but he still does it when he has no choice."

King of Plagues was safest when he escaped to reality, but it was also a risky move because he had to log in again at some point.

Marie had no way of knowing this either, but if he was logged out for too long, there was a chance that his bacteria would all die off, costing him his deadly web of defense. That was why logging out was his last resort.

"So...you breathe lightning on him again, he'll go with the second option and just weather with his resistance gear. As in, *he won't try to escape*."

Marie was saying that she would use this moment as an opportunity to strike. Her thoughts, now put into words, were both slightly surprising and somewhat disturbing to Arcal.

"You thought that far ahead?" he asked.

"Well, yes. It happens that I've been thinking about such things for years."

Marie—Nagisa Ichimiya in the real world—was the creative mind behind *Into the Shadow*, a battle manga with superpowered professional killers.

However, the "superpowered" part didn't apply to the main character—also known as Marie Adler. Her first ally, Daisy, as well as everyone else in the series, were inhuman assassins. *Into the Shadow* was a story where Marie Adler—a normal human hit man—used only her wits and mundane skill to win against her supernatural foes.

And so, as author of this work, Nagisa spent many days thinking about how someone might deal with a far more powerful enemy. This experience turned out to be valuable in *Infinite Dendrogram*, making her a Master who was quite proficient at observing other people's abilities and countering

them.

“Anyway, we’re almost there,” she said.

“Indeed.” Arcal had arrived at the sky right above King of Plagues. This was about time the walking calamity would catch sight of him using the Star Helmet.

Knowing what I’ll have to do next, I’ll need about 40 seconds, Marie thought. Marie reconfirmed and recalculated the actions she’d take next, then gathered the resolve to go through with them.

“Anyway, please do as I said. Spew lightning at him for 40 seconds,” she said.

“That is quite a lot you are asking of me.” Though he ranked high among Pure-Dragons, Arcal was no longer a UBM. Breathing lightning for such a long time and from such a distance was a taxing act that would surely drain him.

But...

“If it is to avenge my friend...consider it done.”

Following those words, Arcal opened his jaw and released lightning onto King of Plagues below. The bolt struck true, but was once again negated by his lightning resistance raincoat.

In that moment, Marie grasped a different blade in each hand...and *jumped off Arcal’s back.*

This was the only way to reach him—a fall from directly above.

During her investigations, Marie had reached the conclusion that the bacteria’s effective range in the air wasn’t nearly as great as it was on land.

Mahr said that when To’ori helped him escape, the cattle left on the ground were dying—that alone made it clear that the altitude slowed the disease down.

Additionally, some of the people who’d used skydragons and avians while setting out to kill King of Plagues were able to get deep into his deadly range without any issue.

Thinking about it, this was to be expected.

There was *absolutely nothing* in the air. No soil to cling to and no nutrients the bacteria could use to proliferate. Even if they could linger in the air, they certainly couldn’t spread easily.

Marie had guessed that even at its highest—right above King of Plagues—the effective height of the bacteria was only about 5000 metels. This estimation was confirmed when Arcal told her that he'd been able to attack King of Plagues from above. With this approach, though, they'd given themselves more room to work with, coming from a height of over seven thousand metels. While this altitude was a bit much for the avians of the DIN branch, it wasn't a problem for a powerful dragon like Arcal.

However, even all these preparations and an approach from a less defended angle wouldn't be enough to win against King of Plagues. While the sky might not have been dense in bacteria, they still reached as high as 5000 metels. Even with supersonic speed, delivering an attack would take over 10 seconds. That was more than enough time for Candy to switch to appropriate resistance gear, counter it with other bacteria, or run away and make more distance between them. And now that he had the Star Helmet, ranged attacks weren't enough to take him out—but his disease miasma meant attacking him from up close was impossible too.

Falling toward him from above didn't change much of this scenario. Marie would be consumed before she even touched the ground.

Except she had something that let her break—or more accurately, *pass* through.

"Art of Vanishing."

The moment she spoke the name of her skill, her body stopped existing in this world. The light that allowed her to be seen, the air touching her skin, the lightning that could burn her, and the bacteria that destroyed everything it came into contact with now passed straight through her as though she wasn't even there.

This was Art of Vanishing—the ult of the onmitsu grouping Superior Job, Death Shadow.

Leaving everything behind as though she had never even existed, Marie plummeted to the surface far below.

And since she didn't exist, the Star Helmet couldn't possibly see her coming.

Thirty-six, thirty-five, thirty-four... she counted down in her head. Normally, forty seconds wasn't enough for a person to fall even two thousand metels, because air resistance slowed them down.

However, that didn't affect Marie as she was now. Art of Vanishing negated all physical influence on her, and even the dense air wasn't doing anything to her speed. But even though there was no friction, she was still affected by gravitational acceleration, as evidenced by the fact that her feet stayed in contact with the ground when she used the skill on the surface.

Thus, during these forty seconds, she closed the distance between her and King of Plagues at the highest possible speed.

Twenty, nineteen, eighteen...

King of Plagues only moved by foot and wasn't exactly swift, but forty seconds were more than enough time for him to move dozens of metels.

Another reason Marie had asked Arcal to shower King of Plagues in lightning was to minimize this possibility. Her calculations told her that without the effects of wind upon her, she could reach him by simply falling.

"Tch!" However, despite it all, there was now a discrepancy between the point she was falling toward and Candy's current location.

Had Candy himself moved? Or was this an effect of Arcal's lightning?

I'll do this, then! Thinking fast, accelerated by her AGI, Marie quickly made a decision.

A moment later, her forty seconds expired. Arcal's lightning had ceased, and Marie removed her Art of Vanishing.

But as she did that, she immediately used her Art of Shadow Clones.

She then *kicked the clones* to readjust the trajectory of her fall.

"Huh?" Candy said, finally picking up on Marie's presence. The moment Art of Vanishing was undone, both the Star Helmet and the swarm of bacteria focused entirely on her.

However, before King of Plagues could react in any way, Marie *shoved both her blades into the neck of her target*.

Thanks to her accelerated thoughts, she was able to perfectly coordinate her fall with her attack. Her left blade drew an arc from below, while the right was swung down.

The attack with the left blade was restrained. Candy's level was immense, but his HP wasn't impressive, and this attack was meant to do damage while keeping him alive.

The attack with the right blade, however, was fatal. It carried the kinetic energy of Marie's free fall straight into a critical area.

Pulverizing Marie's own right arm as it sank in, the right blade delivered damage that surpassed Candy's HP many times over, triggering his Brooch several times and shattering it.

A moment later, Marie herself crashed into the ground, activating and breaking her own Brooch too.

Marie’s ambush left them both without a lifeline.

◇◆

“Agh.” A sudden attack, damage to his neck, a shattered Brooch.

The change in situation was so sudden that even Candy couldn’t stay surprised.

As Marie tried to recover from the fatal crash, he backed away, blood spurting from his neck.

At this moment, they were on even footing. However, Marie was already infected by his disease. The flesh-consuming Collapsed Present was quickly draining Marie’s HP.

Candy spared a moment to think.

This was someone who could break through his defenses—his empire of plagues—and end up right next to him. It wasn’t out of the question that she could once again negate the effects of his bacteria.

Thus, Candy chose to take her seriously.

Spreading a colored cloud of bacteria to conceal himself, he began his escape.

Preparing to leave this world in thirty seconds, he initiated the logout sequence...only to get an error.

A...debuff...?

Candy then realized that his status summary said “Paralysis (Slow Acting).”

This was the effect of the dagger in Marie’s left hand—Palsy Stingblade, Belspan. It was an MVP reward that delivered a paralysis poison requiring time to become effective, making it difficult to resist.

But while it was slow acting, it didn’t change the fact that the debuff was still *there*, and having a binding-type debuff prevented a player from logging out.

In that case... Candy realized that he had no choice but to kill his opponent immediately. Thus, he prepared to use his ultimate, The Lab of the God of Pestilence—Resheph...

“...n...gh...!”

...only to realize that *his destroyed throat* made him unable to speak the words.

This was also the work of Belspan. Marie had used it to lower his HP, apply a debuff that prevented escape, and stop him from using skills that had to be called out.

The blade had been given three roles, and it had fulfilled them all.

Even as she coughed, the bacteria consuming her, Marie still had her eyes fixed on Candy.

He'd spread a smoke screen, but her abilities as a job from the onmitsu grouping still allowed her to track him.

She'd also switched out the dagger in her left for a handgun.

This was Marie's Embryo—Arc-en-Ciel. But instead of having its usual six shot revolver form, it was in the shape that primed it to fire a single, giant shot.

It was the form Arc-en-Ciel took for its ultimate skill.

All was silent. Candy fixed his eyes on the assassin who was ready to claim his life. She'd broken through his defenses and destroyed his throat, preventing him from using his ult. With the assassin so close now, and the gun aimed right at him, there was nothing left for him to—

Construction setup.

No—someone who claimed to be a god would never fall this easily.

Unable to say a word, Candy began manipulating his own magic.

This wasn't accomplished by any of his job skills. This was the pinnacle of pure technique, said to be reachable only by tians with The One series of Superior Jobs. It was the realm of original magic skill creation—a world that only Masters like King of Glaciers AT WIKI would someday ascend to.

Candy happened to already be deep within this uncharted territory.

Outputting guidelines. Defining concept. Connecting network.

Using only his own thoughts and powers, he wove something that matched the most superior of all skills. Since he couldn't speak—since it was all in his thoughts—this process contained none of the colorful, deranged *role-playing* he normally affected. He merely acted like a system—a god—designed to act like he did, and exercised his authority accordingly.

Construction complete. Exhausting internal magic.

What he wove was something befitting the title of Plaguemancer—a job focused on creating and managing diseases—and yet something completely unlike it at the same time.

False God Imitation—Infinite Daimon: Carnage the God of Pestilence.

The bacteria that gathered right before Candy in that moment assumed a shape that resembled a giant, angry spirit—the image of a divinity that had wielded immense power in a certain era of some particular world. Synonymous with destruction, its very touch brought the end.

This false god, built from bacteria and magic, rose like a restless deity that could devour all that lived and destroy all that did not, swinging its claws at the heretic that dared to stand before it.

This was divine might that no human could withstand.

However, no matter how inhuman, unique, or even godlike the enemy...

...Marie Adler was the protagonist of a tale that was all about defeating them.

“Phantasmal Raingun—Arc-en-Ciel: La Gravelle the Godslayer.”

What Marie fired at that calamitous false god was a single, fatal bullet that made use of red, blue, green, white, black, silver—all the colors Marie possessed and all the Resources loaded into Arc-en-Ciel.

What manifested was a woman with her eyes covered by a green cloth veil, wielding a sword so massive it could only have been made from the bones of a giant beast.

Her name was La Gravelle the Godslayer, and she was the strongest professional killer in Nagisa Ichimiya’s work.

Thus, two creations had been summoned. One from the history of a different world, the other from a fictional story—both remnants of those who had once held godlike power.

All that was left was to see which *past* was stronger.

A moment later, Candy’s false god and Marie’s godslayer clashed.

The billions of bacteria comprising the false god rushed to consume this enemy that mocked it. A single swing of its claw would reap the life from anything it passed through.

There was no living being that could withstand this mythic ruination.

However, La Gravelle was the *Godslayer*.

She had that name exactly because she could surpass mere mythology—the manifestation of explosive *power* that came at the cost of so many Resources that it left Marie's Embryo useless, yet didn't even last for ten seconds.

The swing of her sword called forth such a mighty wind that it surpassed the magical pressure gluing the billions of bacteria together and carved open a path for her. Then, with a step that cracked open the earth, La Gravelle rushed through where the density of bacteria was thinned out.

Though, "thinned out" didn't mean that this calamity was harmless. It still wouldn't take long for the bacteria to consume a single person.

In just two seconds, La Gravelle would vanish, bones and all.

However, it wouldn't take even a single second for her to break through the false god and stand before the *true* god—Candy Carnage.

Candy's eyes widened.

Even as parts of her body disintegrated, La Gravelle raised her sword high and swung it down.

What protected Candy's head was the item granted to mankind by a being that surpassed Mythical tier. Its ability to see enemies wasn't all the power it possessed—it also excelled simply as a defensive piece of equipment. Even a blade of Mythical metal would bend before it.

But this one truth could not be forgotten: *the Godslayer surpassed mythology*.

The attack that would eventually break even Superior metal split the Star Helmet...

"Ah."

...and cut through the god.

It all ended with one attack, without even any time for revival.

Stripped of control, the false god collapsed in an instant, and Candy began to melt into motes of light.

With her role finished, La Gravelle also vanished without so much as a word. And her summoner, Marie, was also succumbing to the damage the bacteria had done to her body.

It was likely, however, that Candy would die first. Thus, he realized that this was undoubtedly a loss for him.

The silence stretched on as Candy Carnage, his body split in half and unable to speak, gazed at the woman who was swiftly becoming nothing but light, just as he was.

I'll get back at you someday... Candy thought as the bits of light that were once his godly body were carried off by the wind.

A moment later, that which had once been Marie disappeared in the same way.

Arcal had witnessed all this from high above, and when it was over he flew off to the west, eager to tell the boy that their friend had been avenged.

The brief yet truly eventful battle was over.

The Master who'd killed more tians than any other—this one-man calamity—had been defeated by a lone assassin and sent to the gaol.

This was the conclusion of the King of Plagues incident.

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Following this, it became known that King of Plagues had fallen to a certain professional killer. This truth was sent out to the world by the twin CEOs of DIN—the control AI.

The name of this assassin was a mystery, so people wanted something to call them.

Perhaps if Candy Carnage had been recognized as a god by anyone besides himself, the Master who had killed him might've come to be known as "Godslayer," just like the method she had used to destroy him. However, no matter how wretched the casualties of his actions, he was still only a *Superior*—a mere human.

That was the extent of the world's understanding of him, and that was why the one who slew him became known as the "*Superior* Killer."

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The Gaol

As Candy descended upon this place, he wasn't smiling—though his face was not twisted in anger or grief either.

He was merely squinting his eyes, apparently lost in thought.

Ever since he'd received the death penalty he'd been thinking about that black-clad woman who'd killed him—in fact, he was thinking about her right now.

Who was she? Where had she come from? And regardless of how shoddily he might have constructed it in the little time he had...how had she broken through his False God Imitation?

He couldn’t begin to answer those questions, so he could only wonder about it fruitlessly.

From Candy’s perspective, this was like getting randomly assaulted while out on a casual stroll. It had all happened so fast that he couldn’t comprehend how he’d died, nor could he accept it.

However, Candy was someone who used bioterrorism to destroy an entire country. His distress couldn’t hope to compare to what the people of Mahem felt as they’d suddenly perished to his deadly disease. Some might say that this death was just Candy getting what he deserved, but it was truly only a fraction of that.

The wrongdoers and the wronged, however, always weighed such things on different scales.

For Candy in particular, his outlook on this outcome was more like a god’s than a human’s. Thus, he himself didn’t really think that he’d gotten what he deserved. That was why he saw it as more of a random assault by some maniac rather than understanding it as an act of vengeance.

He was actually wondering why it even happened at all.

Candy had already decided that he’d get his revenge, but first things first—he had to find answers to his questions...

“Yo! A newbie, aren’t ya?”

“The outfit’s a little much, but you’re pretty cute!”

“Ohh, those lips are *gorgeous*...”

...but his thinking was cut short by some voices calling out to him.

Candy was standing at the gaol’s save point, so it wasn’t so strange that someone would try talking to him.

“Gettin’ sent here is makin’ you feel all anxious, huh? Don’t worry! We’ll show you around!”

“Let’s start with the only café that serves good coffee! That’s also where you’ll find the biggest guy here!”

“If you don’t mind, give me your cup once you’re done with it.”

With the exception of the obvious Legendarian, the men didn’t have any ulterior motives. While some of them were probably trying to hit on Candy, they were also completely honest about wanting to lend a helping hand to a gaol newbie.

However...

Candy's response was a crushing silence. From his perspective, they were irreverent, unpleasant fools who had bothered him while he was trying to puzzle out something important.

But this also led him to another thought.

Here in the gaol, he could no longer hope to power level by committing tian genocide, but there were still people he could kill for their Resources.

Thus, a smile appeared on his face for the first time since he logged in...

"Collapsed Present."

...and he instantly infected the gaol with the very same bacteria that had destroyed Mahem.

The three who called out to him were the first to die—and as the save point was in the heart of the town, death quickly spread throughout all of it.

They don't give as much as tians, but they'll have to do, Candy thought. He would first kill all Masters, then massacre the monsters of this created dungeon.

With the gaol presumably being made using spatial control powers, Candy figured that if he gathered enough Resources to reach his limit as a *Superior*, he might be able to escape. And so, he intended to turn this gaol into his personal empire of plague where anything besides him was dead.

But then...

"Excuse me, about this poison...or, rather, bacteria—would you be so kind as to stop spreading it?"

...someone behind Candy tapped on his shoulder and addressed him directly.

Candy's eyes widened in shock as he turned around. First the skeleton, then the black-clad woman, now this—it was his third shocking encounter within a very brief span of time.

However, in a way the source of Candy's surprise this time might've been the strangest of the three.

"It seems to affect the flesh of living beings...but it also broke down the eggs I just bought at the store."

The man behind him was holding a shopping bag, looked awfully plain, and behaved completely *normally*.

Unlike the skeleton or the woman in black, he didn't try to attack Candy the moment he appeared. He only wore a somewhat strained smile and lamented the loss of his recent purchase.

It was as though to him, the spread of Candy's deadly disease was roughly equivalent in seriousness to his broken eggs.

"You..." Candy hissed. The man didn't *look* strange. He wasn't a skeleton in Japanese clothes or a woman wearing a black men's suit. He was just a spectacled man in casual clothes who didn't stand out in any way. None of what he wore seemed like MVP rewards.

But all that was exactly why this didn't seem right.

"What are you?" Candy was so dumbfounded by this that he couldn't help but ask that question.

Notably, he didn't ask "who" but "what," as if he wasn't sure if the man was even human.

And, in a way, Candy wasn't that far off.

"You are speaking to Sechs Würfel. I am known as King of Crime, and I am the owner of the café here. Oh, and I am also a slime."

The man—Sechs—casually answered Candy's question, readily admitting that he was not human.

A slime! Candy thought as everything fell into place.

Collapsed Present targeted only people and other creatures that possessed actual flesh—slimes weren't its focus, and as a result its effects on them were minimal. Even a little defense or a minor countermeasure against disease from a tertiary target like a slime would be enough to negate it.

But that also meant that the man was vulnerable to bacteria *specialized* against slimes.

With that thought, Candy immediately gave an order to Resheph, causing it to release the antislime bacteria he'd prepared in the past.

A burst of black smoke laden with pestilence quickly enveloped the man.

If everything went as Candy planned, this would've killed his opponent immediately, and yet...

"Hmm. So your Embryo consists of fatal bacteria—or rather the system to prepare them. I suppose it's true that, given enough time and Resources, a production-focused Embryo *can* become something fearsome."

Candy’s eyes widened again. The man claiming to be a slime spoke with a tone as calm as before, and Candy almost began to suspect that he was bluffing about being a slime—but then he noticed a bigger issue.

The man’s voice had changed. In fact, it had become a voice that Candy found very familiar.

“Though it does seem that you produce them with the bare minimum of safety measures.”

The wind then blew away the black smoke...

“Like, for example, making it so they don’t target *you*.”

...revealing none other than Candy himself.

“Huh...?” Candy was now more confused than ever, but there was a fairly simple explanation for what had just happened.

Candy’s assumption about why Sechs was able to approach him without fear of the bacteria was correct. However, when Sechs had touched Candy’s shoulder, he’d also taken a hair from Candy’s head and absorbed it into his slime body. This enabled him to use Shapeshift—his transformation skill that required him to acquire cells from whomever he wanted to transform into.

Thus, Sechs had simply made his flesh the same as Candy’s.

“I believe spreading the disease any further is meaningless now, unless you intend to include *yourself* in the massacre,” Sechs went on. “So would you mind putting a stop to all this, please? There might be better ways of going about all of this in any case.”

In terms of form and structure, Sechs’s transformations were flawless. They were so good, in fact, that they were able to perfectly mimic the bloodlines of Special Superior Jobs.

As Candy’s current level was higher than his, Sechs couldn’t copy his skills as King of Plagues, but that didn’t stop him from creating a true reflection of Candy’s physical body, thus putting Candy in checkmate.

In silence, Candy considered the situation. He possessed many MVP rewards, but none of them provided any means of attack.

That was because his usual method of dealing damage—of dealing *death*—was his bacteria. His MVP rewards had thus ended up being either defensive items or materials for his diseases.

And since Candy had excluded himself as a target with all of his bacteria creations, by copying his cells, Sechs became effectively immune to anything Candy could do.

I've only been here a few minutes and I've already gotten hit with all this... I've got no luck at all these days, Candy thought.

The skeleton and the woman in black had both succumbed to the bacteria. However, Sechs was immune to them as long as Candy was himself. Candy had absolutely no chance against Sechs now.

Well, I'm stumped. Can't think of anything I can do, Candy thought. There were some options that would have been open to him before Sechs had come this close, but it was far too late for that now.

On top of that, still reeling from the shock of the current situation and the death penalty dealt him by the woman in black, Candy failed to notice one other detail—he no longer possessed the helm that so greatly enhanced his defenses.

"So...will you stop? Living here would become quite difficult if you do not." Sechs's words, spoken using Candy's own face, were obviously an ultimatum, carrying a very specific hidden message: stop spreading the disease or die.

Unlike Candy, Sechs had means of attack that didn't rely on bacteria, so if they fought, it would be completely one-sided. Candy was well aware of that.

It would only lead to his immediate second defeat.

I'll have to be more careful with my concoctions from now on, he thought. First, he would have to research bacteria that worked on beings with identical cell structure to his.

With that thought, Candy ordered Resheph to cease spreading the disease and raised his hands in surrender.

However, he was a few moments too late.

"Oh," Sechs sighed. He, for some reason, shifted his eyes from Candy up toward the sky.

Candy couldn't help but follow his gaze...

"What?"

...and saw a circle.

Actually, it was the bottom of a cone that expanded upward—specifically, it was Sandalphon, the Embryo of the gaol's second *Superior*—King of Berserk, Hannya.

The Embryo had appeared right above Sechs and Candy so suddenly that he might as well have teleported.

The very next moment, the massive cone smashed into them.

Candy—as well as Sechs taking Candy's form—were both *ground into the earth below*, immediately giving King of Plagues his next death penalty.

An encounter with people who were very different kinds of outliers than he was—this was what marked the beginning of Candy's life in the gaol.

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Old Mahem

The battle between King of Plagues, Candy Carnage and Death Shadow Marie Adler ended with both of their deaths.

Functionally, it was a solid defeat for Candy, but regardless it was a battle that didn't leave much of a mark on the world. Once it was over, the combatants had both dissolved into light, Arcal had flown off, and Candy's bacteria were rapidly decreasing in numbers as they destroyed themselves without his direction.

Soon, Mahem would look exactly as it had before all of this had happened—just uninhabited.

However, there was something in this scene that stood out.

It was a split piece of headgear—none other than the Prototype Horobimaru-Star Helmet.

Once given to The Hero To'ori Kusanagi by an SUBM, it was then claimed by his murderer, Candy. Now it was lying on the ground, thoroughly destroyed.

Instead of vanishing alongside Candy, its remains were simply lying there, exposed to the wind that flowed across the field.

There was other loot that Candy and Marie had dropped in death, but the helmet had an aura that made it stand out from the rest.

Suddenly—perhaps because of the wind—the remains of the helmet shook a little.

"Dead host. Dead victor. None qualified. Grave damage."

A faint voice, its source unclear, could be heard in the barren wasteland.

"Continued recording impossible. Prioritize current information. Incomplete. Abandoning. Unsatisfactory."

The voice was coming from *the helmet itself*.

“Returning.”

With that one word, the helmet transformed into bits of light and vanished.

The sight resembled the death of a monster or a Master’s death penalty, but it was neither.

If To’ori or other seasoned warriors of Tenchi had been there, they might’ve noticed that the Resources comprising the helmet were flowing somewhere else.

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Somewhere completely unknown, everything was obscured by darkness.

In the profound blackness of the deepest depths of an unimaginably deep cavern, outside of the reach of wind and rain and thus thoroughly unchanged since ancient times, there was a space that at first glance resembled a burial chamber.

Perhaps, though, this place was better likened to something with a far different purpose—a smithy, to be precise. There was a furnace, an anvil, and a hammer.

That was more than enough to make it a smithy even despite the fact that this was a crucible of pure darkness untouched by the rays of the sun or the glow of a fire, wasn’t it?

Now, however, the deep silence had a source. Absently floating in the heart of the black smithy was what looked like little more than a haze.

Did this thing exist? Did it not? Even that much wasn’t clear—but it was there regardless.

It must’ve been there—been *waiting*—for an obscenely long time.

“Retrieving.” But then, the seemingly inert haze whispered that word, and something flowed into the darkness. The shapeless and invisible energy took form in the haze’s hand.

The object was the now shattered Star Helmet.

“Incomplete.” The haze echoed the words spoken by the helm itself.

“The Hero, The Arts, The Earth, King of Plagues, The Cannon, Over Wrestler, Death Shadow.” The haze named some Superior Jobs—specifically, the ones that the owners of the helm had met or battled.

It almost felt as though it was lamenting something.

“Few. Insufficient. Unsatisfactory.”

It voiced its displeasure with the fact that the number it counted was less than desirable.

The haze was the creator of the helmet, and what it wanted was for the item’s owners to fight Superior Jobs.

It had even made the helm so it would seek out stronger and stronger wielders. In fact, while Candy had picked up the helmet off of To’ori’s body himself, it would’ve moved to him even if he hadn’t.

But now that Marie had destroyed the helmet before disappearing along with Candy himself, this feature had become meaningless. The helmet had no choice but to return to the haze, its goal incomplete.

“*Conflict knowledge inadequate*.” Disappointed though it was, the haze quickly took to action.

The furnace of the black smithy was lit for the first time in who knew how long, and its flame grew, melting the broken helmet. The haze took the hammer in hand and began working the metal that was left.

This task would clearly take him quite a long time.

“Begin. Perfect. First step.”

The haze’s—*his*—job was to repeat the same thing five times. Though the first step was incomplete, he had to fulfill his duty.

“Dedicate. Dependent. Task.”

This was something he’d decided he would do a long time ago.

Behind the scenes of the turbulent King of Plagues event, unknown to all, this being had taken to action.

This would eventually result in something fearsome taking center stage.

Interlude: A Story That Was Spoken and a Story Untold

Sorcerer Ray Starling

"...And that's how I beat King of Plagues and became famous as the mysterious PK known as the *Superior* Killer. After this, I was flooded with contracts and had to count on help from the twin CEOs of DIN, among other things...and one of the jobs I got out of that led to our first meeting."

I silently listened. Expanding upon the articles that speculated on her means and contained various other pieces of information, Marie had told me about the event and had now reached the conclusion I already knew—that the *Superior* Killer had defeated King of Plagues and sent him to the gaol.

"Well, with how big the whole thing was, there's probably some stuff that I don't know about it, so all I could really tell you was what I heard here in Altar and how the battle played out for me," Marie said. "I also don't know much about what King of Plagues has been doing after he was thrown into the gaol—though I did see that recent video of him being a little terrorist in there."

"Oh yeah... I saw that too."

Someone I'd known since our high school days—a fellow EGRS member—was a streamer and content creator who'd gotten sent to the gaol and occasionally made videos about it. He was eccentric to begin with and there weren't a lot of people making gaol content, so those videos always got a good amount of views.

I'd watched some of them myself, and, well...that lip fetishist sure seemed to be the same as ever. Not that I approved of what he did, though Stealing the fairy queen Titania's cup was a pretty crazy thing to do.

That aside...

"By the way, Marie..."

"Yes?"

"How would you describe King of Plagues? His appearance, I mean." The news articles wrote about his deeds, but there was nothing about what he looked like.

"His appearance? Well, it was definitely pretty weird."

Weirder than somebody wearing a business suit in a fantasy world? I thought.

"I mean, he wore *a samurai helmet and a raincoat*! That's not exactly a look I'm ever going to forget."

"Ohh, that *is* weird. I never met him, but I'm sure I'd recognize that outfit right away."

"Well, he's in the gaol now, so it's not like we'll ever see him again." Marie had beaten King of Plagues, and Shu had beaten King of Crime, but no matter what they did, as long as they were Masters none of them could actually die. They would just come back once their death penalty expired—but if their sins were grave enough, they'd be sent to the gaol.

So far the only people who had made it out of there were people like Hannya, and knowing the extent of his crimes there was no chance that King of Plagues would ever get free.

I mean, it's not like the security there is so lax that he could just escape, right?

"Anyway, that's more or less how the King of Plagues incident went," said Marie. "Do you have any more questions?"

"Just one." There was actually one more thing that Marie probably knew about, but hadn't yet mentioned. "It's about the boy who survived. How did Mahr end up?"

I wanted to know about Marie's client—the sole survivor of Mahem. Marie had neglected to mention what kind of life the boy had ended up living once all was said and done.

However, the only response I got was silence. Marie clearly looked like she didn't know what to say.

"Was he sent to some orphanage?" I asked. "Wait, don't tell me that he..." *Joined his friends and family?* I completed the sentence in my head, feeling uneasy.

However, Marie's answer didn't align with my assumed worst-case scenario.

"I don't know. I think that once it was all over, the dragon that helped me took him with him somewhere.”

The dragon who was a friend of The Hero and his tamed monster—the one that had gladly agreed to help Marie with her plan. With the boy having lost his family, friends, and homeland, that dragon was, in a way, the only connection he still had.

“His friend entrusted the boy to him, so...I guess the dragon took him into his own care?” I said.

“Probably. Well, the dragon seemed reasonable, so I’m sure that boy is living a decent life somewhere.”

Well, that seemed like a good enough outcome to me. I could only hope that the boy found *something* to live for in the time after the tragedy.

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The following events occurred after the incident, yet were unknown even to Marie—the one who had finally ended it. Neither most of the players on the board nor human society at large could fully grasp the story that unfolded.

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After King of Plagues’s Defeat, Kingdom of Altar, Ajani County

Mahr first heard of King of Plagues’s defeat from Arcal, then from the workers in the offices where he was currently staying.

With that, he understood that black mist—the professional killer—who had accepted his request had actually done what To’ori could not and defeated King of Plagues. The people here told Mahr that although Masters couldn’t die, the crimes King of Plagues had committed were so serious that he would never leave the gaol.

With the incident finally in the past, Altar was overcome by relief.

But now that it was all over, Mahr was left with *absolutely nothing*.

He’d lost his homeland, his family, his friends, and now even the person responsible for all of that loss was gone.

Recent examinations of Mahem’s lands proved that the bacteria were on the decline and that it would soon be a place where people could live again, but that didn’t mean anyone had survived.

The people that made up Mahr's life—those he had any ties to—were all dead.

In silence, Mahr looked back upon those days that would never return, his eyes fixed in the direction of Mahem. The office workers had already tried talking to Mahr about his life from now on, and the town had a state-sponsored orphanage that had asked if he would like to live there. The suggestion was made out of kindness on their part, and it was probably the best path Mahr could have taken, but Mahr just couldn't see it that way.

Altar was still Altar. It wasn't the homeland in which he'd lived his entire life so far.

The fact that the homeland was all but eradicated didn't change that.

The office workers concluded that the boy just needed time to think, and so they let him stay as long as he needed.

However, Mahr was planning to leave this place soon. He had no means of surviving on his own and would probably die, but he didn't feel that it would be a particularly unfortunate outcome. In fact, he was gradually feeling less and less of anything, becoming more hollow as time passed.

Even when Arcal or the people in Altar's government offices told him that King of Plagues was defeated, Mahr didn't feel anything that resembled happiness. It made the burden on him a little lighter, but he did not get any positive emotion out of the news.

Mahr didn't even feel sadness or rage anymore, let alone joy. The moment he'd asked the hit man to kill King of Plagues might've been the last time he'd felt any kind of intense emotion whatsoever.

Now, with a hollow heart, he merely stared in Mahem's direction from dawn until dusk.

But as he was doing exactly that, Mahr thought he saw something strange in the sky—a distortion in the air, so vague it would likely vanish if he glanced away.

This strange object that his eyes captured by pure chance seemed to have the shape of a creature. If his eyes weren't deceiving him, it looked like a translucent dragon, swimming through the sky.

"It has been long indeed since the eyes of mankind have caught my reflection." A moment after Mahr saw that hazy dragon, he heard an unfamiliar voice by his side.

Silently and showing little surprise, the boy looked toward its source.

This was the second time something like this happened in a short while. It couldn't shock him any longer. His heart and mind had become too lifeless for that.

What Mahr saw looked like a miniaturized version of the dragon he'd seen in the sky. He couldn't tell dragons apart by their faces, but he felt as though this one was somewhat similar to the dragon he already knew—Arcal.

"This reflection is woven from spirit and nature's lingering magic. To witness it is a sign that your heart is profoundly hollow—that you are attached to nothing. There is not a single thing that concerns you now—even the question of your own life or death is a distant thing. Am I wrong?"

Mahr said nothing and didn't even nod in response, but he did feel that the dragon was right.

"Hmm," the dragon said. "So this is more than a state of mind."

The transparent dragon gazed into Mahr's eyes. It was no doubt an unsettling scene, but the boy wasn't scared in the least.

"Keh heh heh...how unusual indeed. You even have the talent. You carry what it takes to inherit the throne of the *lost Superior Job* that has stood vacant since the pre-ancient times."

"Hm...?" Mahr finally spoke.

"Had you not suffered a tragedy such as this, you would have died without this potential ever coming into bloom." Mahr understood the spectral dragon's words, but the deeper meaning was lost on him.

It almost seemed as though it was saying that Mahr was...*special*.

"Young Mahr." The dragon spoke the boy's name easily, as though he already knew everything about him. "You *are* special." The creature clearly affirmed the very thing that Mahr had assumed was a misapprehension. "Were you to train with me, you would soon—at least in terms of *the outside world's time*—become a being of great power. You would be someone truly *special*, just like The Hero himself."

Silence.

"Shall I take you under my wing?" the dragon asked.

To become special, just like The Hero To'ori Kusanagi—this used to be one of Mahr's greatest desires. He'd dreamed of being someone truly special and living out amazing adventures.

Back then, he would've immediately agreed to all of this, but there were things he’d come to understand since those days. He now knew that being special didn’t stop To’ori from feeling exactly the same way, and Mahr had realized with painful clarity that the adventures he’d envisioned were nothing but catastrophes for most everyone involved.

Mahr no longer wanted anything *special*. What he wanted—what his nearly hollow heart wished for—were those simple days that would never come back.

“I’m not going. I don’t need it.”

That was why he responded to the dragon’s offer with a slow shake of his head. If this upset the dragon and drove it to eat him alive, Mahr wouldn’t even run.

The boy no longer needed to be special. There was nothing that he wanted at all. He didn’t even desire to keep living.

He was “■?#.”

“Very well...”

Upon hearing Mahr’s answer, the dragon nodded...

“You pass.”

...and as he proclaimed this, a veil of light began enveloping Mahr’s body.

“Hm...?” Mahr said. To some, this would seem like an attack. Mahr seemed to be obviously in danger, yet he wasn’t shocked or surprised or anything like that.

However, he did have a question: what did the dragon mean by “You pass?”

“You lose your right to it the moment you seek it,” the dragon said. “That is why it is lost, that is why it presents such a challenge...and that is why you are deserving. And although you shall not seek it yourself, it does not mean that I will turn a blind eye to you.” The dragon cracked an obviously joyful smile. “A piece this peculiar is not one I would idly remove from the board. As I wish to continue spectating the game, I shall take you with me and have you grow.”

Mahr said nothing, but he realized that the answer he’d thought would make the dragon mad had actually made it more interested in him than before.

He would now be enveloped in this orb of light, stored away, and probably taken somewhere far off.

However, the boy didn't intend to struggle against what was happening to him. While he might've not been seeking life or power, he also didn't exactly desire death.

He wasn't attached to anything. He was nothing but a stray child who'd lost sight of anything that could tie him to the world.

When Mahr was fully embraced by light, the door to his room burst into pieces.

Stepping over the remains of the door, a man—Arcal in his human form—entered the room.

"Father...!"

"Kyeh heh heh...Arcal? I see you've kept yourself well all this time."

The reflection of the dragon—one of the three dragon kings, Skydragon King, Drac-Heaven—chuckled as he welcomed his son.

"Mahr...!" Seeing the boy, enveloped in an orb of light, Arcal grew pale.

The boy had been entrusted to him by a late friend. If Mahr didn't wish to go into an orphanage in Altar, Arcal had planned to invite the boy to travel the world with him. He hoped that the journey could help cure the boy's hollow heart.

But now that he actually came to present this offer, he found Mahr with someone else—his own father.

"What do you intend to do with him...?!" Arcal cried. It was very likely that his father had been watching—*spectating*—the entire King of Plagues incident. And through the chaos, for some reason his attention had fixed on Mahr.

Arcal asked his father about his plans for the boy, and the Skydragon King replied, not hiding a thing.

"I will take him to the Border Mountain Belt—no, to the Timedragon's Mausoleum."

"Ah...! Mother's...?!"

"Kyeh heh heh. The custodians ordered me to never let in any Masters, never use it to enhance monsters, and destroy it rather than allow them to set foot in it... But they have not told me anything about letting tians in. This is most appropriate."

The Timedragon's Mausoleum was a profoundly special place.

For Arcal, it was his mother's grave. And for the rest of the world, it was the most unique *natural dungeon* that existed.

"Listen, Arcal." As Arcal grew more and more confused, unable to read his father's intentions, the Skydragon King spoke to him in a voice only he could hear. "No matter where you are, all that lives will eventually die. Lunnings and Mahem are no different in this regard."

Arcal's eyes widened. Both of those were places where he'd lost close friends. At Lunnings, Arcal had even died himself; at Mahem he'd come close to dying again.

"Even your power may not be enough to protect him," Arcal's father continued. "Surely you are aware of this?"

"Yes." Recalling these heavy defeats, Arcal nodded with a bitter face.

"The turmoil in this world will only continue to grow, and the only way those living here can ensure their survival is to become as powerful as they can possibly be. And the optimal means of achieving this goal lies under my wing."

Arcal was silent. As one who had already experienced death, he knew well that his father spoke the truth.

"Have faith in me. I would have Mahr gain the power to survive by himself—make him powerful enough to *at the very least,* win against King of Plagues as he is now."

As he grinned, the Skydragon King and the light orb containing Mahr both began to vanish.

"Father..."

"If you are still concerned, feel free to visit now and again. Although...considering the environment, this might not even take a month to achieve."

With that, the Skydragon King and Mahr vanished from the room. They were likely already in the Border Mountain Belt.

All that was left was silence. Arcal's face was bitter and full of anguish, yet he was unable to deny the truth of his father's words.

He also knew that his father kept his promises. There was no doubt that Mahr would be granted special powers, even if he himself didn't desire them.

"If I too..." Perhaps Arcal could have contradicted his father if he'd been stronger than he was—and perhaps if he'd been stronger long ago, he might not have lost so many friends in the first place, and Mahr's heart might not have ended up as hollow as it was.

Following that thought, he reached the conclusion that he had to address his own powerlessness before he could deny his father.

And thus, he also left the room.

◇

When the people working in the office arrived, all they found was a broken door. They tried searching for Mahr, but even with the use of skills, they couldn’t find any trace of him.

And with that, this little incident that followed King of Plagues’s defeat became a cold case.

After all, no one would ever come to the absurd conclusion that the Skydragon King had taken the boy to the Border Mountain Belt—even though that was exactly the truth.

Conjunction: From the Depths

Imperial Capital, Vandelheim

In the heart of the imperium's capital, there was an immense mechanical structure—Throne of the Imperium, Dryfe Imperstand.

It was a fortress that doubled as Dryfe's palace, and *tripled* as their oldest and strongest weapon. All of the imperium's political activity was centered in it and around it.

It could even be said that if the Imperstand fell, so would Dryfe itself.

In a silent office within the Imperstand, there was a single woman sitting with her eyes closed.

Her name was Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe. Publicly, she was the sister of the imperator as well as Dryfe's strongest martial artist—The Ram.

In reality, *she* was the imperator, as well as the imperium's greatest engineer—King of Machines—and even held the title of Imperator Machina.

She was the bearer of multiple lives as well as her many titles.

There were two special things about her that made her capable of this.

First, it was her own talents as a "High-End."

Most of those who were called by this term were the rare individuals who stood out among their kind for the natural talents that had manifested in them. High-End Dragons were a major example, although there were cases when the title was given to created monsters like undead.

However, job holders—tians—that were considered High-Ends only came about once every several centuries, and perhaps it was this rarity that made them stand out among their kind far more than the High-Ends of monster species.

Master avatars had an affinity for all jobs, but tian High-Ends often possessed talents so far outside the norm that it dwarfed even that advantage. In addition to that, these High-Ends were gifted with vast amounts of information about the world.

Claudiah was the High-End tian of this era, and that was why she could be both The Ram and King of Machines, bearing Superior Jobs both martial and technological.

Right now, this paragon of unspeakable talent was sitting on a chair in a lightless office, eyes closed as if sleeping, immobile and silent as the dead.

This was a kind of contemplation or meditation—but despite appearances, she wasn't doing it alone.

Within her, a discussion raged between two people.

"The limit has almost been reached," one said. "I wonder if Altimia will agree to our suggestion."

"It will be optimal if she does—for us, and for her."

The people talking were both Claudiah, but the personality—the *program*—was different.

This was the second special thing that made her what she was—the ability to shape her personality.

Ever since Claudiah was young, she had possessed the talent to create new personalities that were better suited for specific goals. It wasn't clear if this ability came from her nature as a High-End or if it was merely a talent she happened to have, but she'd used it to create several personalities.

The first of them was Reinhard. It was the oldest personality, as well as her base. With just a few modifications, this personality had become fit to be both a politician and an engineer. He was a brother for Claudiah, the holder of the job King of Machines, and the imperator who wished to save Dryfe and make it thrive.

The second one was Claudiah herself. Born through modification of her inner self following her meeting with the First Princess of Altar, Altimia, this served as her current main personality.

Claudiah was Dryfe's strongest martial artist—a combatant of unbelievable skill. She was a sister, the holder of the job The Ram, and Altimia's friend.

There was a third one, but it could barely even qualify as a full personality. It was a shapeless thing that was more like an aggregate of the information the first two had acquired as a High-End.

This proto-personality provided directives that had to be fulfilled for the sake of the world—one of which was the defeat of The Evil. It was more of a *duty* than a person, but it was certainly not something Claudiah could ignore.

Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe’s mental activities were a discussion between these three. This was true even when deciding what actions to take against Altar.

Reinhard the imperator. Claudiah the friend. All the information available to both of them as a High-End. They would each gauge their goals, and Reinhard, specialized in strategy, would craft a plan to achieve them.

This was why their operations were primarily focused on ensuring that Dryfe thrived, but the will of the other two was never completely ignored. That meant their actions oftentimes ended up being *less optimal than they could be*.

If they truly wanted to do what was best as an imperator, they would have either shown Altar less mercy or been more considerate of Altimia. However, as her friend, Claudiah would make some actions slightly more gentle than they had to be, while the information provided by the High-End sometimes pushed for being truly merciless toward the kingdom that most likely harbored The Evil.

This was a conflict that existed because Claudiah was who she was, and cutting off any part of her would make her stop being *her*.

Without Reinhard, the dying Imperium would be unable to survive—and without Claudiah, she would have no reason to live on as a person. And if she was to ignore the directive provided to her by her instincts, the world would fall apart and end.

That was why they had no choice but to proceed while somehow appeasing all three, no matter what failures it led to.

“If she refuses the War Game I suggested—Tri-Flags—that would mean our only option is a standard War—a nonconsensual, indiscriminate conflict that would last until one side was eradicated,” Reinhard said. “I’m certain she already knows well that that is the worst-case scenario.”

“That’s true.”

The postwar acts of Dryfe-sponsored terrorism in Gideon, Quartierlatin, and Altea, the warlike conflict that had broken out between Caldina and Granvaloa... Altimia must have reached one particular conclusion based on these things. That conclusion could only be that Masters who still had available save points posed an immense danger.

Masters who came back from death in just three days were, in a way, suicide bombers that never truly died. If they were *Superiors*, sending them to battle every time they came back was akin to dropping a nuclear bomb on the enemy country every three days.

Becoming aware of this reality would make it clear that traditional War was an awful idea. It would be a painful conflict of attrition where both sides would gradually lose everything except their Masters.

The most logical solution to this problem was the War Game that Reinhard had proposed—a winner-takes-all War that involved only their inexhaustible Masters. At the very least, this option would prevent both countries from losing their people or resources. If Altar won, Dryfe could do nothing to resist as the kingdom took whatever they wanted. If Dryfe won, they'd acquire vast food resources and bolster their Master count enough to stand against Caldina and other nations—not to mention that they would gain the opportunity to take action against the most pressing issue of all. They would even be able to make the kingdom accept conditions more taxing than the ones they'd tried to push for during the peace talks.

"If we win under these rules, all of our desires will be fulfilled," Reinhard said. "The imperium would be out of its predicament, Altimia would still be alive, and we will be able to search Altar for The Evil and do away with it."

"This would be far easier if it were just the first two."

Indeed—it was because of The Evil—the reset device left behind by the *Infinite* Jobs—that Claudiah's and Reinhard's goals had become so immensely difficult to accomplish.

Because it automatically grew as it absorbed the Resources of the dead, The Evil would no doubt awaken if ignored. It was like a time bomb whose explosive power constantly grew as its timer ticked down.

That was why Reinhard had decided that it had to be eliminated as soon as possible, even if it meant acting in haste. After all, the info they had as a High-End had already told them that The Evil had been born.

"That is also the main source of the conflict with the previous king. The country born through the destruction of The Evil turned out to be the least aware of the threat that it poses. It's as if someone purposely tampered with their information," said Reinhard.

Before the previous War, Reinhard had used a hotline to have a discussion with King Eldor. He'd requested that Altar provide Dryfe with food, while also speaking of The Evil and the GAME OVER that it would awaken.

However, the kingdom was oblivious to most of what Reinhard had said about The Evil. While they knew a great deal about Sacred King and the others who had defeated it, they were so thoroughly unaware of the true power and nature of The Evil that it seemed strange. Their knowledge didn't go far beyond the vague outline of "a powerful entity with many dependents that claimed the ruins of King of Kings' capital once he was gone."

This created a major difference in awareness between Eldor—who knew little—and Reinhard—who had immense knowledge as a High-End.

And when Reinhard had said that he would find The Evil and deal with it, the king had asked, "How far are you willing to go to kill The Evil—this creature of legend?"

Imagining the worst-case scenario, Reinhard had this to say in response: "Worst comes to worst, I would have to kill every inhabitant of at least one city—most likely Altea."

Needless to say, the king didn't agree to that, and he likely would not have even if he understood the threat as well as Reinhard did. The proposal was simply that outrageous.

However, Reinhard could not lie about this matter. The two countries had exchanged a covenant that prevented them both from using the hotline to speak falsehoods.

That was why Reinhard had been honest about how far he would go to solve this problem—and it was precisely because it wasn't a lie that Eldor decided to end the alliance between Dryfe and Altar. Perhaps he thought that Reinhard was a delusional madman driven by the imagined threat of The Evil, but there could have been any number of reasons behind that decision.

"If we can't find The Evil by searching for it, we have no choice but to eliminate the entire area where we believe it to be," Claudiah said. "The tians of modern times cannot win against The Evil of this generation."

Even the previous The Evil had required the combined power of the strongest tians from the western side of the continent. The overall power of tians had only dropped since, and many Superior Jobs had since been claimed by Masters. Claudiah was a High-End, yes, but this enemy was too great even for her.

The Evil grew stronger with every generation, and this one would no doubt be the strongest ever seen.

"Perhaps King of Kings might have put up a direct fight against it." While this wasn't a *Special* Superior Job, it was a Superior Job with extremely strict conditions—but the fact that Reinhard would bring up this one-of-a-kind tian powerhouse made it clear just how desperate the situation was.

"With her final contact, Zeta confirmed to have seen something that looked like The Evil within the capital. In a way, this may be a worst-case scenario, but it should lead to a better result than the one promised by the GAME OVER."

What Reinhard wanted to learn by attacking Altea was The Evil's location. The Evil automatically retaliated against attacks, so he expected to find it by committing an act of terror in the capital—its most likely location.

Of course, initiating combat around The Evil came with the risk of increasing its level and maybe causing it to unlock some skills. But if it was still in its early stages, knowing its location would be enough for Reinhard to find a way to counter it.

"But we haven't heard from Zeta since then," Reinhard pointed out.

"Indeed. We haven't received information from her, and it's unclear how the preparations for plan C went. But if we have confirmation for that, we will be able to be a bit more forceful about initiating Tri-Flags."

None of Claudiah's facets had heard from Zeta—the one who'd led the assault on Altea—ever since they talked after the battle during the peace talks, and she thought that perhaps Zeta might have gotten the death penalty and been sent to the gaol. When she'd had Behemot check the internet on the other side, however, she hadn't found anything that suggested that. The Masters posting guides and other information about the gaol mentioned that a sudden virus had spread and given everyone there the death penalty, and that the café owned by a *Superior* had gone on break, but there was nothing about Zeta.

Where she was and what she was doing were completely unknown. Until that was clear, Claudiah had to think about how to proceed with the Tri-Flags negotiations. And while that was in limbo, Dryfe had invited two more *Superiors* to join them, while Altar was trying to grow stronger through their Tournaments.

It was worth noting, though, that Behemot was bound by a contract with Tsukuyo Fuso where she'd received healing in exchange for promising not to fight for a month after the peace talks had ended.

"As long as we don't know what the others are planning, we can't remain inactive for long." As mentioned before, the biggest reason Claudiah wasn't able to take the most optimal course of action was because her three goals conflicted in one way or another. However, the problem extended far beyond Claudiah Reinhard Dryfe's inner world.

She made her moves according to what she saw on the board. However, the board was now covered in Masters—people who were more or less unbound, yet had immense power that made them practically walking bombs.

Among them, there was the piece known as "Ray Starling," who might break her—and Dryfe's—plans without even being aware that he was playing on a game board at all.

These pieces that Claudiah could not account for were nothing but nuisances in her eyes.

And of course, there were others who looked down at this same board and played just as she did, oftentimes getting in her way.

They all watched the board from a different position than Claudiah, making their own moves.

The "player" in the kingdom of Altar had always been the Arch Sage—or to be more precise, the ones who had roots in the long-gone pre-ancient civilization. Driven by vengeance, their goal was to eliminate the current custodians, and they showed little care about the damage they would bring upon this era.

The previous Arch Sage had died in a battle against Claudiah's friend, Behemot, but he had already been replaced by his successor. Arch Sage Flagman had always passed down his will and knowledge to the most promising of his disciples, and the Arch Sages had long been accompanied by entities that supported them—Crystal Tuners. They were no doubt scattered here and there, doing various covert operations that would further their goals.

The second player was the custodians that the Arch Sage was trying to defeat.

It wasn't clear how much they knew or what their goals were. Not even a High-End like Claudiah had any information about these mysterious outsiders.

The information she'd been granted contained nothing about Masters either.

Because of this, she knew that these custodians were entities from a different game that had joined after the current one began.

Because of this, she knew that they were alien beings who could do nothing against The Evil.

Because of this, she didn't know *what* their limits were—or what would set them off.

She didn't know their rules, and it wasn't clear to her what would drive them to kill someone.

It was because of this that after the battle at the peace talks was over, Claudiah couldn't tell Altimia the details of what she knew. At the very least, their actions during The Era of the Peerless Three, as well as the many dangerous UBMs they'd dealt with in history, made it reasonable to assume their goal was to preserve the world.

But that had changed after Masters grew in number. The SUBMs that had appeared since, as well as their lack of action concerning Irregularities such as Corpse Stronghold, threw doubt on that position.

And then there was one more player with a hand upon the board—the final and perhaps the closest thing that Claudiah had to a true enemy.

"I'm especially curious about the actions of the witch. The many incidents in Caldina, the clash with Granvaloa... I do not believe for a moment that she didn't foresee that these things would put her country in jeopardy," Reinhard said.

The president of Caldina, the woman often called a "witch"—La Place Phantasma. Said to have the power to see the future, she was, in a way, a player in this game who was more mysterious than even the custodians. Looking at how things had played out so far, she was one of the reasons for Dryfe's current dire state, and she was now pushing it toward war. Additionally, she had many Masters under her command.

When all was considered, it seemed like she was planning to eventually take control of the entire world.

However, there was something that didn't add up.

If she wanted Caldina to thrive, there must've been better ways to go about it. The clash with Granvaloa was the thing that stood out the most in that regard—how did a country that prospered through trade benefit from taking part in such a conflict?

And for someone who seemed to possess supernatural foresight...she really seemed to be very hands off when it came to the incidents caused by the Treasurebeast Orbs that had spread throughout Caldina. Instead of stopping the incidents themselves, she'd let Sefirot take care of the mess *after* they'd already happened.

It almost seemed as though her goal was to *increase* casualties.

Claudiah's powerful brain had tried to find a reason for the president's strange behavior, but she didn't have enough information to arrive at a good answer.

"Perhaps she died and was replaced by someone else?" she suggested.

"Like how I replaced our late brother?" Officially, Reinhard was the imperator as Claudiah's twin brother, Reinhard Claudiah Dryfe. After the real Reinhard died in an act of terrorism when they were young, Claudiah's Reinhard personality had acted as a suitable replacement.

"Perhaps an unforeseen accident claimed her life, but she prepared a replacement to act as though she's alive and prevent the country from falling apart. That is not impossible, but..."

If that were true, then the witch's replacement was incompetent. One could say that it was the reverse of Dryfe's situation, where the real Reinhard had been an ordinary imperial child, while Claudiah was a High-End.

However, it was hard to imagine that someone who saw the future could die in a random accident. This made less sense the more Claudiah thought about it.

Letting out a breath, Reinhard—now the dominant personality—put an end to his considerations and returned to his duties.

He didn't have to process information or discuss anything to be busy—he had mountains of imperator work to attend to.

With a wave of his hand, a magic light lit up the dark room. He then looked over the documents on his table, giving his approval and signing them.

But then, his eyes stopped on one piece of paper.

“Right, the kingdom’s Tournaments are about to enter the final day.” The paper contained information from DIN, showing the results of day nine—everyone who’d made it past the preliminaries and how each battle had ended. “There’s something strange about this Tournament, though...”

“Oh yeah, one of the UBMs escaped,” Claudiah remarked. Claudiah and Behemot both had heard of what had happened on day six.

However, Reinhard shook his head.

“That’s not what I mean, Claudiah.” While they possessed the same knowledge, Claudiah and Reinhard had different perspectives and thought patterns. That was why one could notice things the other didn’t. “You’ll notice that something isn’t right if you look at each day’s winners, as well as those who made it past the preliminaries.”

“Hm...?” Reinhard laid the nine Tournament charts on the desk. The ones at the top were either top ranking Altarian Masters, or ones who had solved various problems on Altar’s behalf, so nothing stood out as unusual.

“Besides the fact that it’s mostly familiar names from Altar, I don’t see anythi... Ohh.”

Claudiah finally realized what wasn’t right with these results.

Having reached a common understanding, Reinhard whispered within his mind.

“Well...I wonder who made *this* move.”

◆

Thus continued the secret conflict between the players who treated the world as their game board.

Conspiracies, strategies, demonic plots, and divine plans... Something that no mere pawn could measure was taking place in Altar—specifically, Gideon.

But it had to be noted that although there might have been a few “players” who directed the world as they wished, they certainly weren’t the only ones with influence over it.

There were countless people moving across the world, and there were many who acted with *so little thought* that these “players” couldn’t begin to compare. Naturally, some of them were irregularities—uncertain variables—that stood outside their plotting...

...and yet still had the power to flip the board.

◇◆◇

City of Duels, Gideon

Following the end of The Tournaments day nine, the city was overcome by a festive mood.

Actually, it had been like this for the entire period of the event. Countless duel fans could be seen talking about their favorite matches, betting winners were squandering their newfound fortunes, and the losers were drowning their sadness in booze.

The winner of today's Tournament was a non-ranker—a man called Grimms, belonging to a group known as the Fairytale Squad. The other contestants were no joke, yet by some miracle this dark horse had won the day. Because of this, the betting sphere was far more lively than usual.

Even so, it was unlikely that the current mood would surpass how things would be tomorrow.

The next day was The Tournaments' final one, a big event with a big prize—the right to challenge a Mythical UBM

Those who'd already been revealed as participants were Bishmal the Raging Blaze and Catherine Kongou of the Four Underworlds.

And most importantly, there was the *Superior,* Gideon's king of duels—Over Gladiator Figaro.

There was no doubt that the spectators were in for a hell of a show on the next day. Because of this, there were many tourists and traders who were hurrying through the gates despite the late hour, rushing to make it to the final day.

"I'm here. I'm finally here!"

Among these new arrivals, there was a girl dressed somewhat strangely. She walked along the road linking Gideon to Legendaria, passing the south gate as she entered the city.

"It's so lively. And it's more developed than my hometown! That kind of annoys me!"

Her appearance was certainly eye-catching. She had light purple hair that reached down to her knees and spread voluminously across her shoulders. On her head, rising from between all this hair, were a pair of goat horns. A thin *tail* extended from her lower back, and her eyes were as golden as the moon hanging in the night sky.

Her appearance was more or less in line with a typical fictional devil girl.

"It's festival season here too!" she said. "It looks so fun! I'm right on time!" Smiling broadly, the girl walked along the pavement. Despite it being night, she held a *parasol* that she poked into the stone, using it like a walking stick.

Strangely enough, she didn't stand out from the crowd as much as she could have. Though her appearance wasn't normal, it wasn't out of the question for someone from Legendaria. Especially for a Legendarian with a crest on her left hand—a Master.

Since Gideon was a colorful city full of many races and Masters, she blended in it as though she had always been part of it.

"Eh heh heh. Where to start? What to do? I've never been to Gideon before. It's so exciting! I'd love to see all the kinds of duels you can't get in Legendaria, and I'd love to surprise *brother dearest* with a sudden visit. Oh, I also wanna try that popcorn I heard about."

Like a teenager excited to have arrived at a popular tourist spot, she was the very picture of joy.

Such sentiments were also commonplace in this city. It didn't make her seem unusual and blended into the excited crowd without issue.

"Oh, but first of all, before all that..."

But if there was someone who *did* look closer...if there was someone who could see her stats, currently hidden by her equipment, she wouldn't be counted as one of the masses for long.

What was she, then?

The answer to that lay in the *small crown*, sitting proudly on top of her head.

One of her colleagues, so to speak—*Overlord Acedia ZZZ*—had once described her like so: she was...

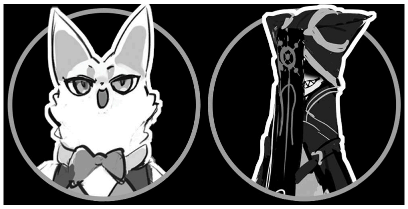
"Where's the guy who beat my brother? The one my dear King of Light is so infatuated with? Where's *Ray Starling*?"

...the *most "Overlord-ish" among them*.

Thus, from the depths of Legendaria, came the second Overlord.

To Be Continued

Afterword



Cat: “WE ARE SO SORRY WE ANNOUNCED THIS VOLUME FOR SUMMER, YET RELEASED IT IN AUTUMN!”

Xun: “I’m Xun, shOrt for Xunyu. StArtin’ off with thE apology, huh?”

Cat: “The announcement has been off for four volumes in a row nowww... Oh, and I’m the Cat, Cheshire.”

Xun: “Well, the maximUm frequEncy of releases beforE was six months, yet it endEd up bein’ sevEn this time, sO...”

Cat: “This may sound like an excuse, but the author has yet to miss a single deadline...”

Xun: “There’s lOts of people involved in gEttin’ these books out, so not everythin’ wOrks out all the time, y’know?”

Cat: “Yeah...and that’s why WE’LL MAKE THE NEXT ANNOUNCEMENT EVEN LESS SPECIFIC!”

Xun: “Bro, that’s nOt it at all.”

Cat: “This is the only way the author can prevent any further misses with the limited power he has!”

Xun: “ReallY...?”

Cat: “Anyway, time for the author’s own words!”

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am Sakon Kaidou.

Volume 21 is closer to a collection of short stories, which is something we haven’t had in a while—volume 10 was the last one like this.

This time I ended up adding various scenes and tried to make them more connected. A good example of this is how AT’s baby steps in original magic are used as groundwork for the later introduction of Candy’s impressive and powerful False God Imitation. And that is far from the only Candy-related thing that you can find here that is not in the WN.

Now, as far as writing goes, it was mentioned above that I haven't missed a single deadline, and that is the truth. However, it should be noted that I'm pushed to the limit fairly often—I'm writing this very afterword on the final day before the deadline.

This is a result of the volume creation process. The problem is that I can't know how many pages I have for the afterword before the edits, illustrations, next volume announcements, and advertisements for other works are in place and the amount of pages they will take up has been nailed down. The afterword always comes after everything else and has the tightest deadline. It's quite scary, if you ask me.

Now, as for the reason I'd write about that topic... It's because I was told I have four pages to work with, yet all I can really write here is an apology and an announcement. Yes, I'm simply dragging this out.

Anyway, this volume 21 came out at the exact same time as volume 12 of the manga. That shows the end of the long battle against Franklin, drawn with Kami Imai's immense skill, so please do pick it up and have a look. Personally, I love just how obvious it is that Baldr can transform, as well as the zany background Masters that really stick out like nothing else.

Speaking of the manga, the deadline for the short story about Lobohta's adventures that would come with the new volume is the end of September, and I intend to work on it right after this. Do go and see if I made it in time.

Next, I have an announcement about the next volume of the LN.

I imagine that the character who made her debut at the end, complete with an illustration, was quite a surprise for both readers of the LN as well as readers of the WN.

Volume 22 will focus on two things—the final day of The Tournaments and Overlord Invidia. There was no sign or trace of her at this point in the WN, but here she is now.

The events involving her are just like volume 17, in that they were both things I'd plotted out and planned to write in Crow Record if it happened to continue. Sadly, that did not work out, but I am glad to have a chance to bring it to life here in the LN. As you could see in the last illustration, Taiki quickly whipped up a wonderful character design for her, which I found very motivating.

Having to add vast amounts of text to the story makes my job noticeably more difficult, but I will do what I can to satisfy all those of you reading, as well as to not miss any of my deadlines.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram.*

“When I’m done writing the draft, I’m gonna make an Embryo crest decal in *Armored Core VI...*”

Xun: “...Did oUr guy just put up a deAth flag?”
Cat: “Looks like iiit... Anyway, that’s it for the afterword. That means it’s time for the announcement!”
Xun: “I feEl like we should just stOp doin’ them. You can’t gEt the date wrong if you don’t annOunce it.”
Cat: “No! That’s the pessimist’s way of dealing with it! We won’t miss the release period this time! VOLUME 22 IS SET TO COME OUT IN THE FIRST HALF OF 2024!”
Xun: “All that mOtivation, and you shOt out the vaguest announcemEnt ever.”
Cat: “That should work as insurance, but we’ll try to get it out in March!”

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 21
by Sakon Kaidou

Translated by Andrew Hodgson
Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2024

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Infinite Dendrogram

22. When Stars Align

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22. When Stars Align

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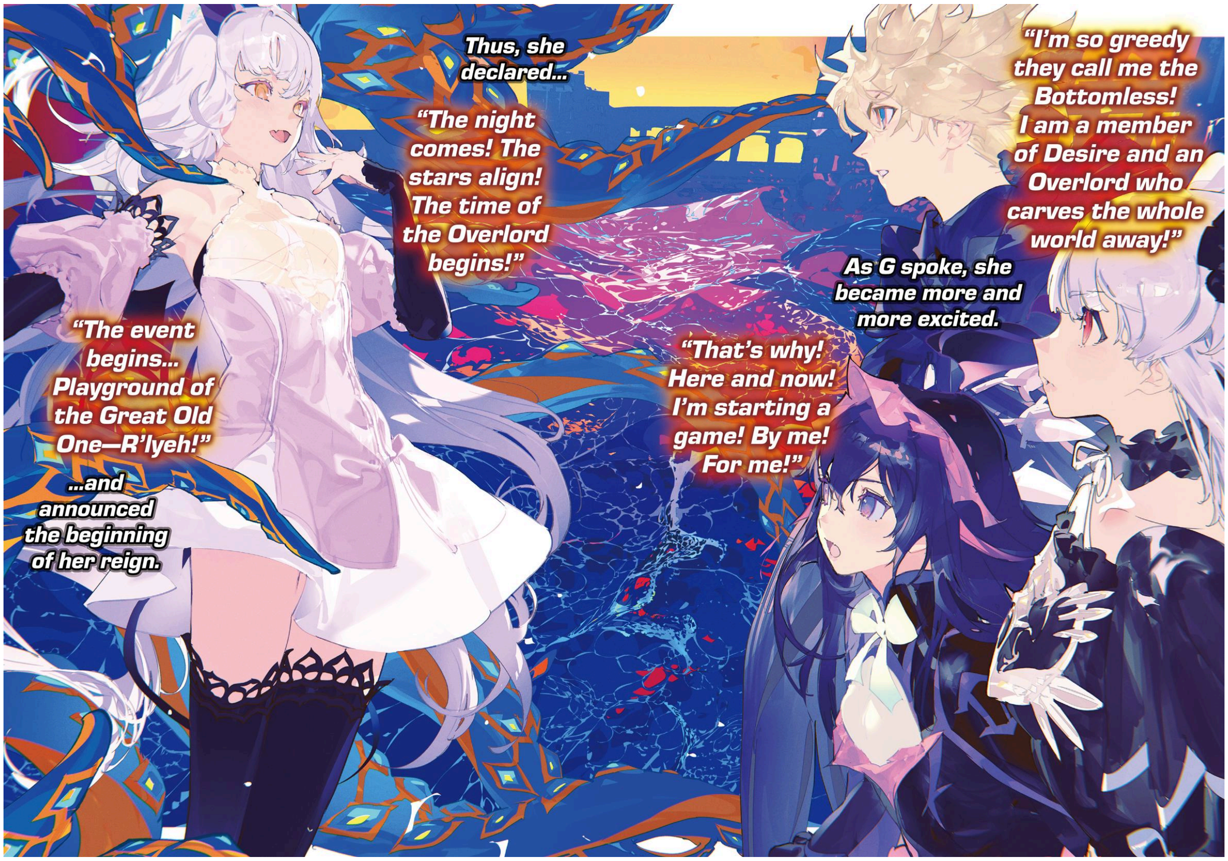
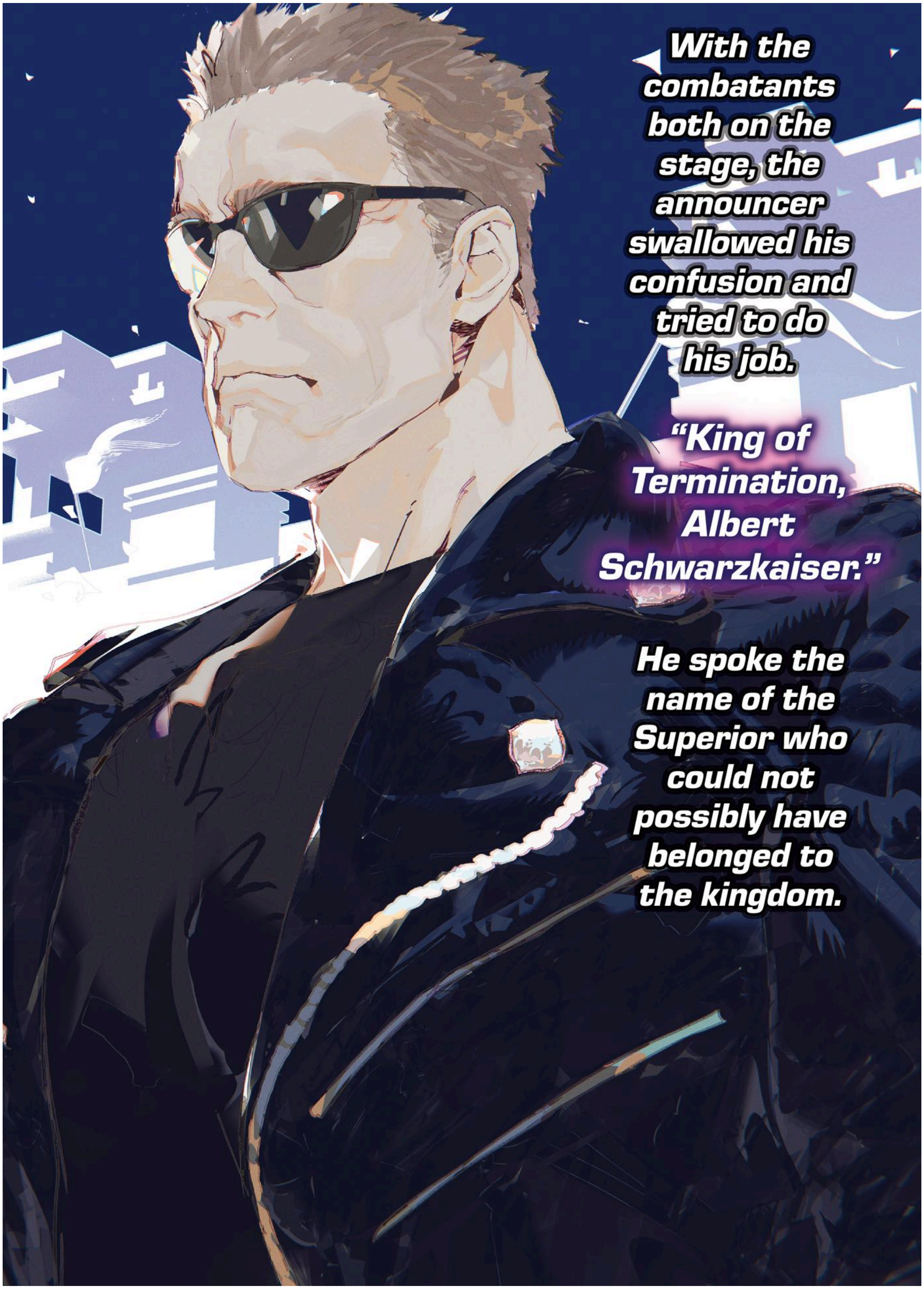

Thus, she declared...
"The night comes! The stars align! The time of the Overlord begins!"
"The event begins... Playground of the Great Old One—R'lyeh!"
...and announced the beginning of her reign.
"I'm so greedy they call me the Bottomless! I am a member of Desire and an Overlord who carves the whole world away!"
As G spoke, she became more and more excited.
"That's why! Here and now! I'm starting a game! By me! For me!"



With the combatants both on the stage, the announcer swallowed his confusion and tried to do his job.

"King of Termination, Albert Schwarzkaiser."

He spoke the name of the Superior who could not possibly have belonged to the kingdom.

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Prologue: Star Guidance

April, The Channel of a Certain Streamer

At first glance, this room might've looked like any other charming, feminine room.

However, this one stood out for one reason: It was not real. Instead, it was modeled using CGI.

The room was currently empty, and the only thing moving was the chat box on one side, containing hundreds—thousands—of comments, silently flowing by.

But when the CGI clock in the room hit 9:00...

"All eyes on G! Welcome to my channel!" Flashy effects flooded the space as a 3D model of a girl appeared right in the middle of it.

The devil girl, complete with curved horns and a tail, struck her usual pose and greeted her many viewers on the other side of the screen.

```
I am LOOKING
GEEEEEE
G is so cute
```

Many similar comments appeared one after another as the channel's regular intro routine played out.

"Hello! We meet again! Maybe it's been a while...or perhaps you're new here? In that case, I'm G, the *Superior* streamer and *Dendro* content creator!" Punctuating her words with all kinds of gestures, the devil girl greeted her audience.

Being CGI didn't stop the avatar from being expressive. Even her face was full of life.

"Today we've got our weekly chat stream! I'm gonna reply to everyone and answer all the questions I can! Most of them are about *Dendro*, though! Like always!" G held out a mailbox-like object and looked over the questions that she’d received as more comments flowed by.

No surprise there.
Yeah, you’re the strongest content creator, and the most open in your group
Maybe a little *too* open
Give me back the items I dropped when you PK’d me!
Getting PK’d is a skill issue. Git gud

“All right, first question: ‘Why are you and US committing crimes in Legendaria? You know you’re being a real pain, right?’ True!” G said with a nod. Though the question seemed to have come from a hater, she didn’t seem the least bit bothered.

‘True’? Lmao
Well, you cause a lot of problems...but it’s for *them,* so...
The gap between Legendaria’s pro-regime and anti-regime factions is deeeeep
Guess it’s all about the values

“Well, yeah,” said G. “I, my clan, and Desire all have our problems with Legendaria! They’re kinda annoying—I like Titania, though! I’d love to meet her again!”

Chat was quick to respond:

They’re kinda annoying *steals their land*
They’re kinda annoying *kills all their Master bodyguards*
They’re kinda annoying *takes all their tribe leader’s slaves*
You don’t go that far cuz you’re ‘kinda annoyed’...
The band battle against Titania was awesome! I’ll be waiting for the rematch!

“Next question! ‘Why do you look the same in *Dendro* as you do in your streams?’ I get this one every now and then, but it’s just because when I was creating my character, I went and asked if I could look the same as the G avatar I use for my channel. It was pretty funny that the control AI kitty knew about me, though.”

The chat exploded.

Lul
You’re a vtuber, where’s your kayfabe?
Don’t say ‘avatar.’

“If any of you haven’t started *Dendro* yet and dunno what appearance you’d pick, just go ahead and ask the control AI. That should make things easy. Oh, but I’m the only one who can look like this! If you use my appearance for anything lewd, I’ll sink you for ten thousand years!”

She literally would.
You probably wouldn’t surface until the stars align...
I never thought of that
If only I’d thought of that sooner... I already made my avatar.
Well, it’s not like anyone can copy the second form...

The chat flowed on—half joking, half serious.

Eventually, it was time to end the stream...

“That’s about it for tonight! It’s time to go! But before that, I have a very special announcement!” said G, causing the chat to speed up with anticipation. “I’m making a new video! I haven’t even recorded it yet, but I’ll be fighting a very special guest!”

Oh, a fight vid?
If it didn’t happen yet, maybe we can find the filming location?

A ‘very special guest’? Girl, you just fought Titania. Who can match that?

“Whether I win or lose, it’ll be a premiere—so get ready to watch, like, and donate!”

Yyyep, that’s our Bottomless!
I’m new here. Is she always this obsessed with money?
She doesn’t even try to sugarcoat it! We love that, though!
G is so cute

“Anyway, buh-byeee! See yaaa! Goodniiight!”

Goodniiight!
Goodnight
I still wonder who the big guest is...

[Today’s stream is over! Come see me again!]

◆◆◆

April, A Call Between Brother and Sister

“Hey! Hey! Hey! I’m actually thinking of going on a trip! Taking off on a journey!”

“Well, Golden Week is almost over, isn’t it?”

“No no no! I deny and defy that! I mean a trip in *Dendro*!”

“A little expedition with your clan, then? Who are you picking a fight with this time? Speaking of that, your recent ‘I Broke Into Titania’s Concert and Challenged Her to a Band Battle’ was a good one.”

“The view count is going crazy! I got lots of donations during the premiere too!”

“That’s good to hear. Though, I must say I’m surprised Titania accepted your challenge. I wouldn’t think the leader of a whole country would do something like that.”

"I lost and died, but I'll win next time! I'll recruit more musicians into my clan and challenge her again!"

"That's one of the good things about you. You graciously accept defeat, but are strong-willed enough to try again."

"Oh yeah! Since that video got me so much money, I'm thinking of giving Legendaria a cut by sharing some of my in-game wealth with them. Where do you think I should donate?"

"That's not something you'd expect to hear from someone who belongs to an anti-Legendaria criminal alliance. Anyway, I guess you could donate through the YLNT Club? They'd use every single lir for children's welfare."

"...It's weird how those absolute perverts are so gentle and sincere when it comes to children."

"I imagine Legendaria thinks something similar about your clan."

"We give fun times to our viewers! Good stories to the innocent! Annoyances to the authorities! And we take everything from the baddies who are above the law! We're the Underground Sanctuary, and that's how we operate! We're basically righteous bandits!"

"Nezumi Kozo and Robin Hood would probably rush in and punch you for saying that... You take from innocent Masters too, don't you?"

"Well, yeah! It's PK! Wait, did we go off on a tangent? Did our talk get derailed?"

"It did. I think you said something about a trip?"

"Right! The trip! It's not a clan event! I'm going solo! By myself!"

"Oh?"

"The lolicon and the card gamer aren't in Legendaria at the moment. We're also looking for the next person whose stuff I can take with my ult, so I got nothing to do right now."

"Mm-hmm."

"And ZZZ used our alliance connections to send us a request, so everyone in the clan is busy fulfilling that now!"

"Overlord Acedia? What did he want?"

"He said he needs materials for his thralls, and that he's paying 1.5 times the market price, so everyone just went and started digging away at the mountain we got from the greedy Dvergars! They're all mining right now."

"Short on materials?"

“He said something about getting attacked by three *Superiors* and an evil-looking prince on a silver steed.”

“That description sounds really familiar.”

“He lost a lot of thralls he used to defend his territory, so he needs some help making them again. But you won’t see *me* gathering materials for him! I’m not a miner!”

“Well, you’re not really that type of person, I guess.”

“Yes! You’re right! So I got nothing to do right now!”

“I see. And that’s why you’re going on a solo trip?”

“Yes! Exactly! And that’s why, well... I have a question for you.”

“Yes?”

“This has nothing to do with the trip, but... Where are you right now?”

“Hm...”

“Hello?”

“Oh. Sorry. I’m in Gideon for the time being. There’s that tournament, and a few interesting figures I can use for reference.”

“I see! So that’s how it is! Good to know! That’s perfect!”

“What do you mean, perfect?”

“N-Nothing! Don’t mind that! Anyway, bye!”

And just like that, the call abruptly ended.

“...If she thinks that’s enough to fool anyone, my sister really is a terrible liar,” the man said with a sigh. He was an author who frequented the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* as King of Light, F—but right now, he was just a brother shocked at his sister’s inability to hide her true intentions.

She was obviously planning to pay him a surprise visit—she’d done this in real life too.

“Though...she said ‘perfect’...”

That implied that she had a goal besides visiting F.

Knowing her well, he thought about what his sister would do in Gideon and quickly found his answer.

“Mm-hmm... Well, that will be interesting,” the author said, speaking from an observer’s point of view as he imagined the events that *would* soon unfold.

Chapter 1: The Fallen Angel and the Arch Enemy

Ninth Day of The Tournaments, Gideon, City of Duels

“Nnnh...”

On this day, the Fallen Knight, Juliet—the fourth in Altar’s duel rankings—was faced with an unusual problem.

“There is no sanctuary where I might hone the darkness I wield... (I can’t find an arena to rent...)”

Gideon had a whole thirteen arenas, and they were the very reason the city received its title. However, they weren’t all being used for duels and events all the time. There would always be some that remained unused, and the local duelists would rent them for sparring matches or to test their new gear or skills.

But right now, there were The Tournaments that rewarded the winners with Orbs containing sealed UBMs. Many other powerful Masters had gathered from all over to fight for them and prepare for the fights. With tomorrow being the final day, their numbers were especially high, and because of that, not a single arena was left unreserved.

“My mortal frame has yet to acclimate to my newfound power... (And I still haven’t figured out the MVP rewards yet...)” Juliet had acquired two MVP rewards recently: one from a gacha ticket she’d won during the Anniversary and one from the UBM she’d slain after winning the Tournament she’d participated in. They had no doubt made her more powerful, but she had yet to familiarize herself with their specifics.

The MVP reward she’d gotten from the UBM had been generated with her previous reward in mind. They now formed something of a pair, best used together.

To put it another way: They were awfully unwieldy if used separately. They were, in fact, double-edged swords that would kill *her* if misused.

Before she could employ them in actual battle, she had to thoroughly test them within the barrier of an arena, where death wasn't an issue.

Juliet let out a sigh as she spotted a familiar face.

"Oh. Julie! Any luck on your end?" said Chelsea—Juliet's friend and rival—as she approached. "Goin' by your face, I'm guessing not, huh?"

"Yeah... You too?"

"Nothin' on the west, no. With a Mythical reward on the line, they're all really serious about tomorrow's Tourney."

They had split up to the east and west sides of the city to look for any open arenas, but everything was fully booked everywhere.

They usually had Max and Shion with them too, but they weren't in the city right now.

Max was out making money. There was an auction being held on the same day as the final Tournament, and among the items being sold was one of Tenchi's Hundred Famed Blades—the exact one she wanted most—so she was out hunting monsters to gather as much wealth as she could before it began.

Shion was currently offline because of a cold. She had come online yesterday and had looked just fine on the *Dendro* side, but her servants had hastily chased her over there and brought her back.

Juliet had told her to take care of herself, genuinely concerned, while Chelsea had privately thought something rude—along the lines of "So even idiots catch colds, huh?"

"Hrm... Maybe some of our friends have a reservation? We could join them instead..." Chelsea suggested.

"The ones who are participating in the final day are Figaro and Bishmal, right?"

"Yeah. But Figaro probably didn't rent one, while Bishmal said he wanted to 'recharge his batteries' and went to a maid café instead."

Chelsea's words made Juliet tilt her head. "Bishmal is one thing, but...Figaro didn't rent one?"

"I mean, Figaro is a member of Death Period. Their entire base is a—Oh."

Chelsea stopped mid-sentence. She was looking at something ahead, causing Juliet to do the same.

There, she saw...

"Ray?"

...their friend, Ray Starling.

◇◇◇

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

Today was the ninth day of The Tournaments, but instead of watching it, I was just looking around the bazaar.

The clan member participating today was Kasumi, but she’d been eliminated in the preliminaries and I didn’t know any of the people who made it through, so I just didn’t feel like watching it.

Kasumi wasn’t the type to fight solo, so her loss wasn’t really unexpected, and we’d already held a little consolation party for her during lunch.

I really didn’t know who to bet on this time either, so I just went with a name that caught my eye—someone called “Grimms.” The sum I put down was smaller than any of my previous bets, but the multiplier was only behind Rook’s, so I’d still make some good money if he won.

Also, I currently didn’t have Nemesis by my side.

Well, actually, I did—but she wasn’t coming out of the crest on my left hand. She’d been meditating like this a lot more ever since our battle against that Overlord.

At first, I thought this was a sign that she was evolving, like what had happened in Torne. It didn’t seem to be a one-day deal this time, but there was no mistaking it: Having already evolved three times, she herself could now sense that her next evolution was drawing close.

There was something else she’d said about it too.

“Ray. This is conjecture, but...my next evolution will likely grant me the you-know-what.”

“Huh?”

“My *ultimate skill*.”

Ultimate skills. Bearing the Embryo’s own name, they were the greatest, most powerful abilities in any Embryo’s arsenal, and the supreme manifestations of their core traits.

This meant that her next evolution—her fifth form—would set in stone her nature as an Embryo.

Nemesis was currently reflecting on herself in preparation for that, and instead of disturbing her, I decided to just walk around alone.

“Hm?”

But then I noticed a couple of familiar faces. There was Juliet, looking somewhat down, with Chelsea right by her side. They’d noticed me too.

“What’s up, you two?” I asked as I approached them.

“The favors I carry, newly bestowed... They cannot yet be awakened,” said Juliet.

“I wanna test my new MVP rewards, but no arenas are open,” huh? I thought. *I get it.*

This reminded me that she’d been the one who won the Tournament on the fourth day, as well as beat the UBM to take the MVP reward afterward.

“Because of the Tourney, the arenas are bein’ rented by people who don’t usually use them,” said Chelsea.

“I see...” That made sense—duelists weren’t the only people participating in The Tournaments, and with the arenas being the perfect place to practice one-on-one fights, there were probably hundreds of people trying to rent them.

“And it’s the final day tomorrow,” Chelsea continued. “Not a single arena is open.” With the prize being a Mythical MVP reward, it was no wonder the participants were taking this seriously.

But because of that, these two hadn’t been able to do any training...

“Why not use our place, then?” I asked.

“Huh?”

My clan’s base was the Eighth Arena, and it had the same barrier that all the others did.

I’d even used it myself to test the axe that had blown away my arm.

“Can we?”

“Sure. It’s not like it costs us anything. Someone else might be using it, but the barrier can be separated just like in the other arenas, so won’t be a problem.”

If there was someone using it now, it’d probably be Figaro. He was participating in tomorrow’s Tournament. There was probably enough space for everyone there.

“Thanks! Maaan, there’s nothin’ like a good friend!”

“And so, we descend upon the citadel of the Light- and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson... (We’re visiting Ray’s place...)”

“Hm? Juliet? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. She’s just cute like that.”

“I don’t really get it, but okay...” Well, Juliet was still a middle schooler in real life, so it was probably best not to pry.

Anyway, that’s how it was decided that I would let these duelists into our base.

“The Eighth Arena, huh? I’ve actually never been there,” said Chelsea, prompting a nod from Juliet.

“Really?” I asked. “You two are proper duelists, so I kinda assumed that you’d been to all of them.”

“The ranked battles all happen in the Central Arena, and there’s more convenient places for warm-ups and sparring,” Chelsea said. Well, looking back at it, whenever I joined them for sparring, we never did use the eighth.

“If we go to arenas besides that, it’s usually for their events, but...” Juliet added.

“Ohh...” Right. Since the eighth was in a bad location, it never attracted much of an audience and was operating at a net loss, so it probably wasn’t economically viable for them to do any big events.

That makes our base sound like some rural horse-racing track that was on the verge of shutting down, I thought.

“By the way, can you fill your arena with water?” Chelsea asked.

“I never tried, but I think you can.” Not every arena in Gideon had this feature, but some could be filled with water for aquatic fights, and I was pretty sure ours was among them.

“I’ll pay for the water... Actually, I’ll just provide it myself. Would you mind if I did that?”

“I’m pretty sure it would take up the whole arena, so if someone else is using it, you’ll have to ask them. If they’re fine with that, then I see no problem.”

“Thanks! That’ll be a big help! I’ve been on a losing streak lately, so I need to do some serious training!”

“That so? Speaking of, what day did you participate in?”

I hadn’t seen her name on any of the public rankings in The Tournaments, so I’d assumed she’d been unlucky and gotten a bad matchup during the preliminaries...

“...Day six. I got matched with Kashimiya in the prelims.”

"Ohhh..." *Yeah, that'd do it,* I thought. *Even the public battles ended in seconds that day.*

"The reward didn't attract much attention, and I'm pretty strong against lightning, so I thought I had a chance," Chelsea added. "Though, looking back at the whole escape thing, that UBM was probably too much for me."

The UBM released on day six had broken the barrier and flown off somewhere, escaping not just Kashimiya, but all the *Superiors* present—Shu included. Thankfully, it seemed like the UBM hadn't caused any incidents since.

Still, there had been a serious counterplan meeting about it, and both Shu and Figaro had both been called to participate as observers.

"Speaking of Kashimiya, I wonder when he'll challenge Figaro," said Chelsea.

"Oh, Figaro himself actually asked him about that," I said.

"What did Kashimiya say?"

"'I will challenge you when you can duel me with all your strength.'"

"You mean...?"

"The sharpest fang in the Lion King's maw? (Figaro's ult?)"

Chelsea and Juliet instantly understood what Kashimiya had been referring to.

Indeed—while Figaro was the strongest duelist in the kingdom and possessed incredible power, he was actually handicapping himself by *never using his Embryo's ultimate skill*.

Figaro had sworn that he'd never use his ultimate skill in a duel until he got another chance to face his close friend and rival, who'd disappeared following some event in the past. Figaro was so serious about this oath that he hadn't even used his ult against Xunyu during the Clash of the Superiors.

"'Tis not that I do not grasp the desires of the great and powerful, but time flows ever onward toward its ultimate end... (I understand wanting to fight someone when they're at their strongest... But I wonder when he'll get to do that.)"

"Well, for Kashimiya, it's less about his duel ranking and more about overcoming a great obstacle," said Chelsea. "He just wants to fight someone powerful—becoming duel champion is kind of a bonus."

Looking back, that was more or less how he'd been with Tom. Even though it was a bad matchup for him, Kashimiya had challenged Tom again and again, until he eventually emerged victorious with the techniques he'd honed throughout it all. He improved himself by overcoming those who were strong—these great obstacles.

For Kashimiya, duels weren't the goal, but just a means to that end, and that was why he didn't care about staying second in the rankings.

He would remain there until the day he could fight Figaro at his strongest.

"But if that's how it is, I say let him keep waiting," said Chelsea. "I'll just beat Julie, Tom, and Kashimiya too, then challenge Figaro myself!"

"Our ambitions are equally matched—and yet, only one shall bear fruit. (I was thinking the same thing! I won't lose to you, though!)"

Those two really were duelists. I was looking forward to their fights as both a friend and as a spectator. If letting them use our arena would help them on their path, then that was all the more reason to do it.

And what of you, as the leader of Figaro's clan? Nemesis asked telepathically. She must've woken up at some point.

Knowing Figaro, he'd just be really happy they got stronger and gladly fight them both, no? I thought back at her.

That is true, came her reply.

As far as *Superiors* went, Figaro was relatively normal as a person, but when it came to combat power and fighting spirit, he might've been the craziest guy around. Who else would keep fighting after literally getting their lung ripped out?

Continuing to gossip, we soon arrived at our base. Thankfully, no one was using the stage, so they could have aquatic fights just like Chelsea had requested.

I actually joined them myself, and sparring with them made me realize that they'd grown stronger too—especially Juliet.

She'd actually died more times than me, though, so I felt like it'd be a while before she mastered her two new MVP rewards—especially the one she'd gotten using the gacha ticket.

Once we were done, I told them that they were free to use the arena for practice anytime.

But man, Juliet's MVP reward... I honestly would've loved to have gotten it myself, I thought. *The Carriage House of Legend I pulled from the gacha isn't exactly disappointing, but the thing Juliet got would've fit my fighting* *style so well.*

◇◇◇

Gideon, City of Duels

After a few hours of sparring in the Eighth Arena, Chelsea said she had some business to attend to and logged out.

Juliet was thinking of doing the same. While it was evening in Gideon right now, it was almost dawn in real life—and since it was a regular Tuesday, a middle schooler like her had classes to attend.

But in all honesty, her heavy sighs clearly showed that she wanted to stay logged in.

In *Dendro* time, tomorrow was the final day of The Tournaments. It was the climax of a major dueling event, and yet Juliet had to go to school. Just thinking about that before she'd logged in had made her so disheartened that her head had started to feel strangely heavy.

Thus, she was now walking through the city wearing a rather gloomy expression.

Logging out right away was an option—but knowing that she'd get less than two hours of sleep before her mother came to wake her up, Juliet wanted to enjoy the festivities a bit longer instead.

Additionally, though she'd been logged in for a while now, she didn't actually feel all that sleepy. She'd taken a nap between day eight and day nine. Converted to real time, it was only about an hour of sleep, but it had spared her from feeling drowsy.

Juliet was actually full of energy and a desire to do something.

It's right before the final day, so maybe they're doing something in the first district? she thought. *It's a bit far, though. I'll just fly there.*

She spread Hræsvelgr—her Embryo—wide and prepared to leap into the sky when...

"Hey! You there! You, with those photogenic black wings!"

...someone suddenly called out to her.

Juliet turned around in surprise to see an unfamiliar girl running up to her, eyes glittering.

"Is that cosplay? Or are they the real deal? Oh! They move! Can you fly? That's amazing!"

“Hm? Huh? What?” Juliet was completely taken aback by the mystery girl’s sudden approach. She didn’t even manage to speak in her usual manner, instead only letting out confused exclamations.

“There’s winged Masters in Legendaria too, but theirs don’t really work! Everything in character creation is just cosmetic! But your wings *move*! Are they some kind of magic item? Wait, Identification doesn’t show anything... It’s an Embryo!”

“I-It is...”

“Nice! *So* nice! Wings that can actually fly! A fallen angel! This would get so many views! Tons of likes! Hey! Would you join me for a photo shoot? I feel like we can take some great pictures together!”

“O-Okay... Huh?” Overwhelmed by the girl’s energy, Juliet found herself nodding.

Sh-She’s so pushy... Juliet thought. *I feel more pressured than I did with Max.*

In their first meeting, Max had challenged Juliet to a duel in the middle of the street—but in a way, this girl was more overwhelming. It was enough to knock the role-playing right out of her.

“Yay! That’s great! We’re like a devil and a fallen angel! This will look *great* together!”

“A devil...? Oh.” Juliet finally noticed the girl’s devilish horns and tail—though the horns were somewhat rounded, and combined with the hair color that matched her dress and crown, along with the closed parasol she carried, she looked more like...

“A cute devil girl...”

“Yeah! I know, right? Thanks! I’m proud of my avatar too!” Those words, along with the crest on her left hand—showing an image of what almost seemed to be an ancient underwater temple—were more than enough to confirm that she wasn’t a tian, but a Master.

While *Infinite Dendrogram’s* avatar creation let players assume all sorts of strange appearances, it was often difficult to balance the function and design of features humans didn’t have in reality. However, this devil girl pulled it off really well. The tail even seemed to move based on her emotions, however that worked.

“Oh! Right! Can I have your name? I wanna put ‘Me and Whoever’ as the title for the photo set!”

“Um... I’m Juliet.”

The fact that the devil girl had to ask her name made it clear that she was new to Gideon. Juliet was fourth in the duel rankings—the duelist who showed up in more matches than any others near the top. Nobody from the area who cared even slightly about duels would fail to recognize Juliet’s face or name.

Oh yeah, she did say something about Legendaria... Juliet thought.

"Juliet. Julie it is then! I hope we can be friends!" The devil girl grasped Juliet's hands and shook them up and down.

It was an awfully blatant expression of familiarity, but it obviously came from the heart.

"And, so... You are...?"

"Huh...? Oh. Right. Riiight..."

Juliet's question made the devil girl freeze mid-handshake. However, she quickly rebooted and gave Juliet a smile.

"I'm G! A streamer and content creator! Search for 'G Channel' and you'll find me!"

"Oh. A streamer..." Juliet mostly watched fashion and occult videos, so she didn't know much about streamers, but based on G's reaction to her lack of recognition, Juliet figured she must've been pretty famous.

"I-I'll have a look..."

"Please do! Check me out! Anyway, on to the photo shoot!" G said with a smile plastered across her face, making Juliet nod.

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"I saw a good photo spot! The moonlight really spices up the scene! Let's go there!" G said, pulling Juliet's hand.

The sight made them stand out, and some of those they passed by talked about them.

"Oh. Look at that devil girl. Pretty cute, huh?"

"Devil...? Which one do you mean?"

"C'mon. The one holding hands with the Black Crow, obviously."

"She doesn't seem all that devil-like to me." This made Juliet feel somewhat bashful, while G didn't seem to care.

But as they walked, the amount of people around them gradually dwindled.

"We're here! We've arrived!"

Eventually, they ended up inside some stone ruins—a property that had been destroyed during Franklin's act of terror. Unfortunately, its rebuilding plans had been delayed, if not completely lost in the legal process, because it didn't have any inhabitants or owners to begin with.

"I think devils and fallen angels are best paired with the scenery of destruction! The absolute end! Not scenes of everyday life, but the desolation left after it's over!"

"Our minds are as one... (I totally get it...)" G's assertion was something that really touched Juliet's teenage tastes.

They had chatted a bit on the way here, and though Juliet had found G a bit much at first, she eventually decided G was actually very easy to talk to despite her unique tone and overwhelming personality.

"Let's get ready now! I'll set everything up!" G said as she reached into her Inventory and took out various photography equipment. There were floating orbs and mirrors that shone to function as lighting, as well as crystal balls with wings that functioned as cameras—all of them Legendarian magic items.

Appropriately for a content creator, G seemed very serious about her setup.

"Let's get started, then. It's photo time! We'll do each of us individually first, then pair up for the rest!"

"O-Okay." And so, the photo shoot commenced, beginning with Juliet.

G left the poses and expressions up to Juliet at first, but then began telling her where and how to stand, and what faces to make.

Juliet checked the photos on the spot, and seeing them was quite surprising to her.

G's photography skills were just incredible—even more than one might expect out of a content creator. Juliet was into fashion and taking selfies, so she could easily tell that G's photos did a good job of highlighting her charm. Juliet was already Juri Kurosaki's ideal avatar, yet these photos seemed to somehow make her look even better.

"Pretty..." said Juliet, so overcome by emotion and excitement that she could only manage the most basic statements.

"Well, I gotta be good at it for my job. I gotta know how to captivate people. Not that I don't like the praise, though!"

"You made me look so gorgeous... Can I have these too?"

"Of course! I'll give them to you along with the pay!"

I'll definitely send them to the other side and put them in an album, Juliet decided.

"Oh. I forgot to ask... Would it be okay if I use my photos with you for video thumbnails or post them on social media? Would you be against that?"

"Not at all." Juliet was a high-ranking duelist, so there were already plenty of videos and photos of her duels. Agreeing to this wouldn't change a thing.

"Nice! Thanks a bunch!" G said with a bright smile.

The photo shoot continued, and they ended up taking dozens of pictures.

The ones where they posed together as a devil and a fallen angel were especially beautiful—breathtaking, even. The background shadows and lighting worked splendidly to create scenes that looked simply magical.

"Wow... I don't even feel like I'm looking at myself here..." said Juliet.

"Well, it's your avatar. It's important to make it look even better than it does normally," G replied as she sorted the photos. Some would be used in videos, some in streams, and some posted on social media. Her eyes as she did this were nothing if not serious.

"You content creator types are really amazing..."

"We're not all like this. There's a bunch of areas we can fall into. For example, the lip feti— I mean, someone I know gets viewers not through photography or recording skills, but just by showing interesting and funny occurrences. I don't have whatever weird predisposition makes that kind of thing happen to me on its own, so I set up my *events* myself and make some eye-catching screenshots and pictures to go with it."

"You're so good at this, though. You'd be a great photographer..."

"Oh, that's not happening. Not a chance. No way."

"Huh?" G's strong denial made Juliet's eyes go wide.

G, however, maintained a smile as she said, "I mean, the thing I wanna photograph the most is me. *I want people to look at me*. I wanna shine brighter than anything else in the world! That's not the usual outlook for a photographer, right?"

"Umm... That makes you sound more like...a princess?" That was the first word that came to Juliet's mind when she thought of "someone who shines brighter than anyone else in the world."

That might've been kind of a childish answer, though, Juliet said, regretting her choice of words when...

"AHA! Yeah! You might be right!" Apparently finding humor in Juliet's words, G let out a laugh. "You really don't know *me*, huh? So this is what it's like to leave Legendaria."

"Hm?"

"Ah ha ha! Don't worry about it. Thanks for helping me out today. Here's your pay," G said as she handed Juliet a sizable sum of money and the copies of the photos she'd made on the spot.

"Thanks..."

"Oh! Right! Can I add you as a friend? You know, to celebrate those great photos we just took?"

"Okay!" Juliet said with a nod. She was happy to have a new friend on top of all the wonderful pictures she'd received.

After adding each other to their friend lists, the pair were ready to part ways.

G seemed to have somewhere else to be, while it was about time for Juliet to log out and prepare to go to school.

"I'll go check out your videos, um... Miss G?"

"Just 'G' is fine. 'Miss G' sounds like the name of a rapper or something, so just 'G' is fine. Anyway, Julie, whether here or on stream, let's meet again sometime!"

"Okay!" Her heart lifted by the wonderful photos and her new friend, Juliet logged out.

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Fully satisfied, she—now Juri Kurosaki—opened her eyes.

"Hm...?" But the moment she logged out, she realized that something was off about her body.

She was obviously sleepy, but it was more than that. Her head was heavy, her breathing difficult, and her joints ached here and there.

"Ah-choo..." A charming sneeze escaped as she woke up.

She then looked at the large mirror in the room...

"...Huhhh?"

...and saw her face, all red.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth District

The Eighth District was chaotic even by Gideon's standards. It was home to many legally gray guilds and underground shops.

However, even this area had one place that even the lawless locals wouldn't dare approach.

It was Gideon's Eighth Arena—the base of the Death Period clan.

It was home to not only four of Altar's *Superiors*, but also the ones who had saved Gideon during Franklin's Game.

Immense power and a debt of gratitude combined to make the local criminals hesitate to do anything to this particular location.

Because of that, any outlaw who wanted to try anything funny here would almost certainly be a foreigner, not a local.

"So this is his house... So this is Ray Starling's base."

Having just split up with Juliet, G looked up at the Eighth Arena with those words.

On a wide thoroughfare, lit only by the streetlights and the moon, G opened her umbrella.

That made a rounded shadow fall next to her feet, which then rippled like the surface of water.

"I...can't do all of Gideon, obviously. That's too much. This city has way too many Resources. I guess it's all the arenas? I can *do* at least one, though. That's reasonable. And I guess it's gotta be this one."

G was muttering to herself as if confirming something. But then, she looked away from the arena and to the *sky* diagonally behind her.

"What a shame. I wanted to surprise you, but I guess you found me first."

There was nothing there.

Actually, no—there was an optically camouflaged orb—a floating drone.

"Well, there's a big event happening. I sent eyes all over, so of course I'd notice you."

Following those words, a man wearing a coat like the night sky appeared before G.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, this man was known as King of Light, F, but in reality, he was G's blood brother.

"So this really was your destination, eh?" he asked.

"That's my brother—such a detective. I'm amazed you could pinpoint where I was headed like that. Maybe you should try writing a mystery next."

F said nothing, though he seemed to be thinking, *It's worrying that she's being completely serious...*

"So, do you also know what I'm here for? Did you see right through me?"

"Based on the fact that you're here, I have a guess," F said as he looked up at the Eighth Arena.

Knowing his sister's personality and her Embryo's ult, he could easily imagine what she was planning.

"I don't think your odds are good, though," he continued. "Death Period has four *Superiors*. They obviously can't fight at full strength in the city, but it will still be a difficult battle. Actually, isn't Figaro a hard counter to you? I don't think there's a Master who is as good at 'clearing' as he is."

"Oh, come now, dear brother of mine. I'm not *that* careless."

Silence. *Really?* F thought, but stopped himself from saying it out loud.

"Tomorrow is the final day of The Tournaments, right? That'll keep the fabled Figaro busy until probably the final match, and I hear Shu and Hannya are on security duty. It seems like Lei-Lei doesn't log in much in the first place, so I don't even have to consider her, while the rest will probably watch the last Tournament."

"Mm-hmm. So you'll take care of business while they're all away?"

"Oh, no no no. That won't make for a good video."

"Suppose that's true."

"But I won't fight any *Superiors*. My only target...is Ray Starling."

I thought as much, F thought, narrowing his eyes.

"While everyone's focused on the Tournament in the Central Arena, I'll summon *just* Ray Starling. This will be the stage for our battle! The filming location!"

"Mm-hmm... The public part of the final Tournament tomorrow will probably last from noon to about three p.m., JST."

G's words made her brother mutter under his breath and begin to calculate something. However, she ignored that and continued talking as though carried by the momentum of her own words.

"I'll get what I want, and by winning against someone who beat you and some *Superiors*, I'll show that I'm stronger than all of you. Those are my main goals this time!”

It almost felt like she was picking a fight with her brother.

“I see. I’ll be looking forward to that.”

However, F was unfazed and replied to her words from the heart.

He really did think it would be interesting.

He knew just how powerful G was, but he still didn’t have a good measure of Ray’s strength.

A conflict between the two would be as exciting as the final Tournament—if not more.

But there was one problem...

“By the way, Ginga.”

“Hey! Not even you can say my real name here, okay?!”

“Oh, sorry. Then, G... I have a question for you...”

His little sister neglected to consider something important, so he chose to point that out.

“Yes?”

“Tomorrow is a weekday, right?”

“Yes! It doesn’t matter much to us, though! People who’ve got day jobs and school sure have it rough, huh?” They were a content creator and an author, respectively. As far as professions went, theirs didn’t have much of a set schedule.

That must’ve been why G hadn’t considered this particular issue, but...

“Do you think our friend Ray will be able to log in on a weekday at noon? Based on the times he comes online and the name of his brother’s avatar, he’s almost certainly Japanese.”

“...Oh.”

The standard Japanese work and school hours—an unlikely obstacle to G’s plans that nonetheless had thrown a huge wrench into her plans.

Interlude: Morning of the Final Day

Gideon, City of Duels, Tenth Day of The Tournaments

The ten-day event had now entered its final day.

The nine previous days had seen many contestants, but this final event had considerably more than any of them.

The reason for this was obvious: The UBM in the Orb that was today's reward was Mythical—the strongest tier of conventional UBM—meaning that the MVP reward it would provide would likely be very powerful.

Additionally, the duel champion of Altar, Figaro, was fighting today, attracting many challengers who just wanted to face him in battle, as they were usually barred from doing so by the rankings.

There were many spectators too. Like in the previous days, they would only get to see the fights from the contestants' fifth battles onward, but that didn't stop some from staying up all night near the arena waiting to be let in.

In fact, some probably had their sights set on this final Tournament for days now.

Naturally, the tians working in the arena were overwhelmingly busy with the preparations. Many in the offices were looking over all kinds of documents and calling various people using comms magic. The knowledge that it would all be over after today drove them to work as hard as they could.

"Hm..."

Among them, there was a young man—barely in his late teens—writing something in a separate office for high-ranking individuals.

His name was Aschbarray Gideon. He was the count of this great City of Duels, and he was greatly burdened by all the turmoil his city had a tendency to attract.

Following the events in places like Quartierlatin and Altea, though, he'd begun to think that maybe Gideon didn't have it that bad—which was, quite frankly, delusional.

Like everyone else here, he was hard at work attending to his duties. The Tournaments had pushed both him and his subordinates close to their limits. There was so much to do that he'd even had to get some of the ninjas from his intelligence agency to help out with the event.

He'd barely slept over the past nine days, and even now he was working while taking the occasional swig from a potion.

The reason he was in the arena was that he had to attend the event himself, and even the time it would take to travel there from his mansion felt wasteful.

The UBM's escape on day six hadn't helped at all. The overwhelming amount of duties, combined with the stress that the event had caused, was so bad that he'd even required healing magic.

But this soul-crushing work was about to reach its end.

"That should be that..." he said with a sigh as he looked at a paper tacked onto the wall.

It showed the results of The Tournaments thus far.

Day 1: Poison Fist, Lei-Lei.

Day 2: Armor Giant, Barbaroy Bad Burn.

Day 3: Lost Heart, Rook Holmes.

Day 4: Fallen Knight, Juliet.

Day 5: High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso.

Day 6: The Unsheath, Kashimiya.

Day 7: King of Storms, Caydence.

Day 8: Gale Rider, Masked Riser.

Day 9: Sneak Raider, Grimms.

These were the winners of the previous nine days.

Taking a small break, he looked over the list of names and tried to remember what the winners were known for.

Superiors*, duelists, that member of Death Period on day three...and day seven is the third in the kill rankings and leader of the fourth-ranking clan, Welkin Alliance.*

He began with the ones he knew best. Death Period had helped him a great deal, but caused problems as well, so he found himself feeling somewhat conflicted about them.

"I do not recall much about the winner of day nine..."

However, he couldn't remember anything about the person last in the list. The count thought that they might have been a foreign Master who'd joined the kingdom of Altar, but...

"Grimms is a member of the Fairytale Squad—a party operating on the western side of the kingdom. They contributed to the defeat of the Goblin King and resolving the exploding ghost ship incident in Keyora." His secretary—actually a female ninja dressed as one—volunteered more information about this character.

"I see."

It seemed that his intelligence agency had been gathering info about the west too.

With that, he now knew about this "Grimms."

"Looking at the results now, they are both surprising and expected." The list included everything from *Superiors* to people not on any ranking, showing that these Tournaments weren't just about pure power, but also luck in matchups.

Actually, even getting to participate in one of The Tournaments involved a great deal of luck. People in the duel or kill rankings, Superior Jobs, and those the kingdom gave express right to appear were given priority, but for everyone else it was a lottery.

For the record, all members of Death Period were given priority as well.

That had been Altimia's decision. The clan's core members had fought alongside her during the peace talks, while Kasumi's trio had contributed greatly during the attack on the capital.

They would've been allowed to participate even if they weren't Ray's friends—the Babylonian Battlegroup and K&R had also received this honor.

And, whether by luck or inevitability, these clans had all won Tournaments and the right to challenge their Orbs.

Even though the UBM fought by K&R had flown off into the sky and disappeared.

Additionally, following that incident, they'd temporarily stopped the UBM fights until they made sure something like that couldn't happen again, after which they would allow everyone else to face their UBMs. Because of that, the winners of days seven to nine hadn't challenged their Orbs yet. The winners of days three and five hadn't fought theirs either, so they would also be waiting for now.

"...I just realized that all the winners are Masters who were already from Altar." The count thought he'd see a decent amount of unfamiliar names—Masters from other countries—so this was a somewhat unexpected result.

He was in a position to know that there were quite a lot of Masters who'd changed their allegiance to Altar specifically to participate in The Tournaments and that many of them were considerably powerful.

But looking at the details, these new additions to the kingdom had either vanished in the preliminaries or had been defeated right after the public matches began.

The matchups were random, and the count was certain that there had been no foul play that had put them at a disadvantage. Had they all just lacked the luck or power to make it to the top?

As that thought went through his head, a worker entered with the latest report. "We finished the lottery for today's canceled slots!"

"I see. So the deadline is already past..."

The rules said that if a registered participant didn't show up at the appointed time, they would have their participation revoked and their slot put up as a same-day lottery prize.

That was how Lei-Lei—the winner of day one—had been able to participate.

That wasn't strange at all, but...

"Even the last day had cancellations?" While Masters chose the days they would participate on based on their plans, some would inevitably still be forced to cancel.

They obviously had their reasons. Masters had that strange habit of "disappearing to the other side," so it wasn't strange for them to cancel on account of "sudden real-life issues," as they described them.

However, there had been cancellations every single day. They didn't even amount to three percent of the total participants, but it felt like a lot to the count.

"Hm...?" Curious, he rummaged around for the documents detailing everyone who had registered but not participated. He quickly found them in an office drawer and looked them over.

"This..."

As he did, he noticed something.

Many of the registered nonparticipants were new additions to the kingdom, and among the strongest of them to boot.

They were, in fact, the very powerful foreign or freelance Masters that Altar actually hoped to acquire with this event.

"And here are today's cancellations," said the secretary-ninja as she handed him a new document.

"How dreadful."

Its content was even worse.

He'd thought that today's Mythical reward would attract a great many powerful Masters. However, a few of these had canceled their participation regardless.

Three pre-*Superiors* and one *Superior* had not shown up by the deadline.

"The rules of The Tournaments are..." The count mentally reviewed the very thing he'd checked over countless times before.

The Tournaments had four main rules:

1. The participant must be an Altarian Master.

2. The participant will be unable to switch countries for three years after The Tournaments.

3. If the participant commits a crime within Altar's borders that would otherwise be punished with one or more years of penal servitude, they will be rendered unable to use any save points.

4. The participant will receive the right to challenge a UBM depending on where they place in The Tournaments. Additionally, those who also sign the Contract declaring their will to participate in any war Altar may be involved in within the next three years will receive an extra prize in the form of the right to select a rare piece of equipment. The order of selection will also depend on placement in The Tournaments.

Knowing the goal behind The Tournaments, these conditions were fairly ordinary.

But what about those who had registered, but didn't actually participate? Did these rules also apply to them?

The answer to that was no. Nonparticipants weren't subject to the Contract. Any legal obligation instead went to those who won the same-day lottery for their slots.

Maybe it would've been different if they signed the extra prize Contract, but the more powerful they were, the less they cared about it, so none of them had done that.

"...Is this intentional?" Had these Masters just changed their mind postregistration and decided that the conditions for participation weren't acceptable? Maybe some of them had, but it was unlikely to be the motive for every single one.

That made it possible that there was actual intent behind all these cancellations—that it was the result of someone's interference.

"S-Sir! W-We have a problem!" As that thought ran through his mind, a panicked staff member rushed into the office.

The secretary-ninja stood between them, ready to protect the count, but he told her to relax.

"Why the panic? Is another *Superior* causing trouble?" Franklin, Gerbera (and Shu), Hannya... With all these potentially dangerous *Superiors* in this city, they had become the first thing that came to the count's mind whenever there was trouble. After that, he thought of the second princess, and after her, he expected UBMs.

In response to the count's somewhat sarcastic question, the worker...

"Yes!"

...gave him a big nod.

"...Huh?"

"Well, actually, it's not really *a problem*, per se, but..." Hurrying to walk back the words that had just come out of his mouth, the staff member started to sweat a little.

"Tell me everything, from start to finish."

"O-Of course. We just finished the substitute lottery for today's cancellations, and..."

Slightly more composed now, the worker gave a thorough explanation.

Upon hearing everything, the count could only let out a shocked cry of "WHAT?!"

Chapter 2: The Man Who Shouldn’t Be Here

Reality, Kurosaki Household

“Your temperature’s 38.5... You’ve got a cold,” Juri’s mother said, giving her a worried look as she checked her temperature.

Juri Kurosaki coughed. It seemed she’d caught a cold right before the final day of The Tournaments.

There seemed to be a minor, out-of-season epidemic in the area. Juri’s classmate, Licorice Saionji, had also missed school due to this illness, and now she’d caught it too.

“I’ll call the school and tell them you’re not coming in today. Miss Natsume too. You can’t be tutored like this,” her mother said.

“O-Okay.”

“Are you feeling all right? Should I take the day off to look after you?”

“I-I’ll be fine by myself...! You should just head to work and not worry about me!”

“Really...? I’ll make you an ice pillow, at least. And some porridge too—you can warm it up for yourself later.”

With those words, Juri’s mother left the room.

Listening to her footsteps, Juri let out a sigh.

“A cold...” She had felt like her head was strangely heavy last night, but it had gotten so much worse since then.

“And we’re supposed to have pudding at lunch today...” While she could have pudding at home too, Juri felt that there was something special and different about the taste of school lunch pudding, so she was a bit sad she wouldn’t get it.

Regardless...this was now a day off.

Juri looked at the headgear next to her bed.

It made her think of her friend who’d logged in despite having a cold, forcing her servants to drag her out.

"I shouldn't play a game when I'm too sick for school... But..." Juri's desire to enjoy the event was at war with her own conscience.

And ultimately...

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Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth District

After her mother did a couple things for her and headed off to work, Juri caved and put on the headgear. She did feel some guilt, but it did not stop her, and her conscience had lost the battle.

Guess I logged in after all... Juliet thought. *Weird... I had a headache, but I'm not feeling anything now.*

Just like her sleepiness, all the malaise from her illness seemed to have vanished. Unlike Juri, Juliet was the picture of health.

There were several icons advising her about her condition in real life, but there was a setting to hide them, so they didn't bother her much.

Juliet wasn't aware of it, but that setting was commonly used by the Masters from The Lunar Society. Given their circumstances, playing without it would be quite inconvenient.

What do I do now...? Juliet wondered. She didn't actually have any plans. Since it was the final day, the event was at its peak—but assuming that she'd be at school during the actual Tournament on that day, she hadn't bought a ticket. And knowing the demand, she thought even the scalpers must have been sold out by now.

Maybe I should join Max and take a look at the auction...? she thought, when...

"Huh? Julie?! Why're you logged in at this hour?"

...she heard her friend Chelsea calling out to her with a face full of surprise.

"I caught a cold... No school for me today."

"You know you're bein' no better than Shion, right?" said Chelsea, casually taking a shot at Shion.

"Ngh... But I..."

"Ugh... Are you at least warm back in the real world?"

"I took some medicine, got an ice pillow, and logged in after covering myself up."

“Well, I guess a little bit of *Dendro* should be fine, then. But log out the moment you get a notif that you’re gettin’ worse, got it?”

“Okay...!”

After that exchange where she sounded like Juliet’s mother or older sister, Chelsea seemed to just move on.

“What about you? Why are you here?” Juliet asked.

“I was thinkin’ of borrowing Ray’s arena again, but it just hit me that he’s in college too.”

“Oh...”

“And? Do *you* got any plans?”

“I thought I wouldn’t get to see the matches, so I didn’t buy any tickets...”

“Same here.”

“Huh? You too?”

“It’s the final day. There’s gonna be lots of videos on the internet anyway. For now, let’s go check out that auction Max went to. We can rent an arena after that. Ray’s not here to let us use his, but there should be another one free today.”

“Okay.” The two then took off toward the hustle and bustle of the Fourth District.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Fourth District

The Fourth District was always a lively place full of bazaars and shops, but because of The Tournaments and the people they’d attracted from all over, there was even more excitement here than usual.

One major reason for that was the auction being held on the final day.

Many merchants had brought in some of their most impressive, valuable items, and the best of them were being separated into auctions based on their categories. Even the tickets and catalogs for the auctions were quite costly—you had to be very wealthy to even participate.

For Masters who made it to the ranks, though, it wasn’t all that much—and this included the duelist, Great Genocide Max.

“Is this enough?” Waiting on the weapon auction, she worriedly counted the money she had. She could easily cover the participation cost, but she wasn't sure if she had enough for the specific item she wanted to buy.

The weapon she was after was among the greatest in the entire selection—one of Tenchi's Hundred Famed Blades.

Its name was "Sekiun"—the "Cumulus Cloud." Barring MVP rewards that were adjusted to suit the specific player they were awarded to, it was probably the weapon that suited Max's combat style more than any other.

If I'm ever gonna fight Jubei again, I gotta get somethin' better, she thought. In a recent event, Max had indeed fought another battle against Jubei. She'd given her all and ended up getting close enough to Jubei to tear out her eye with her fingers.

Having used that opportunity to score a touch on her rival, Max now wanted something that would enable her to actually defeat her—a technique, a Superior Job, an MVP reward, or an Embryo evolution.

Sekiun was one of the things that had come to mind.

I could scrape up about fifty million lir...but that's not that much, she thought. That was far below the market price for one of the Hundred Famed Blades. While Sekiun was quite difficult to use effectively, it was hard to imagine that absolutely no one would outbid her for such a masterwork. If some wealthy merchant wanted it for collection or speculation, Max would stand no chance, and looking around, she saw many such bidders here.

You could tell by her face that she thought her chances were low, and yet she still waited for Sekiun to come up for auction...and that was when she heard a conversation.

"What about this one? A knight sword that uses mana to increase your STR by 50% for 30 seconds."

"Your STR is not that high, so I feel it would not have much of an effect. It's far more suited to Brother Bear."

"Apparently, weapons like this just break when he wields them..."

"I suppose that is a clear case of 'too much of a good thing.'"

"Oh. This next greatsword looks—"

"No greatswords. No halberds, shields, pinwheels, or dual swords either. I will not tolerate cheating."

"Your attitude is exactly why we can't ever find anything useful, you know... Besides, I doubt we'll even see a pinwheel here."

It was an exchange between two of her acquaintances.

"What're you two doing here?" Max asked.

“Oh. Max. Didn’t see you there.”

The people sitting behind her were none other than Ray and Nemesis. They’d been on quests together and had all participated in the recent event, so they definitely weren’t strangers at this point.

However, Ray had defeated Jubei, succeeding where Max still failed, so her feelings about him were a little conflicted.

“We were just wondering if they had any good weapons for ordinary situations. Everyday use and all that,” said Ray.

“The axe and the bracelet we got recently are far from *ordinary*,” Nemesis added. “Though, in a way, the latter is seeing plenty of ‘everyday use.’”

“KSHAAA!” A closer look revealed that there was a small demon girl—Gardranda—munching on Ray’s hair.

“That ain’t what I’m askin’,” Max said. “Last we sparred, you said you wouldn’t be on during the final day, ’cause of college.”

“Oh. That? I did go to class today, but the afternoon lectures were all canceled. Looks like there’s an out-of-season cold epidemic where I am.”

That had apparently allowed him to participate in the events of the final day. He was also planning to meet up with Marie and watch the Tournament later.

“And? What about you?” Ray asked. “Chelsea said you’re after something specific.”

“I am,” said Max as she showed him the catalog page for Sekiun.

Ray read it and instantly thought, *Yeah. This is perfect for Max.*

“I could allow a katana,” said Nemesis. “But *this* certainly does not suit you.”

“That’s true. Maybe if I used it with the axe...? No, you have to swing that to get any attack power out of it. I feel like the only ones who can make good use of this sword are Figaro, Max, and Jubei.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” said Max. As the three talked, Sekiun’s turn on the block came up.

“And here we have one of the Hundred Famed Blades from the far eastern lands—Sekiun! It has a rich history and is a beautiful work of art in its own right! We’re starting at ten million lir!” With those words from the auctioneer, the bidding war began, and the price quickly grew.

Many of the bidders weren’t swordsmen but mere merchants who only wanted it for its reputation as one of the Hundred Famed Blades.

"Ngh...!" The bidding wars leading up to this one had made the auction really competitive, and it didn't take long for the price to go above the fifty million Max could afford.

"Max? Isn't that the one you wanted? Aren't you gonna bet?" Ray asked.

"...It's already past my budget," Max said, clearly disappointed.

"Should I lend you some money, then?" Ray asked.

"Ha... With the way it's goin', I don't think 'some' would be enough..."

"You think five hundred mil wouldn't do it?"

"Huh?!" Max's eyes widened. That was ten times her own budget.

Ray ignored her reaction and handed her an Inventory full of high-value coins. It seemed to contain exactly as much as he'd said.

"You—! Wha—! Hey...!"

"Before coming here, I checked the results for yesterday's Tournament. It turns out Grimms won, and he was the dark horse, so..."

"I cannot believe that you won such a careless and risky bet," said Nemesis. "It is honestly quite ominous that you wagered on the winner every single day except the first one—and that was only because you missed your chance to bet. It makes me feel as though you will soon die once again."

"Don't say that. It's creepy..."

Max felt that this gambler—this faux Paladin might've made more money from The Tournaments than anyone else. As a friend, she thought that she had to warn him that his financial senses were starting to get skewed, but instead, she silently looked at the Inventory with the five hundred million lir.

Borrowing that much would basically guarantee that she would win Sekiun. If she didn't get it here, she would probably never see it again.

And Max had already saved up fifty million in a short time. Even if she went hundreds of millions into debt, she could pay Ray back in a reasonable amount of time.

"One hundred eighty million, going once! Any higher offers?" the auctioneer called as the bidding war reached a new peak of intensity.

"Nnnngh...!" Her conscience and lust for power spent a moment locked in battle—but in the end, she found herself shouting, "Two hundred million!"

After a heated war, the final, winning bid was 350 million...and Great Genocide Max was now three hundred million lir in debt.

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Sorcerer, Ray Starling

In the end, we left the auction without a worthwhile weapon.

There were some good ones that came up, but they were all greatswords and the like—categories Nemesis was strictly opposed to.

We did help Max get the item she wanted, though, so I still felt that going there was worth it. She was now about three hundred million in debt to me, but as a duelist in the rankings, she shouldn't have much trouble paying it back. The ranker world was full of people like Shu, who'd once spent three billion on just a single battle.

Also, Max wanted to test her new katana, so I let her use our arena and gave her the key.

"I feel like that is far too much money to lend a friend," said Nemesis. "Then again, it is certainly a better use of money than gambling. Without anyone to hold you back, you would spend everything you had betting on those duels."

"Huh? I *am* about to do just that. I'm gonna put all my money on Figaro." Silence. "He's the clear favorite, so you gotta bet a lot to— Guh...!" My words were cut short by Nemesis's fist sinking into my side.

"Gacha, duels, combat... What is your fascination with risky bets?!"

"You got it all wrong! This isn't really gambling—Figaro is one of us! I just believe in him, that's all!"

"Yet you did not bet on Fujinon. What would she think if she heard you say that?"

That was our conversation as we walked toward the Central Arena. There, we'd take a look at the people who made it through the prelims, set our bet, then watch the fights. Marie had reserved our clan a box for the whole ten days, so we didn't have to worry about seats.

On the way there...

"There you go. Wow, you eat a lot."

...we stopped and stared at something that we just couldn't ignore.

The scene wasn't all that special by itself—a man was just giving snacks and pets to a white dog.

The strange thing was the man's appearance. He had black hair, a coat like the night sky, and kept one of his eyes closed.

That look was all too familiar to me. He was...

"...KoL. What are *you* doing here?"

King of Light, F—the pre-*Superior* who'd tried to cause an incident in Gideon and ended up fighting me because of it.

"Oh? Ray Starling," he said. "It's been a while... One moment."

He gave the remaining jerky to the dog, patted it, and stood up with a disappointed look, as if he wanted to pet it longer.

The white dog grabbed the jerky in its mouth and ran off. It looked like it was shaking for some reason.

"Oh dear. There it goes," F said.

"No, really, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, it just so happens that I've met that dog before, but I didn't have any snacks for it back then. I'd been carrying some in my Inventory ever since, and I finally got my chance to give it some."

"You like dogs?" I asked.

"I do. You?"

"We got a pug at my parents' place."

"Wonderful. There's something uniquely adorable about pugs. Even the way they snore is charming."

"I get what you mean." *Wait, what kind of conversation is this?* I thought. I decided to change the subject. "Why are you in this city again, anyway? Don't tell me you're planning something funny for the event."

"Perish the thought," he said. "I'm simply gathering reference material. I don't have to lift a finger to make The Tournaments worth watching, and this day should be especially diverting."

"That so? Well, as long as you don't do anything you shouldn't."

"Mm-hmm." He looked like he had something to say to me.

"What is it?"

"Oh, don't mind me. More importantly, are you sure you have time to waste here? They're about to stop taking bets for the day. If you're betting on the ultimate victor, you can't do it after the first match—and you're planning to wager a *lot* of money today, aren't you?"

"Ah!" His words made me realize that betting was going to close in less than five minutes.

A part of me wanted to ask how he knew about my bets, but with the first match drawing so close, I had to hurry up.

"You better not cause any trouble!" I admonished him as I left.

"Don't worry. *I* won't do anything today."

The way he said it made me raise an eyebrow, but we chose to ignore it and rushed to the Central Arena.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Main Street

"Take care," F said with a smile as Ray ran off. "*What luck*, though. He's actually online."

It wasn't clear what was going through his mind as he said that or who exactly was lucky in this situation.

Regardless, the setup was now complete. Now, with just a bit of *guidance*, the actors gathered upon the stage would put on a wonderful impromptu performance.

"His attitude toward me is quite interesting. I gathered as much from his relationship with the *Superior* Killer, but it seems that he doesn't cling to the past."

F had once used Hannya to cause a major incident in Gideon.

When Ray had faced him back then, he'd been overcome by a powerful rage, but it didn't seem that he felt any enmity toward him now.

"He feels anger, but doesn't hold grudges," F said to himself. "What really matters to him is your role in whatever tragedy is unfolding *at that moment, right before his eyes*—whether you're the one behind it or someone standing against it. That is what truly sways him... I see."

If they were on the side of tragedy, Ray wouldn't even hesitate to fight against those he called friends—like how he'd faced Hugo during Franklin's Game.

And if they stood with him against the tragedy, he could fight even alongside someone like Marie, who'd killed him, or Tsukuyo, who'd kidnapped him. Which meant that...

"If I approach him *from that angle* next time, I may see a new side of him."

F was in the process of arranging a new plan for Ray—this wellspring of inspiration and reference material.

"Well, today's event comes first. Though... Heh heh. How troubling. I can hardly decide what to watch with my own eyes."

Cracking a joyful smile, F looked at the Central Arena at the end of the main street.

"There are too many things to witness today," he said, thinking about the *wonderful surprise* that awaited there.

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Gideon, City of Duels; Central Arena; Waiting Room

The four preliminary matches were over, and the audience had gathered to watch the fifth onward.

In the waiting room was Bishmal—the seventh in the duel rankings—meditating in preparation for his next battle.

He wasn't making a sound. The prize for the final day's Tournament was a Mythical MVP reward, and it wasn't hard to imagine that the fights ahead would be intense.

Figaro, the duel champion, was among today's participants too—in fact, that was the reason Bishmal had chosen to participate in this day's events. It was a chance for him to fight Figaro without getting past the third in the rankings, which he couldn't do because his matchup with Tom was extremely disadvantageous.

This particular Tournament allowed him to duel the champion in more than just a sparring match—and in a way, that itself was enough reward for him.

"Riser won his Tournament," Bishmal mused. In the Tournament two days ago, his friend Riser had put up a splendid performance and come out on top.

Some would say that it was only because, with the exception of Tom, all the duelists who were above him in the rankings had participated on the other days. But Riser's day had featured participants who were high up in the kill rankings, as well as the leader of the AETL Union, so it certainly wasn't easy. And yet, Riser overcame them all and emerged victorious.

Bishmal pondered his friend. They had both been stuck for a while now, but Riser seemed to be moving beyond that. He felt that Riser had advanced somehow during the assault on Altea that had happened while Bishmal was still away due to the death penalty.

Bishmal felt that he had to keep up, and so he chose today's Tournament to do that.

That was why he had to keep winning. He thought that if he was ever to advance, he had to purge all distractions and charge single-mindedly forward.

He hadn't even looked at the Tournament bracket today—all that mattered to him was fighting Figaro, and for that, he just needed to keep winning.

That sole thought had already carried him this far.

"Mr. Bishmal. It's time..."

"All right." Bishmal was soon called by the staff, so he stood up and headed toward the stage entrance.

He was so focused that he didn't even notice the worker's strange expression—a face seemingly full of pity.

“Hm...? What?” When he appeared on the stage, Bishmal instantly realized that something was off about the audience’s mood. Some spectators did cheer when he appeared—but most of them just seemed bewildered.

He briefly thought that he’d made some sort of blunder while coming on the stage, but quickly realized that wasn’t it. Most people weren’t looking at him at all, but instead had their eyes fixed on the other entrance to the arena.

His opponent wasn’t on the stage yet, but Bishmal could tell that there was something strange about them.

Am I fighting Figaro already? he thought. If that was the case, he would consider it a stroke of luck and find joy in the fact that he’d gotten the chance to go all out this early in the day.

...No.

But his instincts told him that that wasn’t right.

This was not how the audience would react to a match involving Figaro. If that were the case, the arena would be drowned in joyous cheers for the champion and his opponent.

Bishmal had been matched to someone who attracted more attention than a high-ranking duelist like him, and yet sparked more confusion than excitement.

He didn’t have a clue who it could be.

Bishmal was resolved to fight no matter whom he was up against, but this question had shaken his resolve a bit.

It didn’t take long for him to get an answer, though—a man appeared at the other end of the stage.

Silence ensued.

It was a man with an impressive physique. He was wearing a leather jacket and trousers, but they did nothing to hide the defined muscles beneath.

A pair of sunglasses concealed his eyes but didn’t obscure his strong facial features.

Bishmal had a muscly avatar himself, so this matchup almost felt like a wrestling event. But neither the audience nor Bishmal were in a state of mind to think anything that flippant about the situation.

“What’s going on?” Bishmal now shared the audience’s confusion.

He’d never met the man before him, but he knew his clothes and appearance well.

He'd never seen him in the flesh, but he'd seen numerous videos of him on the internet.

He remembered his name—as well as two of the rules of this Tournament.

The participant must be an Altarian Master. The participant will be unable to switch countries for three years after The Tournaments.

Those rules made it so that this man shouldn't...*couldn't have been here*.

And yet, *he was*.

"Th-The first match of the fifth battle, on day ten of The Tournaments..."

With the combatants both on the stage, the announcer swallowed his confusion and tried to do his job.

"In the west, we have the seventh in the duel rankings, the Power Wrestler, Bishmal the Raging Blaze."

First, he named Bishmal.

"In the east..."

And then...

"We have the ex-second in Caldina's duel rankings..."

...he gave Bishmal's opponent's previous title. "King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser."

It was the name of the *Superior* who could not possibly have belonged to the kingdom of Altar.

Chapter 3: GG

Past, Somewhere on Earth

“Checkmate.”

One of his memories involved a particular board game. He’d played against the “mother” who’d created him, each taking turns moving their pieces on the board.

However, he wasn’t able to win a single match against her.

He couldn’t hold the pieces, so his “mother” moved them for him—and now she once again put his king into checkmate.

“And that’s my fifteenth win in a row. Hrmmm... This is unexpected. In a way, the fact that I’m winning at all makes this a success. It implies very gradual growth—a growth process different from machine learning. It’s probably faster when you consider the exponential curve, though.”

He couldn’t understand what his “mother” was saying here.

“This growth is organic. And that’s why...”

He had no idea what she was thinking at this moment. His thoughts were still focused on the board game.

He was on a losing streak, but he was gradually getting the hang of it, and he wanted to play again so he could put up a better fight—no, he wanted to *win*.

“Oh? You want a rematch? That’s new. Hmmm... Then I guess I should teach you some common courtesy for situations like these.” Silence. “Before you start a new game, you need to end the last one. And when you do that, both players should praise each other’s efforts. Let me give you an expression for that.”

His “mother” smiled at “him”—*the screen that displayed his thoughts*—and said...

“‘Good game.’ Remember these words if you ever play with people.”

Thus, the “mother” concluded her little lesson in how to interact with people, hoping that her “son” would someday get a chance to use it.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

Even though this was only the first public battle of the final Tournament, the venue was already flooded with emotion (mostly confusion) by the presence of King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser—a participant who, by all accounts, could not have been here.

These Tournaments allowed only the kingdom's Masters to enter, and participants couldn't switch to other countries for three *Dendro* years after its conclusion—which was one year in real time. Additionally, the contract made it so that any participant who committed a crime against Altar that would normally be punished by at least a year of penal servitude would be barred from using any save points anywhere in the world.

That made it more or less impossible that a foreign *Superior*—a member of Caldina's very own Sefirot, at that—would participate in this Tournament.

Albert was known as perhaps the greatest contributor in the fights against Caldina's many UBMs and other notable monsters, as well as the second in their duel rankings, behind only The Fight. Even if this was all part of some scheme, he felt like too valuable a piece to give away to the kingdom for three whole years.

"What is the meaning of this?" said Altimia, the first princess of Altar, as she looked down at him from her royal box. *When did he align himself with the kingdom?* she wondered.

The princess was definitely not involved in this. Landowning nobles could also induct Masters into the kingdom, though, so one of them might have done it in secret.

His name was not among those who registered ahead of time, Altimia thought. *That means he must have gotten in through today's lottery.*

If Albert had been participating from the start, she would have definitely noticed and at least talked to him—or done whatever was needed to prevent this from happening.

However, he had never actually registered. Albert was only participating now because he'd *happened* to win the lottery for the Tournament slots that had opened up today.

The odds were against him...but we have designed this competition to *prevent any foul play.*

The winners and losers of the lotteries were decided completely randomly. The staff working on them were even Contract-bound to not intentionally manipulate the results.

That was why this could only be a coincidence—and they could not take away his win.

But if there is anyone actually behind this... It can only be Caldina's president, Altimia thought. The Caldinan head of state was often said to be a witch who could see the future. Most people thought that this just meant she was excellent at thinking ahead, but it might have actually been far more literal than that.

If, for example, she could foresee *exactly when joining the lottery would guarantee a win*... Well, that would make her a truly terrifying and unprecedented force.

Someone like that was now likely getting involved in the war between Altar and Dryfe and had now sent Albert to this event. If these two things were true, the implications would be staggering.

Caldina has been offering us their cooperation for quite some time, Altimia thought. *I have always refused, so did they decide to make certain we were in their debt? By giving us not just temporary reinforcements, but a* Superior *for us to keep?*

Would Caldina benefit from this enough to make the loss of a *Superior* worth it?

Hm? Wait, when, exactly, was he...?

The moment a new question formed in her mind, Bishmal and Albert's duel began.

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"Fight!"

A booming voice declared the start of the battle, but neither of the combatants moved an inch. Bishmal had always been the type to charge in without hesitation, and Albert surely had the upper hand in this situation—yet both of them stayed right where they were.

"Ngh!" A bitter expression crossed on Bishmal's face as he realized that he'd frozen up when he ought to have been moving. The impossibility of the situation had perplexed him to the point that he hadn't launched into his golden combo.

Bishmal had disregarded checking the brackets to eliminate distractions, but that had ended up working against him.

Having lost the opportunity to strike immediately, he chose to wait and see what would happen instead of charging in. This unexpected situation had almost made him lose sight of himself.

Albert, on the other hand, was completely silent and showed no emotion in his expression. It was as though his face was carved from metal, betraying not a single one of his thoughts.

Maintaining the silence, Albert began walking toward Bishmal.

At first glance, he looked completely open to attacks, but a closer look revealed that his movements were smooth and stable.

Walking like a skilled martial artist or a precision machine, Albert closed the distance between them and, still eerily silent, *extended his right hand*.

He was offering a handshake.

Bishmal's eyes widened once again. It looked like a simple display of sportsmanship from a fellow contestant, but it caught him completely by surprise.

The obvious conclusion was that this was a trap, but Bishmal's touch could easily be lethal, so offering to shake his hand was an absurd move even if there was some ulterior motive behind it.

Neither Bishmal nor the audience understood what Albert was doing, but there were four in the venue who did. The Masters who had fought him in the preliminaries knew that he would do this once the match began.

Their responses to the handshake offer had been split between attacks and hesitant acceptance, but the reality was that this was no trap. It was not any kind of offensive maneuver at all.

"...Sure."

After a bit of thought, Bishmal accepted the offer and shook Albert's hand.

Albert's grip was like steel, lacking the fleshiness of a normal human hand, but the handshake ended without anything happening.

Instead of following it up with some attack, Albert simply turned around and headed back to his starting position. He seemed wide open to any attacks, and Bishmal felt like he could win by just launching his ult right now.

However, he'd decided against it.

Partially this was because Bishmal was hesitant to attack someone from behind, but it was also the danger sense he'd honed as a ranking duelist that stopped him.

Bismal had the feeling that if he attacked now, it would be over for him.

Nothing beyond the handshake happened as the two returned to their starting positions.

This was the true beginning of the duel, and Albert assumed a fighting pose...

"Hm...?"

...but seeing it made Bishmal raise an eyebrow.

Based on what he'd heard, Albert's combat style was wide-scale bombardment using heavy weaponry. He possessed immense firepower that he used to defeat countless monsters, and this was common knowledge thanks to an accidental recording of his battle against a UBM.

He was also known to use weapons—MVP rewards included—in duels like this.

However, Albert now stood before him unarmed and empty-handed.

"No weapons?" Bishmal asked. Albert only shook his head in response.

Most would think that he was mocking his opponent, implying that he wouldn't even need weapons to defeat him—but Bishmal noticed that behind his sunglasses, Albert's gaze was fixed on the audience.

Does he think that his attacks could destroy the barrier? Bishmal wondered. With the duels he'd fought in Caldina and Gideon, Albert was certainly familiar with arena battles by now, and all such battles typically worked the same way.

However, Gideon's barrier had recently been broken by a UBM. Albert might have been limiting his use of weapons on account of that.

Putting aside the question of whether that was a valid concern, there were two conclusions to draw from that fact.

First, Albert might just be *that* confident in his firepower.

And second, he was truly concerned about any possible harm he might cause to the audience, however unlikely that was.

It wasn't just weapons either—Albert hadn't activated any of his Embryo skills either.

He'd deliberately chosen to fight without his biggest strengths.

"I see," Bishmal mused. It was almost insulting, but he wouldn't tell Albert to change his strategy. Albert was free to choose how he wanted to fight, after all.

And so, Bishmal would do the same.

He charged toward Albert. However, he wasn't using Surt's firepower. Just as his opponent wasn't using his weapons, Bishmal faced Albert with nothing but his ability as a Power Wrestler.

He wanted to match Albert's handicap, but that wasn't the only reason...

I just can't bring myself to go all out if my opponent isn't! Bishmal thought. *That's why it's better if I just hold myself back too, get on the same page mentally, and fight him from there!*

Thus, their duel assumed a form rarely seen in battles between Masters. No weapons, no ranged attacks, no unique powers—just pure hand-to-hand combat.

The audience was surprised to see Bishmal fighting differently than usual, but Albert remained silent and unfazed. He dealt with all of Bishmal's punches and grapples using martial arts techniques that were mechanical in their precision. The eyes behind the sunglasses darted around, seeing all of Bishmal's attacks and blocking them with optimal movements.

The high stats granted by a Superior Job were perfectly complemented by his excellent technique.

"Not bad!" Every time their bodies clashed, Bishmal could feel how high Albert's STR and END truly were. While his friend Riser was a fellow hand-to-hand combatant, his AGI focus made fighting him quite different from this.

This guy's AGI's about the same as mine, but he's got a good eye! Bishmal thought as he used Reveal to check Albert's stats. *He's seein' through and punishin' everything I do!*

Each and every response to Bishmal's attacks was more or less perfect. Albert's defense in hand-to-hand combat was unmatched, but it seemed to come at a cost to his offensive capabilities. He focused so much on repelling attacks that he neglected to take advantage of openings that even Bishmal himself noticed.

As a result, the tiny amount of damage that did manage to get past

Albert's defenses was starting to chip away at his HP.

Bishmal had the upper hand, which filled the audience with excitement, but Bishmal himself was growing increasingly uneasy.

He's gettin' faster!

Albert's responsiveness to Bishmal's attacks was only improving. It was as though he was learning the way Bishmal moved, allowing him to further optimize the speed and precision of his defense.

If this continued, Albert would eventually be able to see through everything Bishmal did, at which point Albert could go on the offensive and defeat him.

King of Termination was a job that emphasized attack power, and yet Albert was operating like an endurance build.

"In that case—" Bishmal cried, and jumped in front of Albert.

Albert tried to counter this, but the eyes behind his sunglasses widened a bit. His vision was briefly obscured by a burst of flame—and when it subsided, Bishmal was no longer right in front of him.

When the fire was gone, the only thing Albert could see was Bishmal's shirt, now removed.

He looked around to search for the man himself, but...

"Got ya!"

...before Albert could turn his head, Bishmal locked it in place with a choke hold from behind.

Bishmal's equipment was custom-made to match Surt's powers that allowed him to turn him into flame. Even though they were made of cloth, they had built-in skills that allowed them to turn into fire whenever the wearer did.

Bishmal had just used that property of his equipment in combination with Instant Wear to remove the flaming shirt, then leaped backward, leaving the shirt behind. Since it was no longer equipped, the skill that transformed it into flame deactivated, turning it back into cloth.

Bishmal had basically used a double smoke screen of fire and cloth, allowing him to drop into a low stance position and slip behind Albert to grapple him from his blind spot.

"*Hngh*!" Bishmal grunted as he put all his strength into his grip, and with one strong move, snapped Albert's seemingly unbreakable neck.

Albert's head was now twisted over ninety degrees to the right. This usually conferred the Broken Cervical Vertebra status effect, which didn't kill instantly, but was an injury-based debuff that quickly led to death.

Case in point—Albert's HP was falling at an astonishing rate.

The unusual, gruesome conclusion to the duel filled the arena with not just cheers, but also shrieks of terror.

However, Bishmal didn't even think of letting go of Albert.

His senses told him that this wasn't over yet.

Despite the situation, Albert still wasn't making a sound. His neck still broken, he moved his eyes to glance at Bishmal's right arm before using both hands to grab it. Bishmal still showed no sign of letting go.

Eventually, Albert's HP dropped to critical levels. Like a countdown, it was fast approaching 0. It soon reached the point where he was just 1 HP away from death, but then it *stopped*...

"α: Dubhe."

...and, at the same time, the name of a skill resounded throughout the arena.

The voice was clear, as if the damage to Albert's throat were absolutely nothing. This was the first time he'd said a word since the duel began, and doing so caused light to engulf his body.

A moment later, two things occurred.

Bishmal's eyes widened as he realized he could no longer feel Albert's neck under his arm—or, to be more precise, it wasn't that he couldn't feel it at all. It was more like he was suddenly trying to choke out a rubber tube.

And immediately after that...

"Gah...!"

...Bishmal's right arm was pulverized. The bones in his arm shattered, shredding the muscle and flesh around them—his arm was now little more than a bag of skin filled with blood.

Never losing his stone-faced expression, Albert tore off Bishmal's weakened arm and escaped the choke hold.

It seemed as though something invisible was bursting within both of his hands.

"Heh! Used an Embryo skill, huh?!" Bishmal didn't understand exactly what had happened just now, but by using Reveal, he could discern part of it: Albert's HP had jumped from 1 all the way to full.

"RRRAAAGH!" *Then I'll just bring it down again!* Bishmal thought as he positioned his now-maimed body for a fierce kick. Just as before, Albert assumed a defensive posture and held out his left arm to block the attack.

However, something was different now. Albert didn't even flinch, as though the kick didn't cause any damage whatsoever.

And, indeed, his HP total didn't change at all.

Bishmal's eyes widened again. He'd felt it the instant they collided—when his kick landed, the force of the impact was completely dispersed.

It was nothing like it had been before—Bishmal now felt almost like he was punching a slime.

By contrast, Albert's counterattacks now seemed to strike at Bishmal's very core.

The moment Albert's right hand touched his leg, a bone-shattering shock burst through him.

"Ghhh...!" Bishmal quickly jumped back to make some distance between them. Though not nearly as bad as the damage to his right arm, the damage from that one touch had clearly been devastating to his right leg.

That single exchange was all Bishmal needed to know that he now had no chance of beating Albert in straight hand-to-hand combat. If he wanted to win, he would be forced to fight the way he always did—using his Embryo, Surt.

The audience was shouting for him to do the same.

Bishmal and Albert both fell silent, and there was a brief moment where neither of them moved. Albert seized the chance to take out a revolver-type grenade launcher and fire it toward Bishmal's feet.

Upon hitting the stage, the grenade created a red explosion highly reminiscent of the Crimson Sphere ability.

As Bishmal evaded the blast, he instantly understood what Albert was trying to convey: "I used my weapon, so stop holding back. Use yours too."

"Then I'll do just that! Burstflame Rise—Surt!" The next moment, Bishmal was engulfed in fire, and *became the flame itself*.

Appearing as something like a hybrid of man and elemental, he rushed toward Albert using his specialty—his charge.

Albert was quick to respond and fired another grenade at him, but the explosion meant nothing to a body made of fire. Bishmal closed the distance without issue, and Albert immediately dropped the grenade launcher in favor of using his right hand to deliver the same attack that had shattered Bishmal's arm.

But since Bishmal was now essentially an elemental, the touch-based shock waves coming off Albert's hands did nothing to him.

What's more, mere contact with Bishmal's body made Albert's arm melted instantaneously.

Unfazed, Albert tried to draw another weapon, but Bishmal unleashed a high kick before he could do so. The leg of pure flame melted Albert's left arm entirely from the shoulder down, the damage even reaching all the way to where his heart ought to be.

The severed arm fell to the ground, showing a *glimpse of the steel inside*.

"OOOAAAARRRGHHHHHH!" Albert's HP fell to critical levels once again, but Bishmal did not relent, throwing even stronger attacks aimed at Albert's head. Even if Albert had a skill that healed and strengthened him, Bishmal thought—no, *felt*—that he could counter it by just attacking so fast and often that Albert would have no time to activate the skill in the first place.

Faster than any forethought, acting first and thinking later, charging nowhere but straight ahead—at this critical moment, Bishmal clearly manifested his true self and worth.

He thoroughly pulverized, melted, and burned Albert's head, making it impossible for him to announce any skills.

Albert's HP soon dropped to 1 again...

"β: Melak."

...and it stopped there once again as an emotionless voice echoed through the empty space.

"Aaagh!" Hearing the name of a skill didn't stop Bishmal's onslaught.

However, after just a handful of attacks, he noticed a change.

Having fully rebuilt his head and arms a second time, Albert was no longer affected by Bishmal's flames. Even as his clothes caught fire, his skin was not even singed.

When Albert retaliated with a knife hand strike, Bishmal's body, despite being made of flame, began to come apart.

The man who had been evaporating at Bishmal's mere touch just moments earlier was now obliterating *him* instead.

"...I see how it works now." This was enough for Bishmal to understand the power of Albert's Embryo. It restored all his HP, then granted him near perfect resistance to his opponent's means of attack as well as an offensive ability that was highly effective against them. It combined three incredibly powerful effects into a single skill.

Since he didn't use it right away, I guess it only works when he's nearly dead, Bishmal thought. The price for the skill's power must have been its harsh use condition—it could only be used at 1 HP.

However, there was yet another secret behind Albert's strategy.

Both times, his HP stopped goin' down right before it hit 0. Guess he must have some kinda "guts" effect active. There was a generic skill like that... What was its name again?

The skill Bishmal couldn't remember was called "Last Stand." It came from Rear Soldier, a low-rank job from the soldier grouping, and it enabled those struck by a fatal blow to survive with just 1 HP for five seconds. It did not negate any damage, and though similar effects were often extremely good in traditional RPGs, in *Infinite Dendrogram* HP was usually tied to the physical state of one's body, so it was far less useful. The five extra seconds meant little when someone was on the verge of death and could barely move, and once the time was up, any injury-based status effects they had would instantly kill them.

The primary difference between this skill and Death Soldier's Last Command was that it could be treated by healing magic rather than resurrection magic, but the five seconds it granted were rarely enough for healers to make it in time. Considering its much longer duration, Last Command typically ended up being the more useful skill.

Since it kept one's HP above 0, Last Stand could technically be used in duels—but unless you had a Superior Job and wanted to use your final ult to turn a guaranteed loss into a tie, it was fairly meaningless. Duelists fought to win, so none of them would waste a job slot for the possibility of a tie.

But it's different for this guy, Bishmal thought. *If he can survive a few seconds longer—just long enough to use that skill he's got—he comes back stronger and with full HP.*

Bishmal guessed how Albert's combo worked, thought about the power of this synergy...and shuddered.

I dunno what to say. That's a Superior *for ya, I guess.* Bishmal now had a grasp of Albert's combat style. If pushed to the verge of death, he endured any and all attacks coming his way. Then, he used his Embryo skill to fully heal himself, become resistant to the attack that brought him to 1 HP, and even gained offensive abilities that would help him defeat his attacker.

This skill likely wasn't unlimited, though.

It didn't look like Albert's MP or SP was going down by much, so Bishmal assumed it had a limited amount of uses instead. If he used them all up, he would no longer be able to come back from the verge of death.

However, this meant that you needed enough different methods of attack to force Albert to expend every use. If you didn't, he was simply undefeatable.

Bishmal himself didn't have anything besides hand-to-hand combat and fire, so now that Albert was resistant to both, there was no way he could win.

In fact, most duelists were hyper focused on a single thing, so even among the rankers there were few who could match him. Even Kashimiya had no chance, as he didn't have anything besides his sword-drawing arts.

"RAAAGGGHHHH!" Still, Bishmal didn't stop attacking.

There was no battle he would ever back away from. Even if he was up against an impassable wall, he would keep charging forward.

Whether the wall would break or not was beside the point—he would advance until it did.

That was the kind of man he was.

Albert, on the other hand, was still stone-faced and silent.

What was going through his mind as he watched this opponent relentlessly throwing out attacks that no longer worked? He certainly didn't underestimate him. Just as he had before he'd gained his resistances, Albert watched Bishmal's strikes, defended against them with optimal moves, and threw some counterattacks in between.

As this repeated, Bishmal was eventually brought to his limit. His ult had expired, and he'd sustained too much damage.

"...Ha." Looking solely at the result, one could say that Bishmal just went straight at Albert and practically handed him the win. But strange as it might seem, he had no regrets—for at least after the battle began, he kept on charging ahead, showing no fear of the *Superior*.

Bishmal fought like *himself*, and that was enough for him.

The match soon reached its end...

“Good game.”

...and, after saying his first words that weren’t skill declarations, Albert decapitated Bishmal.

Thus, the Raging Blaze was extinguished, and Albert advanced to the quarterfinals.

Chapter 4: Lunchtime

Gideon, City of Duels, Fourth District

"It takes a certain type to borrow that much, and a hell of a person to lend it out too..."

"Heavy are the chains forged in gold. (Being in debt seems pretty scary.)"

"Ngh..."

After getting saddled with enormous debt to acquire Sekiun, Max rushed to the Eighth Arena to test it—but on the way, she bumped into Chelsea and Juliet.

The looks she got when she told them about how much she owed Ray weren't exactly heartening.

"Seriously, Maxie?" Chelsea said. "That much debt? At your age?"

"I know, I know..." Being called "Maxie" used to make her mad, but recently she'd been learning to just accept it. Even if she hadn't been, though, she wasn't in a state to argue right now.

"Well, thanks to his big bro, Ray's sense for money needs to be seriously recalibrated," said Chelsea. Shu was an even bigger spender than Ray, and Ray earned a lot of money here, so he rarely hesitated to open his wallet. Someone who did wouldn't be spending a hundred thousand lir on gacha nearly every day. "Three hundred mil lir, though..."

That was a lot of money. If someone in real life got that deep in debt—the equivalent of three billion yen—it would be the shock of a lifetime.

However, lir was an in-game currency, and there was the anti-RMT law that functionally prevented any money flow between reality and *Dendro*, keeping the lir wholly separate.

And as a capable Master who'd made it into the rankings, Max could feasibly save that up in a short amount of time. Because of that, while she wasn't thinking too hard about how she'd get the money to pay off this debt, she wasn't overly concerned about it.

Well... Chelsea thought. *As long as they're not as unlucky as Leon—well,* *Eldridge—anyone who makes it close to the top probably won't have many money problems...* Thinking of her childhood friend and his recent financial issues, Chelsea gave Max a sympathetic look.

"If you want hundreds of millions, your best bet is probably goin' to the deeper levels of the Tomb Labyrinth and prayin' for good drops," Max said. "It ain't easy to make full use of Ipetam's skills there, but this katana could change that."

"An expedition such as dreams are built upon... (Going there together could be a lot of fun!)"

"Well, then let's do that whenever our schedules line up!" And with that Chelsea concluded their future moneymaking plans and went on to talk about what they would do today.

Ultimately, they decided that they'd have a meal, then go sparring together.

"What should we get?" asked Chelsea.

"Why not just grab somethin' from a random stall?"

"Well, then let's split up, buy whatever we want, and bring it all to one place. I think the park in the Fifth District sounds good—the one with the tables and benches."

"I acquiesce. (Okay.)"

"Sounds good."

And so, having temporarily parted from her friends, Juliet began looking around for food stalls, wondering what to buy.

I guess it's better if we don't all get the same things... she thought. Chelsea insisted that it'd be more interesting if they didn't plan what each of them would get, and while Juliet agreed, she wanted to avoid buying the same things.

That meant she had to go for something she thought the others wouldn't, but nothing came to mind.

A big reason for that was the fact that Chelsea always got *so* much food that there was almost inevitably going to be some overlap no matter what Juliet got.

"I stand before a feast of the unknown... (What should I buy...?)" Unable to find anything that caught her eye, Juliet found herself at a loss. Just then...

"Not here. Not there. I can't find it anywhere."

...she heard a familiar voice saying something similar to herself.

"G?"

"Oh? Julie! I haven't seen you since last night!"

When Juliet called out to her, G ran over with a spring in her step. It was daytime, so she was using her umbrella, but other than that, she looked the same as she had yesterday.

"What ails thee? (What's wrong?)"

"I heard about King of Destruction's popcorn. It's like this new big thing here in Gideon, so I've been looking for it all over. Just seeing a *Superior* selling popcorn could totally go viral! It'll do some big numbers no matter what!"

"Ohh..." Juliet was aware of the popcorn too. It was a snack being sold by none other than King of Destruction, Shu Starling—her friend's older brother.

However...

"That very sovereign of devastation now feels the burden of these festivities weighing upon his shoulders. (He's really busy during The Tournaments...)"

"Ohh. Right. He's doing security at the arena. What a shame..." said G, dropping her shoulders and letting out a sigh.

"...Mine own coffers, though, contain what you desire. (I have some stocked up. Do you want it?)" said Juliet, unable to watch G pout like this.

"Seriously?! You're sure?! That's great! That's *really* great!" G took Juliet's hand and hopped up and down in glee.

It made Juliet glad she'd offered, but...

Huh? Since she was surrounded by so many passersby, Juliet realized she'd defaulted to using her affected manner of speech—"Julietese," as some called it.

However, G didn't seem to be bothered by that. She'd carried on a conversation like she'd understood every word. She seemed basically like Ray in this regard, and Juliet found it strange.

"Weren't you also looking for something?" G asked, cutting short Juliet's thought and bringing her back to the conversation.

"The path of a gourmand is endless, and I, too, tread upon its many twists and turns. (I'm also looking for a food stall...)" Juliet took the opportunity to tell G what she was doing, figuring that G might've seen something while walking around and looking for the popcorn.

"You too? We're in the same boat! What stall are you looking for?"

"Culinary delights few have laid eyes upon. (Anything rare and interesting, basically.)" Juliet asked if she'd seen any unusual foods that were less likely to overlap with Chelsea's haul.

"Well... How about a drink that goes through the colors of the rainbow as you drink it? They say the taste changes too."

That was enough to make Juliet's eyes widen and sparkle.

"Then I must make haste. Ah, and if thou art willing, a banquet with my companions and thy promised treasure awaiteth thee. (I think I'll go get it right away. Oh, I'm eating with my friends. Do you wanna join? I gotta give you that popcorn too.)"

"Sure! Thanks a bunch! Don't mind if I do!"

And so, the two went to buy the rainbow drink, along with some other food, and then headed to the park where their group was set to meet.

"Oh. You're the first one here... Wait, who's this with you?"

When the pair arrived at the park, they found Max sitting at one of the tables. Max immediately gave G a suspicious look.

"A companion brought to my side by the whim of fate, known to all as G. (She's G, a friend I happened to run into.)"

"I'm G—Julie's friend, G! I think we're going to get along great!"

"Uh... I'm Max. A pleasure."

So she's the type who's not at all bothered by how Juliet talks, just like Ray, Max thought. *Then again, she's kinda got her own weird way of talking.*

She then noticed that G was looking right at her.

"What?"

"Your clothes are really nice. Looks great on you!"

"My design, then, has borne fruit... (I know, right?! I picked them out for her!)" Max had once challenged Juliet to a duel, lost, and been compelled to be her dress-up doll as punishment. These were the clothes Juliet had put her in, and for no particular reason, Max had just kept wearing them ever since.

"Julie! You really do have great taste in fashion! Can I take some photos of you?" G asked Max.

"Sure, I guess," Max replied, prompting G to clap in glee and pull out a magic camera. *Yeah, I can see why they're friends,* Max thought. *She's even got this whole devil thing goin' with her horns and tail.*

And thanks to her parents, Max was more than used to having her picture taken.

"So you understand all that Juliet's sayin', huh?" Max asked as she was being photographed. It was the same question Juliet had had on her mind earlier.

"I guess I'm just used to it. My brother's novels are also full of those weird turns of phrase."

"That so?" Max wondered if it was something anyone could *actually* get used to, but then she realized that she herself also had a better grasp of Julietese than she did when they first met.

"Thanks! I got some really good ones! Have some copies!"

"Sure, whatever... Wait, these *are* really good. You a pro?"

"She is one whose calling is to spread spectacle across the world. (G is a content creator.)"

"Really? That sure is somethin'."

Right as G finished taking Max's photos, Chelsea finally joined them.

"Sorry for the wait, you two! Wait, three?"

"A companion brought to my side by the whim of fate, known to all as G."

"I'm G—Julie's friend, G! I think we're going to get along great!"

"Those are the exact same lines you used with me," Max said.

"Oh? G, huh? As far as Julie's friends go, you're pretty...*normal*."

"Are you even listenin' to yourself...?" Max felt that was a weird thing for Juliet's *best* friend to say—but at the same time, another question popped into her head.

Is she really that *normal?* The horns, tail, and the crown felt like features that made her stand out even more than Juliet. *Well, maybe it's normal by Dendro standards. There's people here who wear animal costumes all the time.*

As Max rationalized Chelsea's statement, Chelsea and G shook hands, introducing themselves.

With everyone gathered, they showed each other the food they'd brought. Thankfully, Juliet was the only one who'd gotten the rainbow drink.

"It's so interesting! Tastes good too! This would get so many views!" G was already acting like a part of the group, enjoying the mountain of food Chelsea had brought while giving her thoughts on Juliet's rainbow drink.

"Views, huh...? If you're a content creator, what kind of content do you make, anyway? Food reviews?" Max asked.

"I do a variety of things. Singing streams, game commentary, events I set up with my *Dendro* clan, et cetera..."

"That so?"

"But recently, basically everyone in my clan has just been mining a mountain. It's not much of a show."

"Sounds like it'd make good background noise for people to listen to while they work or something..."

"That's not what I'm going for. I make content because I want people to look at me. That's why I came to Gideon. There's this whole festival going on, and I met Julie here," G said before taking a sip of her drink, looking really happy. Hearing her words made Juliet look slightly bashful.

But there was one here who was just watching the exchange in silence—Chelsea noticed something and couldn't help but ask.

"Hey, G, I have a li'l question..."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Why are you *usin' an umbrella*?" G had been carrying an umbrella ever since she'd met up with Juliet today. Even after she sat down and began eating, she was still resting the open umbrella against her shoulder, hiding the top half of her body from sunlight. However, the sun wasn't even that bright today, which made this a little unusual.

"Oh! My face is weak against ultraviolet rays, so I use it whenever it's daytime. UV is the enemy."

"You worry that much about an avatar's skin? Is it like a restriction or somethin'?" There were jobs that had certain restrictions based on the in-game clock—those in the vampire grouping, for example, which suffered major stat reductions during the day. Embryos could have similar restrictions too. Chelsea assumed that there was something like that making G use an umbrella.

"That's basically what it is. You got it right!" G nodded, not denying the assumption whatsoever. "I get that it takes a lot of space, so I'm sorry about that."

“It’s fiiine. It’s a big table.”

“Yeah. Chelsea bought so much food, but it all fits on it no problem.”

“Quell thy fears. (Don’t worry about it.)”

“Heh heh heh. Okay. Thanks.”

The four then continued to have a fun lunchtime.

“Thanks for the lunch. It was really tasty! Seriously delicious. Especially KoD’s popcorn...”

Having finished eating, G basked in the postlunch warmth, clearly ecstatic. As promised, Juliet had given her some of the famous popcorn, and she seemed to be very satisfied with it.

“I know, right? It’s crazy good!” said Chelsea.

“Though I hear that the bear’s actually holdin’ back when he makes it,” said Max. “He said that if he actually cooked for real, it’d shock your taste buds so much it’d kill ya. It sounds like a joke, but...yeah.”

“And thus thou shalt be delivered unto the pearly gates... (So tasty it *literally* takes you to heaven...)”

The three of them agreed with G. Shu’s cooking skills were simply *that* absurd.

“That sounds interesting! I’d love to try that! It might be difficult *for me*, though...” G muttered.

“That bear’s... Well, that guy’s elusive even now that his identity’s out in the open. At least he has a clan and a base now, so it’s a little easier to get a hold of him.”

“And he said he’s been busy with security and farming materials and whatever.”

Chelsea and Max expressed their agreement with G’s sentiment.

“Hm...?” However, Juliet felt as if G’s words held some different meaning. She couldn’t find a way to express how, but she found something off about them.

“Anyway, we’ve eaten, so let’s go sparring! I gotta test my katana too!” said Max, cutting off Juliet’s thoughts before she could put them into words.

“Sparring?” G asked.

“Yeah. That’s what the three of us planned to do after lunch. Wanna join us? It’ll be a chance to fight against three ranking duelists!”

Chelsea’s words made G tilt her head.

“Ranking duelists? You’re gonna meet some?”

“Meet some? You’re lookin’ at ’em,” said Max.

“Ah hah hah,” Chelsea chuckled. “So Julie didn’t tell ya, huh? The three of us are in Altar’s duel rankings. Julie’s in fourth place, I’m in eighth, and Maxie’s in twenty-fourth.”

“...I’ll be near the top eventually,” Max added, seemingly bothered by her comparatively low rank. She’d once tried to beat Juliet and skip ahead, but she lost. Ever since then she’d been going up the ranks one by one.

“So duelists aren’t just naked wrestlers, their victims, and card gamers...” said G.

“The hell do you mean?!” Max shouted.

“Ohhh. You’re from Legendaria, huh? Their top-rankers are known to be pretty...*colorful*,” said Chelsea.

“Sounds to me like they give us a bad name!”

“Hey, it’s just like how Tenchi’s duelists are known to be battle junkies. It’s a national thing.”

“Ngh... But my old country’s battle addiction peaks with Jubei at fourth. The top three duelists are way more balanced as people... Definitely not as fighters, though.”

It seemed that the disposition of duelists varied greatly depending on where they were from.

“Thus, we now must make haste to our ephemeral conflict. Whither shalt thou go? (So yeah, we’re gonna go spar now. What about you, G?)”

“I have something to do when it gets dark, so it depends on the location. Where are you going?”

“The arena in the Eighth District. A friend lets us use it.”

“The Eighth Arena?” G put her hand to her mouth as if in thought and shifted her gaze. “...Okay. That place works for me. I’ll come with you! I can watch,” she eventually said with a nod.

“Thou art most graciously welcome indeed. (Sure, go ahead.)” said Juliet with a smile on her face.

“Hm? Wait, G, didn’t ya come here for the final Tournament?” Max asked. “The public matches must’ve started by now. Shouldn’t you go watch ’em instead?” She felt that if any outsiders came to Gideon at this point in time, they would likely be here for that, so it struck Max as odd that G didn’t seem to care about it whatsoever.

“I’m here for a different reason. Well, I came to meet my brother too, so...two reasons, actually.”

“Thou art bound to another by the ties of blood? (Oh? You have a brother?)”

“Yeah. He’s with Altar, so...yeah. But he’s now watching the final Tournament, so here I am.”

Is that why she said she had something to do when it gets dark? Juliet thought. The final match of The Tournaments would start sometime late evening or after sundown. If G’s brother was in the audience, he wouldn’t be free until after that.

“I see,” said Chelsea. “But if you’re in Gideon, you can’t leave without seein’ some duels. At least watch us spar. If anything, things could get more intense than those Tournaments.”

“Okay! I’ll do just that, then! I’ll enjoy myself, then!” said G, filled with unfiltered glee.

Her expression was very natural, clearly showing that she really was excited about what would happen next.

Thus, the four of them made their way to the Eighth Arena.

◇◆

Upon arriving, the four entered the Eighth Arena through the entrance once used by the spectators. They opened the glass door and went in as if it were nothing, which made G wonder.

“No keys? What’s up with the security here? Why are they so careless?” she asked. In response, Max showed her the gold plate given to her by Ray.

“I borrowed a magic key,” she said. “Entering without it activates the barrier, and breakin’ through it sounds the alarm, so the security here is just fine.”

Though this Eighth Arena was currently being rented by a clan, the clan’s main members each had a key, and the leader—Ray—had multiple spares. One of those spares had been given to Max.

“I see. And just one is enough to let in everyone with you?”

“Yeah. You can also use it to change the stage’s settings.”

They continued walking as the two talked. Juliet and Chelsea were taking the lead, since they’d already used the arena yesterday. Passing what used to be a corridor meant for duelists, they arrived at the stage.

Just like last time, the members of Death Period were not present, so there was no one to greet them.

"I'll set things up, then. You mind if I use the aquatic fight setting again?" Chelsea asked as she began to manipulate the arena's controls.

"I don't mind," said Juliet. "What about you, Maxie?"

"It doesn't matter to me either way. I'm just here to test my katana," said Max as she took out Sekiun—the blade she'd won at the auction.

"Aquatic fight? You can fill this whole place with water?"

"Yeah. There's a setting for it. I'm gonna fill it up like *this* today, though."

Chelsea set the stage by taking out Poseidon and using its water summoning powers. It was a blatant brute-force approach—but it reduced the water bill, so nobody else was going to say anything about it.

"Oh? So it doesn't spill and just keeps filling up!" said G.

"Legendaria doesn't have aquatic arena fights?" Juliet asked.

"No. I don't remember ever seeing one, anyway. They just fight like normal. On the stage."

"Legendaria's tribes can gain serious advantages based on their environment. If they don't fight in the most generic setting, it'd just be unfair."

Chelsea's explanation made sense to everyone present.

"By the way, Julie, you're talking different now. Why?" G asked.

"Um..."

"Julie's a pretty shy girl, so she talks different whenever there's lots of people around."

"I see. That's kinda cute."

"Is it?" Max asked.

"Nnngh..." Juliet's cheeks flushed a bashful red.

"Speaking of, the way you talk is different too, G. Like how you often say the same thing twice..."

"Oh. This is intentional. It's on purpose."

"Intentional?"

"I say the same thing in multiple ways so that my words are understood correctly and the nuance isn't lost."

"So it's a 'so important you say it twice' kinda deal?"

"More or less. That's about right," G said as she nodded with a smile. "I want my words to get across properly. If you say something wrong, you can attract flames and drama."

"That sounds like a peek into the dark side of being a content creator..."

"Actually, wouldn't talkin' more increase the risk of sayin' the wrong thing?" Max asked.

"That is one way to see it. This is another. So yeah!"

"I'm dooone!" said Chelsea, putting an end to their exchange.

The stage within the barrier was completely underwater by now, and there were a number of Chelsea's boats floating about, acting as platforms to stand on.

"All right! I'll show ya how much stronger I've gotten! Ipetam! Let's go!"

"Grrraaah!"

Following Max's call, her Embryo emerged from her left hand. It was Ipetam—a bearlike Sentinel with swords growing out of its back.

"Ah ha haaa! Well, *someone's* motivated. But I'm not letting ya catch up with me that easily!" said Chelsea, looking more than ready to face Max.

"You two go first, then," said Juliet. "G and I will spectate."

Chelsea and Max walked into the barrier, while Juliet and G went to the audience seating. It was a good bit higher than the stage, but Juliet was able to fly up, while G managed to clear the height with a jump. They then took a seat and watched Chelsea and Max's aquatic battle.

"I can't say I've seen many fights on the water, so this is pretty interesting," said G. "I am familiar with *underwater* fights, though."

"Really? Oh, but I guess even Altar doesn't have many places that use boats. You have to go to Keyora for that." Granvaloa was perhaps the only country where fights *above* the water were commonplace.

"You Altaran duelists are something else, though," said G. "They're fighting for real, and it's enjoyable to watch."

Her excited face as she watched the duel on the stage was proof that these words came from the heart. Chelsea and Max were both non-SJ max-level Masters, and the clash of their combat expertise was a sight to behold.

"Is it different in Legendaria?" Juliet asked.

"A lot of duels there are about forcing your own rules onto the other person. Skydrag'in actually turns it into an entirely different game. Well, not like I'm in a position to talk."

“What’s your combat style, anyway? You probably have some high stats, don’t you?”

“What makes you say that?”

“That jump you did. Also, your movements are very smooth, so I figured you fight a lot.”

Juliet’s combat sense was very high even by duelist standards, so she’d noticed many things while observing G since they met yesterday.

“Yeah. I’m actually *very, very* strong, if I do say so myself.” Showing no humility, G answered as if this were an absolute truth. “My Embryo is in the Castle family, though, so it’s not well suited for duels. I also fight using monsters that are above my capacity.”

“I see...” Duel rules forbid the use of tamed monsters that didn’t fit within the minion capacity and had to use party slots. And excluding exceptions like Lang’s Halley, Castles were a rare sight in duels.

With that, Juliet understood that G was indeed powerful, but just not suited for arena fights.

“Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t have asked you to talk about your abilities...”

“It’s fine! It’s completely fine! I revealed most of my powers in my videos. Though, this tells me that you haven’t watched them yet.”

“Ngh. Sorry...”

“Ah ha ha. You only found out about me yesterday. I get it, I get it,” G chuckled as she patted Juliet’s head.

That gesture made Juliet feel like, although their avatars were about the same age, G was probably older than her.

“By the way, about you borrowing this place...”

“Huh? Yeah...”

“Are the three of you on good terms with the owner... Ray Starling?” Though she found the change of subject somewhat strange, Juliet nodded in response.

“Yeah, we’re...friends. Yeah, friends.”

“I see. So that’s how it is.”

G put her hand over her mouth and shifted her gaze, just like she had at the park. It must’ve been a habit of hers whenever she was lost in thought.

“I wonder if I’ll get to meet him today.”

“...Huh?”

“Oh. Uh... I’m intruding in his place like this, and I’m just wondering if it’s okay to do that without even introducing myself.”

Juliet felt something slightly off about this, but ultimately brushed it off.

“Ray... He’s probably watching The Tournaments right now. I think he’ll come back here once that’s done...”

“I see. In that case...”

Whatever she said after that was too quiet for Juliet to hear. However, G’s eyes were shining with a light different than any before.

“Oh.” Then, as if noticing something, G looked up at the sky and, for some reason, began waving.

However, Juliet didn’t see anything there.

“Umm, what are you doing?”

“Mmm, nothing much. Just wishing upon a star.”

“Huh?” It was still daytime and stars were nowhere in sight, so Juliet found that very odd.

“Things are gonna get so fun soon. I’m so excited.”

“I see...” Juliet was happy that her friend was having a good time.

But at the same time, she felt that there was something strange about all this.

G’s behavior just now strongly reminded her of King of Asuras, Jubei Kaga—the powerful foe they’d faced in the recent event.

Chapter 5: The Night's Arrival

Sorcerer, Ray Starling

I was in the box that Marie had reserved for us, watching the matches of the final day.

There was enough space here for everyone in the clan, but the only one with me here at the moment was Marie. Figaro was one of the contestants. Shu and Hannya were on security duty. B3 was still in college—her classes were keeping her from leaving like I did. Rook was leveling to prepare for when he'd challenge his UBM. Kasumi's trio were simply in school. Nemesis was meditating again.

Because of all that, Marie and I were the only Death Period members watching The Tournaments.

"So that's a Caldinan *Superior*... Man, he's strong." King of Termination's Embryo had a really powerful skill.

He'd been matched first with Bishmal, who definitely wasn't a pushover. He was specialized in hand-to-hand combat empowered by fire, and the destructive force it delivered had kept him high in the duel rankings for a quite a while at this point.

However, it was precisely because he was so specialized that he was a terrible matchup against King of Termination.

The same could be said about the bout that followed. Even though these Masters excelled at what they did, there was simply nothing they could do.

"It heals him, gives him resistance and a new means of attack..."

It could be roughly categorized as a counter-type Embryo. Considering that its effects relied on the opponent's damage, you could even say that it had some similarities to Nemesis.

"What do you think?" I asked Marie.

"Weeell... Based on the stats, either the skill can only be used near death, or it gets stronger the closer he is to dying. Regardless, it's probably combo'd with Rear Soldier."

I nodded. Rear Soldier's Last Stand was a skill that let you survive with

1 HP for five seconds even if you took fatal damage or had damaging debuffs on you.

I had learned about it after taking Death Soldier and had even considered using it myself. However, it was a choice between five seconds alive and being active for ten times that long after death, so I'd picked the latter.

Picking both was also an option, but I'd prioritized jobs with other useful skills rather than the extra five seconds of action.

Another notable thing about Last Stand was that it had a five second cooldown. Last Command could only be used again after a resurrection—a rather harsh condition—while Last Stand would be ready again after just some healing.

But whatever flaws he had, defeating KoT after he was fully healed and granted resistances was a huge challenge.

"I think that healing power must have a limited number of uses," said Marie. "Do you have a guess how many?"

"Seven. Eight at most."

"Well, that was a quick answer."

"The skill names are a dead giveaway," I responded. The words KoT said right before healing were "Dubhe" and "Merak." Those were the α and β stars in the Big Dipper constellation—sometimes called the Septentrion.

If the skill names and the Embryo as a whole were really based on that, he could use the skill a total of seven times.

Even if you included *that one star* that was often mentioned alongside the seven, eight would be the absolute limit.

"It's the strict use condition and use limit that allows the skill to be as powerful as it is," I said. "Though, it looks like the resistances he gets cover a pretty wide range. Probably that's the most important factor when he's pushed to the edge of death, not the specific means of attack."

"Yeah, probably." When Bishmal almost killed him by breaking his neck, KoT gained resistance to not just strangleholds, but physical attacks as a whole—including Bishmal's kicks. It might have even covered more than that.

"It's really powerful in duels," I said. I would guess that normally, after he gained his resistances, some time needed to pass before the number of uses and resistances he'd gained reset. Nemesis was another counter-type, and her Counter Absorption recharged one use per day, so it was fair to assume KoT had something similar.

However, duels were special—once the matches were over and the barriers undone, the fighters returned to the state they had been in before the duels. Even if KoT fought multiple matches in a row, he could start each of them with all the uses of this skill available, and every one of his opponents would have to overcome his healing and buffs at least seven times, maybe more.

Experienced Masters had their ults and other aces up their sleeve, but usually not too many of them. In most cases, they just had two: their Embryo ult and a job ult. Only a small portion of them had MVP rewards and other things on top of these.

However, defeating KoT required a minimum of eight, if not *nine* different means of delivering lethal damage. While this was possible if you fought him as a group, that was really difficult to achieve in a one-on-one fight. Even all-rounders like Xunyu and Juliet would struggle.

“And I... I don’t actually have enough either, do I?” I had one attack with fixed damage from Vengeance and the like, two with Purgatorial Flames, three with the lethal debuffs from Hellish Miasma, four with Shining Despair, five with the holy element from Grand Cross and Purifying Silverlight, six with physical damage from either Gardranda or copying KoT’s STR using Chaser, and seven with a risky swing of my still-cursed axe.

Huh? Wait, I’m actually kinda close, I thought. My Wind Hoof bomb trick was physical damage, so that would overlap with some of the others, but...didn’t I have something more?

...Ohhh. If the axe’s element selection worked right, that might actually give me the upper hand against KoT.

“But...” I mused. That was really just if I was the only one attacking. I’d still have to withstand KoT’s attacks and bring him down while my own attacks were being rendered useless too. “The way he’s fighting in these matches isn’t how he usually fights, right?”

“No, it’s not,” said Marie. “The way he normally fights is uhhh... Oh, he’s like your brother’s battleship, but human-sized.” An unpleasant expression crossed her face as she remembered getting bombarded by Baldr in Noz Forest.

All that firepower in a human form, though? A wide-scale extermination type...the very *thought* of fighting like that inside a city like Gideon was terrifying.

That must've been why he'd fought Bishmal mostly empty-handed.

"When dueling in Caldina, that combat style allowed him to win without even using his healing and buff skill," said Marie. "He never lost a duel... Though, he also never had a public match against his biggest counter—The Fight."

I guess they settled who was stronger within the clan and didn't want to reveal their cards in a public match? I thought. *Though, that makes me wonder about The Fight's combat style too...*

"Is the arena situation there different than in Gideon?" I asked. It sounded that KoT didn't hesitate to use all his firepower back in Caldina, unlike here.

"Oh, it is. Everything is wide-open and there are fewer people. The duels breathe some life into their surroundings, but comparing it to Gideon is just unfair. Gideon is the greatest dueling location in the Seven Great Countries—it's even better than Tenchi in terms of providing a venue for duels, if not in the average power of its duelists."

"Well, it's got a whole twelve arenas... Thirteen if you count our base." That made me wonder why arenas were so concentrated here in Gideon. I'd heard that the city predated the Kingdom of Altar, but...

"Anyway, based on what we've seen so far..." said Marie. "Figaro is gonna win this."

"Yeah." My thoughts had gone off on a tangent, but I could only agree with that.

Figaro had a large arsenal of weapons—many of them MVP rewards—and his Embryo empowered them, making him the most well-rounded attacker in the kingdom. He could easily field more than eight forms of offense, so he could overcome all of KoT's resistances and defeat him. Additionally, KoT was fighting with a self-imposed handicap that kept him from using his high-firepower weapons.

"Bad compatibility and holding himself back," said Marie. "With these two disadvantages, it's sooo clear who's winning this."

With his offensive powers curtailed like that, KoT had no hope of beating Figaro. As things were, it was obvious that our duel champion had this in the bag.

“Hm...” However, if both of them could use all their powers and weapons to the fullest—if both of them were capable of *actually* killing each other—then it could honestly go either way.

That was what I believed, and I was sure *he* thought the same thing.

The Tournaments’ matches continued, and everything was going about as you’d expect.

KoT was climbing up the left side of the bracket as Figaro was rising up the right. Many powerful Masters were taking part in this, but they were all falling before the two *Superiors*.

In the quarterfinals, KoT had defeated a duelist in the middle of the rankings, and in the semifinals, he’d brought down Catherine Kongo—the second in the kill rankings.

She(?) had actually gotten pretty close to beating him. She’d first gotten him with Charm, then four times using her tamed monsters in their human forms, and then yet again in close quarters physical combat using her Embryo ult. That made a total of six times.

But once KoT had the resistances and the attacks that countered her monsters, she finally fell. The skill names he used for every heal were all stars in the Big Dipper, adding credence to my idea that he could come back at least seven times.

“By the way, why were her monsters in human form?” I asked.

“Oh. That’s because their true forms don’t fit in the barrier. The third maid—the one with the green hair—is actually a High-End Disaster Elemental. She’s probably bigger than all of Gideon.”

...I see, I thought. So she(?) was also fighting with a handicap. It was like how Shu’s Baldr in its fifth form onward couldn’t be used in the arena either.

But man, I’d never thought that tamed monsters could be that big.

“Weeell, if they weren’t tamed, Catherine Kongou’s four ‘Nethermaids’ are pretty much guaranteed to be UBMs,” said Marie. “If someone goes around with a retinue this destructive, it’s not at all surprising that they’re only behind KoD in the kill rankings... Though, the third... The one who beat me could probably beat Catherine one-on-one.”

I felt like I heard her say something under her breath at the end there, but I chose to ignore it.

Anyway, KoT had already advanced to the finals, and Figaro just beat his semifinals opponent too.

"It's getting pretty dark," I said as I noticed the twilight.

The finals had been delayed due to preparations, so by the time the match actually began, it would probably be night. The Masters of Cor Leonis—another name for the star called Regulus—and Septentrion would fight beneath the starlight, and I felt like there was a kind of romance to that.

"Hm...?" As that thought went through my mind, I heard a knock on the door to our box. Had some clan member logged in in time for this? Did the arena staff have something to tell us? Wondering who it was, I opened the door and...

"Hello again. We met just a short while ago."

Behind the door, there stood King of Light, F.

"Why are *you* here?" I asked. "And how did you know our seat?"

"Research." So he'd been spying on us using his drones again.

I swear he'll get arrested for this someday, I thought.

"As for why I am here... There is something I feel I should inform you about." *Inform us...?* "I'm currently using my drones to observe Gideon..."

That made me notice that his right eye was closed, and I wondered if his drone Embryo could be linked to his vision in order to give him a bird's-eye view of the area... It had been a real pain when I'd fought him, and I bet he was using it right now.

"And?" I prompted.

"There is trouble at your clan's base. Three of your duelist friends have gotten caught up in it, as well."

"HUH?!" Both Marie and I let out a cry of shock. This had really come out of nowhere.

There's trouble at the Eighth Arena?! And three duelist friends... Right! I gave a spare key to Max! Who else would be...?

"Should you not hurry there?" King of Light interrupted my thoughts.

"What kind of trouble?!" I asked. "Are they all right?!"

"Please go and see it with your own eyes—I want to see your reaction."

"Nnngh...!" Of course—this guy was so obsessed with his research for inspiration and reference material that it was literally *criminal*. "Ugh... Marie! I'll get on Silver and take a look!"

“Shouldn’t I go too...?”

“You stay and watch over this guy! He might be planning something—don’t let him out of sight!”

“I see. That’s definitely necessary,” Marie said.

“I don’t understand why you’re so distrustful.”

Remember what you did during the last event here in Gideon and try saying that again, I thought. Regardless, I left the two where they were and ran out through the arena’s exit.

“Nemesis! You awake?!”

“Yes, and I know the situation. I wonder what that trouble he mentioned is...”

“I have no idea. For all we know, it might have something to do with KoT’s appearance in The Tournaments. But whatever it is, we can’t ignore it.”

“Indeed!” Once out of the arena, I instantly took out Silver, jumped on his back, and flew off. I also shattered a job crystal and switched my main job to Paladin, just in case.

My destination: our base, the Eighth Arena.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena, Box Seat

Ray had stormed out, leaving behind the two pre-*Superiors*. Neither of them knew what to do about this awkward situation, but the first one to break the silence was Marie.

“Standing at the entrance like that is a bit annoying, so why not come in and sit down? The seats here were reserved by our clan, and there’s more than we need.”

“Oh? Well, if you would offer, then I will do just that. The view here is really quite good, after all,” said F as he entered the box and sat down *right where Ray had been sitting*. The sight of that made Marie grimace.

The conversation ended there, and they were now both just waiting for the final match, not saying a word. However, Marie felt that this really wasn’t going to work out and broke the silence again.

“So? What are you plotting this time?” she asked.

“You’re asking that now too? *I* am not plotting anything today, but I see that people around here really don’t trust me.”

“Of course—and it’s not just because of the Love-Duel Festival either. Do you have any idea how many incidents you’ve probably caused?”

“Oh, but I help people too. My goal isn’t crime, but *research*.”

“Ha! An author who can’t do ‘research’ without bothering people. What a laugh,” said Marie—which was ironic, considering she herself had been engaging in commissioned PK in order to role-play as the protagonist of her own work. If her fellow clan members—especially B3—were here, they would’ve definitely told her that she was in no position to criticize F.

A brief silence ensued. F also knew that Marie was a player killer—the *Superior* Killer, no less—and did indeed consider retorting by pointing out that she was hardly better than him.

However, instead, he chose to attack her from a different angle.

“By the way, your avatar... That’s the protagonist of *Into the Shadow*, isn’t it?”

“Yes. What of it?” Though Marie had tried to hide it, F’s question startled her. *Into the Shadow* was the title of the manga created by her real-life self, Nagisa Ichimiya.

“I read every volume,” said F. “Though I do prefer the tankobon format, so I missed anything that wasn’t included in those.”

When the magazine it was published in was canceled, Marie’s manga had gone on hiatus before it was finished, and the newest chapters had yet to be collected into the tankobon format. However, the fact that F was a tankobon-buying reader made Marie think that he might’ve not been so bad after all.

Hook, line, and sinker.

“Oh yes, I read it. And I enjoyed it a good bit,” F added. “Though, I feel like the volcano eruption that helped defeat Upas-Kamuy the Crusher could’ve used a bit more buildup. The final scene *did* happen on a mountain, and I understand that when Daisy’s doomed battle revealed that fire was effective, you intended that to be foreshadowing, but I still felt like there was a step or two missing in the lead-up to that eruption ending the fight. It would’ve been better if there was a little bit more information sprinkled around to preface it.”

“Y-Yeah,” Marie said. The harsh criticism of her work caught her completely off guard and hit her where it hurt. F had already guessed that she was a similar type of person and purposely picked a critique that would sting.

Trouble was brewing at the Eighth Arena, the final match of The Tournaments was about to start...and in the background of all this, a mangaka and an author waged their little passive-aggressive war.

◇◆◇

Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth Arena

As the sun began to set, the sparring session at the Eighth Arena also reached its end. The boats and water used for the aquatic battle vanished, returning the stage to its original form.

“Ngh... Once again, I didn’t pull it off even a single time...” Juliet was the only one among the duelists who looked a bit down. That was because she hadn’t yet been able to master her MVP rewards.

“Well, your new stuff is a bit hard to use under duel rules,” said Chelsea. “It’s nothin’ like Maxie’s new sword—that one’s so simple and easy to wield. Only if you’re Maxie, though.”

“Yeah,” Max said. “I’m pretty sure the only ones besides me who could use it right are Jubei and Figaro.”

With the sparring over, it was time to share their thoughts. The three duelists were talking about what stood out for them about their sparring match, and this sight seemed to impress G somehow.

“You’re all so stoic!” she said. “I feel like I’m watching a shogi research society or something!”

“Well, our strongest duelist is *crazy* strong. If we don’t work hard, there’s no way we’ll ever catch up to him,” said Chelsea.

“I see. I can just feel your sporty passion! It’s so hot! It’s burning!”

G had just been watching a practice bout, but she pumped her fist in the air enthusiastically.

It was safe to say she seemed pretty excited.

“Oh, right. G, didn’t ya have some business?” Chelsea asked, just now remembering what G had said.

“Oh yeah! Do you think you’ll make it in time? I can fly you there if you’re in a hurry...” Juliet said.

“Oh no. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.” G shook her head, rejecting Juliet’s concerned offer. “I’m already where I need to be. *This* is the stage of the event.”

“Huh?” As G’s words filled Juliet with confusion...

“Max! Juliet! Chelsea...! What happened?!”

“Huh?! Ray?”

...Ray and Nemesis descended from the air upon Silver’s back and jumped down onto the stage. The girls thought that he looked unusually alarmed.

“What’s wrong? Why the panic?”

“Chelsea—oh, I was just told that there was some trouble here...”

“Trouble? No, there isn’t. We were just sparrin’, that’s all.” And it was true that there were no problems here—the sparring had ended without any issue whatsoever.

“I see,” said Ray. “Well, that’s good to know.”

“Indeed,” Nemesis concurred. “But then, why did King of Light say... Hm?”

That was when the two of them noticed the unfamiliar face among the duelists.

“Uhhh... And you are?” Ray called out to the one person he didn’t recognize, and...

“Eh heh heh. Thank you, brother dearest. Your timing is perfect, oh brother of mine.”

...instead of answering Ray’s question, she only...cracked a grin.

At the same time, countless orbs began rising all over the arena.

She’d set them up without anyone noticing, and they—or rather, the magic cameras—now activated all at once.

“What...?!” Ray wasn’t the only one confused now—Juliet’s trio clearly knew nothing about this either.

“Aaall righty, then! All eyes on G! Welcome to my channel!”

Only one person was speaking now, and it was the only voice that showed no hint of shock at the situation.

Everyone’s eyes focused on the speaker—the girl now standing in the middle of the arena stage, surrounded by cameras.

Acting like the arena was her personal studio, she turned to every which way with an expressive, smiling face full of life.

“Hello! We meet again! Maybe it’s been a while? Or perhaps you’re new here? In that case, let me introduce myself! I'm G, the *Superior* streamer and *Dendro* content creator!"

"G...?" The smiles and words she excitedly spread in every direction felt almost like they were meant not for Juliet and the rest, but for an invisible audience.

G continued as though her friend's confusion meant nothing.

"Remember what I announced last time? This premiere is for a battle against a very special guest! And my opponent this time is... Shock and awe! The strongest newbie! The one who beat multiple *Superiors*! Ray Starling the Unbreakable!" Saying that, she extended her palm toward Ray, and the cameras synchronized with her movements, instantly turning to film them.

Ray still didn't have a full grasp of the situation.

However, he already understood that this had to be the "trouble" he had been told about.

"Oh, and would you look at that! Julie and her Altarian duelist friends are joining too! Meanwhile... I'll be fighting solo! Huh?! Isn't that bad news for me?! Won't I lose?!" The cameras then panned over Juliet's trio, and G faked a little panicked reaction. "Well, the results are still unknown! I'll go as hard as I can! I'll seize the possibility even if it's beyond the radix point! Yeah!" After copying Ray's words like that, she lightly moved her hand, stopping the camera sync.

"So, yeah. A pleasure to meet you. Good evening, Ray Starling."

Though still smiling, G addressed him by name while behaving completely differently than she had when the cameras had been filming.

Ray said nothing. The drastic change in her behavior perplexed him, but at the same time, something in his memory was nagging at him.

Before he found his words, though, Nemesis spoke in his place.

"Who are you?! And what do you mean, 'battle'?!"

"I'm G—I already said that, though. Let me introduce myself another way..."

She answered directly this time, first giving them her name, and then...

"You know King of Light, F? I'm his little sister."

...revealed a truth that told Ray and Nemesis all they needed to know.

Ray's eyes widened as Nemesis said, "Huh?! So he *is* the one behind this!"

"Oh, I just asked him to lead you here. He'll only watch now and not involve himself at all. This event—this stage—is all mine," G said as she spun around joyously.

"Event...?"

"Yes. I'm about to... Oh."

Before G could finish, the situation shifted.

Chelsea swung her greataxe at her, while Max rushed in with her katana.

What followed was a noisy clash. However, it wasn't the sound of blades slicing through a human body...

"So you went at me the moment you realized I was planning something," said G. "You work fast. That was probably the right move...though it looks like you can't get past my *bodyguard*."

...it was the sound of something abnormally strong deflecting their strikes.

A horde of octopus-like tentacles were now sticking out from G's shadow, forming a barrier of flesh.

"Huh...?!"

"An Embryo...? No! A tamed monster!"

The tentacles then moved to retaliate against their attackers. Chelsea and Max dodged by jumping backward, but the tentacles shattered the stone stage.

"And a pretty strong one, at that," said G. "I'm not sure how he measures up, but I wouldn't be surprised if he's as tough as your summon... 'Gardranda,' right?"

"Well... You sure seem to know a lot about me," said Ray. "Did you get all that from KoL?"

"He has nothing to do with this. I don't think you understand how famous you are. You used her against both Hell General and King of Beasts—everyone knows about her."

Hearing that made Ray scowl. First Jubei, now G—his fame was really working against him.

"Though, you seem to *know me too*. So we're even on that count."

"What do you mean?"

"*This,*" G said as she closed the umbrella she had been using up until now.

The last rays of the setting sun shone directly on her face.

That was all. From Juliet's perspective, nothing had changed. Well, she was now wearing a choker that wasn't there before, but that was it.

But that little change meant a *lot*.

"Huh?!"

"*A disguise*?! So good that it ignores Reveal *and* Truth Discernment?!" Ray and Chelsea raised their voices as though surprised by something.

"Huh? What's with you two? She didn't change at all," said Max.

"Huh?! *She changed a ton*! She grew horns, a tail, and her face and clothes're all different! And wait... If she actually looks like this, and her name's G, then she's...!"

"What's going on...?" Juliet was lost.

Chelsea was talking about G's appearance as though she had only assumed this devilish form just now, but those features had been present since Juliet had met her yesterday. Why was Chelsea so shocked?

"Wait..." Juliet said as she was struck with a sudden realization. "Did *different people see you differently...*?"

Those words made G's smile grow deeper.

"Correct! I'm pretty well-known, and I got a lot of enemies, so I can't go outside without a disguise."

G put a hand on her neck and tore off the choker-shaped accessory. It was an *Epic MVP reward*, hidden until now by becoming one with her skin.

Its name was Nightcrawl Chaos, Netherface, and its effects were concealment and interfering with others' perceptions. It also only worked when out of direct sunlight.

"Those who know me don't see me as *me*. The only exceptions are those who've just found out about me and anyone on my friend list. This is off-the-record, by the way. It's a secret I haven't even revealed in my videos!"

"Friend... Oh." The MVP reward obscured her true identity from everyone except those who didn't know her—and those who were on her friends list. Yesterday, Max and Juliet were the former. Today, Juliet was the latter.

And since Ray and Chelsea already knew her, they saw her as someone else.

If you knew G's appearance ahead of time, she simply assumed a different appearance, making you unable to recognize her. If you knew her job ahead of time, Reveal even displayed false stats. As long as she stayed in the shadows, no one could identify who she really was.

That was the reason G could walk around such a crowded city without anyone noticing her.

Juliet and Max didn't know her, and thus saw her true form—while Chelsea, who regularly gathered info about powerful Masters even if they were foreign, had seen her differently.

"Since you didn't see the real me, you must already know who I am, right?"

"Yeah..." Indeed—Ray knew too. Following his recent battle against Overlord Acedia, ZZZ, Ray had looked into the other Overlords and came across the one who revealed more info about herself than any other.

She was...

"A member of Desire, just like ZZZ... Overlord Invidia, G!"

"Yes! Exactly! That's me! I'm the Overlord!"

An Overlord and a *Superior*. One of Legendaria's greatest criminals who reveled in chaos.

That was G's true identity.

Juliet's eyes widened. The revelation of her friend's real identity filled her with shock.

"And why would someone like you come *here*?" Ray asked.

"I came to take the arena! I'm gonna steal it!" G answered, proudly announcing that this was indeed a theft.

"Steal...?"

"Yes! Exactly!" G clapped once and then spread her arms wide. "I want an arena! This facility itself! It's useful and rare even in this world, and I *want* it!"

She closed her right hand as if grasping something.

"I want to avenge my brother. I want to defeat the one who took him down—Ray Starling!"

She gave a thumbs-up with her left hand, then turned the gesture upside down.

“And I want to record my entire battle against you. This is my stage—my production—and I’m gonna bring it to the viewers!”

Finally, she drew her outstretched arms back and crossed them across her body, embracing herself.

“*Three* birds with one stone! That’s what I want!”

“Well, aren’t you *greedy*.”

“Yes! Yes, I am! Exactly!” G agreed with Ray’s comment, all smiles.

She once again waved her hand, syncing herself up with her cameras.

“I’m so greedy they call me the Bottomless! I am a member of Desire and an Overlord who carves the whole world away!” As she talked, she was becoming more energized. “That’s why! Here and now! I’m starting a game! By me! For me!” As she spoke, the sun completely vanished beneath the horizon...and night fell upon the world.

Thus, she declared her final intention.

“*The night comes*! The stars align! The time of the Overlord begins!” G held up the crest on her left hand, showing a design like a sunken temple...

“The event begins... *Playground of the Great Old One—R’lyeh!*”

...and announced the beginning of her reign.

Chapter 6: The Fatal Fight, the Overlord's Descent

Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

While Ray's group was being dragged into the Overlord's event...

"By the way, did you not participate in The Tournaments? I don't believe I saw you in any of the public matches."

"Grrrgh... I-I don't think I saw you either."

...the two artists continued their verbal battle—this sarcastic back-and-forth.

"You didn't, because I didn't participate. Despite how it may seem, my face and identity are supposed to be a secret, so I wouldn't expose and embarrass myself in such a public setting. Surely you understand?"

Marie seemed to be losing ground here. Being defeated in her first Tournament fight was coming back to haunt her—and he knew her identity, giving F a huge advantage. He had a great many cards he could play against her, while it wasn't clear how Marie could approach him.

At some point, Marie had taken out her Arc-en-Ciel—and not the normal revolver form, but the single shot form meant for her ult. However, the mangaka side of her felt that fighting back against his words with violence would be a loss in its own right, so she was able to hold herself back...if only barely.

"Oh? Looks like it's time."

"Hm...? Ohh. It is."

But then, the end of their verbal battle arrived. The thing everyone here had been waiting for was about to begin—the ultimate match of the final Tournament.

The two *Superiors*—Figaro and Albert—were already facing each other on the stage, but the start of the match had yet to be announced.

Perhaps because it was the final day, Altimia A. Altar—the acting ruler and first princess of the kingdom—was currently making a speech about

The Tournaments so far.

"Hm...?" However, Marie, F, and some other members of the audience found it strange.

The speech was supposed to happen *after* the final match, yet the order had somehow been reversed.

F wondered why that had happened, and soon realized the reason.

He'd sent many drones all over the venue, and the information they provided let him know what would happen next.

"I see," he said. "So he'll lose the handicap for this one."

"What do you mean?"

The handicap in question was obviously the limitation on Albert's firepower. His consideration for the audience had rendered him unable to use his real combat style. If he fought Figaro like that, Figaro would have the upper hand in terms of both compatibility and sheer power.

Being from the same clan as him, Marie would've liked that, but it was unlikely that *Albert himself* would.

"Attention visitors. The stage will now undergo *maintenance* in preparation for the final match."

Shortly after Altimia concluded her speech, an announcement echoed through the venue. However, there seemed to be no damage to the stage, so what was the maintenance for?

The answer to that question came in the form of a person who parted the wind and flew in, stopping right above the stage.

Looking up at the sky, the spectators saw a lone woman. She was wearing a wizard's robe paired with a pointed hat, and she sat on a staff with both legs over one side, the classic picture of a witch riding a broomstick. The only thing that diverged from that image was the monocle over one eye.

Regardless, some people present already knew who she was.

"The maintenance will be done by the current Arch Sage—Integra Sedna Clarisse Flagman."

Integra—a friend of the first princess, and currently the only court mage. She was usually busy with work in Altea, so some wondered why she was here in Gideon.

Her sudden appearance made the audience look up at her in shock.

Meanwhile, Figaro was smiling, Albert showed no emotion, and Altimia made a face as though to say, “Finally, she’s arrived.”

The reason she’d pushed the speech forward was to buy Integra some time. This implied that the Arch Sage was necessary for the final match—and this was proven by what she did next.

“Miss Flagman will now reinforce the arena’s protections.” Following that announcement, Integra created a massive barrier over the existing one.

She was adding multiple new layers over the five that already covered the stage, resulting in a large number of magical barriers nested within one another.

This was in response to the UBM escape on day six. There had been a counterplan meeting where the likes of Altimia and Count Gideon had discussed how to prevent such a thing from happening again. Being an arena expert, Figaro had also participated as an observer.

One of the solutions they’d come up with was enhancing the barrier by adding extra layers on top of the ones already there, and this responsibility was given to the Arch Sage, Integra. While the Arch Sage could use magic of all kinds, Integra was especially good at barrier magic. They’d intended to use her powers to add additional walls and prevent more UBMs from escaping.

But now, contrary to their plans, they were using this solution in the final match.

The reason they were doing this was actually *Figaro*.

This many-layered barrier would reduce the risk of audience casualties even further—and that was exactly why, having listened in on the meeting, Figaro himself had asked that they use this in the final match.

Though he was participating in The Tournaments, he didn’t actually want the MVP reward—those were just something he received in the course of pursuing his true goal.

Figaro was someone who enjoyed battle from the bottom of his heart and always sought powerful enemies against whom he could burn away his spirit, body, and all that he was. Blessed with an opponent as great as Albert, Figaro would never allow him to bear such an unfair handicap.

“...Heh.” Figaro stood on the stage with a smile on his face. His expression spoke more eloquently than any words could, saying, *The stage is set. Let’s go all out*.

Even the audience felt like they could hear the silent invitation.

Saying nothing in response, Albert spent a moment looking at the enhanced barrier...

"Deploying armaments."

...and adorned himself in MVP rewards.

Figaro's smile deepened as he took a weapon in hand.

Thus began an all-out battle between *Superiors* armed to the teeth with countless powerful artifacts.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth Arena

Legendaria had three Overlords—Overlord Acedia, ZZZ; Overlord Gula, Dis Satisfactory; and Overlord Invidia, G.

Overlord Acedia did nothing but sleep inside his realm. As long as no one threatened his territory, he did not partake in conflict against anyone. If sleeping dogs were left to lie, they wouldn't bite—and the same was true of Overlords.

Overlord Gula was wandering around Legendaria, going where the winds took her, and those who stood in her way were fated to be consumed. She was like a natural disaster, growing stronger day by day thanks to her *auto-leveling* as an Overlord.

Meanwhile, Overlord Invidia's activities were much more reminiscent of the dark lords and demon kings many players would be familiar with from fiction. She commanded an army—her clan, Underground Sanctuary—and regularly invaded Legendaria to take their rare items, riches, and territory, all while recording it and creating videos to upload online.

Overlord Invidia, G was definitely the most "Overlord-ish" of the three.

There were two reasons why she'd taken action now.

First, her ult could only be used at night.

Second, it was because nearly all the eyes and ears in Gideon were focused in the Central Arena. The unexpected appearance of the foreign *Superior* had made it attract even more caution and attention than she'd anticipated.

On top of that, Figaro was a participant in the match, while Shu and Hannya were on security duty, drawing them away from any potential danger to Ray.

The uncertain variables that could interfere with G's plans had been reduced to an absolute minimum.

The only ones here now were Ray and Nemesis, as well as Juliet's trio—and G *couldn't have asked for a better cast*.

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"Playground of the Great Old One—R'lyeh!"

Following her skill declaration, the environment in the Eighth Arena changed drastically.

"Ngh...?! What...?!"

"The arena...is *sinking*?!" A transparent cylinder surrounded the arena as dark water began seeping in from the bottom of it, the level slowly rising.

The Eighth Arena—Death Period's base—was gradually sinking.

Ray and the others jumped high and landed in the audience seating, where the water couldn't yet reach.

"Liquid summoning?! Like Chelsea's Poseidon?!" Max exclaimed.

"Not exactly. Not quite," G said with a chuckle. "This is R'lyeh *rising up*."

"Huh...?!"

"It's something I gotta do to get the arena—and it's my win condition for this game."

"Right! I looked this up! So this is her ult...!" G's words made Chelsea show a hint of panic, and Ray grimaced.

"'Game,' huh? You talk like this guy I know who wears a lab coat everywhere," Ray said with a scowl as he recalled an unpleasant memory.

"Franklin's Game, right? I know that! It went viral. I dunno if you realize this, but you're *very* famous. You're better known than even some *Superiors*."

"Can't say I'm happy about that!" Ray said before letting out a sigh. First Jubei, now this—becoming famous had gotten him nothing but trouble. If not for that, G wouldn't have targeted him in the first place.

"And that's why I think fighting you will make for a great video. Content, revenge for my brother, and this arena—I'm getting *so* much from this!"

G regularly recorded her activities and uploaded them on her channel.

Due to her unusual role as both a *Superior* and an Overlord, as well as her personality, she had a lot of followers expecting to see something unexpected or entertaining. G believed, without a doubt, that “stealing an arena” and “fighting the Unbreakable” would amaze people as much as—if not more than—her previous escapades.

“Ya keep sayin’ you’ll take the arena. Whaddya mean by that?” Though Max now knew that G was an enemy, she still didn’t know much about her, and nothing had gotten any clearer for her. Juliet was the same in that regard. Ray and Chelsea knew of G and seemed to be getting more and more worried, but Juliet didn’t know why.

“That’s G’s skill, Maxie. It’s Overlord Invidia’s Embryo ult,” Chelsea began explaining to them. “She already cut off a buncha Legendarian territories, but she didn’t change the country’s borders like what happens in a War.”

“Then what *did* she do?” asked Max.

“The moment this ult is complete...”

“...The Eighth Arena itself will be *absorbed* by her Embryo,” Ray finished.

R’lyeh was a fictional location from the Cthulhu Mythos. Sometimes called an island, sometimes a city, it was always at the bottom of the ocean. However, it was said that when it rose to the surface, the Great Old One—Cthulhu—would awaken and subjugate the world.

Thus, R’lyeh’s core trait was “domination.”

When the rising waters of R’lyeh sank the targeted area, it would take control of and steal the land, the buildings, and any items within, turning them into a part of itself.

Basically, it was a Superior Embryo that forcefully claimed the very terrain in which it was summoned, cutting off parts of the world itself.

While this ult didn’t possess any direct offensive power, to a country, this was more terrifying than any violent attack. Multiple Legendarian tribes had already lost their mines, castles, and towns to this Embryo, whittling away at the country as a whole.

After claiming whatever she set her eyes on, G released everything in her faction’s base, creating her own land—the Overlord’s domain.

That was the core of her Underground Sanctuary’s strategy.

“Seriously?! That’s some totally lawless shit!” said Max.

“It is. As an Overlord, I make my own laws,” said G, not ashamed whatsoever. “Also, there’s a limit to how big an area and how many Resources I can absorb, and the more I steal, the longer it takes. This arena will be consumed in...a bit over an hour, I guess?” She explained with glee as she gazed at the water filling the arena from the bottom and the “scale” etched onto the top of the cylindrical barrier around the arena.

The time needed for her Embryo’s ult to complete scaled with the Resources of the target.

“Anyway, it’s time to reveal the rules! The channel regulars already know them, but I’ll make them clear to new viewers who came here just for the Unbreakable!” G once again spread her arms wide and raised her voice to ensure that the countless cameras all around could hear her.

In one of her hands, there was now an uncanny, unusual shape—a trapezohedron.

“The rules are simple! I lose if this trapezohedron breaks before R’lyeh consumes the Eighth Arena! This is the core of the ult!”

R’lyeh’s ultimate skill provided other people with the means to stop itself. The fact that it could only be used at night, its long cooldown, and this “fail state” were harsh restrictions that allowed for its greatly empowered effect.

“Of course, you could just defeat me, instead! R’lyeh will disappear and that’ll obviously stop the ult! But if you can’t do either before the time runs out or all of you are eliminated, Team Unbreakable loses!” G then put her hand on her throat and called out to Ray’s group surrounding her.

“Now! The Overlord’s head is right here! If you wish to protect your land, then face me like real heroes! This is the start of a fight to annihilate the Overlord!”

Following those words, pillars of water rose up everywhere. From the water, now knee-deep, large tentacles burst out and attacked Ray and his friends.

“Ngh...!” Ray reacted instantly, jumping on Silver to rush to the sky, while the others evaded their attacks as well.

Thus, they weathered the tentacle ambush, and the only things damaged were the places where the four had been standing.

“First they blocked Chelsea’s and Max’s attacks, now they attack us... How are those creatures even fitting in that amount of water? It is not that deep yet!" Already in her weapon form, Nemesis couldn't make sense of this absurd scene.

But Ray and Chelsea knew exactly what was going on.

"The water is just *an entrance*."

"An entrance?"

"The surface of this water is a connection to her Embryo... A whole *other world*."

G had already revealed her abilities in her content. Ray had also featured in multiple public videos since Franklin's Game—G's powers were probably at least as well-known as his, maybe even more so.

However, G was a case where knowing her powers wasn't much help in defeating her.

"Heh heh heh. I'm happy you know me so well, but should you really be doing this? Should you waste time just talking? Don't you think you'll run out the clock?"

With her legs in R'lyeh's waters, protected by countless tentacles, G cracked a grin.

Her ultimate skill was consuming the arena as they spoke, and if G wasn't defeated within the next hour, it would disappear entirely.

"Yeah," said Ray. "It's not like you'll stop if I just tell you to, huh? Just like your brother."

"Yep. I probably shouldn't say this, but I'm not nearly as reasonable as he is."

"Well, that's...a problem." King of Light, F had created a misunderstanding between a couple that had almost destroyed a city—yet Overlord Invidia, G claimed to be an even greater nuisance.

Coming to understand that with absolute clarity, Ray let out a sigh.

"But, man... I've fought a bunch of *Superiors* for a bunch of different reasons, but this is the first time one of them has attacked me for my *real estate*."

"This is a rental, though," Nemesis interjected.

"Hey! Don't forget that I'm also fighting to avenge my brother! It's an emotional endeavor!" G interjected.

"Be honest."

"You beat him, so if I beat you, it'll prove that I'm better than him, right?"

"Do you two hate each other or something?"

"We get along great! But that is one thing—this is another!"

"That so?" Ray realized that it wasn't just her motivation that was unique—she was nothing like the previous *Superiors* in terms of personality either.

The vibe here kinda reminds me of Mori-Mori, he thought, remembering the senior from his high school club. *I feel like she and G would get along really well.*

Regardless, he'd already decided what he would do. She was telling him to fight and defeat her, or else she would take what was his. He had only one response to that.

"Sure. Let's do this," said Ray, still mounted, as he brandished Nemesis. "Beating an Overlord... That sure is a *quest*, all right."

Gathering his resolve, he declared that the quest had begun.

"This is good! Very good! I can see why my brother is so infatuated with you!" said G, her smile growing deeper at Ray's words.

But then, she turned away from him...and looked at Juliet, making her eyes widen.

Juliet had backed away into the air, but couldn't...*didn't* do anything beyond that. She didn't instantly register G as an enemy like Chelsea and Max did, nor had she gathered her resolve like Ray had when he'd realized G's true intentions.

Juliet was the only one here who was still perplexed by the situation.

While Chelsea was the oldest and most proactive of them, and Max was used to situations like this thanks to Tenchi's battle junkies, Juliet had never experienced anything similar.

This was nothing like the all-out battle against Chelsea she'd had in the recent event, or her disputes against Shion from before the Exodragon King Incident, when they were still hostile to each other.

A friend she'd just made was doing something bad to another one of her friends. Something like that had, thankfully, never happened to her before.

She'd never had enough friends for it to be possible.

And that was why Juliet was so perplexed she was frozen in place.

Though she'd only met G yesterday, they'd hit it off instantly, and albeit in a different way than with Ray and the others, G had quickly become a friend Juliet felt she could connect with. In this conflict, Juliet had no idea what to do.

She couldn't rush to eliminate G like Chelsea or Max, nor ask her questions like Ray. She was stuck acting like a child her age, doing nothing but watching the situation, lost in confusion.

"Ngh..." As a friend, the reasonable thing to do here was to join Ray and stop G from committing this crime.

She knew this in her mind, but her confused heart kept her body from moving.

Thus, Juliet was unable to choose...

"Julie! You fight me too!"

"Huh?"

...and the one who gave her the push she needed was the enemy—G herself.

"You are this video's guest performer! It might have happened by chance, but never mind that! I'll be really happy if you show me what you got!" G reveled in causing chaos and committing terrible crimes, and yet her words seemed to contain no guilt or shame. She was self-indulgent, self-centered, and selfish.

Despite this, her words melted away Juliet's reservations. There was no contradiction between her reasoning and her friend's words—and combined, they gave her the encouragement she sorely needed.

"...Okay!"

And so, Juliet flapped her dark wings and brandished her blade.

Her friend had asked her to stop her crimes, so Juliet would do just that.

Thus, the four-person party prepared to face the Overlord.

There we go, G thought. *Every good star has to know how to read the mood.*

She looked at the four, all ready to fight, and smiled in satisfaction.

I guess Julie isn't used to things like this. I feel like I did her wrong, but I also followed it up nicely, so I guess it's all good... But wow, this just makes me think how insane Legendaria's rankers are. When I went at that card gamer, she responded so fast it was like she knew the future.

Estimating Juliet by the standards of the rankers G knew had caused her to misjudge the girl's mental fortitude. G reflected on that, but she now had the matchup she wanted.

I want an arena. I really, really do. It'd really help my clan and my *friends at Desire...but that's just one of my goals.*

The second was defeating Ray Starling—and there was a third, which was far more important than the other two.

That was the reason she'd approached this situation like she had.

Instead of taking the arena like a sneaky thief, she'd gathered a cast of combatants before using her ult. She'd also explained everything so they could fight without confusion.

If someone present was confused and hesitant, she straightened them out with her words.

And if all this led to an exciting battle for her to record, nothing would please her more than that.

She wouldn't tell them to just lose—how could she?

All out and beyond—a wild dance of supernatural powers. A gleaming light that could only be found in this world.

That was the blueprint of the future G desired.

"Now! Let's fight! Let's play!" Thus, G spoke—sang—to the world.

"Let's go all out...and see what lies beyond!"

She faced the heroes who would challenge her and the viewers who would watch her—and let them all know that *she was here*.

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Such a curious coincidence...

At the same time, in the same city, but at different locations, Figaro and G—two *Superiors*—gave their own opponents exactly what they needed to give it their all.

Gideon was now a stage of two battles truly fought in earnest.

Chapter 7: Sunken Labyrinth

Gideon, City of Duels, Eighth Arena

"Anyway, let's get this started for real! Face me! Challenge me with all you got!" And with that, G fell backward into the dark water and began sinking into it—inside her own Embryo. But then...

"Blackwing Requiem!"

"You're not gettin' away! Bladescale Hail!"

Having resolved to fight, Juliet and Max attacked G, attempting to prevent her escape.

"Oh, what a barrage! So intense! Sadly..."

However, both Hræsvelgr's black light projectiles and Ipetam's blades...

"They can't reach *the bottom of the sea*."

...were deflected by the *water* and failed to touch her.

The water that covered G didn't seem more than a few centimeters deep—and yet it completely blocked the attacks, letting her sink within.

Juliet's eyes widened as Max shouted, "What's going on?!"

"The Superior Embryo, R'lyeh," said Chelsea. "It's not immediately obvious, but under the water is an entirely different world."

Type Invasion Labyrinth, "Encroaching Sea-Altar, R'lyeh."

Standing next to Tsukuyo Fuso's Kaguya, it was one of the few Embryos crowned with the "Invasion" type. Though Kaguya and R'lyeh targeted different things, they were similar in that they ate away at the world outside of their boundaries.

The water—in other words, its outer shell—acted as an entrance linking R'lyeh to the rest of the world and allowed it to consume things with its ult, but at its core, R'lyeh itself was an independent universe.

Even if the water *looked* shallow from the outside, there was no telling how deep of an abyss it really was.

Thus, attacks that *couldn't pass through its entrance* would never strike R'lyeh.

"That water is an entrance that only allows living beings through. It totally rejects attacks and stuff," said Chelsea.

"I thought Ipetam's blades could be counted as part of its body, but I guess they aren't."

"What do we do, then?!" Max asked.

"Basically, if we wanna beat the Overlord, we gotta enter her dungeon."

That was a classic RPG scenario. However, entering the enemy's territory was still a scary thing to do, especially when the entrance was a pool of dark water protected by tentacles and there was no telling what lay beyond.

"I guess that makes her basically the same as ZZZ in that regard," said Ray. "Still...!"

The man who'd already been dragged into an Overlord's domain and overcome it didn't back down a single step.

"I'm going in!" Ray dismounted Silver with no hesitation and led the charge.

Assuming that his steed's air-walking abilities wouldn't work underwater, he simply jumped in there by himself.

"Whoa! No hesitation at all!" said Chelsea.

"I'm going too!" said Juliet, jumping in right after Ray.

A moment later, the world completely changed.

"Huh...?!"

The second her whole body was submerged, she found herself very suddenly *out of the water*.

But she was no longer in the Eighth Arena where she had just been standing either.

She was now inside of a damp, dimly lit cave, filled with a fishy stench. There was a wall behind her, and the only way to go was a tunnel straight ahead.

"Where...?" Looking around, she saw that Ray was already there, and they were soon joined by Chelsea and Max.

"Huh?! We're not actually underwater!" Max exclaimed. She'd equipped an accessory to help her breathe in the water, but this unexpected sight meant her caution had been all for naught.

"Ugh... I figured you'd choose *this place*, but man..." Meanwhile, Chelsea put her hand on her head as though she had just realized something unpleasant.

“What do you mean?”

“What does she mean? *This* is what she means!” G’s voice resounded from somewhere unseen, responding to Juliet’s question. G herself was nowhere in sight, and there were no visible speakers, but this place was basically the inside of her Embryo. Thus, it made perfect sense that she was able to talk to them like this. “My R’lyeh is unbelievably wide and deep! It contains many of the places I’ve helped myself to! It’s like an amusement park! Is that a good comparison?”

R’lyeh was an underwater otherworld. Most of its vast area was a sunken seabed, but there were some places that were quite different. Those were the locations that she had “helped herself” to—or, rather, had *stolen* from people. The dvergar mountain mines, the lionkin citadel, the hidden elf forest—they were all places that were important to powerful Legendarian tribes, and they were most of the reason she was a wanted criminal.

“I can choose where intruders end up. Though, while the ult is active, the rules prevent me from putting you *too* far away from me or the trapezohedron. Well, regardless, this time you’ll find both at the end of this dungeon! That’s your goal!”

Like the Legendarian locations inside R’lyeh, this was another place that she’d cut out and taken for herself, but this one was different in one respect. It *didn’t have a previous owner*.

“I had a really hard time in this dungeon. I’m sure it won’t be easy for you too!”

“Huh? What is this place, anyway?” Max asked. G chuckled a little before saying...

“Ever heard of the Depths of Jealousy?”

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

In one of the box seats of the Central Arena, overlooking the raging-hot final match, F kept one of his eyes closed in order to view the scenery of another world.

So she did end up choosing that place, he thought. While his open eye watched the battle between Figaro and Albert, he simultaneously observed his little sister's own event.

Since only living beings and their possessions could pass through the surface of R'lyeh, F had asked her ahead of time to bring some of his Zodiacs inside. That had been his compensation for guiding Ray there.

R'lyeh's ultimate cuts off the land itself. It can steal entire mountains and castles, but that dungeon took it an entire night, and it still only managed to absorb a part of it... I suppose Overlord dungeons are just that exceptional.

Overlord dungeons—challenging, trial-filled labyrinths that bestowed a Superior Job from the Overlord series upon anyone who cleared them.

G was now using *this* as the challenge for her current game.

Her previous games had ranged from direct confrontations to speed mining events where her victims were forced to mine up the trapezohedron within the time limit. But this time, she'd chosen something that was not quite so straightforward, but also not particularly unorthodox either—a traditional dungeon full of challenges that Ray and Juliet would have to overcome.

She's very enthusiastic about this one, F thought. He knew his sister well enough to guess what she was thinking.

A dungeon with an Overlord waiting at the end didn't just make for a good spectacle—it was also the place where G could use her combat style to the fullest. It was clear that she was very motivated for this one.

That was exactly why F was somewhat concerned, though.

Will they be able to clear the dungeon in time? he wondered.

Because Overlord dungeons granted a Superior Job while ignoring prior jobs and talents, they were all extremely difficult to clear. The Depths of Jealousy dungeon that had chosen the current Overlord Invidia was no exception. Though she'd only cut away a part of it, making the dungeon far more compact, F still wondered if they could make it through within the time limit.

I suppose I will just have to wait and see. Despite his concern for his own research and his sister's event, F continued simply watching things unfold.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"Now—you have fifty-eight minutes left! Hurry up! Do your best!" Urged on by the dungeon boss herself, we started running. There were some things that didn't quite make sense, but we didn't have the time to hesitate and think about it.

The four of us were now rushing through a damp, natural-looking cave.

"Maaan," said Chelsea. "We talked about goin' to the Tomb Labyrinth to help Maxie farm up some money, but I can't say I expected to go to the Depths of Jealousy first."

"Now's not the time to say shit like that! Hell, I'm the one who borrowed the key, so this is my fault too! If she takes the arena, then forget about payin' him back! There's no way I could make up for that!"

"Same here..." The spare key I'd given to Max had let Overlord Invidia enter the arena, and Juliet was the one who'd brought her there. That meant they both seemed to feel pretty guilty about all this.

"Hey, don't let it bother you," I said. "She probably could've used her ult from outside the arena just as well. I do appreciate the help though."

"R-Right!" Juliet said.

"Leave it to me! I'll slice up her *and* her tentacles!" Max added.

As we talked, the cave seemed to change a little, and we arrived at a fork in the path.

"Left or right, huh? Pretty standard," said Chelsea.

"Hey! You two saw this place in her videos, right? Doncha know the right path?" Max asked.

"The problem with that is...this place's structure changes with time." I said.

"I saw about three videos, but one of them had a guy go 'Hey! I saw this place on G's channel once!' and then run straight into a trap, so..." Chelsea said.

"A reply truly scribed in crimson... (That makes me think of the Red Pen Teacher...)"

Shu had once told me that despite them both being in the category of "created dungeons," Overlord dungeons like the Depths of Jealousy were a good bit different from the Tomb Labyrinth.

Apparently, the Tomb Labyrinth was the newest of these dungeons, created shortly after the time of the first Azurite, while the others had existed since before the pre-ancient civilization. The Tomb Labyrinth was deeper and housed stronger monsters, but the Overlord dungeons came out ahead in terms of troublesome gimmicks and tricks.

Incidentally, Shu had actually destroyed an Overlord dungeon while fighting The Earth.

"Wait, you're tellin' me you can die by just pickin' the wrong path?!"

"Yes," Chelsea and I instantly replied in perfect unison.

This place really was just that much of a pain.

"Then again, we can't just stand still here," I said. "I'm gonna keep going."

"Huh?"

I took the left path and took a step forward. "Nemesis?"

"Certainly." Understanding what I was planning, Nemesis *prepared* herself.

And when I was about three metels into the passage, my face was instantly and fully obscured.

A blue-purple mist had burst out from every direction, completely swallowing me up. Through the air I breathed and even through contact with my skin, the mist inflicted countless debuffs on me.

"I see... These must be the debuffs of these Depths..."

The Depths of Jealousy was an Overlord dungeon specialized in debuffs.

It was especially rife with poisons, bindings, and curses. That single spray had given me a whole seven status effects: Poison, which drained my HP; Magic Drain, which sapped my MP over time; Soul Drain, which caused me to lose SP; Weakness that halved my stats; and finally Lethargy, Paralysis, and Frailty which further reduced my STR, AGI, and END respectively.

There were so many debuffs that conventional items and skills wouldn't be enough to deal with them, so most people would be forced to fight the monsters here while greatly weakened. That could easily kill anyone who was unprepared, and that made this dungeon really difficult—especially for tians, who only had one life.

Apparently, G had become the current Overlord Invidia by taking shelter in her otherworld, R'lyeh. ZZZ had probably become Overlord Acedia by using his dream invulnerability, so they were kinda similar in that regard.

Anyway... I'd just confirmed what we were dealing with.

“That was the wrong path. Past the trap, it’s a dead end.”

“Hey! Are you okay?! You look way too calm for getting all those crazy debuffs!” Max shouted, staring at me as I stood painted blue-purple by the mist. She had nothing to worry about, though.

“If anything, I’m even better than before,” I said as I showed her Nemesis.

“Truly! It has been long since this form was useful!”

She was currently in her Flag Halberd form.

Indeed, if we were dealing with debuffs, nothing was more effective than her second form’s “Like a Flag Flying the Reversal.” This might’ve not worked in the original Overlord dungeon, but this whole area was now a part of an Embryo—in other words, an enemy. That meant that Reversal could function against these debuffs. And since these status effects weren’t from a Superior Embryo *fully* focused on debuffs like Miss Eldritch’s Kaguya, I could reverse them into buffs without a problem.

Because of that, my matchup with this dungeon was actually pretty good.

“Though, it hit us with over twice the amount of debuffs as Hellish Miasma right from the start,” said Nemesis. “That feels unfair—perhaps even illegal.”

“No it isn’t!” G insisted. She must’ve still been observing us. “That’s just how the Depths of Jealousy works! Overlord dungeons become way harder the more people enter them! With four of you here, the dungeon will be going all out right from the start!”

Right. I’d almost forgotten that was a thing they did.

I feel like Figaro could totally get an open Overlord job, though, I thought.

“Anyway, I’m the right person for this. I’ll be our canary,” I said as I took the lead and advanced.

“Huh. A canary? Aren’t you supposed to be a Starling? How did you mix those up?”

Ignoring G’s comment, I considered that she had probably anticipated this. Her voice didn’t seem to contain even a hint of surprise that I’d used her debuff traps against her.

That could mean that she had worse traps prepared.

We gotta stay cautio—

"Ngh...?!"

"Ray?!" Juliet cried.

"Ooof... A spiked ball just jumped from the ground and *went straight for his crotch*... Scary stuff," Chelsea commented.

G, you bitch! Couldn't you set up a more normal trap?! I've got pain turned off, but that almost felt like it'd been switched back on!

"Ray, are you okay...?" Juliet asked.

"I-I am. My gear's fine, and I'll heal the damage pretty quickly with the reversed Poison..."

It didn't hurt, but I did feel weird, like my insides had been flipped upside down...

"So there's physical traps too, huh? Not just debuffs," said Max.

"Well... Actually, these spikes *are* covered in poison," said Chelsea as she grabbed the spiked ball.

I would've liked her to stop touching it, in that case.

"Actually, while I kinda get the poison mist, I'm not sure if the Depths of Jealousy is supposed to generate traps like this spikey thing. It's just not what you'd expect from a place that looks like a natural cave," said Chelsea, considering the trap that had attacked me.

"You're right! That one is different. Some of the traps here were gifts from our sub-leader."

G gave this answer like it was nothing, but...

"Who the hell gifts people traps?! And traps this messed up, at that?! It was so bad it reminded me of Mori-Mori from high school!"

"Who? That just makes me curious," said Chelsea.

"She was a senior who challenged people to games and set traps for them, only to have them all blow up in her face!"

"The fact that you refer to her using such an odd nickname makes it clear what kind of treatment she gets..." said Nemesis.

Yeah... Honestly, she was even more of a joke than Miss Eldritch. She deserves the nickname, I thought. *This trap, though... No way, right?*

Following that, I was subjected to several more traps, but Reversal's buffs and healing over time allowed me to withstand them all as we brute-forced our way through the passage.

And beyond it, the cave suddenly ended.

The oppressive ceiling and walls disappeared, revealing a large, open space. Within the dome-shaped area, there was a straight bridge extending from the passage we'd come from all the way to the wall on the other side. I could see an exit over there.

There was something wrong with this space, though—right below the bridge, there was water with the same blue-purple color as the mist from earlier.

Needless to say, falling off was probably an awful idea.

Also...

"Places like this always have some kinda surprise, don't they?" said Chelsea, saying exactly what I was thinking.

"Well, nine out of ten RPGs would either put an ambush here or make the bridge collapse," I said with a nod as I looked around.

I didn't see anything suspicious on the walls or ceiling, but the water was so dark.

"We should fly." With one person joining me on Silver and Juliet carrying another, all of us could fly past here. If we were in the air, the bridge collapsing wouldn't be a problem, and it'd be easier to deal with anything that came out of the water.

With that in mind, I prepared to summon Silver when...

"Ah. Hold on a sec."

"Chelsea? What's wrong?"

"I'm just guessin', but... Yah!" She took a Gem out of her Inventory and threw it at the empty space.

A moment later, *there was an explosion* that painted the walls and water in an orange glow.

The three of us were speechless.

"Ah, I knew it," said Chelsea. "Air mines—and they're even camouflaged. That military nerd from my old country used those a lot..."

I couldn't see a thing, but it looked like there was a trap that Chelsea had spotted. She herself was a bit of a mine expert, so maybe it wasn't that surprising that she'd figured out something we hadn't...

G expressed no chagrin about this, though. Instead, she actually clapped and praised Chelsea. “Wow! You saw right through it! You’re pretty good too, Chel! By the way, the mines will just keep coming back, so if you try to destroy them all, you’ll just run out of time.”

“That so?” I said.

“Also, the explosions act as a *signal*.”

A moment later, something broke the surface of the dark water and leaped onto the bridge to block our path.

“GEH GEH GEH!”

“Wha?! The hell are these?!” The things that had emerged from the water, apparently immune to its poisonous properties, were dozens of monsters that looked like mermen.

“Monsters of the Depths of Jealousy...!”

“Bzzt! Wrong! When I absorbed this dungeon into R’lyeh, I didn’t get its monsters or monster-producing mechanisms. They’re just like those air mines—I procured and spread them here! They’re not even tamed, but this is their territory, so they’ll attack any intruders!”

G graciously told us about the mermen.

I was wondering why she was going out of her way to tell us so many things, but it could be that she wasn’t doing it for our benefit, but for the viewers who would watch all of this once she turned it into a video.

Additionally, these mermen were armed with harpoons and the name “APM” was visible above their heads. It did look like they were immune to the poison, so...maybe that stood for “Anti Poison Merman?”

“Hey...” said Nemesis. “Is it just me, or is that naming scheme somewhat familiar?”

Oh, come on! There’s no way that guy could be involved in...

“ALSO! Since this is the halfway point, I’ve placed a boss here!”

After G said that, the water’s surface rippled, and there was a splash even larger than the one that the mermen had made.

“E a H e A h e a H E a h E A H!”

And that was the entrance of a freakish monstrosity that looked like a cross between an octopus and a humanoid giant.

“What *is* that gargantuan thing...?!” said Nemesis.

“That’s gotta be the main body of the tentacles that attacked us back at the arena!”

The creature was massive, with a size matching even the Afforest King Golem we'd fought some time ago.

This was a pretty large space, yet its octopus-like head almost brushed the ceiling.

The air mines were reacting to it and blowing up, but it didn't even flinch. Any damage they did rapidly closed. Its grandeur and size made for a sight that could definitely drive someone past the boundaries of sanity.

"Hmm?!"

But there was something that drew my attention more than anything else about it—something *above its head*.

"Hold on! G! I got a question!"

"What is it? What do you wanna ask?"

"It's about the *name* of this octopus thing!" I said as I pointed above its head—at the name hanging up there. I'd already seen the tentacles, but its name was a different—and *way* bigger—problem.

"Huh?" That was when the girls noticed it too, and their eyes went wide.

I couldn't blame them. After all...

"This is just a monster, not an Embryo, right?! Why is it named like that?!"

The letters above the octopus giant's head said "Cthulhu." This thing was the Great Old One from the Cthulhu Mythos—not just in appearance, but even in name.

"This world's got Cthulhu as a goddamn *monster*?!"

"I feel like a world with an ancient evil in it would be fated for destruction..." Nemesis said.

Well, Azurite's ancestor did beat something literally called "The Evil," so that part is real, at least.

"No," said G. "Cthulhu *doesn't* exist in this world—at least not in the wild. This one's not natural."

"Not natural... You mean...?!" Her words made a certain person come to mind.

"Yes. I had him made special for me. There's someone in Dryfe who creates custom monsters for you. *His name's Franklin*... Oh, wait, it looks like you already know each other!"

"THAT LAB COAT SHITHEAD!" Hearing the name, I found myself raising my voice. *I sure as hell didn't expect my sworn enemy's name to* *show up here!*

"I mean, my Embryo is R'lyeh, and R'lyeh has gotta have Cthulhu, right? I brought in some materials and had Franklin make him for me. I even used an MVP reward."

Right. Franklin had used Dragon King mats to create a monster that could use the Dragon King Aura. Knowing that, it didn't seem out of the question that could probably make something like this too.

The fact that it was made using an MVP reward gave me a bad feeling about this, though.

"Oh, and I got the APMs at a discount for buying them in bulk. He said he didn't have much use for aquatic monster materials, so he sold them to me for cheap. I bought a lot!"

"You got those things because they were on sale?!"

What kind of Overlord army is this?!

"Hmm. I like that reaction. You're a fun one, Unbreakable. I can see why you went viral so many times."

"Is *that* what you're impressed by...?" said Juliet.

"Who gives a damn who made these and where?! If we can't get past the mines in the air, that means we can't get through if we don't beat that octopus and the mermen!"

"Ah! Right! Sorry, Max! This all just caught me off guard!" I remembered we didn't have time for this nonsense—we had to clear the dungeon.

G had said this was the halfway point, and we had about forty minutes left. It seemed like we were making good progress, but considering we still had to overcome this mid-boss and then G herself, we had no time to waste.

"Corpse-Eating Bird—Hræsvelgr!" Right as I finished my thought, Juliet besides me used her ult, starting the battle with a bang.

"GEH!"

"E e e a A a h H H!" The sideways tornado released from Juliet's hands swept away the group of mermen on the bridge while also badly damaging Cthulhu's upper body.

"Julie?! Wow, you act fast!" G exclaimed. Having her bargain finds... I mean, the mermen wiped out like that might've stung a bit.

"Well, Julie's like this in duels too. She's pretty proactive when she's locked in," said Chelsea.

“The fact that the bridge is still standing tells me that she controlled it properly too...” Nemesis added.

Yeah, when a bunch of enemies group up and block the path, few things are better than a wide-scale ult, I thought.

“Now...!” Juliet called.

“All right!” Urged on by Juliet, we ran on the bridge, now free of mermen.

“E a A h h H...” Though Hræsvelgr had gone straight to Cthulhu’s face, he wasn’t just still alive—he was quickly regenerating. It reminded me of the RSK I’d fought during Franklin’s Game, and I could really tell this Cthulhu was another one of his creations.

Regardless, he was still recovering, so he was completely immobile. Even if he fully healed, that large body would work against him, and he wouldn’t be able to chase us into the passage. Not even his arm would fit—the best he could do was a tentacle or a finger.

That meant that if we made it out of this space, we could just leave Cthulhu behind.

With that in mind, we kept running, and we soon passed the middle of the bridge.

“E a h... E a h... E a h.” Still recovering, Cthulhu was holding his head with his left hand.

However, the right one was being extended toward us.

He wasn’t trying to grab us, just reaching out his hand—and then it suddenly *began to shine*.

My eyes widened.

“E a h E A h e A H e a h E a H e a h E A H H H!” Letting out a screech in a voice both maddened and maddening, Cthulhu pointed his finger at us.

“Def— I mean, DODGE!”

As I alerted the girls, Cthulhu’s fingers released a blue-purple beam.

The light was eroding and rotting away everything in its path. It was ruination made manifest.

We dodged just in time to avoid it, but the air it passed through was blackened, the bridge melted away, and even the walls collapsed.

“This is...!”

“It’s like Gardranda’s Purgatorial Flames: Zero...!” That was the terrifying power that had melted away Logan’s Legendary Gigaknight. The destruction before me was more than enough to remind me of that.

"That's Cthulhu's Gandr—the Finger of Ruination! Whaddya think?! Do you like it?!" While we were overcome by terror, G proudly explained what just happened.

"Is that a skill from the MVP reward you used on him?"

"Yeah! It was originally a Legendary UBM that lived here in the Depths of Jealousy! He absorbs debuff particles, compresses them, and fires them as a beam! In fact, he's charging another one right now!"

So instead of negating the debuff-filled environment, he accumulated them and used them as a weapon. That explained why he was keeping his lower half in the poisonous water.

"Hm..." I couldn't expect to be able to Reverse *that*. Letting it hit me was a bad idea.

The worst part was that we couldn't just skip past it now.

From what I could see, the passage on the other side was a long, straight line that went on for quite a while. If Cthulhu managed to get even a finger into the tunnel and fire while we were there, it would hit us for sure.

"I guess we actually gotta beat this thing, huh?" I said.

"Yep! I won't let you skip the mid-boss! This isn't a speedrun!"

"Says the one who gave us a harsh time limit..."

"*That* is one thing! *This* is another! Oh! And here's a second helping of these guys!"

Following her words, the water rippled again, and dozens of APMs jumped onto the bridge again.

How many of these did that lab coat freak sell her?! "Ngh! Let's deal with the mermen and take out Cthulhu!"

Chelsea was quick to respond. "Okay! The harpoons look poisoned, so since you can handle debuffs, you go to the front! Maxie and Julie, use Ipetam and your magic to reduce their numbers from a distance! Maxie, you and I will fight Cthulhu! Julie, back us up if you find an opening to hit him hard!"

"Roger that!" we all said in unison.

"Gheow!" called Ipetam. Chelsea had more experience in group battles than anyone else here, so we flew into action according to her strategy.

"GEH GEH GEH!" Despite the previous group of mermen being unceremoniously wiped out, the new ones didn't seem to show any fear.

They must've been made for combat, just like Franklin's suicide series.

Holding debuff-imbued spears in their webbed hands, they charged at us.

"No way you'll hit me!"

However, none of their attacks could land. The debuffs that halved and reduced my stats had all been reversed into buffs. My multiplied AGI let me read all their moves and slice the mermen apart with my Flag Halberd.

Even more of them then tried to attack me from a blind spot, but Ipetam provided cover, firing blades into their foreheads.

"Blackwing Requiem!"

As their movements started to slow, Juliet's black light projectiles overwhelmed and devastated them.

"Let's do this!" Max called out.

"All right! I'll give us some footing! C'mon, Skyanchor!" Chelsea held up an Inventory and released *an entire ship*.

It was the vessel that used to be the Golden Pirates' base, and a force to be reckoned with in Granvaloa's duels.

The antiair sailing ship, Skyanchor, landed on the blue water.

"She's coated, so she can handle the poison for a while!" said Chelsea. "But maintenance could be a pain, so let's settle this quick!"

"Hell, if we waste too much time, tentacle-face here is gonna charge up and blast us along *with* the entire ship!"

"Can't say I'd like that!"

Skyanchor began moving as soon as they landed.

Riding the current created by Poseidon, they approached Cthulhu.

"FIRE!" At Chelsea's order, the armaments installed on the ship began bombarding the monster. She herself contributed with Gems, showering the still-regenerating Cthulhu with explosions.

"E e A a a A a A A H H H!" He released a voice of anguish, but his tough body was far from fatally wounded. As though to prove that point, he extended his arms—not to fire a beam this time, but to attack with his tentacles.

They wrapped around the ship, creating a scene that was straight out of a classic high seas fantasy story.

"Ugh, it's been a while since somethin' like this happened, but it's still as gross as ever! Maxie!"

“On it!” Responding to Chelsea, Max grasped her katana and ran onto the deck. Her eyes were fixed on a tentacle that seemed far too thick for a blade like hers to slice through.

“Heh! This will be the perfect test.”

Despite all of that, Max’s face was in a confident grin.

She then activated the Swordmaster job’s Laser Blade skill and took a swing.

Cthulhu didn’t react to it whatsoever, focusing instead on attacking the ship.

That was understandable. Back at the arena, Max had charged at Overlord Invidia, but her blade had been deflected by these same tentacles—it hadn’t been effective whatsoever. It wasn’t clear just how intelligent Cthulhu was, but it would’ve been reasonable for him to assume there wasn’t anything to worry about.

However, the situation now was completely different than before.

This was proven when Max’s attack reached the tentacle several times her own size and *sliced clean through it*.

“E E A A H H?!” Cthulhu was shocked by this, but who could blame him? Max’s blade had dealt far more damage than its appearance alone would have suggested.

“Ha...! So it’s good even when shit gets real!”

In her hands, Max held one of Tenchi’s Hundred Famed blades—Sekiun.

Its skill was called Ungo-Musho—“Bladecloud Convergence”—and its effect was devastatingly simple.

It took the attack power of all the blades currently being used by the wielder and focused all of it into itself.

That was rather meaningless in most cases. Even if used while dual-wielding, it didn’t result in much of an increase due to Sekiun’s low base attack power, so it was more effective to just wield two katanas of equal power instead.

Jobs in the gladiator grouping could equip more weapons, and King of Asuras had the Asuran Battle-Mounts skill that added floating weapon slots, so they might’ve been able make better use of it.

But here stood an exception among exceptions—a duelist who used far more blades than King of Asuras and the Over Gladiator.

She was...

“I’ll turn ya into sashimi, ya damn octopus!”

“Gheow!”

...Great Genocide Max, the twenty-fourth in Altar’s duel rankings and the Master of Bladeswarm Beast, Ipetam.

Max was using *a hundred blades*, already released by Ipetam, and their metallic shine was now reflected by Sekiun.

Thus, just one of her swings was now a hundred times more powerful than they had been before.

And despite having just acquired it today, she was using it very effectively.

Max was sending Ipetam’s hundred blades at the APMs attacking me, and in between she was slicing at Cthulhu’s tentacles.

The swarming blades and the focusing blade—Max could turn the Bladecloud Convergence skill on and off just by thinking it, and so she switched attack power between the hundred and the one as she both repelled the APMs around me and fought Cthulhu on the ship.

Max was a powerful Master who’d once made it to the top of Tenchi’s infamously stacked duel rankings. She was far stronger than her current position suggested.

“E e A h h...! E a h e A H e A h...!” Cthulhu was tough enough to deflect Chelsea’s and Max’s attacks, possessed regeneration so powerful you could see it happening in real time, and even had a skill that let him turn debuffs into a devastating offensive weapon. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he was actually a match for Legendary UBMs.

However, he could still take damage that surpassed his toughness, and Chelsea and Max were overwhelming him to the point that his regeneration couldn’t keep up.

Cthulhu swung his tentacles in rage, but Max sliced them off so they couldn’t do any damage, and Chelsea detonated so many Gems around him at once that he lost his footing.

I’d once said that not even *Superiors* could create perfectly invincible monsters, and that was true here, as well. Chelsea could use her optimal combat style here, while Max had just obtained an incredible new power—and together, they were overwhelming Cthulhu.

“E e E a a A h h h H H H!”

And yet, he still moved.

Was it because of the Overlord's orders? Or was it the pride of a creature bearing the name of the Great Old One? Regardless, Cthulhu pointed a finger at Skyanchor, fully intent on destroying all of his enemies.

But then, there was a break in the flowing horde of mermen, letting Juliet and I leap into action.

I hopped on Silver, Juliet flapped her wings, and the both of us flew forward, keeping low to avoid the air mines.

"Juliet! You get Max!"

"Ah...! Okay!" Juliet understood what I was planning and sped toward the ship.

I, on the other hand, stopped right between the ship and Cthulhu.

"You realize this is a gamble, don't you?!" said Nemesis.

"The usual, then!"

"Well, I suppose...! Form shift—Black Shield!"

Right as the menacing light on the monster's extended finger grew stronger, Nemesis switched from the Flag Halberd to her shield form.

With Reversal gone, I was now afflicted with a bunch of debuffs—but I held on to Silver and tried to bear it.

And then...

"E e E a a A a A A A A A A A A H H H H H H!"

"Counter Absorption!"

...a blue-purple light crashed into my barrier of light.

"Ngh...!" The beam attack was so concentrated it caused physical destruction.

Weathering the seven debuffs, I gave my all to hold on to Nemesis and the reins.

The beam felt like it was never-ending. The barrier of light cracked, on the verge of shattering, and a blue-purple aura was leaking through, touching the surface of the Black Shield. My defense would be broken in just a few more seconds.

"...We win."

However, I knew what would happen next.

I saw Max, holding on to Juliet's hand as she flew toward Cthulhu.

"Hyakujin Itto!" With that shout, meaning "Hundred Blades in One," Max swung the single blade empowered by hundred and split Cthulhu in half at the torso.

"E a h...?!" With a pained sound, the monster's top half fell into the blue water.

Cthulhu still tried to move for a moment, but eventually he disappeared, flickering out of existence as though flowing back into something that lay elsewhere.

"It's over." Switching to the Flag Halberd, I let out a sigh.

Cthulhu was probably set to return to a Jewel when he took too much damage. It looked like not even G wanted to lose a monster that she had used an MVP reward on.

Regardless, the threat blocking our path was now gone.

We also had less than half an hour left. We had to hurry and...

"Huh?! They...!"

"GEH GEH GEH!"

We'd beaten the mid-boss here. However, these mobs—the APMs—were still swarming the bridge.

"They're still coming?! Just how many of them are there?!"

"Franklin said he wanted a bunch of metal from my mines, so I got a very good deal on these," said G. "There's a *whole* lot more."

Metal, huh? He'll probably use that for monsters or Magingears, I thought. *But man, my sworn enemy and current enemy really struck a win-win deal, huh...*

"I fear that whatever he makes will be used against us," said Nemesis. She was probably right, but we had to focus on what was in front of us.

We could just rush forward, but getting stabbed in the back would be pretty bad too.

"All right! Maxie and I will hold them off! You two go on ahead!"

As I thought about what we had to do next, Chelsea raised her voice.

"I'm doin' this too...?! Well, fine!"

"Chelsea...?"

"G's probably after Ray. She'd probably do somethin' funny again if he doesn't go. Also... You wanna face her yourself, doncha, Julie?"

"Yeah!" Juliet said with a nod.

"Then that's how we're gonna split! We'll catch up once we're done here, so leave this to us and go!"

"Hey! Stop settin' death flags for us...!" said Max as she cut down some mermen and pointed Sekiun at the passage. "Hurry up and go!"

“...Thanks,” I said. “We’ll leave this to you!”

“We’re off...!”

Thus, Juliet and I turned our backs to them and advanced deeper into the Depths of Jealousy, where the Overlord was waiting for us.

Chapter 8: Beneath the Starry Sky

Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

Over Gladiator, Figaro and King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser.

They were both *Superiors* and powerful duelists, but their similarities went beyond that.

For one, they were both record holders—each had the most MVP rewards in Altar and Caldina, respectively.

Figaro’s Cor Leonis empowered his gear and made him an extremely well-rounded combatant, which had allowed him to explore the Tomb Labyrinth solo and defeat many of the UBMs the control AIs had placed there.

Albert’s Septentrion granted him resistances and effective counterattacks, which was how he had defeated many of the Caldinan UBMs that were known to be dangerous opponents due to their unique means of attack or defense.

Either of them could be the bane of just about anything they encountered, so they had each overcome many unique challenges. As a result, they had countless UBM rewards adjusted to suit them, and any battle between these two Masters would serve as an exhibition of these powerful artifacts.

First, Figaro drew a pistol.

He rarely used this, as it wouldn’t be suitable as his main weapon—but that was exactly why he’d picked it.

Albert could come back to full health seven times, gaining new resistances and offensive powers with each comeback. This meant that Albert would be at his strongest after his seventh use of this power, and Figaro had to reserve his greatest weapon—Gloria α—for that moment. Until then, he wanted to avoid slashing and light-based attacks.

That was why Figaro had started with the pistol.

Watching him in silence, Albert drew out a weapon of his own.

It was another firearm, but it was nothing like Figaro’s. It was a cannon.

Albert held two enormous barrels—each one as large as his own enormous body—in each arm. These were not two different weapons, though. A serpentine cable extended from the back of each barrel, connecting the two into one single weapon that resembled a two-headed snake.

This was the UBM reward, “Serpentflame Purger, Firelyx.”

The moment Albert pulled the trigger, a flash of fire sparked deep within the cannon’s maws...and the flames that burst out pierced through three of the arena’s barriers.

The easy obliteration of their protection caused a stir among the audience, but they relaxed once they remembered that there were still two unbroken barriers on top of Integra’s extra wards. This also made Albert’s behavior in previous matches much more understandable—if his firepower was this potent, it made sense that he had refused to use it.

It was a bit early for the spectators to accept that he really *was* that powerful, though. After all—this was only his first attack.

As the flames quickly approached, Figaro widened his eyes, stopped attacking, and focused on evasion.

Albert, however, was still able to see his target. He turned around, swinging the maws of the cannon around with him. The flames pursued Figaro, licking the stage and leaving *two heated lines* on the barrier.

If he’d done this to a horde of monsters, it would’ve surely exterminated all of them.

That’s probably a Legendary MVP reward, Figaro thought, analyzing Firelyx as he dodged its flames. *It must be like Ray’s Miasmaflame Bracers, except focused on firepower. Ray’s a special case, though...*

Firelyx’s offensive power seemed to rival that of a Superior Job’s ultimate skill, but the fact that Albert could keep firing it for such a long time meant that it must not cost much to activate.

Figaro considered that the item might be immensely Resource efficient because of its simplicity, but he felt that was too much for a Legendary...

Actually, it looks like his MVP rewards are a special case too, he thought as he looked at Albert and noticed something. *That one doesn’t protect the user.*

His opponent’s body was *burning* in the flames released by his own weapon.

Unless they were completely fired in the wrong direction, item skills like Gardranda's Purgatorial Flames usually minimized their effects on the wielder. However, such balances and safety measures cost Resources, often making the items weaker than they would've been without them.

Firelyx didn't have that. Its fearsome flames scorched everything around it—Albert included.

In exchange for reducing MP costs and increasing firepower, it burned its wielder to death.

It seemed like a useless failure of an MVP reward...

"α: Dubhe."

...but not when wielded by King of Termination.

The flames burning Albert subsided as he instantly returned to his original form.

He was still overwhelmed by immense heat, but he was no longer actively catching fire.

The reason for that was obvious.

He's resistant to it now, Figaro thought. *I see. So it works on self-inflicted damage too.*

Albert had used his own MVP reward to acquire the same fire resistance he'd used in the fight against Bishmal and Surt.

Albert's Septentrion was a Superior Embryo with the core themes of "learning" and "overcoming." The chain of skills that started with "α: Dubhe" activated when he was near death and gave him a resistance to whatever phenomenon had contributed the most to bringing him there—usually the element that had dealt the most damage.

That meant it could be used regardless of where the damage had come from.

Using the skill on self-inflicted damage, though, wouldn't give him a new means of attack. The new attack would've been drawn from the skill's target, which was Albert himself—and as he possessed a Type Body Embryo, he was *built* differently than most people.

This meant that this first use of the skill didn't give him any offensive abilities, but that wasn't much of a problem, since he could now use Firelyx without any risk.

That wasn't the only change he'd undergone, though.

"What...?" A murmur arose from the audience as they sensed that

Albert’s flames had become more intense after his first comeback.

However, there was no actual change in the intensity of the flames. He’d been firing them at full power since the start.

What had changed was the *temperature* within the barrier. Firelyx’s flames had already increased the temperature to several hundred degrees Celsius. Arena barriers allowed air to flow in, so the area inside never became a vacuum, but it was already an environment that no normal person could survive.

The only reason Figaro was largely unfazed by this was because he’d switched one of his rings for another with fire resistance and empowered it. He’d experienced scorching environments like this in the flaming traps of the deeper Tomb Labyrinth. That was why he’d been able to counter Albert’s attack so readily.

His strategy’s good too, Figaro thought. Even though Figaro could negate the effects of the temperature, it effectively *forced him to use* one of his item slots, preventing him from removing it to empower himself. Additionally, the fire resistance ring meant little against the flames of Firelyx itself.

Thus, Figaro went on the offensive. Turning his body to evade the snaking flames, he aimed the pistol in his right hand at Albert.

The weapon wasn’t made of metal. Its surface was colored like limestone, and it was decorated with a pattern of serpentine scales, giving it the appearance of a snake flowing between rocks.

That was a hint toward what it had once been.

Figaro’s first weapon was “Lifefall Petrifier, Marbledrop.”

It was what remained of a small venomous snake UBM that had once been feared as an invisible peril to all exploring the Tomb Labyrinth.

Avoiding the flames, Figaro fired its bullets straight toward Albert. However, Albert saw the gun pointing at him and moved Firelyx to evaporate the bullets before it could reach him.

The snakes of flame lapped at the bullet flying through the air...

...and the bullet passed clean through them.

A hint of shock could be seen on Albert’s face. Marbledrop had once been a UBM that passed through the walls and floors of the Tomb Labyrinth to approach its targets and deliver its lethal bites.

Because of this, the bullets fired by its MVP reward had the ability to pass through anything nonliving.

Like a dark magic spell, the limestone-colored bullet ignored the call of the superheated flames. It simply continued its flight and *hit*.

That was when its second effect activated.

Shock overcame Albert as he saw the point of impact transform into limestone. The material that comprised his body was being turned into stone—Petrification effect. Normally, this could be resisted with enough HP and END.

However, it was Figaro who had fired the bullet.

Empowered by Cor Leonis, the Petrifying projectile quickly began to affect Albert's entire body.

Not yet resistant to Petrification, Albert became a stone statue, unable to do anything to stop it. Taciturn at the best of times, he fell utterly silent as Petrification rendered him completely immobile.

This obviously also locked his Firelyx completely in place.

"HYAAAH!" Figaro closed the distance between them and switched to another weapon—Gloria α.

This was perhaps the strongest blade among all Figaro's many MVP rewards.

However, he didn't use it to attack Albert's statue, instead splitting the two maws of the Firelyx.

The flames within it were unleashed, creating a massive explosion. Figaro jumped away, but Albert's Petrification prevented him from doing anything to protect himself.

Even though he had fire resistance, the pressure of the explosion overwhelmed him and blasted his body into bits.

"Now..." With his fire resistance ring and his skilled evasion, Figaro reduced the explosion damage to a mere graze.

By the time the fire was gone, so was the Firelyx.

Albert himself had been reduced to fragments too small to recognize. He was certainly on the verge of death now.

I wonder... Figaro thought.

While Petrification was a debuff that completely immobilized those affected, Figaro rarely used this pistol. It certainly delivered a lethal debuff, but Figaro had multiple ways of killing his opponents that were easier than landing a shot. Plus, though it did lead directly to death, the debuff didn't kill instantly, so it was a little slow in ending a battle.

Figaro had used it now for a few reasons. One was to force Albert to use up a resistance slot for an attack type that was unrelated to his main one.

Another reason was to confirm something. Petrification was an immobilizing status effect that also prevented the use of skills. Even if Last Stand worked, Figaro thought the debuff might prevent Albert from using his heal and buff skill at least.

He'd chosen Marbledrop to check if he was right.

The answer to that...

"...β: Merak."

...came from the empty space in the form of a skill declaration.

The tiny fragments pulled themselves together, instantly rebuilding Albert's body.

"...I see," said Figaro. This wasn't an unexpected result—after all, Albert had come back even when Bishmal had evaporated his head and when Catherine Kongou had used Charm on him.

With this, Figaro now knew that Albert would come back even if he was rendered completely immobile.

Maybe the skill activations had some trick to them, but Figaro didn't think that suited Albert very well.

Thankfully, Figaro had no shortage of ways to defeat his enemies. He simply thought, *I'll just beat him six or seven more times.*

Albert returned to life with shock waves bursting in his hands. This was the same power he'd used after his first comeback against Bishmal. Likely, it was an additional weapon meant to cause immense damage to the organs within the human body.

Direct attacks against the body weren't very useful in this scenario—indeed, they weren't useful in many scenarios where Albert used his equipment-focused combat style. This was because, while monsters often had special resistances, humans were generally frail enough for his MVP reward firepower to finish the job.

Thus, Albert had already decided what weapon he'd use now that Firelyx was gone.

Figaro also put away his two MVP rewards and took out another weapon.

This was only the end of the first round of their duel. If either of them was at a disadvantage here, though, it would be Albert. He'd already suffered fatal damage twice, and his Firelyx was destroyed.

The item he equipped next was a pair of bracers with a mechanism on the back meant to release some kind of gas.

As Figaro was thinking about Ray's Gardranda, the bracers released an intense burst of white mist. It filled the entire stage, but it didn't obscure the vision of the audience, as it was less dense than expected. The spectators could still observe the fight without a problem through the thin haze.

It was clear that it wasn't intended as a smoke screen, and just when the audience was starting to wonder if it might have been poison...

...they suddenly noticed that Figaro was acting strangely. He turned his head this way and that, as if looking around for his opponent.

The problem with that was that Albert wasn't even moving. What was Figaro looking for, then?

As Figaro was on high alert—or perhaps he was just confused—Albert took out his third item.

It was a very typical cannon, and he aimed it right at Figaro.

However, unlike before, Figaro didn't evade his shot. He only stood in place and looked around.

It was almost as if *he couldn't see a thing*.

Soon after, Albert pulled the trigger...

"Nghhh!"

...and *that* was when Figaro finally moved.

He dodged the projectile by a hair's breadth, and it flew past him to strike the barrier. It pierced through the five arena wards and even shook those added by Integra.

Figaro kept running around without stopping for a second, while Albert targeted him wherever he went.

This time, though, Albert aimed his cannon a bit lower than he had for his first attack, as though he didn't intend to hit the barrier at all.

The mist was so thin that the audience could see the battle clearly—and yet, they couldn't help but feel confused about the way things were unfolding.

"That MVP reward is craaazy."

But some of those watching knew exactly what was going on. One of them was a woman sitting in a box seat—the *Superior*, Fuso Tsukuyo.

"Generally speaking, MVP rewards with major flaws have equally major benefits to make up for it." Eishiro Tsukikage, her servant and aide, also spoke as if he understood the situation. He claimed that this situation was the result of the bracer MVP reward that filled the arena with a seemingly pointless mist—and that that was actually its flaw.

"Yep. It's like how my *Superior* reward can only target humans, has a smaller range, and only works on lower-level targets, but in exchange it got to keep its defense against ranged attacks. With enough drawbacks to balance it out, MVP rewards can use some parts of the UBM's full power."

"This one has two flaws," said Eishiro. "First, you can easily see from the outside in. And second..."

"The big guy can't see anything either. The mist blocks out the senses of anyone inside, *including his own*. It's a flaw that ignores the wielder's safety, just like the other item he used."

While Figaro's behavior was obviously strange, Albert's own movements were a bit awkward too, so they both guessed at the reason behind it.

And they were completely right.

The bracers were a Legendary MVP reward, "Toxicating Mistbringer, Drac-Mist."

This was an MVP reward that fully shut down the visual, auditory, and olfactory senses of anyone inside.

The item was useless against anyone outside the mist, and since Albert would almost certainly be in the middle of it, he was guaranteed to be affected.

It was an extremely flawed item, and anyone using it could easily be overwhelmed and killed by any opponents outside the effect's range.

Needless to say, the mist had no such flaws when used by the Mistdragon King, Drac-Mist. However...

"The fact that he has the MVP reward means that he must've beaten the UBM," said Tsukuyo. "He's gotta have something that lets him fight in the mist."

The more flawed the MVP reward, the stronger its effects. However, capable and cunning Masters were able to counteract the flaws—or find a way to use them to their advantage.

Tsukuyo herself had something like this. Kaguya's Faint Light skill could reduce enemy levels and turn Gloria β into a fearsome weapon capable of killing any non-SJ. Based on this principle, Tsukuyo and Eishiro speculated that Albert could aim at Figaro as well as he did because he also possessed some method of overcoming the mist's flaws.

Was it his Superior Embryo, then? Had he developed a resistance to this item's effects, just as he had with Firelyx?

No—Albert hadn't been brought to the verge of death. He hadn't gained a resistance to the mist, and it didn't deal damage, so he might not have even been able to in the first place.

The synergy here wasn't with his Embryo, but with his job. He was using the skills he had as King of Termination—the *kill-specialized Superior Job*.

The words "kill-specialized" likely brought a number of things to mind. Did it refer to immense firepower meant to kill many foes? Did it grant some special powers that enabled his attacks to be more effective against a variety of enemies?

King of Termination actually did neither.

Termination in this context meant *extermination*.

When someone used immense firepower to wipe out a horde of monsters that threatened the people and their way of life, a small number was likely to survive. These monsters would run away, grow their numbers, restore themselves, and once again rise to become a danger to the people.

King of Termination would not allow this to happen.

The job had two skills besides the ultimate.

The first of them was "Countdown Radar." This allowed him to select a type of monster that he had defeated and immediately learn the locations of all other monsters of the same type.

The second skill was "Scar Marking," which told him the current location and stats of anyone he dealt damage to.

Indeed—King of Termination was actually a job focused on *pursuit*.

No matter how hard his quarry tried to hide or flee, the terminator would follow you to the ends of the earth.

Albert was specialized in extermination through *not letting anything get away*.

Figaro was currently affected by Scar Marking, due to Firelyx's explosion that had recently obliterated Albert. Figaro had jumped away and was equipped with a fire resistance accessory, so he hadn't taken that much damage. In fact, he was barely scratched.

That, however, was more than enough. Scar Marking had been activated the moment Figaro was touched by Firelyx's explosion.

Because of this, Albert could attack him even though he couldn't use his vision, hearing, or sense of smell.

This was exactly the strategy he'd used to defeat Drac-Mist. And unlike the dragon, Figaro couldn't sense a thing. The tide had turned overwhelmingly in Albert's favor.

"I am impressed how well he is handling it, though," Eishiro commented. Despite losing three of his five senses, and even though Albert could still see him, Figaro hadn't received a single hit yet. His evasive movements were timed as though he knew when the attacks were coming, and Eishiro was wondering why that was.

"It's the hat," said Tsukuyo as she used a fan to point at the feathered hat Figaro always wore. "It's an MVP reward, 'Avian Windwatcher, Weather Feather.' It's got a juiced-up version of Killing Intent Perception or something. I think it reacts to dungeon traps too."

"I see. That explains his skillful dodging."

A versatile danger-sensing item—it made sense that a solo dungeon explorer like Figaro would wear such a thing all the time.

"And, well... There's something else he's always got on hand, right?"

The moment Tsukuyo said that, Figaro switched his equipment.

There was now a chain in each of his hands. The Crimson Dead Keepers—some of his most-used weapons.

A hint of shock came over Albert's face. The two chains attacked automatically—not by vision, hearing, or smell, but by locking on to the opponent's vital signs.

Their aim was true despite the mist, and they struck out. Albert's heart and head were pulverized.

Albert staggered as metallic parts tumbled from his damaged body...

"γ: Phecda."

...but this activated his third healing and buff skill, immediately fixing all the parts he'd lost.

The two chains continued attacking him, but they now bounced off him without dealing any damage.

In exchange for defeating Albert once despite his inability to see, Figaro could no longer fight him using impact-based physical attacks.

Despite that, he didn't put the chains away, instead choosing to continue his attack—or maybe his inability to see or hear had prevented him from realizing that Albert had already been beaten once.

"Hmm?" As Tsukuyo watched this battle, a question appeared in her mind. It wasn't directly about the battle in the mist, though.

"I've been thinking this since the fifth battle, but...that one's kinda *fragile*, huh?" She was referring to Albert. Though they'd been launched by Figaro, who empowered all his gear, it was still surprising that the chains had dealt fatal damage to Albert, since they weren't MVP awards.

His skills that granted resistances made up for that, but it was hard to deny that Albert seemed fragile.

King of Termination was a job that granted mainly HP and STR. While END certainly went up slower than those, it still felt like he was receiving more deadly injury-based debuffs than he should have.

"Machine parts fly off when he's damaged, so maybe he's a full-body replacement...? A Type Body, in other words. If that's true...it would explain a lot." Tsukuyo's guess was right on the mark: Albert's Septentrion was a Type Body Superior Embryo that replaced his entire body with a mechanical one.

While Embryos of this type were extremely rare, the few examples that did exist had several things in common.

One of them was that they applied a negative modifier to any stats increased by jobs. In exchange for his transformation ability and the properties of a slime, King of Crime had a negative modifier on all stats, for example.

Similarly, Septentrion also had such a stat penalty—especially for END. As a Superior Job with a high level, he should've been extremely tough, but he was actually so fragile that even Bishmal—a mere high-rank job—could strangle him to death.

Some might have argued that Septentrion's resistance-granting skills made this flaw more like a feature, but...

Sechs gets negative stat mods in return for gaining the properties of a slime and the transformation thing, Tsukuyo thought. *It would make sense if this one gives him the resistance power, but also the properties of a* *machine.*

There actually was some evidence to suggest that. Albert could activate his skill even when his head had been crushed or he'd been turned to stone. The mechanism that allowed that might've been related to how his body actually functioned.

However, just watching the battle from the box seat wasn't enough to let Tsukuyo figure it out.

In fact, even Figaro didn't know that, and he was the one fighting Albert.

"Hmm..."

"Kage? What's wrong?" Tsukuyo asked, sensing that Eishiro had a question.

"Figaro must've realized that his opponent is fragile by now."

"Well, of course. He's got Reveal and all."

"Then why is he not switching out the chains?" Now that Eishiro had brought it up, it *was* strange that Figaro did not seem to have realized he'd already destroyed Albert.

And yet, despite having already granted him resistance to his chains, the duel champion continued the attack.

"What's he trying to do?"

"He has also removed his footwear and is now barefoot," Eishiro commented. Indeed, Figaro had removed the Unbound Sabatons MVP reward that protected him from binding effects and was now fighting on his bare feet.

While lowering the amount of things he had equipped empowered his remaining items, it seemed like that wasn't his intention here.

"...No way." Tsukuyo realized what Figaro was doing, and it made her break into a cold sweat.

No way he's trying to pull something that absurd, right? she thought.

But she was exactly on the mark.

A moment later, despite having lost three of his senses, *Figaro ran toward Albert.*

He zigzagged to avoid the cannon fire, but he was definitely approaching him. He shouldn't have been able to see, yet it was as if he knew Albert's location with perfect accuracy.

Albert seemed a tiny bit shocked. He couldn't actually see Figaro's approach, but Scar Marking made it clear that Figaro was closing the distance between them.

How did Figaro know where he was?

Albert assumed that it was because of the attacks Figaro had been making with his chains—or what Albert figured were chains, anyway, based on prior information.

Because of this, Albert changed into a coat-like MVP reward that released a shock wave around him and used it on the chains attacking him. This reward also didn't consider the safety of the wearer and would've pulverized himself too, but he already had resistance to physical impacts.

The chains that must've been guiding Figaro were shattered as they struck the shock wave barrier around Albert. If he came too close, Figaro would meet the same fate.

Blind, deaf, and unable to smell, Figaro charged toward Albert, *only to stop right before the shock wave*.

Scar Marking told Albert what he'd done, and the fact that Figaro had stopped moving right outside the shock wave's effective range really threw him for a loop.

He'd lost three of his senses—how could Figaro know Albert's location and predict his attacks with such precision?

The answer to that resided in things he *hadn't* lost.

Figaro had continued attacking with his chains even after Albert had become resistant to their damage in order to measure the distance between him and his opponent, based on the feel of the chains as they pulled him along.

As he did that, he also made himself barefoot to *feel the vibrations* on the stage.

Was Albert moving? Was he firing? Did his method of attack change? Figaro answered all these questions using only these vibrations.

Indeed—though he'd lost three of his senses, he was able to measure the opponent's location using *only the sense of touch*.

"HYAH!" And using this absurd tactic, the duel champion caught up to his opponent and equipped two new MVP rewards.

In his left hand was an Ancient Legendary MVP reward, the "Glacial Burstlance, Jökulhlaup."

Aiming this weapon—perhaps best described as a "gun lance"—at Albert, Figaro pulled the trigger.

The man was instantly overwhelmed by immense frost.

He couldn't fend off the cold with his shock waves. The coat MVP reward, the cannon he was holding, the Drac-Mist on his wrists, and his own body were all Frozen in a split second.

Stepping on the freezing stage with his own two feet, Figaro thrust at the icy sculpture with the lance.

With Albert's toughness greatly reduced by the ice, Figaro's empowered attack instantly shattered him, reducing him to pale dust.

"δ: Megrez."

As the MVP reward's mist cleared, Albert used his fourth heal and buff skill.

However, Figaro was right in front of him, brandishing his next weapon.

Having equipped it alongside the lance, he was holding the Ancient Legendary "Scattering Spellblade, Paledin." This was a shapeless energy blade that inflicted dark damage and a curse-based damage-over-time debuff, and Figaro used it to slash at Albert.

He was aiming to take advantage of Albert's cooldown.

The Rear Soldier's Last Stand skill couldn't be used for five seconds after its effect expired. If brought to 1 HP within this interval, Albert wouldn't be able to survive.

That was what Figaro was attempting to do.

Normally, killing Albert in just five seconds after he was fully healed was difficult. HP was easy to increase as far as stats went, and with him being an HP and STR-focused SJ, Albert's HP easily surpassed 200,000 even with the growth penalty imposed by his job. Because of this, many had tried to kill him by destroying vital body parts or suffocating him, but no one had managed to do it before he could use Last Stand again.

This didn't apply to Figaro, however.

Focusing his gear empowerment abilities on his weapon and AGI items, Figaro intended to use these five seconds to reduce Albert's HP to nothing.

Once again, Albert was shocked. Far behind his opponent in terms of AGI, he wasn't able to switch his equipment in time.

One second. Albert lost control of both his arms and a third of his HP.

Two seconds. Albert's head was disabled, and he lost two thirds of his HP.

Three seconds. Albert's torso was slashed horizontally, bringing his HP to 1.

Four seconds. Albert was split in half from the top of his head to the groin. This was an attack meant to take away that last tiny sliver of HP.

Five seconds. Albert *still had 1 HP left*.

Figaro's expression warped in confusion.

Albert hadn't activated Last Stand. After enduring all of those lethal attacks, there was no way he could have any HP left without using his job skill.

And yet, Albert still had 1 HP.

This could only mean that his combo didn't rely on Last Stand.

"ε: Alioth."

And so, he used the fifth heal and buff skill.

He'd come back yet again, as if nothing had happened.

"This is..."

It made no sense. Most members of the audience thought that Figaro simply failed to defeat him in time, but it was abundantly clear that he'd delivered more than enough damage to do that.

And yet, Albert had still survived with 1 HP and revived himself.

There has to be something more, Figaro thought. Albert's healing *wasn't* from the synergy between his Embryo and his job. Figaro was certain of that, and he guessed that it must be from yet another MVP reward—or something else entirely.

Having come back, Albert was as silent as ever, but he had leaped into action.

A new MVP reward had appeared right next to him. It was the item he'd tried to take out while being torn by Figaro's spellblade—a suit of armor as crimson as fresh blood, larger than even a man as imposing as Albert.

It had a different feel about it than any MVP reward he'd brought out so far. While it looked mechanical, it also gave off the impression of something that labored under a dire curse.

In fact, it was the Ancient Legendary "Crimson Armor, Exademon"—perhaps the strongest MVP reward in Albert's arsenal.

"Crimson-Stained Steel: Exademon."

For the first time, Albert spoke the name of a skill other than his Embryo skills.

"O o o r r r g h h..." Responding to the call, the armor made a growl reminiscent of a carnivorous beast, then opened up like a maw and engulfed Albert whole.

A moment later, red liquid that looked like oily blood flowed out from within.

Some shrieks could be heard in the audience. They couldn't understand what was happening here. Some even assumed that this was some kind of attack by Figaro.

However, Figaro himself knew that wasn't the case. His eyes then widened, and he jumped back at the same time as Albert made his move.

"ζ: Mizar." Even though he hadn't been attacked, he activated his heal and buff skill for the sixth time.

As he did so, though, he moved. Clad in the strange armor, Albert raised his fist high and brought it down like a hammer.

The next moment, *the stage vanished*.

A thunderous sound akin to a meteor impact echoed even outside the arena. The stone of the stage was shattered, blasting debris into the air with such force that it broke through several layers of the barrier.

Some screams resounded from the audience, but Integra's barriers were able to keep them safe from the rocks.

That obviously wasn't true for Figaro, though. Shards of stone too numerous to evade had sliced open countless small wounds on his body.

Following this first impact, the stage became a crater, and within it stood Albert, clad in crimson armor, and Figaro, covered in his own scarlet blood.

This damage would've been far worse if he hadn't retreated as quickly as he did.

"...I see." Figaro now understood how Albert's armor worked.

Neither Albert nor the armor had performed any special attack.

He'd only swung down his fist *as hard as he could*.

The effect, however, had been as powerful as a Superior Job's ultimate skill. The full body armor MVP reward, "Crimson Armor, Exademon," had only one skill on it—"Crimson-Stained Steel: Exademon." It dealt fixed damage that reduced the wearer's HP to 1, then converted the damage dealt into attack power and defense.

Many of Albert's MVP rewards were unwieldy, but this one was a whole new level of difficult to handle. Having just 1 HP meant that even a scratch could kill you.

But in Albert's case, it was nothing but an advantage. It guaranteed a near-death state, and granted him resistance to fixed damage on top of immense attack power and defense.

In fact, when combined with KoT's own stats, Albert's current attack power actually exceeded that of King of Destruction in his Godcloth. Even Figaro would die in one direct hit.

And this attack power was matched by his defense.

Faced with this, anyone reasonable would simply give up.

"...Heh heh." However, Figaro didn't look remotely resigned or despairing.

This was an extreme situation where even a single hit would kill him, and yet he was laughing.

All-out battles like this were exactly what Figaro wanted. There was no cowardice or compromise here.

After all, there was still something he could do. While he had countless MVP rewards, there weren't many that would work against his opponent's current defense, but there was still one option.

"This is a bit earlier than planned," Figaro said as he took out a broadsword.

It didn't look all that impressive, but its overwhelming presence felt like it could burn anyone to cinder.

Gloria α—the strongest weapon in Figaro's arsenal, and the one he'd used to defeat other *Superiors* like Xunyu and Tsukuyo.

It was the second time he'd equipped it in this duel. But this time, he wouldn't use it on a weapon, but on the armor the opponent was wearing. It would surely cut through not just the MVP reward, but Albert himself.

Instead of worrying about giving Albert a resistance to his strongest item, Figaro chose to focus on cutting him apart.

The Over Gladiator, brandishing a sword, and King of Termination, clad in armor.

The two faced each other as their battle entered its final stage.

Chapter 9: Paradigm Shift

Paladin, Ray Starling

We ran and ran down a long, straight passage.

Even though we were still activating traps, they were all the kind that came with the Depths of Jealousy. It didn't seem like we were encountering anything else that G added herself.

My guess was that since we got past the mid-boss, she had no intention of stopping us now.

It felt like she actually *wanted* us to reach the end of the dungeon—like she really did want us to come to her.

That was exactly what was strange about G—an ordinary thief would never act like this. If all she wanted was to complete her ult and take our arena, she could've done a lot more to stop us.

However, she'd set up the time limit and the obstacles in our way to make this as close as possible—almost like she was balancing a game.

I'd seen a few of her videos, and it never seemed like she was trying to create a situation where her enemies had no hope of winning. I got the impression that, while she didn't want to lose, she was also *prioritizing something over certain victory*. It was much like how her brother would do *anything* for his research.

But if that was the case, then what *was* G's main goal...?

"Hm?" As we proceeded, the passage drastically changed. Its cave-like appearance was suddenly replaced by man-made stone construction, and the lighting now came not from dimly glowing crystals, but magic lights that activated when we came closer.

The overall effect reminded me of a dark lord's castle from an old RPG, and the lights guided us deeper in.

"I didn't see this area," I muttered. One of G's videos I'd watched had been set in the Depths of Jealousy, but the Masters she'd picked a fight with had all been defeated by the fearsome traps and the rest of G's clan.

At the end of the video, she'd said something like, "The defense has too much of an advantage here! I should really be more cautious about using this place!” It seemed like she’d decided we were the right opponents to challenge the Depths of Jealousy.

“Hmm... Lights and stone,” said Nemesis. “I do not see any traps here, but this is quite a view...”

“This must just be what G likes,” said Juliet. “It does look really good.”

She wasn’t wrong. If this hadn’t been a path leading us directly to an enemy, I would have stopped to admire the style and beauty on display here.

The passage soon ended, though, and we arrived at our goal—a strange room that seemed like a mix of the natural and man-made sections of the dungeon. The floor and walls were entirely covered in dark-gray rectangles of stone, and the light of the eerie chandelier hanging from the ceiling disrupted the shadows cast by the tapestries on the walls.

But where the wall farthest from the entrance should have been, there was instead a plunge pool with a blue waterfall endlessly flowing into it.

And enshrined right before it, there was a throne too large for any human.

“Greetings, brave intruders! I bid you welcome! You are the first to ever make it to my throne room!” Overlord Invidia, G was waiting for us. Her legs dangled as she sat on the oversized throne and looked at us in glee. “Well? What do you think? Me and my clan worked so hard to renovate this place, but no one could make it this far, so I haven’t even gotten to reveal it until now! Thanks for the opportunity!”

“Um... Uh... You’re welcome?” G’s genuine happiness made Juliet a bit perplexed. “Ummm... If you’re satisfied now...could you please stop trying to take Ray’s arena...?”

“That is one thing! *This* is another! We’re playing this out until the bitter end!” G denied Juliet’s request with a smile. “You got about twenty minutes left! That’s enough time for a good climax! You’ve got a dungeon! You’ve got an Overlord! It’d be a waste to end it now!”

G then hopped off the throne, stood up, and took out her weapon.

My eyes widened. It was a sinister-looking trident, perfectly suited for a devil.

However, it was *absurdly* large.

Its length exceeded five metels, making it over three times larger than the girl who held it. The edges and the grip were appropriately thick too—it seemed far too unwieldy for someone her size.

"What's her fighting style, anyway...?" Juliet wondered, and I couldn't blame her.

The Overlord series of jobs could be acquired by anyone who cleared the associated dungeons. This meant they had no prerequisite jobs, which made it difficult for Juliet to guess her powers. I'd seen some of her videos, but I wasn't that much better informed than she was. All I knew was her basic combat style and the fact that she stole locations and added them to her Embryo.

Based on the video of her breaking into Titania's live concert, her stats were about on the same level as a vanguard SJ, and she was a well-rounded combatant who fought using a mix of weaponry and magic.

But that also meant that she didn't have the kinds of standout combat abilities you'd expect from a *Superior*...and I hadn't seen her use that huge trident in any of the videos I watched.

"Well, I don't think the Embryo itself is the type that contributes to the battle directly..." I said.

"Oh? So you didn't watch all of my videos?" G asked, tilting her head.

"Sadly, I only started watching recently. I only managed to watch the newest ones."

"So... That means you saw the band battle and the recent dungeon raid I set up when I was bored. Well, that's understandable, then. I get it," she said as she let out a sigh, then smiled again. "That means...you'll get to see everything live!"

The relaxed atmosphere instantly became one of extreme tension.

The aura of powerful creatures was something I'd encountered many times in this world. This Overlord had it too, and was directing it right toward us...

My eyes widened. Right—while she seemed like a fun-loving, mischievous type of person, someone we could have a casual chat with, there was now no doubt that she was also an Overlord.

There weren't even double-digit numbers of her kind in the world, and she—Overlord Invidia, one of Desire's *Superiors*—was among the most powerful.

"Action!"

With that word as the signal, G made her move.

She swung her treelike trident as if to sweep us away. As the massive weapon hurtled toward me at the speed of sound, I swung my halberd up to meet it.

I was empowered by seven buffs, but the weight of the attack still pushed me backward. It wasn't enough to break my stance, though.

But as if taking advantage of this moment, Overlord Invidia held up her left hand and cast some sort of dark magic, firing ten projectiles of black light toward me.

"Blackwing Requiem!"

They all failed to reach me. As I was pushed backward, Juliet fired a volley of her own dark magic, canceling out G's.

While their magic clashed, Juliet moved at supersonic speeds to close the distance between them.

The sight made G's eyes widen.

Juliet had great combat instincts even by duelist standards—only the likes of Figaro could match her. Even other SJs would have a hard time countering her movements. Now, she was trying to land an attack on G before she could swing that trident again. The Overlord didn't have enough time to intercept it.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! In that case... Take this!"

But it was Juliet's turn to be shocked as her flight trajectory was abruptly changed.

I noticed a thread of light extending from one of the three points of the trident.

"Got you, little *fishy*!" G taunted, and the thread of light began winding back.

Juliet was forcefully, at a high speed, being dragged toward the tip of the trident.

"It pulls enemies into it!" That meant they could effectively negate the distance between allies and enemies—very useful in any battle.

Juliet flapped her wings, trying to fight against the pull, but then G pulled the trident back, preparing to skewer her catch.

"Not happening!" Using my enhanced leg strength, I stuck out my left hand and rushed toward G. "Purgatorial Flames!"

The bracer opened its maw, releasing scorching flames from within.

"Whoa?!" G jumped away before they could reach her, but that made the thread of light vanish, freeing Juliet.

"That was enough to break it?" The thread of light had appeared without even a skill declaration, and it had disappeared just as easily. Maybe it was the type of thing that only activated under certain conditions?

"It probably requires her to look at her target or stay still herself... I think." Juliet answered my question.

She'd actually experienced it, so she could probably *feel* a little bit of how it worked. The flames had blocked G's vision of Juliet, and she'd moved away to dodge them. It seemed pretty likely that either of those things had interfered with the thread's effect.

"That's a good guess, Julie! You're right! Harodihg Gnik's 'Attraction Anchor' requires line of sight to work!" And with that, G herself once again revealed the nature of her power to us—as well as the viewers who would watch the video.

It's rare to see people who reveal their hand so casually, I thought.

"'Harodihg Gnik,' though?" I said, after a moment. "That name's pretty hard to say... Hold on! Is that seriously what it's called?!"

When I realized what the name was when you read it *backward*, I couldn't help but make that comment.

"Hey, this was made for me by my clan members. What's your problem with the name? You're being rude."

"*I'm* being rude?! Tell that to whoever named it!"

"Hm?" G and even Juliet both tilted their heads, clearly not sure what I meant.

"You don't even get the reference?! Damn it! First the monsters, now the weapon... Do you have anything with a normal name?!"

I mean, I get that these weird names might spice up the video, but still...!

There was one conclusion we could draw from the battle so far, though —that G actually was a combatant who used both weapons and magic, much like Juliet. She wasn't the type who was impossible to counter on the first try, and she didn't have any gimmicks that made her pretty much unbeatable. Sure, she had advantages like R'lyeh blocking all attacks from the outside and her ability to choose our location when we went inside, but they were irrelevant now that we were inside and fighting her.

Though, again... If she really wanted to have the arena, she could've just dumped us right into some instakill traps.

It really did seem like the arena and avenging F weren't actually her top priorities.

"I already knew this from your videos, but you make a good comedic straight man! You'd be a great addition to my work. Would you like to appear in more of these? Julie can join too!"

"Nope."

"Huh?" *I sure as hell don't wanna deal with a mischievous criminal more than I have to, but... Juliet, why do you sound a bit disappointed?*

"Okay! I guess I'll have to make the most out of...this!"

Laughing at my answer, G charged at me.

"Juliet!"

"Oh. Right!"

Juliet instantly understood what I meant and released a barrage of dark magic. Launched toward G's head, it completely obscured her vision.

"You sure think fast! Already countering Harodihg Gnik, huh? But...!"

Though her threads of light were disabled, G didn't falter one bit. She used dark magic of her own and swung the trident at Juliet, who met it with her sword.

G's eyes widened. Her trident clashed with Juliet's blade—but unlike me, she wasn't sent flying backward.

"That sword...!" G said. While the two of them were locked sword to trident, G and I both noticed that Juliet had at some point switched her weapon.

It was a sword of a pure black color—the new weapon she'd won in her Tournament.

Its name was "Spiritblade Gleam, Gradsoul," and it had come from Spiritblade Rider, Gradsoul—Juliet's reward for Tournament day four and an Ancient Legendary UBM that converted grudge into power, just like the Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

Adjusted to suit Juliet, the dark blade Gradsoul had two skills.

First was Curse Conversion. When cursed with the Fallen Knight's "Darkness of Valediction," it converted it into a buff for Juliet, giving a fifty percent increase to all her stats except HP, MP, and SP.

Clad in a dark, cursed aura, the sword had already activated this skill, empowering Juliet and giving her stats that brought her up to the Overlord's level, if not higher.

"I saw you use that while sparring! It looks really useful! I'm kinda jealous!"

"Th-Thanks...!"

Now that Juliet was buffed too, we had the upper hand. G's stats were very high. She was on about the same level as Juliet right now, as well as me with all my Reversed debuffs.

However...stats weren't everything.

"G herself is not that skilled," said Nemesis. Indeed—she was nothing like Figaro, Kashimiya, or other ranking duelists.

From our battle so far, I could tell that her fighting ability was limited by her use of sense skills—it was something that any regular player could have. Even if she had high stats, in practice she would lose against Juliet, who had both an SJ and excellent combat instincts—and her Embryo, R'lyeh, could hardly contribute to battles like this.

If we both attacked G now, we'd definitely overpower her.

Juliet demonstrated this fact by slashing close enough to slice off a bit of G's hair.

G backed away, touching the now-shortened lock of hair. Her eyes widened as she looked at us.

"Yeah! This could be pretty bad for me!" G casually admitted that she was at a disadvantage.

"Could you stop this, then? If you turn off the ult..."

"Hm? You misunderstood, Julie. I said this *could be* bad for me. Not that it *is*." G shook her head as she denied Juliet's suggestion. "If anything, the fun is just getting started."

Her smile grew wider, and a moment later, she jumped even farther back.

She was headed behind the throne—to the blue waterfall endlessly flowing from the ceiling.

It had just looked like part of the decor at first, but it turned out that it was more than that...

"Ah ha ha ha ha!" G jumped into the plunge pool, and her skin started *melting away*.

It didn't end there either. According to Reveal, she was now afflicted with seven debuffs—Poison, Magic Drain, Soul Drain, Weakness, Lethargy, Paralysis, and Frailty.

“These debuffs... Wait, that waterfall is...!”

“Yes! It’s a source of the debuffs flowing through the Depths of Jealousy! R’lyeh could only take one of those sources... But that’s more than enough! That’s exactly why this place is the goal!” Despite being afflicted by so many status effects, G was still laughing. Like an ascetic meditating beneath a waterfall, she exposed herself to the deadly torrent.

The scene made Juliet’s eyes widen and her face turn pale. It felt like she couldn’t wrap her head around what G was doing or why.

“When I first watched the Unbreakable fight the Hell General...” The Overlord didn’t seem to care about her awful condition. Instead she just kept talking to me, or Juliet—or maybe to the cameras that were probably installed all over the place here. “This was before the Unbreakable’s fight against my brother, so I watched it like anyone would watch a viral video about a newbie. And it made me think...”

G placed her left hand on her chest and cracked a smile that only grew wider and wider.

“‘Oh, *someone’s doing the same thing as me*.’”

My eyes widened as I instantly understood those words.

“By the way,” G continued, “do you know what dark lords in RPGs always have?”

“What?”

“Ah...!” Juliet seemed confused, but I knew exactly what she was saying.

The bad feeling I had quickly turned to panic, and I rushed toward G.

I got to the plunge pool, but before I could swing my halberd...

“*Paradigm Shift*.”

...Overlord Invidia’s form was engulfed in a sinister light.

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Altea, The Royal Capital, The Royal Castle

That evening, after having dinner, Third Princess Theresia was sitting alone on her bed. She was thought to be sickly, so neither the maids nor the knights who protected her questioned this.

However, she did have a specific reason for being alone now.

Both Altimia and Integra—Altar's strongest tian and most skilled caster—had left the castle to go to Gideon.

Situations like this were convenient for Theresia in many ways.

"You're here, aren't you? Come out."

She clapped her hands, prompting a man to appear in her room.

For a moment, he looked like a mix between a bat and a person, but he soon took the form of an ordinary human.

His name was Morter Cortana, and he was the former King of Raids, as well as a former Idea working for IF.

And now, he was a Dependent of the current The Evil—Theresia C. Altar.

"Did you finish the job?"

"The scary women leave, and you tell me to bring the info I've gathered so far... What's this about?" Grumbling to his boss, Morter took out an Inventory full of documents and handed it to Theresia. From the outside, it might have looked strange that an adult was being ordered around by a child, but Theresia could actually kill him without breaking a sweat. In fact, she was so much more powerful that she might as well have inhabited a different dimension.

Also, it had been Morter himself who'd chosen to stop being human and obey Theresia to survive—he had no right to complain.

"Thanks. I can now make better future plans and think of something more specific."

"That so?"

"I could call you here more often if Altimia and Integra weren't around so much... Can you do something about that?"

"Please. They're really powerful even by Superior Job standards. The only reason I could come here safely at all is because they're both in Gideon now... It's a real pain in the ass that your room is so deep in the castle."

"Heh heh. Sorry. I'm all sickly and weak, you know?"

"As if. You're like one of the most overpowered beings in the entire world..." The Dependent wasn't amused by her joke. "Oh yeah, by the way, I heard in town that there's been some trouble in Gideon," he said.

"Oh? Do tell."

"A Caldinan *Superior* joined The Tournaments. The gossip's all about how he's gonna end up fighting Figaro."

"I see... I wonder if that's another one of her plays. With all the scheming she does around me, I can't help but find her troublesome."

Theresia let out a sigh as a certain woman came to mind. She didn't know the woman's face, but she knew *what she was* all too well.

"Should I do something?" Morter asked.

"I don't know what should be done, so no. And if the matches progress as normal, the Over Gladiator will certainly be winning this. Shu has often told me how strong he is. Though, this world is full of things that one simply can't expect, so I suppose I can't be too sure about that."

"...You're not wrong." Through involvement with things he didn't even want to think about, Morter had fallen from grace, become a criminal, been captured, been turned into an Idea, and then become a Dependent of this girl before him.

He was starting to take the unexpected for granted.

"It is quite impressive, though," said Theresia. "Figaro became the Over Gladiator without taking any other Superior Jobs... All that really did for him was remove his level cap and give him some extra item slots."

"What do you mean?"

"The Over Gladiator is The Hero's *prototype Superior Job*."

"Prototype?"

"Yes. The prototype for The Hero, who can take lots of jobs and sub-jobs, then use them all together. Similarly, the Over Gladiator can use the skills of multiple Superior Jobs without regard for their groupings."

The Hero's "Almighty" skill let him take a hundred high-rank and hundred low-rank jobs, and on top of that, it allowed him to use all of their skills.

The Over Gladiator's "Complete" skill didn't add any job slots, but it allowed him to freely use the skills of his subbed Superior Jobs, and anyone could have as many of those as they wanted.

However, Figaro had no other Superior Jobs, so the job's biggest advantage was not currently active.

"Superior Jobs had prototypes?" Having been King of Raids, Morter was intrigued by this new revelation regarding jobs.

"All Special Superior Jobs have prototypes. No exceptions. For example, the 'General' series of jobs—oh, with the exception of Hell

General and Heaven General—were all prototypes for Conquest General."

"No exceptions? Does that include your job?" Morter asked as he looked at the girl—the youngest and most fearsome Special Superior Job of all.

"Yes. My Special Superior Job is the key to The Demise, and my prototypes are the Overlord series of jobs."

As The Evil, Theresia couldn't reveal much to other people.

However, that didn't apply to her Dependents. She could tell Morter the many secrets she knew—and that might've been why, when they were alone, they always seemed to have conversations like this.

"The Infinite Jobs—the creators of this world—prepared those jobs to create and individually test the many functions of The Evil. The power to turn inorganic things into monsters that I showed when fighting you is based on Overlord Acedia's 'Enthrall,' while the power that made your body into what it is now is based on Overlord Luxuria's 'Progress.'"

"I see..." Morter said as his gaze shifted toward his hand. He currently had the form of a person, but if he wanted, he could become something that was neither human nor monster. And this was made possible by that Overlord's...and The Evil's power. "So The Evil has the powers of all seven Overlords...?"

"Yes. Well... Actually, it's not quite that simple."

Theresia nodded for a moment, but then seemed to remember something.

"What do you mean?"

"There's one function that changed between the testing and the implementation, so I have the powers of six Overlords and one power that's entirely new."

"So there was one prototype that turned out to be no good?"

"More or less." If the purpose of a prototype was to pinpoint any problems in a design, then that one was a success in its own way.

"So, which Overlord job had its function replaced?" Morter asked.

Theresia let out a sigh...

"Overlord Invidia."

...and spoke the title of the very Overlord currently fighting in the depths, ready to use the power of her job.

"Overlord Invidia's skill is called 'Paradigm Shift.' It's a power that strengthens you the more status effects you have and the more cornered you are. Envy from the depths... It turns all status effects into *inverted and empowered* buffs."

It was essentially a direct upgrade to the Flag Halberd's "Like a Flag Flying the Reversal."

"I can think of lots of insane uses for that. Why didn't The Evil get it?"

"Honestly, I wonder about that myself sometimes. If I had it, I probably wouldn't have gotten kidnapped by Sechs... Though, that's how I met Shu, so maybe it was for the best."

As Theresia reminisced, Morter looked at her in shock and thought, *The boss of my old group kidnapped...this? Insane.*

"Though, the reason I didn't get it is simply because we'd *never get the chance to use it*."

"Never?"

"Things were different when we were younger, but once The Evil has grown enough, it's pretty hard for us to get status effects. We have really high stats and resistances."

By the design of the Infinite Jobs that created this world, The Evil and The Demise were a hurdle that those who lived here simply had to overcome. They were the final bosses, after all, and they were not made *weak* enough to be debuffed and turned into punching bags.

"It would've been completely useless as it was. That's why the Infinite Jobs didn't use Overlord Invidia's function and changed it, replacing it with a skill specialized against a status effect so bad not even The Evil could negate it—*Death*."

"Ohhh. So that's why..."

"Yes. That's why The Evil grows stronger after every death."

"I see. That sure seems different from the prototype."

"It is. Though, because of this difference..."

The Evil—the culmination of Overlord skills—looked at her hand...

"...Overlord Invidia is the only Overlord that's not just a weaker version of me."

...and spoke of the sole exception.

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Paladin, Ray Starling

"Paradigm Shift."

Following that skill declaration, a burst of light in hostile colors like red, black, and purple enveloped the Overlord's body like a cocoon.

The light didn't last long, however.

As I tried to stop this with a swing of my halberd, a hand reached out from the cocoon and grabbed it.

"Ah...!"

"Eh heh heh heh. You can't rush or interrupt moments like this," she said as she tossed me away along with the halberd.

I flew *in a completely straight line* toward the wall opposite from the pool.

"Ah?!" She'd thrown my body with strength that was simply unbelievable. I desperately hooked my halberd into the floor to slow myself down and just barely avoid crashing into the wall.

"Ray...!"

"I'm fine! But...!"

G's transformation wasn't over yet.

The cocoon unraveled, starting from the point where her hand peeked out, and what was inside was now bared for us to see.

"AH HA HA HA HA HA!"

What emerged from the cocoon...wasn't the Overlord she had been before.

But she also wasn't in a disguise like the one she'd shown me or Chelsea.

She...

"You gotta dress well, you know?"

...she looked like a real dark lord...an Overlord straight out of a story.

The horns that had just been a tiny accessory had become larger than her head. The impish tail had grown to one that was dragon-like in size. The skin on her entire body had assumed a blue-purple hue that was truly inhuman. The clothes she'd been wearing were replaced with a bondage dress that had a bewitching gleam even in this dark seabed.

And her frame had grown to over three metels in size, while her shape became more feminine.

"Eh heh heh heh heh. Ah ha ha ha ha! Surprised? Of course you are! I like those faces! This is so fun!"

If it weren't for certain familiar features on her face, you'd hardly believe she was the same person. She'd changed *that* much.

It was almost like she shifted into her *second form*, like a classic evil overlord from an RPG.

"Ah...!" Using Reveal, we could see that the transformation didn't stop at just her appearance—her stats were also completely different. She was affected by seven debuffs, but all of their effects had been inverted.

The HP, MP, and SP that she'd lost in the battle so far was regenerating, and the stats that the debuffs had greatly reduced were now over ten times higher than before.

"It's like our Reversal... No... It's stronger!"

"Ah ha ha ha ha! Like I said! We do the same thing!" Giving oneself debuffs, then flipping them for great power.

They *were* basically the same thing, but her buff multiplier was higher than mine...!

"So this is an Overlord!"

"Yes! Indeed! I am the Overlord! The most Overlord-ish of them all!" ZZZ's Dreamland let him control both dreams and reality, making him nigh-invincible, and while not by the same means, she also reached the realm of Overlords.

This was the combat style—the second form of the Overlord Invidia, G the "Bottomless."

Empowered and transformed by oppression and scorn.

As she was now, she was nothing if not an “Overlord.”

“Now! Let’s begin this! Let’s have fun!” She laughed heartily.

The liveliness and charm she’d possessed before had been replaced by fearsome, awe-inspiring power...

“Let’s enjoy this climax!”

...and the Overlord called us to dance with her.

Chapter 10: Star of Death

Past, Earth, Somewhere in Germany

Albert's "mother" was known to be a highly capable engineer. She specialized in artificial intelligence—specifically, the technologies surrounding the so-called "control AIs."

Her technological genius had once led a criminal organization to kidnap her, intending to use her knowledge to develop new weapons, but she and Albert had both been rescued by someone described as "a female agent with a first name containing a number and a last name referencing a type of bird." Ever since then, they had led an ordinary life in Germany.

Albert's "mother" put long hours into her research but still made time to play games with him.

But as they were living this peaceful life, a particular game rose to prominence.

Infinite Dendrogram—a true dive-based VRMMO claiming to offer unmatched realism.

Albert had taken notice of it himself, but his "mother" was even more interested in it than he was.

"There's clearly something bizarre about the technology they're using," she said. "But when I asked the higher-ups if we should look into it, they said they didn't have the funds. Maybe Germany's involved in this too?"

As Albert listened to her in silence, he couldn't help but wonder if their country really was part of some conspiracy, or if her bosses had just refused because investigating a video game wasn't part of her job description.

"There's been some strange rumors about it too. You know the US-based company Technorock? The massive game developer? They actually tried investigating *Infinite Dendrogram* at one point, but they never dug up enough concrete info to even analyze. They couldn't even find any servers."

Albert found that very curious. What MMORPG had servers that couldn't even be located?

"Apparently, even their communication system itself is unconventional technology... It's not the usual electronic stuff. That's why even Technorock couldn't analyze or track it."

This surprised Albert even more. How could this company have access to technology like that, but sell it so cheaply that even children could buy it?

"The team from Technorock could log in just fine, but they couldn't bring in their analysis equipment. That's why they decided to do something a bit forceful."

Still, Albert listened intently.

"No one's sure who exactly developed *Dendro*, but there are multiple companies scattered across the world that handle its sales and hardware production. In the US, it's a pretty small company called simply 'ID Supplier,' so Technorock set their sights on them."

The phrasing "set their sights on" made Albert expect they'd done something drastic...

"They hacked the company using Overture—their company data control AI."

...and it turned out he was correct. A large company had hacked a rival firm.

Control AIs were supercomputers with processing power so immense they could manage all the data necessary to run a country or megacorporation. Hacking a smaller company that didn't have one would be child's play for them.

However, no matter how easy it was, it was *definitely* a crime.

"Was it the blueprints? The server location? I don't really know what they were after..." Albert's "mother" continued.

It was an under-the-table, underhanded, *unfair* approach.

But hearing all this brought a question to Albert's mind. This was most definitely a peek at the dark side of Technorock—something that they simply couldn't allow to come to light.

How did his "mother" know all this, then?

"And this is what happened next," she said as she lightly waved her hand to turn on the TV, which happened to be showing the news.

"Technorock, a massive US-based game developer, is currently in a state of collapse." Albert watched in shock as the news announcer revealed the details.

Recently, there had been trouble in their network which resulted in a leak of classified files stored on their servers. These files had contained not just the details of their latest hardware, but also evidence of the many cybercrimes they'd committed against rival companies.

This had resulted in the management being arrested and had flung the company into chaos from top to bottom. Their stock prices had plummeted, and today the business had finally fallen apart.

"And while the heart of the trouble was Technorock's control AI, Overture, the classified file leak was followed by an explosion of uncertain origin that—" That was where Albert's "mother" turned off the TV.

"So there you have it." Based on what she'd said thus far, Albert assumed that this must have been the result of a counterattack by ID Supplier—or more specifically, by *Infinite Dendrogram*.

But how could they have done something like this?

"Well, all this means is that the people behind *Infinite Dendrogram* have a control AI that can counter-hack and even break current gen corporate control AIs. Maybe it can even take on the cutting-edge stuff used by government agencies... Did the higher-ups not give me permission because they knew that? Or perhaps... Perhaps *Infinite Dendrogram* has something *fundamentally different* from the control AIs that we know?"

Her voice dropped to a whisper, and Albert couldn't hear that last part.

However, he had some thoughts about her idea that even the most cutting-edge control AI couldn't measure up. It made him wonder whether there existed *something beyond that*... Or *something of a different kind altogether*.

"Oh. I'm not letting you hack them, okay?"

It was as though she read his mind.

Albert had suspected she would say something like that. However, he couldn't have anticipated what she followed it up with.

"I just want you to play the game normally."

"...Huh?"

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Past, Infinite Dendrogram

A week had passed since his "mother" had told Albert about *Infinite*

Dendrogram.

Now, he was inside the game.

Since he was somewhat differently shaped than the average user, connecting him had required some hardware modifications, but he'd been able to make it in.

He was now in a place that looked much like a lab. Ahead, he saw a man with a strange silhouette doing some sort of work. Although he had several inhuman features, he was humanoid in overall shape and wore glasses that gave him an air of intelligence.

"Hm?" The spectacled man noticed Albert, looked at him for a moment, then pensively laid a hand on his mouth and looked up at the ceiling.

"I'm surprised... Truly, I am."

Those words seemed to come straight from the heart.

"How much time has passed since No. 0 compensated them with those key technologies? They actually created an *information entity* capable of logging in, and that's even compatible with Embryos? I understand that they were provided *some* knowledge, but this... Even our own technology is partially... Wait. According to No. 10, the current publicly available technology is quite far behind this. Is it all due to this entity's creator, then? Is it the work of someone extraordinary?"

Voicing his astonishment at the sight of Albert, the man seemed to be gathering his thoughts.

"First the *outsider* welcomed by No. 3, now this... The environment there is quite different from that in our homeland... Hm?" The spectacled man then seemed to regain his composure and looked at Albert again. "Apologies. This unexpected phenomenon had me a little shaken."

The word "unexpected" made Albert a bit concerned. While he himself didn't have a strong desire to play, his "mother" had asked him to provide reports about it.

"Oh. No need to worry. You logged in, which means you have a person's... Well, the same qualifications as any other person. Let us proceed with the avatar creation."

A few windows then popped up in front of Albert, allowing him to set his appearance.

He could hardly envision an avatar like himself, so he simply based it on a character from an old movie his "mother" had often watched.

Thus, he created a muscular man, received the necessary items, and had his Embryo implanted in his left hand.

But the moment he received his avatar, his entire body began telling him that something was *really wrong*.

An awful sense of discomfort consumed him.

"It will be difficult for you at first," the man said. "But you are a rare entity indeed, so I personally hope that you will continue in spite of that. Though, being a Master, that decision is entirely up to you."

The spectacled man—control AI No. 4, Jabberwock—spoke as if he knew what Albert was feeling.

"Regardless, welcome to *Infinite Dendrogram*. We truly appreciate your arrival."

Following those words, Albert was flung into the air and plummeted toward the country he'd chosen as his starting point—Caldina.

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Thus, like many other players, Albert landed near Caldina's largest city...

But he was overwhelmed by shock as the sensation from earlier not only did not go away, but actually got worse.

His sense of smell taking in the air, the tastes in his mouth, even the feeling of the wind caressing his skin—all this *impossible information* distorted his world.

The people behind *Infinite Dendrogram* claimed that it was profoundly realistic, but Albert's problem was far more fundamental than that.

Many users suffered immense discomfort while playing NEXT WORLD, but none of them had felt anything close to what Albert was currently experiencing.

The five senses themselves—the *fatal error that we call a human body*—had rendered him unable to even move.

Albert Schwartzkaiser was an anomalous *electronic life-form*, and to him, the very flesh and blood avatar he'd received was a source of errors that tortured his senses.

In real life, he was a mechanical computer that simply contained the information that made up his mind. With his avatar granting him sensations he simply couldn't have, Albert was overcome by a sense of discomfort that rendered him unable to even stand, and he collapsed on the sandy ground.

Assaulted by these unknown senses and unable to even activate the log-out process, Albert spent several hours like that.

However, the pain eventually vanished.

This was because his Embryo hatched, replacing his entire body with one that was fully mechanical.

The errors subsided as soon as that occurred.

Albert once again only had vision, hearing, and a degree of pressure sensitivity—senses he already knew well.

Thanks to the Embryo that had become his body, he was able to adapt to this world and overcome his suffering.

Having thus gained the ability to move, he proceeded to practice it. After about a week of such training, he could move as well as any other person and began operating like any other Master.

He engaged in the extermination of harmful monsters, tested himself in duels—he did much of what anyone might expect a Master to do.

Throughout all this, his body—Septentrion—evolved into a Superior Embryo. This caught the eye of Caldina's president, and he was invited to join Sefirot. Since then, he'd followed her orders and continued to hunt UBMs, as well as battle wanted Masters.

The *final and greatest exception* to such work was his participation in The Tournaments.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

Figaro was now wielding the strongest sword from his expansive arsenal.

Albert was clad in the most fearsome armor from his massive collection.

The two clashed, but Albert had the upper hand.

Though wielding Gloria α, Figaro couldn't use its Overdrive without getting close to Albert. If he used this powerful skill from a distance, he would have to fire horizontally—but with the barrier being right behind Albert, it was possible that it would break it and harm the audience.

Indeed—Albert wasn't the only one who had to worry about his MVP rewards causing damage to the spectators. That was exactly why Figaro had defeated Xunyu by firing the weapon vertically at point-blank range.

He would have to do the same thing with Albert, but getting close to him meant being in range of his fists. Even if Figaro used Overdrive first, the briefest pause during the firing would allow Albert to reach him.

And Albert could come back at least one more time. If he committed to a desperate retaliation, that would be the end of the battle right there.

Of course, even without its Overdrive, Gloria α was an awfully powerful blade that could be empowered with the heat of light.

Figaro might have been able to evade Albert's attacks and simply cut him apart—though that wouldn't change the fact that just a single hit would be enough to kill him.

A single impact—no, a single *scratch*—would be fatal.

To make matters worse, Figaro didn't know the extent of Albert's resistances. He'd already been brought near death by both fire and physical damage, granting him resistance to both. Light and slashing damage were both adjacent to those types, so Figaro's chances of a successful attack depended on how broad Albert's damage resistance actually was.

Regardless, each of them had fangs aimed at each other's throat.

All that really mattered now was how well they wielded them.

While Figaro silently tried to chart his path to victory, Albert took to action *immediately*.

This was an obvious move. Albert still had a life left, so if they clashed as they were now, he would most certainly emerge victorious. If anything, giving Figaro any time to find a way out of this predicament would be an awful idea.

"O o o r g h..." With attack power that exceeded even King of Destruction's capabilities, and with the defenses to match, the armor let out a devilish groan as Albert charged ahead—an all-consuming, devastating sprint, each step of which left cracks and craters in the remnants of the arena.

He wasn't even using any other MVP rewards.

Was that simply because nothing he had surpassed Exademon in pure attack power? Or was there some other reason for it?

For a moment, it looked as though Albert was going to charge directly at Figaro, but then Albert *kicked a stray rock*.

It shattered under the immense force, but the kinetic energy from the impact sent its shards flying ahead at supersonic speeds.

As though they were fired from a shotgun, they flew toward Figaro, leaving him nowhere to run.

Though his eyes widened, Figaro didn’t even try to dodge.

Instead, he imbued Gloria α’s blade with searing light and swung it, precisely cutting down and destroying all the rock shrapnel flying toward him. As unavoidable and deadly as it seemed, Figaro was able to defend himself against this dangerous attack.

However, this was well within Albert’s expectations. In the brief time Figaro focused on defense, he closed the distance between them.

Just a few more steps until the armor’s fists could reach his opponent.

If Figaro met the punch with his blade, both their bodies would shatter—and only Albert would be left standing.

That was what the entire audience expected, and when their eyes focused on Albert’s raised fist, not even a tenth of them noticed how Figaro’s appearance had changed.

“That’s...!” What the more observant spectators saw was a new piece of equipment Figaro had put on using Instant Wear.

Actually, it wasn’t quite accurate to call it “new.” After all, it was one of the items that defined his appearance.

It was his blue coat—“Rendshield Cloak, Closer.” Left behind by the first UBM he’d ever defeated, it had been with him longer than any other item in his vast arsenal.

One of its skills...

“Rendshield.”

...briefly but completely shut off any attacks coming from the outside.

The barrier that went up was immediately struck by a blow so powerful it surpassed even King of Destruction.

The impact shook the very air as the shock wave spread throughout the entire venue.

However, the barrier didn’t even shake. Despite the incredible power it had just been subjected to, it remained completely unaffected.

A split second after the impact, Figaro deliberately dropped the barrier...

“Fang of Gloria: Overdrive.”

...and, just as he’d done against Xunyu, Figaro swung the sword upward to deliver the Overdrive to his enemy.

He'd retaliated against Albert's attack with his ultimate firepower, and everything was executed with flowing perfection. He'd negated the damage at the moment the punch had landed, canceled his defense right after the clash, and gone in for his slash without leaving any openings to take advantage of.

It was a technique much like Ray's Impact Counter but possessed of even greater finesse.

Shock overcame Albert. He couldn't even react. Though his attack and defense were greatly increased, Figaro still had higher AGI, and the counterattack had been executed too brilliantly. He didn't have time to back away, launch another attack in response, or deal with the Overdrive in any way.

Though they both were entirely capable of killing each other in theory, in practice Figaro was simply on another level.

And so, unable to do anything about it, Albert was pierced by burning light.

It shot through the first layers of arena barriers, then the ones added by Integra, creating a pillar of light reaching toward the sky.

Any parts of Exademon that were caught in its wake evaporated, along with any of Albert's body that was inside.

It was as though his fire resistance was powerless before this scorching light—as though the difference in how the heat was *delivered* was paramount.

Whatever the reason, Albert's HP instantly fell to 1...

"η: Alkaid."

...and he finally used the seventh—Septentrion's final heal and buff skill.

"The Seven Stars—Septentrion."

But this time, it was followed by *another skill declaration*.

Figaro's eyes widened as he heard Albert's voice—and because he heard it, he instantly flew into action.

Figaro had let Albert use this final regeneration on purpose, hoping to use his speed advantage to finish Albert off immediately after.

Albert's body was now restored, and though clad in half-destroyed armor and empowered by a resistance to light-based heat, he couldn't stop a slash from Gloria α's naked blade.

Tsukuyo had called him "fragile," and he could do nothing to resist the attack aimed straight for his throat.

Shortly after being restored—before he could even move—Albert was decapitated.

Thus, King of Termination was defeated. Everyone was certain that Figaro had emerged victorious.

But then, he was *attacked from six directions*.

Figaro’s eyes widened. A bursting net of flames, a cannonball, a shock wave, a frigid blizzard, a dark mist, a fixed damage projectile...

The moment Figaro thought he had defeated Albert, six kinds of attacks rained down on him.

Even Figaro couldn’t respond to all of them in time, and he was soon consumed by this storm of destruction.

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“Huh?!”

Sandalphon—the Superior Embryo tasked with security—was watching the duel as well. This was only natural, as the man his Master loved was one of the combatants. Thus, as he made sure the venue was safe, he watched the duel alongside Hannya.

And of course, right when he thought Figaro had won, the battle was flipped upside down.

“What is this...?” There was perhaps no better reaction than that. It felt as though it wasn’t just the battle that had been overturned, but the very rules of the engagement itself. The scene before him was simply that shocking.

There were now *six Alberts standing on the stage*.

Albert had already used his final revival and had his head severed from his body, but there were now six of him.

This reminded the audience of a certain high-ranking duelist—Tom Cat, the ex-champion who dominated the battlefield using an ultimate skill that let him multiply and revive without limit.

However, what Albert had done wasn’t quite the same.

The Seven Stars—Septentrion. That was the ult of Albert’s Superior Embryo, Seven Star Turnover, Septentrion.

It could only be used after seven revivals, and its effect was to present the results of his learning and overcoming *all at once*.

The six doubles of Albert who were still standing and the one who had been decapitated were based on the skills he’d gained, starting with α: Dubhe and ending with η: Alkaid.

The fire-resistant Albert Dubhe.

The Petrification-resistant Albert Merak.

The physical-impact-resistant Albert Phecda.

The frost-resistant Albert Megrez.

The dark-resistant Albert Alioth.

The fixed damage-resistant Albert Mizar.

The light-resistant Albert Alkaid.

Turned over to reveal seven stars—seven bodies that had different resistances and means of attack.

This also gave Albert extra attack power. By having each version of himself wield weapons with penalties that were canceled out by his resistances, he became an even greater force of destruction. He didn't seem to have anything that took advantage of Petrification specifically, but every other weapon the duplicates wielded was much like the ones that Albert had used before—high-power MVP rewards that disregarded the wielder's safety.

Even Figaro would have a hard time if exposed to such fearsome attacks from basically every direction.

"Lady Hannya...! Umm, Master Figaro is..."

While Figaro's fiancée stared intently at the stage, silently clasping her hands together as if in prayer, Sandalphon gave her a sympathetic, almost panicked look.

"Calm down, Sandalphon."

However, the one to respond to him first was the person standing on the other side of Hannya.

It was another *Superior* tasked with security—Shu Starling.

"That's the kinda move Sechs would make, and it caught me by surprise, that's for sure... But Figgy hasn't lost this yet." As though to prove Shu right, the dust from the destruction began to clear.

Behind the curtain, Figaro was still standing. Though wounded all over and leaning heavily on Gloria α for support, he was still upright.

The outcome of this duel was yet undecided.

However, his situation was dire. Figaro was seriously hurt, and defeating the remaining six Alberts would be a challenge even for him.

"That just leaves five." But Shu's count of Albert's duplicates didn't match the number visible on the stage.

A moment later, one of them—the one with fixed damage resistance, Albert Mizar—swayed where he stood and collapsed backward.

Without even changing his pose, he shattered into pieces and *became nothing more than a pile of rocks*.

"What...?"

"Figgy's counterattack," said Shu. "When the six attacks came in, he fired that gun toward one of ’em.”

Why had Figaro thought that Marbledrop would have any effect when Albert already had resistance to Petrification?

It was because he’d realized Albert’s resistances had been scattered the moment he felt his blade sink into the seventh duplicate’s neck.

Albert was supposed to have resistance to physical impacts, but Figaro had not felt any when slashing him. Combined with the fact that he’d instantly been targeted by six separate attacks, Figaro’s instincts had worked faster than his mind to conclude that Albert had split himself into seven forms, each bearing a different resistance and mode of attack.

And so, with two Alberts having projectile attacks, Figaro spotted them both and retaliated against them with Marbledrop’s bullets that passed through all inorganic material.

One of the Alberts he’d shot was the Petrification-resistant Albert Merak, so the attack was negated, but the other was Albert Mizar, who was only resistant to fixed damage.

It was this decisive action and reaction that allowed Figaro to survive.

Albert stared at him in silence. He’d realized that Figaro was still alive when he noticed that the barrier was still up. But after having timed his attack so perfectly and still suffering a loss to Figaro’s retaliation, Albert decided to refrain from attacking further and assumed a more cautious approach.

This was the opposite of what he’d done earlier, but it was the correct decision now. The situation had shifted, and the barrage had left Figaro with multiple injury- and curse-based status effects. The Bleeding and Burning debuffs were steadily lowering his HP, while the Magic Drain and Soul Drain curses sapped his MP and SP.

The many items that Figaro could use to resist such effects only worked if he’d put them on ahead of time. With duels forbidding the use of recovery items, there were very few ways to remove a debuff that had already been applied.

Time was on Albert’s side now, and he outnumbered Figaro five to one. Even if Figaro retaliated and destroyed one Albert, the remaining four would overwhelm him.

And that was exactly why Albert took the safe approach. Figaro might have managed to survive Albert’s first barrage, but he had no means of turning this around. The countdown to his defeat had already begun.

The scales of victory were tipping in Albert’s favor.

“Umm...” At that moment, just as the entire venue fell silent at the realization that their champion was going to fall, Sandalphon spoke up.

His Master, Hannya, still had her eyes fixed on Figaro with hands clasped as if in prayer.

“What?” Shu asked.

“Can he still win? Does he have anything to turn this around?”

Shu fell silent for a moment at Sandalphon’s question. He knew that the Over Gladiator’s job ult was useless for someone who had no other SJs, and he knew that Figaro wouldn’t use Cor Leonis’s ult here either. With how severe Figaro’s injuries were, using it would only kill him.

“Will he... Will he lose...?”

Did all that mean that Figaro would be defeated?

“I dunno what he’ll do about this... But there’s no way he’s losin’.”

And yet, Shu still denied that possibility.

“But how...?”

Shu was really confident, but that wasn’t a question for him to answer.

“Because...*he’s him*.”

Finally, Hannya broke her silence with an explanation.

It wasn’t a reason that would make sense to anyone else. However, Figaro’s friend, sitting by her side, thought she was completely right.

“Vincent *will* win this.”

Hannya spoke with certainty as she declared that her beloved would emerge victorious.

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A question appeared in Albert’s mind as he faced Figaro in this five-on-one battle.

Time was on his side, but as it flowed by, he couldn’t help but wonder why *Figaro wasn’t doing anything*.

The Over Gladiator must’ve been aware of the debuffs draining his HP, MP, and SP. Death drew closer every moment, and more and more of his skills became unusable.

Why, then, was Figaro maintaining this deadlock?

Albert had a guess, of course.

He knew that Figaro's equipment enhancement became more efficient as more time passed.

However, Figaro was barely going to last even a few more minutes. Just how great of an improvement could he expect in this short amount of time? And even if he *was* greatly empowered, what would be the point of it if he couldn't even use his skills?

Because of this, inaction had to be the wrong decision. Figaro had to defeat Albert while he still had the power to do so.

Figaro must've understood this—and yet he wasn't doing anything. Albert couldn't help but wonder why.

"...Phew." Breathing raggedly, Figaro seemed to be observing the Alberts surrounding him.

Was he preparing to respond in case they took action? Or was he searching for a path to victory?

The champion slowly looked around as if trying to sense something.

I can't see it. I can't feel it. It really doesn't seem like there's anything there. But...

Figaro was lost in thought. Defeat was drawing closer by the second, and he was searching for a way to repel it.

I couldn't see the moment he split into seven. I didn't even realize he was doing that. I didn't look away from the seventh for even a moment...but next thing I knew, I was surrounded.

Figaro was thinking as hard as he could. He replayed the flow of events that had led to this situation in his mind and let intuition do its job.

He firmly believed that that was where he would find his chance at victory.

Right. The very first attack. He was turning the flamethrowers.

When using Firelyx, Albert had turned the fires to target Figaro, licking the entire stage with its tongues of flame. Figaro had managed to evade them, but it was still an area attack that was blasted in every direction indiscriminately.

I didn't see anything strange about the shape of the fire. There was nothing in its way. That means...

Figaro finally reached an answer.

"I see how it is."

His sudden words caused a stir in the five remaining Alberts...

"I finally see the last part of your *trick*."

...and the word "trick" caused a murmur to ripple through the audience.

If this was about Albert's healing and buff skill, then its workings had been clear for a while now.

If it was about him splitting into seven parts, then that was an ult—hardly a "trick."

What was Figaro referring to, then?

"Anyway... It's time to end this."

And then, the Over Gladiator took action.

The time that had passed, though, had ravaged Figaro's body. He could no longer use his devastating Overdrive.

Instead, the move he chose to make was...

"Liferend Shield Formation."

...another skill from Rendshield Cloak, Closer.

It was the ultimate move of the UBM it came from, and it created countless shield blades that both protected its wielder and sliced anything that came too close.

However, using it in this situation seemed like an awful idea. While it wasn't as costly as Overdrive, using this rendered Figaro unable to use any other skills. It also wasn't enough to block the Albert duplicates' immensely powerful attacks, nor did it have enough offensive power to destroy them.

No matter how it was used, the skill would not be enough. It didn't make sense.

"HIII-YAH!" Figaro swung his arm, sending the countless blades flying like a winter hailstorm.

They ricocheted within the arena, dealing damage to the five Alberts.

But just as he and everyone else expected, the firepower just wasn't enough.

Though frail as far as SJs went, Albert was still a combat-focused Superior Job. The blades did little if Albert just assumed a defensive stance, and each duplicate had high enough HP that most of this damage was irrelevant.

Most importantly, the attacks simply weren't concentrated enough. Split between the five Alberts, the blades simply weren't able to deal enough damage to end this.

In fact, despite all the Alberts being on the ground, some of the blades had been launched *into the air*.

The audience tilted their heads in confusion, the hardened fighters watched in disbelief...and Albert changed his expression for the first time.

Figaro's seemingly meaningless area attack made all five Alberts open their eyes wide.

They prepared to shift from defense to attack in order to stop Figaro's blades...when *a light thud could be heard amid the chaos*. One of the airborne blades had struck something.

"Oh. Guess I was right." And with that, Figaro instantly leaped into the sky.

This was something he'd done in his fight against Gloria.

Using the shield-blades as platforms, he rushed upward.

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There were a few things that Figaro had found strange in this duel against Albert.

The first was his second heal and buff.

Despite having been Petrified and shattered, Albert was able to declare the β: Merak skill and revive.

That had made Figaro wonder how he'd been able to speak the skill's name despite being turned to stone.

Next were Albert's fourth and fifth comebacks. Figaro had most certainly delivered fatal damage to Albert while Rear Soldier's Last Stand was still on cooldown.

Despite that, Albert still survived with 1 HP and bounced back from it.

Figaro had been pondering how he was able to accomplish that when the job skill that supposedly made it possible was inactive.

And finally, it had been the ultimate that split Albert into seven.

Figaro had defeated Tom Cat, and he knew about King of Crime. Because of this, he was aware that duplicates created by such skills usually split off from their source.

However, that hadn't been the case for Albert.

Figaro had been entirely focused on the Albert that had possessed all the resistances to his attacks—but before he knew it, Figaro had been surrounded.

This untelegraphed split was the third thing Figaro found strange.

Only one thing could adequately explain these three phenomena.

Albert's main body had to be elsewhere.

Everything would make sense if he had *a separate body with only 1 HP*.

If his main body was elsewhere, he could declare skills despite Petrification.

If his main body was elsewhere, he would have 1 HP left even when he couldn't use his job skill.

If his main body was elsewhere, Figaro's focus on the opponent in front of him would have caused him to miss the split.

But if there really was such a main body, then where would it be?

It was Albert's own actions that had provided a hint.

While he used Firelyx to spread flames in every direction, covering the entire stage, it didn't seem like anything had been caught in them. That could only mean one thing—the main body had to be somewhere the flames hadn't reached. The only option was up in the air.

Figaro had used the Liferend Shield Formation to confirm this.

And now, having pinpointed its location, he used the blade shields as platforms to reach it.

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Albert—in other words, his main body—looked down at Figaro in silence.

The Over Gladiator's intuition had been right.

g: Alcor. It was a barely visible star close to the Big Dipper—Septentrion. Its name had roots in the Arabic "al-khawāri," meaning "faint one," and some cultures claimed that anyone who could no longer see the star was fated to die.

It was the skill that pointed to Albert's nature as a mechanical being, as well as the brain—the core—that existed outside his human-shaped body, Septentrion.

Being a machine enabled him to split his brain and his body. About the size of a golf ball, this metallic object floating about was where Albert's mind resided.

He had used all five accessory slots to both cloak himself visually and obfuscate his skills, and he'd used damage reduction to keep him safe from weak attacks like the blade shield strike.

Indeed—this was the truth behind Albert's near death and healing buff combination.

The job was a decoy. While Albert did have Rear Soldier, it was merely a bluff to lead his enemies to a false conclusion.

In reality, Albert would have survived death even without Last Stand. The secret behind his survivability wasn't that skill, but the way his own body worked.

This was the trick Albert used to become the powerful *Superior* that he was.

But now, the trick was exposed.

And Figaro, the one who'd seen through it, was now charging toward him, Gloria α in hand.

The Over Gladiator shouldn't have been able to see his main body at all, but there was no hesitation in his dash.

The moment one of the shield blades touched the core, multiple other blades swarmed to surround and cage it. Albert had nowhere to run.

The five bodies looking up at them all fired everything they had at Figaro.

This was an extremely close game. Would Figaro reach and split the core in time? Or would Albert's attacks finally bring him down?

Only one *Superior* could win this, and every single second counted.

But Albert soon realized that he was going to emerge victorious. Figaro was injured, so the speed of his ascent couldn't outrun the attacks from Albert's bodies down below.

Though the champion had made the first move, the gap was closing fast. Albert's attacks would hit Figaro before he reached the core.

And Figaro didn't have any means of attack besides Gloria α. He no longer had the MP or SP to use any other MVP reward skills.

Albert's victory was set in stone.

He calculated this future in the blink of an eye—but then he noticed something odd.

During this brief moment, something had changed about Figaro again—the weapon in his hand was different.

It wasn’t Gloria α, or some MVP reward, but a long chain wrapped around his right hand.

A Crimson Dead Keeper—one of his most favored weapons, known for its immense reach. It could most certainly land a hit on the core before Albert’s attacks touched him.

Albert knew that it wouldn’t matter much if it did, though. Unlike the seven duplicates, the main body had all of its previous resistances. An attack from the Crimson Dead Keeper couldn’t even take away its 1 HP.

With Figaro’s final move rendered meaningless, Albert’s victory would be completely certain.

And yet, it wasn’t.

The moment the chain reached, Albert noticed...

Gloria α was tied to its tip.

Shock overcame King of Termination. An unorthodox use of weaponry—combining two items that were never meant to be combined.

The gladiator grouping granted multiple weapon slots for each hand.

This was Figaro’s strongest weapon, combined with his most-used weapon.

Perhaps because of that, despite the bizarre arrangement, there was no flaw in the trajectory of the slash.

It was a brilliant move that rendered irrelevant the distance, the time, and the inherent weakness of his chains.

Albert was in awe. When had Figaro gotten the idea to do this?

When he realized that Albert’s attacks would reach him first?

Or maybe when he dashed into the sky?

Or perhaps the moment he used Liferend Shield Formation?

Regardless, Albert hadn’t seen this coming and could do nothing against it.

Though swung on the end of a chain, Gloria α carried more than enough power for this task.

Albert’s core had no resistance to slashing attacks, and this blow would no doubt take away its 1 HP.

Figaro had used his own prowess to flip the scales of victory in his favor.

How? Because *he was him*, of course.

“Good game. You are the winner.” With a mechanical voice praising his opponent *in English*, Albert's core was split in two, and all five of his remaining duplicates on the stage vanished.

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Tournament: Final Day.
Reward: Mythical "Night Sky General, O'oimimaru."
Core traits: Unknown (Space alteration?)
Winner: Over Gladiator, Figaro.

Chapter 11: Bringing the Climax

About G

Overlord Invidia, G. Real name: Ginga Fujiwara.

She was born in a rather ordinary Japanese household, but one could easily say she led a charmed life, as she had many friends and got along well with her entire family, including her older brother.

However, starting when she was very young, this same brother had given her a bit of an inferiority complex.

He wasn't exceptionally smart, nor was he terribly athletic. If anything, Ginga was the more capable one.

However, there was one thing that set them apart: Her brother had been recognized as a novelist at a very young age. He'd made his debut in his teens—when Ginga was still in elementary school—and his talents as a writer were immediately made clear.

Her brother might as well have inhabited an entirely different world, shining almost like a star, and looking up at him always made her feel jealous and miserable.

On an exam, a perfect score was the best you could do. Gym class wasn't exactly a place for breaking records and standing out, no matter how much effort you put in. Ginga was envious of her brother for having a talent that allowed him to go beyond what most people his age could achieve and shine so much brighter than she did.

He was a wonderful sibling, and she certainly didn't hate him—quite the opposite, really.

But that didn't stop her from feeling jealous all the same.

She wanted to shine brighter than he did—no, *brighter than anyone in the world*.

That was how she ended up on the path of a content creator fairly early in life.

She'd tried being a writer just like her brother, but she couldn't reach his level, and she didn't think she was beautiful enough to make it as an idol or a movie star.

However, Ginga did have a talent for photography and film. She was a natural at bringing out her subjects' charms in her photos and videos, and she found she could easily hone this skill further.

Perhaps if she just focused on the path of cameraman or director, Ginga thought, she might be recognized artistically at a young age, just like her brother had.

But that wasn't what she really wanted either.

Though she did have a knack for making others shine, she wanted to be the brightest star in the sky *herself*. The problem with that was that there simply wasn't anything exceptional about her.

But that didn't stop her from trying—struggling, even.

A few people called her voice cute, so she tried to harness that. Eventually, Ginga looked into all the related technology she could find and eventually became a devil girl VTuber—G. She streamed gaming content, did karaoke, and made videos using her photography and editing skills.

While that did earn her some recognition, she never reached the level that she wanted.

No matter how she tried to shine like her brother did, he only grew brighter by the day.

She just couldn't reach him. As more time passed, the gap between them widened, and her jealousy deepened even further.

One day, for a change of pace, Ginga went on a trip to the sea and took a photo of it in the evening. The setting sun and its faint reflection upon the water made for a fantastic shot.

But the sight of it made a thought spring to her mind.

"...This sea is me."

No matter how beautifully it shone, it was just a reflection—the sea had no light of its own. Even the light it reflected never reached the bottom—all that was there was stagnation.

No matter what *the sea* did, it would never reach *the stars* above.

With that thought, she was about to give up on ever matching her brother...

"*Infinite Dendrogram* will provide you with a new world and your one and only possibility!"

...and that was when she heard an advertisement for a certain game.

This new world—this new stage—would prove to be a turning point for her.

Ginga's *Infinite Dendrogram* avatar was more than just a virtual form. It allowed her to live in this world as herself, but with an appearance completely unlike her own.

This was the chance to shine she'd always longed for.

G learned to use the magical filming equipment within *Dendro* to plan out and execute productions that she starred in.

R'lyeh—her studio—assisted her by painting the world as she wanted it to be.

As her *Infinite Dendrogram* videos gained a lot of popularity, she eventually joined a clan and started participating in various in-game activities with them.

She garnered more and more popularity, and eventually, the site she was active on sent her something—the silver award given to those who reached one hundred thousand subscribers.

The moment she saw its shine, Ginga—the girl who had always wanted to shine brighter than anyone else—felt as if everything had finally paid off. The next time she logged in, her R'lyeh had become a Superior Embryo.

It was as though that feeling had been the *trigger* for it.

That was how she became a *Superior*.

However, both the silver award and the Embryo evolution were nothing but milestones to her. She'd once considered giving up on her dream, but now she wouldn't even consider it.

Becoming a *Superior* had given her new powers, and at some point she was made leader of her clan. She intended to use everything she could get her hands on to make videos that would make her shine.

For that purpose, she did a lot of things she had never done before and recorded it all.

She'd braved the Depths of Jealousy to become Overlord Invidia and claimed the throne.

She'd orchestrated plans to fight the corrupt order of Legendaria and rebelled against it.

She'd formed an alliance with other anti-Legendaria *Superiors* and collabed with them.

She'd challenged Legendaria's idol and head of state and battled her with song.

And now, she had picked a fight with the world's most famous newbie and tried to avenge her brother.

A girl who would do anything to promote herself—to make herself shine.

That was Ginga Fujiwara—Overlord Invidia, G.

◇◆◇

Encroaching Sea-Altar, R'lyeh, Depths of Jealousy

"Ah ha ha ha ha! Let's go! Let's do this! Here I come!" Brandishing her trident and filled with fighting spirit, Overlord Invidia charged at Juliet.

The girl's eyes widened. Juliet had a wealth of combat experience, but the largest opponents she'd faced thus far were the Armordragon King she'd battled during the Exodragon King incident and Rosa after using her ult to create an exoskeleton.

However, G was now larger than either of them—and had stats that surpassed them both. Her trident thrusts were more like the charge of a battering ram. They left her completely open to attacks, but the overwhelming strength of her massive form shattered the stonework whenever she moved. She was like a natural disaster in human form.

But she also had a technique that no natural calamity could possibly possess.

This was demonstrated by the thread of light extending from the tip of the trident and connecting to Juliet's body.

Ah...! The pull's even stronger than before! Juliet thought. Harodihg Gnik's force apparently scaled with the wielder's STR. Held by G in her second form, it could attract its prey with over ten times more power than before.

The fearsome pull left Juliet so unbalanced that she couldn't even cast her dark magic to block G's sight.

That thread of light was now a nigh unavoidable death sentence.

"Purgatorial Flames!"

Ray, however, would not let that sentence be carried out. Extending his left hand, he made his Miasmaflame Bracer spew its fire.

With G's vision blocked, the thread of light was severed, allowing Juliet to escape the charge.

But a moment later, the trident was swept sideways, tearing through the fire as it flew in Ray's direction.

His eyes widened. G's thread of light had only been a feint, intended to bait Ray into trying to block her line of sight.

Not minding the flames whatsoever, she broke through and closed the distance between them.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! What're you gonna do now?!" As her reversed and enhanced Poison debuff regenerated her bunt flesh, G swung her trident at Ray.

He didn't have the time to meet her weapon with his—and her mighty sweep would've simply shattered the halberd in any case.

"Counter Absorption!"

Instead, Nemesis quickly transformed into her greatsword form and blocked the attack using her barrier of light. Though the barrier creaked at the impact, the Overlord's trident didn't break it.

"There's more where that came from!"

But the moment both of them stopped moving, G reactivated the Attraction Anchor, connecting it to Ray this time.

Ray was abruptly dragged out from behind the barrier of light and flew straight toward the tip of the trident...

"I won't let you...!"

But this time, Juliet attacked G with her magic, severing the filament of light.

Ray used the opening to switch back to Nemesis's Flag Halberd and backed away from the Overlord.

"Ah ha ha! Almost nobody lasts this long after I transform! You two are pretty good!" G laughed and praised them, but neither Ray nor Juliet were in a state to appreciate it.

One wrong move and a single hit would break them. G's massive stat increase had also made Harodihg Gnik far more fearsome than before.

If Ray and Juliet didn't coordinate to block G's vision continuously, defeat was inevitable.

"Your party's gotta be in perfect sync or you wipe," Ray said. "What is this, an MMO raid?"

"Huh? It kinda is, isn't it?" G asked.

“...Yeah, you’ve got a point.” *Dendro* was definitely an online RPG, and G was very much like a boss monster, so Ray couldn’t help but agree. “I can see why she’s called the most Overlord-ish of them all.”

“She really does look the part of a horrifying monster,” said Nemesis as she looked up at G, now standing three metels tall—not quite sizable enough to be truly monstrous, but enormous for a person.

As though she’d heard that, G froze as if shocked and laid a hand on her chest.

“I mean, it depends on how bad my debuffs are, but this is generally how I end up. Whenever I transform, my clan and all the comments on my videos often tell me to change back. Personally, I think both my forms are fine...”

“I-I do think it looks cool and sexy, though...” For some reason, G was starting to look a bit sad, so Juliet couldn’t help but share her honest thoughts in the hope it would make her feel better.

Ray, however...

“I mean, if they like the cute design of your first form, of course they’d want you to turn back. You really don’t pass as a ‘charming devil’ right now. You’re more like some kinda hulking demon or something.”

...wasn’t as kind.

“Thanks, Julie! Unbreakable, though... You’re dead meat!”

“As if you weren’t trying to kill me anyway! Bring it on!” G was in the middle of trying to PK Ray and taking his arena. His rebuttal was entirely reasonable.

But unfortunately... he thought. *Fighting her head-on might be a bit hard now.*

They had about ten minutes left until the arena was taken.

G had grown a lot stronger, and she quickly regenerated most damage done to her. If there was any way for Ray to defeat her, it was by using Counter Absorption to stock up damage for a fatal use of Vengeance, or...

Wait. If all I want is to prevent her from taking our arena, I should forget about G herself and go for...

“Oh? Are you looking for the trapezohedron?” G asked, noticing that Ray was looking around.

Ray’s eyes widened. Indeed, that was exactly what he’d been thinking—if they just needed to stop her ult, they could ignore G and for that instead.

"If that's what you're planning, then I'll do..."

Reading his intentions, G took the trapezohedron from her chest...

"This."

...and *swallowed it whole*.

"Huh?!"

"Wha—?!"

"Aaand nooowww... You have no choice but to fight me! There's no escape!" As Ray and Juliet were struck dumb with shock, G flashed a mischievous—but belligerent—smile. "Now! Let's go! Let's do this! It's bombing time! Ah ha ha ha ha!" With a loud laugh, G resumed the battle, firing countless black light projectiles.

It was the same low-rank spell she'd used before, far from the strength of a job ult, but...

"Ah!"

"There's so damn *many*...!"

When released by G's second form, there were too many projectiles to count—easily hundreds of them. Ray's and Juliet's eyes widened as the projectiles flew toward them. Dark magic could only be blocked by dark or its opposite—holy.

Juliet began to throw out every dark spell she had while slicing at the bolts with her Gradsoul empowered by Darkness of Valediction, while Ray fought the barrage with his halberd imbued with Purifying Silverlight.

"I can keep this up all day! How long will you last? What will you do next? I'm dying to see it!"

However, just neutralizing the attack didn't do anything to *stop* it. There was simply no end to G's hail of darkness, even without any chanting and with the ever-increasing MP cost she must have been incurring to bypass the skill declaration.

Normally, such careless magic would quickly use up the caster's MP, but she was an exception. As Overlord, she had high MP to start with, and not only had it been enhanced further by her transformation, but her MP was constantly regenerating thanks to the reversed Magic Drain.

Her spending and regeneration were perfectly balanced, enabling a perpetual barrage. They might've been low in power, but the volume of these projectiles made them into something fearsome indeed.

This is bad...! A cold sweat started to bead on the back of Juliet's neck.

However barely, she was still holding on.

But if this went on for much longer, she would run out of MP long before her opponent, and the rain of projectiles would grow even more intense. Neither Ray nor Juliet would be able to withstand that—they would quickly be overwhelmed.

And this wasn't even the only thing G could do.

"Is it too much?! You can handle this, right?! I'm sure you can!" Still firing the dark magic barrage with her left hand, she used her right to ready Harodihg Gnik.

Judging by the way she charged forward, the buff from Paradigm Shift had only made her more excited.

Their hands full with the dark magic, Ray and Juliet were unable to dodge, and Nemesis's Counter Absorption would surely be wasted on the projectiles.

The Overlord cackled as she approached, looming over Ray and Juliet like a towering bear. She swung her trident at them.

As death drew closer, Ray prepared to make his final gamble...

"Maddened Blade, Sip Their Blood—Ipetam."

...but then, a hundred blades sliced through the air, aimed straight at the Overlord.

"Oh? Oh my." The blades failed to even pierce G's skin, but she still stopped and looked at where they'd come from—the mouth of the passageway leading into the throne room.

"Kept ya waitin', didn't we?"

"So she's not just stupid huge, but stupid tough now too! And I thought the octopus was bad!"

The two figures who appeared were people Juliet knew very well.

"Chelsea! Max!" The moment the barrage stopped, Juliet and Ray backed away from G.

The Overlord didn't mind and looked over the four with a smile.

"You took care of the mermen?!" Ray asked.

"Yeah!" said Chelsea. "They just stopped comin'!"

G had been manually sending out the APMs using R'lyeh's powers. However, when she started fighting Ray and Juliet, she wasn't able to keep the process up, and as a result the flow of mermen stopped. This allowed Chelsea and Max to finish any that were left and come to help Ray and

Juliet.

“Eh heh heh. This is good. This is great, even! Things are heating up!”

The enemy received reinforcements, but the Overlord wasn’t flustered in the slightest. The shallow wounds opened by the hundred blades had already healed, leaving only small drops of blood that she licked away with a smile.

“Everyone’s here! The party that will fight the Overlord is complete!” Despite the fact that there were more enemies now, a change in circumstances that was entirely a disadvantage to her, G laughed as if she were truly happy. “Now! You have five minutes left! Gather your courage and fight me!”

At the peak of excitement, she shouted out loud.

“This is the climax!”

The preface was over—this was the real start of the battle.

G welcomed her enemies—her costars on the stage—with nothing but pure glee and anticipation.

This was her territory, and the pressure of the power she wielded as Overlord made her a match for any *Superior*. Her voice alone was enough to shake the air and send chills down the spines of those before her.

“...Yeah.” However, Ray remained unshaken, prepared to face her directly. “The arena, getting back at me, and turning all of that into content... You really just do whatever you want, huh?”

He held up a finger for each of G’s goals...

“But you’re right—this *is* the climax. The curtain’s ready to fall on your stage.”

...but in the end, he curled his hand into a tight fist.

“We’re winning this game. I hope you’re ready, Invidia.”

“You’re the best, Unbreakable!” G heard his declaration loud and clear. He was meeting and exceeding her expectations.

Thus, the final battle began, and G made the first move.

“Leeet’s gooo! Harodihg Gnik... FULL DRIVE!” *Three* threads of light extended from the tips of the trident, capturing Ray, Juliet, and Max.

Their eyes widened. This was the weapon’s secret trick—Attraction Anchor could be used on several targets at once. G had kept this hidden while fighting just Ray and Juliet, but she’d decided that now was the time for the big reveal. She knew how strong those two were, and she knew that

Max had cut down her Cthulhu in a single slash, so she chose to pull and bind them by force—an effective move.

However, this could only bind three people at most...

"Ohhh? You're leavin' me free? Really underestimatin' me, aren't ya?"

And she had four foes.

G's eyes widened. She'd seen Chelsea's sparring and knew her strategy. Because of that, she didn't think that the pirate would be much of a threat where there was little water and she couldn't summon her ship.

It was important to remember, though: Chelsea hadn't needed those things to become eighth in the duel rankings of Altar—the holy land of duelists. Water or not, there were plenty of things she could do.

"Golden Bull Tsunami—Poseidon." A crushing waterfall of liquid gold flooded over G's head.

"This is pretty! A bit *light*, though, don't you think?" Despite sustaining a direct hit from an ult, though, G barely even missed a beat. Her immense STR and END made her far too powerful for this volume of gold to crush her. Its nature as a pure physical attack rendered it incapable of doing much damage here.

However, damage wasn't what Chelsea was aiming for.

"Next up... World Reversal Waterfall!"

"Oh?"

Chelsea topped off her ult by surrounding it with an upward waterfall veil. G's threads of light were undone, making it difficult for her to lock on again... But that wasn't all Chelsea had done.

The attack had reduced G's vision in every direction, giving Chelsea's companions a chance to land their most devastating attacks.

"Eh heh heh. It's...a bit too basic, I think!"

However, G remained unshaken. She held the trident by the butt end and *spun it* for one massive swing.

In one gigantic sweep of her oversized trident, the veil of water around G vanished. Anyone caught in the trident's arc would surely have been obliterated.

However, it was only water that sprayed in every direction. There was no blood to be seen.

"Your feet are wide open, ya *big* baddy!"

A voice rang out from the lower half of the scattered veil.

Accelerated by Ipetam's blades, Max approached G from a low trajectory, allowing her to avoid the trident's sweep and get close.

Then, she used Bladecloud Convergence to empower Sekiun and slash at the Overlord.

The Famed Blade sunk into G's lower leg...

"Not bad!"

...but it was stopped yet again by her muscles and tough skin—STR and END.

Max quickly let go of her weapon, but she was blown away by a trident strike. Sent flying to the wall, she suffered an impact powerful enough to shatter her Brooch.

However, Sekiun was still stuck in G's left leg, hindering the Overlord's movements.

Now, if Maxie went for the legs...

The real attack would surely come from the other two.

"Here...!" The first of the two to take to action was Juliet. Brandishing her sword, she flew in for close combat.

"That's! A bad idea! Doncha think?!" G faced Juliet head-on, swinging her trident to meet Juliet's blade, and the two weapons clashed.

As a result, the sword began to creak.

Juliet's eyes widened. "This is obvious! It's just what you'd expect! My buffs are way superior to yours!" Forged by G's clan, Harodihg Gnik was designed to be tough enough that she could wield it after using Paradigm Shift. That was also the reason for its massive size.

And Paradigm Shift's buffs were far greater than that of Gradsoul's Curse Conversion.

Despite her lower stats, Juliet continued to struggle, avoiding the fatal trident strike, but this accumulated damage upon her weapon, and finally...

"Oh my..."

With those words from G and a widening of Juliet's eyes, the sword reached its limit and shattered.

Though a bit disappointed that it had ended this way, G knew what she had to do. She launched a finishing blow straight toward Juliet.

The battle between Overlord Invidia and the Fallen Knight was about to meet its expected end—with the latter speared upon the former's trident.

"I remain unbroken."

But that would not come to pass.

A moment later, with a roaring, metallic impact, the trident was knocked aside.

What had parried the fatal strike was...

"It's fixed?"

...the same blade that had broken just moments ago.

It was now completely restored, seemingly without a single scratch. In fact, it now shone with a light more sinister and powerful than before.

This was Gradsoul's second skill, "Unbreakable Blade." When it was destroyed, the wielder could pay half of her HP to instantly restore it.

"I didn't break it during the sparring match, did I?" said Juliet. G had watched Juliet spar, but this feature was still unknown to her.

No matter how many times it shattered, Juliet's sword would remain unbroken and rise again. Reminiscent of a certain someone, it was Juliet's new partner.

"That's a great weapon! Also..." The unexpected restoration had caught G off guard and allowed Juliet to deliver a hit.

A deep wound had opened in the Overlord's left side.

"Oh...! It's stronger too!" G said.

Indeed. In exchange for making Juliet unable to heal the HP she'd used to restore Gradsoul, Unbreakable Blade increased Curse Conversion's stat bonuses from 50% to 200% for ten minutes.

Juliet's weapon had shattered and she'd lost an enormous amount of HP...but this had only made her more powerful.

High risk, high reward builds—there were many RPGs that rewarded this kind of dangerous play.

"I can do this!" Juliet now had three times the stats of a typical vanguard SJ. Though she still didn't reach Overlord Invidia's level, her combat experience allowed her to come close.

"Not bad, Julie! You surprise me, Julie! But..." Though shocked that Juliet could keep up with her despite the vast gap in stats, G was still confident that she would win.

The wound in her left side had already closed. The reversed Poison was now a healing-over-time buff. While Juliet had lost HP to pay for the skill and was gradually losing more as they fought, G was quickly regenerating all the damage done to her.

It was simply impossible for Juliet's blade to outpace the healing and defeat G before her own life expired. Juliet's HP was critically low—it had dipped down to just ten percent of her total.

"Looks like you're still fated for defeat!" G said. It almost felt like there was a question implied by her words: "What will you do, then? Can you still shine on this stage?"

"Even if I am fated to fade..." Juliet replied as she deflected G's attacks. "Even if the ending of my tale has already been penned..."

She had only one response.

"That is merely one wave upon the vast sea of possibility."

She wouldn't even think of giving up.

"And beyond that...is the possibility I truly seek."

Juliet's shining eyes never wavered, fully fixated on the horizon past what was possible.

"Thus, here and now, upon this battlefield...the flames of life burn ever bright!"

And with that cry, something on Juliet's chest began to shine.

It was a necklace hanging from her neck—the MVP reward she'd acquired in the event alongside Ray, before she'd even obtained Gradsoul.

It was the Ancient Legendary "Light of Finality, Climax."

Once belonging to the Sacred Blazer, Aslan Faldreed, it was an accessory that could only be used at *less than 10%* of your total HP.

It had only one skill, "Like a Flash: Climax."

Usable only in the most dire of situations, the skill tripled the final number of all the user's stats, and dropped the MP and SP cost of skills to zero.

It was perhaps the ultimate ability for a risky low HP build like Juliet's.

And now...

"What...?!"

"I can reach you...!"

...the Fallen Knight was finally on the same level as the Overlord.

Now evenly matched, their battle accelerated. Though Juliet had barely enough HP to survive another hit, with their stats being equal, she could now use her battle prowess to its fullest.

This was the biggest difference between them. Juliet was a natural duelist, standing next to the likes of Figaro and Kashimiya.

Meanwhile, G's talents didn't lie in combat. Her fighting abilities were on the same level as that of most players—simply something given to her by high-rank sense skills.

So now that their stats were matched...

"HHAAAAAAAGHHH!"

...G's system-limited strength was outmatched by Juliet's system-*surpassing* skills.

Juliet's HP stopped decreasing, while G's HP began falling faster than it regenerated. The tables were turned. If this battle continued like this, Juliet now had a chance of winning.

"Ah ha ha ha! This is amazing! But is it enough to finish me off in time?!" G still thought that she could survive long enough for her ult to complete, winning her the battle.

But she also thought that would be *boring*.

Winning and losing was secondary—she wanted this to be even more exciting.

This stage was superb and the cast second to none. An anticlimactic finale was simply unacceptable.

"Not yet! It's not over yet! More! MORE! You still have something, right?!" The Overlord continued to insist that *they all could shine even brighter*.

"Yeah. We do."

It was the other knight who responded.

G looked up to see Ray, galloping through the air astride Silver.

"Juliet!" As he called out, Juliet backed away...

"Hellish Miasma!"

...and Ray closed the distance, taking Juliet's place as he held up his right bracer and released a dark-purple poison mist.

That's the... Well, it doesn't matter. It can't do anything to me now, G thought.

Indeed, this meant nothing to Overlord Invidia. The mist had three debuffs: Poison, Weakness, and Intoxication. She'd already taken on the first two herself, while Intoxication wasn't worth worrying about.

Hellish Miasma wouldn't do anything to her.

"Ah! Wait! This is a smoke screen...!"

But the fact that it was a *colored* mist made it capable of blocking her vision. That made it effective at preventing Harodihg Gnik's Attraction Anchor.

But what will he even do if he gets close?! My stats are way higher than his! And I made sure not to give him ammo for his special counterattack thing!

G had only hit him once, when Nemesis had put up her Counter Absorption. Doubling that damage would barely scratch her.

Is he playing this like his other battles, then? Looking for an opening to take advantage of...? With that thought, G prepared for whatever trick Ray had in store for her.

However, there was no trickery here. None at all.

If anything, it was the opposite—he was fighting her face-to-face.

"I'm a bit late in saying this, but... Thanks for the buffs, Overlord."

And with that, Ray broke through the dark-purple curtain, equipped with a gas mask—his Storm Visage.

In his left hand, there was the Flag Halberd...

"Thanks to you, I can use this at least once!"

And in his right, there was the *nameless axe*, wrapped in curse-cloth, fresh out of his Inventory.

It was Ray's strongest weapon, and the world's greatest double-edged sword. When he'd tested it in the arena, simply holding it up was enough to tear his arm to pieces.

He was doing the same now—but although the flesh on his arm cracked and bled, it wasn't fully destroyed. Reversed by Nemesis's skill, the seven debuffs of the Depths of Jealousy enabled his body to withstand the price of wielding it.

Continuously bleeding, but healing just enough to keep going, Ray held up the axe...

"EAT THIIIS!"

...and swung it down as hard as he could.

G's eyes widened. Whether she actually felt the axe's power or if her sense skills had simply forced her to act was unclear, but she held up her trident to defend herself—only for the axe to cleave straight through it and sink into her right side.

"Ah?!" The axe opened a wound on her right shoulder, slicing through her arm, the right half of her torso, her right leg, and even split the stonework beneath.

Ray gritted his teeth—the price he'd paid to destroy the Overlord's weapon and flesh was the absolute pulverization of his right arm.

But his eyes were still burning.

He knew what he had to do next—and who to call upon.

"JULIEEET!" "Right!" The unbreakable knight's call was answered by the knight with ebony wings.

At some point, she'd become surrounded by a vortex of countless black feathers. It was a sign that she was using her ultimate, but something was different this time.

Normally, Juliet's ult would release these black feathers after they circled her arms. Instead, the feathers now surrounded her as she flew through the air.

"Corpse-Eating Bird—Hræsvelgr..."

It was as though she herself had become the black wind.

"PENETRATOR!"

Putting all her power into the tip of her blade, she became an umbral vortex.

Her target no longer had a weapon to turn Juliet's sword aside. Faced with the vortex coming to pierce her, the unarmed Overlord...

"AH HA HA HA HA HA! YOU'RE ALL THE BEEEST!"

Even as she threw her left fist toward Juliet, she laughed and laughed.

The wounds—the injury-based debuffs—she'd received empowered Paradigm Shift further, making her fist even stronger than her trident.

This would no doubt be her last stand—the final exchange of the battle. Whoever's attack landed would shatter the other.

And so, not even a moment later, blade met fist.

It was an immense impact that shook not only the surrounding air, but all the waters of R'lyeh.

A knight and an Overlord. A pre-*Superior* and a *Superior*. Two girls shining with a dazzling light.

Only the *Black Crow* kept on flying beyond the horizon.

The dark vortex shattered the Overlord's fist and pierced through her torso.

And, after a brief silence, R'lyeh collapsed.

Epilogue: Sea Light, Star Light

Paladin, Ray Starling

Right after Juliet fatally wounded G, we were sent straight back into the Eighth Arena.

Both the cylinder around it and the rising water were gone now. There was also no sign that the place had been submerged mere moments ago—it wasn't even damp.

And in the middle of the stage stood Overlord Invidia. She was back in her original form, but the damage she'd sustained was still visible.

"I looost... That really did feel like a true boss monster's defeat, though..."

She's got no arms and a hole where her heart should be. How is she so lively? I wondered—before an answer came to me. "Do you have Death Soldier?" I asked.

"I do. I took it so I could be sure to save all my footage before I die."

Well, that explained why she was still alive.

Wait, I just noticed that she's using her legs to operate the magic camera console. Man, she's dextrous.

Then, I realized that Juliet looked somewhat sad. G seemed to notice it too. "Oh? What's wrong, Julie? What's the matter, Julie?" she asked.

"I... I gave you the death penalty... That means you're going to the gaol..." That clearly explained what was bothering her. While fighting G, Juliet must've been completely focused on the battle—the time limit and the circumstances didn't allow her to think about anything else.

And now that we'd won, she'd realized what beating G really meant, which had made her upset. She felt guilty about sending her friend to the gaol.

There was one small issue with that, though...

"She's not going to the gaol," Chelsea and I said in perfect unison, denying Juliet's concerns.

"Huh?"

“What? She pulls this kinda shit and she’s *not* wanted?” Juliet tilted her head, while Max became confused. I couldn’t blame them. I wouldn’t have known this either if I hadn’t watched her videos.

“Oh, she is,” said Chelsea. “She’s like public enemy number one in Legendaria.”

“Then why’s she not goin’?”

“She’s got an MVP reward that lets her bypass her wanted status and come back from her death penalties,” I said. If my memory served me, it was a mobile save point called “Sevenfall Eightrise,” and it let her come back from her death penalties eight times per year. I’d seen the video where she fought a music battle against Titania—she’d lost and died after it, but ultimately it had all ended with her coming back like nothing mattered.

“If you wanna know more, check out my video, ‘Super Useful Item! G Tries Something New!’”

She’s trying to get viewers even now! She’s really on that grindset! I thought, but then I realized something. “Wait. Why *are* you still alive? We Death Soldiers don’t get to live *this* long.” I was pretty sure that a minute had already passed.

“I got someone to make me an accessory that extends the duration by minutes!” First Harodihg Gnik, now this... Underground Sanctuary seemed to have some pretty good crafters.

“I’d actually love to have that too...”

“Our desires align... (Me too...)”

“You’re both way too excited about builds that involve dyin’.”

C’mon, Chelsea. Juliet’s a low HP build, while I’m, well...me. It’s pretty important that we get to stay around for a long time once our HP’s gone!

“I could give you some if you ever come hang out with my clan!” said G. “Consider it payment for today’s performance!”

Wait, really? I thought. *Honestly, that might be enough for me to forgive all this.*

“I must say,” Nemesis spoke up. “For someone who was just soundly defeated, you’re acting quite upbeat...”

“I mean, I had fun. We were all shining bright. It’s normal to feel good after something great happens, right?”

The Overlord—G—said those words with an expression that showed she was telling the honest truth.

That basically confirmed my suspicions about her...

"Hey, G," said Chelsea. "You could've destroyed us easily, right?"

"Huh?"

"Whaddya mean?" Juliet and Max seemed confused by Chelsea's accusation, but I knew what she was saying. While G had fought us with all she had, she wasn't putting everything she'd got into *winning*, exactly.

"I mean, R'lyeh's got way worse places than that dungeon inside it, right?" The Depths of Jealousy was a terrifying dungeon and could be easily flooded with her monsters. However, the very fact that she'd picked a place that was possible to clear at all told me that she wasn't just trying to kill us outright. R'lyeh could easily hold a lot of places where just surviving would be borderline impossible. I mean, if she'd dumped us into the deep sea, we wouldn't have even been able to breathe.

The only reason we were able to win in the first place was because the dungeon she'd given us had both a start and a goal.

"Also... You're holding up pretty well even at 0 HP. There's something you could do even now, right? Something that would take us all out?" I asked. The damage to her torso might've destroyed the trapezohedron, but though her ult was canceled, it's not like she *had* to take us outside like this.

If she really wanted to beat me, she could've used the time given to her by Last Command to do something else—maybe even that classic load-bearing boss move where you destroy the dungeon to take the heroes down with you.

Her answer to that...

"I didn't want that. I mean... It would've been *boring*."

...was brief and straightforward.

"Nobody wants to see a video where I just beat the crap out of someone who can't fight back. And I clearly lost, so of course I'm not going to turn the tables and just make it a draw. I'm against that kinda stuff."

Indeed, the reason she did what she did—and didn't do what she didn't—was *that she was a content creator*.

For her, all of this was just *a gaming video recording session*.

G's attempt to steal the arena had just been a way to enable the game between us, while the stuff about avenging her brother was nothing more than something to spice up the narrative.

At the heart of it all, G wanted to make a video featuring herself.

To put it simply, if the resulting video was interesting and exciting, to a content creator like her, whether she won or lost was irrelevant. It was a victory regardless.

And her good mood told me that the battle we just had must've greatly exceeded her hopes and expectations.

"This turned out better than the stuff I made with Legendaria's *Superiors*. I honestly wanna say thanks. Seriously, I'm bursting with gratitude!" she said with a bright, blissful smile as Chelsea, Max, and I looked down at her with conflicted expressions.

Getting caught up in her shenanigans had been a pain, but she honestly didn't seem like that bad of a person.

"But if you'd lost, she would have taken your arena. Does that not make her a proper enemy?" Nemesis asked.

Well, I guess, I replied. *She's not bad at heart, but she is a real handful... I guess that makes her kinda like Miss Eldritch?*

"I don't mind being your enemy, but I will come back to record another video sometime!" G said. "Oh! But I want you to see through my disguise, so let's become friends!"

"What a wild thing to say..." Not seeing through her disguise seemed like it could be bad, though, so I just did as told and put her on my friend list.

"Friending someone who just tried to kill me and take my arena makes no sense," I muttered, "but it feels like it'd be worse if I didn't. Scary stuff."

"Don't worry about it. This is pretty common in Legendaria."

Seriously? That's actually kind of terrifying. Legendaria might be a match for Tenchi.

"Suppose it's almost time." G's extended Last Command then expired, and she started to transform into motes of light. "Oh. Right. I almost forgot." As if she'd just thought of something, G turned to me with a cruel smile. "Heh heh heh. Don't think this is over... You may have defeated me, but I'm not the only Overlord you must face..."

Silence settled over the arena in the wake of G's stereotypical evil Overlord line.

Well, I get what she's going for, but there's one small issue...

"Umm... You're actually my second Overlord," said Juliet.

"Mine too," I added. That line only worked if G was the first we'd fought.

"Huh?! Can I ask who your first was?"

"Uhhh... I got caught up in a fight between Dis and Sechs..."

"I recently fought ZZZ..."

"Oh. So that's why he made that request. That explains it." G looked like this had made everything clear to her. "What a bummer, though," she continued. "I've been wanting to say that at least once ever since I became an Overlord..."

"S-Sorry," said Juliet.

"It's fine. I'm over it," G said, letting out a sigh and smiling at Juliet. "Let's play again sometime, Julie."

"Okay."

And with that, the last bits of G became light and vanished.

"She really did whatever she liked until the very end," said Nemesis.

"Well, I guess it's good to find out that there's Masters like her too." As far as *Superiors* went, she was honestly pretty all right.

"She did not endanger the country or any tian lives either..."

I feel like the arena's disappearance would've knocked Count Gideon out from the stress, though.

Anyway, that concluded the trouble at our base...

Which made me start to wonder how things had turned out at the Central Arena.

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Gideon, City of Duels, Central Arena

"...Heh heh."

"What? Why are you laughing? It's creepy."

The intense duel at the Central Arena had just ended, and F, seated in the Death Period box seat, let out a chuckle that made Marie look all weirded out.

"Oh, I just felt that I'd witnessed some excellent fighting." Using his own eye and Zodiac both, F was able to gather inspiration from two battles at once. Both were exhilarating fights and hardly everyday occurrences.

However...

"The fighting today was friendly, fun, and generally splendid..." F said of the battles at the two arenas. "*But not more than that*."

"What are you talking about?" Marie asked.

"Are you saying you don't agree? If it doesn't involve something that can be lost forever—tians, for example—then no matter how intense the battle, it's never more than a game, is it?"

Figaro vs Albert. Ray's party vs G.

While both battles had been truly something to behold, neither of them carried the weight of something that might be truly lost.

"Tragedies happen only when there is something that cannot be undone," F said. With mere games, an observer might find the tension somewhat lacking—but *Dendro* was both a game *and* a world, so it could offer a kind of heightened spectacle that could not be experienced anywhere else. And yet, F felt that there hadn't been much of that special tension in the battles he'd just witnessed.

It was as if they'd received perfect scores, *but nothing more*.

"Perhaps if only Masters are involved, their conflicts can never be deeper than simple fun," F concluded.

"You know you almost ruined a relationship, right?" During the Love-Duel Festival, F had nearly broken up a pair of Masters, and Marie couldn't help but point that out.

"Oh my. How harsh. But in hindsight, I really only helped bring them closer together, didn't I?"

"You've got a lot of nerve, saying that... Should I split your head open?" Marie clicked her tongue as she loaded Arc-en-Ciel with La Gravelle.

"Heh..."

Despite what F said, he had gained something from the incident at the Eighth Arena. He was sure that the Ray he knew wouldn't have been able to fight as well as he did today. F could tell that in the short amount of time that had passed since their last meeting, the young man had experienced some tremendous growth.

Learning of this change in his research subject was certainly a good thing, but...

"Then again, neither you nor I will get what we want from mere games, will we?"

Marie said nothing in response. She couldn't deny that the two of them were cut from similar cloth.

"I want to read more of your work, so please pick it back up as quickly as you can...*Nagisa Ichimiya*," F said, flashing a mischievous smile before standing up.

Marie frowned—that had hit where it hurt—but just as F was about to leave...

"Yeah, yeah. You keep up with your own writing too...*Seigen Kato*."

...she addressed him. Not by his avatar name, nor by his real name, but by his *pen name*.

It was the name of a certain author who'd participated in a publisher get-together from some time ago.

Marie was obviously trying to tell him that she'd realized his true identity.

"...Of course." Grinning wryly at the unexpected counterattack, F walked away.

◇◇◇

Paladin, Ray Starling

Once that thing at the Eighth Arena was taken care of, I headed to the Central Arena to see how that had panned out—only for Shu to tell me to come right to the conference room. There, I found Shu, Figaro, Hannya, Azurite, Azurite's bodyguards...and Figaro's opponent in the final duel: King of Termination, Albert Schwartzkaiser.

Apparently we'd all been gathered for *questioning*.

KoT's intentions were still completely unclear. It just didn't make sense for a well-known Caldinan *Superior* to suddenly join Altar and instantly be allowed to participate in The Tournaments.

The questioning had been postponed until after the event to preserve fairness, but it was now time to hear what Albert had to say.

The *Superiors* who were already in the city were present, as well. Shu had dragged me in here too, but that seemed to be at Azurite's request.

That made sense, though—I was the leader of their clan as well as her friend.

Honestly, I wasn't sure if it was a good idea for Azurite to be here at all, given we didn't know what KoT's intentions were, but she insisted on interrogating him herself. That was just how she was—in fact, that was exactly how we'd met at Quartierlatin in the first place—but if KoT was planning to assassinate her, this gave him a golden opportunity.

Though, we accounted for that possibility too.

In addition to the three *Superiors* that were visibly present, Fuso and Tsukikage were also hiding in the shadows, just in case. If something happened, she'd use Faint Light to cut Albert's AGI and they both would get involved.

With such preparations in place, Azurite began the questioning.

"Now, let us begin."

Silence.

"What is your reason for participating in The Tournaments... For joining Altar?" Azurite went straight for the big one. With Truth Discernment in place, KoT couldn't lie...

"Can I have an answer?"

...but that meant nothing when faced with someone who wouldn't say anything at all.

With a face that was almost robotic in how emotionless it was, KoT remained completely silent.

That made me realize that even in his duels, he hadn't said anything besides skill declarations and a short phrase at the end of his matches.

"Are you Contract-bound to not say certain things?" Azurite asked. I'd forgotten to consider Contracts, and yeah, that would certainly explain why KoT wasn't speaking. If he was Contract-bound to keep secrets, he'd have no choice but to remain silent.

Would breaking the Contract actually kill him, though? I wondered. *Wouldn't he just gain Contract resistance or something?*

However, as that thought was running through my head, KoT shook his head in response.

It was a gesture that clearly meant "no."

He and Azurite looked at each other in silence, but then the latter broke it.

"Did you come to Altar by the president's order?"

A nod—almost certainly a "yes."

"Why did she send you here?"

KoT tilted his head—probably the gesture meant "unknown."

"Oh..." I said. Now I understood—

KoT didn't speak, responding only with three gestures that meant "yes," "no," or "unknown."

Azurite's first question couldn't be answered by any of those, and that was why he'd shown no reaction to it. But why was he doing this, anyway?

"Are your answers limited by some sort of skill or Contract?"

He shook his head.

"You cannot speak?"

He shook his head.

"Are you just doing this because you want to?"

He nodded... *Wait, nodded?!*

"I see." Azurite placed a hand on her temple as though suddenly exhausted and slowly reached for Altar—the sword by her side.

"Whoa whoa whoa! Don't try to cut him down for that! Calm down!" I interjected.

"Oh. Sorry. For a moment, I felt like Caldina's president was using him to mock me..."

Well, I get she's the one who sent him here, but still...!

This felt like it was getting nowhere. We could ask just yes-or-no questions, but there was no telling how long it would take for us to get anything useful out of him.

"Oh," said Shu. "Looks like the help I called fur is here."

"The help?" The moment he said that, there was a knock on the door. It was followed by the voice of a knight from the outside.

"Rook, a member of Death Period, has arrived."

"Rook?"

Azurite gave permission, and he entered the room. His face and gear were a bit dirty, so I guessed he'd been doing a little training even though there was a big dueling competition going on.

"I'm sorry for the wait."

"It's cool. Anyway, we could use some interpretation." With those words, Shu moved a bit away from KoT's side, giving his position to Rook.

"Interpretation," though? How do you interpret someone who doesn't even talk?

"Fur now, continue the questionin' as you were."

"Very well," Azurite said as she resumed her interrogation.

Nodding, head shaking, tilting, silence... The questioning continued, still awkward and mostly uninformative, for nearly ten minutes until...

“I think I understand now,” Rook said. “Please ask something other than yes-or-no questions.”

Azurite gave a slightly puzzled expression before posing her first question again.

“What is your reason for joining Altar?”

“‘I have concluded that if I want to gather information and test myself in various environments, staying in one place is suboptimal. The four years I spent in Caldina were more than enough, and I am now considering a stay of similar length here in Altar. The president also directed me to participate in The Tournaments, which made this transfer all the more convenient. I intend to assist the kingdom in hunting dangerous monsters and pursuing wanted Masters as I have in Caldina. I hope we have a productive relationship.’ That’s his answer.”

Rook’s sudden speech made everyone except Shu look shocked.

He seemed to be directly reciting KoT’s words.

Rook was almost like a mind reader sometimes and often knew what was going on in our heads, but it looked like the past ten minutes of questioning were enough for him to figure out Albert too.

Wait, I could kinda understand if Rook was observing someone who talked a lot, but how’s he doing it with a guy who doesn’t say anything? And how’s he getting so much out of him?

“Is that all correct?” Azurite asked. KoT nodded in response, and you could tell by his raised eyebrow that even he was surprised by Rook’s feat.

“He says ‘More or less,’” Rook translated.

“Why do you not speak for yourself?”

“‘There are personal circumstances that make it somewhat difficult for me to present information using voice. I am capable of it, but my efforts are inefficient. Even after several years here, I cannot say more than a few words at once. Additionally, the nuances of my language may cause difficulties with communication. Even if I were to write, my original language would be incomprehensible to tians. In the common language, all I can give are names and a few words. Because of all that, I generally communicate using gestures.’”

He sure says a lot for someone who doesn’t talk! I thought.

“Did the president give you any other orders?”

"'No. I was only ordered to participate in The Tournaments. I was not even told why. She said I was free once it was over. Additionally, she said that if I went to the reception at her designated time, I would win the Tournament lottery.'"

His answer made Azurite fall silent, deep in thought. The president had sent him here almost like a blank slate, and had given him orders as if she knew the exact timing he needed to win.

That was just baffling.

"Do you know if there is anything else Caldina is doing in Altar?"

"'Fellow Sefirot members, Carl and Yumeji, accompanied me on the way here, but in Caldina's west, we encountered Legendaria's King of Curses and Summon Princess. The resulting trouble separated us, and I have been operating on my own ever since. I am not involved in nor do I know anything about the orders the president gave to them.'"

"I see." Two more *Superiors* had approached the kingdom. That was important information, and it felt like a strategic move by Caldina.

It was strange, though, that he was giving us all this information without even attempting to obscure it.

KoT wasn't hiding a thing, but the president's intentions weren't becoming any clearer.

Also, I couldn't understand how Rook was picking up specific names and stuff like that.

I ended up asking about it, and it turned out that the deduction skills he practiced in real life had been greatly enhanced by *Dendro*'s mechanics. Rook regularly leveled up before I even realized he'd gotten stronger, but it looked like it wasn't just his stats that were improving. Honestly, this was basically another superpower at this point.

"If a war broke out between Altar and Dryfe, could we expect you to fight on our side?" Azurite asked.

"'I belong to the kingdom now, so I have no objections about aiding them in their effort. Though, war or not, I would like to refuse actions that cause tian casualties.'"

"What if only Masters participate?"

"'Then there would be no problems. I would gladly assist Altar.'"

After saying that—well, having Rook say that—KoT gave a nod.

That was nice to hear.

Based on Rook's translations, KoT seemed like a good-natured and diligent individual despite his stern appearance. Honestly, if you ignored the fact that he didn't speak, he might've been the most normal *Superior* in Altar.

"'Speaking of which, if I am to participate, I believe I need to join a clan. Is there any you recommend?' Oh, you can come to our Death Period. We're second in the rankings," Rook interjected before continuing. "'Thank you. I will gladly join.'"

"Hold on!" Basically talking to himself, Rook had casually made a pretty big decision for us.

We're getting another Superior*?!*

"Oh? Do you object? I assumed you would approve."

"I do, but still!" Rook was reading every inch of my mind *and* personality! *This really is a superpower!*

"No it's not. Anyone can do this with enough training. It's similar to how you understand what Juliet is saying."

"But Juliet talks out loud! Normally!"

"Huh?"

That aside...

I really did have nothing against him joining our clan.

The Tournaments' goal was to keep the participants from committing crimes and attract foreign Masters to increase Altar's forces in the coming war.

For some reason, there were fewer foreign and freelance Masters than expected, but KoT was a skilled *Superior* who could hold his own against Figaro, and him joining Altar would be a great asset. While we didn't know what the Caldinan president was planning, I felt that we could trust Albert just fine. Rook and Shu would surely notice if he had some ulterior motives.

Azurite still seemed to be pondering something, though. She'd been lost in thought ever since Albert said how he ended up in Altar, and I could hear her whisper something like "When did...?"

"Azurite?"

"King of Termination... I have another question... *When* did you depart from Caldina?"

"'When?' Is that important?" I asked. "I know Caldina's pretty far, but still." Crossing the desert to travel all the way to Altar surely wasn't an easy task. AGI builds could get through it at supersonic speeds, but based on his duels, Albert seemed pretty slow. Did he travel in some sort of vehicle?

"Huh?" That voice of confusion came from Rook, and I assumed it was caused by Albert's answer to Azurite's question. With a dubious expression on his face, he went and translated it. "...'In terms of time on this side, I was ordered to go to Altar *about a month ago*.'"

Shock filled the room. I finally understood what had Azurite so lost in thought.

A month ago in *Dendro* time... That was before even the peace talks—*before Altar had even gotten the idea to hold The Tournaments*.

Despite that, the president had already sent Albert to participate in the final day, and even given him the time that would let him win the no-show slot lottery.

Maybe she really could see the future...and that prospect made us all shudder.

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A Month Ago, Drac-Nomad, The President's Residence

Some time before Altar and Dryfe had their peace conference, in the president's residence atop the Caldinan capital of Drac-Nomad, a man and a woman were having a conversation.

Or rather, a woman with a thin veil over her face was talking to a large man who responded only with subtle gestures.

"Here are the documents to change your affiliation. Give them to the person you're supposed to meet in Altar, and you will belong to the kingdom," said the woman. The man responded with a nod.

The woman was the president of Caldina, La Place Phantasma, while the man was Albert Schwartzkaiser.

"You may be wondering how I did this. It's simple. There happens to be a territory-owning Altarian noble who borrowed money from me, so now they are in my debt. This gives me indirect authority to have a Master—even you—change affiliation. And make sure you go through the lottery reception at the precise time I gave you. *You will make it in*."

Albert nodded.

"Yumeji and Carl will accompany you for a while. Their goal is different from yours. Oh, and you will get into trouble with Legendarian rankers on the way. Make sure they do not kill you, and refrain from killing them as well."

Albert nodded.

"After The Tournaments...you will be free. Live in Altar as you will."

Albert...didn't nod.

"You don't have to worry about Sefirot losing a member. You came here to gather information and carry out some tests, didn't you? You don't benefit much from staying in a single country. You learned all that you could learn in Sefirot. This is my last quest for you—consider it your final operation test here in Caldina."

"I am grateful for your support," Albert said in English as he nodded.

"Good work on everything thus far. And good luck in your future endeavors, Albert."

"Thank you." Expressing his gratitude again, Albert left the room.

"That was the first time he's said two sentences in a single conversation. I suppose it just goes to show how grateful he was," La Place said with a wry grin before turning around to gaze off in another direction.

At some point, she was joined by a man of a darker complexion and clothes characteristic of a desert nomad.

"Are you sure you should've let him go? He's strong."

The man was the strongest wide-scale exterminator—Fatoum, the "Magical Apex."

"Yes. This is for the best. Keeping him around wouldn't be very beneficial for us," La Place said, not even slightly surprised by Fatoum's presence.

"It wouldn't?"

"If sent to fight Granvaloa or participate in *the battles that would follow*, he would likely switch sides or refuse to follow orders."

"Oh dear." Fatoum gave a wry grin, but he didn't disagree. If anything, it seemed he also suspected that that was exactly what would happen.

"He seems to think such actions are completely unlike dueling or fighting monsters and criminals, even though the only difference is that tians die."

Sefirot was a collection of oddballs, eccentrics, fiends, and superhumans, but if you ignored Albert's origins and Embryo, he was easily one of their most normal and good-natured members. Even more than their leader, he served as the group's conscience.

"He's powerful, but too pure. How curious that a nonhuman would cling to humanity as he does."

"That might be the very reason he does it. His lack of humanity could be what is driving him to behave as *human* as possible. If a nonhuman was instructed to act like a human, I imagine that directive would not include the uglier side of humanity."

A nonhuman entity who looked at humanity with a positive eye, focused on its good side. Fatoum thought that if something like that learned what it truly meant to be human and tried to behave like one, it would most likely become someone virtuous—and La Place felt that he had a point.

"Regardless, sending Albert to Altar is enough to drive a wedge between Altar, Dryfe, and the rest." It would definitely shake the kingdom and make Dryfe feel uneasy. The increase to the ranks of Altar's *Superiors* would make the other countries look at them differently too. "This will also make it easier for me to crush the fools trying to attack me from the inside."

Being the president of Caldina—a city-state union—she had many enemies who wanted to claim her wealth and authority for themselves. However, whenever such characters appeared, she quickly mowed them down, increasing her own influence in the process.

The recent Cortana incident was a good example. With its mayor having essentially destroyed himself, Caldina's largest city was now fully within La Place's grasp.

"By the way, why did you send Carl and Yumeji too?" Fatoum asked.

"Their role is negotiation. They will talk to the powerful Masters who are considering going to Altar and offer them a better deal if they join Caldina instead. They are already willing to switch and have no attachment to Altar yet, so this is a great opportunity to expand our forces. I will not let it pass by."

"That makes sense."

"I would want a *Superior* most of all... Someone to replace Albert. Despite what I said to him, 'Sefirot' does refer to the ten sefira. It feels wrong to use that name when there are only nine."

Even if they'd already joined Altar, until The Tournaments happened, the Masters were functionally freelance, and La Place didn't hesitate to claim them for herself. Excessive interference with Altar's attempts to grow their forces would negatively affect the war, so she had gone and given them Albert—someone who would eventually stop working for her regardless.

In a way, it was a win-win situation. With Albert, Altar would gain the forces they wanted, while Caldina would get someone to replace the *Superior* they were about to lose anyway.

Caldina would likely also get some pre-*Superiors* and ex-rankers, though, so they were still the bigger winner in this exchange.

"I wonder if Albert will find his place there..."

"He's an honest sort. I believe he will fit in well, even in Altar." Albert was an agreeable person, but more importantly, he wasn't involved in any conspiracies. Nothing could be gained from interrogating him, and he possessed no secrets he could leak.

In terms of help Caldina could send to the kingdom, he was the best option they could ask for.

"When he enters The Tournaments, he will show his powers too. Though I suppose his victory is unlikely."

Albert was going to the same Tournament as Figaro, who was said to be Altar's strongest. If he won against Figaro, his power and value would become undeniable.

However, there was little chance of that.

"Well, as far as duels go, Figaro isn't a favorable matchup for him," said Fatoum. "It could honestly go either way, though. If we ignore the old-timer who changes the very rules of combat, Figaro is probably the only duel champion who can beat Albert."

"He does have a lot of weaknesses. That is exactly why I had him participate in that particular Tournament."

An Embryo focused on scouting would instantly notice Albert's main body, although those were admittedly somewhat unusual to see in duels, and outside of duels there were many ways to circumvent Albert's powers. For example, one could simply gather eight Masters, each with their own means of fatally wounding him.

Albert was certainly useful, but these flaws meant he could easily be replaced. And that was the reason the president had sent him to The Tournaments.

He was now effectively *a foreign asset* they would never get back. Her last quest took him to The Tournaments specifically so he would *reveal his many weaknesses*.

By taking part in the competition, Albert would establish ties with the kingdom and gain their trust. That would make it easier for him to operate there, and it would certainly be a positive for him.

However, other countries would learn how to defeat him. That would obviously include Dryfe, and since Caldina wanted the Dryfe-Altar war to be as close as possible, that was a positive outcome for them.

“Not having Yumeji and Carl around might make some things a bit hard for us, though,” said Fatoum. “Though I suppose that cannot be avoided right now. If we did not do this, it’s likely that very few people would agree. If we use them as messengers, offer funding, provide a favorable environment, and have Sefirot help them hunt UBMs that I am aware of, they will be more than likely to accept our offer.”

The reason La Place had used *Superiors* as headhunters was to give the offer more credibility, as well as make the Masters think that Caldina truly valued them and was serious about wanting their allegiance.

That wasn’t the only reason La Place had sent *Superiors* to the west, though.

“This is no issue,” she said. “Even if something unexpected occurs—something beyond my calculations—we can simply counter it with excessive force. And if we play all our cards, you and I alone can deal with *anything*.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. If we are together, there is no tian or Master... No...” La Place paused for a moment. “There is no outsider Infinite... *No Incarnation we can’t win against*.”

She mentioned the Infinite Embryos—the strongest of all possible entities, hiding in the background of this world—and still claimed that she and Fatoum would win.

“That is why I chose you, after all,” she said.

“It’s an honor. As both a warrior, and your husband,” Fatoum said as he smiled at *his wife*.

“Nothing unexpected will happen for a while, though. The changes to the peace conference, as well as the Eltram and Vennsayle incidents, will be very few. The same goes for The Tournaments after that. There will be some deviations, but they will be negligible overall. I had to be especially careful while calculating the time for Albert to join the lottery, though.”

Altar and Dryfe would hold a peace conference. It would break down, leading to conflict which would end with Claudiah suggesting a Master-only war, which would in turn cause Altimia to set up The Tournaments to prepare for that.

At that point, there did not exist a single tangible sign that these Tournaments would even happen—and yet La Place was making plans as if they had already been announced.

However, Fatoum didn’t even think of arguing against her idea. La Place was often called a witch who could see the future, and he had absolute confidence in this power of hers.

“I will not be wrong about this. Things are different this time.” The smile on her face vanished before she continued. “A piece as eccentric as *Ray Starling* will not appear again.”

A strong enmity could be seen in her eyes as she spoke that name.

“Are you still bothered by that?”

“Of course I am. It’s rare for me to calculate so thoroughly and be so wrong.”

La Place reached into an Inventory she had on her and took out some documents with text on them, reading things like “Altea Blockade Project” and “UBM Release Project.”

Going through these documents, La Place continued talking.

“I consolidate all the information I receive and use it to paint an image of the future. I am confident that my overall world prediction ability rivals that of the Incarnation of Influence.”

She then brought up one of the custodians—the twins claiming to be control AI No. 11. The power they’d demonstrated two millennia ago was immense, yet La Place casually claimed that she was on their level.

“But there are some that render my calculations meaningless.” Her fingers stopped as she came across a photo. It showed a single Master—a young man raising his right arm high before a creature engulfed in flames. "Those without *vessels* for me to read, and Masters who entered this world after the calculations—those who *didn't even exist here*—simply could not be included in the equation. Naturally, I failed to consider them. However, such entities usually did not have enough influence to affect my results...with some exceptions."

She glared at Ray's photo, clearly displeased.

"This is who we have to blame for the divergence of the Gideon incident, as well as the immediate disappearance of the Monochrome I had you awaken... Actually, he's also the reason the Altea blockade ended a few days earlier than planned."

La Place and her Sefirot clan had multiple schemes in place for the kingdom. Some revolved around Dryfe's acts of terror, while others were of their own devising. However, a good few of them—some of them very important—had been ruined by Ray Starling.

First had been Dryfe's plot to assassinate the Grandrear sisters. While their deaths wouldn't have had much of an impact on the war between Altar and Dryfe, they were qualified to inherit the Granvaloan pirate fleet, so their deaths would've exacerbated the turmoil that would occur there after the war.

That would have been successful, and all Caldina had to do was watch.

However, Ray's involvement had turned the assassination into a failure.

Next was the Altea blockade. Caldina had arranged this act of terror to make Altar's situation worse.

But after Ray's death, Shu had gone out to Noz Forest to avenge him. Then, thanks to Ray meeting Figaro in the Tomb Labyrinth, the blockade at the Sauda Mountain Pass had also been broken earlier than planned.

He was actually somewhat responsible for the destruction of the western blockade too. When Lei-Lei learned her friend's little brother was having a welcome party, she chose to stay at the capital longer than originally planned. And then, when her order for the party was stolen by Goblin Street, she went to the Wez Sea Route to get back at them.

And while the east blockade hadn't been broken because of Ray directly, it was still the PK of a newbie faithful that had caused the Lunar Society to take action, creating a result.

It went without saying that the same applied to the events surrounding the Gouz-Maise Gang, Gideon, and Monochrome.

"Because of him, my calculations have been thrown off even now. The *damage to the world* has been less than it should've been."

She'd had a hand in many of the incidents in the kingdom—yet through Ray Starling's involvement, some of the more important ones had ended differently than she'd calculated.

"The worst of it was Altar refusing Caldina's cooperation offer. According to my calculations, they should have accepted it. And yet they didn't. It's as though Altar still stands unbroken."

That had been Ray Starling's influence. Through the battle in Gideon, he'd shown them hope, and through the battle in Quartierlatin, he'd formed a bond with Altimia. Without him, the board would have played out closer to how she predicted.

Her stern expression made it clear just how much this irritated her.

"It's not like you to be vexed by the past," said Fatoum. "You have always been someone who looks toward the future."

"...That is true." Her husband's words made her relax a tiny bit.

"Speaking of, what do you believe the future will be like?" he asked.

"The ramifications of that miscalculation and the overall increase of variables in the world means that our window of prediction has been narrowed, but I foresee some significant incidents in the near future. Though, I have already told you about most of them."

La Place nodded before continuing.

"The ones that involve us the most will be the Eltram incident and the events at Vennsayle. And even with three members of our clan sent to the west, we can still direct these in our favor. If anything, we won't even have to employ the two elders or Rainbow...our Prismatic Fortress."

"That is good to know."

"IF is involved in both, but I say we let them do as they please. Many of their activities are positive in terms of world damage."

"Should we tell that to Moneygold too?"

"No. All that matters is that he does not encounter the Irregularity there. We don't have to tell him to be considerate. He won't end up killing The Weapon, Murder Princess, or the Great Soul Daoshi regardless. I see the shadow of death upon him, though. You might get to see him lose all that weight," she said with a smile, presenting her prediction in a joking manner.

"Now that's something to look forward to," Fatoum said with a chuckle.

Her words would come true—Splendida would kill Moneygold shortly after the Eltram incident.

"So, what are the 'things that do not involve us' and the 'things you haven't told me about'?" Fatoum continued, noticing that his wife was omitting something.

La Place responded with a mischievous smile. "I saw something very interesting. It isn't confirmed to happen yet, but it would be good news for us if it does."

"Do tell."

"I looked into the future of Altea...and saw a large *crater*," she said with a hint of delight.

"You don't mean the King of Blaze incident?"

"No, it's not the act of terror during the peace conference. That one is bound to fail, anyway. Now, the disappearance of Altea would destroy both the save point and the barrier there. On top of that, it would cause many deaths and allow countless Resources to flow toward the vessel without any needless obstruction. If the vessel doesn't die when the capital vanishes, our victory might be guaranteed then and there."

"Perhaps I should head west too?"

"No. I'm already having you work against Granvaloa. If I changed your objective now, I'll be unable to do much calculating for a while after that. Altea's disappearance would be simply a nice bonus... Ngh."

As she spoke, La Place clutched at her head as though struck by a sudden pain.

"...So there," she managed. "The three we sent will be our final interference with Altea... With the west. Once Albert's Tournament ends, Dryfe will surely swing into action. That High-End's...final struggle is..."

"La Place. *It might be time to switch*."

"You're...right. I might've done one too many repeats... I'll let the device...the brain get some rest."

La Place then sat down on a chair and closed her eyes. Fatoum watched over her, and it looked as though she had fallen asleep.

About a minute later, her eyes opened.

"...Oh. *She* went to sleep. I see she worked quite hard today as well."

There was something strange about La Place's words. Her manner of speech was different, her very presence had changed, and she spoke of herself as if she were someone else.

"She did. Does your head hurt, *Shashie*?"

As though it were the most obvious thing in the world, Fatoum called his wife by a different name.

"Oh, my brain is only a link... She does the calculations herself from the far-flung place where she resides."

"But none of this is within the capabilities of normal people. It burdens your brain too. You should rest... Do you think you can eat? If you can, shall we go have something together?"

"My... I would be happy to," La Place said, smiling like a cheerful young woman.

She had the same face as the cold and calculating clairvoyant witch she'd been moments before, but her behavior was nothing like it had been.

"Let me take the lead. I reserved a table at our leader's business."

"Oh my... I cannot wait."

Fatoum treated both of them the same way—it was as though to him, both these personalities were one and the same.

After Story: The Viewer and the Streamer

Reality, Kurosaki Household

Right after the battle at the Eighth Arena, Juri logged out.

Her mother returned from work soon after that, so she just barely evaded being caught playing *Dendro*.

The cold she'd caught was making her feel pretty bad all over. Her head was hot and felt like it was stuffed with cotton, as though her body were basically begging her to get some sleep.

However, there was something she wanted to do before passing out.

"Umm... Japanese works for this, right?" Juri took her mobile device in hand, went to a video-sharing platform, and ran a search.

She found what she wanted right away.

"There... That's done. I'll do more...after I wake up..."

Finally, she'd reached her limit, and she fell asleep.

The mobile device was still in her hand, its screen showing a channel with a freshly clicked subscribe button.

◇◆◇

Reality, Fujiwara Household

"Yeah. This is good! It's done!"

G—Ginga Fujiwara—finished her work and stretched as if tired.

After she'd gotten the death penalty, she'd spent the entire day editing the footage she'd created in *Dendro*.

The fact that she could do this on zero sleep was a show of just how immersed she was in her work.

"This video's crazy good! And making it was so much fun."

Those were her honest thoughts as she looked over the recordings and what she'd built from them.

The video had plenty of intense action, emotional moments, even some comedy from the Unbreakable's reactions. It was exciting all throughout.

She'd lost and hadn't managed to steal his arena, but she was more than glad that she'd gone to Gideon.

The actors had flourished on her stage, and she was shining bright even in defeat.

It was easily one of the best videos she'd ever made.

"Hrmmm... I'm still a bit upset that I lost, though. He did beat my brother, so if I'd beaten him, I would've finally become the better sibling... Well, come to think of it, he lost a one-on-one fight, while they outnumbered me four to one, so...maybe I'm still better than him?"

With those words, she set the finished video up for a premiere.

"Well... At least I made some new friends. That's something to be happy about."

A good video and a longer friend list—she'd gained more than she lost, so she couldn't complain too much.

"I got a good story to tell Shousen too... Aaaahhh..." G mentioned her clan's sub-leader—a name that might have rung a bell for Ray—before letting out a yawn.

Having been up since logging in for the recording, Ginga had finally reached her limit.

There was still time until the premiere, so she'd decided to get some sleep. She checked on her channel one last time and went to bed.

The subscriber count that she saw was slightly bigger than it had been yesterday...

END

Afterword

Cat: “Time for the afterwooord. Brought to you by Cheshire the ‘Cat’ and...”
Bear: “Shu Starling the ‘Bear.’”
Cat: “Anyway... I’m exceedingly sorry for the waaait!”
Bear: “An apology, huh? A beary good way to start this.”
Cat: “Heh... We said that this volume would come in the first half of 2024 and acted like there’s no way we’d miss that deadline...”
Bear: “But it ended up comin’ out a whole year after the last one, deep into the second half of 2024. It feels like every recent afterword announcement just keeps pushin’ the date further and further back.”
Cat: “The author never missed a deadline, though...”
Bear: “Books are made through cooperation between beary many people. Sometimes stickin’ to your own deadline ain’t enough.”
Cat: “The author came to understand that things can be delayed even if no one’s at fault and nothing bad happens...”
Bear: “We got some good news too, though. Fur real.”
Cat: “Yes. There was the delay—but during the wait, we were able to try something new. Those of you buying from stores may have noticed that we released two volumes at once!”
Bear: “The other one is *Infinite Dendrogram SP 1: The Southern Cross Part 1*, where *I’m* the star of the show.”
Cat: “We’ll let the author tell you more about that.”

Dearest readers, thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaido.

Let me echo Cheshire and extend my sincere apologies for the long wait on this volume. While certain circumstances greatly delayed the release, through some discussion with the editor, we were able to use that time to start doing something new.

We took the anime Blu-ray exclusive Southern Cross side story, gave it the subtitle of “SP,” and released it separately from the mainline story.

Thanks to Eri Kuroda, the illustrator we got for SP, we were able to do something we’ve never done before—releasing two volumes at once.

Additionally, we are planning to release part 2 of *The Southern Cross* fairly shortly after this, and we are working on a continuation to the e-reader exclusive EX series.

I intend to do all I can to provide you with new stories to read and hopefully make up for the long wait for volume 22.

Now, with those announcements and advertisements out of the way, let’s talk about this volume.

Those who read both the web novel and the light novel surely noticed, but this volume contained quite a few changes from the original. G’s surprising appearance at the end of the previous volume allowed the creation of a new story that was centered around Ray, reminiscent of how King of Light appeared in volume 12. In fact, it was somewhat of a continuation from that storyline.

With the LN introducing F during the Love-Duel Festival—earlier than originally planned—G’s introduction was also pushed to the forefront and happened during The Tournaments.

It was kind of like how an event in a video game sometimes requires a prerequisite event to trigger.

Thanks to Taiki, this volume also did an incredible job portraying G as both charming and a true Overlord. The work on the other characters was excellent too, and it made me really appreciate our illustrator.

Now, this volume will be followed by volume 23, which will take us back to Caldina for a continuation of the story from volume 20.

And just like volume 22, I hope that it presents you with something unknown and unexpected.

Please continue supporting *Infinite Dendrogram*.

—Sakon Kaido

Cat: “Anyway, it’s time to wrap this up, but...”

Bear: “But...?”

Cat: “...You think we should announce when the next volume’s coming out?”

Bear: “Ohhh. The delay this time was so bad that you’re beary scared of

doin' that, huh?"
Cat: "I mean, it feels like there's a jinx making it so we always miss the time frame we set!"
Bear: "Hey, the aufur said they're gonna pace their releases better now. Have some faith."
Cat: "O-Okay... Here I gooo...! VOLUME 23 IS COMING OUT WITHIN A YEAR! PLEASE LOOK FORWARD TO IT!"
Bear: "Hmm. Not saying *which* year, huh? So you went fur a wide range while also minimizing the damage even if it's late again."
Cat: "We'll still do our best to release it within a reasonable time frame...!"

Bonus Short Story: G Channel: Job Build

An Unspecified Day, A Certain Streamer's Channel

"All eyes on G! Welcome to my channel!" Accompanied by dazzling effects, a devilish girl appeared in a CGI room and announced the start of the show.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, so it was time for her weekly chat stream. Once she was done with the greeting, G began answering questions.

"First one! 'They say that it doesn't matter what job you had before taking an Overlord job. What were you as a high-rank?' Watch my older streams to find out!"

Her words sparked a fresh flow of comments.

```
Lmao
Looks like we got more newbies who don't know...
Oh c'mon, tell them
```

"Okay, fine! My main high-rank job is Magic Spearmaster, while my sub is Shadowmancer!"

```
Never heard of those...
Holy low profile
How'd you clear an Overlord dungeon with that scuffed
build???
Obviously because she's G you donut
```

"Magic Spearmaster is basically just Magic Swordmaster for spears. It lets me add my magic elements to my weapon and use my sub-job spells, plus I get sense skills for melee combat. I don't really fight using IRL techniques, so I really need those abilities.”

`Makes sense`
`You say that like there’s people who DO fight using their IRL skills`
`There’s a buncha ppl like that in Tenchi`
`Those lunatics don’t count`

G’s explanation was generally met with understanding, but there was another question mixed in.

`But swords are more popular and would give you more options, wouldn’t they?`

“Well, yeah, there’s more people who make and use swords, but I’ll always use spears instead.”

`Ohhh?`
`Why the fixation...?`
`I sense a deep conviction here`

“I mean, I can use them to poke my enemies from inside R’lyeh! And if they get annoyed and jump in, they’re sitting ducks! People know not to do that now, though, so these days it only really works on monsters!”

`LMAO devious`
`That’s basically an attack from out of bounds`
`D-Deep conviction?`
`Uh, G friends? Is this really your great Overlord?`
`This was her playstyle before she got the job. It’s all good.`

“And Shadowmancer lets me suppress light levels! I can even block lasers!”

That’s...pretty limited
Girl, save yourself from low-rank spell spam and grab Umbramancer instead
If you need defense, isn’t Wallmancer the better choice?
I’m sorry, did you just call her chest a wall?
Hey, she’s well-endowed... In her second form, at least

“Oh come on, you guys,” G said with a chuckle. “You’re making fun of it, but Shadowmancer is great! It’s a must-have for me!”

But why?

Seeing that question—and a lot of similar ones—G replied, “It lets me easily manage light levels even when I’m recording outside.”

...Those eyes are 100% serious
Well, recording is kinda her thing
G is so cute

“Also, it gives me an advantage against King of Light. If I take care of his lasers, it ends up just being a battle between our summons. That’s a pretty equal fight even without my R’lyeh.”

KoL? Did something happen between you two?
Did you get caught up in some trouble he caused?
Aren’t you the one who usually causes trouble, though?

The audience wanted to know more, but she couldn’t elaborate on this point. She wasn’t lying about Shadowmancer being helpful for recording, but another significant reason she’d taken the job was to oppose King of Light, F—her older brother, Seiga Fujiwara.

Even though she’d evaded the question, she had once again held a successful stream for her audience of enchanted fans.

The End

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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 22
by Sakon Kaidou

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Original Japanese edition published in 2024 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: June 2025